

## East Devon District Anti-Poverty strategy

### Context

East Devon District Council 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 the high Cost-of-living in the area.

In 2019 the council's housing and benefits team identified that there were worsening levels of poverty, with concentrations of poverty in particular communities. Below are key figures which depict the issues East Devon is facing:

- A quarter of residents in East Devon receive a weekly wage that, at £275.60, 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, which is accompanied by an action plan. The strategy is embedded in the council's plan for 2021 to 2023, where it is set out as one of the priority actions in the council's priority one: better homes and communities for all. The council recognises that 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 leverages its power and influence where possible to make a difference to 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 specific groups need support and the geographic areas which they need to be targeted.

### 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 measure, 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 the 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 strategy

### Poverty Working Panel

A Poverty Working Panel was created by the council in 2020 primarily tasked with identifying how the tackling poverty/anti-poverty approach could 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, ranging from how best the council can coordinate partnerships to how could the strategy be cross-cutting and meaningful.

## Partnership working

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

To pursue the lines of inquiry mentioned above, the poverty working plan gathered evidence to inform the development of their strategy. They considered examples of good practice, such as Cambridge City Council's anti-poverty strategy and asked internal and external stakeholders to give evidence on key issues. Over this period, they worked with the council's housing and benefits team and economic development team, as well as external organisations such as DWP, Citizens Advice, and Local Enterprise Partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> See case study 4.

## Funding

The strategy does not have a specific budget of its own, instead the council is using pots of funding already allocated to services and general hardship funding. The strategy has not required a huge amount of additional funding, as it 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 outline actions that the council can deliver directly or in partnership with public, voluntary, and community partners. In addition, it highlights issues which 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 residents and communities. The council are working with residents and communities to identify the solutions to poverty.

The Poverty Working Panel has developed five strategic objectives with lead services identified to work on specific core aims. 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.**

- Partnership actions: The council provides funding to voluntary and community groups for activities that achieve one or more of the priorities or actions listed in the strategy and action plan. The Action on Poverty Fund accepts applications for grants of between £500 to £5,000.

**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 identifying where the Council can best provide support.

**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.**

- 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.

**5. Improving health outcomes for people on low incomes, including access to good diet, health care, and ill health prevention. Lead Service – Environmental Health.**

- Partnership actions: Supporting outreach advice services for residents experiencing mental health issues due to low income, debt, or addiction.

## 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.

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

### Leadership

The council highlights that political commitment coming 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.

## Monitoring and evaluation

The action plan details completion dates, performance measures, and outcomes. Each lead service which 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. Light-touch reviews will be made annually, while the official review of the strategy takes place every three years.

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

- Data on where referrals for financial support have come from e.g., schools, local charities, support agencies, and foodbanks.
- Feedback from partner organisations.
- Number of residents receiving unemployment benefits, (with the aim of seeing a reduction in this figure over time).
- 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 to provide visibility of locally relevant data, drawing on best practice from other councils and organisations. The council 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. Issues can be visualised and contextualised, and information can be drawn from individual wards, enabling interventions to be targeted towards the most deprived areas. The dashboard is currently only available internally, but the council is working to make it available to the public.

### Oversight and governance

Oversight of the strategy is the responsibility of two bodies, the Poverty Working Panel and the strategic management team. The Poverty Working panel report back to the cabinet on the delivery of the strategy, while the strategic management team of chief officers also oversee delivery.