

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via Zoom app on 8 December 2022

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 12.10 pm

42 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

43 Declarations of interest

There were none.

44 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 17 October 2022

The minutes of the previous meeting were noted as a true and accurate record.

45 Rough Sleeper Navigators' presentation

The Housing Solutions Manager introduced this item which detailed the work being undertaken to target rough sleeping in the district. The Rough Sleeper Navigators are two of four posts financed through the Rough Sleeper Initiative via DLUHC, following a bidding process in which EDDC had to explain out how the money would be targeted. The funding is for £568k over 3 years effective from April 2022, which enables the team to make some longer term plans to target rough sleeping.

The presentation set out the scale of homelessness and rough sleeping in East Devon, and detailed the schemes and projects in place to address rough sleeping including:

- Housing First, which provides accommodation for those for whom other accommodation options are not available or have not worked out.
- A Rent Deposit and Bond Scheme, which assisted 81 households into private sector housing in 2021-22 and 38 so far in the first six months of 2022-23.
- Two Rough Sleeper Navigators who provide support for rough sleepers, follow up new reports of rough sleepers, carry out outreach work and partnership working in the community, and follow through cases from the start until a positive outcome is achieved.

Positive outcomes for people and households from a rough sleeping background include:

- 11 assisted into supported accommodation last year, and 9 this year
- 17 assisted into private sector accommodation last year, and 9 this year
- 10 assisted into social housing last year, and 3 this year.

The following points were made in discussion:

- The number of rough sleepers changes constantly and there are seasonal fluctuations. Whereas some are assisted into accommodation, others may return home or move out of the district.
- Accommodation options are somewhat restricted for rough sleepers with dogs, since a lot of temporary and private sector accommodation will not accept pets, but every effort is made to keep people and their dogs together. There is a recent case where a home was found for a person and their dog but a positive outcome would have been secured more quickly had it not been necessary to find somewhere that would take dogs.

- Some rough sleepers are initially resistant to accepting help but the Rough Sleeper Navigators persist, with a view to forming trusting relationships over time.
- There are more male than female rough sleepers and often there are complex needs including drink or drug issues but there is no specific factor common to all rough sleepers.
- There is a strong focus on prevention and as soon as it is known that a person is at risk of homelessness, the Housing Options Team can act to try to prevent a rough sleeping situation.
- The Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) is triggered where temperatures drop below freezing over 3 consecutive nights, and Councils are obligated to make contact with rough sleepers and offer temporary accommodation. This can kick-start a positive process of engagement and a lot of effort goes into trying to address a person's situation and move them on to more permanent accommodation. It was noted that SWEP is in operation at the present time.

The Working Panel then heard from the Rough Sleeper Navigators Leah Steele and Julie Brooke who detailed a number of case studies which illustrated the breadth of the critical work they do in the community, which changes people's lives.

Discussion following the Rough Sleeper Navigators presentation included the following points:

- One Member was concerned to learn that the housing cost element of Universal Credit is insufficient for a room in a shared house, and this is a key contributory factor to the situations people find themselves in. He suggested it would be appropriate for this Council to lobby for an increase in the housing element of Universal Credit.
- Members recognised the emotional pressure that the Rough Sleeper Navigators must be under and asked if they have the emotional support and training that they need. The Rough Sleeper Navigators commented that they feel well supported by each other and their managers, and can access counselling if necessary through the Employee Assistance Programme.

The Strategic Lead – Housing, Health & Environment thanked the Rough Sleeper Navigators for the difficult work they do with some very good outcomes, often following very persistent interventions for people who initially do not want to be helped.

46 **Breathing Spaces Scheme update**

The Service Lead – Revenues and Benefits introduced this item which detailed the background to the Breathing Spaces scheme and how it works.

Breathing space came into force in May 2021 through legislation, and is a mechanism by which residents are able to engage with a debt advisor and to obtain the time that they need to organise their debts so that they can manage them or enter into one of the existing insolvency processes.

The number of residents entering breathing space has been low in East Devon particularly when compared with the number of banded properties/adult residents in the district. The notifications have caused additional work to officers to search for debts and hold them for the required periods of time but the low numbers involved has meant that this additional work is minimal.

The trend this year has been for less people and less debt to be entering breathing space within the area compared to last year but with the cost of living crisis which is likely to lead more people falling into debt or not being able to maintain debt plans, there may be more residents entering into breathing space along with higher level of debts owed.

The debt that has the highest amount held by breathing space notifications is Council Tax but this was expected from the outset. No debts so far for business rates have been the subject of Breathing Space.

The Government are still considering the introduction of a Statutory Debt Repayment Plan, and the consultation findings relating to this can be found at [Microsoft Word - SDRP Government response November 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/114222/microsoft-word-sdrp-government-response-november-2022.pdf). As the Statutory Debt Repayment Plan is not yet law, the Council as a creditor is not bound to have to accept any repayment plan put forward by the Insolvency Service. No repayment plans have come in under this route however, and for a lot of people using the Breathing Space scheme, it has not led to any follow on action or arrangements, and it appears they have not used the time to address their debts. It is therefore intended to do some follow up work to help this Council to better understand what some of the outcomes are for those using the Breathing Spaces scheme.

The Working Panel noted the report.

47 **Housing Support Fund update**

The Service Lead – Revenues and Benefits introduced a briefing on the Additional Discretionary Fund. This follows Members approval at full Council on 19 October 2022, where Officers were asked to investigate creating an Additional Discretionary Fund using evidence from the Social Resilience (Poverty) Dashboard, and how this could be financed and resourced.

At the 2 November 2022 Cabinet Meeting under the report titled “Household Support Fund (HSF) and Discretionary Fund” it was highlighted that the Council already had funds set aside of £257K within the Hardship Fund to support households struggling to afford essentials. It was proposed that this funding could be used in addition to the Household Support Funding to help households struggling.

The previous Covid-19 Hardship Policy has been updated and renamed the Cost of Living Hardship Fund, to run alongside the Housing Support Fund (HSF) Policy. This updated draft policy allows flexibility over how the fund of £257K will be utilised. Currently, the Council is not in a position to identify where the need is for further support until the targeted funding from the HSF has been distributed and there is a better understanding of who is approaching through the open application process. As the HSF is time limited, the Council will always seek to use that funding first.

A full equality impact assessment will be presented to Cabinet as part of the proposed draft policy, if Working Panel members agree to this approach.

The report also detailed other schemes in place to support people with the cost of living including the Energy Rebate Scheme, Working Age Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Alternative Funding Scheme and Alternative Fuel Payment.

The following points were made in discussion:

- It is important to get the word out about the HSF, via social media as well as flyers in community centres, and the Financial Resilience Team are already active out in the community and working with partnership organisations.
- There are a lot of people living in mobile homes, on boats and in caravans who will need help with the cost of heating; however it is not currently known if these households will meet the eligibility criteria for the Alternative Funding Scheme, which includes being registered for Council Tax. Anyone who is struggling can make contact and the Council will look to provide emergency support if it is needed.
- The Social Resilience Team are working to understand the reasons why some households do not want to receive funding, to help inform their work going forward, in particular with the Discretionary Fund. The Service Lead – Revenues and Benefits will report back on this to the Working Panel at a future meeting.
- People on Pension Credit receive extra Government support through the Cost of Living Payment and those who are registered disabled will have received an additional payment automatically. People are also often linking in with voluntary groups, and so have a support network. Some pensioners have an income level which means they sit just slightly above the thresholds to access Pension Credit and this is a cohort of people to whom the Council would like to try to promote the HSF.
- For the next meeting the Service Lead – Revenues and Benefits will present a version of the Social Resilience (Poverty) Dashboard that can be provided as an interim measure until such time as IT upgrade work is complete, which will enable a public facing version to be published, and an appropriate version to be made available for Members.

In a vote, Members of the Working Panel endorsed the report.

48 **Food Poverty update**

The Community Development Worker delivered a verbal presentation outlining the challenges faced by food banks in the district in the context of consistently growing demand and decreasing frequency and quality of donations.

In a meeting of food providers, it was suggested that East Devon DC could help by networking, and sharing resources, ideas and good practice, and the Council tries to do this in the food provider meetings. The Community Development Worker outlined at length recommendations for how the Council might support food providers, and how the food providers might access alternative sources of donations.

Discussion included the following points:

- A Member raised that there is a grant which is available from the Prince of Wales' Charitable Funds for white goods, and suggested this is something the Community Development Worker might look into.
- It was felt that more publicity about the surge in demand could be helpful.
- The removal of best before dates on loose fruit and veg has meant that less of it is available for food banks and what is available is on the edge of rotting, so there is a supply problem.
- Exeter Food Action does extraordinary work as a logistics hub in distributing food, with a huge network and knowledge of how to disperse food quickly. However there is a focus on trying to bypass Exeter Food Action, partly to reduce food miles, and to get food more directly to where it needs to be within the district.
- Funding to tackle poverty situations was considered at the last Community Grant Panel meeting and a Member was particularly interested in a bid from Project Food in Axminster which involved working in connection with a local farmer. The Member hoped this could be replicated elsewhere in the district.
- A press release is going out highlighting that Community Grant funding is still available and informing people of how they can apply.

- The Community Development Worker stated that she regularly asks the food providers for referrals to the Financial Resilience Team with a view to helping people with the root causes of poverty. She commented that food providers are of the view that that the biggest cause of food poverty is Universal Credit.
- The Service Lead – Revenues and Benefits expressed that data from the Social Resilience (Poverty) Dashboard highlights some of underlying issues that are not directly linked to Universal Credit, although some people do miss out on payments due to difficulty navigating the benefits system.
- Budgeting is identified as a significant issue and a meeting is arranged with the new Chief Executive of Citizens Advice to look at some work around budgeting tools, which may help. An update on this could be brought to a future meeting of the Working Panel.
- An update on the Poverty Action Plan will be brought to the next meeting.

The Strategic Lead - Housing, Health and Environment remarked on the joined up way the Council is working to support vulnerable people in our communities, commenting that this is a Council that cares. He added that he will bring an update to the Working Panel on the work that the Council is doing around winter pressures.

The Chair thanked the Community Development Officer for her update and Members agreed that a report encapsulating the recommendations will be brought to Cabinet on 4 January 2023.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Allen
M Armstrong
B De Saram
D Ledger (Chair)
M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
J Rowland
E Rylance
E Wragg

Officers in attendance:

Julie Brooke, Rough Sleeper Navigator
Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Andrew Hopkins, Communications Consultant
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Libby Jarrett, Service Lead Revenues and Benefits
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Andrew Mitchell, Housing Solutions Manager
Victoria Robinson, Community Development Officer
Leah Steele, Rough Sleeper Navigator
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

Councillor apologies:

J Bonetta
S Hawkins

P Jarvis
T Woodward

Chair

Date: