

REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

Homelessness Response Strategy

To: Warden and Members of County Council

From: Acting Director of Human Services

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That County Council adopt the Homelessness Response Strategy, as provided in Attachment 1 of Report HS 2025-04, entitled “Oxford County Homelessness Response Strategy”, and that the recommended actions assist to guide the County’s efforts in addressing and preventing homelessness;
2. And further, that Council direct staff to annually review the recommended actions of the Homelessness Response Strategy for consideration in the County’s annual budget process;
3. And further, that Council authorize staff to establish a working group, consisting of up to six members from community partner organizations in the homelessness service system, and up to two County staff, for the purpose of monitoring and implementing the actions of the Homelessness Response Strategy, as well as supporting and improving Coordinated Access, and where relevant, the group be integrated into Safe and Well Oxford to reduce duplication;
4. And further, that Council authorize staff to expand the newly developed County-wide outreach team, consisting of both County and Area Municipal staff, which has been developed to ensure a coordinated and consistent approach to supporting and transitioning individuals out of encampments, to include support from community partners focused on housing stability;
5. And further, that Council authorize staff to pursue the acquisition of an appropriate property, in collaboration with the City of Woodstock, for a future Homelessness Support Centre that seeks to co-locate existing emergency shelter services, provide support services that are flexible and focused on transitioning individuals out of homelessness, address the actions of the Homelessness Response Strategy, and ensure a stable system that supports pathways out of homelessness, including connections with the proposed Homelessness and Addictions Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub/Wellness Centre, and that staff report back to Council with potential funding and implementation considerations;

6. And further, that Council authorize the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee of Council, including the Warden (Chair) and Councillors _____, _____ and _____, for the purpose of providing preliminary feedback on potential locations for a future Homelessness Support Centre, prior to staff reporting back to Council with potential funding and implementation considerations;
7. And further, that staff release a Call for Applications for up to \$500,000 from the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP) allocation that is anticipated from the province for the upcoming funding year (April 1, 2025 to March 31, 2026), for the purpose of inviting proposals from community partners that are focused on transitioning individuals out of homelessness, by providing support services in conjunction with the proposed Homelessness Support Centre and in line with the actions of the Homelessness Response Strategy;
8. And further, that Council authorize the transition of up to 20 units at the County-owned Community Housing project located at 82 Finkle Street, Woodstock, to support the creation of up to ten transitional and ten supportive housing beds, subject to receiving operating funding and supports through the HART Hub/Wellness Centre;
9. And further, that Council authorize staff to implement a more comprehensive rent supplement program that focuses on housing individuals from the community housing waitlist (centralized waitlist), as well as individuals that are struggling to remain housed;
10. And further, that Council authorize staff to work with the City of London, as the Regional Service Manager, to implement the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), with a goal of implementing Coordinated Access and supporting an outcomes-based approach to addressing homelessness, subject to available funding through the Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP);
11. And further, that Council authorize the Chief Administrative Officer and Director of Human Services to execute any agreements associated with the recommendations contained in this report.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The purpose of this report is to present the final Homelessness Response Strategy, the result of collaborative planning aimed at strengthening local commitment to homelessness prevention. Additionally, this report provides recommendations for the development of a local Homelessness Service Centre, in alignment with the outcomes and actions identified in the Homelessness Response Strategy.

- In support of the outcomes of the Strategy, staff are seeking Council's support to focus on a number of initiatives, including, but not limited to, improving Coordinated Access, expanding outreach efforts, creating a working group, allocating future HPP funds in line with the actions of the Strategy, providing transitional/supportive housing units at Finkle Street, expanding the rent supplement program and implementing the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS).
- Based on a review of best practices and the recommendations of the Strategy, staff are also recommending the creation of a Homelessness Support Centre that will offer emergency shelter and support services that are flexible and responsive to the needs of those experiencing homelessness.
- The Strategy is a critical step in understanding specific local homelessness needs, in an effort to provide a variety of actions to assist in improving the system, with a focus on transitioning individuals out of homelessness.

IMPLEMENTATION POINTS

If Council is favorable of the recommendations contained in this report, staff will begin implementing various initiatives, including the establishment of a working group to assist in realizing the actions of Strategy, as well as improving Coordinated Access. In addition, staff will prepare a Call for Applications for anticipated HPP funding in 2025-2026, continue to work with the Oxford Ontario Health Team (OHT) and Woodstock Hospital to secure funding commitments for the transitional and supportive housing units at Finkle Street, implement HIFIS, and expand the rent supplement program.

Staff will also collaborate with the City of Woodstock to identify a suitable property for a future Homelessness Support Centre and seek input from the proposed Ad Hoc Committee, with a commitment to reporting back to Council with potential funding and implementation considerations.

Overall, the findings of the Strategy will serve as a guiding framework for the County's strategic response to homelessness. This will include integration into the annual budget process, informed by anticipated Federal and Provincial funding commitments and key partnerships.

Financial Impact

With respect to the 2025 budget, staff are proposing the following allocations in accordance with existing available municipal and provincial funds, as well as anticipated future provincial HPP funding (Table 1). Overall, the Strategy will support the realignment of existing municipal and anticipated provincial funding, to better meet the needs of the community.

Table 1: Proposed Funding Allocations

Proposed Action Item	Proposed Funding
Homelessness Support Services (in conjunction/within the proposed Homelessness Support Centre)	Up to \$500,000 - anticipated annual HPP funding (2025-2026)
Transitional and Supportive Housing – Finkle Street	Operating: up to \$1.3 million in annual funding through the HART Hub/Wellness Centre (currently for 3 years)
Expanded Rent Supplement Program	Up to \$630,000 in remaining municipal rent supplement funds
HIFIS Implementation	Up to \$50,000 annually - anticipated future HPP funding

Specific financial contributions related to the proposed Homelessness Support Centre will be considered by County Council in a subsequent report.

It should be noted that the outcomes of the Homelessness Response Strategy are intended to inform the annual budgeting process, specifically with respect to the action items, projects and support services for the given year. These action items may be adjusted based on annual budget commitments and anticipated provincial funding to ensure a responsive and sustainable approach to addressing homelessness.

Communications

Recognizing that preventing and addressing homelessness is a shared goal among many stakeholders, consultation played a key role in developing the Strategy. A summary of the various consultation methods is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of Consultation Methods

Consultation Method	Participants	Details
Consultation Workshops (two in-person)	A mix of community partners, County staff and individuals with lived experience	These sessions formed the basis for the Strategy, including the determination of system gaps and areas for improvement. These sessions also included input from those with lived experience to ensure a fulsome understanding of system impacts and inefficiencies.

Consultation Method	Participants	Details
Advisory Team	Community partner organizations and County staff	Assisted to validate the feedback and recommendations that were received from the various consultation methods.
Municipal Survey	Municipal CAOs, By-law and Parks staff, as well as local Business Improvement Associations (BIAs) and Chamber of Commerce	Seeking feedback on the impact of local homelessness.
One-on-one Interviews	Various Community Partners working directly in the Homelessness Service System	Seeking individual feedback on potential improvements and insights into system gaps.
Council Workshop	County Council, SHS Consulting and County staff	Seeking Council input on the overall feedback that was received through the previous consultation methods.

It is also important to note that following the approval of the HART Hub/Wellness Centre, staff met with members of the OHT and Woodstock Hospital, to discuss next steps and determine connections with existing services to ensure consistency and clear system pathways. These discussions have been incorporated into the recommendations of this report.

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 recommendations in this report support 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> <p>Goal 3.4 – Financial sustainability</p>

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

DISCUSSION

Background

On January 26, 2022, County Council passed a resolution in support of [Report HS 2022-01](#), approving the expansion of the emergency shelter to provide 24/7 operations for individuals experiencing homelessness. As a result, the overnight shelter ('The Inn', Woodstock), was expanded from 12 to 25 beds, with additional space secured at College Avenue Church for daytime services. The 24/7 shelter model was fully implemented by October 2022, supported by a combination of provincial and County funding, as outlined in [Report HS 2023-07](#).

Following implementation of the 24/7 shelter model, County Council passed a resolution at the March 8, 2023, meeting, requesting staff to report back on a number of items, including the progress and efforts that had been made with respect to securing a potential permanent location for homelessness shelter services, with support from the City of Woodstock and other applicable community organizations. For background purposes, on July 12, 2023, staff presented a report in closed session regarding this resolution. At that time, it was determined that securing a permanent location remained a long-term goal. As such, as an interim measure, staff recommended several immediate temporary actions in [Report HS 2023-14](#) to address the current situation. These actions have since been implemented and include:

- Expanding the overnight shelter ("The Inn") from 25 to 55 beds.
- Implementation of an overnight emergency shelter in Tillsonburg for the winter months.
- Continued use of hotel rooms for families seeking temporary shelter accommodations.
- Increased outreach response through the Mobile Health Outreach Bus (MHOB) and County Community Access Navigator, as well as implementation of Municipal 511 for encampment response.

Through Report HS 2023-14, staff also recommended the development of a Homelessness Response Strategy to review the current homelessness service system and provide recommendations for addressing existing pressures, identifying potential improvements, and establishing long-term solutions. The Strategy aimed to take a community-based approach to addressing homelessness across the County. Following Council's approval, a consultant was retained, and work began in March 2024.

While the Homelessness Response Strategy was being developed, the City of Woodstock received a \$1,990,736 contribution through the Building Faster Fund (BFF) — a three-year program providing up to \$400 million annually to municipalities committed to achieving their 2031 housing targets. The funding is permitted to be utilized towards housing-enabling core infrastructure, affordable and attainable housing, and homelessness service hubs. In light of these criteria, City Council passed a resolution on November 21, 2024, directing that the BFF funds be allocated toward partnering with the County to acquire a property for the creation of a new homelessness service centre. Subsequently, County Council passed a resolution on November 27, 2024, directing staff to report back on how the BFF could be used to develop a Homelessness Service Centre, with a focus on transitioning individuals out of homelessness.

Additionally, on January 27, 2025, the Province announced funding to support the creation of a Homelessness and Addictions Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub/Wellness Centre in the City of Woodstock. This proposal also included up to \$1.3 million for supportive housing. For clarity, it is important to note that the HART Hub/Wellness Centre is not an emergency shelter; rather, a treatment center designed specifically to address mental health and addiction needs. The details of this Centre are provided later in this report.

With consideration for the above, this report seeks to present the final Homelessness Response Strategy, the result of collaborative planning aimed at strengthening local commitment to homelessness prevention, as well as address the resolution that was passed by County Council respecting the BFF and how this funding could be used to develop a Homelessness Service Centre, with a focus on transitioning individuals out of homelessness.

Comments

Homelessness Needs – By-Name List

The need for emergency shelter is reflected in the growing number of individuals on the County's By-Name List, as shown in Table 3 below. It is important to note that the By-Name List was initiated in July 2022, with implementation taking place in 2023. In addition, only individuals that are willing to be identified as experiencing homelessness are accounted for.

Table 3: By-Name List and Contributing Factors to Homelessness

Date (as of)	Number of Actively Homeless Individuals	Most Significant Contributing Factors (individuals)	Originating Municipality
February 2024	135	Mental Health – 109 Substance Abuse – 79 Domestic Violence – 28	Woodstock – 93 Tillsonburg – 31 Ingersoll – 5 Norwich – 1 Zorra – 1 Blandford-Blenheim – 1 Other – 2
February 2025	159	Mental Health – 138 Substance Abuse – 115 Domestic Violence – 12	Woodstock – 128 Tillsonburg – 20 Ingersoll – 10 Blandford-Blenheim – 1

The most predominant factors contributing to homelessness include mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence, with the majority of individuals originating from the City of Woodstock. While the Wellness Centre will now provide an opportunity for many of these individuals to seek treatment for mental health and addictions, there is still a need for a stable shelter system to support appropriate referrals, ongoing support before and after treatment, as well as continued support for those that are not able to access treatment or experiencing homelessness due to other contributing factors, or risks, such as age (youth/senior), disabilities, and the presence of dependents (families).

Current Emergency Shelter Services and Identified Barriers

As shown in Table 4, the County's current 24/7 Emergency Shelter system consists of varying locations and hours.

Table 4: Current Emergency Shelter Locations and Hours

Location	Hours	Target Demographic
The Inn – Woodstock Old St. Paul's Church 723 Dundas Street, Woodstock	Overnight 7 days a week 4:00pm to 8:00am	All demographics, with accessibility limitations
College Avenue Church 18/22 Wilson Street, Woodstock	Day Space Monday to Friday 8:00am to 4:00pm	All demographics, with accessibility limitations

Location	Hours	Target Demographic
CMHA Office 522 Peel Street, Woodstock	Day Space Saturday and Sunday 8:00am to 4:00pm	All demographics, with accessibility limitations
The Inn Out of the Cold – Tillsonburg Avondale United Church 10 Harvey Street, Tillsonburg	Overnight November 1 to May 1 7:00pm to 8:00am	All demographics, with accessibility limitations
DASO	Overnight	Women fleeing domestic violence

While 24/7 services are currently available, the multiple locations and varying hours present challenges in terms of delivering efficient and appropriate support services to those experiencing homelessness. In developing the Strategy, a number of barriers were identified that prevent proper use of the current emergency shelter services that are available, including:

- Space usage limitations related to the function and ownership of the day and overnight shelters in Woodstock, including:
 - Guest storage
 - Pet permissions
 - Congregate bunking
 - Accessibility and inclusion accommodations
 - Duration of stay
- Substance influence
- Consistent and scheduled community partner support on-site

Considering the above, alternative approaches are needed to ensure the homelessness service system effectively provides pathways out of homelessness. This includes addressing barriers that hinder proper access to supports, thereby facilitating the transition of individuals from encampments to emergency shelters and, ultimately, to stable housing.

Current Overnight Emergency Shelter Usage

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, following expansion of the ‘The Inn – Woodstock’ in March 2023, as well as the addition of the temporary overnight space in Tillsonburg in January 2024, capacity has not been a concern. That said, this is largely the result of the barriers that were identified in the previous section of this report.

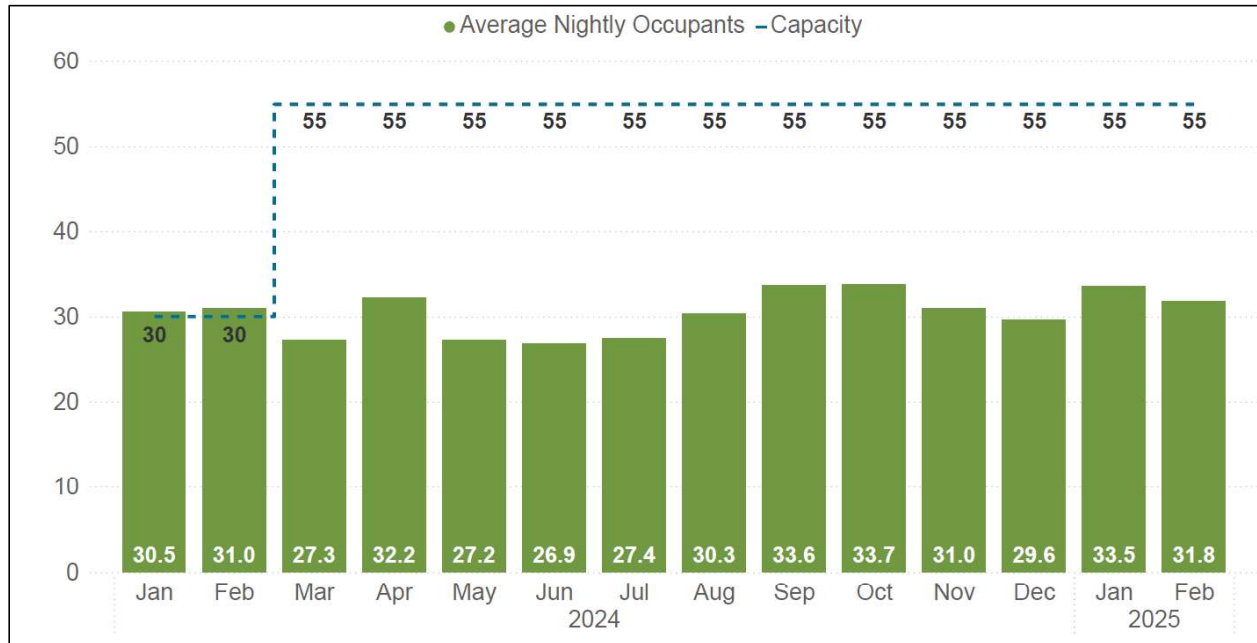


Figure 1: Emergency Shelter Capacity (The Inn – Woodstock)

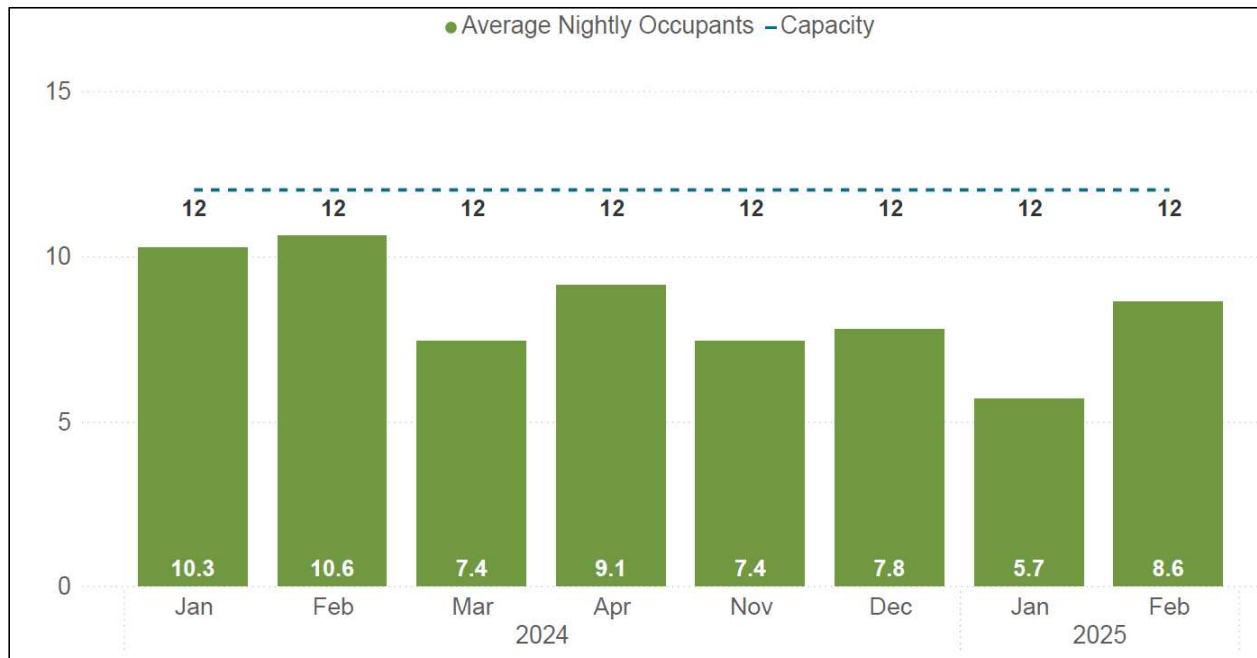


Figure 2: Emergency Shelter Capacity (The Inn – Tillsonburg)

Capacity issues typically result in individuals being turned away from shelter services or temporarily accommodated in motels. While this is the case, motels are not an ideal emergency shelter solution due to inconsistent availability, high costs, and the absence of staffing supports that could help households secure more appropriate, permanent housing. In addition, motels

are typically reserved for individuals who cannot be accommodated by emergency service providers, such as families.

Motel stays are also not contracted services, meaning staff have minimal oversight or input into daily operations. Additionally, motels are not part of Coordinated Access or the broader homelessness system of care, which results in reduced levels of housing stability services.

It should also be noted that a number of individuals are living precariously in encampments, primarily across the urban municipalities. While these encampments are a symptom of many factors, such as the housing crisis, increasing costs of living, inadequate income supports, and other social difficulties such as substance abuse and mental health illness, they are also partly the result of barriers that prevent access and support at emergency shelter locations, as detailed in the following section.

Emergency Shelter Services – Best Practices

Emergency shelter needs continue to grow in complexity, with these centres playing an increasing role as the front door to more permanent housing solutions and supports. As such, a growing number of communities, including St. Thomas, Midland, Sarnia, Waterloo, Cambridge, and London, are moving towards a single-location 24/7 emergency shelter model, with a focus on reducing barriers and providing on-site supports to transition individuals out of homelessness.

A review of best practices reveals that effective shelter systems must focus on pathways out of homelessness, with a housing-first approach that integrates necessary supports. This approach focuses on reducing barriers to access shelter and supports, with a goal of assisting individuals to access appropriate housing options as quickly as possible.

This approach aligns with the 'low-barrier model', which refers to systems with limited sobriety and income requirements, minimal restrictions for entry and stays, as well as access to supports that focus on pathways out of homelessness. These shelter models accommodate individuals regardless of previous non-compliance with housing arrangements or support plans. This approach also addresses factors that may discourage individuals from seeking shelter, such as providing safe storage for personal belongings and ensuring separate accommodations for different demographics (e.g. men and women).

While low-barrier shelters may include limited sobriety requirements, they are not intended to be safe consumption sites. Instead, the emphasis is on providing shelter for individuals who may be under the influence, provided their behavior does not pose a risk to other guests or staff.

In addition to offering 24-hour accommodation, these shelters may provide a reservation system or extended stays for individuals who are accessing appropriate supports focused on pathways out of homelessness. Ensuring easy and immediate access to shelter also requires significant collaboration with outreach and community support partners, both onsite and in the community. Table 5 provides an overview of municipalities that have adopted or are working towards this emergency shelter model.

Table 5: Emergency Shelter Review

Municipality	Capacity	Hours	Details
St. Thomas	55 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite beds with extended stays permitted for access to supports. • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Congregate private bunking and restroom facilities (men, women, priority groups, etc.) • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • In-community support from local police (special constables), hospital and outreach team
Midland	21 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite beds with extended stays permitted for access to supports. • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Congregate private bunking and restroom facilities (men, women, priority groups, etc.) • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • In-community outreach support from community partners
Sarnia	25 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite beds with extended stays permitted for access to supports. • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Congregate bunking with private rooms for families • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • In-community support from local police (special constables), hospital and outreach team

Municipality	Capacity	Hours	• Details
Waterloo	Approx. 100 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite beds geared to men and couples, single/double room occupancy with extended stays permitted for access to supports. • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • Service restrictions for behaviours. • In-community support from outreach team
Cambridge	Approx. 78 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite beds geared to families and singles with extended stays permitted for access to supports. • Individual family units and divided congregate bunking (females and priority groups) • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • In-community support from outreach team
London – Homelessness Hubs (varying locations)	Approx. 30 individuals	24/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reducing barriers • Respite and transitional beds. • Guest Storage • Laundry facilities • Daily on-site support from varying community partners • In-community support from local police (special constables), emergency services and outreach team

Homelessness Response Strategy

Lessons Learned

While the final Strategy marks the end of the community-driven process, it is the beginning of a process to implement the actions that have been developed. Before detailing the actions of the Strategy, it is important to provide an overview of the 10 system gaps that were identified (Attachment 1, page 14), based on the feedback that was received through the extensive consultation process, the various data measures and system level mapping. These gaps include:

1. Lack of Secure Tenure: The rising cost of living is creating more instances of unstable housing, forcing renters into vulnerable situations. This, coupled with a lack of protection for renters against rapid rent increases and unfair evictions, has widened the pathway to homelessness.
2. Inconsistent Access to Services: service navigation and advocacy support is not guaranteed, and success often depends on individual staff capacity. Some services, particularly food programs, are offered on varying schedules, which requires individuals to travel, putting the onus on individuals who are unsheltered to chase supports.
3. Stigma and Discrimination: The stigma faced by individuals experiencing homelessness creates barriers to accessing housing, support services and employment, causing feelings of hopelessness and isolation.
4. Lack of Capacity to Implement Coordinated Access: The Coordinated Access system, including the By-Name List, requires significant capacity and resources to maintain. Current resourcing does not enable the County and community partners to seamlessly coordinate access for individuals experiencing homelessness. There is a need for greater and sustained buy-in and commitment to ensure partners can appropriately connect clients to services.
5. External Pressures Influencing Program Design: community organizations have recently shifted staffing and resources to better navigate the landscape of homelessness supports. Furthermore, a lack of stable and adequate funding often results in a scarcity mindset, which invites program design that restricts access.
6. Lack of Connections and Sharing between Partners: in the current system, individual staff bear the burden of maintaining and building new connections. Thus, practices around By-Name List intake are not widespread through the different partner organizations. Some organizations are better able to connect their clients to housing supports, whereas others without connections to the County or knowledge of the system, struggle to provide the same information.
7. Limited Connections between Healthcare and Homelessness System: limited connection between hospitals, the County and community partners exacerbates points of crisis and leaves individuals without support once they are discharged and ready to re-enter the community. As hospitals are not currently Coordinated Access partners, there is a critical gap in the network of services touchpoints in the community. With the recent announcement of the HART Hub/Wellness Centre, there is an opportunity to improve the connection between healthcare, community partner organizations and emergency shelter providers.
8. Coordinated Access does not Connect to Circle of Care: a lack of transparency has created barriers for frontline staff in partner organizations and disincentivized full participation in the implementation of the By-Name List. The current structure of the system does not allow partners to see who else is supporting their client, and thus, there is an inability to strategically coordinate support services.

9. **Lack of Capacity to Meet Needs:** The greater complexity of need, without adequate supports, has made it difficult for individuals to find and maintain housing, particularly if individuals have experienced chronic homelessness. Those who have experienced chronic homelessness typically require deeper support. This means wraparound support after being housed, including mental health and addictions support, healthcare, advocacy, and counselling.
10. **Lack of Stable Housing:** despite recent investments, the supply of transitional/supportive and affordable housing is not sufficient to meet the needs of the community. Additionally, the depth of support community providers are able to offer is not sufficient to meet the complexity of needs in the community.

Actions

To provide an appropriate response to homelessness, it is critical that these gaps are addressed. In this respect, the Strategy identifies a total of 49 actions, under main eight goals and 20 accompanying strategies. For Council's information, the goals, strategies and accompanying major actions, are summarized in Table 6, with the fulsome list of actions starting on page 30 of Attachment 1.

Table 6: Homelessness Response Strategy – Overarching Actions

Goals	Total No. of Actions in Strategy	Most Significant Actions
Build System Capacity	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a working group to implement the actions of the strategy, including members from community partners working in the homelessness service system. Create and prioritize opportunities for joint operational funding for coordinated service delivery, particularly to meet high acuity needs. Establish a formal process for assessing and adjusting program rules (through service provider funding agreements) to best reflect the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness in the County.
Streamline Service Navigation	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement Homelessness Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) to manage the By-Name List and support Coordinated Access, ensuring sufficient County staff capacity and consultation with community partners to ensure successful roll-out. Implement further training and education on the By-Name List, HIFIS and Coordinated Access for all community partners with a focus on emphasizing the benefits of high-quality By-Name Data and ensuring consistent application within and across organizations. Integrate common requirements around the By-Name List and Coordinated access into service provider funding agreements. Increase co-located services, providing increased opportunity for in-person outreach between organizations, while ensuring an appropriate balance of services across municipalities.

Goals	Total No. of Actions in Strategy	Most Significant Actions
Act Before Crisis	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review program rules for existing financial assistance programs (e.g. rent supplements) to ensure accessibility and reliability for households in need. • Develop and implement an awareness campaign around preventing homelessness, including strategies to maintain housing and potential avenues for support. • Create and maintain a 'cheat sheet' of existing programs that can support successful tenancies, including assistance with utility costs and first and last month's rent.
Uphold Tenant Rights	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize staff resources to assist and educate both landlords and tenants, with a focus on providing pathways to mediation support, if needed. • Deliver education for landlords, tenants, local law enforcement, and other community members about tenancy agreements, rights and responsibilities, and avenues for support, (e.g., RentSmart). • Advocate to the provincial government for more funding to support legal aid and legal support at the Landlord-Tenant Board.
Help People Grow	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase access to co-located, community support programs, to provide opportunities for individuals experiencing homelessness to build connections and community, with a focus on transitioning out of homelessness. • Expand cross-county outreach to individuals experiencing homelessness, following best practices around assertive and housing-focused engagement, including continued work through the County Outreach Team (including area municipal staff).
Provide Equitable and Stable Access	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with the Oxford OHT and Woodstock Hospital (through the proposed HART Hub/Wellness Centre) to ensure coordination with homelessness support services, including integration of client pathways for individuals struggling with mental health and additions, and the transition of individuals into transitional and supportive housing. • Increase access to washrooms, showers, and other necessities for individuals experiencing homelessness. • Expand existing emergency shelter programs to address gaps and barriers (accommodations for specific demographics, 24/7 single-location programming, greater geographic coverage, limited stays), as well as integration with the proposed HART Hub/Wellness Centre. • Review and update policies at emergency shelters and transitional/supportive housing sites to reduce barriers to entry (e.g. identification and residency requirements, lack of designated area for safe use, hours of service, restrictions on family members staying together or visiting). • Allocate a portion of annual HPP funding to community partners that are working to transition individuals out of homelessness by providing support services in conjunction with emergency shelter services and working in line with the actions of the Strategy.

Goals	Total No. of Actions in Strategy	Most Significant Actions
Increase Access to Housing Across the Continuum	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transform emergency shelters to a housing-focused approach, building in community consultation, the use of best practices, and a focus on co-located support services. • Assign resources to enhance landlord engagement, including relationship-building to build a network of landlords that will provide non-discriminatory, safe, and affordable housing, with a focus on providing rent supplements. • Continue to work in support of the Master Housing Strategy, with a focus on increasing the supply of various housing options, including supportive, transitional and affordable.
Support Lasting Housing Stability	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassemble resources to develop/expand a Housing Support and Stability team that will provide support in specific residential buildings and co-located support hubs (i.e. emergency shelters) comprised of multiple service providers, including mental health and addictions services, community health support, case management, and employment services. • Develop a life skills program for individuals that have recently been rehoused outside of County owned housing.

These actions have been used to inform the recommendations of this report, as well as the proposed next steps detailed in the following sections.

Proposed Next Steps

1. Homelessness Support Centre

As previously noted, current emergency shelter services are provided at various locations, with varying hours. As a result, guests are required to relocate at multiple times of the day, leaving minimal ability to provide adequate and stable supports to ensure individuals can appropriately transition out of homelessness.

Based on best practices, it appears that many municipalities are working towards a housing-focused emergency shelter model, with appropriate on-site support services and a focus on reducing barriers. This model focuses on providing equitable stays for individuals that are experiencing homelessness, with separate areas for women, men, families and other demographics, as well as the ability to extend stays for limited periods, provided individuals are accessing on-site supports. While this model is often referred to as 'low-barrier', it does not mean 'no-barriers'. Municipalities and Service Providers still have the ability to set reasonable restrictions, particularly with respect to substance abuse.

In the County's context, and in line with the actions of the Strategy, there is a need to acquire a more stable shelter location, to which a secure and efficient support system can be developed. This includes consideration for a new location to which the County can have greater influence over both physical and operational changes to ensure services are meeting the needs of those experiencing homelessness. For example, under the current arrangement with the County's

primary emergency shelter provider, the County is not party to the existing leases for each of the three separate locations. This not only creates difficulties in terms of long-term planning, but it also creates instability in the system and limits the ability to reduce barriers that prevent individuals from accessing services (i.e. individuals from encampment).

The physical limitations of the current arrangement also reduce the ability for ongoing on-site support services from community partner agencies. While there is currently dedicated office space at the day space, there is limited availability at the overnight and weekend shelters. In addition, community partners have varying office hours, with many being inconsistent, which creates a gap in support. In this respect, there is a need to move towards a more stable emergency shelter location to ensure an effective system of support, and advancement of a housing-focused emergency shelter system.

To support this action item, staff are proposing to develop an Ad Hoc Committee of Council to ensure an efficient and fulsome review process, as well as coordination with Area Municipal partners, prior to recommending next steps to Council.


HART Hub/Wellness Centre Connection


While the proposed HART Hub/Wellness Centre is expected to be a significant component of the homelessness support system, it is important to note that it will not capture the full extent of the support that is necessary for those experiencing homelessness. The HART Hub and Wellness Centre are considered to be different components of the system, defined as follows:


- HART Hub: the Hart Hub refers to the system of care that is available to support individuals that are experiencing homelessness with accessing mental health and addictions support through the Wellness Centre. The HART Hub primarily refers to the group of community partners that are currently working in the homelessness system, that could facilitate both referrals into the Wellness Center, as well as ongoing support following the exit of an individual experiencing homelessness. While many of these system components are already in place, there is a need to better co-locate and align services to facilitate a clear pathway of care and support.
- Wellness Centre: refers to the mental health and addiction recovery centre that is proposed to be located at 16 Graham Street, Woodstock. This component will be primarily operated by the Woodstock Hospital and is considered the 'medical' component of the system. The Wellness Centre will be available to the broader community, not just individuals experiencing homelessness. This Centre will provide the following services:
 - Withdrawal (10 beds) and Stability/Recovery (40 beds) Support - primary and psychiatric care, mental health and addictions services, including counseling, brief therapy, assertive community treatment, addiction treatment, Mental Health Emergency and Response Team crisis services, Rapid Access Addictions Medicine, and withdrawal management.
 - Transitional Housing (10 beds) – with mental health and addictions support, housing stability/eviction prevention, and housing case management support.

To better understand the various components of an individual's journey through the homelessness system, including connections to the Hart Hub and Wellness Centre, staff worked with the OHT and Woodstock Hospital to develop client journey map that is provided in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Homelessness Support Journey (including the Proposed HART Hub/Wellness Centre)

Component	Steps in Journey	Details	Stakeholders
HART Hub (Emergency Shelter and Community Support Partners) 	Step 1: Initial HART Hub Visit	An individual experiencing homelessness visits any HART hub (Community) partner (i.e. County Human Services, Emergency Shelter, Hospital, CMHA, MHOB, OCCHC etc.) and is screened to identify needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County • Community Partners • System Navigators (HART Funded)
	Step 2: Assessment and Referrals	<p>Based on outcome of assessment tool, HART hub (Community) partner directs the individual to the appropriate support services.</p> <p>This may include a referral to other support agencies, or a transfer to the emergency shelter to ensure continued access to on-site supports.</p> <p>If individuals require access to the Wellness Centre, HART Hub (Community) partners can assist with the intake process.</p>	

Component	Steps in Journey	Details	Stakeholders
Wellness Centre 	Step 3: Withdrawal Support	If admitted to the Wellness centre, individuals will access withdrawal management beds (10 total), with ongoing support services, including primary care, substance use treatment planning, addiction medicine. This step is expected to take 7 to 10 days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodstock Hospital
	Step 4: Stability and Recovery	Individuals 'graduate' into stability and recovery beds based on their identified goals (40 beds total). This step is expected to take up to 3 months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodstock Hospital
	Step 5: Referral to Transitional Housing	<p>Following completion of stability and recovery, individuals are eligible to continue treatment in sober living transitional housing for a period of 3 to 6 months. This step includes extensive support services through community support partners that are funded through the HART Hub.</p> <p>Individuals are required to be on the By-Name List to access these sober transitional beds. Supports will be provided based on the individual's level of acuity and identified goals.</p> <p>This step refers to the proposed 10 transitional beds at the County's community housing site located at 82 Finkle Street, Woodstock, as well as other transitional housing locations in the County as they become available.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodstock Hospital • County • Community Partners

Component	Steps in Journey	Details	Stakeholders
HART Hub 	Step 6: Referral to Supportive Housing	<p>Following a successful duration in the sober transitional housing beds, clients 'graduate' into supportive housing for a period up to 12 months. This step also includes support services via community partner agencies that are funded through the HART Hub. The supports provided at this step are not as intensive.</p> <p>This step also refers to the proposed 10 supportive beds at the County's community housing site located at 82 Finkle Street, Woodstock, as well as other supportive housing locations in the County as they become available. Acuity and client goals will be used to determine appropriate placement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County • Community Partners
Existing System of Support	Step 6: Permanent Housing	<p>Following a successful stay in supportive housing, tenants are expected to transition into more permanent housing, such as affordable housing or market rental housing with rent supplement support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County • Community Partners

If an individual that is experiencing homelessness is not able to access the Wellness Centre due to a waitlist, or other factors, they will remain in the homelessness system, with a potential referral back to the emergency shelter for continued assessment and support until a space is available at the Wellness Centre. While the HART Hub component refers to the system of care that is available to support individuals that are experiencing homelessness with access into the Wellness Centre, the current function of this component of the system is not consistent, with many partners working in silos across different locations. In light of this, the HART Hub/Wellness Centre presents a greater need to co-locate support services, so individuals that are experiencing homelessness may continue to be assessed and supported by a variety of community support partners, while awaiting access to the Wellness Centre.

Overall, there is a greater need to improve the pathway through the entire system of care for those experiencing homelessness, including providing a location that would facilitate the co-location of community support partners that could be part of the HART Hub, which would then lead into the Wellness Centre, as well as the homelessness support system.

2. Continued Focus on Transitional and Supportive Housing

As part of the 2024 Human Services Business Plan and Budget, Council approved New Initiative (NI) 2024-10 – Homelessness Response Strategy, allocating up to \$2.6 million in both development and operating funding (\$2.1 million for development and \$500,000 for base

operating) to support the creation of supportive/transitional housing for individuals on the County's By-Name List (BNL). Through Report HS 2024-08, these funds were designated to support the development of three transitional housing projects: two in the Town of Ingersoll and one in the City of Woodstock.

This type of housing is essential to support the transition of individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to more permanent housing options. It provides structure, support, supervision, life skills, and, in some cases, education and training. The first step toward housing stability is helping individuals obtain and maintain a home that addresses their unique needs. To continue supporting transitions and pathways out of homelessness, additional supportive and transitional housing is needed for varying levels of acuity.

The Strategy details significant action in the areas of supportive and transitional housing, including the need for greater wrap-around supports across the housing continuum. Furthermore, with the introduction of the HART Hub/Wellness Centre, additional transitional and supportive housing is needed for Steps 5 and 6 of an individual's journey through the system of care. To facilitate the transition of individuals from the Wellness Centre and provide an additional level of transitional and supportive housing for those experiencing homelessness, staff recommend transitioning up to 20 units at the County-owned community housing project located at 82 Finkle Street, Woodstock. These units would be converted through a phased approach, following the relocation of the existing tenants into appropriate accommodations. Overall, this model will provide a clear pathway from the emergency shelter and Wellness Centre and subsequent permanent housing, which supports the overall goal of the Strategy.

This proposal will be facilitated via funding and support services through the HART Hub/Wellness Centre. At this time, the Ministry of Health has approved annual funding in the amount of \$1.3 million, for a period of three years, to cover wraparound support services from community partner organizations, security, and ongoing maintenance costs. While the funding had not been formally confirmed at the time of drafting this report, this partnership will need to be formalized before proceeding with this project. In addition, as the funding has only been committed for a period of 3 years, staff will work with the OHT and Woodstock Hospital to develop a stability/exit plan in the event that funding is not extended beyond the first term. After reviewing the condition of the existing building, it was further determined that minimal renovations are necessary to update the units and create an on-site office for support services staff. These minor changes can be accomplished utilizing the existing approved budget that is in place for this site.

3. HPP Funding – Supports

The HPP is a provincially funded program that supports Service Managers to provide affordable housing and support services for individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness. HPP is intended to be flexible, so Service Managers can allocate funding to where it will have the greatest impact on reducing and preventing homelessness.

The County's HPP allocation for 2024-2025 was \$2,922,000, with the majority provided to support the emergency shelter system and supportive housing. The remaining funds were allocated to community outreach and support services, with funding disbursed on a per project basis throughout the funding year.

While the per project methods has been used in the past, in light of the changing needs of those experiencing homelessness, there is a need to focus funding to those community partners that are directly working to transition individuals out of homelessness. As such, staff are proposing to allocate a portion of the planned 2025-2026 HPP allocation (which is currently expected to be \$2,922,000), for the purpose of issuing a call for applications, specifically aimed at community partners that provide supports and outreach for those experiencing homelessness. This approach will ensure the proposed Homelessness Support Centre is adequately resourced, to support individuals on pathways out of homelessness. This will also ensure the County is able to oversee support services to ensure a consistent approach.

It should be noted that the funding and supports provided through the HART Hub/Wellness Centre will be monitored to ensure no further duplication of services, and potential resource efficiencies, if possible.

4. HIFIS Implementation

HIFIS was developed by the federal government for the purpose of supporting the day-to-day operations of service providers working in the homelessness service system. As a comprehensive data collection and case management system, HIFIS enables participating service providers to access, collect, and share real-time homelessness data. This ensures individuals and families accessing services are prioritized and referred to the appropriate resources at the right time.

Overall, HIFIS supports communities by allowing multiple service providers to access real-time data and refer clients to services, as needed. This tool is critical for ensuring a collaborative approach to homelessness service delivery, enabling partners to coordinate case management and service tracking within one system. This benefits both clients and service providers delivering support. Overall, the implementation of HIFIS will significantly improve collaboration and information sharing between service providers, ensuring better use of Coordinated Access.

Given the significant technological requirements of implementing this program, the City of London has offered to serve as the regional service manager for HIFIS. Staff have been in discussions with City of London staff and will work on an implementation plan for the rollout in late 2025.

5. Working Group and Coordinated Access

As the Strategy includes a variety of action items involving multiple partner organizations, it is recommended that a group of community partners be established to ensure both short- and long-term implementation. Overall, the working group will ensure a collaborative approach to addressing homelessness while fostering continued buy-in from community partners.

The Strategy also identifies a gap with respect to the use of Coordinated Access, which enables community partners to match individuals experiencing homelessness to housing and supports that meet their unique needs. It aims to connect the various partners working in the homelessness service system and centralize efforts to coordinate services. The By-Name List is a feature of Coordinated Access and works to collect the information required about individuals' unique situations and needs. Together, they are vital systems of service delivery that drive the response to homelessness.

As this group will include community partner agencies that are already connected to Coordinated Access, staff are also proposing to utilize this group's expertise to strengthen the use of Coordinated Access, to foster buy-in and promote fulsome support for those experiencing homelessness. This group can also assist to ensure HIFIS is fully implemented.

6. Rent Supplement Program

Due to increasing rental prices, it has become progressively difficult to maintain a supply of private units to accommodate individuals on the Centralized Waitlist, even with the support of a rent supplement. As landlords can charge higher rental rates, rent supplements have needed to increase significantly to bridge the gap between what an individual can afford, and what the market dictates. While the County has successfully provided several rent supplements, in most cases, the rental accommodation is either pursued by the client or provided by an existing non-profit.

Despite these efforts, there is an increasing need to seek additional private rental units to expand housing options. To address this, staff propose an expansion to the existing rent supplement program by introducing an application process for landlords seeking to offer units to individuals on the Centralized Waitlist. Rental units with excessively high rents or those offering luxury accommodations and amenities will not be considered. Before an application is approved, each unit will be inspected, and the rent will be negotiated. Once the application is approved, the landlord will enter into a Rent Supplement Agreement with the County.

Individuals receiving a rent supplement will pay the landlord based on the rent that would be payable for a rent-geared-to-income unit, with the County covering the difference to meet the full market rent charged by the landlord. The landlord will collect the rent, maintain the property, and provide the same services and repairs as they would for all other tenants in the building.

Funds from the existing rent supplement budget will continue to be utilized and leveraged in support the expanded program. Any future funding requests will be brought before Council during the annual business and budget planning process.

7. Resources and Assistance for Tenants and Landlords

The Strategy identifies a lack of secure tenure as a gap in the homelessness service system. While this gap is the result of larger economic changes, it does signify a need to ensure tenants and landlords are adequately supported in these challenging times, particularly with respect to the Landlord and Tenant Board, lease execution, and connections with other support services to assist individuals facing eviction.

This assistance would primarily be tied to the County's housing stock, Housing Provider portfolios, and affordable housing projects, as well as rent supplement units, but will be made available on the County's website for greater use by community partners, the public and those accessing other programs (i.e. My Second Unit). Communication and education are critical in addressing these gaps.

CONCLUSIONS

Addressing homelessness requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and compassionate approach. The Homelessness Response Strategy proposes a multi-faceted response that focuses on improving the current service system to foster more successful and supported transitions out of homelessness. By continuing to invest in transitional and supportive housing, strengthening community partnerships, and continuing to support pathways from encampments to permanent housing, with access to mental health and additions services, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Sustained collaboration between various levels of government and community partners is crucial to the success of this Strategy. Working together to address the recommendations of this report and the actions of the Strategy will ensure the implementation of effective and appropriate actions to respond to homelessness.

SIGNATURES

Report author:


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ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1 Oxford County Homelessness Response Strategy, March 26, 2025









Homelessness Response Strategy

Final Audit Report

2025-03-19

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