

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 Thursday 26 April, 2018 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr A Baxter (by VC)
Mr R Gale

Mr A Henderson (by TC)
Mr R Laird

In attendance:

Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Office
Mr A Gunn, Head of Revenues and Customer Services, Corporate Resources Service
Ms T Urry, Head of Roads and Transport, Community Services (Item 4)
Mr I Kyle, Children's Planning Manager, Care and Learning Service
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, Development & Infrastructure Service (Item 6iv)
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Preliminaries

In the absence of the Chair, the Group **AGREED** that Mr R Gale be appointed as Chair for this meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs M Davidson, Mr J Gray, Mr A Jarvie and Mr A Mackinnon.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

There had been circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Group held on 13 February 2018, which were approved by the People Committee on 15 March 2018.

4. Poverty and Inequalities Working Group – Work Plan

Members were advised that it had been agreed at the February meeting for the work of the PIWG to initially focus on three key themes:

- Child Poverty
- Transport Inequality
- Income

It was noted that a facilitated discussion was held at the meeting in February 2018 to assist the Group to identify the key areas of work and priorities under the area of Child Poverty.

A facilitated discussion then took place on the additional themes of Transport and Income. Members were advised that based on the discussion a programmed work plan would then be developed to support the delivery of these priorities.

In relation to Transport, it was agreed that it would be important to streamline activity and incorporate the Redesign Board's transport review as key areas for development but to consider these particularly in relation to inequality. In addition, themes and actions should be developed around the inequalities faced by people in poverty in relation to transport to access employment, and also with regard to developing alternative options to having to travel. Account should also be taken of the Scottish Government's National Transport Strategy review.

In relation to Income, key areas of focus included developing actions to support those who: (i) were in work but whose income was low or costs were excessive; (ii) who had assets but were on small pensions; (iii) only had access to seasonal work, and (iv) young people not living in parental home who due to age restrictions did not get the same level of wages or support through the social security system as older people despite having similar costs.

The cross-cutting nature of all three priority areas was noted and it highlighted that there would be actions shared across all three.

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

5. PIWG Priority Area: Child Poverty

Scottish Government Child Poverty Action Plan

There had been circulated an update by the Acting Head of Policy which provided a summary and link in relation to the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan 2018 to 2022.

Arising from the report, it was explained that a challenge facing the Council was that it did not have access to the same level of data around poverty as the Scottish Government. In terms of support, the Scottish Government was to fund a national coordinator post specifically to support local authorities to develop their action planning and reporting. There has also been an offer to work with the Scottish Poverty and Inequalities Research Unit at Glasgow Caledonian University who had undertaken to support partners with a range of analytical and policy advice. This could potentially be extremely helpful to the Council, particularly in relation to identifying the impacts of rural poverty and building on the work already underway to understand poverty in more detail. The Children's Planning Manager reported that he had given an early indication that the Council would be interested in this type of support.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- whether information was available about the number of children living in poverty against the different Scottish Government targets. It was explained that information was available in relation to children living in families in relative poverty before and after housing costs at a ward level but not in respect of the

other categories and the Acting Head of Policy undertook to circulate this information to the Group;

- in regard to the above, it was noted that work was ongoing to better understand the drivers and the bigger picture behind child poverty in Highland in order to develop an effective set of actions/solutions;
- reference to the pressure school holidays placed on families on low incomes and the potential to work with High Life Highland, partners, communities and the Scottish Government to address this area of inequality and in particular how to make children's activities, programmes and facilities more inclusive;
- that as part of the Council's improvement plan, the Group should also consider how to better promote, advertise and remove any stigma in relation school holiday activities for children which had a subsidised element; and
- there was a need for the Group to explore the issues around access to child care for children of parents who worked night-shifts.

Draft Child Poverty Improvement Plan

There had also been circulated the child poverty draft improvement plan which had been developed following the facilitated discussion held at the Group's meeting on 13 February 2018.

In discussion, Members were asked to consider if they wished to reorder the improvement priorities with a focus on the actions that were being taken forward initially and whether they wished to add to the plan or review it going forward as further actions were developed.

In response, Members indicated that they were content with the order of the improvement priorities as set out in the draft improvement plan.

Thereafter, it was suggested it was impossible to separate child poverty and family poverty and therefore it was important to consider the wider context in addition to the child orientated indicators. In this regard, there was a need to consider the impact of drugs and alcohol and in response, it was reported that this issue would be picked up as part of the work to explore the evidence base around child poverty. The Highland Alcohol and Drugs Partnership was also developing an improvement plan which was very much focused on inequalities and the impact on families and this would be brought back to the Group once available.

Thereafter, Members were provided with an update on the initial work being undertaken to explore the evidence base around child poverty. This included considering Council held data alongside national indicators that were available and commencing the process of having conversations with key staff and professionals in relation to the data in order to explore the issues and challenges they were identifying when working with families.

The Group **NOTED**:-

- i. the summary of the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan; and
- ii. the draft improvement plan developed following discussions at the February meeting; and
- iii. that a further update would be provided to the next meeting work being undertaken to explore the evidence base around child poverty.

6. 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:

i. Welfare Reform Update

There had been circulated Joint Report by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services and Director of Community Services which provided summarised information on the current status of Universal Credit and other welfare initiatives.

In particular, it was highlighted that:-

- the Scottish Government had commenced recruiting to its Social Security public service bases in Dundee and Glasgow. The Head of Revenues & Customer Services was progressing positive dialogue with the Scottish Government regarding local face to face delivery of pre-claim support to achieve a local service in Highland that complements the Council's existing provision by the Welfare Support Team and the Citizens Advice Bureaux;
- around 40% (3,200) of the 8,000 individuals who were currently in receipt of Universal Credit in Highland were in some form of employment;
- Council house rent arrears for those tenants who were known to be in receipt of Universal Credit had reduced from £701 to £679 per household for the last quarter of 2017/18. Receipt of two payment schedules from DWP plus payment by some tenants during the 2-week non-rent payment period will be impacting on the reported reduction in rent arrears;
- the Head of Revenues & Customer Services had ensured the necessary IT software had been fully tested and implemented to enable his Service Delivery Team to automatically administer the UC transition payment introduced by the DWP on 11 April 2018;
- the Head of Housing and Building Maintenance had re-tendered the provision of temporary accommodation resulting in a new accommodation and rent framework being introduced from April 2018. The rent changes that have arisen from the framework meant that around 128 tenants would claim housing benefit from 16 April 2018 at which point their Universal Credit housing cost element would cease.
- The Scottish Government planned to abolish the Social Sector Size Criteria at source in Universal Credit and had jointly agreed with DWP to implement the change from Spring 2019. DWP had announced that this change would now be delayed to May 2020 at the earliest which was being challenged by Scottish Ministers. Mitigation was currently provided through Discretionary Housing Payments administered by local authorities. DWP was therefore assessing the additional administrative burden that the delay placed upon local authorities; and
- positive outcomes for local young people were being achieved via the framework that is in place for the Scottish Welfare Fund.

In discussion, the following key issues were raised:-

- clarification was sought and provided that the Council would not lose out as a result of the changes associated with the abolition of the Social Sector Size Criteria. It was explained the main beneficiary would be customers and this was

a more efficient way of operating with the onus being taken away from the claimant;

- it was noted the evidence showed that claimants on universal credit had at least twice the level of rent arrears than those on housing benefit and it was queried whether these were actual rent arrears or reflected delays in payment of universal credit. It was confirmed that while delays in payments was a factor, the removal of direct payments to the landlord had also been a significant contributory factor to the increase in rent arrears;
- a point that private sector landlords faced similar challenges as the Council and there was an increasing trend for those landlords not to accept customers on universal credit; and
- concern was expressed at the use of foodbanks by those on benefits and also in relation to the evidence which showed the main group in respect of which an increase in the use of foodbanks had been observed was from those in low paid employment.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

ii. Scotland's Energy Efficiency Programme – Update

There had been circulated briefing paper by the Energy and Sustainability Manager which provided an update on Scotland's Energy Efficiency Programme (SEEP) which was the Scottish Government's policy vehicle by which to provide support to projects that would improve the energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty.

The report detailed the range of actions the Council would be required to put in place to deal with the SEEP programme and advised that the Energy and Sustainability Team would deliver the programme on behalf of the Council. The Scottish Government would issue a roadmap for SEEP in May 2018 that would detail the full scope of the programme to 2050, incorporating any targets to be achieved. The Council should be prepared to set out and commit to an early strategic plan on how to deliver the programme so that there was certainty in the bids that would be made to Scottish Government to secure the funding required.

In discussion, Members confirmed they were content with the level of detail provided in the paper without the need for a further briefing.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

iii. Fairer Scotland Duty – Update

There had been circulated an update by the Acting Head of Policy on the Fairer Scotland Duty which had come into force in Scotland on 1 April 2018 and which placed a legal responsibility on public bodies in Scotland to actively consider how they could reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions. The report noted that Highland already impact assessed for equality, poverty and rural impacts and therefore this new duty would build upon the work already in place.

Members were advised that implementation of the Fairer Scotland Duty provided an opportunity to review and improve the Council's approach to impact assessment, and to ensure 'due regard' was taken so that consideration was given as early in the decision-making process as possible. The Policy Team would review and streamline the Community Impact Assessment process and develop new guidance

for staff and members which would provide an opportunity to raise awareness and embed the new duty going forward.

During discussion, it was noted that the Council was required to 'actively consider' the impacts in terms of informing its decisions and how it could reduce inequalities when making strategic decisions. It was further explained that the broad definition provided of socio economic disadvantage was helpful in that it included reference to inequalities within communities, which took into account the rural context and challenges in Highland. In addition, one of the prompts within the Government guidance was that public bodies, including community planning partnerships, consider adopting a version of the definition for use across the organisations and that the Group may wish to consider going this forward.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

iv. Fair Start Scotland Programme

There had been circulated Report by the Director of Development & Infrastructure which outlined the contractual arrangements put in place by the Scottish Government for the delivery of the Fair Start Scotland (FSS) programme in Highland. The report also highlighted how the Council's employability services were being integrated and aligned with partner services, and how the Council was seeking improvements via the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal to drive forward employability service alignment and integration between partners and across Highland.

Members were advised of the challenges and issues which were considered outstanding in regard to the Fair Start Scotland programme for the Highlands and Islands. While Council funded employability services were not directly affected, the Council had a direct interest in FSS insofar as it managed the ESF support for the Third Sector providers and there was a wider need to monitor local delivery and performance.

In discussion, Members raised concerns at the Council's lack of control over and feedback in relation to performance in regard to the FFS programme, and how the relevant information could be obtained to ensure it was working in Highland. The Economy and Regeneration Manager advised of the need to build up anecdotal evidence which could then be reported back to the Group. He reported that Council officials were also engaging positively with the Scottish Government, the contractor PeoplePlus Ltd, and local providers. The arrangements were being tested by the Scottish Government and would be reviewed after the contract period.

7. **Dates of Meetings 2018**

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

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

The meeting ended at 12.20pm.