

Poverty: review of council activities during the pandemic year 2020-2021

Introduction: council work which underpins the Poverty Strategy

This brief overview of activities has been compiled from information readily available from East Devon District Council's published Service Plans, published here: <https://eastdevon.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/strategies-policies-and-performance/our-plans/service-plans/>

Services covered:

- Countryside and Leisure
- Environmental Health, Private Sector Housing & Car Parks Services
- Finance
- Governance and Licensing
- Growth Development and Prosperity
- Housing service
- Place, Assets and Commercialisation
- Planning service
- Organisational Development, Transformation and Equalities
- Streetscene service

The period reviewed here covers the pandemic months of 2020-2021 and therefore inevitably follows an exceptional course, different from the one anticipated when services planned their activities for 2020-2021.

It is not a comprehensive list of all activities, but provides a flavour of work by services while the Poverty Strategy was under development. The structure follows the five themes of the new Strategy.

1. Helping people on low incomes

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

- i. The Revenues and Benefits Team had numerous initiatives to implement and a significant increase in workload, to support residents and businesses impacted by Covid-19:
 - Government Business Rate relief schemes were introduced to support business during the year. These had to be implemented quickly, with customers informed and revised bills issued. (Circa £18m+ in reliefs)
 - Various business grant support schemes were introduced at extremely short notice ranging from prescriptive schemes to discretionary schemes. Ongoing work by the team, the Growth and Development team, Strata and Members to implement successfully and at pace. To date circa £50m has been deployed to over 4,500 businesses.
 - A significant and unprecedented increase in the number of individuals requiring financial support, has resulted in more residents claiming Council Tax Reduction, requiring arrangements, money advice, council tax hardship and also needing direct financial support.

- The team led on a Devon-wide Test and Trace Payment scheme policy that was set up and implemented successfully within a couple of weeks.
 - The Council Tax team have supported many of these changes and assisted individuals to deal with difficulties currently experienced in paying their council tax bills.
 - A financial resilience officer post has been created using external funds.
- ii. Our Customer Services Team have been handling a high volume of calls ranging across council services; the public have required more support with during the pandemic. Since October the Team also now manage (with the support of specialist colleagues across the council) the Coronavirus Community Hub.
 - iii. A new banded discount scheme was implemented for Council Tax Support giving additional support and reducing administration of the scheme.
 - iv. Assets estates team: Delivered rent deferment scheme for tenants struggling to pay rent during lockdown. They supported tenants generally through Covid 19, signposting to other services or grants where applicable.

2. Strengthening families and communities

Strengthening families and communities, including supporting groups of people that are more likely to experience poverty, and community and voluntary groups working to combat poverty.

- i. Roles were reassigned during the pandemic. Officers worked with volunteer contacts and councillors helping to identify community volunteer response leads for all 8 towns and 70-80 parishes/villages. The Covid-19 hub was created on our website providing information and guidance for all our residents and businesses and leading on engagement with East Devon's Coronavirus community efforts.
- ii. We worked with elected members to distribute £25,912 to community-based not-for-profit projects through Crowdfund East Devon.
- iii. Environmental Health officers investigated and dealt with a 50% increase in complaints about neighbours behaving in an anti-social manner, neighbourhood disputes / breaches of lockdown restrictions and accumulations of rubbish in gardens. This increase may be associated with lifestyle changes linked to Covid-19 lockdown measures.
- iv. Our Pest Control Officer treated an increased number of rat infestations thought to be associated with reduced domestic green waste collections, closure of household waste recycling centres and closure of food businesses.
- v. Wild Exmouth met our target of recruiting 35 volunteers including new role of Orchard Guardian, created 3 new Community Orchards.
- vi. Thelma Hulbert Gallery with Wild East Devon and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (East Devon and Blackdown Hills) developed the 'Creative Cabin' – a mobile creative space taking

nature and culture on tour in a 'Recovery Roadshow' to enable dialogue and exchange and support communities in their health, environment and well-being.

- vii. Streetscene continued to open and maintain all parks and gardens and react to increased maintenance demand due to rising volumes of local residents and visitors enjoying open spaces due to Covid-19.
- viii. Officers communicated with groups of young adults to avoid incidents of anti-social behaviour.
- ix. Planning collected over £3.2million in CIL receipts in the year towards infrastructure projects in the district with over £500k being distributed to communities within the district as their neighbourhood proportion.
- x. Planning collected over £850k in S106 receipts and worked with our communities to spend over £550k on sports and play areas in the district.
- xi. Key evidence documents to support production of the new Local Plan have been produced included an East Devon Housing Needs Study.
- xii. We have established a gypsy and traveller forum and held a first meeting of the group which seeks to improve communication with these groups and enable their greater participation in planning as we seek to meet their housing needs.

3. Inclusive economy

Promoting an inclusive economy, by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low incomes.

- i. Place and prosperity team: existing Thriving Towns funding for Exmouth and Axminster amalgamated to form an East Devon Thriving Towns mini-programme to provide greater scope and flexibility. In addition to the two local authorities, the NHS, Police and central government departments will be actively involved in the programme.
- ii. EDDC was allocated £130,992 from the Re-opening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSS) programme (based on population as a proxy for footfall). The monies are from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).
- iii. Growth and Development staff provided support for key local employers who were experiencing challenging conditions. This included a rapid redundancy response when Axminster Carpets and Flybe went into administration. A series of events featured Job Centre Plus, Business Information Point, Axminster Job Club, and others. The team also participates in a Redundancy Task Force set up to offer coordinated support to Oscar Mayer in South Somerset following October's announcement of potential site closure. The team provided input to a county-wide Redundancy Response Network in partnership with Devon County Council and DWP.

- iv. A package of support has been agreed for Exeter Airport, the most impacted by Covid-19 of any business in the District.
- v. Hospitality businesses e.g. pubs and cafes, were assisted with identifying outdoor seating spaces, risk assessments, temporary licences and sitting-out consents. Their endeavours to trade responsibly following the lockdown were supported.
- vi. Parking Services Covid-19 Response & Recovery:
 - Provided free parking to NHS and key workers.
 - Extended winter parking offer to the end of June 2020 to support the community during the lockdown period.
 - Introduced a range of parking concessions for community volunteers doing Covid-related voluntary unpaid work.
- vii. Licensing team assisted the taxi trade through the impact of the pandemic and associated legislation/guidance by prompt delivery of an emergency hackney carriage and private hire licensing policy to alleviate reduction in work and income of licensees.
- viii. Licensing provided high levels of contact and support to existing and to new business ventures throughout 2020 in the hospitality industry and taxi trade in line with our commitment for “assisting clients to run their businesses effectively”.
- ix. Officers and councillors worked in collaboration with the taxi association and licensees in spring 2020 by promoting healthier lifestyle options for licensed drivers in support of the council’s Public Health Strategic Plan 2019-23.

4. Housing

Addressing the high cost of housing, improving housing conditions, creating affordable warmth and reducing homelessness.

4.1 Housing Service

- i. Response & Recovery actions during the Covid-19 pandemic maintaining essential services to tenants, using alternative methods of communication and contact, maintaining tenant safety, switching to agile/remote working and supporting the Community Support Hub.
- ii. Housing have delivered and enabled 356 new affordable homes in 2019/20 with housing association and developer partners.
- iii. Have sustained tenancies and supported tenants during a challenging period of lockdown where vulnerable and shielding tenants have found it difficult to adjust to the ‘new normal’.
- iv. Efficient response to the Covid-19 outbreak with a swift response to the ‘Everybody In’ requirement and the continuation of letting properties through the pandemic. Temporary accommodation provided to 89 households from when lockdown was introduced until the end of September; support provided to all whilst accommodated.

- v. Reacting the pandemic and the effect it had on homelessness in the district, including bringing the Sailors Rest, Exmouth flats into use as move-on accommodation. The project included a change of proposed use and upgrading the furnishing and fitting of all rooms using repurposed funding from MHCLG. This has provided a sustainable move in addition to benefitting the temporary accommodation budget by freeing up units of temporary accommodation.
- vi. A homelessness project to get the HMO in Morton Road, Exmouth up and running including furnishing and fitting of all rooms, setting up a key card entry system and provision of procedures. Close management of the HMO has been in place since it became available to occupy in February 2020. Sixteen occupants have benefited from the accommodation to date with only one eviction. As of October 20 it is calculated that £78,430 has been saved, based on calculating the number of nights occupied a standard B&B nightly charge of £50.
- vii. Effective use of the private sector and the rent deposit and bond scheme – 88 applicants assisted into the private sector through the scheme in 2019-20 and 56 in the first six months of 2020-21, providing positive outcomes for applicants and relieving pressure on social housing.
- viii. Successful bid to MHCLG for Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) funding. £230k received, jointly with Mid Devon for 2020-21, enabling the team to (i) employ two Rough Sleeper Navigators (ii) employ a second Private Sector Liaison Officer (iii) cover a contract with BCHA for support to six Housing First projects between both LAs and (iv) receipt of a £10,000 prevention pot.
- ix. Taking actions such as tackling the hard-to-let properties within our stock and prioritising the availability of properties when under offer to homeless applicants in temporary accommodation. Providing options for properties that cannot be let through the usual channels e.g. Manor Close being used as temporary accommodation, reducing the B&B budget whilst bringing revenue in.

4.2 Private Sector Housing team

- i. HMOs licensing and service requests for housing standards.
- ii. Currently have £800k grant for adaptations to houses.
- iii. Ensuring Covid security in HMOs and caravan sites and advising landlords on Covid-19 security.
- iv. Working to help residents in filthy and verminous homes.
- v. Resumed the Better Care Fund and our Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) programme and maintained the Devon wide Housing Assistance Policy offering more variety of grant assistance.
- vi. Seen an increase in ECO Flex top ups and loan applications for energy efficiency measures.
- vii. Resumed the caravan and HMO licensing visits to ensure compliance.
- viii. Income generation of fees and ensure the safety of the residents.
- ix. Maintained our social media presence by providing advice and information on harassment and illegal evictions of tenants in private rented accommodation.

- x. Advised and informed tenants and landlords on changes to harassment and illegal evictions.
- xi. Updated policy and procedures and introducing new policies for the enforcement of EPC and MEEC regulations.

4.3 General

- i. Public Health officer facilitated contacts for fuel poverty schemes with WEB and NHS colleagues; made various introductions and set up meetings.
- ii. Planning team consulted on and adopted a new supplementary planning guidance on affordable housing, to help to guide the delivery of affordable housing in the district.

5. Improving health outcomes

Aiming to improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health care and ill health prevention.

- i. Housing Services team contacted sheltered tenants more frequently than pre-Covid, and contacted every tenant to check their wellbeing, many still now having a weekly call.
- ii. Officers provided support for clinically shielded people, ranging from emergency food distribution to welfare visits. This included prioritising and addressing numerous actions raised by Devon County Council. Parking Services team reassigned Civil Enforcement Officers and their vehicles to deliver 150 emergency food parcels and over 150 dietary boxes. Environmental Health and Housing officers made welfare visits to uncontactable shielded people.
- iii. Our public health focus shifted to Covid-19 communications but some social media activities have resumed e.g. tweeting health messages.
- iv. We continued to liaise with other communications teams and groups such as campaigns from Public Health England, and the Smokefree Devon Alliance led by Devon County Council. These campaigns are evidence-based and aim to tackle health inequalities.
- v. Researching and liaising assistance for Axminster community-based holiday hunger scheme.
- vi. Facilitated East Devon's first Hygiene Banks [in response to request from member] by arranging for public libraries to host drop-off points.
- vii. Public Health Officer was invited to join the local NHS-funded Devon Population Health Management Development Programme PCN Action Learning Set delivered by Devon's CCG, and influenced the decision to focus on Littleham, Exmouth.

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