

Appendices

None

**CABINET REPORT****Report Title**

Emergency Funding for Northamptonshire's Refuges

AGENDA STATUS:**PUBLIC**

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cabinet Meeting Date: | 7 September 2016 |
| Key Decision: | No |
| Within Policy: | Yes |
| Policy Document: | No |
| Directorate: | Chief Executive's |
| Accountable Cabinet Member: | Councillor Stephen Hibbert |
| Ward(s) | N/A |

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet of the financial difficulties facing Northamptonshire's refuges and to support the 'bridge funding' that the seven Borough and District Councils, the County Council and the Police & Crime Commissioner have arranged, between them, to avert the refuges' closure in 2016/17.
- 1.2 'Bridge funding' totalling £138,086 has been provided to sustain the refuges in 2016/17 pending a decision on how the Government is planning to spend the £40m it has set aside to support victims of domestic abuse in line with the Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) Strategy it published in March 2016.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet notes and supports the action that has been taken by the Borough and District Councils, the County Council and the Police & Crime Commissioner to sustain Northamptonshire's refuges in 2016/17;

- 2.2 That Cabinet approves the Council's contribution of £39,362 (28% of the total) to the 'bridge funding' arrangements and agrees that, if this money is not reimbursed through the VAWG funding, it will need to be funded from the Council's Revenue Budget 2016/17 or reserves; and
- 2.3 That Cabinet agrees that the Chief Executive will make written representations to the DCLG and the Home Office, highlighting the financial difficulties facing Northamptonshire's refuges and urging Ministers to make an early decision on when, how and to whom the £40m funding for domestic abuse will be awarded and to provide an assurance that, when funding is awarded, it will take into account expenditure that the refuges have already incurred in 2016/17.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 In its Spending Review and Autumn Statement of 25 November 2015, the Government announced that it will "continue to protect the most vulnerable" by increasing funding to prevent and reduce homelessness, including **"providing £40 million for services for victims of domestic abuse, tripling the dedicated funding provided compared to the previous four years and complementing the wider violence against women and girls strategy."**
- 3.1.2 Unfortunately, despite its acknowledgement of the importance of refuges and its commitment to provide support for refuges and other accommodation-based services, the Government has still not provided any detailed information about the funding arrangements or, indeed, the criteria that it will use to assess applications.
- 3.1.3 The problems caused by the ongoing uncertainty over future funding have been especially serious in Northamptonshire where the three refuge providers had received funding from the DCLG in 2014/15 and 2015/16 but were not told what would happen when the DCLG funding ran out on 31 March 2016.
- 3.1.4 In order to avert the sudden closure of the refuges and give the refuge providers sufficient reassurance to delay issuing any redundancy notices, the Chief Executives of the Borough & District Councils and the County Council decided to provide the refuges with 'bridge funding' to cover the shortfall between the basic operating costs of the refuges and the amount of money that they will collect from residents in rent and service charges, during the first six months of 2016/17.
- 3.1.5 When it became evident that the Government funding would still not be forthcoming until after the six months' 'bridge funding' ran out at the end of September 2016, the Chief Executives of the Borough and District Councils and the County Council (together with the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner) supported extending the 'bridge funding' arrangement to include the refuges' costs up until 31 March 2016.

3.2 Issues

Refuge accommodation in Northamptonshire

- 3.2.1 At present, there are 43 units of refuge accommodation in Northamptonshire and these are provided and managed by NWA (Northampton Women's Aid), WENWA (Wellingborough & East Northamptonshire Women's Aid) and Eve (formerly Nene Valley Christian Family Refuge):

- NWA manages a total of 15 units of accommodation
- WENWA manages a total of 15 units of accommodation
- Eve manages a total of 13 units of accommodation

3.2.2 In order to calculate the likely funding shortfall in 2016/17, the refuge providers were asked to provide a detailed breakdown of their annual operating costs and the income they expect to receive in rent and service charges. This information was then used to calculate the size of the net funding shortfall, based on the basic operating costs.

3.2.3 Based on the information provided, the total annual shortfall (between the 3 refuge providers) for the 43 units of accommodation in 2016/17 was just over £138,000.

Risks posed by the closure of the refuges

3.2.4 The three refuge providers have only limited reserves and, in the absence of any assurances about funding, there was a strong likelihood that redundancy notices would be issued and all of the refuges would close. Without the intervention of the Borough and District Councils and the County Council, the first closure could have occurred as early as April 2016.

3.2.5 Any sudden and unplanned reduction in the number of refuge places may have serious consequences, as the refuges play a vital role in preventing homicide and keeping families safe from harm. As well as causing distress to the residents, closure would increase the amount of temporary accommodation that the local housing authorities are required to provide for victims of domestic abuse.

'Bridge funding' to avert a crisis

3.2.6 Although representations will continue to be made to encourage the DCLG and Home Office to release the £40m for domestic abuse as soon as practicable, the priority has been to avert a funding crisis and the unnecessary and avoidable closure of refuges.

3.2.7 To ensure the continued provision of the refuges, the Chief Executives Group and the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner have agreed to provide 'bridge funding' (initially in April 2016 and then in October 2016) totalling £138,086 in order to enable the refuges to meet their operating costs for the whole of 2016/17.

3.2.8 The total financial contribution made by each organisation (for 2016/17) is as follows:

- Northamptonshire County Council – £39,362
- Northampton Borough Council – £39,362
- Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner – £14,362
- Borough Council of Wellingborough – £7,500
- Corby Borough Council – £7,500
- Daventry District Council - £7,500
- East Northamptonshire District Council – £7,500
- Kettering Borough Council – £7,500
- South Northamptonshire District Council – £7,500

3.2.9 This 'bridge funding' has been provided on the strict condition that, when the DCLG eventually allocates the £40m of domestic abuse funding, the money that has been paid by the County Council, the OPCC and the Borough and District Councils will be reimbursed from the funding awarded to Northamptonshire. However, until then, it remains a financial risk.

3.3 Choices (Options)

3.3.1 Cabinet can note the action that has been taken by the Borough and District Councils, the County Council and Police & Crime Commissioner to sustain Northamptonshire's refuges in 2016/17.

3.3.2 Cabinet can note and support the action that has been taken by the Borough and District Councils, the County Council and Police & Crime Commissioner to sustain Northamptonshire's refuges in 2016/17.

3.3.3 Cabinet can choose to do nothing.

4. Implications (including financial implications)

4.1 Policy

4.1.1 The action that the Council has taken to prevent the sudden closure of Northamptonshire's refuges is in line with Council policy and reflects the priorities in the Corporate Plan 2016-20.

4.2 Resources and Risk

4.2.1 As the action taken has successfully prevented the closure of the County's refuges in 2016/17, its overall impact on the cost of delivering public services (including homelessness, policing, safeguarding and community safety) is likely to be positive.

4.2.2 Although there is no guarantee that the 'bridge funding' will be repaid, Ministers are being urged to award the £40m funding as soon as possible and to give an assurance that, when funding is awarded, they will take into account the expenditure that the refuges have already incurred in 2016/17.

4.2.3 If the 'bridge funding' is not reimbursed through the VAWG funding, the Council's contribution of £39,362 will need to be met from the Council's Revenue Budget 2016/17 or reserves.

4.3 Legal

4.3.1 Any legal implications arising are contained in the body of the report.

4.4 Equality and Health

4.4.1 By successfully preventing the closure of Northamptonshire's refuges in 2016/17, the Borough and District Councils, County Council and the Police & Crime Commissioner have enabled the refuge providers to continue improving the wellbeing and life chances of people with protected characteristics. The action taken, therefore, will have a positive impact on Equality and Diversity.

4.4.2 The action taken to prevent the closure of Northamptonshire's refuges demonstrates the Council's commitment to improving communities and our town as a place to live, tackling discrimination and inequality, and developing a fairer society.

4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

4.5.1 Consultation took place with the County Council, the other Borough and District Councils and the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner in the course of the deliberations and negotiations.

4.6 How the Proposals deliver Priority Outcomes

4.6.1 The action taken to prevent the closure of Northamptonshire's refuges helps meet 3 of the priorities in the Corporate Plan:

- **Safer Communities:** It will help victims of domestic abuse to feel safe and secure by ensuring that they are able to access safe accommodation.
- **Housing for Everyone:** It will provide victims of domestic abuse with access to a safe, secure home and help them achieve and maintain independence.
- **Working Hard and Spending your Money Wisely:** It will prevent the Council from having to provide alternative, more expensive temporary accommodation.

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