

The Highland Council

Poverty and Inequalities Working Group

Minutes of Meeting of the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group held in Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Tuesday 21 November, 2017 at 1.00 p.m.

Present:

Mrs M Davidson
Mr A Christie
Mr J Gray

Mr R Laird
Mr C Smith

In attendance:

Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Service
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, Development & Infrastructure
Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Corporate Resources Service
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager, Community Services
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Chief Executive's Service

Mrs M Davidson in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Henderson, Mr A Gunn
Mr D Goldie and Mr I Kyle.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr A Christie as General Manager of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB 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 his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

There had been circulated Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 20 September, 2017, which were approved by the People Committee on 19 October 2017, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

4. Proposed New Remit for the Group

Members were asked to consider and agree the following remit for the newly defined Poverty and Inequalities Working Group.

“The Poverty and Inequalities Working Group will provide leadership and oversight of the activities, involvement in and response to addressing poverty and inequalities as outlined in the Council’s Corporate Plan.

The Group will consider and monitor the Council’s contribution to the delivery of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan, Locality plans and associated legislative duties related to addressing poverty and inequalities.

The Group will seek new approaches, learning and innovation across the areas of poverty and inequality. The Group may choose to lead on some areas of work with relevance beyond Highland, for example, rural poverty.”

It was suggested that the last sentence be amended to read *“The Group may choose to lead on some areas of work with relevance beyond Highland.”*

The Working Group **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** to the People Committee approval of the remit for the Group, subject to the above change.

5. Council Programme Commitments

The Group were asked to note the agreed Programme commitments related specifically to addressing poverty and inequalities and rural living and consider the proposed supporting actions to deliver against these commitments.

Commitment: All people should live a life free from poverty and discrimination and benefit from good mental health and wellbeing. We will work with our partners to achieve this.

Proposed Actions & Measures:

- through the work of the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group support how council services contribute to the reduction of inequality through the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan by October 2018 and ongoing;
- the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group will develop a work plan to direct and monitor Council action on addressing poverty and inequalities in Highland;
- we will review the Fairer Highland Plan in light of the new equality outcomes agreed for 2017-2021.

Commitment: Identify and recognise the unique challenges of living in rural and remote areas of the Highlands and ensure Council policies and the provision of services have local people in mind. Work with the Scottish Government and other public authorities to do the same.

Proposed Actions & Measures:

- promote and develop the use of rural impact assessments to ensure remote and rural needs are recognised in local and national policy by March 2018 and ongoing;
- lobby for equal status for rural proofing in light of the Scottish Government's adoption of island proofing by June 2018 and ongoing;
- review the evidence base on rural poverty and inequality to reframe the key messages needed at local and national levels by December 2018;
- ensure rural poverty and inequality is reflected in the work of the Community Planning Partnership through the delivery of the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and locality plans by October 2018 and ongoing.

In discussion, the following key points were raised:-

- It was felt that Transport poverty was an issue that should be addressed and that the Programme Commitment on Transport should be considered by the group as well as the two other commitments set out to ensure that the actions around the commitment consider the issue of inequality. It was advised that Transport was one of the outcomes in the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan. There was also a commitment about how community transport could be encouraged and progressed.
- Reference was made to generational poverty, where people might be living in a second or third generation poverty environment and might be less well equipped or have the tools they need in order to progress. It is closely associated with closing the attainment gap and the need to build aspirations. This is an area that potentially needs explored further in order to understand the associated issues.
- It was noted that the Council currently impact assesses for equality, poverty and rural issues. These are currently captured as community impacts within the committee report structure. It was highlighted that the intention is to move to an integrated impact assessment approach and that this work was currently underway. It was questioned whether given this, the Council should be highlighting and promoting rural impact assessment separately and whether such an approach was compatible with an integrated model. It was highlighted that the reference to rural impacts was specifically in relation to island proofing and to ensure the issues of rural areas were captured alongside island issues.
- There was a need to address urban poverty as well as rural communities. Therefore the focus of the Group should be on poverty whether that is in rural or urban areas.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the agreed Programme commitments relating specifically to addressing poverty and inequalities and rural living and the proposed supporting actions to deliver against these commitments.

6. Welfare Reform Update

There was circulated Joint Report No. PIWG/01/17 by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Community Services.

In discussion the following main points were raised:-

- In relation to the estimated loss of £37million per annum from 2020/21 for Highland residents as a result of reductions in UK welfare spending, Members requested the knock on financial effect for the Highland economy, the overall estimated loss for the whole of Scotland and the Scottish Government report referring to this matter;
- It was noted that since June 2017 rent arrears for known Universal Credit cases had increased by 26% to £1.2million. Further detail on the impact of these arrears on the Council's bad debt provision would be reported to the People Committee in January, 2018 as part of the annual rent setting process.
- It was noted that the Council's Intensive Support service had proactively managed £290k of customer debt. The total customer debt managed in Highland by the Council's Welfare Support Team and CABx was requested. Where possible, this should also include debt managed by other organisations. where available. As part of the annual rent consultation with tenants, it was suggested that tenants should be notified of the impact of Universal Credit. It was estimated that any rent increases for next year could be kept to a minimum as loan charges were not as significant as had been projected.
- There had been tabled a briefing paper by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission which detailed useful facts regarding tax, social security and public spending reforms.

Thereafter, the Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the estimated loss of £37 million per annum from 2020/21 for Highland residents and the local economy as a result of reductions in UK welfare spending;
- ii. **NOTED** the marked increases in Universal Credit Full Service claims across the Highlands since the further roll-out with Inverness from July 2017;
- iii. **NOTED** the financial burdens for local authorities arising from Universal Credit in the first four Full Service areas in Scotland (Highland, East Lothian, Inverclyde and East Dunbartonshire). In particular, noted that these local authorities represented 9.8% of Scotland's population and identified additional burdens of around £830,000 in 2016/17;
- iv. **AGREED** to encourage the ongoing actions being taken forward by the Rent Arrears Officers Working Group, within Community Services, to review the local impact of Universal Credit for council tenancies;
- v. **AGREED** to support ongoing dialogue between the Corporate Resources Service and the Scottish Government regarding future face to face support for those accessing the Scottish social security system;
- vi. **NOTED** that:
 - at the end of Q2 2017/18: Highland wide council house rent arrears were £1,933,343 and more specifically that since June 2017 the overall rent arrears for known Universal Credit cases had increased by 26% to £1,244,065;
 - in the first 7 months of implementation, the Council's Intensive Support service had proactively managed £291,938 of customer debt (£71,280 rent arrears) and achieved benefit gains in excess of £145,000;
 - the Count Your Cash initiative had provided assistance to 77 clients, identifying total savings of £13,145, which equated to an average of £170 per household per year.

vii **NOTED** that in relation to the estimated loss of £37million per annum from 2020/21 for Highland residents as a result of reductions in UK welfare spending, Members be provided with the knock on financial effect for the Highland economy, the overall estimated loss for the whole of Scotland and the Scottish Government report referring to this matter;

viii **NOTED** that the impact on the annual rent setting process as a result of rent arrears for known Universal Credit cases would be provided for Members;

ix **NOTED** that the total customer debt managed in Highland including CABs would be provided for Members. Where available, debt managed by other organisations will be included in the report.

x **AGREED** that the report be submitted to all Members of the Council for information.

7. Poverty and Inequalities – General Updates

The Group was asked to consider and discuss the updates provided in the accompanying paper against each of the following issues:

In discussion, the following main points and actions were raised:-

i Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

- It was noted that under the requirements of the new Bill, the Council and NHS Board would be required to produce an annual report on what was being done to address child poverty. Guidance is awaited on the detail of these requirements however it was noted that it was important this was aligned to other similar reporting requirements.
- It was requested that definitions for relative poverty, absolute poverty and persistent poverty as set out in the Bill be provided for Members;
- It was noted that the levels of child poverty were higher in Wick than in Inverness and there was a need for this to be addressed in that Area's local outcome improvement plan. In this respect, information on child poverty estimates for each area in Highland would be provided for Members;
- In terms of the issue of generational poverty, it was queried whether it was possible to explore this issue in more detail, perhaps through looking at education levels through different generations.
- It was queried what the difference was between this Bill and the UK Child Poverty Act brought in on 2010 and repealed in 2016. This information would be provided for Members.

ii Rural Poverty and Inequality

- It was noted that the Socio Economic Performance Index had been adopted by the CPP to improve the identification of rural communities across Highland experiencing inequalities.
- It was noted that there were communities that had entered the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) but then had come out of it. Information was requested on how these communities had managed to achieve this however it was noted that SIMD was a relative index and therefore it was difficult to draw exact conclusions from the changes in position on the index.

iii Highland Outcome Improvement Plan

- It was agreed that the 1 year action plan for the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan be submitted to the next meeting of the Group. There was a need for this Group to have oversight of the actions identified and progress against the actions.
- It would be clarified which Committee, Community Planning Partnership Minutes should be submitted too.
- More information regarding the Scottish Government's Employability Programme was requested and to consider how it sits with Community Planning.

iv Locality Planning

- Information on Community Planning Partnership's Locality Plans specifically in relation to tackling poverty and inequality was requested.

v ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion

- An update was provided on the progress of the Preventing Poverty project and case studies circulated outlining the type of work being undertaken by contractors.
- It was advised that more could be done to raise awareness amongst Housing Officers and Children Service Workers to help identify families of children in early years settings and primary schools in order to maximise incomes and address financial management and that there were further opportunities through the Move On project for more intensive work within individuals.

At this point, Mr A Christie left the meeting when the Group discussed the contract relating to the Preventing Poverty Project. Mr Christie returned to the meeting following this discussion.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** that an update progress report on any relevant initiatives and issues would be reported to future meetings.

8. Poverty and Inequalities Working Group – Work Plan

Members were invited to discuss developing an outline work plan for the Group for the coming 18 months.

In discussion, the following suggestions for the work plan were submitted:-

- **Income** – a focus is needed on the impacts of welfare reform, universal credit, low wages;
- **Child poverty** – although this is embedded in the integrated services agenda, there needs to be a particular focus on how it originates, what is the impact, and what can be done about it;
- **Integrated activity** – consideration of how poverty and inequalities is addressed within the Council but also what other public sector partners are doing, so that there is an integrated approach to tackling these issues;
- **Project activity** - examining the various projects being undertaken across Highland that could help tackle poverty and inequalities;

- **Evidence base** – examining the indicators in the Socio Economic Performance Index and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and considering what the Council is doing across these areas;
- **Transport inequality**;
- **Health inequalities**;
- **Inclusive growth** – employment, employability, skills development and raising aspirations.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** that a report be submitted to the next meeting on the work plan for the Group for the coming 18 months.

9. Scottish Government Fuel Poverty Consultation

There was circulated Report by the Housing Policy and Investment Manager providing a briefing on the Scottish Government's Consultation on a Fuel Poverty Strategy for Scotland.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was suggested that the Group meet again in early January, 2018 to consider a response to the Consultation which would then be submitted to the People Committee for consideration;
- Reference was made to a school in Birmingham that had opened its kitchen to the public for them to use and receive tuition on cooking. One of the issues with child poverty was that parents did not know how to cook in order to provide meals for their children. This pilot project tried to address this issue and also help with fuel poverty by providing the kitchen facilities. It was noted that as part of the engagement activity around the HOIP, similar suggestions had emerged with potential benefits associated with food and fuel poverty, intergenerational activity but also social isolation in communities. Officers were asked to explore the opportunities for a pilot project in this area along with our partners.
- It was queried what percentage of Council tenants were experiencing fuel poverty, but it was confirmed that the Scottish House Condition Survey does not distinguish within the category of social housing between housing association tenants and Council tenants (54% of social housing tenants in fuel poverty).
- It was queried what percentage of temporary accommodation was Council, Housing Association and private. This detail will be provided as part of a report on Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation to the People Committee in December, 2017.
- It was queried what percentage of Council housing used key meters, as there may be a correlation between fuel poverty and households using key meters.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** that a further meeting be arranged early January, 2018 to consider a response to the Scottish Government's Fuel Poverty Consultation.

10. Future Meetings

The Group **APPROVED** the following meeting dates for 2018:-

- January (date to be confirmed)
- Tuesday 13 February – 10.30am
- Thursday 26 April – 10.30am

- Tuesday 14 August - 2.00pm
- Tuesday 30 October – 10.30am

The meeting ended at 3 p.m.