

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via the Zoom app on 15 March 2021

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 11.00 am and ended at 1.40 pm

41 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

42 Declarations of interest

44. Presentation by the Housing Service.

Councillor Bruce De Saram, Personal, Designated Person for EDDC tenants.

46. Updated Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan

Councillor Mike Allen, Personal, Involved in local church which runs a food bank.

43 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 February 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

44 Presentation by the Housing Service

The Chair welcomed Jo Garfoot - Acting Housing Service Lead; Andrew Mitchell - Housing Solutions Manager; Sophie Davies – Housing Business and Customer Improvement Manager, and Sue Bewes – Housing Services Manager, to the meeting.

Jo Garfoot gave an overall introduction to the Housing Service and the work of various officers and stated that;

- Upgrading properties to be carbon neutral was likely to have the biggest impact on costs for tenants in terms of reducing the potential for fuel poverty.
- Upgrading properties was also likely to be the biggest expenditure that the Council had ever made.

Andrew Mitchell gave a presentation about Homelessness and this included the following points:

- Homelessness and poverty go hand in hand and the Council had a number of initiatives to address these inter-related issues.
- There was a clear increase in demand for temporary accommodation in 2019 and 2020, and when the COVID pandemic started to make its impact felt several months later. This had given rise to initiatives such as 'Everybody In', increases in Domestic Violence, and the inability for people to 'sofa-surf'.
- EDDC had responded with schemes including the Rent Deposit and Bond scheme to assist people into the private sector, and the Homemaker Financial Advice and Assistance scheme which were working well and assisting an increasing number of people.

- Housing First was a scheme to provide accommodation for rough sleepers who had no other options. Accommodation was provided by the Local Authority with support provided by others and funded by monies from the Rough Sleeper Initiative. EDDC has 3 properties in 2020-21, but is hoping to apply to MHCLG to double that to 6 over the coming months.
- The Furniture Project is set up to assist people moving from temporary accommodation into more settled housing, but have no means of furnishing it. The project ensures that people have what they need when they move into a property and uses recycled furniture which may have been donated.
- This links to a number of Council strategies in tackling homelessness, climate change and poverty.
- There are a number of challenges facing officers in this work in relation to how far the Council can go to assist on top of its statutory duties, including storage, transport, and lifting of items amongst others.

Debate following the presentation included the following comments:

- There were currently about 25 residents in B&Bs presently which had a big financial impact on the Council and those concerned, and was not ideal for families or single people.
- It was harder to move people on at present due to the COVID situation.
- Domestic Violence victims originated from both urban and rural areas and the Housing Service just needed to respond as fast as they could.
- In the current circumstances EDDC were allocating 60% of accommodation to temporary needs and was actively looking for 3 or 4 bedroom properties in order to bring more properties into EDDC stock.
- After the eviction moratorium, there will be an expected influx of people who will need rehousing.
- Temporary accommodation is exempted from the Right to Buy rules.
- Mutual exchanges occur each year, which are private swaps between existing tenants to suit a variety of circumstances.
- In terms of a moving on programme, there is always a plan to suit the situation of individuals.
- The Housing Service are quietly confident that additional funding will be made available to increase the number of properties from 3 to 6 as previously referred.
- EDDC is expecting monies to become available under the Domestic Violence Bill 2020, which will increase the responsibilities for local Councils in future.
- In response to a question, officers confirmed that carpets can be recycled for temporary accommodation.
- Work is ongoing with letting agents to understand forthcoming cases and assist with deposits and rents.
- The former Housing Company TaFF is evolving into a different kind of group hoping to increase levels of housing stock.

Sophie Davies (who was replacing Graham Baker – Housing Property & Asset Manager due to an unexpected appointment) gave a presentation about the Green Energy Project and this included the following points:

- The aim of the project was to improve the energy performance and affordable warmth of some of the worst performing and most expensive to heat properties; to improve living conditions for tenants and reduce carbon emissions by more than half.

- Funding was made available by Government in 2020 as part of their Green Homes Grant Local Delivery Scheme. EDDC successfully bid for funds on condition that it was able to match fund the project costs by a minimum of 50%, which it confirmed that it would.
- The grant fund was to install more efficient air source heat pump powered heating systems to 100 homes, while EDDC match funds would be used to put in additional measures to improve the energy performance of the homes.
- 100 properties will have received the pumps by the end of March 2021, with other measures to follow.
- Tenant feedback to date has been very positive about the new heating systems.
- Funding models to cover EDDC housing stock and to meet climate change targets need to be developed.
- The Stock Condition Survey will form the basis of future work on the suitability of different properties to green works. It will enable a forecast of the cost of carbon efficient works required on Council housing stock and facilitate the planning of spend over the next 20-30 years.

Debate following the presentation included the following comments:

- Criteria for prioritising which tenants are assisted are given as part of the scheme.
- Tangible benefits for tenants who have provided feedback include how life has changed by, for example, being able to afford to heat a whole house instead of only one room.
- Issues were discussed in relation to the cost of upgrading properties which could then fall under the right to buy and money being lost for the benefit of future Council tenants. This would effectively mean public sector funds were being handed to the private sector, and would be an issue facing Councils everywhere.

Sue Bewes gave a presentation (on behalf of Nettie Giles who was unable to attend) about the work of the rental team in preventing poverty and this included the following points:

- The challenges currently facing EDDC tenants include having no money for rent or council tax, for food, for heating and many are living in fear of poverty.
- The pandemic has taken away financial and emotional security of tenants and the rental team ensure that they do not lose their homes, and that they can live in a comfortable environment in which they can care for and feed their families. This is done with outside agencies.
- Financial support is offered via referrals to Homemaker Southwest, as well as to food banks and charities for furniture or other goods.
- Tenants will also be given support with claims for Universal Credit, Council Tax Reduction and Discretionary Hardship Payments.
- The team work across the Council with Housing Benefits and Council Tax teams to assist tenants.
- Three case studies were referred to, to indicate the various ways in which the Rental Team had worked with others to assist tenants in positive and practical ways.

The Chair thanked Jo Garfoot, Andrew Mitchell, Sophie Davies and Sue Bewes for their presentations which would be circulated after the meeting.

45 **Review of Council poverty-related activities 2020-21 - Helen Wharam - Public Health Officer**

Helen Wharam gave a brief summary of her Review of Council poverty related activities during 2020-21. She stated that this was compiled from readily available documents supporting Service Plans across the Council. The last year was the year of the pandemic and not a typical year, but the review gave an indication of the huge range and volume of activities undertaken by services under the five headings of the Poverty Strategy Action Plan;

1. Helping people on low incomes
2. Strengthening families and communities
3. Inclusive economy
4. Housing
5. Improving health outcomes

It was clear that a staggering amount of work had been done across the Council, made more difficult because of the COVID pandemic which had made life worse for many people.

The Chair thanked Helen for presenting her report.

46 **Updated Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding - Strategic Lead - Housing, Health & Environment**

John Golding presented the latest iteration of a developing Poverty Strategy Action Plan which had been circulated prior to the meeting. Some elements had been updated to reflect different themes covered and issues such as digital inclusion.

He hoped to conclude work on the document at the April meeting of the Panel and then implement the actions, all of which needed to be aligned with all the updated Service Plans over the next few weeks.

He referred to predictable problems which could not be resolved by EDDC alone, such as poverty amongst older people, or the disparity in pay between men and women which would impact on pensions, but that the Council would need to lobby Government on such issues. He also confirmed the need for financial resilience and how the Council could promote positive messages and information.

The Chair thanked John for this latest draft of the Action Plan.

47 **Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Monday 12th April when a final draft of the Poverty Strategy should be available.

The Chair said that the work done by Jamie Buckley on community engagement and with the Community and Voluntary sector will be a topic for the next meeting. Libby Jarrett – Service Lead for Revenues and Benefits, suggested briefing members of the Panel in April, on the new ‘Breathing Space’ regulations which would be introduced in May, and which would put all debts on hold for 60 days. The Chair agreed.

The Panel would also discuss a report for Cabinet about how it would evolve into more of a monitoring group over the coming months, reviewing how the Action Plan is being progressed.

Future meetings will be held on 10th May, 14th June, 19th July, 20th September and 22nd November 2021.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Allen
M Armstrong (Chair)
M Chapman
B De Saram
P Jarvis
M Rixson
T Woodward

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
P Faithfull
M Howe
A Moulding
J Rowland
E Rylance

Officers in attendance:

Jo Garfoot, Acting Housing Service Lead
Sue Bewes, Housing Services Manager
Amanda Coombes, Democratic Services Officer
Sophie Davies, Housing Business and Customer Improvement Manager
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

Councillor apologies:

S Hawkins
F King

Non Panel Councillor apologies:

I Hall

Chairman

Date: