

**Divisions Affected – N/A**

**CABINET MEMBER FOR  
CHILDREN, EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES  
18 October 2023**

**Children's Services Residential Capital Programme for  
Oathill Lodge, Enstone, Chipping Norton**

**Report by Interim Director of Children's Services**

**RECOMMENDATION**

**The Cabinet Member is RECOMMENDED to**

1. Release funds to:
  - (a) Purchase Oathill Lodge, Enstone, Chipping Norton for **the amount listed in Annex A**
  - (b) Cover fees of **amount listed in Annex A** (Stamp Duty Land Tax, valuation, legal etc)
  - (c) Cover the adaptation and refurbishment for the **amount listed in Annex A**

**Executive Summary**

2. Approval of the Children's Services Residential Capital Programme was received on 5 December 2022, Appendix A. This was for the acquisition and associated works of four residential properties to be converted to Children's Homes. Two of these properties are to be utilised as Larger long-term homes for ASD and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH), comprising 6-bedroom properties to accommodate four children each.
3. The subject property at Oathill Lodge, Enstone, Chipping Norton (Oathill Lodge) has been identified by the service as meeting their needs as a Large children's home specifically for children with complex emotional needs. Terms have been agreed to acquire and refurbish the property for the amount listed in Annex A subject to approval by Cabinet. The offer is at the asking price listed in Annex A and is supported by a desk top market valuation at the same level.

**Alignment to relevant strategy:**

4. Children We Care for [Sufficiency Strategy](#) 2020-2025
5. To support the departments Sufficiency Strategy for placements for Children We Care For, Children’s Services plan to deliver four additional Children’s Homes which will be operated and staffed by the Council’s experienced Residential and Edge of Care (REoC) service. To support children with the greatest needs CEF plan to purchase four properties from the open market and convert to a specific specification working with the Council’s Property department.
6. To increase the number of residential beds within county, to prevent having to place Children We Care For out of county.

<b>Ref no.</b>	<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Measurement</b>
B.01	To provide Children We Care For with complex needs a homely and nurturing environment with specialist trained staff including access to the Council’s Clinical Psychologists to enable them to thrive close to their family and friends.	<i>Reduction in CWCF placed outside of Oxfordshire</i>
B.02	These schemes will support the department to meet their duties under the Sufficiency Strategy to increase the provision of in-county residential placements.	<i>Increase in internal residential provision</i>
B.03	The internal residential expansion programme is an invest to save initiative whereby CEF aim to save between £0.5m and £5.6m per annum which is a cost comparison on current un-registered arrangements and out of county placement spend for children who would be accommodated in these homes based on a 75% occupancy rate.	<i>Reduction in number of children placed in unregistered provision</i>
B.04	Increase in the quality of care afforded to our children	<i>Clear Corporate Parenting oversight of the provisions our children are living within</i>

### **Exempt Information**

7. The information in the Annex is exempt because it contains information that could reveal the identity of an individual (the vendor of the private property) and relates to the business affairs of the vendor (the commercial sensitivity of the purchase of a private property).

### **Case for Change**

8. Before this property was selected as one of 4 properties for conversion across Oxfordshire, a detailed search exercise was undertaken which looked at all vacant properties owned by Oxfordshire County Council. Unfortunately, none of these were suitable as a prospective large or small children's home. Therefore, an extensive search has been carried out across the county to identify properties on the open market for purchase and conversion. The Service consider each property in light of the particular needs of the children the home will be catering, and Oathill Lodge property was found to be suitable as a large children's home. Oathill Lodge has already been operating as a Childrens home for 15 years under a private provider, so whilst planning will be required for a change of use this should be a straightforward exercise without any objections.
9. The house was chosen as it gives children the opportunity to live and thrive within a settled and safe community within easy reach of universal amenities that are afforded to any other child living within Oxfordshire. Ordinarily there will be no more than 4 children living at the property with 3-4 adults caring for them.
10. Oxfordshire currently has 3 children's homes each of which provide a home for up to 6 children at any one time. These homes are well established within their communities and are all registered with Ofsted and rated GOOD at their most recent inspections.
11. Oathill Lodge will be offering a long-term home to a maximum of 4 children at any one time as we move away from institutionalised living and offer these children the valued experience of living within a nurturing family setting that supports the recovery from trauma suffered from being unable to live with their birth families.

### **Constraints and dependencies**

#### Constraints

12. The pool of larger 6-bedroom properties available on the open market within Oxfordshire for our £1.5m budget and suitable for minimal conversion is very limited. In addition, locating such a property with sufficient parking, mains drainage, suitable amenities and not located near a railway, waterway or main road is a geographical challenge. For reference, Ofsted view railways, main roads and waterways as significant risks to our children and therefore not suitable.

#### Dependencies

13. The existing planning permission is for use as a Children's Home although this use is 'personal' to the current owner and operator (Hillcrest)
14. Planning permission will be required to either transfer the personal use from Hillcrest to OCC, or for full change of use from C3 (residential dwelling house) to C2 (residential institution); planning will also be required for the proposed refurbishment works

15. Ability to recruit to the volume of residential staff required in the timeframes will be a challenge due to the current national shortage of candidates entering the care sector. This will require a focused recruitment campaign with support from Human Resources, Marketing and Communications Teams.

### **Economic case**

16. The proposal is to purchase the property at Oathill Lodge, Enstone, Chipping Norton.
17. The house is a two storey 10-bedroom children's home with a small garden to the side and rear of the property. It is set within a rural location with fields and woodlands to all sides. Proposed accommodation will comprise Ground floor: kitchen/dining room, lounge, games room, staff office and meeting room, and First floor: x4 Children's bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms and x2 Staff bedrooms.

Indicative refurbishment works to include

- The interior of the property will require a complete refit and a link will need to be created between the main body of the house and the annex
  - Internal robust re-fit including new heating system and new external windows and doors; small increase in floor area due to new connection between the house and the annex at first floor level
  - Demolition of office building in garden
  - Installation of new fencing and gates at the front of the house and some additional protective barrier fencing at the rear
  - Photovoltaics to roof and increase insulation throughout
18. This is an initial proposition to inform project costs and facilitate acquisition of the property and will be properly designed at feasibility stage.
  19. The preferred option is to purchase Oathill Lodge, obtain planning consent for change of use and carry out the refurbishment as required.
  20. This is the agreed template as approved by SCB (April 23) and the programme on Oathill Lodge will follow the same approach as the first children's home at 79A Lower Icknield Way, Chinnor.
  21. The high-level programme is based on carrying out pre-planning application discussions with the planners, local community and residents during the purchase process. The necessary surveys will also be carried out during this period to inform the design work. Once the property is purchased, the planning

application will be progressed and submitted to obtain planning consent for change of use before construction works start.

22. A review of potential risks has been carried out by the project team, including the possibility of starting works prior to planning approval. The risk consequence includes potential reputational risk and impact on the relationship with neighbouring residents longer term. Also, if obtained as hoped, planning consent may have conditions precedent that need to be complied with prior to starting works on site. The council would automatically be in breach of the planning consent if work had started prior to consent.
23. Therefore, it was agreed that construction works will be procured during the planning determination phase and once consent is received a contractor will start on site.

## **Financial Implications**

### **Financial case**

#### **Identification of funding source**

24. Strategic Capital Board (SCB) approved the Business Case strategy to develop the Children's service Care Home capacity through the purchase and adaptation of 4 children's homes costing a total of £10.450m with 50% match funding by the DfE. The authority capital commitment totals £5.225m. Cabinet subsequently approved the proposal at its meeting December 2022. The table below provides a summary of the budget for each of the units together with a breakdown of the purchase and adaptation (construction) costs.
25. Purchasing and adapting 3 / 4 of the units in this financial year will enable the service to optimise its claim against the DfE conditions, spend profile and share of funding across 2023/24 and 2024/25. The approach will ensure that the spend is at or above the minimum spend thresholds preventing any risk of clawback of underspend on any individual or combination of units against the DfE 50% share. The approach is reinforced by the DfE policy of paying its share of the costs in full up front leaving the authority to cover the balance and have maximum discretion and flexibility in utilising any underspends
26. The CEF Service confirmed approval for staffing and non-staffing supplementary revenue budget through the January 2023 (P10) Budget Monitoring Report approved at Cabinet in May 2023. Funding for the costs is based on an Invest to Save strategy, further details are listed in Annex A. The rationale and basis for the savings strategy is set out in the original Business Case approved by SCB and Cabinet in December 2022
27. The financial strategy and approach to the purchase and adaptation of the units has been planned and structured to ensure best quality of care for children obtaining best value, maximising the use of the DfE's share and optimum use and return on the investment funds.

**Future costs, income, and planned expenditure:**

## Revenue costs

28. The original business case for the four new homes, including two large homes (of which this is one), set out estimated savings totalling between £0.5m and £1.8m per annum. Recently revised, the potential revenue saving per annum on all four children's homes once operational will be in the order of £1m - £5m per annum. This is based on 10-12 children and a cost saving listed in Annex A. The return on investment is 10%-50% per annum and the capital investment would be fully recovered between 2 and 10 years.
29. Net revenue savings for each home were estimated at between £0.2m to £0.5m per annum. The running costs of a single home have been reduced overall following a reduction in proposed staffing levels, offset by small increases in other costs and an increase of £4,000 for utility costs from £20,000 to £24,000 per annum due to inflation, giving a total of £44,000 for property-related costs.
30. Costs will be incurred prior to the home becoming operational, particularly in relation to the early appointment of staff. These costs are estimated at no more than £80,000 and these can be offset by the savings from more expensive external placement costs. There are also other revenue costs that have been, or will be, incurred that relate to the property acquisition process that cannot be charged to capital. This includes professional costs incurred in preparing a bid for a property that was subsequently rejected. There may be other costs, such as design fees, but these are minimal and can be met from revenue budgets.
31. The estimated full year running costs for the home are £850,000, including £24,000 for property-related costs. These costs will be met from savings in other placement costs as set out in the original business case and incorporated into the Medium-Term Financial Plan

Comments checked by: Danny Doherty, FBP, CEF  
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**Legal Implications**

32. The legal due diligence will be undertaken in-house by Legal Services.
33. Any additional building and technical surveys required prior to the exchange of contracts will be instructed via existing framework agreements or through a purchase order.

Comments checked by Richard Hodby, Solicitor, [Richard.Hodby@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:Richard.Hodby@oxfordshire.gov.uk)  
(Law and Governance)

## Staff Implications

### Technical Advice and Refurbishment Works

34. The minor works team will provide detailed surveys and specifications in line with the requirements of the service. Following agreement on the scope of works, a tender exercise will be run in line with CPRs to select a contractor to carry out works.
35. Project management of the tender process and subsequent works will be carried out by the minor works team, who will procure a specialist project manager to complete both the design and completion of the works to the agreed scope and specification.
36. The procurement of this project manager will be carried out via a multi discipline framework ensuring we procure services for both design and project management of this project.

### Risk Management

<i>Ref no.</i>	<i>Risk</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Likelihood</i>	<i>Impact</i>	<i>Mitigating Action</i>
R.01	Planning	Approval for change of use not achieved resulting in the need to sell the property	Medium	High	Pre-application engagement will seek to determine response from OCC planners on acceptability of change of use before exchange; in addition, a consultation exercise will be undertaken with neighbours, parish council and local Councillors
R.02	Property Acquisition (1)	Acquisition falls through due to vendor change of circumstances	Low	High	Engagement with vendor through vendor's agent at pre-bid stage to understand circumstances and drivers for sale
R.03	Property Acquisition (2)	Acquisition doesn't proceed due to failure at due-diligence stage	Low	High	Already undertaken pre-bid property, planning and high level technical due diligence
R.04	Staff Recruitment	Unable to successfully recruit the volume of staff needed for the home to be operational in the desired	Medium	High	High impact recruitment campaign including marketing & comms and the use of social media

		timeframe			
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NAME  
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Annex: Annex A

Background papers: Nil

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