

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held via zoom on 7 December 2020

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 11.00 am and ended at 1.35 pm

16 Public Speaking

Gillian Adamson a resident of Exmouth spoke about homelessness in Exmouth and was pleased to advise that a homeless person she had been helping was now in bed and breakfast. She raised concerns about the slow response from the council on rough sleepers and homelessness in Exmouth and suggested the council could provide caravans at Maer Road Car Park as a temporary stop gap or to purchase one of the empty hotels to convert into self-contained rooms. In response to the comment about using empty hotels as temporary accommodation Councillor Wragg, Exmouth Ward Member advised the hotels were needed for holiday accommodation which was needed to help support the local economy.

Ben Reid, a resident of Exmouth spoke about homelessness. He advised about his 25 year working background that ranged from working in hostels and drop-in centres in Exeter and East Devon. He referred to a person who had been living on the streets for 3 weeks in Exmouth and said the only support that had been offered to him by the council was a train ticket out of Exmouth. Ben advised this was unacceptable and as a result had found the person a caravan to stay in and had contacted Exmouth Friends in Need who had been amazing. Ben was pleased to advise the person had now found employment and was doing well. Ben raised concerns that there were other homeless people that the council were not helping. Ben thanked Councillor Millar for all his help and enthusiasm and said with Councillor Millar's help the homeless will be able to get more help.

Claire Austin, Exmouth Friends in Need Chairperson, had submitted a statement read out on her behalf by the Democratic Services Officer, which stated:

Exmouth Friends In Need (EFIN) was started just under two years ago to help alleviate short term poverty within the community usually caused by a sudden change in an individuals or family's circumstance. Primarily the main focus was ensuring that people had sufficient food but as time has gone on we now not only focus on this aspect but also provide help with heating and furniture.

There are countless families and individuals in the Exmouth area who do not have the means to properly furnish their homes and EFIN do their very best to help where we can. We also get many indirect referrals from the Council/Housing Department to help those with nothing. The local community is very good at passing on old furniture but sometimes it is barely fit for purpose and not suitable. Unfortunately we sometimes have to turn down quality furniture as we have no immediate home for it but alas have nowhere to store it. There is of course quite a large second hand furniture market but in these COVID times most of our funding is being spent on food and heating.

We understand that the Council is trying to develop an initiative to address furniture poverty and EFIN would very much welcome such a scheme. Support could come in a

number of ways, not just targeted funding but perhaps a small storage area or help with logistics when it comes to moving larger items.

Please contact us if you would like to discuss any of these points further.

The Chair thanks the speakers and advised as part of the homeless strategy the council was looking into setting up a 'magic garage' and was working in partnership with other voluntary organisations to get it started.

17 **Declarations of interest**

Minute 19. Poverty and the Economy - presentation by Andy Wood - Service Lead - Growth, Development and Prosperity.

Councillor Mike Howe, Personal, Owns a retail shop.

Minute 20. Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding.

Councillor Eleanor Rylance, Personal, Involved with Broadclyst Foodbank.

Minute 20. Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding.

Councillor Mike Allen, Personal, Involved with Honiton Foodbank and a number of initiatives to minimise poverty through the church.

Minute 20. Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding.

Councillor Paul Hayward, Personal, Executive member of Nourish which is a group in Axminster providing meals for those in poverty.

Minute 20. Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding.

Councillor Paul Millar, Personal, Volunteered for Exmouth Friends in Need and employed part-time for Co-op Group which raises money for foodbanks and similar charities.

18 **Minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 November 2020**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

In response Councillor Millar commented that it was difficult to determine whether the minutes were accurate as there was no recording and asked why the previous two meetings were not held in public and requested that future meetings were held in the evenings to ensure all panel members can attend. In response the Chair advised the issues would be discussed during the meeting.

The Chair clarified the comment made by Councillor Chapman at the previous meeting about refuges and advised in recent months there had been an increase in numbers fleeing domestic abuse and violence. The Chair advised there are no refuges in East Devon but there were places of safety in partnership with a local organisation. The nearest refuges were in North Devon, North Somerset, Cornwall and Torquay. In response Councillor Chapman said the lack of a safe house in East Devon did not reflect well and that there was a need to look at this urgently when people's lives were at risk.

19 **Poverty and the Economy - presentation by Andy Wood - Service Lead - Growth, Development and Prosperity**

The Chair welcomed the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity and reminded Members that the Panel would be inviting three further Leads from the remaining strategic areas of Housing, Finance and Environmental Health to explore their service in more detail and how it fits in with the Poverty Strategy Action Plan.

The panel received a detailed presentation which started with the relationship between poverty and economic performance. Key aspects highlighted in the presentation included:

- Poverty is not the same as having a low income;
- Fixed costs are important;
- The South West is unique in being the only region with above average house prices but below average wages;
- Being able to access a decent well paid job is a key determinant of quality of life and wider wellbeing.

The Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity outlined some key elements highlighting that East Devon had a higher proportion of part-time workers than the South West (36.3%) and the UK (32.4%). Two of the largest employment sectors were agricultural and the seasonal visitor/tourism sector which were characterised by low average salary levels.

Members noted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020.

This included a number of companies either going into administration or experiencing large scale job losses such as:

- Exeter Airport
- Flybe
- Shauls Bakery
- Shearings Holidays
- Devon Cliffs

He outlined some potential opportunities to support economic recovery to ensure opportunities were available across the district to continue to improve tourism and hospitality and referred to Objective 3 of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Action Plan. This sought to promote an inclusive economy by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low incomes. A range of activity was identified in the draft action plan to help to realise this objective.

Discussion included the following points by members outside of the Panel:

- Poverty levels and economic prosperity depends upon the driving forces within it. Reference was made to a lecture by Mark Carney which had considered the points of economic value and social value and how high fixed costs compared to low income resulted in debt;
- Quality of employment was an important factor;
- Clarification sought on whether the GDP figures show what proportion of people working in Exeter and living in East Devon. In response the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity advised that care was needed in terms of interpreting the statistics and particularly whether they were measured by work place or place of residence. Commuting to and from relatively well paid employment in Exeter had a significant influence on large parts of the District;
- Reports show that there is a significant proportion of in work poverty including families with children. This was considered to be a national disgrace. The

importance of engaging local MPs in helping to address this issue was also highlighted;

- Concerns were raised about the structural shift in retail and the need to make sure our local towns prosper and to make sure our shops thrive by encouraging rents to stabilise so that shops can continue trading. Members noted that landlord rents and business rates were an issue that needed to be addressed on a national stage.

Discussion included the following points by Panel members:

- Members thanked the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity for an excellent presentation;
- Statistics showed that in the UK there were 56% of working families in poverty compared to 39% 20 years ago. Clarification was sought on whether there were statistics for East Devon as data shows the majority of people in poverty were actually in work. In response the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity agreed that there was a generational shift and that families increasingly have to have two jobs. The rising number of people in in work poverty was a significant issue and he advised that he would investigate what data was available and send these statistics to members;
- A recent survey showed the average tourist in Exmouth only spent £16 per head. A suggestion was made that if tourists were not spending the money we would need to look at bringing other forms of employment into the area, especially as low paid seasonal jobs were affecting the community. In response the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity advised of the importance of having a diverse economy that is able to perform well in many areas. There is a challenge for our coastal towns to raise spend. He highlighted East Devon Excellence as an example of a private sector led initiative designed to showcase best practice across the full breadth of the tourism sector and more widely such as food and drink;
- The need to look at higher paid employment;
- A suggestion was made to find out where the retail hot spots were to help find out what was going on in communities. In response it was advised the council was currently looking at footfall and local spend and advised Members about a funding source that was available called the 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund';
- Clarification was sought on whether the council had employees on a zero hour contract. This would be checked and the answer reported back to Members;
- Reference was made that Overview Committee had considered the use of digital technology in the high street;
- Digital inclusion was important. In response the Service Lead for Growth, Development and Prosperity referred to digital support programmes run by Cosmic. Digital inclusion was also an area highlighted in the action plan;
- Concerns were raised about the need to look at improving skills and to unlock employment sites and reference was made to specific grants.

Draft Poverty Strategy Action Plan - John Golding

Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment presented Members with a draft Poverty Action Plan which had been based on a format used by Cambridge City Council. The draft Action Plan included the five objectives agreed at the last Panel meeting which were:

- Helping people on low income to maximise their household income and minimise their costs, building financial resilience and reducing indebtedness;

- Strengthening families and communities, including supporting groups that are more likely to experience poverty and community and volunteer groups working to combat poverty;
- Promoting an inclusive economy by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low income;
- Addressing the high cost housing, improving housing conditions, creating affordable warmth and reducing homelessness;
- Improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health and ill health prevention.

Members noted that many of the poverty activities are already being undertaken by the Council and had been for some time. The Action Plan suggests enhancements and new activities that extend the current poverty interventions. It focuses on interventions that we can deliver as a District Council where we can make a positive difference.

The Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment invited Members to help populate and refine the draft Action Plan as it develops and when completed it is anticipated that it will be presented alongside a strategy document in which the Action Plan will sit as an annexe.

The Chair invited Members to focus their comments and questions on the third objective (the theme of this meeting) - Promoting an inclusive economy by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low income;

Discussion included the following points by members outside of the Panel:

- A suggestion was made to include an qualitative evaluation of the actions to determine which actions were more important (prioritisation of actions);

Discussion included the following points by Panel members:

- The need to consider digital inclusion and connectivity as both play an important role in accessing benefits and shopping in the high street;
- The performance measures and outcomes need to be smart targets and suggested using a balance scorecard approach;
- Digital inclusion needs to be better across East Devon and rural areas are significantly disadvantaged;
- There is a big difference between actions that can be achieved and aspirations and concerns were raised about the council having efforts diluted by chasing matters that cannot get results;
- The need to focus on the defined scope that the council is able to do;
- Councillor Allen sought clarification on a promise to incorporate some of the ideas he had put forward in August 2019 into the draft action plan addressing career advice and laptops/IT devices that are critical for the future of young people, and for the 50+ people and working with the voluntary sector which is an economic area that has not been seen as an economic opportunity. In response the Chair advised his earlier report was taken into account and many of his concerns mentioned were already happening. The Strategic Lead advised Councillor Allen had submitted a really good report and he hoped he had captured a lot of the spirit of what was in the report in the draft actions;
- This council should be declaring a poverty emergency to ensure the issue of poverty is given the appropriate parity of esteem in the upcoming council plan. In response the Strategic Lead for Housing advised poverty is a priority for the

council in the recently published Statement of Intent and advised the timetable for Panel sessions can be condensed if this was the wish of the Panel;

- A suggestion was made to commission a new poverty report to raise awareness. In response to this suggestion the Strategic Lead advised this was being done as part of this Panel's sessions and will be considered at Cabinet and Council by March 2021 as part of the Poverty Strategy;
- A suggestion was made for the need to learn from other councils on how to implement the actions;
- Concerns were raised about debt and how the Citizens Advice Bureau would be able to cope with demand after Christmas and New Year as a lot of people would be in debt. Following the meeting it was advised Citizens Advice East Devon had confirmed that they had increased their phone line capacity locally and they were confident they could deal with the demand after Christmas. They had also invested in a 4 person team to address the need for specialised debt advisors. The council had already agreed that officers working on financial resilience could refer directly into the team while waiting for them to start. It is hoped further discussions would take place with Tim Bridger on 16 December. Providing it is possible to sort this out it was advised that our officers would be able to identify cases that require debt advice now and after Christmas, and either signpost or refer them to the team. Monthly update meetings with Tim will be taking place so if not in place before Christmas this should be in place before we reach March.

The Chair suggested we hold more frequent meetings to be able to achieve the Panel's purpose and terms of reference sooner and advised this would be discussed with the Strategic Lead for Housing, Health and Environment after the meeting. In response Councillor Millar suggested, with the agreement of the Chair and officers, to hold informal meetings and Councillor de Saram suggested Panel members submit questions about the draft documents in advance of the meeting to ensure answers were ready and meetings were quicker.

21 **Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting will take place via zoom on 18 January at 11am with a presentation from Lee Tozer from the Department of Work and Pensions.

Members noted the request from the Chair to email her any questions for Lee Tozer before the Christmas break.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Armstrong (Chair)
M Allen
M Chapman
B De Saram
S Hawkins
P Jarvis
F King
P Millar
M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

- P Arnott
- J Bailey
- P Faithfull
- P Hayward
- N Hookway
- M Howe
- D Ledger
- A Moulding
- E Rylance
- E Wragg

Officers in attendance:

- John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
- Andrew Wood, Service Lead - Growth Development and Prosperity
- Wendy Harris, Democratic Services Officer
- Amanda Coombes, Democratic Services Officer

Councillor apologies:

- J Whibley

Chair

Date: