

REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

Homelessness Response Strategy Award

To: Warden and Members of County Council

From: Director of Human Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. That County Council receive Report HS 2024-04, entitled, “Homelessness Response Strategy Award” as information.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- Oxford County Human Services has engaged the services of SHS Consulting through the Request for Proposal process to develop a Homelessness Response Strategy for the County.
- Community engagement opportunities are anticipated to begin in April 2024 and the plan will be presented to County Council for approval in December 2024.
- Extensive community consultation will be conducted including community experts working in the housing and homelessness sector, people with lived and living experience with homelessness, and policy and decision makers.

IMPLEMENTATION POINTS

County staff (in conjunction with SHS Consulting) will commence public consultation targeting community partners, service providers, community and municipal stakeholders to invite feedback that will inform the development of a Homelessness Response Strategy for the County. It is anticipated that the final report will be brought to County Council for approval in December 2024. The Plan will be made available to the public and posted on the County’s website after Council approval.

Financial Impact

There will be no financial impact beyond what was approved in the 2024 budget for this project.

Communications

The Strategic Communications Team will launch a consultation plan to elicit feedback and participation from staff, community partners, municipal stakeholders, and residents across the County in collaboration with SHS Consulting and the internal project team.

2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

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 recommendation in this report supports the following strategic goals.

Strategic Plan Pillars and Goals

PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3
		
Promoting community vitality	Enhancing environmental sustainability	Fostering progressive government
<p>Goal 1.1 – 100% Housed</p> <p>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

Background

At the September 13, 2023 County Council meeting Report [HS 2023-14](#) pertaining to the development of a Homelessness Response Strategy to address the current pressures throughout the County and create a strategy for pathways out of homelessness was considered. At that meeting Council directed staff to bring a report back with the results of an analysis on whether to use a consultant versus hire a full-time staff member to do this work. Report [HS 2023-17](#) was brought before Council on October 25, 2023 supporting the ask to hire a consultant to create a Homelessness Response Strategy. Council approved moving forward with hiring a consultant to develop a Strategy.

Homelessness is a complex issue that continues to evolve. In the 2024 budget Council invested \$2.8 million to support the creation of additional transitional and supportive housing in the County. A range of supportive housing and transitional housing is currently available throughout the County; however, the wait lists are extensive and with no vacancies, it is difficult to apply a housing first approach when units are not available. Building a framework that provides choice in the housing system that offers appropriate housing with support for those who need it supports the County's strategic commitment of *100% Housed* and 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.

Within its role as the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager, the County is responsible for the delivery of community and social services throughout the County and for maintaining a 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan (HHP). The HHP identifies goals and strategies to address complex housing issues across the continuum. The County's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness plan focuses on housing for all, with an emphasis on ending homelessness by supporting individuals to transition into permanent housing. This vision is supported by the notion that every person has the right to affordable, suitable, and adequate housing.

The development of a Strategy that will lead to more strategic decision-making processes for solutions to reduce homelessness and chronic homelessness in our communities. This is in alignment with the Provincial direction as outlined in the Homelessness Prevention Program funding and the creation of By-name Lists.

Comments

On October 25, 2023, County Council approved a motion directing staff to retain a consultant to assist with the development of a formal homelessness response strategy, which will outline short and long-term strategies and resources to assist in reducing, and identifying pathways out of, homelessness. The strategy will more specifically examine gaps/overlap in the current system, barriers to access, root causes, and will seek creative recommendations and support to improve such services. The overall intent of the Strategy is to provide a collective framework, with associated financial implications, that will provide recommendations (or options) in the creation of a framework to support a pathway out of homelessness by building on available housing options and supports, addressing gaps/barriers to accessing services, as well as focusing on a 'housing first' approach.

A Request for Proposal was issued in January 2024 for the creation of a Homelessness Response Strategy for the County. SHS Consulting as the successful consultant will provide project planning, support, expertise and reporting for the purposes of developing a formal homelessness response strategy, including 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. Overall, the community engagement process should:

- 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; and
 - Identify current gaps or improvements in the homelessness service delivery system, including gaps in services within our community, 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 management measures for the County and those community partners involved in the homelessness service system.
 - Identify options and opportunities for pathways out of homelessness.

SHS Consulting will be responsible for preparing a report that is informed through a public consultation process to demonstrate the relevance to local community needs and provides a strategy that is unbiased to any one agency or organization within the County.

The project plan that SHS has developed would provide extensive community engagement, to both understand the current state and to seek solutions from community experts working in the housing and homelessness sector, people with lived and living experience with homelessness, and policy and decision makers. SHS Consulting is recommending the formation of an advisory group with the support of the County Project Lead, to compile a list of interested and effected parties who can contribute to defining the problem and generating solutions is proposed. SHS Consulting sees this local knowledge as key to generating a community led solution that will fit local community context and need. In their experience this approach helps develop community capacity that helps facilitate plan implementation once the consultation process has been completed.

SHS Consulting, will bring their expertise in human centered design to this project. Human centred design is a process designed to help solve some of the most intractable problems that communities are facing. They will use many facilitation and engagement tools, to guide the community through a series of co-design meetings that will create an equitable space for participation with the goal of mapping the current system, gaining insights into how people are currently navigating in and out of homelessness to better understand those pathways. SHS Consulting will focus on strengths, gaps and challenges within the system that make it difficult for people to access supports and attach to services, and policies that create barriers unintentionally. They will also identify groups not currently well served in the current system.

The information gathered through the community engagement plan and housing needs assessment will be used to develop the Findings Report that will synthesize all the information gathered to identify specific, actionable recommendations to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability for those precariously housed and at risk. The strategy recommendations will include, short-, mid- and long-term strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

The current homelessness situation in Oxford County requires an immediate response; however, to be able to reduce homelessness an investment in long term solutions that seek to build a system that offers people who are experiencing homelessness options, hope and improved health outcomes, is necessary. The Homelessness Response Strategy will be part of an overall housing stability plan and will be actionable in the short-term and mid-term.

In addition to 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.

SIGNATURES

Departmental approval:

Original signed by _____
Kelly Black
Director of Human Services

Approved for submission:

Original signed by _____
Benjamin R. Addley
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