

## **EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via Zoom app on 21 March 2022**

#### **Attendance list at end of document**

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.58 pm

#### **27 Public speaking**

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

#### **28 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **29 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 31 January 2022**

Minutes of the previous meeting held on 31 January 2022 had been circulated in advance and were noted as a true and accurate record.

#### **30 Update on loan sharks - Libby Jarrett - Service Lead - Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud**

The Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud provided an update on loan sharks, which highlighted the following:

- The Illegal Money Lending Team (IMLT) had confirmed that there are no active investigations on loan sharks in the district at this time; this did not mean that they are not active in the area, but they are not being reported.
- Key staff had attended IMLT training on how to recognise loan sharks and how to help residents to overcome barriers that prevent them from reporting. The training would be offered to more staff going forward and resources put in place to facilitate identification of residents at risk or those who are using loan sharks.
- Content would be put out in the residents' newsletter and in social media campaigns, using literature from the IMLT.
- The website had been updated to include information about loan sharks and illegal money lending.
- The Benefits Manager was updating the IMLT on the work that EDDC is doing on poverty and exploring how the Council and IMLT could work together moving forward.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment commented on the good work undertaken in connection with illegal money lending and asked whether there were any credit unions to which the team could signpost residents in need of borrowing. Following discussion, it was agreed as an action point that the Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud would explore this in detail and provide a report to the next meeting.

Comments and questions from Members included the following points:

- A Member asked if there were videos that could help to educate people to ensure they did not get themselves into unfortunate circumstances where they were desperate to use loan sharks. She added that some people might find a video shared on social media more accessible than reports on the EDDC website. The Benefits Manager responded the EDDC website points to the Illegal Money Lending website where there are videos advising people of what not to do.

### 31 **Energy Briefing Update from:**

The Chair welcomed Sharon Church – Benefits Manager; Martin Prew – Technical Officer for Environmental Health & Car Parks; and Jody Harding – Principal Environmental Health Officer – Private Housing, to the meeting, and invited them and the Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud to present their updates, a report having been circulated prior to the meeting.

The presentations detailed at length the challenges that it was identified residents were facing with household budgets, what was being done to support them, and the wider role of Environmental Health Public Sector Housing in helping to address housing-related forms of poverty.

The following points were highlighted as key considerations:

- There was significant concern around the disproportionate impact of the rising energy bills on certain groups, particularly:
  - Those on lower incomes, who spend a higher proportion of their income on energy bills.
  - Residents in rural areas who do not have access to gas and are therefore reliant on oil and are not protected by the energy price cap. There is a real risk that some will struggle to afford the minimum 500L as this is now circa £750.
- Pressure is likely to get worse, with rising costs across all household bills, and there was concern that some households will struggle to afford day-to-day essentials, including food.
- Whilst helpful, the Energy Bills Rebate and the £200 energy bill loan scheme, announced by the government on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2022 to help households with rising energy bills, are not going to be sufficient.
- The Household Support Fund ends on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and support thereafter would be drawn from the Council's own hardship fund.
- Opportunities were being explored with Devon County Council, Exeter Community Energy and Lendology for providing a scheme for funding oil/off mains gas top-ups, and how residents can move to renewables, for those who are financially struggling.
- Some very positive collaborative working was happening and this was critical in being able to achieve better outcomes for residents.
- There were plans to:
  - Continue to develop the Financial Support Hub on the website to make it easier for residents to know what support is available with household bills.
  - Deliver more proactive communications including via social media, the residents newsletter, and the EDDC app.
  - Include in the Poverty Dashboard data on households with oil, energy ratings, rented and low-income households, to help inform future interventions and targeted support, and to bring about energy efficiency improvements in properties with a low energy efficiency rating.
- Citizens Advice would like to see the government expand its Warm Home Discount and make it more generous for people on low incomes.

It was suggested that Members might wish to consider recommending to Council:

- To lobby government for more support with energy costs, including for a price cap on heating oil so that users are provided the same protections as consumers with electricity and gas.
- To lobby government on further emergency funding to continue to help people to eat, now that the HSF is finishing.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their presentations and remarked that with the energy and financial crises happening now, it was appropriate for the Panel to know what actions were being taken, and how EDDC could help people.

Discussion following the presentation included the following points:

- A Member observed anecdotally that a rising number of private landlords were asking tenants to leave, and changing to holiday lets, and expressed concern that i) tenants were left with nowhere to go; and ii) holiday lets did not come under EDDC's curtain for improvements. Were Private Sector Housing aware of the issues, and how did they handle them? The Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud stated that data had been collated in November 2021 on properties taken out of domestic use, the number of second homes and self-catering holiday units; as an action point, she would update this data to provide a comparison and identify the movement of properties between sectors.
- The Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud commented that Wales was trialling a 300% council tax charge for second home owners; this might ensure second home owners contribute more into the local economy, or dissuade them from retaining a second home. She suggested the Panel might wish to consider asking Council to lobby central government for a comparable system in England.
- Members considered the particular issues of poverty in rural areas including i) rising rural crime, e.g. theft of heating oil; and ii) residents who use LPG being linked to one provider and therefore unable to shop around. It was suggested the Panel looks in depth at rural poverty issues, and that EDDC considers how it can raise awareness of the dangers of rural crime and what security people can take to protect their heating oil supply.
- A Member commented that damp and mould in properties were arguably more pernicious than cold, and challenged whether EDDC was doing enough to tackle the causes of damp, including overcrowding and fabric defects, and counselling people enough in how to avoid damp in their houses. The Principal Environmental Health Officer – Private Housing responded that i) a Winter Resilience Project had supported people in tackling the root causes of damp and mould, and this had been very successful; ii) risk assessments could be done under the Housing Act in the damp and mould low risk category, talking with individual residents about lifestyle changes or taking enforcement action against landlords with properties in disrepair; iii) it was intended to increase engagement with residents around damp and mould issues; iv) funding is available through LAD2, LAD3 and the Sustainable Warmth Project to retrofit and improve the structure of properties, before installing renewable energy; v) EDDC has some old properties that are not well insulated and, with the resources available, the team engage as much as possible with affected residents through the complaints process, on a case by case basis.
- The Housing Service Lead drew Members' attention to a useful and informative Ombudsman report on damp and mould, which would be circulated to Working Panel members outside of the meeting.
- The Housing Service Lead stated that they were embarking on a Stock Condition Survey which would give a clearer picture of the challenges and the retrofit measures required. It was expected that significant investment would be required for a lot of the housing stock and, in the meantime, the Housing Leadership team were considering carefully the complex and multi-layered issues around potentially deciding not to let properties which have significant issues, balanced against a competing need for housing. Members discussed the logistics of carrying out the Stock Condition Survey work robustly and in a timely fashion.
- It was expressed that the Housing Task and Finish Forum could consider how to push forward on retrofitting and the specification of housing development.
- An extensive scoping piece of work was underway to highlight potential development sites with a view to building new homes, to support the Housing Service in ensuring homes are fit for purpose for tenants.

- In response to a Member's question, it was confirmed that a register of private sector housing does not exist, and EDDC is unable to proactively offer inspection visits to ensure that private sector housing is suitable. Landlords are the legal entity responsible for ensuring compliance with legislation and any intervention from EDDC is reliant on tenants making contact. It was suggested Members could consider lobbying MPs for a Landlords' Register.
- A Member highlighted that half of people in poverty are disabled and asked that the Panel considers disability-related poverty issues at a future session, particularly whether the Disabled Facilities Grant could be extended to heating and a range of other equipment. It was recognised that the disabled and elderly are least able to take measures to reduce their energy use.
- One Member remarked that people should not feel ashamed to put on warm hats, extra layers of clothing and sleeping bags, and could be encouraged to accept a lower temperature in the home, to help them make their money go further. A counterview was expressed that this is not appropriate for the elderly, disabled, babies or young children, who can die this way and need their homes to be kept warm.
- A Member suggested a briefing could be provided to Council outlining the high quality extensive work being done by officers on poverty and energy issues.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Following the discussion, the following recommendations to Cabinet were agreed:

- To lobby government for more support with energy costs including for a price cap on heating oil and LPG so that they are provided the same level of protections that consumers have with electricity and gas.
- To lobby government on further emergency funding to continue to help people to eat, now that the Housing Support Fund is finishing.
- To lobby government to impose a 300% council tax charge for second home owners.
- To lobby government for a register of private sector landlords.

## **32 Poverty Dashboard presentation from:**

The Chair welcomed George Whitlock – Information and Data Analysis Officer, to present the Poverty Dashboard together with the Benefits Manager and the Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud.

The presentation included:

- The dashboard brings together a wealth of data and outcomes, updated on a monthly basis, to enable the team to identify at a glance what is going on in the district, across areas of financial, housing, health and employment.
- The officers demonstrated the interactive functionality of the dashboard and explained that the Benefits and Financial Resilience teams can run reports of the data to inform future interventions, strategies, and the work of the Working Panel.
- The dashboard remains a work in progress and it is intended that additional data sets will be added over time.
- The full dashboard will not be publicly available for reasons of data protection but a version will be published with sensitive data extracted.

Questions and comments following the presentation included:

- It was felt that this is a very impressive piece of work and a very useful tool in the quest to tackle poverty in the district.
- The approach could be sold and used as an income stream; it is very well designed for proactive work.
- It would be helpful for key headlines and trends to be communicated to Council and Cabinet to help inform policy.
- One Member suggested that information is shared with members on a ward by ward basis so they can ensure targeted supported is available. The Benefits Manager expressed that high level data could be provided for certain wards but it would not be appropriate to share detailed information for reasons of data protection.

Subsequent to the discussion, the Service Lead – Revenues, Benefits, Customer Services & Corporate Fraud stated that the Poverty Dashboard would be brought to the Working Panel again with updated feedback on trends, following the addition of more data sets.

### 33 **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan, as discussed at the previous meeting, had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting. The Chair invited Members and Officers to suggest any further items for the Plan, and to prioritise in what order the items should be discussed at future meetings.

In discussion, it was agreed to add the following items to the Forward Plan:

- Consideration of rural poverty issues.
- Consideration of disability-related poverty issues including whether the Disabled Facilities Grant could be extended to heating and a range of other equipment.
- To receive an update from the Community Safety Partnership on domestic abuse which may have increased as the rising cost of living puts a lot of families under pressure.
- To receive an update report on digital inclusion.
- To receive an update on the new business plan for council housing, after it has been through Housing Review Board.
- To consider wider cost of living issues.

The Chair indicated that she would liaise with officers outside of the meeting with a view to prioritising the items in the Forward Plan.

### 34 **Date of the next meeting**

It was confirmed that the next meeting will be held on Monday 30 May 2022, and Members were reminded that Working Panel meetings will start at 10.00am.

Further dates for the rest of 2022 will be arranged following the annual Council meeting.

### **Attendance List**

#### **Councillors present:**

M Allen

M Armstrong (Chair)

M Chapman

B De Saram  
M Rixson

**Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)**

P Arnott  
P Faithfull  
P Millar  
J Rowland  
E Rylance

**Officers in attendance:**

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager  
Jo Garfoot, Service Lead Housing Task Force  
Amy Gilbert-Jeans, Service Lead Housing  
John Golding, Strategic Lead Housing, Health and Environment  
Jody Harding, Principal Environmental Health Officer  
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer  
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits  
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer  
George Whitlock, Data Analyst  
Martin Prew, Technical Officer for Environmental Health & Car Parks

**Councillor apologies:**

P Jarvis  
T Woodward

Chair .....

Date: .....