

**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 Wednesday 13 March 2019 at 10.30 am.

**Present:**

Mrs M Davidson  
Mr R Gale  
Mr J Gray

Mr A Henderson (Teleconference)  
Mr R Laird  
Ms L Munro (Substitute)

**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  
Mrs S McKandie, Benefits & Welfare Manager, Corporate Resources Service  
Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy and Investment Manager, Community Services  
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, Development & Infrastructure  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Mrs M Davidson in the Chair**

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr J Finlayson, 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 14 August 2018, which were approved by the Care, Learning and Housing Committee on 28 August 2018.

Arising from the Minutes:-

- The Chair advised that Transport was a key theme of the Change Programme and requested that further information be provided on the work/changes that would be undertaken as part of this process and how this would link to the Transport Inequality Improvement Plan which had been approved at the last meeting;
- The Chair queried whether any work was being undertaken via the Northern Alliance in regard to the Education Maintenance Allowance; and
- It was indicated that a lot of work was being undertaken in regard to food poverty and it was suggested that additional ESF Phase 2 funding would provide an opportunity to co-ordinate these approaches and drive the Food Plus initiative forward.

Thereafter, the Working Group **AGREED** that updates be provided to the next meeting on the work of the:-

- i. Change Programme in regard to Transport and the associated links to the Transport Inequality Improvement Plan; and
- ii. Northern Alliance in regard to Education Maintenance Allowance.

#### **4. Review of the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group and CPP Connections**

A presentation was provided on the work and aims of the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group (PIWG) and the work and priorities of the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and linkages between the two, specifically the Poverty Reduction Delivery Group, and taking this work forward.

In view of the connections and the correlations between the work streams, the Chair sought feedback on whether the two groups should be merged in order to reduce duplication. However, the Chair explained that the CPP was an officer group and, if merged, elected Member representation would be required.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Responding to a question, it was clarified that poverty reduction was addressed by different services within the Council. In addition the Council was the lead agency of the HOIP Poverty Reduction Group which was Chaired by the Acting Head of Policy;
- It was felt that there was a lack of general public awareness of the poverty reduction work and that there was a need to improve this which might form part of the actions for the local child poverty action plan
- It was suggested that there should be a dialogue with all partner agencies at a future HOIP meeting to ensure that they were all equally committed to promoting the Living Wage to improve the low wage economy across the Highlands. Further discussions were held in regard to the feasibility of the Council making the Living Wage a contractual requirement and the complexities in regard to this, particularly in respect of third party contracts, were explained. In summary, the Group was informed that it was not possible to make payment of the Living Wage enforceable but it was feasible to ask if it was paid (i.e. a non-scored question) and this information would continue to be gathered. The Group was also informed that it was expected that the Council would receive its Living Wage accreditation in April 2019 and it was recommended that the Council should develop a Living Wage policy to ensure that all actions were being taken to encourage participation of the Living Wage by partner agencies and local employers and utilising this as key poverty prevention tool;
- It was explained that fuel poverty and remote and rural poverty were key issues which had to be addressed and it was suggested that further work should be undertaken to work directly with energy providers to develop a community electricity discount scheme which was an initiative that all locals could benefit from. It was highlighted that many people did not directly benefit from community wind farm projects and therefore this was not necessarily an option to look for funds to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty. The Group acknowledged the importance of reducing fuel bills and the Chair reported that schemes of this nature, whereby communities received subsidised energy bills, were already in place and there was a need for this good practice to be shared with a view to similar schemes being rolled out across the Highlands; and

- With regard to merging the groups, the importance of a joined-up approach and sharing good practice was recognised but it was highlighted the priorities and direction had to come from the communities. It was therefore queried how there would be local level engagement and communication with communities. It was also felt that there was a need for the Department for Work and Pensions and Scottish Government (ongoing development of the new Social Security Scotland agency) to be represented on the Group as well as elected Members. In conclusion, the Group was supportive of the merger of the groups being further examined in order to identify the benefits of doing so and to determine whether better outcomes would be achieved.

Thereafter, the Working Group **AGREED** that a discussion be held at the next CPP Poverty Reduction group to seek views on a potential merger between the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group and the CPP Poverty Reduction Group.

## 5. Local Child Poverty Action Reports

There had been circulated a Joint Report by the Acting Head of Policy and the Preventing Poverty Manager which provided an update on the new duty within the Child Poverty Act on Local Authorities and NHS Boards to jointly publish Local Child Poverty Action Reports. The report outlined how this was being progressed in Highland.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Clarity was sought and provided on the availability of data on child poverty, particularly in regard to household income levels and it was suggested that there should be greater liaison with schools to improve intelligence;
- It was highlighted that there were four different legislative definitions of child poverty and associated targets and clarity was sought and provided on how this impacted at a local level;
- Discussion highlighted that modern day poverty was very different to the past and there were many layers of poverty that were not just income related, particularly in regard to poverty of opportunity and participation, people in employment with high levels of debt and the associated difficulties this caused such as stress and anxiety;
- It was explained that the Local Child Poverty Action Plan would include information on the work that had been undertaken to date; forthcoming work/actions; and also give consideration to protected characteristics. Building on the learning from the approach to identify successful interventions was seen as crucial and it was suggested that feedback should also be sought from Connecting Carers as the likelihood of poverty was increased within a disabled household;
- Maternal poverty and child poverty were inextricably linked and further information was sought on the proxy indicators in regard to this as well as the work being undertaken to address maternal poverty;
- It was queried whether the current position had been established in regard to the four Statutory Income Targets to be achieved by 2030. It was noted that data was not available at a Local Authority level on all four measures. It was indicated that there was a need to measure the current position in the first instance in order to determine increasing demands, the key areas to be targeted, and the metrics to be used to evidence impact; and

- A recent teacher recruitment drive had indicated that there was significant interest in this profession but the teacher training process was cost prohibitive and too bureaucratic. The Chief Executive was currently examining alternative training methods such as Modern Apprenticeships which would help better suit local needs and assist the Council with addressing teacher shortages.

The Working Group **AGREED** the approach as outlined in the report and that an update on the development of a Local Child Poverty Action report for Highland would be provided to the next meeting.

## 6. ESF Update

There had been circulated Joint Report which provided an update on the ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion and Employability Programmes. The report also provided an update on the progress towards phase two of the ESF programmes.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Further information was provided in regard to the action being taken to address in work poverty;
- Employability pipelines needed to be improved. Concern was expressed that jobs were not being filled by locals and there was a need for improved collaboration with schools to facilitate and improve employment opportunities which would also reduce migration and help stabilise local populations;
- Further information was provided on Food Plus in terms of how the grant programme would be operated, funds would be accessed, and initiatives would be delivered;
- With regard to the Move On project, concern was expressed at the low number of referrals received to date and efforts were required to increase take-up. It was explained that low numbers were anticipated and reflective of the client group and their difficulties in engaging with services. However, it was acknowledged that there was a need to increase awareness of the project across the different agencies and a communications campaign was being undertaken in this regard; and
- If, post BREXIT there was a Shared Prosperity Fund, then consideration had to be given as to how this funding would be best utilised. It was explained that many communities were leading powerful preventative initiatives in regard to older people but this model needed to be expanded to include poverty prevention, families and social inclusion, employability etc. The Chair informed the Group that she would soon be meeting with Ms Kate Forbes MSP, Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy, and she would seek to ascertain what additional funds could be accessed as well as any further opportunities that could be exploited.

The Working Group **NOTED**:-

- i. the updates on the ESF phase two applications and Poverty and Social Inclusion and Employability programmes; and
- ii. that a presentation would be provided to the next meeting on the Move On project.

At this point, Mr J Gray left the meeting (11.55 am).

## 7. Support for Rent Arrears

Further to the motion at Council on 7 March 2019, the Working Group was asked to consider and discuss what should be included in the terms of reference for the review (a draft copy of which had been circulated) of support for rent arrears management.

The Housing Policy & Investment Manager informed the Group that in addition to the motion to Council, this matter had also been raised at the meeting of the Care, Learning and Housing Committee on 24 January 2019 whereby it had been agreed that a detailed report would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee on rent arrears management including how the Service contacted and communicated with tenants in arrears. He therefore proposed that all Members should be invited to attend a meeting of the Care, Learning and Housing Policy Development Review Group in June 2019 to review the provision of support for rent arrears management. The Group was supportive of this approach but the Chair requested that this matter be considered earlier than June 2019.

During discussion, the need for an integrated advice service providing a holistic approach in regard to rent arrears, debt management, income maximisation, budgeting advice etc. was acknowledged. However, it was highlighted that it might be best if this service was not all provided by the Council as some tenants in rent arrears might not wish to engage with the Council being the creditor. The importance of impartiality and separation from the Council was emphasised and it was therefore felt that this service could be supported by the Move On project to encourage tenants to access support. In addition, this service had to be provided by staff that were fully trained to deliver impartial advice and specialist support, particularly in regard to debt management which was a highly regulated service.

Thereafter, the Working Group **AGREED** that all Members be invited to attend a meeting, to be arranged as soon as possible, of the Care, Learning and Housing Policy Development Review Group to review the provision of support for rent arrears management.

## 8. Welfare Reform Update

There had been circulated Joint Report by Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Community Services which provided summarised information on the current status of Universal Credit and other welfare initiatives, the Council's lobbying activities to challenge related funding levels and additional costs being incurred, provision of evidence by Council Officers to help inform public policy, UK Government Budget changes, and Social Security Agency for Scotland.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- The Group welcomed the progress being made with Social Security Scotland to co-locate staff within Council premises and highlighted the benefits of an integrated service for customers, particularly in rural areas, and it was queried whether this would create any additional jobs in Highland;
- Concern was expressed that the amount of Education Maintenance Allowance expenditure was reducing, both across schools and colleges, and the Group welcomed the review to better understand the reasons for the decline in take-up of the benefit. It was felt that one of the key barriers was the requirement for parents to disclose their income as part of the assessed application process. Furthermore, it was not known what level of support young people were receiving from their

parent(s) and it was therefore felt that if a young person wanted to continue with their education then they should be supported to do so. It was suggested that one of the main reasons that take up was reducing could be due that the level of the benefit (£30 per week) had not increased with inflation and therefore did not provide sufficient incentive to apply. The Group welcomed a further briefing on this to understand the reasons for the reducing trends and requested that this also include feedback from young people; and

- The Group commended the continued lobbying for the DWP to recompense the Council for the financial burdens that it had incurred for administering Universal Credit. It was felt that, following the appointment of The Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, new opportunities were arising unexpectedly and the Council needed to be prepared to take immediate advantage of these.

The Working Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the:-
  - a. welfare reform updates;
  - b. ongoing roll-out of Universal Credit and impacts on Local Authorities;
  - c. ongoing lobbying and actions undertaken by Highland Council to inform public policy;
  - d. ongoing partnership working including with the Scottish Government / Social Security Scotland.; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a Briefing Note be provided on Education Maintenance Allowance which included feedback from young people.

## 9. Future agenda items

No future agenda items were agreed.

## 10. Date of Next Meeting

The Group **NOTED** that the next meeting will be held on Thursday 25 April 2019 at 10.00 a.m.

The meeting ended at 12.20 pm.