

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via Zoom on 20 March 2023

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.19 am

49 Public speaking

There were no members of the public registered to speak.

50 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 December 2022

Minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 December 2022 were noted as a true and accurate record.

51 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

52 Poverty Strategy actions quarterly update - Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

The Public Health Project Officer presented the Poverty Strategy actions update for the quarter October to December 2022. The update highlighted a range of examples which demonstrate the contribution made by the Council's services to poverty reduction across the district, including:

- 157 children on LED's swim school have a concessionary card.
- The Environmental Protection Team has provided 11 Public Health Funerals.
- Private Sector Housing held a Landlord's Forum in collaboration with Teignbridge/Exeter and Mid Devon, covering energy efficiency in the private rented sector.
- The Public Health Project Officer contributed to the task and finish group reviewing Devon's Smoke Free Strategy 2023-2028.
- The Finance team's Dashboard includes the Household Support Fund data. The team are using the data to help inform discretionary funding e.g. Housing Support Fund 3 and Discretionary Energy Rebate Scheme.
- Finance completed their review of the use of Discretionary funds, to ensure the policy is still meeting needs.
- Growth team and Planning have acquired land in Cranbrook town centre and commissioned a master-planning exercise to guide future delivery of key community assets. Work has started on the supermarket; discussions continue with partners on bringing forward other community spaces and the health and wellbeing centre.
- Housing team have set up weekly Warm Hubs. Housing Rent Officers attend these to offer advice; the Senior Rent Officer is also offering face-to-face sessions.
- Housing's review of the Resident Engagement Strategy has started.
- The housing acquisition programme continues with properties being purchased off the open market.
- Internally, HR's Reward Review proposals were agreed and Real Living Wage implemented in December 2022.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- There are some services not listed in the Action Plan which nevertheless contribute to poverty reduction in the district, e.g. the Communications team which promotes campaigns, such as energy efficiency grants; and the Public Health Project Officer has provided a paper to the Senior Management Team which shows where there are examples which could be included in the Action Plan.
- One Member commented that it is not always obvious how the actions of the Planning service link with the Poverty Strategy, and this will be discussed outside of the meeting with the Public Health Project Officer.

53 **Update on use of hardship funds - Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits**

The Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits and the Benefits Manager provided a verbal update on the use of hardship funds including:

- The Housing Support Fund which started 1 October 2022 and runs to 31 March 2023. Funding was split into two parts; the first for targeted support, the second was open applications. It is expected that the full allocation will be spent by 31 March.
- The Housing Support Fund which starts on 1 April 2023. A paper has been prepared for the 29 March Cabinet meeting with an update on the proposed policy.
- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The scheme was reviewed for working age residents and changes were made to take effect from 1 April, including i) to raise the amount of support that residents could receive if they fall into income band 1, from 85% to 100%; and ii) to amend the income bandwidths to allow for couples, where previously they were aligned to single persons applicable amounts. The changes have resulted in 2,301 households no longer needing to pay any Council Tax from April, and the biggest group to benefit from the changes are households where there are children present.
- The Council Tax Support Fund. This fund was announced in the 2022 autumn statement to help households with the cost of living and rises in Council Tax bills. Government have set the criteria for the funding which ensures that households who were in receipt of Council Tax Reduction received up to £25 off their bills, as long as they had something left to pay. Many households had nothing left to pay, therefore it was possible to raise the amount of support up to £55.
- The Council's Cost of Living Hardship Fund. A further £63k of funding has been received from Devon County Council in the form of an Economic Vulnerability Fund and it is intended to start using this funding to do more proactive work with partners, to reduce root causes of poverty and hardship.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- There appears to be enough money from the Household Support Fund to meet identified demand, and it has been possible to make the allocation last for the whole term of the fund; there is a lot of extra follow-up work, with partners, to give budgeting and debt advice, and the move away from a sticking-plaster approach means that the same people are not needing to repeatedly apply to the fund.
- A Financial Resilience Officer is now present in an Exmouth food bank for one day every fortnight, and this has been very effective in identifying residents needing advice and support. Going forward, the Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits will arrange for the value of this work to be assessed in order to then explore whether the work can be scaled up.
- A Member expressed concern that private landlords with mortgages on rental properties appeared to be considering evicting their tenants and instead going into the tourist market, as has been the case in Cornwall and North Devon. This would lead to a lot of people becoming homeless, and it would be helpful for the Council to be aware of potential issues before they arise.

54 **Alternative Fuel Payment and the Alternative Fund - Briefing by**

Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits

The Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits provided a briefing to Members on two schemes recently launched by the Government as part of their winter package of support with energy costs:

- Energy Bills Support Scheme, Alternative Fund (EBSS AF) – one-off £400 payment which is non-repayable, for those that don't have a domestic electricity meter and contract with an electricity supplier. Funding of £971,200 has been received (based on 80% of government's estimate of eligible households in East Devon); this means that more than 2,428 residents could be entitled under this scheme.
- Alternative fuel payment, alternative fund (AFP AF) – one-off £200 payment which is non-repayable, to households that use alternatives to main gas for heating such as heating oil who haven't received this automatically through their energy supplier. Funding of £224,000 has been received (based on 80% of government's estimate of eligible households in East Devon); this means that more than 1,120 residents could be entitled under this scheme.

The Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits ran through the details of eligibility, key dates, the application process and the role of the Local Authority.

It was noted that there appears to be a number of teething issues with the centralised system to manage the claims process which has resulted in delays going live, and payments are unlikely to start being made until next week at the earliest.

Members noted the report.

55 Update on Warm Spaces - Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager

The Interim Housing Services Manager introduced this item, provided an update on the Winter Pressures Project which comprised delivery Warm Hubs across the district, and a Housing Emergency Financial Support Fund for tenants in need of urgent support. The report covered the following points:

- Extensive preparatory work was undertaken in a very short timescale by the Communities Team in order to open 10 weekly Warm Hubs on 28th November 2022, across East Devon.
- The Project Officer has been approached by Parish Councils for advice on how to open a Warm Hub, and an Exeter University researcher has attended some of the district's Warm Hubs to understand what makes them work.
- The Warm Hubs have been a success with visitors ranging from ages 8 months to 96 years old, and coming from all types of housing. Hot meals have been provided, and warm clothing and blankets given out. Visitors also accessed fun activities, as well as benefits surgeries and budgeting workshops.
- The most beneficial aspect of the Warm Hubs has been the social aspect, with visitors overwhelmingly reporting that they value the chance to socialise and meet their neighbours, over everything else.
- All respondents to a feedback questionnaire agreed that they want the Warm Hubs to continue beyond the end of March 2023; after this date, they will be known as Community Hubs.
- The report detailed some examples of how the Housing Emergency Financial Support Fund has been used. More demand on the fund is anticipated now that the policy and procedure have been shared with all frontline Housing officers.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- The Warm Hubs have been open one or two days weekly, based on demand, with one member of staff present at each session. Going forward, a number of tenants have volunteered to be trained up to support the hubs, and they will be a valuable resource.
- One Member asked if any social events had taken place at the Yonder Close Community Centre, Ottery St Mary prior to its being used as a Warm Hub; the Interim Housing Services Manager stated that he would find out.
- The Interim Housing Services Manager confirmed that the community centres will stay open post March 2023, as Community Hubs; the Communities team is fully resourced and can facilitate this as well as facilitating other organisations coming into the Hubs to help the visitors.
- Warm Hubs are likely to be necessary again next winter; as an action point, the Assistant Director Revenues & Benefits will explore how to best coordinate Warm Hub provision for next winter, with plenty of lead up time, including reaching out to Warm Hubs operated by volunteer groups to get a sense of how it went for them and if they plan to deliver the provision again.

56 **Greater Manchester Poverty Action East Devon District strategy - case study - Cll Dan Ledger, Chair**

Members noted this report, which highlights the recognition that this Council is getting nationally for its work on tackling poverty within the district.

57 **Joseph Rowntree Foundation - The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK - Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager**

The Interim Housing Services Manager introduced this UK Poverty report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which looks at trends in poverty across many important characteristics and impacts, and ran through some of the data and key headlines.

The Benefits Manager stated that it was intended to target Housing Support Fund 4 funding in line with some of the recommendations contained within the report, to address some of the issues raised and the groups struggling the most.

Members noted the report.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Armstrong
M Chapman
D Ledger (Chair)
M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

P Arnott
K Bloxham
P Faithfull

Officers in attendance:

Sharon Church, Benefits Manager

Andrew Hopkins, Communications Consultant
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Customer Access, Fraud & Compliance
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Yusef Masih, Interim Housing Services Manager
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

Councillor apologies:

J Bonetta
B De Saram
P Jarvis

Chair:

Date: