

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via the Zoom app on 18 November 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.32 am

10 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 June 2024

The minutes of the previous meeting were noted as a true and accurate record.

11 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

12 Public speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

13 Update on work being done to support EDDC's Anti-Poverty Strategy - presentation by Devon Communities Together

The Panel received a presentation from Nora Corkery, Chief Executive of Devon Communities Together (DCT) on the work being done to support EDDC's Anti-Poverty Strategy.

DCT is an independent charity that helps to enable and empower communities across Devon to tackle rural insecurities and inequalities and address the issues that are important to them. DCT has been working in Devon for 63 years, engaging and collaborating with rural communities and proactively tackling poverty in rural areas.

Since April 2023 DCT has been in partnership with EDDC funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (with support from DEFRA), under a three year contract to deliver a programme of voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) capacity building in East Devon. It is working alongside grass roots voluntary and community groups in the district, reviewing needs, providing training and fundraising support, and developing new ways of working on and influencing district-wide policy and service development. The primary aim is to strengthen and coordinate support for the VCSE sector in East Devon so that groups are better equipped to achieve their social purpose.

The Chief Executive of DCT listed rural social determinants during the presentation and explained that many of these were very interconnected, with a number of different issues coming together to bring a household into poverty. It was recognised that the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) that scored levels of deprivation, often disguised pockets of deprivation in rural areas. The IMD indicated that East Devon was not experiencing high levels of deprivation, however DCT are aware that locally, there are hidden pockets of high deprivation, which are overlooked.

The IMD was criticised as being biased against rural geographies by focussing on concentrations of deprivation in small areas, whereas rural deprivation was more dispersed. Many of the IMD measures are urban-oriented and some rural concerns are

under-reported or not reported at all. Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) are working with DEFRA on the development of new rural deprivation IMC weightings.

The Devon Health and Wellbeing Board brought in specific indicators, and this was illustrated during the presentation on a cost of living dashboard. This demonstrated that Devon was being proactive in recognising that different data was needed.

The Citizens Advice cost of living and deprivation report and debt red index showed that:

- 80,000 people living in Devon had more money going out every month than coming in.
- Negative budgets are an increasing problem in the county.
- Energy costs and housing are the key costs pushing many low-income households into the red.

The idea around the financial resilience pilot project with EDDC is based on being proactive, with different organisations coming together to work together with rural communities.

- Building financial resilience in rural communities is crucial for economic stability and wellbeing.
- The EDDC Poverty Strategy was commended by the LGA Peer Review, in that it recognises the importance of diverse stakeholders working together in a whole system approach to achieve sustainable poverty reduction in rural areas.
- Greater understanding of individual/localised needs would support the collective ability to address root causes, identify gaps, and build on support and assets already in place.

The aims and objectives of the financial resilience project were outlined in the presentation and noted by the Poverty Working Panel. From the Financial Resilience Pilot, the aim is to scale up the Project across the district.

The Panel noted the East Devon Financial Resilience Group partnership members, and the activity to date this year. The scoping work began at the beginning of the year and the first formal meeting of all the partners took place in September, with the second meeting taking place in October 2024 to consider a short list of communities where the local pilot could commence. The DCT Chief Executive explained the next steps for the pilot, including engaging with local businesses and the establishment of a Community Steering Group.

On behalf of the Panel the Chair thanked the Chief Executive of DCT for her presentation.

14 **Update on Pension age Take-up Campaign - presentation by Citizens Advice East and Financial Resilience Team**

The Poverty Working Panel received an update presentation from Sharon Church, Financial Resilience Manager, EDDC and Dean Stewart, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice East Devon (CAED) on the pension age take up campaign.

The take up campaign was in the EDDC Benefits service plan due to a sustained drop in caseload for pension age residents, cuts to the Winter Fuel Allowance, high energy prices and a request from the DWP to promote the take up of housing benefit and council tax reduction. A joint campaign was being run with CAED to reach as many residents as

possible, to identify pensioners who were entitled to pension credit who were not claiming it, and to promote housing benefits, council tax reduction and Winter Fuel Allowance to qualifying pensioners. Rural areas were considered, and support was gained from partners and local community groups to reach as many people as possible. It was noted that the deadline for applications for pension credit was 21 December 2024.

The presentation outlined the joint approach taken during the campaign, including the communications methods used and the partnership and community groups involved. A small rise in the housing benefit and council tax reduction caseload was seen from September 2024, with an overall upward trend in new awards. The Pension Service had provided a paper application form following receipt of feedback from residents, and residents who were struggling to complete their application were referred to CAED for assistance.

The Chief Executive of CAED reported that due to the size of East Devon, it would not be possible to meet all residents that qualified for pension age benefits. CAED had therefore compiled a simple 'are you eligible for pension credit' checklist for partner community groups and volunteers to easily eliminate people who would not qualify. Feedback from different community groups was that around 200 people had been identified as ineligible.

There had been a large increase in the number of people CAED were seeing, with 17 residents referred by EDDC for help with their applications for Pension Credit. Over £45,000 of pension credit had been secured. In addition, CAED were helping to identify other benefits that people were entitled to, and helping them to reduce debt and secure additional funding from across East Devon.

The EDDC Financial Resilience team had a number of events over the next couple of months to promote the campaign, and were continuing to explore ways to help with the promotion and display of information to residents.

On behalf of the Poverty Working Panel the Chair thanked the Financial Resilience Manager and the Chief Executive CAED for their presentation.

15 **Update on Household Support Fund - presentation by the Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager**

The Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager updated the Poverty Working Panel on the Household Support Fund. Household Support Fund 5 covered the period to 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024 and had £284,944 in funding for residents and £42,741 in admin funding. In September, it was announced that cost of living payments would no longer be paid, therefore more residents would need to access the Household Support Fund, which was allocated by way of targeted support and open application.

For targeted support there was a one-off payment of £100 for those households who met the following criteria:

- In receipt of full Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction.
- Had under £3,000 in capital.

- Someone in the property was disabled or a carer.
- Care leavers in receipt of a Council Tax relief or other district benefits such as a Discretionary Housing Payment.

Following this, an additional £130 payment was made to the targeted support households.

In total £256,150 of targeted support was allocated to 1,105 households, and £30,722 in open applications was awarded to 236 households. Of these, 714 awards were made to households with children and 634 awards to households of pension age.

The Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager reported that Household Support Fund 6 covered 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025 had £396,753 in funding for residents and £59,513 (15%) in admin funding. Extra funding was available for this period, as it covered only one school holiday meaning that fewer DCC food vouchers were required. It was taking time to get the funds out for a variety of reasons including changes to Winter Fuel Allowance eligibility, a continuously changing caseload, carrying out extra data checks and new conditions attached to each scheme. The aim was for the scheme to be live by mid-December, with open applications available and being received.

Targeted support eligibility was similar to Household Support Fund 5, with the addition of those of pensionable age who had lost the Winter Fuel Allowance, and former serving members of armed forces.

It was suggested that communications be sent out to residents highlighting the available help and support for residents who were in need.

On behalf of the Panel the Chair thanked the Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager and her team for their work, which was very much appreciated.

16 **Progress on updating the Anti-Poverty Strategy and connected work - verbal update from the Assistant Director - Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services, Fraud & Compliance**

The Assistant Director – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services Fraud and Compliance updated the Poverty Working Panel on progress on updating the Anti-Poverty Strategy, which was a key commitment within the Council Plan with a deadline of March 2025.

The team was building on its learning from the past four years and, moving forward, the approach would evolve to be place and person centric. This was particularly important given that EDDC was a large district authority with a large rural area, and associated challenges with rural poverty. Learnings from the place-based pilot would help to inform the Anti-Poverty Strategy, moving forward.

The importance of working collaboratively and building strong partnerships was recognised. This would be further developed at a strategic level, and reflected in the Strategy. Public consultation had been carried out. and this would be analysed and reflected upon.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services Fraud and Compliance as well as all the other people who had presented during the

meeting, which highlighted all the fantastic work that was being done by a range of organisations for the benefit of people across East Devon.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

P Arnott
M Goodman
J Heath
D Ledger (Chair)
M Martin
M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

I Barlow
J Brown
P Faithfull
E Rylance

Officers in attendance:

Matthew Blythe, Assistant Director Environmental Health
Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Danielle Furzey, Housing Options Manager
Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Customer Access, Fraud & Compliance
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Catrin Stark, Director of Housing and Health

Councillor apologies:

B Collins

Chair:

Date: