

Peer Challenge Position Statement

February 2024

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We invest in people Gold

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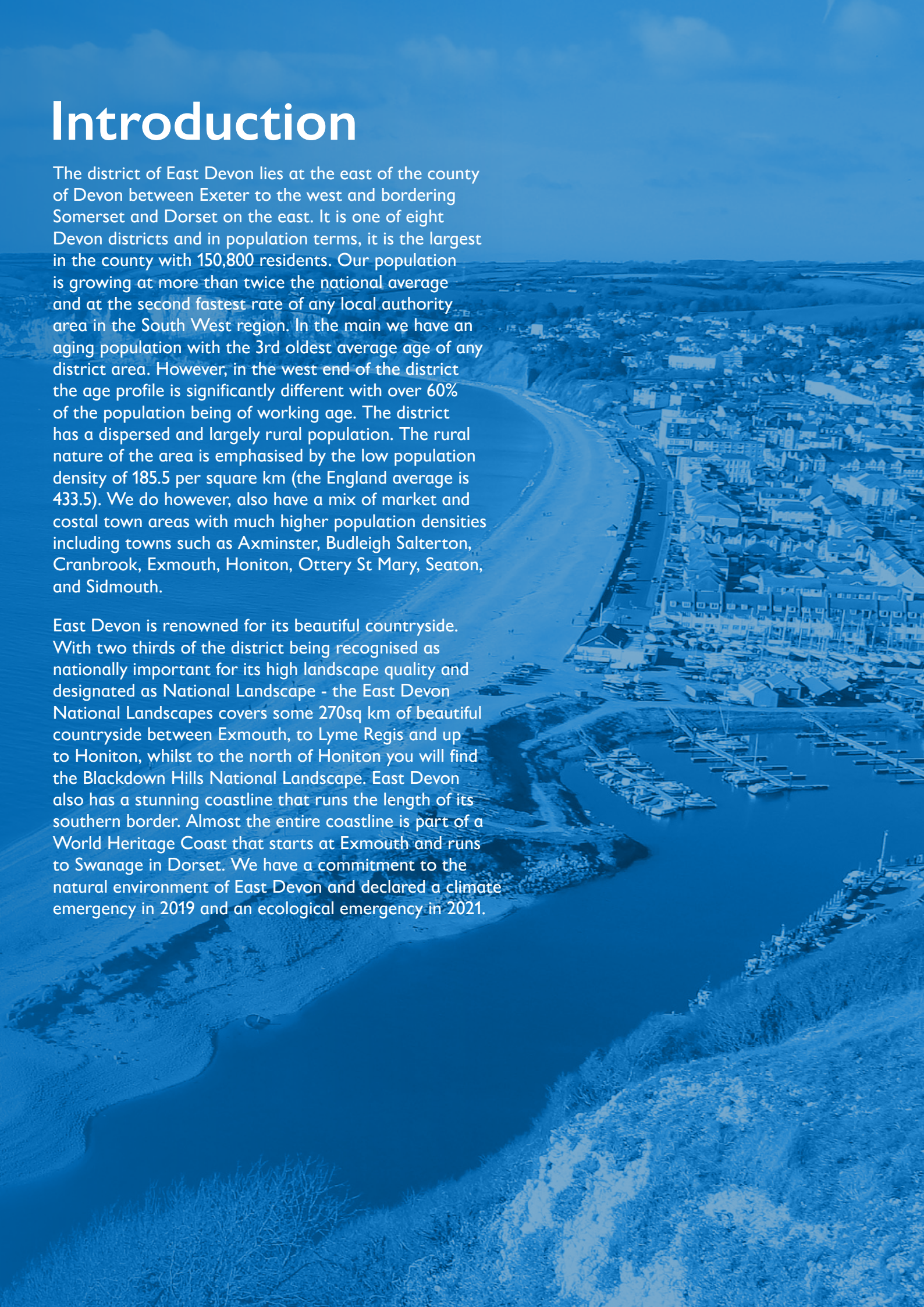
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Introduction

The district of East Devon lies at the east of the county of Devon between Exeter to the west and bordering Somerset and Dorset on the east. It is one of eight Devon districts and in population terms, it is the largest in the county with 150,800 residents. Our population is growing at more than twice the national average and at the second fastest rate of any local authority area in the South West region. In the main we have an aging population with the 3rd oldest average age of any district area. However, in the west end of the district the age profile is significantly different with over 60% of the population being of working age. The district has a dispersed and largely rural population. The rural nature of the area is emphasised by the low population density of 185.5 per square km (the England average is 433.5). We do however, also have a mix of market and coastal town areas with much higher population densities including towns such as Axminster, Budleigh Salterton, Cranbrook, Exmouth, Honiton, Ottery St Mary, Seaton, and Sidmouth.

East Devon is renowned for its beautiful countryside. With two thirds of the district being recognised as nationally important for its high landscape quality and designated as National Landscape - the East Devon National Landscapes covers some 270sq km of beautiful countryside between Exmouth, to Lyme Regis and up to Honiton, whilst to the north of Honiton you will find the Blackdown Hills National Landscape. East Devon also has a stunning coastline that runs the length of its southern border. Almost the entire coastline is part of a World Heritage Coast that starts at Exmouth and runs to Swanage in Dorset. We have a commitment to the natural environment of East Devon and declared a climate emergency in 2019 and an ecological emergency in 2021.



Last review recommendations

Our last peer review was undertaken in 2019. The following recommendations were made as part of this review.

Recommendations

- Consider establishing more formal engagement channels with a range of stakeholders and look to maximise opportunities to build on the willingness of key stakeholders to engage positively with East Devon District Council (EDDC), and in doing so, fulfil its potential at both local and regional levels.
- Improve data insight arrangements to inform decision making and priority setting and look to establish a mechanism for evaluating and prioritising new areas of work, with a focus on evaluating and learning lessons from major development projects.
- The new commercial approach should be carefully articulated and understood by all officers and members alike. We should explore the opportunity to acquire land to build more houses given the financial capacity within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).
- Explore the many positive steps that can be taken to support the developing relationships within the council and embrace the opportunities that exist, with external support and advice, to take further steps to continue to develop leadership cohesion between the new administration and the EDDC Management Team.
- Engagement and support from officers to be developed to reach all council members. Develop and deliver a member development programme to support all elected members in their roles – consider using external advice and support and encourage participation.
- Ensure that there is clarity about the reasons for any change to governance arrangements and the options available, seeking external advice and support where appropriate from the Local Government Association (LGA)

Our responses

When reviewing the progress made to date on the recommendations, we have recognised how previous resource issues and the wider pandemic impacted on initial progress, with limited progress being made in relation to the implementation of these recommendations initially. The establishing of more formal engagement channels was not progressed, improvements were not made to data insight arrangements, although a paper was presented to members reviewing our approach to the delivery of Cranbrook (new town) with lessons learnt and how we needed to approach the planning and delivery of a second new town in the district.

Steps were taken with the support of the LGA in relation to improving the resources available and the development of relationships, but those improvements were not sustained, leading to the Leader and a number of key members writing to the Secretary of State in June 2023 raising concerns about the management of the Council.

Progress was made in relation to Member development but there is more to do in this regard and plans to conduct a governance review were not progressed.

In terms of the commercial agenda, the new administration steered the Council away from commercial activity and this was dropped as a priority. The Council did set aside resources to develop a housing delivery taskforce, which has been successful in supporting additional affordable housing within the district and increasing the council housing supply through acquisitions on the open market, to ensure a fully informed approach to housing delivery moving forward a strategic review of housing investment and delivery options is ongoing with the intention to then adopt a 5-year investment and delivery plan.

Since the retirement of the former Chief Executive and the appointment of three Interim Chief Executives in September 2023, work in these areas and a number of other areas have been progressed to support an open and transparent leadership approach, including a consistent and joined up approach and clear governance, this has included:

- Positive and engaging workshops between the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the cabinet have taken place with positive feedback from both members and officers and from external individuals involved regarding the unity of the Council Leadership Team (members and officers working together)
- Enhancements to the service planning approach including a new simplified service plan template, wider engagement and ownership across officer teams and recognition of 'business as usual' and member supported projects communication channels developed.
- Work on risk management templates and approach moving forward with further changes to come including training, ownership and transparency of approach.
- The Centre for Public Scrutiny being requested to review the Council's scrutiny arrangements, to support the new culture being embedded within the authority.
- An action plan being put in place for a member skills audit.
- An action plan being put in place for a review of the SLT training needs.
- Identification of key gaps in the officer structure which has impacted significantly on previous resilience and expertise within the teams, resulting in key appointments being made and single points of failure being addressed.
- Improvements to our safeguarding policy and procedures including training and support for officers and members, champions within the organisation, safeguarding panel created, enhancements to our website and strengthening of county wide involvement and engagement.
- Plans to introduce regular engagement sessions with our Town/Parish councils to recognise the limited partnership approach previously and support an inclusive district wide engagement and ownership approach moving forward.

- The LGA being invited to carry out a Peer Challenge with positive engagement and inclusion from officers and members.
- Dealing with a number of housing service challenges by:
 - Making significant changes to the structure of the service,
 - Improving capacity and resilience across the wider teams,
 - Improving processes and enhancing policies and procedures,
 - Introducing peer support and training,
 - Introducing team and service management meetings,
 - Providing written monthly portfolio briefings,
 - Introducing monthly performance indicators,
 - Putting a new performance post in place and starting to tackle a backlog of complaints.
- To overcome a backlog of planning applications:
 - Creating additional posts to support resilience and increase resources.
 - Retaining agency planners to help clear the backlog.
 - Introducing a Power BI dashboard to give live monitoring of workflow and enable better performance management.
 - Recruiting to a number of vacant posts.
- Improved governance arrangements:
 - A new Executive Leadership Team (ELT) (meeting weekly) including the Corporate HR and Corporate Communication Leads, to ensure a consistent and transparent approach to leadership and engagement.
 - A refreshed Senior Leadership Team (meeting monthly), allowing a full cascade of information to all staff and full engagement of all senior officers in decision making.
 - A weekly meeting between the Interim Chief Executives, Leader and Deputy Leader providing a two-way communication channel which is both positive and supportive.
 - A monthly meeting between the Group Leaders and ELT.
 - Improvements to our emergency planning arrangements including the introduction of a new SLT rota for responding to emergencies and emergency planning training provided to all senior officers.
 - A review of management team and committee report templates (the latter to be rolled out shortly) including training and support to senior officers.
 - The setting up of a “constitution member working group” to work with the Monitoring Officer on a wholesale review of the Constitution starting in January 2024.
 - Work to encourage more use of the notice of key decisions (forward plan) and training to staff on the forward plan and decision-making.
 - Increasing resources in our corporate complaints team and resilience within the housing service to facilitate and respond to complaints and disrepair.
 - Proposals (shortly to be considered by Members) for the creation of an Information Governance Board and Information Governance officer working group to sit under that Board.
 - A review of complaints procedures both corporate and member code of conduct.
 - Plans for improved reporting and statistical data analysis to compliment the new transparent and inclusive approach including complaints reporting and evidencing changes to service delivery as a direct result of the 360 degree approach to complaints now implemented.
 - Introduction of a member weekly newsletter and member “who’s who” booklet.
 - Monthly written portfolio briefings with key officers.
 - Through a SLT workshop a complete review of performance measures and indicators has been developed in the 2024/25 service plans as the first stage with a further workshop planned to develop appropriate organisation reporting and monitoring once service plans have been adopted in February 2024. A similar session was undertaken to review the Council’s risk register to improve the corporate oversight and various updates have been made.

Due to outstanding Section 106 debts and Community Infrastructure Levy actions and a recognition of a lack of support to town and parish councils wanting to spend monies received, creating additional posts which are currently out to advert and plans put in place to:

- Hold workshops with Towns and Parishes in the summer of 2024;
- For a review of systems and processes,
- To improve access by Towns and Parishes to the data relating to planning obligations.

It is important to note that relationships between members and officers are in a good place and there are plans to sustain and further enhance those relationships through a series of cultural workshops moving forward.



Local priorities and outcomes



Council Plan

Our current council plan was drawn up in 2021 setting out our vision and priorities for the following three years. Our vision is to make a positive difference to residents' lives and our environment in East Devon.

Our plans values

- Seeking continuous improvement of our high performing council,
- Listening to, learning from our residents, and caring for them,
- Adapting as a council to new ways of working and refreshed priorities whilst recognising the pressure on resources.

The priorities within the plan

- Better homes and communities for all with a priority on the importance of good quality, affordable housing suitable in size and location. Poverty caused by the loss of employment, illness or disability is an increasing issue and will also be a high priority for East Devon District Council to tackle through all means available to us.
- A greener East Devon, which prioritises issues arising from climate change and supports our natural environment. This issue affects and informs all our objectives and services.
- A resilient economy bringing prosperity to the district.

As this plan is coming to the end of its term, we are currently working on the development of a new council plan. Work is well underway with this project, and we will have a first draft of the new plan available. The new plan is being developed in close consultation with our Senior Leadership Team, Cabinet, all other non-executive members, stakeholders, staff, and our residents.

This new plan will continue the themes of our current priorities with new actions to progress each and will also include an additional priority around the delivery of quality services.

A copy of the plan is available to the Peer Challenge Team and we would welcome your input so that we can take this into account before finalising the plan.



Communities and stakeholders

We work with a range of partners and stakeholders to provide services and enhance the lives of our residents.

- We have strong partnerships with our service providers, Suez who provide our recycling and waste service, LED Community Leisure Ltd (Leisure Trust which the Council set up) who provide our leisure centre services, Strata Service Solutions provide ICT to ourselves and two neighbouring local authorities in a partnership approach, Ian Williams our housing repairs contractor and South West Audit Partnership for our internal audit service.
- We also have strong partnerships with the Exeter Science Park Ltd, Cranbrook Strategic Delivery Board, Enterprise Zone, Placemaking in Exmouth Town and Seafront Group, Exe Estuary Partnership, The South East Devon Habitat Regulations Executive Committee, Devon Rural Housing Partnership, Devon & Cornwall Housing Options Partnership, Blackdown Hills and East Devon National Landscapes and East and Mid Devon Community Safety Partnership.
- Other key partners for us include Devon County Council especially in relation to highways, social care, supported accommodation, waste disposal and educational improvement. We work with other districts in Devon through the Devon Districts Forum which the leader of EDDC currently chairs. We also participate in Team Devon which is a collaboration of all district councils, Devon County Council and the unitary authorities in Devon.
- Government departments are relevant in relation to legislation governing local authorities, diverse sources of funding, benefits, planning guidance, performance targets and resettlement teams. The Devon Integrated Care Board is important in relation to the planning and delivery of health care for the district.
- The emergency services of police, fire and ambulance cover Devon and neighbouring council areas. Utilities such as the National Grid and South West Water are important in relation to water supply, sewerage, beach management, electricity supply and broadband. The Highways Agency and Environment Agency have responsibility for part of the district's road network and habitat, covering flood management and pollution and we have a partnership agreement with Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council for specialist advisory services relating to the coastal and sea front works.
- Natural England, Heritage England, the management of the National Landscapes, Devon Wildlife Trust and private landowners are important in relation to habitat, biodiversity, and tourism. Developers are important partners in seeking to increase the supply of housing in the district of mixed tenure and ownership.
- Businesses, the Chambers of Commerce, and the Enterprise Zone are significant in relation to the resilience of the local economy and employment, as are the public transport operators including South Western Railway, Great Western Railway, Stagecoach and Exeter Airport. The local economy relies upon visitors to the area and tourists, who in turn seek a quality environment, a welcoming hospitality sector, cultural bodies, and leisure attractions.
- We work closely with community groups including Devon Communities Together and Citizens Advice East Devon to provide support to residents through the voluntary and community sector and EX5 & Devon Refugee support relating to our partnership approach to asylum seekers within the district.

We understand that limited or poor relationships can impact on the wider local environment and service delivery, so we work actively to develop, and sustain good relationships with these key stakeholders in the district. We also recognise we need to further develop our relationships with Town and Parish Councils and have plans in place to address this.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion – including identifying and addressing inequalities

Work has commenced to refresh the Council's approach to equality, diversity, and inclusion. The equality impact assessment template has been updated. A review of the Equality Policy and related guidance will take place during 2024. Training is planned with members and officers.

The Council's Armed Forces Covenant is also being reviewed with a paper going to Cabinet in early 2024, which will be followed by various actions, working closely with the Armed Forces Member Champion.

Although there are good employee engagement mechanisms in place within the Council, it has been recognised that there are no staff reference/network groups which would provide a means of seeking employee feedback to inform policy and practice decisions and to provide peer support. In late 2023 a staff survey sought employee views on demand for networks but unfortunately only 28 employees responded but positively, most felt that the mechanisms already in place ensured that staff had the opportunity to provide feedback and they did not feel that additional means were required. We will keep this under review and seek further feedback as part of annual staff surveys which we will be reintroducing in 2024.

Community engagement is also important, and work is taking place to identify and build relations with groups who can also support and inform this work.

In recognition of the renewed focus on equality, diversity and inclusion issues, we will be appointing a dedicated Advisor, reporting into the Corporate Lead - Human Resources.



Performance management framework

Council plan priorities

Better homes and communities
Greener East Devon
Resilient economy



Annual Service Plan Objectives



Performance Excellence Reviews
and individual performance
objectives

The council plan sets out our strategic direction including our priorities and actions. The plan is published in an accessible format on our website. The actions and aspirations of the council plan are supported by the services through their service plans and by individual officers through their Performance Excellence Reviews. We call this the golden thread which links our priorities to our services, service plans and to all our staff through their objectives.

The service planning cycle starts in the autumn with the proposed service plans going to a joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee for oversight in the following January. The actions and performance indicators from the service plans are reviewed quarterly by the Corporate Performance and Project Management Team and reported to SLT and the Scrutiny Committee.

At the year end review of the 2022/23 service plans all the service actions were reviewed. Of the 83 actions, 18 were completed and 39 were on track for completion within the timeframes stated. 19 were showing a variation which would indicate mild concerns or minor setback for the objective. All had plans in place to finally meet these objectives. There were 7 showing a status of concern with each objective setting out the reasons for the delay and the plan for moving forward. The service plan objectives then flow into team and individual objectives, known as our Performance Excellence Review (PER) framework.



Organisational and place leadership



Managerial Leadership

The former Chief Executive retired in October 2023 and the three Directors have been appointed as Interim Chief Executives. A recruitment process for a new Chief Executive is to commence in late February 2024 using an external recruitment agency. To ensure a consistent and transparent approach, leadership is demonstrated from the top, regular meetings are held, formal communications are shared with senior officers, all staff, all members and cabinet. The Interim Chief Executives work closely together ensuring all decisions are made in a timely manner and cascaded through the organisation whilst an open-door policy is in place with the leader and deputy leader providing a supportive and inclusive officer/member leadership team.

Our Executive Leadership Team (ELT), made up of the three Interim Chief Executives, Corporate Lead Human Resources and Corporate Lead Communications, Digital Services and Engagement meet on a weekly basis, cascading actions and information for noting to SLT.

Our Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is made up of the three Interim Chief Executives and all their direct reports as outlined below, comprising 16 in total. The SLT meet monthly and the Assistant Directors (9 in total) meet separately, also monthly.

- The Interim Chief Executives meet regularly with the Leader and Deputy Leader and the SLT meet with the Cabinet at Cabinet briefings and away days, and individually via regular Portfolio Holder briefings between Cabinet Members and the relevant Director or Assistant Director. The Interim Chief Executives also have separate one to ones with the main opposition Group Leader and their Deputy. There is also a monthly meeting of the Group Leaders and Interim Chief Executives.
- The Interim Chief Executives also have a regular meeting with the local MP's.

Interim Chief Executives

3
People

Executive Leadership Team

3
Interim Chief
Executives

2
Corporate
Leads

Senior Leadership Team

16
People

9
Assistant Directors

Simon Davey

Director of Finance, and
Interim Chief Executive

Libby Jarrett

Assistant Director - Revenues,
Benefits, Corporate Customer
Access, Fraud & Compliance

Tim Child

Assistant Director –
Place, Assets and
Commercialisation

Andrew Hopkins

Corporate Lead –
Communications, Digital
Services, Engagement and
Strata Client Lead

John Symes

Finance Manager (Deputy
S151 Officer)

Melanie Wellman

Director of Governance and
Licensing, and Interim Chief
Executive

Ed Freeman

Assistant Director –
Planning Strategy and
Development Management

Jo Fellows

Corporate Lead –
Human Resources and
Payroll

Anita Williams

Legal Services Manager
(Deputy Monitoring Officer)

**Licensing, Democratic,
Elections and Complaints/
FOI/Data Protection**

Tracy Hendren

Director of Housing, Health
and Environment, and Interim
Chief Executive

Emma Congerton

Assistant Director –
Housing Strategy and
Operations Executive

Amy Gilbert-Jeans

Assistant Director –
Housing Tenancy Services

Charlie Plowden

Assistant Director –
Countryside and Leisure

Matthew Blythe

Assistant Director –
Growth, Development
and Prosperity

Andrew Wood

Assistant Director –
Growth, Development
and Prosperity

Andrew Hancock

Assistant Director –
Streetscene



Executive Leadership Team (ELT)

Team Devon

Team Devon refers to the partnership between the eight district councils in Devon and the County Council. The impetus for this was the Covid-19 pandemic with the Team Devon approach providing a forum to coordinate activity and communication in relation to public health initiatives. Since then, senior level meetings continue and include Leaders and Chief Executives from across Devon. The work quickly expanded to coordinate activity in other related areas, for example the publication of a prospectus to support economic recovery.

The Team Devon approach continues to this day, most notably in relation to negotiations for a potential devolution deal with government. This is expected to lead to the creation of a Combined County Authority in the summer / autumn of 2024. This deal is also expected to provide additional resources in relation to key areas such as housing, climate action and skills development.

Our involvement in Team Devon demonstrates how we create sustainable success, with our leaders actively involved and aware of future challenges, partnering with stakeholders to identify solutions. Most recently activity has included agreeing a pan-Devon approach to providing Council Tax relief for care leavers, a joint approach to the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, early discussion on second home additional council tax income usage across Devon and regular joint communications initiatives.



How we are communicating our challenges, future ambitions

- We are committed to transparent and engaging external communication, employing a range of strategies to keep residents informed and involved. One prominent avenue is the weekly residents update E-newsletter, a digital digest that delivers key information directly to residents' inboxes. This newsletter serves as a regular update on council activities, policy changes, and upcoming events, ensuring that residents are kept well-informed.
- The E-newsletter is delivered to over 15,000 residents each week and is crafted to be accessible and user-friendly, providing a snapshot of essential news and announcements. By leveraging this electronic medium, the council can reach a wide audience efficiently, fostering a sense of community and civic engagement. The interactive nature of digital newsletters allows for hyperlinks, directing recipients to more detailed information on the council's website or other relevant resources.
- In addition to the regularly residents update E-newsletter, the council has embraced technological advancements using the East Devon App. This mobile application serves as a convenient hub for residents to access important information on the go. The app (which has been downloaded by over 60,000 devices) offers features such as push notifications on recycling and waste collections and updates on services to enhance user experience. By integrating technology into our communication strategy, the council ensures that residents can stay informed at their convenience, fostering a more connected community.
- As a social landlord we regularly communicate with our tenants through the publication of our Housing Matters magazine which is posted to all council owned housing 3 times a year. We are currently looking at new ways to increase our communications with our tenants embracing digital technology, but are mindful of those who are digitally excluded.
- Social media platforms play a pivotal role in the council's external communication activities. The council actively maintains profiles on popular platforms like Facebook and X/Twitter to share timely updates, engage with residents, and address enquiries which are answered by the council's customer services team. These platforms provide a dynamic space for real-time communication, allowing the council to respond swiftly to emerging issues and concerns.
- Furthermore, the council values community engagement and is actively pursuing online consultations to seek residents and other key stakeholders' views to enable people to voice their opinions and participate in local decision-making processes.
- By employing a comprehensive communication strategy that incorporates digital newsletters, mobile applications, and traditional community engagement, the Council strives to build a well-informed and actively involved community. This multifaceted approach reflects the council's dedication to transparency, accessibility, and enhancing the overall quality of life for its residents.
- Internally, we have a range of employee communication and engagement mechanisms including a weekly Stay Connected newsletter, Staff Awareness Sessions with the Interim Chief Executives, News and Views Briefings for managers, regular intranet updates and use of the All-Staff email for important and urgent messages. Stay Connected includes a virtual 'Bouquet' section, where staff 'thank you's are shared. Alongside this, StreetScene managers provide monthly email updates to their teams based in the depots.

In November/December 2021 we asked staff for feedback on our communication. We were really pleased to find that:

Stay Connected staff newsletter

99%

Aware of the weekly newsletter

Weekly newsletter engagement

66%

Agreed that they read all

90%

Read at least some parts

Staff intranet

76%

Staff use the intranet at least once a month

Staff emails

90%

Read all or most Staff emails

Manager meetings and updates

69%

Receive regular updates

88%

Regular team meetings

Investors in People survey response rate

82%

Completed last year

80%

from 2019



Achieved Gold

Level award

We also continue our positive relationship with UNISON, our trade union, despite the challenges of the Reward Review (see Page 36) and other changes. The Joint Staff Forum was relaunched in 2022, with a revised terms of reference agreed. Staff are kept informed through the intranet and Stay Connected. Our local UNISON Branch Chair was involved throughout our Reward Review work and there are regular informal meetings with the Corporate HR Lead in between the formal Forum meetings.

Improved member communication is also being developed, with the Communications and Democratic Services Teams working together to develop a regular member newsletter. The first weekly edition was issued in December 2023.

Governance and culture



Cllr Eleanor Rylance, Cllr Sam Hawkins, Chair and Vice Chair of EDDC

Political Leadership

We have 60 councillors representing 30 wards (with one, two or three Councillors representing each ward) and the Council is currently run by the Democratic Alliance Group, a coalition of Liberal Democrat, Independent and Green councillors. The last election was in May 2023.

We have a Leader and Cabinet model of governance. The Leader, Cllr Paul Arnott, has appointed nine Portfolio Holders as follows



EDDC Cabinet, May 2023

Portfolio Holders

- Cllr Paul Hayward**
 Deputy leader and Portfolio Holder Finance and Assets
- Cllr Nick Hookway**
 Portfolio Holder Culture, Leisure, Sport, and Tourism
- Cllr Dan Ledger**
 Portfolio Holder Sustainable Homes and Communities
- Cllr Olly Davey**
 Portfolio Holder Strategic Planning
- Cllr Sarah Jackson**
 Portfolio Holder Communications and Democracy
- Cllr John Loudoun**
 Portfolio Holder Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- Cllr Matt Hall**
 Portfolio Holder Economy
- Cllr Geoff Jung**
 Portfolio Holder Coast, Country, and Environment
- Cllr Marianne Rixson**
 Portfolio Holder Climate Change and Emergency Response

Assistant Portfolio Holders

- Cllr Paula Fernley**
 Assistant Portfolio Holder Coast, Country, and Environment
- Cllr Richard Jefferies**
 Assistant Portfolio Holder Culture, Leisure, Sport, and Tourism
- Cllr Todd Olive**
 Assistant Portfolio Holder Coast, Country, and Environment

The Leader and Cabinet members have responsibility, both individually and collectively, for most day-to-day decisions on Council functions and make recommendations to Full Council on the major policy plans and the budget.

The Leaders from all the political groups meet on a monthly basis.

Full Council, chaired by the Chair of Council, Cllr Eleanor Rylance, makes decisions on those matters it is required to do by law, namely the Council's budget and the plans and strategies that make up the council's policy framework.

The Cabinet is held to account by three Overview and Scrutiny Committees, namely the Overview Committee (forward looking), the Scrutiny Committee (backward looking) and the Housing Review Board (housing HRA specific). The Scrutiny Committee is opposition led. The Overview Committee and Housing Review Board are both chaired by members of the ruling group.

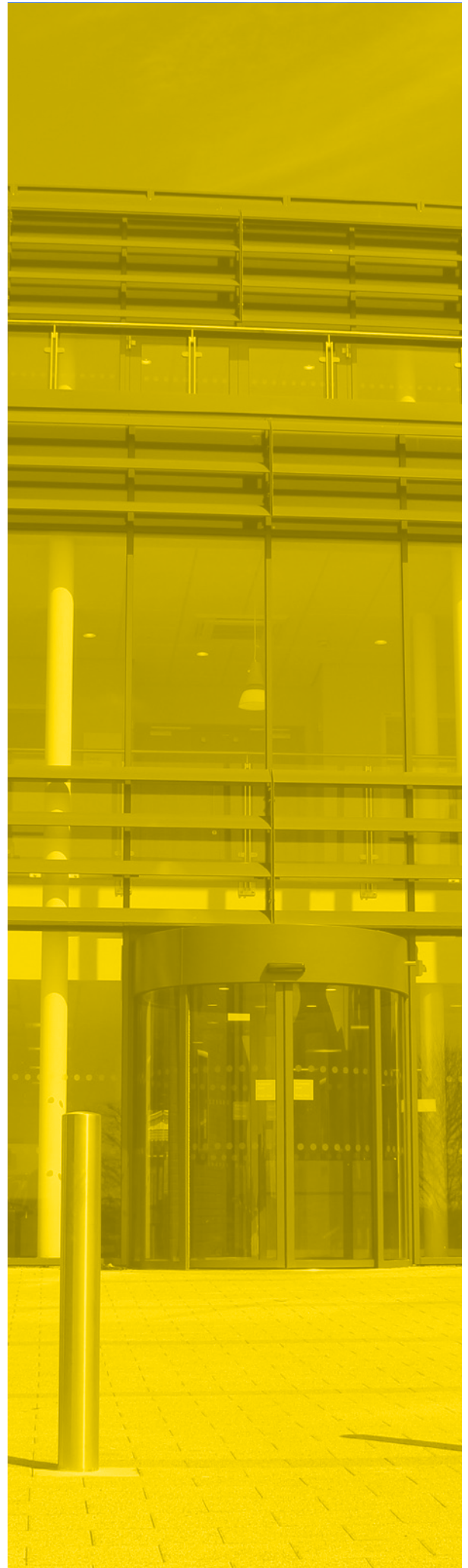
Political groups

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>29
Democratic Alliance Group</p> <p>10
Independent Group</p> <p>2
Independent Councillor Group</p> | <p>16
Conservative Group</p> <p>3
Labour Group</p> |
|--|--|

Recommendations review

We underwent a review of our scrutiny arrangements in November 2023 and the recommendations from that review include.

- That the current structure of three committees is maintained but that work takes place to ensure that they operate in a complementary manner. This recommendation should include a rework of the terms of reference for the three committees.
- That consideration is given to providing a short-term investment to the scrutiny function to ensure that the actions and recommendations arising from this report can be implemented and that 'added value' scrutiny can take place. This recommendation might include backfilling some of the secretariat functions to allow Democratic Services Officers to utilise their skills to providing additional support to the scrutiny function with a view to making this change permanent if the additional investment realises impact and a clear business case can be made.
- That the three scrutiny committees are assigned a senior officer to provide expertise and advice to guide and support each of the respective Chairs and to retain oversight of the function, work programmes and help ensure that they work within their terms of reference and within the scrutiny protocol.
- Consideration of cross-party pre-meetings being held (ideally) before the meeting and led in a way that helps committee members prepare for scrutiny sessions by reviewing the key lines of enquiry and coordinating their questioning approaches.
- That a process is designed and implemented that tracks recommendations made and impact arising and that this is communicated back to all Elected Members
- Provide development support and training for Officers across the Council to build, refresh and enhance their knowledge and understanding of the role, purpose, and powers of scrutiny. This should also include the approach to report writing and presenting and answering questions at committee meetings.



- That the Council provides learning and development opportunities for all Elected Members to include (but not limited to).
 - Questioning skills.
 - Scoping and Managing In-depth scrutiny.
 - Making recommendations.
 - Access and use of information and work programming.
 - An in-depth look at the scrutiny protocol and terms of reference for the committees, focusing on expectations, behaviours, and garnering ongoing support for participation.

- That the approach to work programming for scrutiny is redesigned so that the work programme is anchored by long term strategic issues for East Devon. This should include (but not limited to).
 - Capacity to conduct in-depth scrutiny outside of the formal meetings.
 - Regular collaboration with scrutiny Chairs which might involve,
 - › Routine sharing of work programmes for committees or possibly the consideration of the development of a single work programme for the entire function which is agreed annually. (with scope to flex throughout the year)
 - › Chairs to collectively decide on member suggestions on proposal forms for what goes on the work programme – based on clear criteria that members themselves agree – process should look and feel challenging. Forward Plan could also go to this meeting for discussion (Portfolio Holder reports could go here too).

- Planned space on the work programme for detailed scrutiny of forthcoming decisions in a way that is planned in advance – for most complex / contentious issues – allowing for managed and proportionate political debate.
- Use insight from the public (ward work, corporate complaints) to inform work programming – in a proportionate way.
- Proactively share Forward Plan with members outside of committee; signpost members to background reports where necessary.
- Organise separate all- member briefings for members on forthcoming / high profile things which are for information rather than taking up space on the formal agenda.
- Continue with production of regular Portfolio Holder reports but integrate this better into work programming.

We will be taking those recommendations to Full Council in March 2024, together with an action plan for addressing them and will be holding a session with the Cabinet and Group Leaders, followed by an all member briefing to fully appraise members of those recommendations in advance of the Council meeting. The Centre for Public Scrutiny will be attending those sessions.



Governance arrangements

We have developed and are committed to a Code of Corporate Governance which defines the principles and practices that underpin our governance arrangements. The Code is reviewed regularly and is consistent with the seven core principles of the “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016). The Annual Governance Statement shows our compliance with the Code and describes how the effectiveness of the Governance arrangements has been monitored and evaluated. Our Statutory Officers direct the annual reviews of the effectiveness of the Council’s governance arrangements against the Code. When completed the findings are reported to the Audit and Governance Committee.

A Constitution working group of members, including representatives from all political groups, was set up on 6 December 2023 to oversee a review of key parts of our Constitution. That work will take many months and will be ongoing at the time of the Corporate Peer Challenge.

Council Motion

In July 2023, the Council passed a motion entitled, “Actions to provide the strong, united, and informed managerial and political leadership”.

The motion stated as follows: -



Council believes that the start of a four-year term with a controlling partnership of councillors with an increased mandate from the people of East Devon provides the opportunity to refresh the whole Council both in terms of its priorities and the way it assembles all its resources to deal with the complex issues faced by its residents in challenging times. To that end council commits to the following actions to provide the strong, united, and informed managerial and political leadership that is required:

In the short term, to work with Local Government Association and other parts of the local government family to:

1. Undertake a skills and knowledge audit of all Cabinet Members and key councillors to ensure that they are fully equipped to undertake their roles in the challenging times in which we find ourselves. This will lead to individual support for those members including specific mentoring and placement on appropriate courses and conferences; and
2. Work to bring together the Cabinet and Senior Management to become a unified team which, whilst respecting the different roles of officers and members, can move forward as one body in dealing with the issues faced by the council and its partners. In the first instance this would involve a facilitated Cabinet/SLT awayday and such work as may flow from that.

In the medium term, to:

3. Ask the LGA to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge in September using leading and respected officers and members from other councils to look at the core of the council and recommend ways forward with a particular emphasis on:
 - i. Reviewing the member/officer protocol.
 - ii. Reviewing the Council's communications strategy in the light of experiences gained with Covid.
 - iii. Reviewing the procedural standing orders as part of a constitutional review and make all parts of the constitution become clearer, both to the public and members, and encourage more members to participate in discussions & decisions around both the development, and the scrutiny, of those strategies.
 - iv. Reviewing all safeguarding strategies to ensure the continued protection of our vulnerable residents.
 - v. Reviewing the relationships between the District Council, the County Council, and town & parish councils to ensure appropriate place-based working and the joining up of the public sector and partners to deliver cost-effective and locally relevant services.
4. Ask the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to conduct, as soon as is practicable, a review of the scrutiny processes to ensure that:
 - i. The Cabinet and Officers continue to cooperate in the preparation of strategies to ensure that the undoubted professionalism of our staff is supported by the undoubted skills and knowledge of all local councillors from across the political spectrum in the development of those strategies from the outset.
 - ii. A suite of performance indicators are put in place to ensure that service delivery can be scrutinised by both Councillors and the public and to ensure that modifications can be made to service delivery by a due process of review.
5. Ask SW Employers to undertake a review of the training and support needs of the SLT and the methodologies by which the SLT functions as a coherent team.
6. Ask the Council's S151 Officer, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, to prepare a report outlining the likely costs to the Council of these recommendations and to ascertain any risks associated with them, both financially and reputationally.

An officer group, including members of ELT, has been set up to have oversight of implementation of all these resolutions, which are due to be completed by the summer of 2024

Member/Officer relationships

We have a protocol for relationships between Members and Officers that was adopted in 2019 to guide members and officers in their relations with one another to ensure the smooth running of the Council. The overriding principle is for members and officers to recognise and respect one another's different roles and responsibilities. Members received training on this topic following the elections in May 2023 and, following the Council motion, this Protocol is to be reviewed by the Standards Committee taking into account the findings of the Corporate Peer Challenge.

Strategic risk management arrangements

We have a Risk Management Policy and Guidance (RM Policy) which provides a framework for the management of risk, to enable managers to identify, assess and control risks within their areas. It gives advice and guidance on best practice and describes the different elements that need to be managed, to embed risk management into our culture, raise awareness of and work with partners to develop a common understanding of risk management, integrate risk management into policy, planning and decision-making and to enable us to anticipate and respond to changing social, environmental and legislative conditions.

- Identifying assessing and effectively managing strategic and operational risks across the council,
- Establishing clear roles, responsibilities and reporting lines for risk management across the council,
- Incorporating the assessment of risk into all key decision making and planning processes of the council,
- Using our system, SPAR.net, for recording, assessment, monitoring of controls and reporting of risks.

The likelihood of occurrence of a risk is scored from remote to very likely and the impact that the occurrence of the risk would have on our service delivery or objectives is scored from minor to major impact. Having identified a risk and assessed its impact and probability, control actions are identified to mitigate the risks.

The SLT ensures that risk is managed effectively and in accordance with the RM Policy and the Audit and Governance Committee approves the RM Policy and monitors the risk register and our risk action plans on a 6 monthly basis.

This is an area that we are in the process of reviewing, including linking this to the updated project management process, enabling a clear monitoring arrangement for projects and associated risks and we will be implementing enhancements to the current policy in due course.



Staff feedback and engagement mechanisms

Various staff surveys have been undertaken in recent years, some headlines from these including:

Response rate

88%

Hybrid Staff Working Survey

82%

Investor In People 2023 compared to 80% in 2019

Staff views on our future arrangements

96%

would like to see a return of the Star Awards

- There was a common theme from these that staff generally understand what the ‘golden thread’ means and how their role aligns with the wider organisation’s priorities and that the Performance Excellence Reviews process is embedded, but it was evident that staff have experienced increased demand and capacity pressures in recent years, compounded by the pandemic and recruitment and retention challenges, which has impacted on this.
 - Generally, the surveys indicated that staff had confidence in their managers and feel that they get sufficient support, although the recent IIP survey highlighted a need to further develop management capacity and capability.
 - People generally valued the learning and development available. However, because of work demands and capacity pressures during the pandemic, time for learning and development had been reduced.
 - Staff (as at 2021) were keen to understand what the post pandemic working arrangements would be and to start preparing for this, which we subsequently achieved through the Worksmart relaunch.
 - Staff wellbeing was positive, with the Happy Healthy Here (See page 41) initiatives well received.
- Prior to the pandemic we held regular Star Awards to recognise employees. Those surveyed felt that we should have a staff recognition scheme and most staff stated that they would like to see a return of the Star Awards but there were strong themes around ensuring that all of our teams across the services had a fair opportunity to receive an award (not just front line teams), that there needed to be more flexibility about the nature of the reward and there needed to be clarity around the difference between a Bouquet in Stay Connected and a Star Award. In January 2022 we relaunched the Star Awards, for staff who go above and beyond their day job to be nominated, with SLT agreeing who should win. There are individual and team awards, with individuals receiving a £50 gift voucher and teams invited to attend a lunch with the Interim Executive Leadership Team.

Financial planning and management



Current Financial Health

We have an excellent financial track record and are in a strong financial position, although along with all Local Authorities there are funding challenges.

We are currently and have historically maintained both our General Fund Balance and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Balances at the agreed levels:

General Fund Balance current adopted range

£3.5 – £4.3 million

current balance is £4.3 million

(proposed in draft 2024/25 to increase by a further £0.5m)

Housing Revenue Account adopted sum

£3.1 million

current balance is £3.1m

In addition to these balances, we hold other reserves to mitigate risk and help us invest to balance our books going forward. These are in addition to the normal specified reserves you would expect a Council to hold.

The current financial picture shows a slight underspend on the General Fund Budget and an overspend on the HRA which is being met from specific reserves as we catch up on maintenance work. Historically we have kept within the annual budgets set by Council and the in-year position is monitored carefully.

General Fund; Transformation Reserve

£2.1 million

Business Rates Volatility reserve

£600 thousand

MTFP risk reserve

£3 million

HRA; Volatility Reserve

£1.6 million

We receive unqualified Annual Audit Opinions, although like most councils our audits are behind as part of the national backlog, and we await the completion of the 2021/22 audit.

We have received our value for money conclusion for 2021/22 (Interim Auditor's Annual Report – Grant Thornton December 2023). This report contains 3 key recommendations relating to Governance arrangements at the Council:

Recommendation 1

The Council should recognise that it has been given clear, consistent evidence of the existence of cultural issues and continues to implement action to address the behaviours which have given rise to this culture by:

- Agreeing a set of formalised remedial actions, including a zero-tolerance policy on bullying.
- Revising the members' Code of Conduct and Member/Officer protocol to include specific examples of unacceptable behaviour and the sanctions which may be imposed by the Standards Committee in response to breaches of the Code of Protocol.
- Reporting back to Full Council on progress in achieving these objectives and addressing the cultural issues, within six months of the publication of this Recommendation.
- Appointing a qualified independent facilitator to work with officers and members to develop and deliver a programme of activities to support effective relationships and challenge poor behaviour.

Recommendation 2

The Council should provide a mandatory induction programme for new and returning members, to ensure a good understanding on the part of all the members of:

- The difference between their roles and that of the Council's officers and the importance of respecting and observing boundaries between those roles.
- The Council's legal and ethical responsibilities as an employer and their duty of care to all employees.
- The specific statutory duties and powers of the chief executive, Section 151 officer and monitoring officer roles and their responsibilities to the Council.

Recommendation 3

The Council should strengthen governance arrangements by:

- Providing specific training for members of the Overview, Scrutiny and Audit and Governance Committees to ensure a better understanding of their roles and responsibility including including the importance of demonstrating the independence of mind, attending meetings, asking effective questions and maintaining an a-political nature.
- Developing an annual forward plan for the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to ensure they hold the cabinet to account as a critical friend for the delivery of the objectives in the Council Plan.

As can be seen from the report presented to the Council's Audit & Governance Committee the Council have responded positively to these recommendations with actions already adopted or in progress. The Committee were reassured that the Auditor's report states that the current indications are that various agreed actions should serve to address the issues and are indeed having the positive impact that they intended. The Auditor further comments that given the Council has discussed and agreed these actions in public, taking leadership on issues, they consider the matter is being taken seriously and appropriate subsequent action has begun and continues.

The report related to a particular period of time and it outlines the positive steps we are taking and the progress that has been made by the new Leadership Team and the excellent working relationship between SLT and the Cabinet.

■ [Agenda for Audit and Governance Committee](https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=149&MId=2245&Ver=4)
democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=149&MId=2245&Ver=4

Financial Plan – looking forward

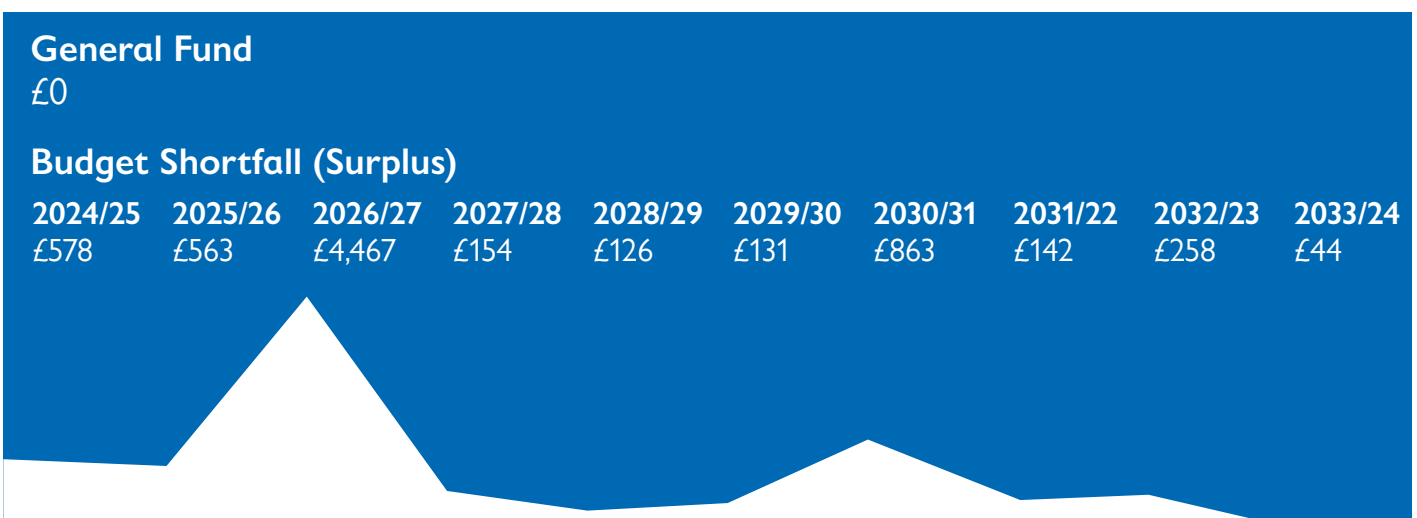
Our Financial Plan was adopted in October 2023 and comprises of two parts.

1. The Medium-Term Financial Plan Model (MTFP)

Our MTFP provides a financial model and forecast of the cost of providing services over a rolling ten-year period, together with an estimate of the financial resources that are likely to be available to the Council. The process is designed to provide an early warning of any potential deficit in the required level of resources.

As well as considering the General Fund, the MTFP also reviews the affordability of the Council's capital programme. Below is a summary of the General Fund position which considers the implications of the capital programme. The HRA is considered separately in an HRA Business Plan which needs rewriting, but we await the outcome of the Stock Condition Survey expected to be completed within the next few months.

Summary of the MTFP Model – Annual budget shortfall assuming previous year's shortfall was found.



The reason for significant changes between years is that 2026/27 is when rebasing of business rates is expected creating a significant funding shortfall.

2. Financial Sustainability Model (FSM)

Our Plan outlines that addressing the funding gap comes in two stages linked to the uncertainty of Government funding for local authorities and even the shape of local government going forward.

The funding gap for 2024/25 and 2025/26 is considered manageable exploring what savings/increased income can be achieved working with services. To follow the methodology in the FSM. The budget gap currently identified for 2026/27 will not be found through this process and requires significant service reduction based on member priorities, however as highlighted the scale of this task and timing is unclear until certainty is given by Government.

- 2024/25 and 2025/26 budget gap - Continue to follow the FSM; with 3 months remaining to help address the 2024/25 budget shortfall and 15 months to address the 2025/26 shortfall.

Broadly of the £578k shortfall in 2024/25 half will be found through the FSM process, the remaining balance to be found by revisiting key assumptions, and to look for cost reductions during the budget process. Then continue to work on the 2025/26 budget gap using the same principles.

This should not be ignored, and actions and scenarios need to be formulated to allow members to consider options, to be ready to implement when required, to the scale required. This modelling and member discussions will happen over the next 12 – 15 months.

The FSM process is described in the Plan and undertakes reviews to ensure we are delivering VFM, drive efficiencies to see what savings can be achieved and to form an evidence base that we have done what we can. There are lead enablers and resources allocated to support the key themes of the model to drive savings/increase income.

- 2026/27 budget gap - If the funding gap estimated in 2026/27 of £4.5m materialises, which is dependent on Government direction, then efficiencies and income generation are not going to drive the level of savings required and we will need to propose significant service reductions. Importantly this action comes at a point when we are clearer on how much we need to find and by when before radical service decisions are made. As stated in our Plan, we have a MTFP Risk Reserve in place to protect us against any immediate changes should Government carry out reforms without good notice.



Council Plan & Service Plans – Financial Alignment

As already indicated, we have a strong golden thread running from our council plan to individuals' objectives. We ensure the council plan objectives that flow to service plan objectives are aligned to the budget ensuring resources are available. In the development of the new council plan this exercise will be undertaken again to identify the financial implications and individual service plans objectives will identify the budget resource required.

Further developments

We are implementing a new financial system to go live in April 2024. We have procured the system along with our partner authorities (Exeter City Council and Teignbridge District Council) who between us own the IT company (Strata). The system is being configured the same for all three authorities agreeing on the best processes between us, this not only brings procurement and IT resource savings but importantly starts to give the 3 authorities resilience with the finance teams being able to share capacity and capability of staff more readily and with one overall systems team.



Capacity for improvement



Organisation development and workforce

In 2021 we introduced a Personnel Committee, to have oversight of workforce matters, review policies and practices and approve key HR policy decisions. The first meeting took place just after the appointment of our new Corporate HR Lead in September 2021 and the following workforce priorities were agreed.

Workforce priorities

- Ensuring that workforce capacity meets service demand, within budgetary constraints.
- Overcoming significant recruitment challenges, with shortages in a range of roles, which exacerbates workforce capacity issues.
- Establishing more robust succession planning arrangements considering the Council's age profile and recruitment challenges, particularly in senior management and other key roles.
- Learning from the 'Worksmart' introduction following the 2019 office relocation to Honiton and new ways of working through the pandemic to clarify and embed longer term working arrangements which support service delivery, high performance, recruitment, and retention.
- Continuing to support managers and staff to deal with service demands and new ways of working, including effective communication of the council plan and links to service, team and individual performance and contribution and ensuring that we continue to support staff health, safety and wellbeing and reduce absence rates.
- Ensuring that we maintain and build upon the generally positive employee and trade union relations environment to support high performance, recruitment, and retention, including retaining our Investors in People (IiP) accreditation.

Areas of work with members

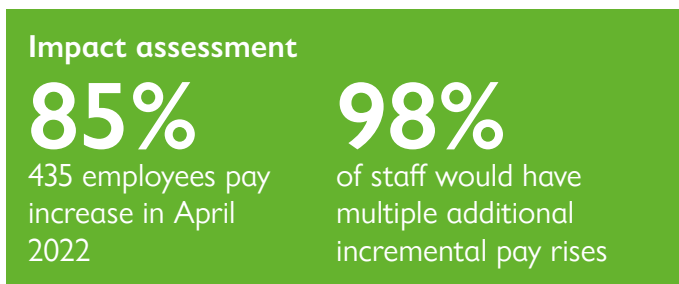
The Corporate HR Lead agreed the following areas of work with members, described further in this document:

- An independent Reward Review, to determine whether changes need to be made to the pay and grading structure and rates of pay to ensure that we achieve our aspirations to be a median pay employer and to mitigate against current recruitment and retention issues.
- A review of Worksmart, informed by learning to date on new ways of working, to determine any changes to policy and practice to support post pandemic working arrangements.
- Recruitment strategy review, to assess whether actions could be taken to strengthen our employer brand and to open up potential new talent sources which could also support our wider economic development, equality, diversity and inclusion and anti-poverty strategies.
- Review the existing staff wellbeing and training offer informed by learning from new ways of working, staff surveys, a wellbeing audit, and our commitment to improve mental health and wellbeing.
- Development of a more structured and wide-ranging workforce planning and 'grow our own' strategy to develop existing talent and recruit new staff, helping reduce existing recruitment and retention challenges and support succession planning.
- Work with SLT and the Communications and Engagement Team to ensure the effective dissemination of the council plan to staff and to support staff communication and engagement.

Reward Review

During 2021 and 2022 we took various steps to improve the employment package to support recruitment and retention, recognising that our reward package was not competitive in the market and that it needed to future proof itself considering the changing economic picture. Initially in June/ July 2021 this involved a review of the lowest pay grades to address recruitment and retention issues, especially in our StreetScene service. It was made clear at the time that this change was part of a wider review of our pay grades but was deemed as being urgent at the lower end of the grades due to the very real impact on our public front line services.

In September 2021 our Personnel Committee agreed to a wider pay benchmarking exercise and Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) were engaged to undertake this work. PWC identified that some of our pay rates were falling below our aspiration to be a median pay employer and therefore the Committee agreed to a review of the pay and grading structure to mitigate against this. In May 2022 the Committee signed off the high level 'Reward Review' proposals and then work was undertaken internally to complete a detailed impact assessment before commencing collective consultation.



The impact assessment identified that if agreed, over 85% of staff (435 employees) would receive a pay increase in April 2022 (the date that the proposed changes were to be backdated to) and over 98% of staff would then have multiple additional incremental rises beyond this, due to headroom in the new grade. The proposals would also have a positive impact on our Gender Pay Gap (from 8.29% to 6.18%). However, it was also recognised that a small number of staff would be adversely affected, with 11 employees 'red circled' (their current pay rate would be higher than the proposed new pay rate) and 11 managers identified as being in the same proposed new grade as some of their direct reports and actions were proposed to mitigate against these impacts, which led to them all being resolved.

Feedback on the proposals was sought from staff and UNISON and there was also a ballot of UNISON members. Around 6% of staff provided feedback, which was carefully considered alongside the feedback from the UNISON regional and national offices and the results of the ballot of UNISON members, where over 80% of members supported the proposals. At a Joint Staff Forum on 21st November 2022 the Reward Review proposals were agreed and implemented in the December pay run, backdated to 1st April 2022.

We are really pleased that alongside pay increases for most staff.



We have been able to implement the Real Living Wage as part of the proposals, aligned to our Poverty Reduction Strategy, with our new minimum pay rate now £12.59 above the current Real Living Wage rate of £12 per hour. We have also made improvements to our annual leave, increasing basic leave for lower graded staff from 22 to 25 days per annum, so that all staff across all services are on the same entitlement, regardless of grade.

We have seen an increase in applications because of the changes and market supplements have reduced from 45 prior to the Reward Review to currently 11. We are continuing to monitor impact through regular people data reporting and staff surveys, alongside periodic benchmarking of a cross section of roles.

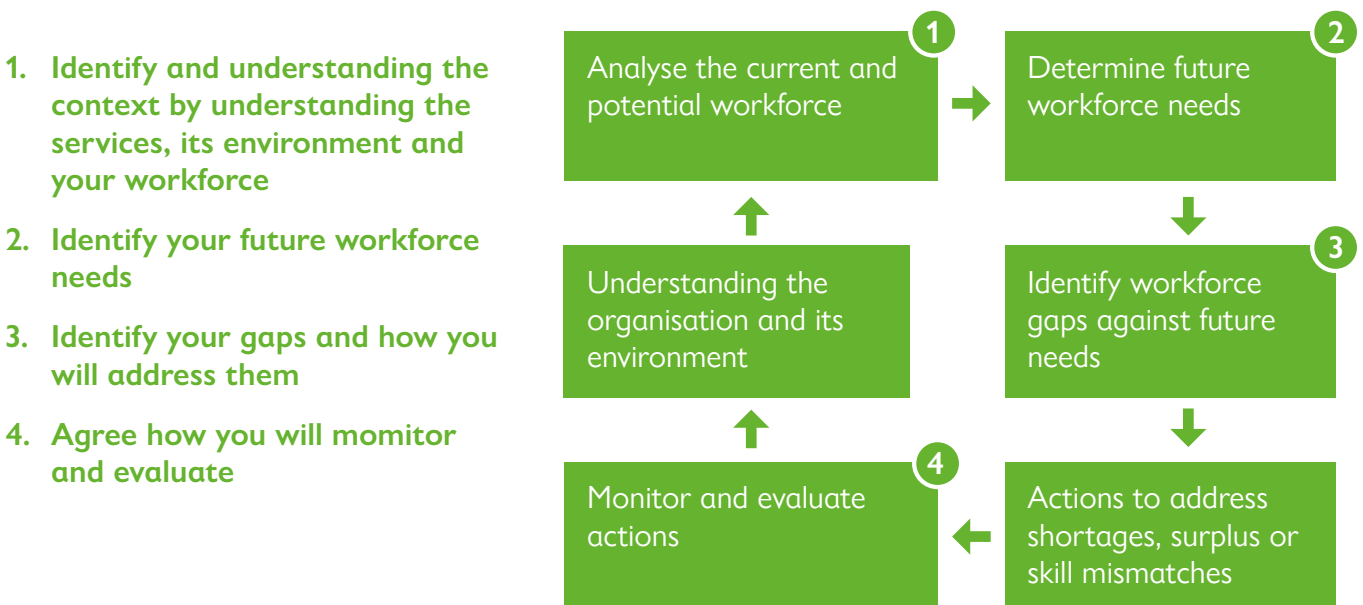
Alongside the Review, we have also implemented an enhanced staff benefits and employee assistance portal which has received positive feedback.

Recruitment

With all the good work across the Council, we wanted to get the message out to prospective employees that East Devon District Council was a great place to work. In August 2022 we filmed a new recruitment video, starring real-life members of staff who talked about their experiences. The video, available on our website, is complemented by shorter versions for social media use and a range of photos that we use in recruitment advertising and internal staff communications. Our policy and recruitment resources and process are also being reviewed to make them more candidate and manager friendly.

Improved workforce planning

The first iteration of a more robust workforce planning approach was included as part of 2022/23 service planning, using the model below (which utilises the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's model). Managers were provided with guidance and support from their HR Business Partner, and they were asked to use service people data to inform their workforce plan. The second iteration will take place in early spring 2024, following the Peer Challenge, and will be used to inform our future people strategy and priorities.



Grow our own

A big focus is progressing our 'grow our own' plans. Alongside the Reward Review and other improvements, we know that developing our entry levels and career pathways will help us to recruit and retain. The grow our own project encompasses a range of actions including expanding our apprenticeship and T level offer, young people's engagement through school and college links and developing career pathways to enable progression.

To support our work, we have become a member of the South West Apprenticeship Ambassador Network, which promotes apprenticeships to other employers. We are also going to be utilising their apprentice network, getting our apprentices involved in promoting apprenticeships to other young people.

We currently have 17 apprenticeships, 4 are new employees and the remaining are existing staff who were looking to develop in their chosen fields. Apprenticeships range from Business Administration Level 3, Counter Fraud Investigator level 4, Business Analyst Level 4, Project Management Level 4, Control Surveyor Level 6, Environmental Health Officer Level 6, Civil Engineer Level 6, Chartered Town Planning Level 7, Chartered Manager Level 6 and Senior Leader Level 7.

Jo Fellows, our Corporate HR Lead joined us in 2021 whilst half-way through the Senior Leader apprenticeship with the University of Exeter. We were really proud that she was nominated as a 2022 South West finalist in the National Apprenticeship Awards. We also have three other members of our senior leadership team undertaking the same apprenticeship with the university.

During 2023 we piloted refreshed work experience placements with our local schools, with students in years 12 and 10 working with various services and developing a young person's guide to working for the Council. We hosted a school Careers Leads meeting in Autumn 2023 and are now working with them to finalise the plans for 2024.



Worksmart

We have been operating the Worksmart flexible working arrangements since we moved to our purpose-built headquarters in Honiton in 2019, but the pandemic gave us the opportunity to learn and review our approach, leading to the launch of 'Worksmart 2022+' from May 2022. At the heart of Worksmart is a focus on three perspectives – our customers, the environment, and employees.

A multi-disciplinary Worksmart Review Working Group was established to identify and progress actions to support Worksmart. Teams have agreed their working arrangements, within the parameters of our Worksmart Principles, which were developed in liaison with our members, managers, and staff.

People data

To support organisational oversight the Personnel Committee and SLT receive regular people data reports, complementing the previous annual report, which has also been developed further to encompass more information.

A key area of focus, bearing in mind recruitment challenges, was the need for accurate and up to date vacancy figures. The HR Team worked together to revise processes and systems to enable this reporting, which was a complex task. However, this is now built into the regular reports.

A Team Toolkit was shared with managers to assist their Worksmart discussions and each team has a Worksmart Team Agreement in place, which is regularly reviewed. We also agreed a new Worksmart Policy. An audit of the Worksmart Team Agreements showed that most managers and staff felt that the arrangements were working well, although improvements were required to accommodation and ICT which we are progressing.

Worksmart is not just about where people work from. We wanted to ensure an inclusive approach so all teams, including front line teams, had a Worksmart discussion which was used to identify support required and promote the wide range of flexible working arrangements including part time working, carers policies and flexible retirement.

Headlines

As a result of the agreed 2022/23 budget to allocate to staffing requirements linked to service need our headcount has increased and is currently 553 (513.75 FTE) compared to 505 (463.26 FTE) at the end of financial year 2021/22.

Market Supplements are an additional temporary payment to the basic salary of an employee where market pressures would prevent us from being able to recruit or retain staff for a particular skill. Since our Reward Review was implemented in December 2022, the number of market supplements has reduced significantly from 45 to 11.

We introduced regular reporting of vacancy data to Personnel Committee and our current level of vacancies is 29, which is 5.26% of our headcount. This is the lowest level reported since reporting began in January 2022.

- At the end of 2022/23, the annual cumulative voluntary turnover rate at the end of March 2023 was 12.62% which was higher than the annual turnover rate for 2021/22 which was 9.91%. We are beginning to see a return to pre-pandemic turnover rates and the current forecast for cumulative voluntary turnover for 2023/24 is 9.42%
- At the end of the financial year 2022/23 our sickness absence rate was 10.94 days per person, compared to 9.56 days the previous year. This increase reflected the national picture in relation to overall higher levels of short-, medium- and long-term absence experienced by employers and in particular higher levels of anxiety, stress and depression, long covid and work-related stress were reported which mirrors our experience. Underlying issues which contributed to personal stress and depression included bereavements, family caring responsibilities and operational demands.
- We also recognise the need to undertake formal investigations when necessary and during 2022/23 we carried out 6 disciplinary investigations for conduct falling below expectations. The learning from this process was embedded through training, policies updates and procedural amendments. As a direct result of this process, we have also created a Housing Performance Lead post to ensure learning from wider tenant feedback including complaints is embedded into service delivery moving forward.
- Currently 90.41% of our workforce identify as White UK (English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish) and 1.12% of our workforce is from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background, this compared to 2.3% of the district's population who are from a BAME background. There are 1.5% more females than males working for our Council. The average age of our workforce is 48 with 61.2% of our workforce aged between 45-64 years and for the first time in 5 years we have 3 employees who are aged between 16-19. 4.74% of the workforce have self-declared a disability.
- Recent staff survey outcomes are summarised under Staff Engagement above. The planned review of the leadership and management development offer, review of the performance improvement policy and refreshed training and ensuring that council plan priorities are reflected in resource allocation through service and workforce planning are some of the actions that are being taken to address employee concerns. The reintroduction of annual staff surveys will take place during 2024.

Performance Excellence Reviews (PER)

- The annual PER conversation between April and June each year
- Regular one to ones during the year
- Our Behaviours Framework.

Our PER framework aligns with our Worksmart Principles and particularly the principle that 'We will measure our success by how we deliver our agreed outcomes,' through the setting of clear performance expectations aligned to service plans and operational outputs and regular opportunities to review team and individual progress and agree support requirements.

Happy Healthy Here staff wellbeing and learning & development

We are really proud of our Happy Healthy Here staff health and wellbeing offer, which offers a wide range of support and initiatives to staff, including an employee assistance programme, free seasonal flu vaccinations, additional flexitime for Happy Healthy Here activities and a lottery rest break for StreetScene operational teams. We are a Mindful Employer and have signed the charter for Employers who are positive about Mental Health. We have a network of mental health first aiders and have recently implemented a wellbeing champions programme to embed wellbeing into the organisation further.

We recognised that the cost of living is rising, and this may impact on employee wellbeing, so we therefore also implemented financial education webinars, a Credit Union and the new staff benefits and discounts hub.

More recently we have sourced training and coaching for employees in front line services who are raising concerns about burnout, utilising some of our Public Health monies to support our workforce.

As a Gold Investor in People, continuous learning and development is at the heart of what we do. As well as our annual Performance Excellence Review and regular one to ones, staff get access to a wide range of learning and development opportunities, from 'bite-size' training to fully accredited apprenticeship qualifications. Alongside mandatory,

Following feedback about reduced levels of mandatory training compliance, the PER and 1:1 form was updated, providing an opportunity for managers and staff to review mandatory training completion, as well as wider development and support needs and managers were provided with updated guidance. The PERs conversation also provides an opportunity to review job descriptions, ensuring that staff are effectively deployed to meet changing priorities.

Feedback was sought on the existing Behaviours Framework in 2022, which most staff felt was still relevant, and a discussion about the behaviours in practice is incorporated into the PER conversation.

core skills and management training we recently focused on safeguarding training, with a new level 3 course implemented for all front-line staff during 2022. Many staff commented on the value of being part of a multi-service cohort, as it provided opportunities to learn from each other. Following feedback Mental Health Capacity Act training has also been implemented during 2023.

Since 2022 we have taken advantage of free training delivered by Smart Skills and South Devon College using money from the European Union Social Fund. Staff have been able to study CMI Level 2 Team Leader Award, Mental Health Awareness Level 1, CMI Level 3 Project Management and CMI Level 3 Coaching and Mentoring. This has been a huge saving on our learning and development budget and freed up valuable funds to provide other training. We also continue to partner with Mid Devon District Council to share training, which also helps to stretch our training budget.

In December 2022 and January 2023, we offered training sessions for staff in Dealing with Difficult Customers and Challenging Behaviours, following concerns raised by staff. The aim is to equip staff to cope and react appropriately with face-to-face scenarios which potentially might be threatening or very emotional. This training provided them with not only the practical skills, but also the know how to confidently signpost vulnerable individuals to other organisations when we cannot help. Group discussions also played a huge part in this training to support reporting and debriefing mechanisms as well as coping strategies to protect mental health.

Digital and data - Transformation

East Devon District Council has embarked on digital and data transformation as part of the adopted financial sustainability model (FSM) with an aim to enhance service delivery, efficiency, and resident experience. This work is delivered by Strata, a tripartite-owned IT service solutions company involving East Devon District Council, Exeter City Council, and Teignbridge District Council. This joint venture allows the councils to pool resources and expertise, fostering a shared commitment to innovation and technological advancement.

Central to this digital transformation is Strata's recently adopted business plan, outlining strategic objectives, key performance indicators, and a roadmap for the future. The business plan serves as a guiding document, aligning the efforts of the three councils to ensure a unified approach to digital and data transformation. By consolidating their efforts through Strata, the councils can achieve economies of scale, optimise resource utilisation, and stay at the forefront of technological advancements.

Driving this transformation is the Corporate Digital and Data Team, a dedicated group within the council overseeing and client-leading the services provided by Strata. This team is tasked with developing and implementing digital strategies, ensuring the effective use of data, and aligning technological initiatives with the overarching goals of the council. Through client leadership, they bridge the gap between technological solutions and the specific needs of the council, facilitating a seamless integration of digital innovations into day-to-day operations.

Strata's services encompass a wide array of digital solutions, from robust IT infrastructure to data analytics and cybersecurity. The collaborative nature of this venture ensures that the councils can leverage collective expertise, staying agile in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

This digital and data transformation at East Devon District Council is not merely about technological upgrades; it represents a comprehensive approach to modernising services, fostering innovation, and building a foundation for sustainable growth. By strategically partnering with neighbouring councils through Strata and empowering a dedicated Corporate Digital and Data Team, East Devon is positioned to navigate the complexities of the digital age and provide enhanced services to its residents.



Climate change and ecological emergencies

Our first Climate Change Strategy 2020-2025 and associated action plan set out our aspirations to achieve a carbon neutral Council by 2040 and the actions that are required in the 5 year strategy. This is currently under review, to recognise the changing landscape and additional actions that have been undertaken by partner agencies and to allow an updated action plan to be developed. We work closely with other stakeholders including other councils in Devon and the University of Exeter who contributed to the development and adoption of the Devon Carbon Plan.

To support this work the appointment of a Climate Change Officer was agreed, with a further support post also then appointed. Carbon Literacy training has been implemented to support this work.

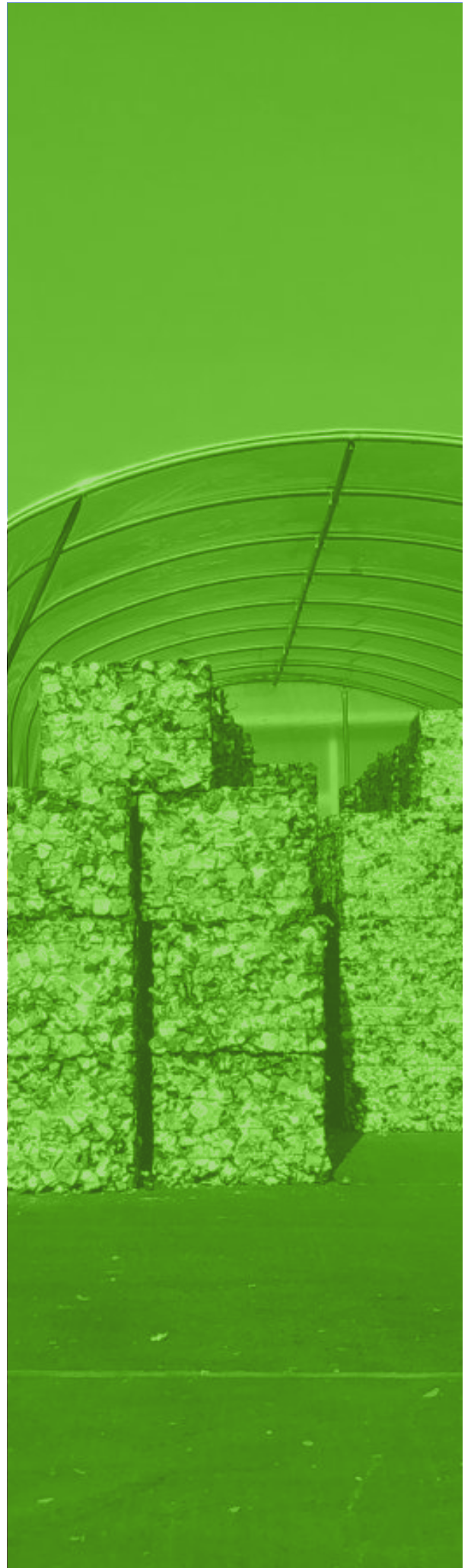
Below are some examples of the work we have done, and its impact so far.

■ [Climate Change Strategy 2020-2025](https://eastdevon.gov.uk/climate-change/climate-change/)
eastdevon.gov.uk/climate-change/climate-change/

Electrification of the Council's white fleet

StreetScene are working on the decarbonisation of white fleet within Operations, as well as Suez operated fleet owned by us and used for recycling and waste collections. As part of this work, we have reviewed one of our existing roles and moved some of its work to a new administration role. Working with the postholder, we are providing training and have changed the role to a Fleet and Equipment Manager, giving us the required capacity to plan and carry out the decarbonisation of our fleet.

So far, we have switched 33% of our white fleet to EVs and are now investigating the infrastructure needed for the decarbonisation of the larger fleet. We have plans to get to 50% by 2024/25, this includes trialling some E kerb side sort vehicles, such as the Terberg 22. Alongside this we have requested a larger capital budget to allow the purchase and real-world trial of 2 EV kerbside sort vehicles and 1 retro fit EV refuse collection vehicle.



The Housing Service

One of our three priority areas identified is our carbon footprint/ stationary carbon emissions from our 4,300 tenanted properties. This work stream is about so much more than just making our properties more energy efficient, these properties and their performance have a profound impact on the health and wellbeing of our tenants plus this work is related to our Poverty Reduction Strategy. Well insulated properties have a lower carbon footprint and use energy more efficiently and are more comfortable places to live.

To date we have retrofitted over 200 houses. Our strategy is to tackle the worst first and use a fabric first approach, with renewable energy options such as solar panels considered once the fabric of the building has been upgraded to ensure the heat generated stays where it is needed. This is not without its challenges, using the Green Homes Fund and the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, both of which are competitive funds that are released in waves. It is a credit to our Housing Team who are so successful at winning this funding that they have seen so many properties renovated.

New district heating system

Delivering large scale zero carbon development in the west end of the district is a key objective in the Council's Climate Change Action Plan. The Devon Carbon Plan also makes it clear that in 2019 burning of fossil fuels for heat accounted for 19% of Devon's greenhouse gas emissions. It states that 'we must consider district heating for new developments where the distribution pipes and energy centre can be designed in from the outset, particularly in locations where waste heat is available from industrial processes. In their Net Zero modelling, the Committee on Climate Change showed that 18% of the UK's heat supply will need to come from heat networks by 2050 to reach net zero commitments, an increase from the current figure of 3%.

One of the unusual features of the west end of the district is the presence of two district heating networks. These are designed to meet all the heat and hot water needs of the buildings to which they connect. The decision to roll out district heating was part of a deliberate strategy to underpin the large-

The Housing Team have almost completed a huge stock condition survey project. Initially it was a challenge to recruit the staff required, but work is underway and progressing at speed with 300 houses already surveyed. This will help the decarbonisation work to be targeted so that the properties with the worse environmental profile can be tackled first. It is important to understand the scale of the challenge so that work can be prioritised accordingly.

scale delivery of low and zero carbon development. This avoided the need for gas boilers to be installed in individual homes. This was a farsighted decision, predating the national Heat and Building Strategy by over 10 years. This strategy emphasises that ultimately, net zero will mean gradually, but completely, moving away from burning fossil fuels for heating.

The Council is bringing forward a project to decarbonise the two networks through harnessing recoverable/waste heat. Working in conjunction with energy company E.ON, significant funds have been secured from the government's Heat Network Investment Programme and Green Heat Network Fund to support the delivery of the required infrastructure. A final investment decision is expected to be taken later in the spring with the expectation that this project will then underpin the large scale delivery of low and zero carbon development and save up to 17,000 tonnes of carbon per year at full build out.

It's easy to just think of this work as purely environmental in nature and concerned only with reducing our carbon footprint but we must remember the benefits at every stage when the Growth and Prosperity Team deployed the £2.1m Innovation and Resilience Fund (IRF) to help local businesses recover from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. They included a specific focus on supporting a green recovery with investments including helping local businesses to develop a new innovative low carbon heating system, new carbon capture technology and electric vehicle charging infrastructure. £1m of this IRF fund was committed from the Council's own internal funds, highlighting our commitment to supporting clean growth innovation. This scheme unlocked a further

£2.1m in volunteered match-funding, bringing total investment up to £4.2m. This scheme will create 103 new jobs and 11 new apprenticeships, with 36 businesses committing to launching a new product or service. Local procurement was also promoted, with a quarter of all grant funds awarded to be spent on goods and services within the district.

Green Team

To support our work a Green Team is being established to lead on the agreed actions and be a conduit for grant funding, information, strategies, and support. The Green Team will also measure, monitor, and report progress against our decarbonisation plans. A senior representative from each of the Council's services is part of the Green Team and climate change priorities are included as a specific area of development in all service plans.



Case studies



1. East Devon District Council accelerates clean growth

Our vision for clean growth and the ambition to transition to net zero is driving forward new investment opportunities across four strategic sites in the Exeter and East Devon Enterprise Zone (EEDEZ). For the 5-year period 2017-2022, EEDEZ offered 100% business rate relief to occupier businesses. The end of the rate relief prompted an extensive brand review to re-position and relaunch EEDEZ with a new offer to businesses. Amidst the challenges of the climate and cost-of-living crises, we are looking to capitalise on opportunities to provide greener, healthier, more vibrant places to live, work and learn.

The challenge

East Devon is an area most widely known for its Jurassic coast and rolling hills. It is also home to the new town of Cranbrook, expected to grow to 8000 homes, and an Enterprise Zone designation covering four key employment sites. Strategically located close to Exeter, adjacent to vital roads, rail and air links and East Devon's outstanding coast and countryside, EEDEZ covers: Exeter Science Park, Power Park, Cranbrook town centre and Skypark.

In 2022, with the end of 5 years of business rate relief, EDDC faced a number of challenges around EEDEZ perception, misunderstanding and service value of EEDEZ. As all business rates growth generated by EEDEZ during the 25 years designation is retained locally for reinvestment in local economic growth, it is crucial to continue to increase occupancy on the four sites.

Against a post-Covid backdrop, where East Devon had lost more than 1,000 jobs, stimulating economic growth in the area became a priority. Job losses included the collapse of Flybe in March 2020 which was, headquartered at Exeter Airport. Many of the jobs were high value, skilled roles.

Through EEDEZ, we are now striving to build a resilient and sustainable economy to promote prosperity in the district. This includes stimulating a low-carbon economy, increasing the levels and quality of employment, and raising wage levels across East Devon. Health and wellbeing are key priorities for us too. EEDEZ sits on the edge of expanding new green space, the Clyst Valley Regional Park which is close to the new town of Cranbrook with its high-quality homes, schools, and a new town centre with a supermarket and parade of shops due to open this year.

We have seized challenges to deliver new, green space for improved health outcomes alongside looking towards a clean and green future. We are driving clean growth through collaboration with key partners including Devon County Council, to reduce carbon emissions and provide greener, healthier, more vibrant places to live and work.

The solution and impact

We have been working in collaboration with Devon County Council, local education institutions as well as partners from the private sector and public sector organisations to enable their collective growth ambitions for the area. This collaboration has also been important in driving clean growth to bolster the local economy as well as create jobs and a skilled workforce for the future across the four EEDEZ sites including in Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine sectors (STEMM) and green industries.

These ambitions were accentuated when the brand review for the EEDEZ revealed a lack of clarity in its offer in stakeholders and potential customers. We have consulted widely with all stakeholders as part of the extensive brand review. As a result, a brand strategy and brand identity were developed.

Brand strategy

- informs how the brand identity is used to influence perceptions of EEDEZ,
- provides a clear “purpose” and a set of “values” for EEDEZ,
- outlines which audiences are most important,
- highlights which services EEDEZ needs to deliver.
- provides a clear proposition for EEDEZ, designed to reposition, and relaunch EEDEZ in the commercial space marketplace.

The brand strategy established that “the role of EEDEZ is to provide a framework, supporting each site and presenting them as a coherent, complimentary economic ecosystem. To achieve this, it was necessary to provide a clear explanation of what each site offers and how they fit together. This established where each site is positioned in the market and what type of business they want to attract.”

A new purpose for EEDEZ was developed and agreed as “To provide a world-class, low-carbon environment for business success.”

Brand strategy

- Catalyst: We provide a location where change and growth can happen. We support businesses to accelerate change.
- Ambitious: We change perceptions of what is possible. We support businesses to fulfil their potential.
- Sustainable: We put the environment at the heart of the economy. We support businesses to deliver clean growth.
- Innovative: We are investing in a low carbon future. We support businesses to push boundaries and create new solutions.
- Quality: We offer the opportunity to be world-class. We support businesses with the environment, services, and connections they need to be market leaders.

The rebranding and repositioning of EEDEZ culminated in a successful celebratory event, where around 50 partners and stakeholders attended a vibrant event to learn about the new visual identity and focus for EEDEZ. The event showcased new marketing collateral including a bespoke video highlighting the benefits of EEDEZ, new website, brochure, leaflet, and giveaways including seed

coasters. The event achieved media coverage in the local press (Appendix 1), as well as gaining traction through digital marketing (social media, newsletters, website etc). A marketing and communications strategy is being delivered which is raising the profile of the EEDEZ across the South West and beyond. To date engagement activities have included:

Engagement activities

- Engaging with more than 1500 people through a public consultation on the future design of Cranbrook town centre.
- Sponsorship of the TechforGood category at the Tech South West Awards including being able to judge the awards, meeting the finalists, branding present across all channels, and presenting the award in front of 400 people.
- Sponsorship of the Ecofriendly category at the Devon Women in Business Awards including being able to judge the category, branding present across all channels and presenting the award in front of 175 people.

Plans for 2024 include: presenting at the Exeter Property Forum; partnering with Devon Women in Business on a tech event at Exeter Science Park; launching a Zero Carbon Grant Fund for businesses in the EEDEZ area; partnering with Exeter Chamber's tech network called EXIST to launch the fund; hosting an event to engage commercial property stakeholders to understand how we can support them.

Our ambition to deliver clean growth is reflected through the following new developments in the Exeter and East Devon Enterprise Zone sites.

Exeter Science Park

Exeter Science Park is a partnership between Devon County, East Devon, and Exeter City Councils alongside the University of Exeter. Located just along the A30 from the Airport, it is home to a new £5 million grow-out space – the George Parker Bidder building. This has been constructed to be net-zero carbon for operational energy and has an A+ energy performance rating and is BREEAM Excellent. The 20,000 sq ft, building is expected to provide accommodation for up to 100 jobs in STEM sectors. A new net zero hotel for Zeal Hotels is currently under construction which will generate all the energy it requires.

The main Science Park Centre is also home to University of Exeter's Enterprise Zone, nurturing tech start-ups through the SET Squared partnership, a global business incubator and accelerator comprising six research-intensive universities: Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter, Southampton, and Surrey and which provides business support for tomorrow's flourishing businesses. This is supporting a number of new businesses that will be at the forefront of driving the transition to a net zero economy.

Skypark

Skypark is a £210 million development managed through a partnership between St. Modwen, a property development company, and Devon County Council. All new developments at Skypark meet the BREEAM 'Excellent' benchmark. This includes the new development of 35 high quality light industrial units, with more to come, to meet demand for commercial space. The site also offers solar PV and EV charging points, covered bicycle storage and insulated panel technology. Skypark, is also home to E. ON Energy's district heating centre which supplies the District Heating Network for Skypark and Cranbrook.

The aviation sector and Exeter Airport

The impact of the loss of Flybe in the region mirrored wider challenges and setbacks facing the aviation industry nationally. This was alongside the global challenge for the industry to decarbonise. A number of new initiatives have been pursued to support the development of Exeter Airport as a test bed for sustainable aviation.

In May 2020, Devon County Council acquired the former Flybe Training Academy. With support from the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership, this building was repurposed as the Future Skills Centre. It is now operated on a long lease by Exeter College and offers training and education opportunities from the building, providing learners of all ages, skills and qualifications fit for the economy of the future. This includes for future-facing high-tech jobs in engineering, digital, construction and clean growth.

In Autumn 2020, Dublin Aerospace took on a long lease of hangars at Exeter Airport which were again formerly utilised by Flybe. This enabled them to establish their first overseas subsidiary business, Exeter Aerospace, providing maintenance, repair, and overhaul services.

In August 2021, a trial of hybrid-electric flights took off at Exeter Airport, as part of a successful bid to UK Research and Innovation's £30 million Future Flight Challenge. Ampaire, a leader in electric aviation, is leading a consortium testing regional electric aviation transport. The consortium received £2.4M for its £5M 2ZERO programme (Towards Zero Emissions in Regional Aircraft Operations), to demonstrate hybrid-electric aircraft on regional routes in the southwest of the UK. The 2ZERO programme provides numerous opportunities for Exeter Airport as an important regional airport and this project puts the airport on the map as a forward-looking airport. Most recently, Exeter Airport has become a testbed to decarbonise ground operations. A partnership between Regional & City Airports (RCA), global travel company TUI and Cranfield University is investigating how to reduce the environmental impact of aircraft turnarounds at airports.

East Devon's natural landscape and the link to wellbeing

There has been a surge in peoples' desire to connect with nature and the natural environment alongside a greater appreciation of the benefits that this brings for our health and wellbeing. Plans are in place for a major expansion of the green infrastructure offer in the district. An award-winning masterplan has been developed for the new Clyst Valley Regional Park. This will be half the size of the city of Exeter, with ambitious plans for increased tree cover and new public green spaces linked with 80km of traffic-free trails. In addition, a significant increase in cycling locally has seen new plans to accommodate this increased demand by opening the new Clyst Valley Trail.

In addition, on the southern edge of the Clyst Valley Park, a new health and wellbeing focussed working and living complex is also being developed to create a vibrant wellness community whilst retaining its historic character and charm. Winslade Park will offer new homes and leisure facilities as well as a boutique personal studio and health club. It is anticipated to generate around 2,000 sustainable employment opportunities.



How is the new approach being sustained?

In 2021, we worked with Devon County Council to develop a new 'Vision for Clean Growth for the West of the District' framework. This framework sets out eight core themes for transitioning to a net zero economy.

1. Redefining how residents work and live well – adapting to developments in changes to work patterns by providing workspaces that seize the opportunities for hybrid working following the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. A thriving innovation ecosystem – stimulating new public, private, and research partnerships to unlock clean growth through the active pursuit of Innovation.
3. World class demonstrators in core technologies – sustainable Aviation, Greener Buildings, Green Finance & Innovation and Smart Grids.
4. Zero-carbon place-making – ensuring that every home is designed to be zero carbon and to create a sustainable, net zero carbon community.
5. Restoring nature connection – blurring the boundary between the built environment and natural landscape, enhancing the connections between people and nature.
6. Powered by nature – be leaders in clean energy infrastructure.
7. A place for creative minds – creating the conditions for success by developing and delivering tailored skills pathways.

Strengthening engagement and consultation with local partners and stakeholders including councils, education providers and private sector businesses will underpin the approach to delivering on this vision. This will also be key to identifying funding opportunities and investment proposals and setting out the short-term and long-term ambitions for the region.

Lessons learned

- Clear communications are essential to avoid misunderstanding and to increase interest in the EEDEZ offer.
- Dedicated resource is key to delivering clear communications.
- Long term commitment is required – both in terms of the vision and the ability to realise this.
- Public sector investment plays a key role in helping to share risk and to unlock private investment.
- The transition to a net zero economy is both an imperative and an opportunity.
- Local residents need to have access to relevant learning and training to benefit from this transition.

2. Working in collaboration with our partners to support residents in helping to address root causes of poverty

Our anti-poverty work focusses on working collaboratively with residents and partners. Our data shows us that residents mainly approach for help due to not being able to afford food or bills. Many of these residents have high energy costs, are not claiming or receiving all benefits they are entitled to and/or are in debt.

Through collaborative working we can help residents access all the services available to them, whilst also supporting their learning of how they can access this support themselves.

This has only become possible through building strong working relationships with partners across the business and voluntary sector.

The challenge

Over the past decade growing numbers of residents have become reliant on emergency and voluntary support in order to meet their basic needs. Government emergency funds have traditionally been targeted to provide one off crisis payments, but this approach doesn't solve the cause.

Due to this and knowing that these funds were going to be time limited we recognised that we needed to work towards addressing the root causes of poverty, a key aim of our poverty reduction strategy.

When our approach changed to addressing these causes, we faced a number of other challenges, some of which are;

- Helping residents who need to apply for welfare benefits navigate a system that does not always take account of their individual needs through to resolution. For example, personal independence payments new awards and reviews are often turned down due to challenges completing forms correctly. These residents are then required to ask for a mandatory reconsideration or appeal the decision ending their entitlement to Personal Independence Payment.
- Finding solutions for those who are suffering with mental health.
- Removing barriers for residents and partners so that they can easily apply or refer for support, to avoid having to keep providing the same information multiple times.
- Other teams, such as private sector housing whose focus is on addressing the property issues were limited on where they could refer residents to address the wider needs (financial, wellbeing etc).

- The amount of information on where help for residents is available from has become un navigable. This is due to the number and diverse range of support offered by organisations who primarily focus on one element of support coupled with the limited time agencies have available. For example, schools, health professions, often don't know the best organisations to where they should sign post residents.
- Reaching residents who would not normally engage with the Local Authority but who would benefit from financial support.
- Keeping residents who have chaotic, difficult or challenging lifestyles engaged in the process.
- The level of demand is high and cases can take a long period of time to fully complete. This is due to the number of residents needing support, the complex issues they are facing, and the need to unpick and find solutions.

The solution

As part of the council's poverty strategy action plan, we created two new Financial Resilience Officer (FRO) roles in 2020 who work under the Benefits and Resilience Manager within the Revenues and Benefits Service. By 2021 this had increased to four. This team deploy emergency and discretionary funds whilst also focusing on helping to address the root causes of poverty.

Over the last three years we have put into place the following solutions to address some of the challenges faced.

- Set up trusted partner codes to allow partners we work closely with to make direct referrals into the team. This not only ensures that partners can refer into the team to get an urgent response, but also that we do not duplicate work already carried out. For example, Citizens Advice East Devon (CAED) may already have completed an income and expenditure form, and with permission from the resident we have agreed that we will use that information.
- Our partnership with CAED is by direct referral to enable a quick response for residents who may be struggling with a Department for Works and Pensions claim or a debt issue. We also discuss referrals where CAED may be struggling to maintain contact with a resident.
- Through working with some of the foodbanks in the district we are locating one of our FRO's in the food bank to help those residents who have received a referral from another organisation. This allows us to pick up those cases who are accessing emergency support that we would not otherwise know about.
- We work very closely with Private Sector Housing (PSH) to help address the poor standards of private housing. As mentioned previously PSH could only deal with the problems relating to the property but were unable to address the wider needs of the tenants. We therefore built a partnership between ourselves, PSH and Exeter Community Energy (ECO E). This allows us to directly refer cases to ECO E via the PSH team. ECO E carry out energy advice visits for these cases as well as identifying other works required. Both ECO E and PSH are able to access other funding streams to help with energy saving measures. This allows us to help residents resolve the issues with the properties that may have had a negative impact on their health and wellbeing whilst also helping to bring down energy costs. Monthly meetings between the three teams are held to continue to develop working practices, discuss any difficult cases and address where a resident may have stopped engagement with one service.

- Providing financial support through discretionary funding from DHP, Exceptional Hardship (for Council Tax), Household Support Fund and our own Cost of Living funds whilst work is on-going to solve the underlying issue.
- Close working relationships with local vulnerable leads in the DWP allows us to ensure that those residents who are not receiving full entitlements or struggling to engage with DWP processes are fully supported for a quicker resolution.
- We have signed up to the Standard Financial Statement and made this available through the Customer platform on our website. This allows us to share the copy with other organisations and internal departments such as Housing, Council Tax, CAED and South West Water. This means the resident only has to complete the form once.
- Close partnership working with our different Housing teams have allowed us to ensure that we start helping those residents who are struggling to afford their rent and are at risk of becoming homeless. Where rent arrears are very high, we will sometimes share the cost between the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) and the Homeless Prevention Funds. This allows residents to stay in their homes avoiding the need for them to be housed in temporary accommodation.
- The Financial Resilience (FR) team keep up to date with what other funding and services are available such as from social landlords, large energy suppliers and/or charities in the voluntary sector. This means we can access other financial support and services available and ensures our own funding can go further.
- Through the FR work we discovered that a number of residents had failed to pay water charges, sometimes for a number of years. By working in partnership with South West Water we are able to refer directly into the Community and Customer liaison team who deal with hardship cases to reduce debts and ensure that residents can afford their on-going costs. We have agreed feedback measures on cases referred to help ensure engagement.
- Through the collection and analysis of our data our Members supported changes to our Council Tax Reduction scheme from April 2023. We have now lifted our lowest income households out of paying council tax altogether as well as other beneficial changes, such as increasing the income bandwidths, extra support for couples as well as disregarding carers income.
- We are currently in the process of introducing the vulnerable debt tool kit to ensure that staff in our debt collection teams are better supported in recognising and providing advice to those who are struggling to pay amounts owed.

The impact

Residents with challenging situations requiring a number of organisations involvement in solving underlying issues have a single point of contact to help navigate solutions with officers keeping cases through to completion rather than being a signposting service.



Key highlights

- Over 35% of cases that our Financial Resilience Officer deal with are referred into our partners such as ECOE, CAED, South West Water, SSAFA, DCC Enabling Team, Devon Primary Care Networks (PCN) team as well as our own internal teams.
- The outcomes from the cases we've referred to CAED shows an average income gain of £2,262.21 per client.
- We're helping to reduce East Devon's residents' energy costs and improve living accommodation. During 22/23 ECOE helped 1,172 households with estimated savings of £487,831 – See slide 9 of the EDDC poverty panel presentation 13.11.23.
- Of the 727 households we worked with during 2022/23 (and have recorded outcomes) an increased weekly income of £85.68 and reduced expenditure of £30.45 has been seen.
- Council Tax collection rates are in top 4% nationally for 2022/23. Benchmarking data with 3 of our neighboring authorities has shown that we send pro rata less cases to Enforcement Agents despite having a high collection rate.
- Through monitoring of cases our officers have recorded the top three underlying issues for causing poverty are:
 - Mental health
 - Physical health
 - Budgeting

This has allowed us to target support to households we know have a health condition as well as helping to shape policies and strategies as part of our anti-poverty work. For example, we are now engaging with our Voluntary Community Social Enterprise (VCSE) Lead and CAED over tailored budgeting support.

How is the new approach being sustained?

The draft Council plan includes as a priority reducing poverty and inequality. As part of our Poverty Strategy, we have a member led Poverty panel where the action plan is agreed which feeds into Service plans and reflects the priorities within the Council plan. This approach ensures the different teams involved are working to achieve the same aims.

Through monitoring and understanding the data we gather we are able to adapt our approach when necessary. These new approaches will depend on the issues being faced by residents and may require a change to a policy for example the changes we have made to our CTR scheme.

Our new recently launched pilot scheme between FR, ECOE and PSH is looking to proactively help residents who are on low incomes and living in

poor energy performance rated properties, bringing about improvements to living conditions by initially utilising our cost of living hardship funds in order to access other funding.

We meet with a number of our partners regularly. The level of meetings depends on the partner involved, for example Private Sector Housing, Exeter Community Energy and the Financial Resilience Team meet every month, whilst South West Water and the Financial Resilience Team are looking to meet quarterly.

Officers also attend voluntary network meetings and events. These meetings allow us to discuss and address any issues that are arising and work together to solve resident's problems.

Since mid-2023 the council now has a VCSE for East Devon run by Devon Communities Together using UKSPF funds. We will be working with them to explore how we can build upon the collaboration of voluntary groups as part of our poverty work. For example, we are keen to look at how we can better address rural and hidden poverty

Lessons learned

It is only possible to help solve underlying causes of poverty by building strong partnerships and working across sectors including within our own organisation. Other lessons include:

- Making contact and building up good working relationships with charitable and voluntary organisations within the district allows us to reach those residents who would not normally engage with a Local Authority.
- Having an easy referral process for all partners including schools, social workers etc, ensures that we can provide support quickly for residents that other professionals are identifying as in need.
- Keeping cases through to completion rather than signposting to relevant agencies/organisations/ departments ensures that residents do not give up on solving their issues.
- Officers need to be supportive and help coach residents into learning how to navigate the system rather than doing everything for them, so they are more likely to be able to solve future challenges themselves.
- Keeping good records and analysis of relevant data helps to identify those residents who need support but are not accessing it. This then allows for direct targeting of support to households who need support but may not be aware of the help available.
- Keeping in mind those who are digitally excluded to ensure that they are still made aware of and able to access the support available.
- Being adaptable to the changing landscape.

Relevant Links

Poverty Working Panel 13 November 2023
[youtube.com/watch?v=RztVKEFgVjs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RztVKEFgVjs)

About the Poverty reduction strategy
[eastdevon.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/council-business/poverty-reduction-strategy/about-the-poverty-reduction-strategy/](https://www.eastdevon.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/council-business/poverty-reduction-strategy/about-the-poverty-reduction-strategy/)

Other documents

- Annual Audit Letter
- Climate Change Strategy
- Council Plan 2021-23
- Draft Council Plan 2024 - 27
- Cultural Strategy
- Diagram of decision-making arrangements
- Economic Review
- Equalities Policy
- Housing Strategy
- Key performance data/reports
- Knowing East Devon
- Leisure Strategy
- Draft Local Plan
- Medium Term Financial Plan
- Organisational structure charts
- Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Staff survey results
- Strata Business Plan
- Tourism Strategy
- Value for Money report