

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the consultative meeting of Poverty Working Panel held Online via the Zoom app on 20 September 2021

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 11.00 am and ended at 2.00 pm

1 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

2 Declarations of interest

Minute 7. Update from Devon County Council on poverty-related issues, including food insecurity and Team Devon - Simon Kitchen - Head of Communities.

Councillor Ian Hall, Personal, Member is a Devon County Councillor and works with Officers on the FareShare scheme.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 April 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 April 2021 were recommended for approval by Senior Officers.

4 Update on the Labour Market - Presentation by Sally Raynes - Economic Development Officer - Employment and Skills

Sally Raynes, Economic Development Officer, presented an update on the labour market which focussed on the employment and skills situation once furlough ends on 30th September. The presentation included the following points:

- There are high levels of vacancies for well paid jobs in East Devon across all sectors and wages are increasing in lower paid sectors.
- The ability to access well paid jobs is impacted by the need to drive to places of work.
- Regarding unemployment in East Devon, the largest out of work group is the 30-45 age group.
- Various schemes are in place to reduce unemployment and help the unemployed back in to work.
- It is still too early to understand the effects of the ending of the furlough scheme and which groups will be most affected.
- With regard to pay, East Devon residents are paid only 88.3% of the average weekly pay in the UK.
- Traditionally low paid sectors and largest employment sectors are raising wages from minimum wage due to shortage of applicants in sectors such as hospitality, construction, care sector and transportation.
- The most effective way to increase average pay is to encourage the workforce to improve skills to enable them to take up better paid jobs.
- There are many free schemes available to support people with up skilling or re-skilling and lots of apprenticeships available in all sector and at all levels.
- As the furlough scheme ends, residents will need assistance with signposting to re-skilling to enable them to take up better paid jobs.

Questions and comments from Members included the following points:

- It was noted that the removal of the £20 increase in Universal Credit is likely to impact low paid workers many of whom rely on the benefit, however, there is no way of ascertaining what the actual impact will be.
- It is vital to encourage and assist those in lower paid jobs to move into better paid work and women aged 45+ are of particular concern in this regard.
- EDDC Officers are in contact with the DWP and the various schemes available such as SkillUp and SmartSkills in order to be able to support residents with moving into better paid work.
- Access to transport is crucial for those seeking to change employment and this has a particular impact on younger people.
- There is a mismatch between the types of jobs available and the jobs which are being sought by residents in line with their current skills and job sectors, many of which are in hard to access rural locations.
- It was noted that the mismatch between vacancies and skills is a nationwide issue. There is DWP funding available to assist with retraining and reskilling to help people move into better paid employment.
- Those seeking to change their employment appear to be less willing to move to a different area.
- It was noted that Devon County Council is preparing a bus improvement plan which should be published by the end of October for implementation in March 2022 and that this should address issues with improving access to employment locations.
- A key challenge for recruitment and the movement of the workforce is the relationship between escalating prices in the housing market and the labour market.
- There is a need for employers to be more flexible with working hours which would also go some way to addressing issues with the timing of public transport for those travelling to work.

The Chair thanked Sally Raynes for her very informative presentation. The presentation slides would be circulated after the meeting and further updates on the economy would be brought to future meetings.

5 **Update on the financial/hardship & financial resilience support - Libby Jarrett - Service Lead - Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services and Corporate Fraud**

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager, presented an update on the financial resilience team which highlighted the following:

- The Council Tax reduction caseload has increased overall, but there has been a drop in new applications in the past 5 months. The caseload shows an increase of 2% towards working age compared with January of this year.
- Referrals received continue to grow and more complex cases are now being referred by other agencies such as social workers, schools and mental health teams.
- The highest number of referrals came from internal departments with the highest reason for the referral being rent arrears. It was noted that 30% of residents referred are in work.
- Regarding payments from the Hardship Fund, the highest need remains for emergency food and fuel support.

- The presentation included a summary of issues which had been identified as contributing to financial hardship.
- There are now two dedicated Financial Resilience Officers in place, on 2 year fixed term contracts, and EDDC officers across departments are starting to identify residents who may need support and are referring them to the Financial Resilience team.
- Policies are being updated in line with the Poverty Strategy.
- A case study was presented which showed the complexity of the reasons for financial hardship and the help which the team had been able to offer to the resident.
- Partnership working across all sectors is key to addressing the underlying issues for those in financial hardship and poverty and EDDC's partners have been very positive and willing to continue to work together.
- Having a dedicated resource is now resulting in good outcomes in the longer term.

Comments and questions from Members included the following points:

- Early intervention is crucial when people are experiencing hardship.
- Helping people to help themselves is key when supporting people.
- Increasing the information available will assist with supporting people and a survey or questionnaire could be a way of gathering data and obtaining input from residents.
- Partners such as foodbanks and schools are starting to refer residents to EDDC which is assisting with identifying those needing support.
- There is concern that the imminent cut to Universal Credit, the increase in National Insurance Contributions and rapidly rising utility costs will have a serious impact on residents.
- Concern was expressed regarding housing associations not allowing tenants who are in arrears with their rent to downsize to more affordable properties. It was noted that this is a national issue.
- Appointing a digital exclusion champion could assist with increasing support available for residents.
- Regarding access to EDDC staff for Exmouth residents, it was noted that signage has been updated to assist with accessing services.

The Chair thanked Sharon Church and Libby Jarrett for their presentation and contributions. The presentation slides would be circulated after the meeting.

6 **'A perfect storm - health inequalities and the impact of Covid-19' - LGA report introduced by Helen Wharam - Public Health Project Officer**

Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer, gave a presentation on health inequalities and the impact of Covid-19 which included the following points:

- The LGA briefing "A Perfect Storm", which had been circulated to Members previously, looked at inequalities and aimed to examine the impact of Covid-19 and the resulting restrictions on inequalities and explore the steps some councils are taking to reduce inequalities.
- It was noted that the pandemic had made everyone more aware of health inequalities and their impact.

- Inequalities highlighted by Covid-19 included geographical, across different age ranges, digital exclusion, mental health, occupation, gender, ethnicity and learning disabilities.
- An outcome of Covid-19 has been the growth of access to online services and those with no access to the internet, for a variety of reasons, are excluded from not only online services, but they also experience barriers to home-working and home-schooling.
- The risks to mental health resulting from Covid-19 have been widely reported and may have the greatest long term effect on public health.
- A positive outcome of the pandemic has been an increase in partnership working between local authorities, other agencies and community sectors.

Comments and questions from Members included the following points:

- There was concern that younger people are not taking up the Covid-19 vaccination and it was noted that Devon County Council, the NHS and other agencies are working together to address this issue.
- There was concern that the message to 'stay at home' has contributed to an adverse impact on mental health; it was noted that local comms messages should reflect county and national advice.

The Chair thanked Helen Wharam for her presentation and the slides would be circulated after the meeting.

7 **Update from Devon County Council on poverty-related issues, including food insecurity and Team Devon - Simon Kitchen - Head of Communities**

Simon Kitchen, Head of Communities – Devon County Council – updated members on the Team Devon approach and work. The following points were included:

- The EDDC Poverty Strategy is helpful for the local government 'family' in Devon and DCC is taking on some of the points raised through the strategy.
- Team Devon comprises the Leaders and Chief Executive Officers of Devon councils who meet regularly and have requested Simon Kitchen to co-ordinate work around poverty and food insecurity on their behalf.
- The need to potentially feed the 60,000 people identified as shielding from March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, had highlighted the need to understand local food organisations and their capacity and communication with each other.
- In November 2020, a report from the Social Market Foundation developed understanding of food insecurity and identified a league table of areas in the UK where residents experienced food insecurity which also included areas in Devon.
- DCC wished to use Government funding during the pandemic to create food sustainability and, with district council colleagues, set up food networks in each district to better understand food support locally. The food network project in East Devon ended at the start of the summer 2021.
- DCC research has shown that really vulnerable families are not accessing foodbanks for various reasons.
- DCC is looking to move forward with work to develop a series of food networks across Devon and to work collectively with other councils to promote welfare generally and support for clinically extremely vulnerable residents.

- A way forward in several areas had been agreed loosely and DCC is looking to commission further research to really understand what interventions vulnerable families and older people actually need. It has also been agreed to consider shared principles across district councils in Devon.
- It was noted that there is a lack of common offer of support across the County and Team Devon is looking to bring all of this work together in an agreed strategy.

Discussion and questions from Members and participants included the following points:

- It is vital to understand the root causes of poverty, rather than just address the consequences.
- Victoria Robinson, a Community Development Worker for the Housing Service, advised Members on how food had been distributed during lockdown to various providers including foodbanks, community fridges and larders. A list of food providers in East Devon had been compiled and was currently being updated. Detailed information from East Devon was available and could help to inform the DCC research work. Food providers are also referring clients to other EDDC services as appropriate.
- Victoria Robinson also outlined the process by which food is sourced from the FareShare hub in Bristol and distributed via Exeter Food Action.
- If all providers across Devon work to the same ethos, it may assist with overcoming barriers which prevent people from accessing support.
- It was noted that there is a difference between distributing food which would otherwise be wasted, arising from a duty not to waste food, and assisting those who are vulnerable and in need through foodbanks.
- Part of the solution to food sustainability could include allotments and growing food locally.

The Chair thanked Simon Kitchen for his presentation and looked forward to working with Simon and colleagues at Devon County Council in the future.

8 **Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector consultation - report from John Golding - Strategic Lead - Housing, Health & Environment, on behalf of Jamie Buckley - Community Engagement & Funding Officer**

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

9 **Poverty Action Plan - Panel comments re. progress?**

This item was deferred to the next meeting.

10 **Date of the next meeting**

The next meeting will be held on 22 November 2021. The Panel will continue to meet every two months during 2022 and proposed dates would be circulated following the meeting.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Armstrong (Chair)
M Chapman
B De Saram
M Rixson
T Woodward

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

I Hall
P Millar

Officers in attendance:

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Simon Davey, Strategic Lead Finance
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment
Susan Howl, Democratic Services Manager
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer
Andrew Wood, Service Lead - Growth Development and Prosperity
Victoria Robinson, Community Development Worker – Housing Service
Sally Raynes – Economic Development Officer – Employment and Skills

Also in attendance:

Simon Kitchen – Head of Communities, Devon County Council

Councillor apologies:

S Hawkins
P Jarvis

Chair

Date: