

OPEN

Adults and Health Committee

22 September 2025

Future Options for Catering in Oakmere and Willowmere Extra Care Housing Schemes

Report of: Helen Charlesworth-May, Executive Director of Adults, Health and Integration

Report Reference No: AH/04/2025-26

Ward(s) Affected: Handforth, Middlewich

For Decision

Purpose of Report

- 1 Following the report on future catering options for Oakmere and Willowmere that was presented at Adults and Health Committee on 20 January 2025 and the decisions made at that meeting, this report outlines actions taken since then to understand the resident's catering needs, assess market interest in delivering a service in the schemes, and identifies a preferred future service model.
- 2 Members are asked to note the catering review (Annex 1) and the actions taken to date, and to approve the procurement of one or more new service providers.

Executive Summary

- 3 At the Adults and Health Committee in January 2025, a report was presented explaining that the decision to close the schools' catering service had led to the closure of the catering service in two extra care schemes – Oakmere and Willowmere. Following resident engagement, an interim hot meals delivery service had been arranged pending a review of the long-term future of the provision.
- 4 The Committee agreed the interim arrangements to allow time for a full review and decision on the long-term catering options. Officers were asked to explore weekend and Bank Holiday meal provision with the interim providers. In addition, the Committee requested a review of the decision-making that led to the closure of the extra care catering services, which was

completed and reported to the Audit & Governance Committee on 31 March 2025 which can be found in the background papers section of this report.

- 5 Options for the catering provision have now been reviewed, supported by two further rounds of resident engagement (one by the operator of the extra care schemes, Advantage, and one by the Council) building on the results of the initial survey, and face-to-face feedback.
- 6 The full review is annexed to this report. It concludes that the preferred future model for the catering provision is to procure onsite providers for both schemes.
- 7 Therefore, the Adults & Health Committee is asked to note the review, and approve the proposed procurement, which will be informed by resident feedback and soft market testing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Adults and Health Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the review of the catering provision in Oakmere and Willowmere (Annex 1) and the findings of that review, including the risk of market failure.
2. Agree to the procurement of a new service provider via an open procurement and delegate authority to the Executive Director of Adults and Health to undertake the procurement and award a contract to the successful provider(s), on terms and conditions to be agreed in consultation with the Governance, Compliance and Monitoring Officer.

Background

- 8 Oakmere (Handforth) and Willowmere (Middlewich) are two of five extra care schemes in Cheshire developed under Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arrangements in 2009. They are managed by Advantage (Cheshire) Limited, a company established specifically for this purpose. Within the project agreement it specifies the responsibility for catering falls to the local authority.
- 9 The report presented at the Adults and Health Committee on 20 January 2025 explained that the decision to close the schools catering service had led to the closure of the catering services at Oakmere and Willowmere. Following resident engagement about the then potential closure, hot meals delivery services were introduced at each scheme as an interim measure while longer-term options were reviewed. These services are provided by two organisations, one in each scheme. The Committee asked officers to explore the feasibility of weekend and Bank Holiday meal provision. Unfortunately, this was not viable at Willowmere, and Oakmere's provider was already offering chilled meals on Fridays to cover weekend period as they were unable to deliver hot meals over the weekend. Concerns were expressed about the impact on Adult Services of a decision made by the

Children and Families Committee to close the school meals service. These were addressed by the Audit and Governance committee in their meeting on 31 March 2025.

- 10 The catering review, annexed to this report, includes resident feedback, market insight, sustainability considerations, and an appraisal of future options. It describes the interim hot meal delivery service, drawing on provider reports and resident engagement. Eighteen Oakmere residents and seventeen Willowmere residents reported that they had tried the services, with satisfaction scores of 2.9/5.0 at Oakmere and 4.2/5.0 at Willowmere. Provider data indicates that fewer meals are being delivered than were served in the previous onsite restaurants. Further details from residents and the providers may be found in [Catering Review - Interim Arrangements](#).
- 11 The review also includes findings from Advantage's annual survey conducted in February 2025, which had a high response rate from both schemes. For future provision, both groups favoured onsite catering, open seven days a week, with their preferred mealtimes being lunch and then breakfast. Further details of the survey results may be found in [Catering Review - Advantage Survey](#).
- 12 In May 2025, the Council held drop-in sessions and re-surveyed residents from both schemes. Most supported an onsite catering service with seven-day access, hot lunches, and snacks available throughout the day. Further details of the responses to this engagement may be found in [Catering Review - Future Options Survey](#).
- 13 There were two responses to the soft market testing carried out in June 2025. Both respondents demonstrated understanding the challenges of providing a catering service in extra care schemes and expressed confidence that the service could be sustainable. Further information on the soft market testing may be found in [Catering Review - Soft Market Testing](#).
- 14 The review considered several options for achieving a sustainable service, although some of them were not achievable in Oakmere and Willowmere. Further information on sustainability may be found in [Catering Review - Achieving Sustainability](#).
- 15 The review further identified four options for the future. These four options are summarised under [Other Options Considered](#) later in this report and more details may be found in [Catering Review - Future Options](#).
- 16 The review recommends procuring an onsite, financially sustainable service, shaped by resident and market feedback. Whilst we acknowledge subsidising the service is not appropriate in the long term it may be appropriate to provide pump prime funding to help establish a sustainable service. This funding would be reduced over the life of the contract as the service became established.
- 17 A specification has been drafted outlining an onsite service, initially delivering a minimum of a lunchtime service on at least five days each week,

with scope to expand opening days/hours and provide ad hoc catering. It is proposed that both price and quality will be evaluated as part of the procurement process, meaning that evaluation scores will be higher for bids requiring lower funding.

- 18 Subject to approval of the recommendations in this report, the approximate procurement timeline is:

Stage	Dates
Procurement Pack Available	Early October
Tender Period	October
Evaluation Period	Early November
Contract Award	Mid-December
Mobilisation Period	Mid-December to early March

Consultation and Engagement

- 19 Extensive engagement has taken place over the past year, including:

Date	Engagement Activity
August 2024	Face-to-face meetings and surveys
October 2024	Letter
December 2024	Face-to-face meetings (to explain interim arrangements)
January 2025	Adults & Health Committee Meeting – residents attended with one resident speaking at the meeting
February 2025	Avantage Annual Survey
May 2025	Drop-In Sessions and Survey
June 2025	Soft Market Testing

- 20 In mid-2024, when it first became apparent that the service might close, it was planned to allow the service to lapse temporarily, whilst budget and procurement decisions were finalised. However, feedback from residents and professionals highlighted the value of the service, leading to the introduction of an interim hot meals' delivery service, to cover the period until a full review could be undertaken and a long-term solution could be found.
- 21 The engagement that has taken place since the Adults and Health Committee meeting on 20 January is described above in paragraphs 10-13.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 22 Resident and market engagement has helped identify resident needs and how the market could meet them. Respondents to the soft market testing expressed confidence in delivering a sustainable service for residents and the wider community.
- 23 Future options were considered based on this feedback, and a service specification has been drafted to reflect resident preferences and align with market insights.

- 24 An onsite catering service would enhance the appeal of extra care schemes to new residents and promote wellbeing by creating inclusive, social spaces for residents and the wider community. It would also contribute to the holistic support available to residents with higher or more complex needs, aligning with the Council's aim to diversify its accommodation offer and helping to reduce reliance on residential and nursing care.
- 25 Although previous procurement attempts were unsuccessful, the 2025 resident and market engagement has informed the draft financial model and specification, reducing the risk of failure. However, market response remains uncertain, and procurement failure is still possible. It should be noted that the interim hot meal delivery service is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term.

Other Options Considered

- 26 More details of the benefits and risks/disadvantages of each of these options may be found in Appendix 1. A summary of each option reviewed together with its associated impact and risks is detailed in the table below:

Option	Impact	Risk
Do Nothing	Interim hot meals service ends in Nov/Dec; no replacement provided.	Residents must make alternative arrangements. Those who are unable to shop/cook may need additional paid support or to move out of the extra care scheme. Reputational risk to the council.
Smart Vending Machines	24/7 access to hot/cold food and drinks.	Strong resident opposition. Limited social value, dietary flexibility, and payment options.
Procure long-term hot meals delivery service	Hot meals delivered at least 5 days/week to those who opt in.	Low uptake may threaten sustainability. (Note current delivery volumes are significantly lower than the previous onsite service.)
Recommended: Onsite catering service	Hot, nutritious meals with social opportunities for residents and local community.	Procurement may fail. Uptake may be too low or too slow, risking financial viability.

Implications and Comments

Monitoring Officer/Legal/Governance

- 27 In 2007, Cheshire County Council (CCC) commissioned Advantage to design, build and manage five extra care housing schemes across Cheshire under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arrangement. As part of the PFI Agreement, CCC was responsible for the catering services in each scheme. The “catering obligation” for the schemes was passed to the successor Councils; of which CEC was one, when the County Council was dissolved in 2009. The Council currently provides catering in Oakmere and Willowmere via a grant agreement with two voluntary sector providers that deliver interim hot meal delivery services. The Council is obliged to provide the catering (as opposed to the landlord) but the contract does not dictate how the meals are to be provided. It is reported that some support from the existing base budget may be required to establish a sustainable service. If it is found that such support is required, the Council will need to go about an exercise to determine if such support amounts to a subsidy which needs to be sanctioned under the terms of the Subsidy Control Act.
- 28 Cheshire East Council has statutory responsibilities to provide Adult Social Care services under Care Act 2014, including promoting wellbeing, protecting adults at risk of abuse or neglect, preventing the need for care and support, and providing information and advice.

Section 151 Officer/Finance

- 29 The Adults Directorate has a £60,000 budget for catering services at Willowmere and Oakmere Extra Care Housing.
- 30 The proposal seeks to initiate procurement for an onsite catering service, subject to market viability and affordability within the existing budget.
- Affordability: The service must operate within the £60,000 allocation. No additional funding is identified in the current MTFS.
 - If procurement fails to attract viable bids within budget, alternative models may need to be explored.

Human Resources

- 31 There are no Human Resources implications relating to the recommended course of action (procurement of onsite catering provider).

Risk Management

- 32 Despite extensive engagement, there remains a risk that the recommended procurement may fail. To mitigate this, resident feedback has shaped the service design and market insights have informed the financial model. In addition, officers are engaging with local providers and have arranged two

engagement/procurement portal awareness sessions to build confidence and understanding of bidding for local authority contracts via The Chest.

- 33 If the procurement fails, it is hoped the interim service could continue whilst the situation is reviewed, but this is not guaranteed. Further decisions may be required around what can realistically be delivered within existing or extended resources.

Impact on other Committees

- 34 No other committees are directly affected by the recommendations in this report. However, the closure of the previous onsite service was an unintended consequence of a decision made by the Children and Families Committee. This was discussed at the Audit and Governance Committee meeting on 31 March 2025, which noted that changes had been made to the constitution to ensure that where a report might fall under more than one committee's remit, members of all committees impacted would have sight of the report and the opportunity to comment on that report as part of the decision-making process.

Policy

- 35 There are no policy implications in this report or its recommendations.

Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all	Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all	Commitment 1: Unlocking prosperity for all
	The recommended action is to procure a service that can provide hot, nutritious meals and promote community wellbeing, not just to older and more vulnerable people living Oakmere and Willowmere but also to the surrounding communities.	

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- 36 EIA in Annex 2.

Other Implications

- 37 No other implications have been identified.

Consultation

Name of Consultee	Post held	Date sent	Date returned
<i>Statutory Officer (or deputy) :</i>			
Ashley Hughes	S151 Officer	Click or tap to enter a date	27/08/25
Julie Gregory	Acting Head of Legal Services	Click or tap to enter a date	14/08/25
Legal and Finance			
Adrian Leslie	Lawyer	Click or tap to enter a date	13/08/25
David Hallworth	Finance Business Partner	Click or tap to enter a date	19/08/25
Julie Gregory	Deputy Monitoring Officer		19/08/25
Other Consultees:			
Executive Directors/Directors			
Helen Charlesworth-May	Executive Director – Adults, Health and Integration	09/09/25	09/09/25
Access to Information			
Contact Officer:	Daniel Coyne – Head of Service Daniel.coyne@cheshireeast.gov.uk		
Appendices:	Annex 1 – Review Annex 2 - Equality Impact Assessment - ECH Catering		
Background Papers:	Minutes of Adults and Health Committee - 20 January 2025 Minutes of Audit and Governance Committee - 31 March 2025		