

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via the Zoom app on 31 January 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.24 pm

19 Public speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak.

20 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

21 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 November 2021

Minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 November 2021 were noted as a true and accurate record.

22 Update on the Household Support Fund from Sharon Church - Benefits Manager

The Benefits Manager delivered a verbal update on the Household Support Fund which included the following:

- 59.61% of the original budget has been spent and what remains should be sufficient until the scheme ends, depending on demand over the next two months;
- Use has been made of other funding sources and help available including food banks and the Citizens Advice Energy Relief scheme;
- Data shows that in the household make-up category, single parents are the highest group applying for help, with single people who do not have children the second highest group;
- In terms of housing status, residents living in social and council housing are the highest group requesting help;
- In respect to employment status, the majority of those applying to the Fund are unemployed. Of those who are in employment, there is a close split between part-time, full-time and self-employed residents;
- Of the applications made, 16.29% required more in-depth work by the Financial Resilience team, down from 44% of applications in November. The majority of these cases made initial contact due to being unable to afford food and energy costs;
- The Fund has been promoted by the Communications team in regular press releases;
- Regular updates have been provided to Devon County Council on usage of the Fund and to discuss wider poverty issues;
- Learnings have been fed back to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policy team concerning what East Devon DC would like to see from any future scheme, if funding is granted after the Housing Support Fund scheme closes in March.

The Chair thanked the Benefits Manager for her report. She was pleased to add that the Council had been approached by the District Council Network as one of only seven district councils being asked to work collaboratively. The Benefits Manager explained this was to look at the underlying reasons for poverty and what could be done to identify and resolve them.

The Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment commented that research had indicated that very few district level local authorities had a Poverty Strategy; Devon County Council had been enthusiastic about East Devon DC adopting one and were keen to share the good practice with other districts within Devon and beyond.

The Chair commented that officers and Members should be extremely proud to be recognised in this context.

In further discussion, the following points were made:

- A Member sought to better understand the underlying reasons for people needing help with energy and food costs, as referred to in the Benefit Manager's report. The Benefit Manager stated that reasons included mental health struggles, low educational achievement and skills, and poor life chances, and a focus for the team was in signposting people to the right support to help them out of poverty;
- In response to a Member's question, the Benefits Manager stated that she would endeavour to provide a breakdown for the next meeting of the numbers of male and female single people and single parents accessing the Housing Support Fund. The Member expressed concern that women might be disproportionately affected by problems of furlough and unemployment;
- A Member asked if there was any indication of what support might be available after the Housing Support Fund ends in March. The Benefits Manager stated that it was not known what would be available through the DWP. She added that the Benefits team were continuing conversations with Devon County Council to explore what preventative work could be done, going forward, rather than focusing only on emergency support;
- In response to a Member's question, the Benefits Manager stated that supermarket vouchers had been distributed to families of children eligible for free school meals covering the Christmas holiday period but it was not known how many families had used them;
- Concern was raised about the time it takes to provide support when people contact the emergency telephone number. The Benefits Manager assured the Panel that emergency financial support was reaching people within 3-4 days of their call, and sometimes sooner. There were some cases requiring more in-depth work which took additional time, but emergency financial support was still provided in the interim;
- The Panel considered how they could address wider issues around poverty including by lobbying central government, talking with MPs, and encouraging local GPs to do more social prescribing;
- Comment was made that the Council had done very well with joined-up thinking in recognising the range of measures that were needed as part of the solution to poverty.

The Chair thanked the Benefits Manager for her report.

23 **Overview of new Service Plans for 2022/23 and how they support the Poverty agenda - Helen Wharam - Public Health Project Officer**

The Public Health Project Officer delivered a presentation outlining, with examples, how the new Service Plans for 2022/2023 support the poverty agenda. The presentation covered the following:

- Through the work of the Poverty Action Panel, East Devon has a Poverty Strategy and an Action Plan with 'SMART' (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound) objectives;
- Checking progress is a cyclical process involving planning, performing, monitoring progress and reviewing performance against objectives;
- Illustrations were provided of how the new Housing, Finance, and Environmental Health Service Plans 2022-2023 align with the Poverty Action Plan;
- A summary was provided of the complexities of aligning the Poverty Action Plan with the Service Plan objectives;

- Initial recommendations:
 - The Housing Service Plan contains in Section 3 the key objectives to 'Deliver the priorities from the poverty strategy and action plan' and 'Provide a greater emphasis on poverty prevention, financial resilience, reduce indebtedness, affordable warmth, and financial equality'; Could we ask all services to follow this example?
- Longer-term recommendation:
 - For the Public Health Project Officer to complete the overview of new service plans for the Working Panel, so that the Panel can take stock at a future meeting.

Discussion included the following:

- Recognition of the link between low energy efficiency standards in housing, fuel poverty, and poor physical and mental health. The Public Health Project Officer outlined the work undertaken to promote recognition and understanding of these issues among GPs and other NHS staff;
- A Member observed that properly planned, designed and insulated housing would reduce the costs to residents of a fundamental level of warmth in their homes. The Panel discussed the costs and benefits of levelling old properties and building new, relative to the costs and feasibility of retrofitting old houses. This linked in with strategic planning and it was suggested that Planning be invited to present to the Panel on how they intend to incorporate the poverty agenda into the planning and place shaping work they are doing;
- The Panel considered the significance of community and community infrastructure in relation to mental health and well being, with poor mental health and isolation impacting on finances and relationships. Concern was raised that there appears to be no sense of community or social vision in planning policy and it would be useful for the Panel to hear from the Planning team on this point;
- The Panel accepted that the Public Health Project Officer should complete a review of new service plans for the Working Panel, so that the Panel can take stock at a future meeting.

RECOMMENDATION:

Following the discussion, the following recommendation was agreed for Senior Officers decision:

- That Service Leads be requested to review their Service Plans for 2022-2023 to ensure that they are aligned with the key objectives to "Deliver the priorities from the poverty strategy and action plan" and 'Provide a greater emphasis on poverty prevention, financial resilience, reduce indebtedness, affordable warmth, and financial equality'.

The Chair thanked the Public Health Project Officer for her report.

24 Joseph Rowntree Foundation UK Poverty Summary 2020-21 - John Golding - Strategic Lead, Housing, Health & Environment

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report 'UK Poverty 2020/21' had been circulated in advance. The report detailed the following:

- Key findings: child poverty and in-work poverty have been on the rise for several years and some groups who are disproportionately likely to be pulled into poverty have also borne the brunt of the economic and health impacts of Covid-19. These include:
 - part-time and low-paid workers, and sectors with much higher rates of in-work poverty such as accommodation and food services;
 - Black, Asian and minority ethnic households;
 - lone parents - mostly women;
 - private renters, who have higher housing costs, and social renters, who tend to have lower incomes;

- areas of the UK where there were already higher levels of unemployment, poverty and deprivation.
- Recommended policy solutions included:
 - Bold action to retrain workers and create good quality new jobs, to enable as many people as possible to be in good jobs;
 - Earnings for low-income working families need to improve, and people need access to sufficient and secure working hours. Government must bring forward the Employment Bill to reduce insecurity for low-paid workers;
 - The benefits system needs to be strengthened; as a minimum, the temporary £20 increase to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit should be made permanent and extended to those on legacy benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance;
 - The amount of low-cost housing available for families on low income needs to be increased, with increased support for households with high housing costs.

The Strategic Lead Housing Health & Environment added that a recent article by Joseph Rowntree Foundation director Helen Barnard published in the Local Government Chronicle had advocated for greater local authority involvement in tackling poverty by:

- Encouraging income maximisation;
- Providing local welfare assistance;
- Reviewing debt collection practices;
- Supporting local charities and community groups;
- Focusing on renewal rather than recovery;

The Panel was pleased to note that the Poverty Strategy in place aligns with the aforementioned recommendations and those set out in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- The Panel recognised the societal pressures faced by people in poverty and thanked officers for engaging respectfully with people in this position;
- A Member remarked on the need for more low-cost housing and observed that average rents were double that of many other European countries. The Acting Housing Service Lead Jo Garfoot commented that this was a market forces issue, and outlined differences in rental agreements and in attitudes towards renting, which keep rents in European countries to a sensible level.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment for bringing the report to the attention of the Panel.

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Forward Plan

The Chair invited Members to consider whether the Poverty Working Panel should have a forward plan and what might be included in it.

In discussion, Members agreed to a forward plan and suggested the following items for the initial plan, to be circulated to Panel members for consideration in advance of the next meeting:

- To receive a report on a Poverty Dashboard;
- To receive a further report on how poverty features in Service Plans;
- To carry out a scoping exercise concerning provision of allotments as part of the community infrastructure. It was felt that allotments provide a sense of community as well as enabling people to grow their own food;
- To consider how the Council could help people with financial planning, as part of the work around poverty prevention;

- To invite contributions from external speakers including:
 - Exeter Community Energy;
 - Simon Kitchen, Devon County Council;
 - Department for Work and Pensions.
- To invite the Service Lead Growth, Development and Prosperity, to outline how the Cranbrook heat network is controlled and how poverty can be tackled through the Council's own investments;
- Inviting Planning colleagues to attend a Panel meeting to discuss how planning policy can contribute toward the Poverty Strategy;
- Consider looking at Local Government Association publications concerning poverty strategy, alongside any other relevant research published.

It was further suggested that the forward plan could be aligned with recommendations from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report as a benchmark against which to measure progress and to ensure the plan stays appropriately focused.

The Chair invited Members to send any further suggestions for the forward plan by email to herself or Democratic Services.

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Date of the next meeting

Due to issues with availability, Members agreed provisionally to move the May meeting from the 23rd to the 30th May 2022. Further dates for 2022 would be arranged following the annual Council meeting.

The date for the next meeting was confirmed as 21st March 2022.

The Chair reminded Members that meetings would commence at 10.00am.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Allen
M Armstrong (Chair)
M Chapman
B De Saram
M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
P Faithfull
E Rylance

Officers in attendance:

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Jo Garfoot, Acting Housing Service Lead
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Service Lead Housing
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Sarah Helman, Democratic Services Officer
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

Sarah Brown, Mental Health Challenge Coordinator

Councillor apologies:

S Hawkins

P Jarvis

T Woodward

Chair

Date: