

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Poverty Working Panel held at Online via the Zoom app on 18 March 2024

Attendance list at end of document

The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.23 am

13 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 13 November 2023

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 13 November 2023 were noted as a true and accurate record.

14 Declarations of interest

There were none.

15 Public speaking

No members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

16 Devon Communities Together (Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise) presentation

The Chair welcomed Ms Natalie Campbell, Service Delivery Lead for Devon Communities Together.

Ms Campbell delivered a presentation which detailed the Financial Resilience Project being worked on by Devon Communities Together along with East Devon District Council and other partners. The project is in its early stages and the presentation set out the progress so far, and the plans for future working.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- Devon Communities Together are new to this project and are learning about new groups, voluntary organisations and faith groups, as key resources in the community, as well as getting to know the communities around the district.
- Members expressed concern about the number of residents in fuel poverty. Devon Communities Together will be working with community groups to address some of the issues, and the Council could consider in strategic planning what could be done to alleviate the problem.
- It is unclear how food providers can further scale within the district because storage is problematic and if storage capacity is increased, providers risk becoming liable for business rates. The Assistant Director – Revenues and Benefits will explore with the Chair how this might be addressed, moving forward.

The Chair thanked Ms Campbell for an insightful presentation.

17 Household Support Fund update

The Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager introduced this update report which detailed the background to the Housing Support Fund (HSF), set out how the funding is deployed, and outlined future support under the fifth HSF as set out in the 2024 Spring Budget.

In discussion, it was noted that there are a small number of people who are eligible for support under the HSF but decline the support, and others who are difficult to contact. The Council are working closely with the voluntary sector to better understand how to reach people and the reasons why some people turn down the offer of financial assistance.

18 **Pilot project with Financial Resilience and Private Sector Housing - Improving homes for low-income families**

The Benefits and Financial Resilience Manager and the Public Sector Housing Technical Officer delivered a presentation which detailed, with case studies, a pilot project being worked on by the Financial Resilience and Private Sector Housing teams, together with the Climate Change Officer, exploring how the Council can help low-income households to improve their accommodation.

The Chair commended all officers involved in this work which is changing lives and is an excellent example of cross-service working.

Discussion and clarification included the following points:

- Following the doubling of Council Tax on second homes from April 2025, officers will be monitoring the data with a view to understanding what the movement is on second homes and whether this is consistent with the policy aim of bringing properties back into use for people in the community.
- Members expressed concern about properties which are left unoccupied by owners on a long term basis, when they could be lived in or let out. It was noted that where this is the case and properties are falling into disrepair or causing nuisance, then complaints can be raised by emailing the Private Sector Housing team at PSHousing@eastdevon.gov.uk. Empty homes also become subject to higher council tax charges, to discourage homeowners from leaving properties empty. Additionally, the Council has an Empty Homes Strategy, currently under review.
- Private Sector Housing are seeing more complex cases of landlords failing to maintain properties to an acceptable standard, and the team work proactively and reactively with landlords to bring about improvements to properties.
- In instances where households are living in accommodation which is in poor condition and cost of living funding is used to finance improvements, it was confirmed that applications are subject to extensive financial and eligibility checks. Additionally, in the case of rented properties, a clause in the application prohibits landlords from increasing rents based on the works that the Council has carried out. Homeowners who are helped under the scheme also have the charges secured against their property under the Land Registry, ensuring that costs are paid back before any sale of the property completes.

Attendance List

Councillors present:

M Chapman
M Goodman
J Heath
D Ledger (Chair)
M Martin

M Rixson

Councillors also present (for some or all the meeting)

K Bloxham
C Fitzgerald

Officers in attendance:

Matthew Blythe, Assistant Director Environmental Health
Sharon Church, Benefits Manager
Emma Congerton, Assistant Director Statutory Housing
Shannon Grover, Technical Officer
Jody Harding, Principal Environmental Health Officer
Libby Jarrett, Assistant Director Revenues, Benefits, Corporate Customer Access, Fraud & Compliance
Sarah Jenkins, Democratic Services Officer
Sarah James, Democratic Services Officer
Helen Wharam, Public Health Project Officer

Councillor apologies:

P Arnott
B Collins

Chair:

Date: