

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 14 August, 2018 at 2.00pm.

Present:

Mrs M Davidson
Mr R Gale

Mr J Gray
Mr A Jarvie

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
Mr I Kyle, Children's Planning Manager, Care and Learning Service
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy and Investment Manager, Community Services
Ms C Maciver, Graduate Intern Research Assistant, Chief Executive's Office
Ms M Macdonald, Preventing Poverty Manager, Care and Learning Service (Item 7)
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Mrs M Davidson in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Baxter, Mr A Henderson, Mr R Laird 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 26 April 2018, which were approved by the Care, Learning and Housing Committee on 30 May 2018.

4. Poverty and Inequalities Working Group – Improvement Plans

The Group was advised that the previous two meetings of the PIWG had focused on identifying key areas of work and priorities for the Group.

Members were now being asked to review and agree the three draft improvement plans for the priority themes previously agreed: (i) Child Poverty, (ii) Transport Inequality, and (iii) Income Inequality.

The Acting Head of Policy confirmed that as agreed by Members at the previous meeting the draft improvement plan in relation to Transport Inequality included actions identified in the Redesign Board's review of transport which could potentially have a focus on inequality.

The Chair highlighted that the Commercial Board was considering various work streams around transport, and therefore it was important the Board was aware of the other work being taken in relation to transport within the Council to ensure a joined up approach. She also advised that in discussions with the new manager of Stagecoach, it had been suggested that a reference/email group be established comprising users with an interest in public transport to be consulted as and when required on transport issues, and that she would have further discussions with the Principal Transport Officer on this issue.

The Acting Head of Policy highlighted that at a local level a number of the Community Partnerships across Highland had identified transport as a priority within their locality plans with some forming sub groups to take this forward comprising local providers in addition to interested community groups and public sector representatives.

Following on from the above, reference was made to a number of community transport schemes in Sutherland and the potential to coordinate these schemes through a network approach to tackle poverty caused by transport inequality by providing access to work, health care etc.

Discussion then followed on the draft Improvement plan for Income Inequality during which the following points were raised:-

- in terms of workforce planning, the potential to use the draft improvement plan to encourage job change for the low paid in the private sector. It was suggested there was a need to actively promote vacancies in the public and third sectors to the low paid, for example opportunities in community care and early years which benefited from better terms and conditions;
- in regard to the above, there was a need to review the public sector recruitment process in order to encourage greater interest in Council posts; and
- the provision of affordable/social housing in localities was also key to attracting people to posts and retaining them in an area.

Further discussion followed on the priority to address the challenges of income inequality faced by young people. In particular, it was suggested there was a need for a general debate and evaluation as to whether the ring fenced Education Maintenance Allowance was serving its intended purpose and whether it was the best use of this significant resource both in Highland and across Scotland. It was proposed that Highland should lead on a review on this issue in conjunction with other local authorities, including Aberdeenshire Council as being another large rural authority. It was also suggested that the Scottish Government may have an interest in investing some resources in such an evaluation.

A further point was also raised in regard to the potential to consider a policy to cover the initial costs incurred when a person was moving from benefits into employment such as transport and clothing costs.

In conclusion of this item, Members expressed the view that the draft improvement plans represented a good starting point and going forward there should be flexibility to remove or add actions as priorities were progressed. The Group should also have the opportunity to review the plans on a regular basis. In addition, concern was expressed at the potential resource implications associated with progressing each of the actions set out in the draft plans and therefore the importance of prioritising those actions. Partner organisations should, where appropriate, also be asked to take forward and

provide funding to support these activities. In response, it was confirmed that quite a number were partnership actions and were already being progressed through the community planning process. In terms of next steps, it was noted the relevant officers would undertake further work to populate the plans and develop more specific actions.

The Group **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** approval of the draft improvement plans and **AGREED** that an update on progress be provided to the next meeting.

5. PIWG Priority Area: Child Poverty

There had been circulated to the Group an overview of the work being undertaken on data collection and analysis related to child poverty. Two example profiles were tabled for discussion, one of which presented the data on a thematic indicator basis, in the example provided on welfare and benefits indicators and the other which provided an overview on a ward basis and which focused on key information.

Members were asked to consider and discuss the child poverty data overview and the draft example profiles and agree how best to take forward this analysis in order to determine priorities to address child poverty.

During discussion, the following key issues were raised:-

- It was highlighted that due to the different sizes of and populations within wards it was important for Members not only to consider the percentages of children experiencing poverty but also the actual numbers;
- in relation to Income Deprivation (Table 6) it would be helpful if in addition to the percentages shown, numerical equivalents were also provided;
- it was important to focus on those areas which the Council could influence, such as interventions to improve free school meal uptake in some schools and to target ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion project activity;
- it was important to understand the picture beyond the data and therefore the early conversations being held with the key staff to understand the situation on the ground was welcomed;
- a point in regard to the social impacts on those on low incomes who lived in relatively wealthy area such as Inverness South, in terms of whether there was a higher level of stigma for example in relation to free school meal entitlement which may be impacting on uptake; and
- concern at the deficiencies of the current definitions of poverty which it was suggested were broad brush and did not capture many people who required assistance, and the need for the Council to undertake work to develop its own metric for poverty to enable resources to be targeted appropriately.

Thereafter, discussion focused on the fact that uptake of benefits which the Council managed such as school clothing grants and Council tax reduction was consistently good and provided staff with the opportunity to target customers to maximise their uptake of any other benefits to which they may be entitled. However the uptake for some other benefits administered by the DWP and HMRC such as child tax credits was much lower and therefore it was frustrating that the DWP/HMRC could not share more information on those people entitled to benefits so that the Council's staff could then target those customers and households to maximise the legitimate uptake of benefit. It was explained that the sharing of such information with Councils would be in breach of data protection laws and reference. It was explained that work was ongoing through the Benefits and Welfare Team and other staff such as health visitors and

housing officers, and the ESF projects to find different routes to target those households in need. It would also be helpful for there to be dialogue between COSLA, local authorities, DWP and HMRC around data sharing.

The Chair requested that the data which had been tabled be circulated to the Members of the Group not present at the meeting, and that the information presented in relation to Ward 3:Wick and East Caithness Ward be circulated to the Chair of the Caithness Committee and Ward Members.

Following further discussion, the Group **AGREED** to consider this item in more detail at the next meeting in the form of a workshop session.

6. Draft letter to Secretary of State for Work & Pensions

There had been circulated draft letter from the Council Leader to the Secretary of State for Work & Pensions regarding the implementation and impacts of universal credit.

The Group was advised that the Council continued to evidence the additional costs and reduced income as a direct result of the introduction of Universal Credit, and had identified four particular areas that required the Government's urgent attention. These related to:-

- Rent Arrears
- Additional Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction administration costs attributable to Universal Credit
- Housing Benefit administration grant funding
- Overpaid housing benefit collections

The Head of Revenues and Customer Services advised that the letter requested in the strongest terms that the DWP recompense the Council for the financial burdens of £2.425m it had incurred since the introduction of Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS).

There was suggested there was a need to undertake further lobbying to have housing costs removed from Universal Credit and return to Housing Benefit as had been implemented for temporary accommodation since April 2017.

In relation to the request for recompense of rent arrears it was suggested that a special case could be made for the Council on the basis that Highland had been one of the early 'go-live' sites and had experienced one of the sharpest increase in rent arrears. It was suggested that ultimately direct discussions with the Treasury may be required and that it would be helpful therefore if the DWP at the very least recognised the negative financial impacts in the draft letter.

Thereafter, clarification was sought and provided on the policy adopted and advice and assistance provided in respect of tenants who were in technical rent arrears due to delays in payment of Universal Credit. Concern was expressed that those tenants should not be pursued for recovery of those arrears and for this to be built into the Council's processes. It was explained that any reminder letters were tailored to encourage those tenants to seek advice and support and that a key challenge facing the Council was that it did not know if tenants were in receipt of Universal Credit unless advised by the customer and concern was expressed at the disconnect that Universal Credit had created compared to Housing Benefit delivered by LAs.

The Chair advised that it was important work commenced on identifying the key issues to be raised in the next round of lobbying, which should also involve Highland MPs and the Scotland Office.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** the terms of the letter from the Council Leader to the Secretary of State for Work & Pensions.

7. ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion Update

A short introduction was provided by the Acting Head of Policy regarding the background, aims and purpose of the ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion programme.

7.1 Preventing Poverty Project

An update paper was circulated for consideration and a short presentation was provided by the Preventing Poverty Project Manager on the project.

In discussion, it was reported that there had been challenges in some schools in terms of how receptive they were to the project but that as processes and relationships were developed the situation was improving. In response to a question, it was confirmed that the project was involved in Council and Care and Learning Alliance nurseries, and was expanding to link in with health visitors. Members welcomed the progress being made and in particular its vital work to engage with those people who otherwise were difficult to reach.

The Acting Head of Policy advised that it was intended to present an update on the project to the Care, Learning and Housing Committee in October 2018. The Chair requested that all Members be advised of this presentation and the opportunity to meet and have discussions with the Project Manager. In response to the Chair, the Children's Planning Manager confirmed that he would liaise with the Project Manager and follow up on any issues being experienced with specific schools.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

7.2 Move On Project

The Acting Head of Policy provided an update on progress on this Project which aimed to take a more realistic, targeted and coordinated approach to working with individuals who experienced multiple barriers such as housing and homelessness, mental health, and drug and alcohol issues. She advised that the Project Manager was now in post, and would be based within the NHS Highland Mental Health Services Team. Four of the five Move On officers had been recruited with a start date in September 2018 and they would be based in different locations across the Highlands. An appointment to the remaining post would be made later in the year. It was anticipated that the client group would primarily be known to and disengaged from services and maybe multiple users of services.

In discussion, confirmation was sought and provided that there would be strong links between the Project and the Housing Team. It was explained that while the numbers of clients involved in the project would be relatively low, those individuals would require intensive support involving a significant investment of time and resources. It was suggested that a key aspect of the Project would be to build relationships with those clients.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

7.3 ESF Phase 2

An update and presentation was provided on phase 2 of ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion funding and the potential opportunity to develop the existing projects and access further ESF funding.

The Acting Head of Policy advised that officers had discussed the potential options in relation to ESF Phase 2, with the potential opportunity to apply to access additional ESF funding. She explained that one option was to apply to the Government to access a 70% intervention rate which could potentially result in an increase in the overall pot of funding. This would require additional activity and outcomes for the overall programme but would not involve any additional contribution from the Council.

Officers had explored a number of potential options for adding value to the existing programme should an increased intervention rate be successful. It was proposed to build on the existing programme by extending the existing Preventing Poverty Programme in schools for a further year than the original timescales, to employ two support officers to support the Move On and Preventing Poverty Projects and to develop a new strand to the Preventing Poverty Project, a 'Food Plus' project in response to the challenges around food poverty.

The rationale for this approach was that food and holiday hunger was an area previously highlighted by Members and that there were a number of different local projects emerging through community based organisations. At this stage it was proposed this would be a small grants approach for community groups, enabling community capacity building in this area. There could also be the opportunity to establish a hub to by which those groups could link in together to give them more capacity to collaborate and to provide them with more support.

During discussion, Members welcomed the opportunity to maximise the Council's contribution on the basis outlined above and commented that it was important that projects around food poverty were part of activities to help reduce stigma and to be more beneficial to the participants.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** in principle that officers develop a phase 2 proposal to access additional ESF funding on the basis outlined above.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The Group **NOTED** that the next meeting will be held on Tuesday 30 October 2018 at 10.30 a.m.

The meeting ended at 4.05pm.