

Report to: Housing Review Board



Date of Meeting 21 January 2021

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## Update on the Review of the Furniture Project

### Report summary:

This report summarises progress made so far on the review of the furniture and household item recycling service known as 'the Furniture Project' and also as 'the Magic Garages'.

The report gives a brief history of the inception of the service, and highlights that it is currently unsustainable to continue delivering the service in its current format. A number of options have been developed, and initial thoughts on these options have been presented.

The report highlights the benefits of the current service in relation to the Council's broader strategic aims.

### Recommendation:

That the Board consider the options as set out in section 7 of this report and give a steer as to which option should be further explored with consideration to the financial implications of each of the options.

### Reason for recommendation:

To ensure that the review of the Furniture Project continues to be relevant to members

Officer: Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager, [amitchell@eastdevon.gov.uk](mailto:amitchell@eastdevon.gov.uk).

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery
- Democracy and Transparency
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Policy Co-ordination and Regional Engagement
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

### Financial implications:

The financial implications are considered and discussed within the body of the report.

## Legal implications:

There are no legal implications to consider set out in the report.

## Equalities impact Low Impact

## Climate change Low Impact

**Risk:** Medium Risk; Failure to continue with the Furniture project will negatively impact individuals who are homeless or who are in temporary accommodation

## Links to background information .

### Link to [Council Plan](#):

Priorities (check which apply)

- Outstanding Place and Environment
  - Outstanding Homes and Communities
  - Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
  - Outstanding Council and Council Services
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## Report in full

### 1. Background

- 1.1 The development of a furniture recycling service, known as the Furniture Project began in early 2019. People approaching the Housing Options team from homeless situations were being housed but unable to purchase many of the basic furniture and other household items to adequately equip their homes.
- 1.2 In February 2019, when EDDC moved into new offices at Honiton, furniture and other items (such as toasters, kettles etc.) were being offered out to staff. Our Temporary Accommodation Officer (TAO) was able to secure a good number of these items, recognising that they could be put to good use helping people as they moved from temporary accommodation into more secure homes across the district.
- 1.3 From its informal beginnings the scheme has now developed into a furniture and household item recycling service, sourcing unwanted items and offering them free of charge to those in need, identified through the day to day work of the TAO and the Housing Options team, including furniture left behind in void council properties.
- 1.4 Initially items were stored in two vacant EDDC garages in Seaton, but as the service has developed so our storage needs have expanded and we now occupy four garages with additional items also stored in the home of the TAO.
- 1.5 The Furniture Project has become an integral part of the allocation process for new tenants who are entering their tenancies with little or no furniture and money. We want to set tenancies up to succeed, as acknowledged in the Homelessness Strategy, and recognise that the basic furniture and household items that many of us take for granted are key ingredients into turning a house into a home. In the last year, the Furniture Project has supported over 40 families in this way.

- 1.6 The primary role of the TAO is to secure and provide temporary accommodation for an increasing number of homeless households, support them whilst they are in temporary accommodation, and then help them move on into more secure homes. However, this continuing expansion has placed an unsustainable burden on the TAO, especially with the increase in homelessness seen to date and expected to remain in the future as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.
- 1.7 In an ideal world, the Furniture Project should be a service that the TAO can tap into for assistance in moving households into temporary accommodation. Instead, the maintenance of the service is taking up an increasing amount of the TAO's time.
- 1.8 The TAO post lies within the Housing Options team and is funded by the general fund. At present, all funding for the service is coming from the general fund and in particular through the Homelessness Prevention Fund.
- 1.9 This report summarises both how the service currently operates, and also a number of options being considered in relation to the ongoing delivery of the Furniture Project. It also examines, if the service continues, whether funding and responsibility for this service would be better placed within the Housing Revenue Account and our function as a Landlord.

## **2. How the service works**

- 2.1 When a person or household presents to the Housing Options team, if it is determined that they are in need of assistance from the Furniture Project they are referred to the TAO as the person who runs the scheme.
- 2.2 If the items a household needs are available, then they are provided to them when they move into their accommodation free of charge. If not, then they are referred to other existing services (who charge for items).
- 2.3 The council currently either pay for items to be delivered from the garages to the accommodation – we have an arrangement with a local delivery firm for this, or the EDDC officer will deliver them in their own vehicle.
- 2.4 All electrical items are PAT tested for safety purposes before they are passed to households. This testing is also free, as the TAO has received the relevant training to carry out the tests.
- 2.5 The person receiving the items from EDDC is required to sign a property disclaimer stating that EDDC has provide the products with no guarantees or warranties.
- 2.6 Items for the Furniture Project are sourced through a number of informal channels, mainly through word of mouth, including donations through local Facebook groups, people who are downsizing from larger properties, and items from abandoned tenancies or house clearances. This is largely undertaken by the TAO.

## **3. Cost of the Service**

- 3.1 It is difficult to quantify the exact cost of the service as it currently operates, in part due to the informal approach undertaken – there are consequently no formal procedures in place for reporting costs, such as a specific cost code to identify expenditure. Most charges are therefore applied against the general prevention of homelessness.

- 3.2 Some costs can be identified; we have utilised a local delivery service for moving some larger furniture, mainly from house clearances. In 2020 as at 8<sup>th</sup> December we have spent £1,887 for this. We also spent £475 on van hire in last financial year 2019/20.
- 3.3 In terms of officer time, the service is estimated to take up an average of two days per week though this does not include anything undertaken out of hours. Also, the amount of time varies from week to week. Staff time is the main issue and driver in seeking this review.

#### **4. A Developing Service – is it sustainable?**

- 4.1 As previously stated, the Furniture Project started off as a very informal effort; some excess furniture became available and we knew people who needed it. However, it has since expanded and continues to develop as more opportunities become available and more needs are identified.
- 4.2 The service has been used to furnish our new Place of Safety, as well as for the preparation of our Housing First properties.
- 4.3 Carpets have proven to be a big requirement for people moving in to EDDC stock from temporary accommodation. We have managed to secure off-cuts from local companies for free on occasion.
- 4.4 We have also identified carpets left in EDDC properties when they become void that could be reused for new tenants. Carpets are currently removed as part of the void process to enable important health and safety checks to take place, but if suitable storage can be found then these could be retained for future use.
- 4.5 The EDDC StreetScene team currently remove bulky furniture for households across the district. These are currently disposed of but it has been suggested that these could also be reused for struggling tenants.
- 4.6 Although these opportunities are exciting, the service has already expanded to the extent that it is unsustainable in its current format and a decision needs to be made as to how and whether the Furniture Project can continue.
- 4.7 Section 6 of this report runs through the wider strategic benefits of the current service and Section 7 summarises the options under consideration at this time.

#### **5. Strategic Benefits of the Furniture Project**

- 5.1 The Furniture Project scheme supports a number of other strategic priorities for the council.
- 5.2 There is plenty of evidence linking a safe, secure and stable home to improved health and wellbeing, not least within EDDC's own longitudinal study, Your Home: Your Wellbeing. The provision of the basic necessities for a home to those who cannot afford it sets a foundation for a safe and secure home.
- 5.3 People presenting to the homelessness service are often in a position of severe financial deprivation, unable to afford furniture and household items, or else having to choose between these and other essential costs such as food or heating. The Furniture Project is helping to battle poverty in our district through the provision of essential

furniture to those most in need. In practice, this will enable people in financial difficulty to better afford rent payments when there have been some cases where it has been a choice between furniture and rent.

- 5.4 As we all seek to work in a greener way, including through the approach of the circular economy, the redistribution and recycling of furniture and electrical goods (including large appliances such as refrigerators and freezers) is clearly in line with this philosophy.

## 6. Options for the future

- 6.1 It should be noted that work on the review of the Furniture Project has been held back due to a need to prioritise urgent services in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. More work will be required to assess the viability of each of the following options, and members are invited to suggest additional ideas for consideration if appropriate. Similarly, if members feel an option outlined in this section should no longer be considered then this report provides an opportunity for them to be discounted.

### 6.2 Option 1: Keep the service in-house, funded through HRA budgets

- 6.2.1 A newly designed service, initially only available to Council tenants, providing furniture, household items and carpets to tenants for free.

#### 6.2.2 Benefits of an in-house service include:

- Certainty that all items are given to households in need
- Good relationships with other housing departments can help with the logistics of moving furniture in at the right time (e.g. to tie in with void repairs and allocations processes)
- Potential to link easily with Estate Management and repairs in recycling items left in void properties.
- Potential to link with Suez for redistribution of bulky furniture collected from residents.
- The provision of this service reinforces a positive impression of the Council as an organisation that is here to help those in need as a landlord of social housing.

#### 6.2.3 Challenges include:

- Funding for staffing required; at least one person but maybe more.
- Current storage facilities are not suitable – an alternative may need to be found at an additional cost
- Delivery of items, particularly heavier ones, currently require the hire of a van to move them. Consideration is needed as to whether to purchase a van or continue with van hire.
- Overall costs of running the service in house are currently unknown although staffing costs, including on costs, for employing one person for one day a week would be £6,000 and one person for two days a week would be £12,002 (based on a new position being evaluated at scale 5)
- Health and Safety considerations of moving heavy furniture
- Systems and processes will need to be set up to ensure the service is run safely and adhering to any legal requirements.

- Establishing if this service would be acting in competition for other existing companies or charities who rely on income from selling second hand furniture etc. Is this service effectively a council funded charity?
- Will a formal service attract the same level of donations?

### 6.3 Option 2: End Service and utilise existing alternatives

6.3.1 The current service is unsustainable. Tenants can be signposted to Turntable in Exeter, HospiceCare, and other companies that sell cheap furniture and other items. Also, social media, Ebay and other local websites could be used by tenants to procure cheap items.

6.3.2 Benefits include:

- No cost to the council at a time where budgets are severely restricted
- Support for existing local companies and charities
- Encouraging self-reliance

6.3.3 Challenges include:

- The poorest people will lose out. Most alternative options come at a cost: the current service offers assistance to those who are unable to afford even the cheapest second-hand furniture.
- The Furniture Project was borne from the fact that existing services could not meet the needs of some people in our district due to affordability

### 6.4 Option 3: End service and replace with a voucher scheme

6.4.1 This option would provide financial assistance to households in need to purchase furniture from other companies.

6.4.2 Benefits include:

- Support the most vulnerable, giving them a good starting point for their tenancy
- Potentially lower cost than continuing the service as no storage or staffing costs

6.4.3 Challenges include:

- Need to decide what the vouchers would cover (just items of furniture, or delivery as well)
- Need to negotiate with outside companies to accept voucher scheme
- Need to develop full rules of usage for vouchers and administration for distribution and reimbursement of companies

### 6.5 Option 4: Limit service to furniture/items acquired through void clearance of council stock

6.5.1 This option involves collecting and storing remaining furniture, household items or suitable floor coverings/carpets left in properties when they become void.

6.5.2 Benefits include:

- Enables the service to continue in some form, whilst reducing staffing time in acquiring new items.
- May be able to link in with Ian Williams' commitment to Social Value.
- Currently required to store tenant items left in properties for a period so potential for savings.

6.5.3 Challenges include:

- Many of the challenges identified in 7.2.3 will apply to this option

## **7. Recommendations**

7.1 That members consider and agree if any of the Options in Section 7 of this report should be disregarded for further evaluation.

7.2 That members approve the options identified in Section 7 for further evaluation