

WELFARE REFORM WORKING GROUP

Minutes of meeting of the Welfare Reform Working Group held in Committee Room 3 at Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Wednesday 21 September 2016 at 2.30pm.

PRESENT

Mrs M Davidson
Mr A Christie
Mr B Fernie

Mrs D Mackay
Mr D Millar
Dr A Sinclair

NON MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr R Laird

Officials in attendance:-

Mr A Gunn, Head of Revenues and Business Support, Finance Service
Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Office
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Finance Service
Mr G Munro, Policy and Assurance Officer, Finance Service
Mr S Carr, Principal Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms M Smith.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr A Christie as General Manager of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB and Mrs D Mackay as a Director of the East Sutherland CAB both declared a non-financial interest in each of the undernoted items but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interest did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.

3. Highland Poverty and Social Inclusion - European Social Fund

The Acting Head of Policy provided a verbal date on the Highland Poverty and Social Inclusion application to the European Social Fund. She advised that the application had now been approved and that officers were meeting to scope out the next steps which included preparing job descriptions and the relevant tender documentation required to deliver the different elements of the application. She also confirmed that periodic updates on progress would be provided to the Group.

The Economy and Regeneration Manager advised the final paperwork in relation to the approval had yet to be received and confirmation was awaited on the timeline for the project and if an extension was to be granted.

In discussion, Members welcomed the fact the application had been approved. Thereafter a point was raised in regard to the potential for NHS Highland to contribute towards the projects contained therein, given the health related benefits that would be

delivered.

The Chair advised that additional funds had been available in respect of the application but that the required match funding could not be identified within the required timescale. She requested that the Acting Head of Policy check with the relevant civil servants at the Scottish Government whether additional funds would be released if the required match funding could be identified at this stage. The Chair advised that if this was the case then she would write to NHS Highland seeking funding in this regard.

The Group **NOTED** the update and **AGREED** that regular updates on progress be provided to future meetings

4. Understanding Individual Experiences of Poverty

There had been circulated Report No. WR/02/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which proposed that two pieces of research be undertaken to better understand poverty at a community and household/ individual level. This work could then be used to inform and develop guidance and a framework for locality planning on poverty and deprivation.

In discussion, a range of issues were raised, including the following:-

- a point in regard to whether the research was necessary and whether people would be willing put themselves forward for interview, especially in relation to the proposals for peer led research given potential issues of stigma;
- the need for sensitivity to be exercised around this type of research if it was to produce meaningful results and particularly around the use of language, e.g. the use of 'fairness' instead of 'poverty';
- it was suggested that measures such as audio recording, capturing the experiences of those who had escaped from poverty or asking people in poverty to describe a typical week/month be considered as a softer approach;
- in terms of dynamics it was suggested that any peer research would be better undertaken by people within the same community particularly in the larger communities such as Hilton, Inverness and Fort William;
- in terms of the recommendations set out in the report, it was suggested that Golspie was a relatively well served community and that Brora would be a richer area for research purposes;
- in terms of the proposal to conduct practitioner interviews it was suggested this be extended to include sheriff officers, fines enforcement officers, and the Council's Income Recovery Team;
- a point that many communities in rural areas such as Sutherland affected by deprivation and poverty were not recognised by the SIMD and therefore this research would help drill down and provide a deeper understanding of the subtleties around poverty and ensure the Council was better placed to provide locally based solutions; NHS Highland also held a wealth of intelligence at a very local level which could assist in this regard;
- a point in regard to whether anything new would be learned from this exercise on the basis there was already a plethora of research around poverty; it was suggested the issues in relation to poverty in Highland were not materially different to other parts of Scotland, and that finite time and resources should instead be targeted to developing policies to address and mitigate the effects of poverty, and also in relation to prevention;
- concern that much of the information in relation to those people in localities in the Highlands caught in the poverty trap was already known; in addition it was

queried whether the sample of 30 people across the Highlands would produce any meaningful results; and

- concern there was a risk this work around poverty could be repeated by the new local community planning partnerships going forward, and the need for this to be clarified prior to any research being commissioned.

Following further discussion, the Group **AGREED** it be delegated to officers to have further discussions with UHI in regard to the proposals taking into account the reservations expressed by the Group as detailed above.

5. Anti-Poverty Summit

The Benefits and Welfare Manager provided an update on the Anti-Poverty summit to be held on Friday 2 December 2016 during which she advised that the Joseph Rowantree Foundation had confirmed their attendance and UHI had been notified. In addition, the Scottish Government Minister for Social Security and representative/s of the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee would be invited to attend. She indicated that the summit would focus on actions to be delivered on the ground in Highland to tackle poverty, and advised that a draft agenda had been circulated to the Group, although this would be subject to change as plans developed.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

6. Highland Council's role in Poverty and Deprivation

There had been circulated Report Nos. WR/03/16 – WR/06/16 which related to the Council's role in poverty and deprivation, as follows:-

a. Poverty Proofing Highland Council

There had been circulated Report No. WR/03/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which highlighted the work being undertaken to 'poverty proof' the Highland Council. This included the development of an integrated Impact Assessment tool as part of the Council redesign process, and developing a better understanding of service impacts on poverty and deprivation. The report also outlined a suggested timetable for Service reports to be presented to the Group for scrutiny from November 2016 into early January 2017.

In discussion, Members raised a number of points as follows:-

- a point in regard to where the Highland Council sat in comparison with other authorities in relation to poverty proofing;
- the opportunity for reports to be brought to the relevant strategic committees once considered by the Group;
- concern that poverty proofing may not be achievable in practice given the significant reductions in the Council's budget going forward and likely impacts on pro-poor services as classified by the Joseph Rowantree Foundation and set out in the report;
- in regard to the above the use of a poverty impact assessment would be a more realistic tool from the Council's perspective on the basis it would make Members aware of the consequences of decisions; however it was important that meaningful information be provided to Members in this regard as opposed to general statements on impacts;

- in developing an integrated impact assessment tool, the opportunity to learn from other local authorities and particularly those with areas of high levels of deprivation and poverty; in this regard it was suggested that consideration be given to inviting representative/s from such local authorities to attend the anti-poverty summit to be held in December 2017; and
- it was important in relation to Community Services that a separate report be provided on Housing, and to ensure that Adult Services also be included within the Care and Learning report.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** to note the:-

- i. development of an integrated impact assessment tool that will include poverty; and
- ii. timetable for reports to be brought to meetings of the Group on the impacts of Service activity on poverty and deprivation, subject to a separate report being provided in relation to Housing, and Adult Services also being included within the Care and Learning report.

b. Chief Executive's Office

There had been circulated Report No. WR/04/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which outlined the activity in relation to reducing poverty and deprivation in the Highlands within the Chief Executive's Office. This included the work being undertaken by the Policy Team in relation to understanding poverty and deprivation, and ongoing work in relation to rural and poverty policy proofing; partnership activity; through the ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion Programme; and consultation and lobbying activity.

In discussion, it was suggested the focus in the report was on rural poverty, with little reference to urban areas which had the highest concentrations of poverty in the Highlands. In addition, the overarching focus should be on 'poverty proofing' as opposed to 'rural proofing' so the emphasis was on protecting people in poverty in both rural and urban areas.

In response, it was reported that the development of the integrated impact assessment tool would assist in this regard. It was also suggested that following the Council elections in May 2017, it was important there was a significant emphasis on anti-poverty strategies within the Council's Programme and revised Service Plans.

The Group **NOTED** the report.

c. Finance Service

There had been circulated Report No. WR/05/16 by the Head of Revenues and Business Support and Benefits and Welfare Manager which outlined the activity in relation to reducing poverty and deprivation in the Highlands within the Finance Service which ranged from strategic matters, such as undertaking an advisory role to the direct provision of financial support specific details of which were set out in the report. The report also set out a number of specific recommendations to change or reprioritise the Service's activity in order to more effectively tackle poverty.

The Chair welcomed the Service's work and commitment to tackling poverty and deprivation in the Highlands and the improved outcomes for people which had been achieved. She would be undertaking a number of ministerial meetings in the near

future, including with the Scottish Office in October 2016 at which she intended to raise the issue of welfare reform. In this regard the Chair requested that officers prepare a list of the key measures that could make a difference to people's lives in advance of the above meetings.

In discussion, Members raised a number of points as follows:-

- discussion in regard to the further steps the Council could take to maximise income in Highland and to speed up the processing of payments by the DWP (as delay in DWP payments processing was one of the main reasons recorded for the increase in foodbanks);
- the opportunity to review in conjunction with the relevant agencies how debt advice was given so that it was targeted more to individuals or groups of individuals where appropriate;
- concern that there was also a need to focus and understand the issues around those people who may be just above the threshold for benefits but were struggling financially;
- concern at the implications for the Council associated with tax relief changes in respect of buy to let properties which may result in landlords selling properties thereby driving up rents in areas such as Inverness; and
- it would be helpful if future reports could focus on the major issues to assist Members understanding of the overall picture.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** the recommendations set out in the report.

d. Development and Infrastructure

There had been circulated Report No. WR/06/16 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which advised that the report addressed the reasons why the Council provided an employability service, and its role in combating poverty; how the Council and partners approached the delivery of the service; and what the employability service provided for clients. The report concluded by offering some final comments on how the City Region Deal was seeking to improve the wider Highland employability service.

Discussion followed on the Deprived Area Fund and in particular the timescale for a report on this matter to be submitted to the relevant committee and the approach to be recommended in terms of the way forward. The Economy and Regeneration Manager indicated that consideration was being given to a change in focus from the current grant based approach to the commissioning of employability services and activities to best meet the needs of clients, including the development of clear pathways. He indicated that if resources were directed into projects which also included non-employability activity then there may be a case for some of the resource to be moved to another budget.

In regard to the above, it was suggested that it would be helpful if discussions were held with the members of Local Committees on this matter prior to a report being brought to the relevant strategic committee.

During further discussion, the following points were raised:-

- the potential for the Council to lobby on changes to employment practices by a large supermarket chain which was having an adverse impact on the pay and conditions of employees on low wages, and concerns about potential for this

- practice to be adopted by other companies;
- as a next step the opportunity to take a more radical approach to employability and in particular the opportunity to target people at a younger age, including undertaking work in schools; and
- the opportunity for the community planning partnership to undertake a piece of work around employability and workforce planning be investigated.

The Group **NOTED** the role and importance of employment in combating poverty and deprivation.

7. Joseph Rowntree Foundation – Anti-Poverty Strategy

There had been circulated Report No. WR/06/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which advised that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation had published their long terms strategy to tackle poverty in the UK on 6 September 2016. The strategy set out a five point action plan to:

- boost income and reduce costs;
- deliver an effective benefit system;
- improve education standards and raise skills;
- strengthen families and communities; and
- provide long term economic growth benefitting everyone.

The strategy also set out a series of recommendations and actions for government, communities and businesses.

In discussion, clarification was sought on the Minimum Income Standard as referred to in the report at a UK, Scotland and Highland level. It was confirmed that this information would be provided to Members outwith the meeting, noting that it varied for different household types.

In addition to the above, it was suggested the highlighted recommendations and actions for local authorities could not be addressed in isolation and it would be helpful to have the highlights for the private sector, health providers, and central government where relevant. It was further suggested there as a need to reflect on the role of the Community Planning Partnership in this regard.

The Group **NOTED** the publication of the JRF ‘We can solve poverty in the UK report’ and the recommendations from the report which are applicable to Local Authorities’, and **AGREED** that the information requested in relation to the Minimum Income Standard be circulated to the Group by email.

8. Draft consultation response : Social Security System for Scotland

There had been circulated draft consultation response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on social security in Scotland.

The Benefits and Welfare Manager indicated that the consultation response would be completed and thereafter circulated to Members for comment and modification where required. The final response would be submitted to the Scottish Government by the consultation deadline of 28 October 2016. In response to questions she indicated that issues around the framing of some of the questions had been raised with the Scottish Government and a response was awaited. The final response would be submitted to

the Resources Committee on 23 November 2016.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

The meeting ended at 4.45pm