

Report to: Housing Review Board



Date of Meeting 14th September 2023

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Review of the Winter 2022 Warm Hubs and plan for Winter 2023

Report summary

This report presents a review of the Warm Hubs which were agreed by the Housing Review Board for winter 2022 as a response to the cost of living crisis. It also details the ongoing support provided through the Community Hubs project during the summer and considers how this can be extended with further Warm Hubs provision through winter 2023/24.

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes No

Policy Framework Yes No

Recommendation:

1. The Housing Review Board recommend to Cabinet and Council the approval of £50,000 to allocate towards delivering this project and to designate as a Warm Hub project.
2. The Board note and agree the contents of the report

Reason for recommendation:

The Warm Hub project was introduced and agreed by the Board in response to the cost of living crisis. The project has been successful in tackling social isolation, food poverty, housing warmth, personal development, community cohesion and in relaunching tenant involvement and engagement. It has clearly made a difference to tenant's lives and there is overwhelming demand for the service to continue

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action and Emergency Response
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Democracy, Transparency and Communications
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Tourism, Sports, Leisure and Culture

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk; .

Links to background information Attach previous report on Warm Hubs project

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- Better homes and communities for all
 - A greener East Devon
 - A resilient economy
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Report in full

1. Background

In the autumn of 2022 Cabinet considered a Winter Pressures plan to help address the escalating cost of living crisis. The plan was recommended to the Poverty Panel in an attempt to mitigate the worst of the effects of increasing prices and costs, ensuring that the most at risk households in our area could continue to access affordable food, housing, warmth, and meet their basic needs

A series of short-term measures were recommended to be implemented over the winter of 2022/2023 with a budget of £50,000 allocated to deliver the project and establish a Winter Pressures Hardship Fund.

The main focus was to meet the needs of our tenants by establishing “warm banks”. These are the equivalent of food banks where people who can’t afford heating are invited to spend their days, at no cost, in our warm spaces.

2. Project objectives

A Project Officer was recruited to deliver the following objectives

- Consider what additional measures can be put into place to support tenants through the winter months; consulting with residents, the voluntary sector as well as financial resilience.
- Set up a Hardship fund to deal with immediate support that residents may need, and design an appropriate policy, procedure and process for it.
- Risk assess and open Community Centres to provide warmth, social interaction, broadband access, hot drinks, and additional food provision.
- Promote the project both internally and externally, through timely and relevant press releases, the production of leaflets and posters and keeping the website up to date.
- Work with other teams to deliver support services at the Community Centres including benefit maximisation, financial advice and resilience, foodbank, and energy efficiency.
- Co-ordinate external and internal support to ensure it reaches those people that need it.
- Consider an extension of the current food poverty work we already undertake.

3. Developing the Warm Hubs

A consultation was held with involved and non-involved tenants by holding a workshop in September 2022 to identify the needs of our tenants throughout the winter period and the best use of resources. The outcome of the consultation was that we should consider:

- The provision of scarves, socks, gloves and blankets.
- We ensure areas where we only have a small number of properties are not excluded.
- The provision of draft excluders
- Ensure we consider the needs of tenants who cannot easily walk to community centres.

- The provision of energy efficient light bulbs.
- Providing information regarding the location and access pathways to the local foodbanks.
- Consider including the provision of pet food.
- Provide utility support advice to tenants.
- Consider funding existing groups, libraries, parish halls, pubs.
- Information packs for tenants.
- Volunteers helping at community centres with opening and closing.
- Enhanced cleaning at community centres.
- Provide reasons/activities for people to come to the centres.
- Consider a special winter newsletter with details of support that can be accessed.
- Educate tenants to keep warm
- Provide support for tenants who cannot manage money.

The session was extremely beneficial and helped us to develop the warm spaces proposal and some new ideas. These included the development of an emergency Winter Hardships Fund.

We identified the most suitable community centres to open as Warm Hubs. We wrote the policies needed to get them up and running safely and to source the staff and resources needed.

3.1 A significant amount of preparatory work was needed in order for us to open Warm Hubs across the district. This included:

- A comprehensive mapping exercise to find out where warm hubs were being opened by others across the District, and where there would be gaps
- A Risk Assessment to understand the risks involved in running the Warm Hubs and to explore how those would be mitigated. This included looking at health and safety measures and determining the staffing required.
- Visiting every centre to ensure the centre was up to standard in regards to Health and Safety, and then to ensure resources were in place to open each centre as a warm and welcoming space
- Arranging deep cleans for a number of the centres
- Designing publicity for the centres.
- Organising a weekly cleaning schedule with an external contractor

3.2 On the 28th November, we opened 10 weekly Warm Hubs across East Devon:

- Monday: Dunning Court Community Centre, Honiton, EX14 1FQ – Closed April 2023
Ratcliffe House Community Centre, Burnside, EX8 3AQ
Waffle at the Hospital, Seaton
- Tuesday: Millwey Community Centre, Axminster, EX13 5EW
Trumps Court Community Centre, Sidmouth, EX10 8BL – Closed end of January 2023
Bidmead Community Centre EX8 2TF, Exmouth (replaced on 30/01/2023 by Churchill Court, Lympstone)
- Wednesday: Broadview Community Centre, Broadclyst, EX5 3HA
- Thursday: Lymebourne Community Centre, Sidmouth, EX10 9HZ
Yonder Close Community Centre EX11 1HE, Ottery St Mary
- Friday: Park Close Community Centre, Woodbury

The primary aim was to provide a warm, safe space for the residents of East Devon. A healthy, hot lunch was available at each session and tenants were also provided warm blankets, hats, gloves and socks if needed. The most popular items were the blankets and woolly socks.

In the weeks before Christmas we also received numerous calls from Parish Councils asking for advice on how to open a warm hub, as our Warm Hubs were some of the first to open.

4. Key Outcomes of the project

4.1 To date, since opening we have had:

- 2438 separate visits to the Warm Hubs. These visits have been made by 362 different residents of East Devon. The youngest visitor was 8 months old, the oldest 96. The visitors have come from all types of housing including EDDC sheltered housing; EDDC General Needs housing; privately rented homes, and a small number of privately owned homes.
- The busiest Hub is Broadview, in Broadclyst. By Wednesday 12th July 499 visits had been made to that Hub since opening. We think this is because it is the most rural of our Hubs and there is very little other provision locally, and so it draws in visitors from the surrounding villages.
- We set up a contract with local charity Waffle for them to provide a Warm Hub in Seaton, as there is no EDDC community centre in Seaton. Waffle's aim is to reduce social isolation and they have two venues, one in Axminster (the Waffle house), and one in the old community hospital building in Seaton. Since the Warm Hub opened, EDDC tenants have been able to go into the café on a Monday and get free tea, coffee and toast. 133 residents have taken advantage of this provision, with many returning every week.
- The quietest is Warm Hub Dunning Court in Honiton, it is likely this is because it is right in the centre of the town with a range of other support offered locally. We decided to close Dunning Court as a Hub in April.
- We have provided over 1602 hot meals including 118 Christmas dinners.
- We provided over 200 blankets and 500 pairs of socks. We also ran workshops on budgeting, seated exercise classes, cooking on a budget and craft sessions, alongside games and jigsaws.
- Gloves and hats

4.2 Feedback

4.2.1 A researcher from Exeter University has attended Broadclyst Warm Hub (as well as other external organisations), in order to understand what makes Warm Hubs work. They were very impressed with the initiative, and have included many of our references into their final report to central government. They sent us this feedback they received from one of our tenants.

One of the respondents said:

"I have personally found the Warm Hub to be a completely wonderful service which has surpassed my expectations, and I know that many other tenants share my views on this!

It is not just a functional warm space, but a positive, joyful, welcoming and fun place to spend time.

We have a real mix of tenants here – from the elderly to youngsters and middle-aged people like myself – most have physical difficulties/disabilities and are at home for the majority of the day.

Personally, I have found the Warm Hub to be a lifeline and an absolute godsend! I am very sociable but became very lonely, depressed and isolated [during Covid]. The weekly Warm

Hubs have really helped me feel positive and happy again and I have made some very good friends.”

- 4.2.2 We organised benefits surgeries and Budgeting Workshops to help the tenants access the benefits they are entitled to as well as trying to help them manage their money more effectively.

“The Warm Hub leader put me in touch with an organisation which checks if you are on the right benefits and that you are getting all the help you are entitled to. I have managed to increase my money by quite a lot since speaking to them.”

“Through the Warm Hub, I have been helped by ECOE who organised a home energy advice visit for me. They gave me energy saving tips and helped me talk to my energy provider about my energy arrears and setting up a payment plan.

“Through the Warm Hub I have also been referred to the Food Bank in Broadclyst, who are now delivering me weekly food parcels, as I have been cutting out food to try and pay my rising bills. This is a HUGE help”

- 4.2.3 By far the most beneficial aspect of the Warm Hubs has been the social aspect; overwhelmingly the visitors have told us again and again that they value the chance to socialise and meet their neighbours over everything else. The feedback forms are full of people saying how much they value the social interaction.

What was your favourite experience or moment?

“Meeting people, playing games and having lunch, even if we don't have any money we can have a hot meal once a week.”

“The weekly Warm Hubs have really helped me feel positive and happy again and I have made some very good friends”

- 4.3 Housing Emergency Financial Support Fund

.We wrote a policy and procedure for accessing the fund. We established an audit process and financial controls and set up a partnership agreement with the Financial Resilience Team. We also completed a Data Impact Assessment. The fund was launched early in March, after being approved by the Resident Involvement Management Group. To date most requests have been for help with energy bills. We had a spike in applications to the fund following the cessation of the Government Energy Bills Support Scheme. After the £66 a month came to an end the weather remained very cold and many families could not afford to pick up the additional cost of having their heating on.

- 4.3.1 So far the Housing Emergency Financial Support Fund has paid out £2018.96. Most referrals have come via the housing officers – the MSOs or rentals officers and most have been for energy payments. The average age of the recipients is 61. All recipients have been in sheltered housing, regardless of age. This suggests that our General Needs tenants are not aware of the full range of services offered by the council. The work involved in ensuring we had a comprehensive policy, audit and checks in place meant that the fund was not fully in place till early in the New Year. This led to delays in communicating the fund to our tenants and staff.

The plan going forward into winter 2023/24 is to alert tenants of potential support available to them.

- 4.3.2 Here are some examples of how the fund was used-

- One person came into Lypstone Warm Hub reporting he was freezing in his home. The officer present was able to buy him some credit for his meter whilst understanding and organising support to address the complex reasons that he had become unable to afford his heating.

- A family with young children in Sidmouth needed money on their meter, so they could stay warm until their next payment was due a £99 direct payment was paid to the energy company.
- A tenant that was unable to access any local group or charity was supported with a direct payment of £1098 direct to the supplier.

5 Community Hubs Summer 2023

- 5.1 In February 23 we undertook another consultation exercise with visitors to the Warm Hubs. Visitors were asked to complete a feedback form asking what they had valued most from the Warm Hubs and what they wanted to happen after they closed. The overwhelming feedback from 98% of tenants was that they would like the Hubs to continue.
- 5.2 To support the continuation of the Hubs we trained Community Volunteers to help run them. Volunteers were identified from the feedback form and were invited to a training session where 18 tenants attended and completed the training. The training included Health and Safety, data protection, dealing with aggression and form filling. Each volunteer was interviewed and assessed for suitability and was provided with ID badges, lanyards and branded merchandise. Volunteer led Hubs have a lead officer who attends once a month to collect the paperwork and checklists, keep the supplies stocked up and address any issues from the volunteers and visitors. These volunteer led Hubs have been running for 15 weeks without any issues. They still benefit from the workshops and activities, but are group led for the majority of the month.
- 5.3 We had a varied programme of events planned over the summer, including Wimbledon Week, Animal encounters and budgeting workshops. The activities calendar is attached in Appendix 1.

6 Warm Hubs 2023/24

The ongoing Cost of Living crisis has not lessened over the past 12 months, inflation is still high with wages not keeping pace with increases. In order to mitigate the worst effects of the increasing crisis we would like the board to consider the continuation and expansion of the Warm Hub provision. In order to ensure the most at risk households can access affordable food, housing, warmth and meet other basic needs we are ambitiously aiming to expand our Warm Hub provision to other of areas of need in the district.

- 6.1 We are intending to change from Community Hubs to Warm Hubs as we approach winter.
- 6.2 We have learnt some valuable lessons over the past 8 months, particularly to do with location, both Hubs in the centre of towns did not succeed – Trumps Court in Sidmouth and Dunning Court in Honiton. We think this is because there is other provision in the area. Whereas the most successful Hub is the most remote, clearly showing that less local provision makes our service more appealing. We have used this information to plan our additional winter openings.
- 6.3 We would like to open a Hub in the St Paul's area of Honiton. EDDC has a large amount of housing stock there, and we used to run a successful youth club in the flat on the estate. We would advocate re-opening the flat as a community area, running a Warm Hub initially with plans to continue as a Community Hub in the summer if it is well attended and the tenants wish it to continue.
- 6.4 There is a real need for a Hub in Seaton. Although Waffle was attended by a small amount of visitors, as it was being run by a separate agency we have no paperwork or records of visitors, and it was very difficult to run additional workshops there. EDDC does not have a

community centre in Seaton, we are currently exploring the use of church halls. It is hoped that with good advertising and transport arranged, a Hub in Seaton could also attract visitors from Beer and Branscombe where we have 68 properties and no current engagement. We have 150 houses in Seaton, making 218 properties within a 5 miles radius and no community centre or activities.

6.5 We would also like to look at the possibility of “roaming” provision in some of our pepper pot communities. We have areas of the district that are quite isolated. But don’t have the numbers of properties to run a regular Hub, but could be part of a rotational Hub that meets once a month to access the services of the council and associated partners. We are very aware we rarely get any sort of support out to some of these hamlets which would really benefit from the services we can offer. For example – Plymtree, Cullompton has 45 properties, Musbury, Near Axminster 35, both feel quite remote but have good parish halls that we could set up a Warm Hub in.

6.6 We have also learnt that although visitors like the activities and workshops, the reason most come is for a hot meal and company. We are providing a hot meal and spaces for tenants to be able to speak, to voice their fears and get the help that they need.

7 Further provision

We would like to expand our offering from the Warm Hubs and look into the possibility of a Baby Bank. This works in a similar way to a Food Bank but resources good quality, used items. Many mothers struggle to buy the items they need for their babies, whilst there are often good quality items bought by families that are barely used. We would have a central bank that would be accessible across the district. It is hoped that this initiative will be adopted as part of the nationwide Baby Bank On Us campaign that is growing across the country.

There are no Baby Banks in East Devon, the nearest are in Exeter and Teignmouth. We feel that there is a need in our area and will sit well alongside our Community Hubs and Food for Families.

8 Summary

The cost of living crisis is an ongoing burden for many households and is not predicted to improve in the immediate future. We know from our poverty prevention work that whilst East Devon seems mainly well off, a significant number of our residents are directly impacted by poverty. We cannot resolve this, but we can mitigate some of the impact through the implementation of an expanded Warm Hubs plan.

8.1 It is hoped that the Housing Review Board will agree an additional fund of £50K to support this very important and popular project. Current running costs are £3,500 a month.

Up until the end of June we have spent £25,286.90. As stated earlier the delays in the launch of the fund have led to an underspend this year. The breakdown is below

Food and drinks for 2,489 visits	Cleaning	Large item purchases – eg.CD players, dishwashers, tea urns	Art and craft supplies	Fees to visiting experts	HESF (Housing Emergency Support Fund)	Blankets	Warm clothing	Training	Taxis
4826.13	6137	1838.39	1286.25	6320.39	2018.96	671.98	1770.2	57.6	360

8.2 The total for food and drinks works out at less than £2 per person, to stay all day and have a hot homemade meal.

- 8.3 The large item purchases will taper off as the community centres become better equipped.
- 8.4 The largest amount is for the fees to vesting experts, because there were 10 hubs initially and all 10 had every activity booked in, that expense was very high. We do try to run as many activities “in house” as we can, the project manager is an arts graduate so is able to run creative activities at no cost, but seated Tai Chi and Healthy Cooking on a Budget require an expert to come in and teach the classes.
- 8.5 The training is for Food Safety and Hygiene training for all the team.
- 8.6 The taxis are for tenants who wish to attend but cannot walk to their nearest Community Hub.
- 8.7 This figure includes £1,100 a month cleaning. In addition we anticipate further requests from the Housing Emergency Hardship Fund which are currently being covered by the resilience fund. The fund will cover the running costs of 10 Warm Hubs, transforming into Community Hubs in the spring along with financing the Housing Winter Pressures Hardship Fund that will be used to continue financial support to tenants.
- 8.8 As part of their social value project Ian Williams have agreed to refurbish each Warm Hub. The refurbishments will include painting inside and out, notice boards, signage and external works and spruce up picnic benches.

Financial implications:

There is a recommendation for a supplementary budget of £50,000, if approved this will be met from HRA balance.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications contained within the report.