

**THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE
WELFARE REFORM WORKING GROUP**

Minutes of meeting of the Welfare Reform Working Group held in Committee Room 4 at Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Monday 27 April, 2015 at 2.30pm.

PRESENT

Mr A Christie
Mrs M Davidson

Mr T Prag
Ms M Smith

Officials in attendance:-

Ms C McDiarmid, Head of Policy and Reform, Chief Executive's Office
Mr A Gunn, Head of Revenues and Business Support, Finance Service
Mrs S Mckandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Finance Service
Ms A Clark, Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office
Mr D Roberts, European Officer, Chief Executive's Office
Ms T Page, Customer Services Manager, Corporate Development Service
Ms J Scotson, Business Change Manager, Corporate Development Service
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Hendry, Mrs D Mackay and Mrs C Wilson.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr A Christie declared a non-financial interest in items 3 to 7 below as General Manager and Company Secretary of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

3. Minutes of Meeting

There had been circulated Minutes of the last meeting of the Group held on 15 August 2015, which were approved by the Resources Committee on 27 August 2015, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

In discussion reference was made to the period of time which had elapsed since the last meeting of the Group in regard to which the Chair explained that over that period reports on welfare reform and poverty related issues had been submitted directly to the Resources Committee. Thereafter, it was suggested that a rolling action sheet from the meetings of the Working Group be prepared to allow progress with the various work streams to be monitored.

The Group **AGREED** that a rolling action sheet be prepared to allow progress with the various work streams to be monitored

4. Update on Universal Credit, Personal Independent Payments and Officer Activities

There had been circulated Report No. WR/01/15 by the Head of Revenues and Business Support which summarised information on the current status of Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments within the Highland Council area. It also detailed the officer activities covering the Council's considerable involvement in this area of work.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- concern that PCs in Invergordon Job Centre Plus had not been operational and whether similar problems with IT were being experienced in other offices; the Benefits and Welfare Manager advised that she would investigate this matter and report back directly to Ms M Smith;
- it was reported that Disability Living Allowance awards could be suspended if a claimant did not engage in the re-assessment process and that this may result in an increase in the number of claimants presenting in emergency situations with specific reference being made to the potential impact on those with mental health issues who may find it difficult to engage in the process as required; and
- discussion around whether Universal Credit data was being shared effectively with advice and support providers.

5. European Social Fund Priority 2 – Promoting Social Inclusion, Combating Poverty and Discrimination

There had been circulated Report No. WR/02/15 by the Head of Policy and Reform which provides Members with the background to the European Social Fund (ESF) stream on promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination. It outlined the proposed approach for developing the Strategic Intervention Application for this funding stream by 1st July 2015.

In presenting the report the Head of Policy and Reform advised that further clarity had recently been received from the Scottish Government in regard to the Programme. In this regard she circulated a paper which provided more detail on the various elements of ESF Priority 2 and local authority involvement. She also advised that the list of areas which it was thought may be eligible for this funding stream had been expanded and could potentially include other groups such as vulnerable young people; enhanced child care, especially for parents who have multiple disadvantages; assistance with travel for employment and training, and assistance for homeless people. She also advised that the funding which had been made available for the Programme to date covered the period 2015-2018 and that additional funding would be made available for the last two years of the Programme up to 2020.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- it was suggested that the Working Group should have the opportunity to consider and comment on the draft application prior to the final application being agreed in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair; in this regard it was requested that a meeting of the Group be arranged for June 2015 to consider the draft application prior to the final submission date of 1 July 2015;

- if eligible, that employment rights/awareness advice be added to the list of key suggested areas for the programme set out in paragraph 2.3 of the report;
- clarification was sought on whether there was the potential to utilise the Fund to develop or reshape existing projects, reference being made to ongoing employability projects in Merkinch;
- points in regard to whether ESF Priority 2 funding could only be accessed in the event that match funding had been secured and whether there were other potential sources of match funding in addition to the Council's Welfare Fund;
- a query in regard to the process for determining if individual projects were eligible in terms of the various categories listed in section 2.3 of the report;
- it was suggested that in developing the Strategic Intervention there was a need to determine priorities and the areas to be funded, and to consider the organisations/groups best placed to deliver those priorities;
- in regard to the above and as part of the evaluation this should include the opportunity to support groups and organisations in Highland whose EU or Council funding streams were coming to an end or were subject to review/reductions particularly where they were involved in delivering projects directly relevant to ESF Priority 2; there was also a need to take a wider view on the opportunities to refocus and refresh existing groups and organisations to take on new work relevant to this funding stream;
- that greater focus be placed on poverty in rural and sparsely populated areas in Highland and the need to support employability in these areas to help sustain communities;
- in regard to fuel energy/advice that the Council should consider lobbying the Scottish Government so that funding was allocated directly to local authorities rather than through utility providers to undertake insulation and fuel efficient programmes in Council properties;
- in regard to any lobbying activity that this should be subject to a separate future report to the relevant Committee to consider progress to date and proposed action going forward;
- concern that in terms of the Priority Axis 2, SO23 did not include local authority input and it was noted that officials had indicated their concerns to the Scottish Government on this matter; and
- it was important to make the link between the Community Planning Partnership priorities and the projects to be taken forward.

The Group **NOTED:-**

- the details currently known about the ESF stream on promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination;
- that the Strategic Intervention will be developed over the next two months with a submission date of the 1 July 2015;
- the Intervention will be developed through a partnership approach to ensure that existing good work is further developed and resources targeted effectively, with it co-ordinated in the Chief Executive's Office with projects led through relevant services; and
- that the Welfare Fund is considered as potential match funding as and where appropriate.

The Group **AGREED** that a report setting out the proposed approach be considered at the May meeting of Resources Committee, taking account of the comments detailed above, and thereafter the application considered by the Welfare Working Group in June 2015, with the final application agreed in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of

the Committee to meet the submission date of 1 July 2015.

6. Proposed Bids for the Council's Welfare Fund

i. 'Count your Cash Days' Enhanced Advice Service for Council Tenants

There had been circulated Report No. WR/03/15 by the Head of Housing giving details of the 'Count your Cash Days' project which in partnership with other Highland Social Housing Providers aimed to deliver a series of events in strategic locations across Highland. These events would bring together a number of agencies and would promote services, products and tools that will help tenants maximise their household income and highlight the range of services that are already available. The proposal was to seek match funding up to £28,500 from the Welfare Fund to enable the Council to work collaboratively on this project and to maximise delivery and take up.

In discussion it was confirmed that these events would be available to both social and private sector tenants. It was suggested that the branding and marketing of the events, particularly in rural areas, be considered to encourage tenants to attend these sessions and that sampling be undertaken at the appropriate time to ensure the project was reaching tenants and delivering the desired outcomes.

The Group **AGREED** to recommend the proposal to seek match funding up to £28,500 from the Welfare Fund to enable the Council to work collaboratively on this project and to maximise delivery and take up.

ii Welfare Reform Funding to Support Digital Inclusion

There had been circulated Report No. WR/04/15 by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development which provided details of the Council's Digital First programme which aimed to support customers in the transition from traditional access channels to services delivered online. The report advised that by funding Citizens Online this would ensure customers were provided with the training and support they needed to access digital services. The report set out proposals to continue this funding support for the next 12 months.

During discussion Members raised the following points:-

- that Citizen's Online provided a vital service within limited funding and that demand for its services was increasing and that the various elements of the project should be welcomed; and
- it was noted that the outcome of the application to the Big Lottery in respect of the project should be known by early May 2015.

Thereafter the Group **AGREED** to recommend the proposal to provide funding support of £90,000 to Citizens Online for 2015/16.

iii School Clothing Grants

There had been circulated Report No. WR/05/15 by the Head of Revenues and Business Support which considered the current payment rates for School Clothing Grants and presented options for consideration from 2015/16 to help customers who are on low incomes/in poverty.

In discussion it was suggested that more emphasis be given to sign-post recipients of grants appropriately to allow potential entitlements to other support services and assistance to be discussed with them and investigated.

The Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** to recommend that Option 4 be approved with the new Clothing Grant rates taking effect from the new academic year, August 2015 and that more emphasis be given to sign post recipients of grants appropriately to allow potential entitlements to other support services and assistance to be investigated.

7. Work in Progress

On hearing from the Head of Policy and Reform and the Head of Revenues and Business Support, and following discussion the Group:-

- i. **NOTED** that the Health and Inequalities Partnership Group was to start work on developing a strategy to reduce poverty in Highland and that a conference/event in this regard was due to be held in the autumn 2015 to consider the basis of that strategy;
- ii. **AGREED** that an update on NHS Highland welfare reform projects be provided to the next meeting of the Group and the appropriate representative invited to attend;
- iii. **NOTED** that a report would be brought to the next meeting on the implications associated with changes to the rules for non-dependent deductions for council tax and housing benefit; and
- iv. **AGREED** that proposals for potential lobbying activity be considered at the next meeting in June 2015, if UK Government intentions were clarified by then.

The meeting ended at 3.15 p.m.