

**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 13 February, 2018 at 10.30am.

**Present:**

Mrs M Davidson  
Mr A Baxter

Mr A Henderson  
Mr C Smith

**In attendance:**

Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Office  
Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Corporate Resources Service  
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy & Investment Manager, Community Services  
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, Development & Infrastructure Service  
Mr I Kyle, Children's Planning Manager, Care and Learning Service  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Also attending:**

Mr B Grant, Centre Manager, Home Energy Scotland  
Mr R Armstrong, Managing Director, Warmworks

**Mrs M Davidson in the Chair**

**Preliminaries**

On hearing from the Chair, the Group **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** that Mr A Christie be appointed to the Group as the representative from the Liberal Democrat Group.

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Gray, Mr R Laird and Mr A Mackinnon.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Warmworks Presentation**

Mr B Grant, Home Energy Scotland and Mr R Armstrong, Managing Director, Warmworks explained that the Scottish Government's principle delivery mechanism to address fuel poverty was through the Warmer Homes Scotland scheme which installed measures in vulnerable people's homes. The scheme was delivered by Warmworks which was a limited liability partnership between Changeworks, Energy Saving Trust and Everwarm. More than 18% of the households helped through the scheme had been in the Highlands and Islands, with more than 68% of those in rural areas. Strong relationships had been developed on the ground with partners and relevant agencies to increase the level of service provided. There was also dedicated, full-time staff based in Inverness and in the surrounding areas to ensure the most responsive and efficient service possible.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- clarification was sought on the contract and funding commitment from the Scottish Government in relation to the scheme;
- an update was sought on the UK Government's intention to share benefit information with the utility providers so that claimants would automatically qualify for a lower tariff;
- clarification was sought and provided in relation to how the Council worked with Home Energy Scotland and Warmworks in Highland, with reference to raising awareness, and making connections with tenants and the public in relation to the scheme and its benefits;
- reference to the challenges which existed in private housing in rural areas and the fact previous schemes could not deal with the different housing construction types in rural areas, and the potential for a targeted geographical approach to be progressed in Highland;
- a query in relation to the action taken by Warmworks in response to any mixed reviews posted online by customers;
- an assurance was sought and provided that Warmworks used local contractors in the Highlands;
- clarification was also sought and provided in relation to the performance framework which was in place for contractors; and
- the opportunities for the public sector to be more proactive in terms of referral patterns

In response, Mr Grant and Mr Armstrong advised that:-

- the Scottish Government had committed to this national scheme for a minimum period of five years and it was anticipated this would be extended to seven years;
- OFGEN was currently considering a pilot scheme in relation to an energy cap and a final decision was awaited;
- concerns had been expressed by some fuel energy groups about data sharing between utility companies and in addition the relevant Parliamentary committee was encouraging OFGEN to look more critically at the capping rate applied in any scheme;
- the main challenge in rural areas was that many people may be income poor but capital rich in terms of their property and therefore not be in receipt of the passport benefits required for the scheme;
- in regard to the above, there may however be opportunities to deliver a joint area based scheme, and reference was made to this type of joint approach being progressed by Orkney Islands Council and other island authorities whereby the aim was to target fuel poverty on a community by community basis;
- it was noted that 98% of customers had indicated they were satisfied with the service provided by Warmworks and immediate action was taken to respond to the small number of complaints received; and
- in terms of referrals, joint working was being undertaken with NHS Highland, CABx and through the Affordable Warmth Group and any opportunities to widen the scope in this regard would be welcomed.

Thereafter, the Chair thanked both Mr Grant and Mr Armstrong for attending the meeting.

On hearing further from the Chair, the Group **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that officers progress further discussions in relation to the potential for a targeted geographical approach to be developed in Highland.

#### **4. Minutes of Previous Meetings**

There had been circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Group held on 21 November 2017 and 11 January 2018, which were approved by the People Committee on 6 December 2017 and 25 January 2018 respectively.

#### **5. Welfare Reform Update**

There had been circulated Joint Report No. PIWG/01/18 by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Community Services.

In particular, the report highlighted that:-

- the Head of Revenues and Customer Services would be taking forward the funding model arising from co-location of the Scottish Government's social security staff on Highland Council premises;
- at December 2017, there were 6,880 active Universal Credit claims in Highland with approximately 42% of claimants in some form of employment;
- with regard to Council housing, overall rent arrears had increased. Of the 2,085 tenants who were in receipt of Universal Credit, 75% (1,565 cases) were in arrears and had an average rent arrear of £776 per household, around three times higher than those in receipt of full or partial housing benefit;
- the take-up of Scottish choices by council tenants was anticipated to have a negative impact on rent arrears due to DWP's administrative arrangements which meant that the landlord was paid 28 days after the claimant had received their monthly payment;
- the local impacts of DWP's wholesale review of Personal Independence Payments involving 1.6m claimants nationally would be monitored to assess any impacts on the Welfare Support Team and advice agencies; and
- the agreed community benefits arising from the framework agreement with the lead supplier for new goods and services in respect of the Scottish Welfare Fund and temporary/homeless accommodation should be acknowledged and that there was an open invitation for the Group to visit the supplier's premises in Dingwall.

Thereafter, the Benefits and Welfare Manager advised that the work undertaken by the Council with the Scottish and UK Governments to mitigate the impacts of Universal Credit was having a positive impact in regard to trends in rent arrears, as demonstrated at table 4.5.5 of the report. She also advised that new regulations were to be introduced which would result in temporary accommodation being taken out of Universal Credit and moved back into housing benefit and that further details were awaited from the UK Government on this issue.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues-

- it was important to highlight that the careful lobbying undertaken by Members and officers of the Council was beginning to deliver positive changes at a Scotland and UK wide level;

- concern was expressed at the continued delays between assessment and payment of Universal Credit and therefore the continued reliance on foodbanks and the significant challenges around securing any improvements to the current system;
- the report be circulated to all Members on the basis that any issues arising could be raised by Members at the People Committee under the Minutes of the Group;
- in terms of lobbying activity, it would be helpful if officers could distill for Members where there continued to be opportunities to make a difference; and
- the response from the DWP to the Chair's most recent letter which contained suggestions for improving Universal Credit be circulated to the Group.

The Group-

- i. **NOTED** the update on Welfare Reform;
- ii. **AGREED** that the report be circulated to all Members; and
- iii. **AGREED** that the most recent response from the DWP to the Chair be circulated to the Group.

## 6. Universal Basic Income

There had been circulated Report No. PIWG/02/18 by the Depute Chief Executive/ Director of Corporate Resources.

The report advised that four Scottish local authorities (Fife, Edinburgh, Glasgow and North Ayrshire) were leading feasibility studies into pilot Universal Basic Income (UBI) schemes for their local areas. They were also developing a joint report for the Scottish Government setting out potential national delivery models. The report also provided a Highland context in relation to UBI.

The Benefits and Welfare Manager advised that it was considered there was a need for a better understanding of UBI, particularly in the context of the recent welfare reforms and the current review around social security. It was recommended that the Group continued to keep a watching brief on this matter. In this regard, the Benefits and Welfare Manager reported that she would be attending a UBI stakeholder event on 19 February 2018, which was being organised by the four lead Councils and NHS Health Scotland. It was also anticipated that the report from the four pilot local authority areas would be submitted to the Scottish Government in Spring 2018.

In discussion, a point was raised in regard to the potential tax implications associated with UBI. In addition, reference was made to the fact that a report on UBI had been requested as a result of a notice of motion to the Council on 14 December 2017. The Chair requested that a copy of the report be forwarded to the proposer and seconder of that notice of motion for their attention.

The Group **NOTED** the briefing on Universal Basic Income.

## 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:-

- Child Poverty Figures – January 2018
- Child Poverty Targets
- Introduction of the Fairer Scotland Duty – Update
- Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness – Scottish Government Consultation

The Acting Head of Policy advised there was no significant change in the child poverty figures over the period from 2016 to 2018 in Highland, with the exception of the Wick and Landward Caithness wards, details of which she provided. A piece of work was currently being undertaken to explore the wider evidence base in relation to child poverty through which a more complete picture of child poverty in Highland could be provided.

In terms of the Fairer Scotland duty which was to commence in April 2018, guidance was awaited from the Scottish Government in relation to reporting. It was advised there were cross cutting elements between this duty and the Council's other socio-economic duties and therefore a need to consider how to streamline reporting as far as possible.

In regard to the Scottish Government's consultation on Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness, the suggestion was that a response be submitted through the Community Planning Partnership, on the basis this linked both to the partnership breakthrough achievement on social isolation and also to the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and the outcome on mental health and wellbeing. In this regard, the Chair requested that a copy of the consultation be circulated to the Community Planning Partnership.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the updates.

## 8. Poverty and Inequalities Working Group – Work Plan

It was reported that following the discussion at the last meeting, three key themes were proposed and agreed to initially progress as part of the work plan for the Group:-

- Child Poverty
- Transport Inequality
- Income

As an initial step, a facilitated discussion, led by the Children's Planning Manager, then took place to assist the Group consider and inform the key areas of work and priorities under each of the above themes. This focused on what the Council was required and should aspire to do, and on its Programme commitments. In terms of the next steps, it was proposed that a programmed work plan would be developed based on the discussion and submitted to the Group for further consideration and approval.

The Group **AGREED** that a draft work plan be developed and submitted to the Group for further consideration.

## 9. Dates of Meetings 2018

The Group **NOTED** that the schedule of meetings for 2018 was as follows:-

- 26 April 10.30am – 12.30pm
- 14 August 2.00pm – 4.00pm
- 30 October 10.30am – 12.30pm

The meeting ended at 12.45pm.