

## REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

# Further Analysis of Temporary FTE and External Consultant – Proposed Homelessness Response Strategy

**To:** Warden and Members of County Council

**From:** Director of Human Services

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. That County Council receive Report No. HS 2023-17, entitled “Further Analysis of Temporary FTE and External Consultant – Proposed Homelessness Response Strategy” and authorize up to \$125,000 from the Affordable Housing Reserve to be used for the purposes of retaining a consultant for the development of a Homelessness Response Strategy;
2. And further, that Council authorizes the Chief Administrative Officer and the Director of Human Services to sign all necessary documents related thereto.

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

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- Staff have considered alternative options, in particular a temporary full-time position to coordinate the development of a longer-term strategy with a housing first approach in reducing homelessness.
- The development of a strategy will allow for better decision-making as well as more responsible and responsive investment and allocation of resources.
- The costs associated with operating emergency shelter services and other temporary solutions continues to rise. Investing in longer term solutions will ensure greater cost efficiency and collaboration in the efforts to reduce homelessness within the County.

## IMPLEMENTATION POINTS

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Upon approval of the recommendations in this report, staff will initiate the process of procuring a consultant to begin the development of a Homelessness Response Strategy.

Once a consultant has been selected, the project would begin, with an anticipated completion date at the end of June 2024, in time to inform the 2025 *Business Plan and Budget* process. Furthermore, information gathered through this process will inform decisions related to initiatives approved as part of the 2024 budget process.

### Financial Impact

In order to address more long-term housing needs in an effort to reduce homelessness, staff are seeking Council approval to engage a consultant to assist in developing a Homelessness Response Strategy for an estimated cost of up to \$125,000. The cost of this plan would be funded by the Affordable Housing Reserve which currently has a projected year-end balance of \$1.7 million. Exact costs will be determined through the County's competitive RFP process.

### Communications

Once the consultant has been selected, a communication will be shared with stakeholders regarding next steps in the development of the strategy and their role. Once the project has been completed, a report will be presented to Council.




## 2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

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Oxford County Council approved the [2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#) on September 13, 2023. The Plan outlines 39 goals across three strategic pillars that advance Council's vision of "Working together for a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable future." These pillars are: (1) *Promoting community vitality*, (2) *Enhancing environmental sustainability*, and (3) *Fostering progressive government*.

The recommendations in this report supports the following strategic goals.

Strategic Plan Pillars and Goals

PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3
		
<b>Promoting community vitality</b>	<b>Enhancing environmental sustainability</b>	<b>Fostering progressive government</b>
<p>Goal 1.1 – 100% Housed Goal 1.3 – Community health, safety and well-being</p>		<p>Goal 3.2 – Collaborate with our partners and communities</p>

See: [Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#)

## DISCUSSION

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### Background

On September 13, 2023, County Council passed the following resolution:

“Resolved that Report [HS 2023-14](#) titled "24/7 Shelter Model Update and Strategy for Pathways Out of Homelessness", be deferred;

And further, that County Council request that staff investigate and bring a report back to Council as timely as possible, the position of a full-time coordinator for the development of a strategy in support of pathways out of homelessness and other options.”

This report represents the follow-up, including input from the Director of Human Resources and community stakeholders, in response to this request from Council; as well as additional context regarding the benefits of creating a long-term strategy.

Homelessness is a complex issue and one that is constantly evolving. There is no simple solution and, in fact, it will take a broad and collaborative approach with all of the dedicated community stakeholders, various levels of government and agencies working together. Due to the immediate needs being experienced in our communities and those experiencing homelessness, short-term solutions are already being provided for this vulnerable population, such as, but not limited to, expanding the capacity of The Inn, operating an Out of the Cold Shelter in Tillsonburg and enhanced hours for the Mobile Health Outreach Bus.

In addition to these temporary reactive solutions, it is important that the County establish a broader, longer-term approach to the issue. It is important to support those experiencing

homelessness and with the County's strategic commitment of *100% Housed* it is also an expectation that the County lead in the development of housing options to provide appropriate housing and supports for those looking for more permanent housing.

## Comments

### Temporary Full-Time Oxford County Employee

Council requested that staff explore the potential of hiring a temporary full-time employee to facilitate the process of developing a Homelessness Response Strategy. While this is an alternative worth considering, hiring temporary staff in particular is not the optimal solution in these circumstances.

Overall, attracting top talent is a challenging task these days and an even more difficult task is filling temporary vacancies. With today's economic climate and labour market, fewer people apply to temporary positions because permanently employed individuals are less interested in temporary opportunities because of the risks associated with leaving a permanent position. In consultation with Human Resources, it has been confirmed that the County has seen fewer qualified applicants to job postings in general, which makes temporary positions even less attractive.

Also problematic with hiring a temporary FTE for this project is the level of expertise required. The expected outcome of this project is a well-informed, thorough strategy with realistic and longer-term solutions to a highly complex social issue. It will be extremely difficult to find one local individual, with the experience, knowledge and skills to be able to facilitate this project. In addition, when creating a new position, the County does not have flexibility with regards to salary. The County would have to pay the employee within our non-union salary grid, in which the salary range is determined through the job evaluation process. The salary range will most likely not be in alignment with the level of expertise required to lead the development of the Strategy.

Another downfall to hiring a temporary employee for this project is the timelines. On average, it takes Human Resources between six and eight weeks to fill a vacancy with an external incumbent. This includes the time it takes to create a job description, have the position evaluated, post it, conduct interviews and references, allow for the successful candidate to give notice and subsequently have someone actually start in the role. In other words, the best-case scenario would likely mean an individual starting at the beginning of January. It also generally takes a couple of months for an external person to become familiar with the organization, the role and its responsibilities, as well as key stakeholders. Realistically, it would be towards the end of the first quarter of 2024 when the incumbent would be in a position to begin working on the project.

Lastly, of major concern with hiring a temporary employee is the perceived bias of this employee throughout the process. Although the incumbent would do their best to maintain an unbiased objective approach, unfortunately the outcomes may be perceived as simply being in alignment with the County's preferences. Council members raised concerns at the September 13 meeting with regards to a consultant being biased in favour of what the County wants. Hiring

an employee to do this work would result in the same perception and present additional challenges. Engaging with stakeholders, asking tough questions and seeking valuable insight will be more difficult for an Oxford County employee. Stakeholders are less likely to be transparent and forthcoming about their thoughts and experiences if they are conveying them to someone who is employed directly by the County.

### External Consultant

Oxford County, like many other municipalities, will often hire the services of an external consultant to do specialized work in which there are no internal subject matter experts or the internal capacity to complete a task within desired timelines. It is good practice to consider whether or not there is value in hiring an employee to do the work, particularly if it is a task or service that will be needed on a regular and recurring basis. Staff routinely consider whether there is internal expertise or capacity prior to determining the engagement of a consultant.

In this particular situation, the intent would be to conduct a one-time, time-limited project, providing the strategic direction with which Human Services staff can then continue to collaborate with partners and stakeholders with a focus to reduce homelessness in Oxford County. More specifically, the consultant would be expected to provide project planning, support, expertise, and objectivity for the purposes of developing a formal Homelessness Response Strategy. The services of a consultant would include the following key project deliverables:

- Completing a needs assessment using various existing sources of information and data to identify the current and future (10-year term) scope of homelessness throughout the County.
- Designing and facilitating a comprehensive and inclusive community engagement process, informed by community partners, as well as those with lived experience of housing instability and homelessness. The community engagement process should gather information, insights and learning to inform the recommended strategies, programs, services, and investments needed to reduce homelessness in Oxford County, including areas of improvement and redundancies. The community engagement process should also:
  - Identify various engagement modalities and information gathering tools to reach a broad cross-section of community partners/members;
  - Contemplate strategies that reduce power imbalances and meet people where they are at;
  - Recognize and describe accommodations to enhance participation;
  - Identify current gaps or improvements in the homelessness service delivery system, including evaluation of community partner services, areas of need, and current funding being offered.
- Developing a Findings Report that describes the insights, learning and recommendations for the Homelessness Response Strategy. The report synthesizes the information from the community engagement process, focuses on key insights and learnings shared by participants, and identifies resulting recommendations to reduce homelessness in the County.

- Identify service gaps, as well as short-term and long-term strategies/resources to assist with reducing homelessness in the County, including change system management measures for the County and those community partners involved in the homelessness, transitional and supportive housing service system.
- Identify pathways out of homelessness that include initiatives within and outside of the County's scope to have a system level approach.

Municipalities such as the Region of Waterloo and Elgin County have engaged in similar processes and hired consultants to lead them through projects of similar scope. York Region is in the beginning stages of considering engagement of a consultant for the development of a strategy. Staff have had conversations with the Region of Waterloo to gain an understanding of their approach and benefits from having a consultant support the development of their Plan to End Chronic Homelessness. In conversation with the Region of Waterloo about their experience, they emphasized the importance of obtaining a third party to lead the project – consultants have a systems level approach, are hired to fulfill a defined project scope and do not benefit from recommendations or decisions made. With the variety of stakeholders, the highly sensitive topic, and the in-depth nature of the information being gathered, they felt it was imperative that a consultant lead the project. The Region of Waterloo expressed similar experiences as Oxford County in seeking guidance in determining a solutions focused approach to a very complex social issue.

An added benefit of engaging the services of a consultant often includes a project team, with multiple experienced staff that would be dedicated to working with the County. Having a team of experts focused on this project would not only broaden the objectivity, but would also improve the start-to-finish timelines, allowing for a more efficient process. Hiring a consultant would require following the County's procurement process, which generally takes 4-6 weeks including the posting and evaluation of submissions. Council has indicated that they want to see action and results which will be realized in a shorter timeframe by bringing in a consultant.

#### [Additional Comments for Consideration](#)

Generally speaking, the current environment around homelessness and supporting individuals in transitioning into permanent housing options is extremely challenging. The availability of physical housing units is scarce, let alone being able to afford the rental units that are available. More people are facing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness due to a variety of reasons including but not limited to affordability, mental health and addictions. There are several community tables currently discussing this topic in an effort to determine solutions and identify best practices for increasing access to housing and support. While these tables have good intentions and a willingness for action involving local experts in these areas, it is evident that a Strategy will support allocation of resources in a more efficient manner.

The County is seeing increasing requests from community partners for financial assistance to support delivery of programs and services. This would include increases in funding allocations as well as requests from agencies who have never before requested financial support from the County. These programs and services are vital for clientele to support housing, food security, eviction prevention, mental health resources, additional staffing, encampment responses, housing targeted for youth and outreach, to name a few. Staff are

now faced with establishing criteria for determining the allocation of Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) funding despite the nominal increase of \$1.2 million, there is still insufficient funding to meet all requests. In the absence of such criteria staff experience criticism of how funds are allocated. Development of a strategy that provides guidelines on priorities will assist in decision making and resource allocations that is fair and transparent.

Recently, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) has been circulating requests for information from Service System Managers pertaining to local homelessness initiatives. These requests include but are not limited to encampments, BNL data, supportive housing, emergency shelters and any planned new initiatives in these areas. MMAH is interested in current trends and data we have that will identify future projections for planning purposes. MMAH is asking for how we plan to address the issues and challenges in our County in the short and long term. Having a Homelessness Response Strategy will assist in staff's ability to respond quickly to these requests from MMAH as well as support funding requests by the County or any of our community partners. Funding from the Province usually means that service managers are competing with each other for a limited pot of money. While not ideal, the ability to demonstrate clear pathways with a focus to reduce homelessness in the County positions us well to be successful in our funding requests.

The scope of services of the 10-Year Shelter Plan review include a deeper look into the area of homelessness, transitional housing and supportive housing that was missing from the existing Shelter Plan. While the 10-Year Shelter Plan review will provide updated information and priorities around housing and homelessness, it is not a Homelessness Response Strategy.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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Homelessness is a very complex issue and one being experienced all throughout Ontario and Canada – we are not alone or unique in our issues. For Oxford County to make a significant effort in reducing homelessness, it is important to establish long-term solutions that seek collaboration and a broader perspective, to inform a future system that offers unhoused individuals' options, hope and improved health outcomes. Internal County staff do not have the expertise, or the workload capacity to engage in such a process within a short timeframe, hence the original request to hire a consultant. It was worthwhile to consider the option of a temporary Oxford County employee, however, it is not a suitable option in the circumstances.

Going forward, there will likely be a need for additional staff to action the initiatives identified within the Homelessness Response Strategy and therefore may result in proposed staffing requests in future budget years. Without knowing what those specific staffing requirements would be, it is unlikely that the skill sets of a temporary employee to conduct this project would align with those required for ongoing implementation of the plan.



## SIGNATURES

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### Departmental approval:

Original signed by

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Kelly Black  
Director of Human Services

### Approved for submission:

Original signed by

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Benjamin R. Addley  
Chief Administrative Officer