Report to the Chief Executive

Staying Close

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Reason for Decision

This paper seeks agreement for Oldham Council to agree the Staying Close Delivery Plan and receive the grant from the Department for Education (DfE).

Recommendations

Approve the proposed grant from the DfE to deliver the Staying Close project, as per the Delivery Plan at Appendix I.

Staying Close

1 **Background**

1.1 The Department for Education (DfE) has invited Local Authorities to participate in the national Staying Close programme, which seeks to improve outcomes for care leavers through enhanced accommodation options, relationship-based support and improved emotional wellbeing provision. Oldham Council has submitted a delivery plan setting out proposals to create a Staying Close offer incorporating Supported Lodgings accommodation, dedicated coordination and mental wellbeing support for care leavers aged 18-25.

1.2 The programme supports the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities and statutory duties towards care leavers by improving access to suitable accommodation, reducing the risk of homelessness, strengthening support networks and promoting independence. The proposal aligns with the Council's priorities to improve outcomes for children in care and care experienced young people and contributes to commitments around prevention, early intervention and supporting vulnerable residents to thrive.

1.3 The DfE has provisionally allocated grant funding of £411,701 to support implementation and delivery of the programme between November 2026 and March 2028, subject to acceptance of the delivery plan.

2 Current Position

2.1 Oldham currently provides a range of support to care leavers through its Leaving Care Service, Personal Adviser offer and wider corporate parenting arrangements. However, the authority does not currently have a dedicated Supported Lodgings programme or Staying Close offer in place.

2.2 The proposed model would establish additional accommodation capacity through Supported Lodgings, provide dedicated Staying Close support and introduce a Mental Health Care Navigator to improve access to emotional wellbeing support. The programme aims to support care leavers who require additional assistance during their transition to adulthood, particularly those who are not eligible for Staying Put arrangements or who may be vulnerable to housing instability.

2.3 The delivery plan anticipates supporting four young people by March 2027 and a further twelve young people during 2027/28 through Supported Lodgings, alongside mental wellbeing support for up to forty care leavers.

3 Options/Alternatives

3.1 Option 1 - Approve the grant and implement the Staying Close Delivery Plan (Recommended)

Advantages:

- Secures up to £411,701 of DfE funding to improve outcomes for care leavers.
- Creates new Supported Lodgings accommodation capacity and expands accommodation choice.
- Improves support for care leavers through dedicated Staying Close coordination and mental wellbeing provision.
- Supports statutory responsibilities towards care leavers and contributes to prevention of homelessness.
- Strengthens the Council's corporate parenting offer and supports improved long-term outcomes.

Disadvantages:

- Requires implementation of a new programme and associated recruitment, governance and performance management arrangements.

3.2 Option 2 - Decline participation in the Staying Close programme

Advantages:

- No requirement to implement the proposed programme or associated staffing and accommodation arrangements.

Disadvantages:

- Loss of access to DfE grant funding.
- Reduced opportunities to improve accommodation options and support available to care leavers.
- Increased risk that care leavers do not benefit from enhanced support designed to reduce homelessness and improve independence outcomes.

4 Preferred Option

4.1 Option 1 is the preferred option.

4.2 Approval of the DfE Staying Close grant and delivery plan will enable Oldham Council to establish a new relationship-based support model for care leavers that combines Supported Lodgings accommodation, dedicated Staying Close coordination and mental wellbeing support. The programme will increase accommodation capacity, improve housing stability and strengthen support for young people transitioning to adulthood.

4.2 The proposal represents an opportunity to secure external funding to enhance the Council's existing Leaving Care offer and further deliver on corporate parenting responsibilities. The programme has clear governance arrangements, defined milestones, identified risks and mitigations, and plans for sustainability through integration into mainstream Leaving Care services.

4.3 Failure to approve the proposal would result in the loss of DfE funding and the associated benefits for care leavers, including access to additional Supported Lodgings accommodation and enhanced support services.

The recommendation is therefore to approve acceptance of the DfE grant and implementation of the Staying Close Delivery Plan as set out in Appendix I.

5 Financial Implications

5.1 The DfE has invited Oldham Council to submit a delivery plan for the Staying Close Offer. The indicative funding is £411,701 but this is subject to the delivery plan being approved by the DfE. The recommended option is to accept the funding which with enable the Leaving Care offer to be further strengthened.

The delivery plan is included in Appendix 1 of the report, and all of the costs are new and will only be incurred once the plan has been ratified by the DfE and a grant agreement is received. It should be noted that the costs for the Mental Health Care Navigator is subject to a separate funding stream and is therefore not included in the £411,701 grant allocation.

(Nicola Harrop – Finance Manager)

6 Legal Implications

6.1 The Council has statutory duties towards eligible, relevant and former relevant children under the Children Act 1989 and the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. The proposed Staying Close programme supports the Council in discharging its duties as a corporate parent and in promoting the welfare, stability and independence of care leavers.

6.2 Acceptance of the Department for Education grant is within the Council's powers and is subject to compliance with the terms and conditions of the grant funding agreement. Delegated authority should be granted to the Exec Director of Childrens Services in consultation with legal services and finance to enter into the necessary grant agreement and associated documentation.

6.3 Where the provision of accommodation, support services or other commissioned wellbeing services is required, officers must ensure compliance with all relevant statutory requirements, including safeguarding, data protection, equality duties and where applicable procurement legislation and the Council's contract procedure rules.

6.4 The report confirms that the grant funding will be to March 2028. Any proposal to continue the service beyond the grant period will require additional consideration and approval.
(Alex Bougatef - Director of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer)

7. Procurement Implications

7.1 There are no immediate procurement implications for receiving the DfE grant. However, Procurement should be consulted with regards to how the grant monies are spent, to ensure expenditure complies with the Council's CPRs and procurement legislation.

Tom Pyne – Assistant Director Procurement

8 Equality Impact, including implications for Children and Young People

8.1 Yes

9 Key Decision

9.1 Yes

10 Key Decision Reference

10.1 KDD-26-11

11 Appendices & Background Papers

11.1 Staying Close Delivery Plan

Approved by the Chief Executive following consultation with the political group leaders who were in attendance as follows:- Councillors: Decision made under the authorisation contained in Section 9C (5) Delegations of Specific Officers of Part 3 (Responsibility for Functions) and Section 3.6 of Part 4 (Executive Procedure Rules) of the Council Constitution for the Chief Executive to take emergency decisions in respect of the Council's executive functions.
Signed: Shelley Kipling, Chief Executive Dated:
Date of Leaders' Consultative meeting:
Summary of feedback from the political group leaders

Appendix I

Staying Close Delivery Plan