

Case study 3: East Devon District Anti-Poverty strategy

Context

East Devon District is one of eight district Councils within the county of Devon in the South West of England. East Devon has strong economic growth and investment in the area has created employment opportunities in a variety of sectors such as hi-tech and bio-technology businesses. Despite this, a significant number of residents are affected by poverty due to a combination of low pay and high cost of living in East Devon.

The impetus to create the anti-poverty strategy came in 2019 when the council's housing and benefits team assessed the local picture of poverty they identified that there were worsening levels of poverty, with concentrations of poverty in particular communities in the district. Below are key figures which depict the issues East Devon is facing:

- One in four people receive weekly pay (£275.60) which is only 65% of the average weekly pay (£426.10) in the district.
- East Devon has a higher proportion of part-time workers (37.5%) than the South West (36.3%) and the UK (32.4%).
- In 2019, the average lower quartile monthly rent was £650, while lower quartile average house prices were ten or more times the average lower quartile earnings.

The [anti-poverty strategy](#) is a three-year strategy from 2021 to 2024 and it is accompanied by an [action plan](#). The strategy is embedded in the council's plan for 2021 to 2023, it is set out as one of the priority actions in the [councils priority one: better homes and communities for all](#). They recognise they do not have all the answers and many areas are outside of their control or influence, nevertheless, they are committed to making sure the council maximises everything it does in the areas it can intervene to make a difference to local residents.

The council emphasises that the creation of the strategy has provided a clear framework for addressing poverty in East Devon and focuses on the areas the council does have the opportunity to improve and influence. It identifies which particular groups require support and the geographical areas that they need to target.

Scope and design

Vision

The council sets out its vision in the strategy, it states that it wants to ensure that:

- Nobody should get into poverty without immediate help from the council
- Nobody should be in involuntary poverty longer than 2 years in East Devon

Poverty definition and identification of the drivers of poverty in East Devon

The council accepts that there are several definitions of poverty, however, they refer to the most common relative income poverty. They define it as "a person or community that lacks

the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living; and where a household income is below 60% of the average”.

The strategy outlines the causes and effects of poverty, combining the issues Joseph Rowntree Foundation identifies with local knowledge through the poverty working panel informed by residents and key local stakeholders. The causes identified include:

- Low-paid, insecure jobs
- Low skills or education
- Ineffective benefits system
- High cost of housing, goods, and services
- Financial literacy
- Discrimination

Development of the strategy

Poverty Working Panel

The council created a poverty working panel in 2020, the panel was primarily tasked with identifying how can the tackling/anti-poverty approach be coordinated, improved, and captured in a corporate strategy document that improves the situation for households in East Devon. The poverty working panel is chaired by the portfolio holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities and made up of elected members and officers.

The panel focused on poverty-related to income and employment, debt and financial vulnerability, food, and nutrition, affordable warmth and water, affordable housing and homelessness, and health equality.

The panel pursued nine lines of inquiry to develop the strategy, a condensed version of the key areas and questions, are as follows:

- Anti-poverty strategy: how can the council tackle poverty in the district?
- Target areas: are target areas of policy intervention to address poverty being consistently delivered and understood?
- Partnership working: what are the limitations on the council’s influence and ability to tackle poverty? How should the council best coordinate partnerships to deliver shared anti-poverty ambitions?
- Outcomes: how can outcomes be identified, and are the long-term ambitions realistic, achievable, measurable, and appropriate?
- Resources: to what extent will the strategy influence the council budget and attract sufficient resources?

- Councillors: how best can councillors deliver the strategy? How can the council effectively lobby for change in social policy that addresses poverty?
- Cross-cutting: how could the strategy be cross-cutting and meaningful?
- Awareness: how can the council deliver the strategy to ensure that stakeholders, partners, and residents understand the strategy and what it means for them?
- What works and what doesn't work: what has the council's approach on poverty achieved to date? How can the council do more of what works?

Partnership working

Partnership working has been integral to the formation of the strategy. The council highlighted that it has worked closely and continues to with a number of partners to ensure the strategy remains fit for purpose.

In particular, to pursue the lines of inquiry mentioned above, the poverty working plan gathered evidence, looking at good practice such as the format used by Cambridge City council for their strategy and asking internal and external stakeholders to give evidence on the key issues in East Devon before they started to develop the strategy. For example, they worked with internal services such as the housing and benefits team and economic development team and external organisations such as DWP, Citizens Advice, and Local Enterprise Partnership.

Funding

The strategy does not have a specific budget of its own, the council is using pots of funding already allocated to services and general hardship funding. They highlighted that the strategy has not required a huge amount of additional funding, as the strategy has pulled together work that the council has been doing for a number of years and is adding layers to it.

Priorities

The strategy is underpinned by three themes, which are summarised below:

1. Addressing the causes and effects of poverty: The main purpose of the strategy is poverty reduction across East Devon. The council is seeking to balance ongoing efforts to address the effects of poverty with a further focus on preventative work in partnership with key local stakeholders both external and internal to the council.
2. Balancing direct delivery, partnership working, and influencing activity: The strategy seeks to be clear on actions that the council can deliver directly, together with some actions that are delivered in partnership with public, voluntary, and community partners and which issues require influencing and lobbying activity to bring about change and secure funding.

3. Building the capacity of residents and communities, and facilitating community action and mutual support: The strategic approach is focused on building the capacity of local residents and communities. They are working with residents and communities to identify the solutions to address poverty.

The poverty working panel has developed five strategic objectives with lead services identified to work on specific objectives. The strategy and action plan that accompanies the strategy highlights the key activities that the council will take to achieve the objectives through direct service delivery, partnership working, and influencing and lobbying.

Below we outline the objectives and include a selection of some of the key activities under them:

1. **Helping people on low incomes to maximise their household income and minimise their costs, building financial resilience and reducing indebtedness. Lead Service – Finance.**
 - District council actions: Supporting low-income residents to access financial support, and providing advice on benefits, budgeting, and debt issues.
 - Partnership actions: The council provides funding to voluntary and community groups for activity that achieves one or more of the priorities or actions listed in the strategy and action plan which aims to address poverty in East Devon. The [Action on Poverty Fund](#) accepts applications of between £500 to £5,000.
 - Influencing and lobbying actions: Promoting Living Wage accreditation to employers in East Devon, including businesses, public bodies, and voluntary and community sector organisations.
2. **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. Lead Service – Housing.**
 - District council actions: Reviewing the needs of the community and voluntary sector in building stronger communities, and identify where the Council can best provide support.
 - Partnership actions: Developing a collaborative, area-based approach to support communities with high levels of deprivation in partnership with a range of organisations
 - Influencing lobbying actions: Building a greater recognition of the need for resilience and supporting households to get back on their feet.
3. **Promoting an inclusive economy, by raising skills and improving access to a range of employment opportunities for people on low incomes. Lead Service – Growth, Development & Prosperity.**

- District council actions: Exploring opportunities to spread the benefits of economic growth across the District, ensuring that all communities have access to high quality skills and education provision.
 - Partnership actions: Working with local businesses to identify ways in which they might use their skills, capacity, and resources to help tackle poverty and disadvantage.
 - Influencing lobbying actions: Lobbying the Government on relevant economic policy issues, and seeking to influence the strategic approach of the Local Enterprise Partnership.
- 4. Addressing the high cost of housing, improving housing conditions, creating affordable warmth and reducing homelessness. Lead Service – Housing.**
- District council actions: Developing new Council homes for rent, and ensuring that rent levels are as affordable as possible. The Council has an ambitious programme to deliver at least 100 new council homes over 5 years subject to funding being available.
 - Partnership actions: Funding a network of prevention, relief, and support activity delivered by partner organisations through a combination of contracts and annual grant funding.
- 5. Improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health care, and ill health prevention. Lead Service – Environmental Health.**
- District council actions: Using planning policy to help ensure new developments help create a good living environment that supports good mental and physical health outcomes, through the provision of open space and the design of the built environment.
 - Partnership actions: Supporting outreach advice service for residents experiencing mental health issues due to low income, debt, or addiction.
 - Influencing lobbying actions: The council is not the lead agency on public health, social care, and clinical issues, so it is seeking to collaborate with and influence, for example, Devon Health and Wellbeing Board, which includes representatives of NHS England, Clinical Commissioning Group, NHS providers, Healthwatch and local authorities.

Delivering the strategy

Responsibility

Responsibility for delivering the strategy is shared across the council and partner organisations. The council emphasised that they cannot tackle poverty in isolation. The objectives of the strategy can only be achieved when the strategy has a strong commitment from assigned council leads and departments and works effectively in partnership with key local stakeholders to deliver the objectives of the strategy.

The accompanying action plan comprises 61 actions some of which are subdivided and many actions are shared by more than one council department, will be developed and delivered in partnership with local stakeholders, and require lobbying government and other national organisations to deliver.

Leadership

The council highlights that political commitment from the council lead, cabinet, and portfolio holder for Sustainable Homes and Communities who has poverty as a named responsibility has strengthened the strategy's reach.

The strategy's objectives are linked to lead services and there is a strong commitment from the heads of the departments to deliver the key actions.

Links to other strategies

The strategy cuts across all council services to ensure poverty is considered in every area of council delivery. The council emphasised that poverty is a cross-cutting issue and there are clear linkages and alignment with a number of strategies/policies including the [public health strategy](#), [housing strategy](#), [corporate debt policy](#), and [equality policy and objectives](#).

Monitoring and evaluation

The action plan details completion dates and performance measures, and outcomes. Each lead service that has activities that link into the action plan will periodically review those items and report back to the Poverty Working Panel with updates on progress, with light-touch reviews annually. The official review of the strategy is every three years.

The action plan includes the following types of performance measures and outcomes:

- Capturing data on where referrals for financial support have come from e.g. schools, local charities, support agencies, and foodbanks.
- Feedback from partner organisations.
- Reduction in the number of residents receiving unemployment benefits.
- Number of new homes for rent provided annually on Council owned sites.
- Number of entries to Council-owned leisure facilities by people holding concession memberships.

Social Resilience (Poverty) Dashboard

The council has created an East Devon dashboard of poverty indicators, drawing on best practise from other councils and organisations it provides visibility of locally relevant data. They emphasised that this has been a key success of the strategy as it has given them a platform to fully understand the issues that they are facing. They can visualise and contextualise it and information can be drawn from individual wards so they can use to target action effectively in the most deprived areas. The dashboard is currently only

available internally but the council is currently developing it to become available to the public.

Oversight and governance

The delivery of the strategy is overseen by two bodies. The poverty working panel who report back to the cabinet on the delivery of the strategy. The delivery of the strategy is also overseen by the strategic management team of chief officers.