



Highland Council Performance 2010-2011

Report of Focus Groups

17th August 2011

Dr. Philomena de Lima
Tim Brauholtz-Speight

Contact: Dr Philomena de Lima | Director | UHI Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, Academy Lodge, Crown Avenue, Inverness, IV2 3NG | 01463 273563 | crrs@uhi.ac.uk

Acknowledgments:

This report was written by Philomena de Lima and Tim Braunholtz-Speight, UHI Centre for Remote and Rural Studies. It draws extensively on notes of the focus groups written by Struan Charters and Cath King, both of Highland Council. Thanks also to all the participants who were willing to give time to share their views.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Contact with the Council	5
3. Satisfaction with Council Services	7
4. Community Life.....	8
5. Volunteering.....	9
6. Voting Experience.....	10
7. Equalities	11
8. Climate Change	12
9. Key Themes – Conclusion	13
Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions and Prompt Sheet	17
Appendix 2: Notes of the Focus Groups	20
Notes of Focus Group: People First	21
Notes of Focus Group: Sight Action	27
Notes of Focus Group: The Scottish Highlands & Islands and Moray Chinese Association (SHIMCA).....	35
Notes of Focus Group: Highland Users Group (HUG).....	40
Notes of Focus Group: Deaf Forum	46

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Five focus groups were undertaken in July and August 2011, in order to supplement the findings of the Citizens' Panel Survey on Highland Council Performance in the 2010-2011 financial year.
- 1.2 The following groups were involved, and overall there were 39 participants distributed as follows:
 - Sight Action – seven people
 - Deaf Forum – eight people
 - Chinese Association (SHIMCA) - eight people
 - Highland Users Group (HUG) - ten people
 - People First – six people.
- 1.3 In some groups individuals participated for some of the time, leaving before the end of the focus group meeting (see Appendix 2 for Focus Group Notes). With the exception of one focus group (People First, which was conducted in-house with a note taker from Highland Council), the focus groups were facilitated by the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies with a note taker from Highland Council.
- 1.4 Most focus group participants were based in Inverness. However, people from around Easter Ross and Inverness-shire also participated in the groups. Overall, across the focus groups there was a fairly good balance between genders, with most being over 30 years age. All the participants in the Chinese focus group were Hong Kong Chinese, who had lived in Highland for over 20 years. There were a small number of Hakka speakers amongst this group.
- 1.5 Each of the focus groups explored the following areas (see Appendix 1), which this report focuses on:
 - Contact with the Council
 - Satisfaction with Council Services
 - Community Life
 - Volunteering
 - Voting Experience
 - Equalities
 - Climate Change
- 1.6 This report draws together the views expressed by participants in the focus groups, emphasising where possible areas of commonality that have emerged from the participants' perspectives. Given the diversity of the groups, more details on the very specific nature of participant experiences are available in the notes provided for each group in Appendix 2. Each of the seven areas is presented in two parts:

- **“Positives”** reflects participants’ satisfaction with Council services or support for Council policy;
- **“Areas for improvement”** discusses areas where participants were dissatisfied with Council services or policy, and their suggestions for improvement. Some suggestions are linked to correcting unsatisfactory services; others focus on additional ways in which the Council could improve life in the Highlands.

2. Contact with the Council

2.1 Positives

- 2.1.1 Participants’ contact with Council services varied across the groups. Some reported having contact with the Council about travel, specifically bus passes, and also education and evening classes. Council tenants also reported contacts, about housing repairs in particular. Other contact concerned use of leisure facilities and High Life cards, libraries, obstructions to public highways, and mental health support services.
- 2.1.2 A number of participants found Service Point staff friendly and helpful. Participants had heard about the Council on Moray Firth Radio, in newspapers and also through the organisations they are involved in – e.g. Deaf Forum, HUG and so on.

2.2 Areas for improvement

The main focus for improvement centred on improving communication about what services are available and how to access these.

- 2.2.1 Although a number of participants had some experience of using Service Points, experiences were mixed. Whilst all those who used the service felt staff were friendly and tried to be helpful, there were some concerns expressed. Language and communication barriers were cited by the Chinese and Deaf Forum members. The latter referred to resorting to communicating with staff in writing, which they found difficult to do as English is not their first language. Chinese participants seemed unaware of the possibility of getting interpretation for visits to Service Points. Some felt put off by waiting times at Service Points and the time it took at times to get issues resolved, so they preferred to contact the Council service concerned directly by phone.
- 2.2.2 There was extensive discussion of the accessibility of Council staff and services to focus group participants and of the appropriateness of Council communications given their varied needs. Many participants preferred not to make contact with the Council directly themselves, but to go through others. For instance, support workers, and family members were important sources of information about Council services for participants that had such support.

Thus one participant stated that:

“It is easier to be taken seriously if your mental health worker approaches the Council“.

While this is a positive testament to the ability and effort of support workers, it suggests a need for improvement in accessibility of the Council in general. Mediators typically involved family members, friends and support workers, and were relied upon for a variety of reasons:

- difficulties in getting an appropriate response;
- problems of dealing with the complexities of the Council system (e.g. People First, and HUG); and
- language and communications issues and complexity of the language, was of particular concern to members of the Deaf Forum (and were also discussed at the SHIMCA group).

Deaf Forum members were especially concerned about confidentiality issues in a context where all their communications had to be mediated by a third party.

- 2.2.3 Few participants, if any, used the Council website. Support workers and family members were important sources of information about Council services. Most participants across all focus groups highlighted the need for better communication about council services. There was often confusion about the following: which services and areas the Council had responsibility for; what services were available; and how to access them. Printed information produced by the Council did not appear to be reaching many of the participants in these focus groups.
- 2.2.4 Communication problems were associated with levels of literacy in English and in some cases in relation to Cantonese/Hakka speakers also. Participants found Council leaflets and application forms complex to understand. Participants in the Deaf Forum focus group stressed that their first language was British Sign Language, and that communication in English was problematic for them. Furthermore, some participants in the SHIMCA focus groups also had problems with reading in Cantonese/Mandarin/Hakka, so translating materials in written form would not address the communication difficulties of those who were not literate in Cantonese or Mandarin. The latter group reported relying on younger family members who were bilingual, and in a small number of cases neighbours, to explain letters sent in English.
- 2.2.5 Suggestions were made for information to be passed on in specific media already used by these groups: for example, talking newspapers for blind and partially sighted people, or in person via meetings and clubs used by participants (e.g. Deaf Club, SHIMCA). Deaf Forum participants suggested training Service Point staff the basics of British Sign Language. They said that they would prefer this to using an

interpreter, for reasons of confidentiality and because of the limitations of communicating through interpretation – “*you don’t get the full picture*”. The Chinese focus group were also keen to have direct communication about Council Services between the Council and their households rather than always mediated through a third party or an organisation. However, they also made two other suggestions: regular updates through SHIMCA on what is available at the Service points, and the employment of a Chinese interpreter or bilingual worker at the Service Point who would be available on a particular day.

3. Satisfaction with Council Services

3.1 Positives

3.1.1 In a context where most participants did not have direct contact with Council services or had limited contact, issues related to satisfaction with Council services were not always easy to explore in a focus group situation. However, in the words of one participant:

“I would say 80% of the time I have found the Council to provide a good service.”

3.1.2 Some Council housing tenants were fairly happy with the service they received. Housing adaptations for particular needs were appreciated. One participant singled out support from Highland Home Carers as excellent.

3.1.3 Community and day centres, both general (e.g. in Merkinch) and specific (e.g. Corbett Centre, Bruce Gardens, or mp33 in Merkinch) were particularly valued by participants. Comments included:

“it gives me a life”.

3.1.4 Travel and mobility issues were also discussed. The independence offered by the bus pass scheme was valued, as was the integration of bus passes with library cards.

3.1.5 Support workers were often mentioned as valuable sources of information and assistance in accessing Council services. They were felt to be good at navigating through the Council system. As noted above, Service Point staff were generally felt to be helpful. People First participants commented on removing the facility for cash payments from Service Points, saying that the pay points were quite easy to use and so this change had not been a problem.

3.2 Areas for improvement

3.2.1 Waiting times at Service Points (particularly in Inverness) were frustrating for participants. Some participants who were Council tenants

reported long delays to have repairs done. There was also some frustration at perceived waste involved in frequent refurbishment of properties: "*The Council wastes a lot of money*". More than one focus group felt that it was easier to get repairs carried out earlier in the financial year than later. Some complained of Council houses being very expensive to heat.

3.2.2 Participants were concerned about the closure or potential closure of community and day centres; libraries were also mentioned as valuable services under threat. Some participants suggested cutting budgets for public art instead.

3.2.3 It was hoped that the next travel card contract renegotiation would be resolved in better time than the last one, which some participants felt had been delayed by Scotrail. Delays in processing blue badges for disabled parking spaces were also mentioned as a problem. It was suggested that the process could be improved by introducing an acknowledgement letter that an application had been received, and by allowing payment by methods other than by card.

3.2.4 There were a few cases reported of support workers not turning up to appointments or at their homes and then blaming the participants for not turning up or being at home at the appointed time. The feeling among some HUG members in particular was that the word of the support worker was more likely to be taken as the 'truth' rather than theirs, and as a consequence in one case it was felt that support had been withdrawn for this reason

3.2.5 Participants were not always sure about the Council complaints process. There was a general feeling as expressed by a HUG participant:

"... you expect the issue to be followed up - 9 out of 10 times it is."

However, form-filling and working out who to complain to were identified as disincentives. There was also some cynicism about the process:

"It's like the police investigating the police."

4. Community Life

4.1 Positives

4.1.1 Some participants felt they belonged in their local community. Chinese participants were very positive about the Highlands as a place to live in terms of quality of life, and participants involved in Sight Action felt that the local community they lived in was very important to them. Mental

health service users, as well as members of the Deaf Forum, tended to feel they were part of a “community of interest” centred on mental health services and the deaf community and their associated support organisations (e.g. HUG and the Deaf Forum). Although participants cited participating in a range of activities at community centres, leisure centres and other venues, for some this was largely enabled through their support organisations. Public transport was particularly valued for facilitating participation in these activities.

4.2 Areas for improvement

- 4.2.1 Some participants expressed concerns about safety attributed to factors such as difficult neighbours, drug taking, road safety and issues related to street lighting. Many noted that the presence of drunk people on streets made night time feel less safe than daytime in certain areas which were to be avoided.
- 4.2.2 People with mental health difficulties and those from Deaf Action generally did not feel part of their local community of place. Some noted that “*people moving in*”, and communications problems (particularly deaf people) limited their sense of local community. Chinese participants had generally experienced some verbal abuse, especially when people were drunk, although they felt this was simply “*part of life*”.
- 4.2.3 There were concerns about cuts to community care fora. More “low rise” buses, and greater attention to detail in bus routes (e.g. stopping as close as possible to activity venues) were felt necessary by mobility and sensory impaired people.
- 4.2.4 Overall there was very little engagement with community councils. The majority of the participants had no contact with community councils and were unaware of their existence. For one that was aware of community council activities through the local newspaper the following view was expressed: “*they never seem to do anything relevant to me*”. Two participants who sat on their community council had contrasting views. Although one felt this activity was worthwhile, the other felt that community councils were “*overblown*”.

5. Volunteering

5.1 Positives

Most participants were very involved in voluntary activities which were mainly associated with their support groups /organisations - the deaf community, HUG, the Chinese community, etc. The Deaf Club, and Women’s Deaf Club, were universally praised by the Deaf Forum focus group participants. Many blind or visually impaired people cited participating in Access Panels. People First participants noted the

crossover between volunteering and sheltered employment: more of them were involved with sheltered employment.

5.2 Areas for improvement

5.2.1 Most expressed a desire to be involved in volunteering, however at least three barriers to involvement in volunteering were identified:

- language and communication issues were mentioned by the members of the Deaf Forum and the Chinese group;
- irregular work hours was an issue for the Chinese community; and
- criminal records checks (HUG participants).

5.2.2 Better information about volunteering opportunities, communicated in different ways (e.g. talking newspapers), was suggested as one way of addressing some of the barriers.

6. Voting Experience

6.1 Positives

6.1.1 Overall, most of the participants voted and some of the participants (in the HUG and People First groups) said they found the process relatively easy, whilst others said they benefitted from staff help with voting.

6.1.2 However, there were also several suggestions for improving the experience (see below). Some expressed a preference for voting in person, rather than by post or proxy, for reasons of confidentiality.

6.2 Areas for improvement

6.2.1 Only one participant from the Deaf Forum focus group voted. The group expressed disillusionment and disengagement with politics – both in general, that voting seems to change nothing – and specifically, that the deaf community is ignored by politicians. In general it was felt that promises towards deaf people are broken or forgotten after election time.

6.2.2 In other groups, people did not vote for a variety of reasons :

- their experience of voting previously had been that it was very complex. There were comments that this year, with the Alternative Vote (AV) referendum, that there had been somewhat of an overload of information and that voting forms were particularly complex;
- they felt they did not understand the issues or the candidates;
- lack of appropriate sensitivity at polling stations to the specific needs of particular groups - e.g. blind and partially sighted people; and
- they did not feel engaged in politics. This was particularly the case for older Chinese participants.

6.2.3 Various suggestions for improving voting procedures and the voter experience were made.- for example:

- clearer information, in bigger print, on voting procedures in advance of polling day was felt important;
- Sight Action participants felt that polling station staff needed better training in providing assistance for blind and partially sighted people.
- HUG reported that it had done some research into voting, and noted that polling stations can be intimidating places for those with mental health problems. HUG's research also raised important technical questions. For instance:

“in what constituency would residents of New Craigs hospital cast their vote, if the residents' home constituency is outwith Inverness?”

7. Equalities

7.1 Positives

7.1.1 There was general support for equality as a principle across all participants. Some, including longer established migrants, welcomed other migrants and cited positive experiences of contact with Gypsy/Travellers. Members of ethnic minorities mostly reported low levels of discrimination or abuse, with verbal abuse often downplayed as simply *“part of life”* or inevitable.

7.1.2 Participants were asked if they preferred to live with people “like them” (e.g. with learning disabilities, deaf and hearing impaired, etc.) or in a more mixed environment. Many responded to this question by stressing how much they valued opportunities to mix socially with people “like them”, and that more such opportunities would be welcome.

7.1.3 The Sight Action group felt that the Disability Discrimination Act had improved circumstances for people who are blind or partially sighted. Deaf Forum participants felt that progress had been made on equal pay matters.

7.2 Areas for improvement

7.2.1 One ethnic minority participant felt vulnerable when out of her home without her husband, and felt that discrimination was widespread. Other participants noted that prejudice against Lesbian, Gays, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in the Highlands was “extreme”.

- 7.2.2 Deaf Forum participants felt that the deaf community was “invisible” and a need for “deaf awareness”, starting with children, was identified as important. Some felt that deaf people were making little progress in terms of equalities and that British Sign Language users were a marginalised minority. Their high dependency on hearing family members and friends for their interaction with much of society ran through all the discussions in this focus group. The feeling of being an “invisible” group – and therefore easily ignored - was also expressed (if not quite so forcefully) by blind and partially sighted people.
- 7.2.3 Discrimination in employment was noted by Sight Action and Deaf Forum group participants. Sight Action participants noted some employers raising insurance difficulties as a reason not to employ them.
- 7.2.4 Many participants expressed some resentment of Gypsy/Travellers and recent Central and Eastern Europeans and the Polish in particular. Complaints centred on competition for jobs, and their perceived easy and quick access to housing, pensions and other social security benefits. In most groups, some (but not all) participants felt that their own group was “*always bottom of the pile*” in terms of public service priorities. Some suggested that funding for Gaelic was disproportionate, and the needs of other linguistic minorities in the Highlands were raised.
- 7.2.5 Equalities issues around transport were raised. The importance of road markings for blind and partially sighted people (and their guide dogs), and of public transport, were highlighted. An example was given in the Sight Action focus group of a bus rerouting in Inverness that left blind and partially sighted people with a difficult walk from the bus stop to the leisure centre, when previously the bus dropped passengers off outside the centre. An equalities impact assessment for bus contracts was suggested.

8. Climate Change

8.1 Positives

- 8.1.1 There was a general awareness of climate change and perception that it was a significant problem amongst all participants. People linked climate change to flooding and other extreme weather incidents. There was often enthusiasm for the “green agenda”, including recycling, and renewable energy. Many participants used recycling bins.

8.2. Areas for improvement

- 8.2.1 In terms of local responses to extreme weather, clearing snow and ice from winter pavements was raised several times as an area for the Council to improve on. The knock-on effects of treacherous conditions

on people's participation in community life, and individual isolation, were emphasised. Problems for particular groups were also highlighted, e.g. snow is "*blind man's fog*" as it muffles sounds and makes kerb edges unclear for guide dogs.

- 8.2.2 There was confusion in several focus groups over recycling rules and procedures. Again, better communication of Council policy and what residents can do, using methods such as talking newspapers, Deaf Clubs, etc, was highlighted as required .
- 8.2.3 One participant felt that although it was important to protect the environment, in his words "*as long as the world isn't*" (referring to large industrial economies such as China and India) he felt it effectively rendered ineffective any advances that the UK makes in these areas. However, most expressed a desire for more education on issues such as litter and the impacts of climate change:

"Climate change is a big problem and the Council should do more about this ... it should make people do more, educate people more. "

- 8.2.4 There were some concerns about the impact of climate change measures on transport, both within the Highlands and the rest of the UK. Participants in the Chinese focus group suggested promoting cycling in Inverness through more dedicated cycle lanes. Better promotion of public transport in the Highlands was also suggested.

9. Key Themes – Conclusion

There were many areas in which Highland Council services and staff were felt to be performing well and were much appreciated. However, participants also highlighted frustrations and dissatisfaction – particularly around access and communication and equalities issues. They suggested means of addressing these issues, as well as offering a range of other suggestions for improving the Council's policy and practice.

9.1 Positive experiences

9.1.1 Contact with the Council

- Participants used a wide range of Council services. Staff were felt to be friendly and trying to be helpful. One participant described Council administration in general as "*tip top*".
- Pay points were felt to be relatively easy to use.

9.1.2 Services – housing

- Most participants who were Council tenants reported fairly good service. However, there was a wide variation in waiting times for housing repairs.
- Services for particular groups for example, house modifications, or liaison services to help people with mental health problems, were appreciated.

9.1.3 Other support services

- Support worker services and organisations, such as People First, Deaf Action and so on, targeted at the needs of specific groups were identified as valuable in learning about and mediating access to Council services (and other organisations and activities).
- Facilitated social groups and community centres were much appreciated. They were very valuable in combating isolation and building a sense of community with others with similar issues.

9.1.4 Equalities

- There was broad support for equality as a principle. While there was some experience of racial discrimination in the Highlands, the Chinese participants were positive about living in the Highlands.
- Legislation on disability rights was felt to be having a positive effect on equal pay by some participants.

9.1.5 Climate change

- There was broad support for action on climate change and the environment in general.

9.2 Areas for improvement

9.2.1 Communication

- The need to improve accessibility of Council staff and contact points was a recurring theme. Most participants approached the Council through their support workers or family and relatives. Whilst accessing services through support workers may be a positive testament to the value of the support worker service, some participants did express a desire to have more direct communication and contact with Council staff and offices without the presence of mediators.
- Many participants also called for better dissemination of information about: what services are available (e.g. interpretation and translation); who provides what service (e.g. in relation to roads and

pavements); and how to engage with Council services (e.g. rules for use of recycling facilities).

- Language barriers were stressed, both by Chinese participants, and by Deaf Forum participants in relation to British Sign Language. The latter in particular were extremely frustrated and felt marginalised by their lack of ability to communicate in their first language (British Sign Language) and the misunderstandings that arose as a result. An urgent need was identified for an awareness and training for Council staff, as well as a communications strategy which takes into account these diverse language and communication challenges.
- Suggestions for change focussed on adapting communication methods to utilise the media already in use by particular groups. These include: simpler, plainer and larger print written communication; different forms of 'written' communication (e.g. the Talking Newspapers service for blind and partially sighted people, posters, etc); relying less on written communication and using staff of intermediaries such as social clubs, community associations to disseminate information by word of mouth.

9.2.2 Housing repairs response times

- There was a perception in more than one group that Council housing repairs slowed down towards the end of the financial year because the budget was running low. This meant that some participants had to wait until the next financial year when their repairs were undertaken.
- Overall the need for a timeous response to requests for repairs was identified, as well as a more coordinated approach to conducting repairs in homes.

9.2.3 Voting

- Better training for polling station staff and information provided in appropriate formats about voting process and procedures were identified as especially important by the blind and partially sighted voters.

9.2.4 Equalities

- Many participants felt that the equalities impacts of many policies and services on particular groups (e.g. pavement conditions, or public transport) were not well understood.
- Sight Action and Deaf Forum group participants both noted the "invisible" nature of their disabilities. They highlighted a lack of awareness and understanding of particular issues affecting them by

Council services and staff they encountered in Service Points, for example. However, many groups felt that they were “bottom of the pile”.

- There was also some resentment of recent migrants and Gypsy/Travellers expressed in several focus groups.

9.2.5 Climate change

- Higher priority to clearing icy pavements in winter weather was a widespread call. Treacherous conditions underfoot contributed to participants’ sense of isolation in the winter.
- There were also calls for clearer instructions on recycling rules (including information communicated appropriately), as well as more education on clearing up litter, the provision of cycling lanes in Inverness city and better public transport.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions and Prompt Sheet

2011 Highland Council Performance Survey Focus group

Introductions

Purpose

Time

Confidentiality/Ethics

Note taking

Questions

1. Contact with the Council

Have you had contact with the council in the last year i.e. March 2010 to April 2011?

What were your reasons for making contact?

How (e.g. telephone, Service point, etc) did you make contact?

Overall how would you describe your experience in making contact? Getting issues resolved?

How would you rate the information available on Council services? How do you access this information?

2. Satisfaction with Council Services

How would you describe your experiences of the services you have used - give some examples? What made it a satisfactory or unsatisfactory experience?

If you live in a Council house, tell us about your experience of the council as a landlord – give some examples of good, poor and indifferent experiences.

3. Community Life

To what extent do you feel you belong in the community you live?

Do you feel safe in the community – yes /no; why and in what ways, give some examples.

Is your community accepting of people from outside the Highlands or people who are different – can you give some examples?

What sorts of activities are you involved in the community?

Do you feel your community is a safe place – yes, in what ways; no- can you give examples of what you mean

Do you have contact with your community council? What was your experience?

4. Volunteering

Do you volunteer in your community? Yes/No – why not? ;

If yes examples of volunteering? Frequency?

If no can you think of ways in which volunteering might be encouraged?

5. Voting experience

Did you vote in the Scottish elections on the 5th of May?

If you did how would you describe your experience?

If you did not vote, can you say why you did not

How would describe the information you received about voting?

In what ways might this be improved?

6. Equality

Do you feel that the effort to give equal opportunities to groups such as for example women, disabled, Gypsy/Travelers, Gay men and Lesbian women, Black and Asian people, have gone too far? Do you know people from these groups?

Do you think that in the Highlands we should try and do as much as we can to get rid of prejudice or do you think that sometimes there is good reason for people to be prejudiced against certain groups? - Can you give examples if yes?

If more people from outside the UK came to live in Highland, do you think the area would loose its identity – if yes in what way? Can you give some examples?

Would you prefer to live where there are lots of different types of people or where people are more like you?

7. Climate change

Have you been affected by severe weather conditions – what type? – In what ways?

To what extent do you feel that climate change is a problem? In what ways is it a problem? If you think it is a problem can you give examples of actions you have taken?

What kind of role do you think the Council has in addressing issues /information /actions related to climate change – can you give examples where they have been helpful/unhelpful/indifferent?

If you don't think climate change is an issue can you explain why?

Thank you and anything else to add?

What happens next?

Appendix 2: Notes of the Focus Groups

This appendix contains the unedited notes of the focus groups, presented in chronological order:

Notes of Focus Group: People First.....	21
Notes of Focus Group: Sight Action.....	27
Notes of Focus Group: The Scottish Highlands & Islands and Moray Chinese Association (SHIMCA)	35
Notes of Focus Group: Highland Users Group (HUG)	40
Notes of Focus Group: Deaf Forum	46

Notes of Focus Group: People First

11th July 2010

Lead – Christine Fletcher, scribe – Cath King

6 participants present (1 for part of session). Geographical spread of home addresses of attendees – all Inverness.

1. Contact with the Council

All participants have had contact with the Council.

All had contact with their Social Worker, based at the Corbett Centre for a range of issues including their Care Review and joining a new art group.

One participant's fiancé had to report a faulty doorbell. He lives in a Council house and is in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Two participants had used a Service Point to renew their travel card and bus pass.

Only one participant had a High Life card and used it to access Council leisure centres. 2 are members of a private hotel leisure club.

One participant had attended evening art classes held in a school.

No-one had seen information about what The Highland Council does and most used their Support Worker to help them to find out about services. None accessed leaflets or the internet, 2 read about the Council in local newspapers and many heard about the Council on MFR.

2. Satisfaction with Council Services

Participants were very satisfied with contact with Social Worker, describing her as “very pleasant and polite.” Both participants who had visited the Service Point reported being happy and very happy with the service there.

The person who had to report a faulty doorbell was not happy that he was told he had to wait for up to 21 days for a home visit. However, the doorbell was fixed before the 21 day period and it is now working well. The same household had new windows fitted and two of the handles are slack. They also needed to get the door fixed three times, but said that it was easy to get the Council back out each time. The participant said that the Council is “sometimes a good landlord and sometimes not.”

Most dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to the ceasing of their attendance at the Corbett Centre. Most said that they missed seeing their

friends and there was limited opportunity to do this outwith the day centre. Following the focus group Christine Fletcher forwarded additional detailed information on this see appendix I).

Most agreed that the Monday Club had changed since the close of Crumpets Café: no carpet bowling and mostly sitting doing jigsaws. Some now attend the People First get togethers in the Innes Bar on Wednesday nights.

Whilst all participants said that they recycle, one participant reported that her mother was frustrated at having to remove lids and wash containers for recycling and her bin is not big enough.

The removal of cash payments from Service Points was noted but has not presented difficulties as the Paypoints are easy to use.

One participant reported that a number of years ago they had experienced problems in getting a bus pass due to criteria, but this has not happened recently.

3. Community Life

One participant said that she did not feel that she belonged in her community. Recently she had to call the Police nine times in one night because “there were 35 kids outside the house.” She said that the Police had initially said that there was no-one available. She added that she now gets a quicker response when she contacts the Police.

The same participant also had to contact the Council to complain about her neighbour who “discriminated against her, held wild parties and had so much rubbish it attracted rats.” She said that the Council’s Housing Officer spoke to her neighbour and the situation has been resolved.

She also said that she is “harassed every time she goes out in town.” This was usually by people she knows and generally other people are “OK.”

One participant said that he felt safe at home (Residential Care Home) and it was handy for town. Another said that she felt that she was part of her community and another two that they felt safe within the house but didn’t feel safe on the streets as they were scared of drink drivers and people speeding on the road. On one occasion a car crashed into their garden.

There are some English and Pakistani people in the Highlands and Polish people are “everywhere you go.” One participant said “The Polish people get all of the jobs and I’m looking for a job.”

Everyone felt that the people who live here who are not from the Highlands are treated the same way as everyone else.

What do you do in your local community?

The following list of groups attended and activities was identified:

All said that they go into local shops and pubs.
Wednesday pub night in the Innes Bar
The Monday Club
The Rainbow Singers
Prospects
The Falcon Group
Bowls at the James Cameron Centre
Merkinch Community Centre Lunch Club and other activities
Art Group
Night classes
Highland Council and private leisure centres
Kingsview Day Service (Run by Maple Ridge)
Doing the Race for Life and another 5k in October

Not one participant had heard of a Community Council.

4. Volunteering

It was noted that there is overlap between volunteering and sheltered employment for most participants.

One participant used to volunteer in a charity shop, another works at a local Residential Care Home doing the teas. One participant is waiting to hear if they have been successful in securing voluntary employment at the Raigmore Hospital Children's Ward and one does sheltered employment at the Floral Hall. Some of the participants volunteer as Board Members for SPIRIT Advocacy, the new organisation being establishing to take over management of PF and HUG once HCCF is no longer in a position to do so.

The time given to these activities ranged from 1 day per week, every day and 2 – 3 days per week.

Nearly everyone said they'd like to do more volunteering. One said that she'd do more if she was treated well and said that she had a bad experience in the past.

Support Workers and other staff have assisted in getting volunteering and work placements.

One participant used Volunteering Highland and for work has attended courses run by JobCentre Plus.

5. Voting Experience

3 participants voted using postal voting and found this easy with staff help.

2 participants voted at the Polling Station and managed this by themselves with help of Polling Station staff.

1 person did not vote because she "didn't know who to vote for or what they were on about."

Other participants said that staff helped them to understand what politicians were saying.

Most said they understood the leaflets a little bit but did not find them easy to read.

Information on postal voting was not in big enough print and participants did not know that information could be requested in other formats.

6. Equalities

All participants knew someone with a disability. Most only knew of gypsy travellers rather than knowing them personally. One participant said that her next door neighbours were Gypsies and “you couldn’t ask for nicer neighbours.” No participants knew anyone who was gay or lesbian. Some of the participants knew a black taxi driver.

One participant said that “Gypsies should be banned and gay men are disgusting.” She did acknowledge that she might change her view if it was someone she liked.

It was felt by some that it was OK to feel different about people who are gay, but not OK for people to feel differently.

It was felt that people from all groups should be given more support by the Council.

All felt that Highland Council should stop prejudice and that everyone should be treated equally.

The group felt that people coming to live in the Highlands did make it less Scottish particularly in relation to Polish people as they were seen to take all of the jobs and houses.

The group agreed that they would like to live in a place with more people with learning disabilities and like them “not coloured.” One participant said that her view was because she had a bad experience in London with black people when she lived there. She added that “it is not so bad here.”

7. Climate Change

All participants mentioned the very wet weather and flooding this weekend. One participant described damage to the walls of the home she resides in being damaged by snow in the winter and an incident where “a tree went sailing down the road” when the burn flooded. The flooding at the Thistle Hotel a few years ago was mentioned.

Icy and slippery pavements were mentioned as a problem in winter. People First had organised some activities last winter and only one person was able to get there in the snow and ice. One participant said that “snowploughs don’t

clear pavements. They do wee bits and leave the rest. I've seen elderly people fall twice."

Participants described the bad summers in recent years. One said the last good summer was three years ago.

Other difficulties noted that arise through changes to the weather were disruptions to flights, not able to go out and not knowing what clothes to wear.

The group felt strongly about people dropping litter. Some felt that there should be more bins whilst others thought there were plenty. All felt that people should be charged and fined when they are caught dropping litter.

The group agreed that they did not know enough about climate change and what things are being done to stop it.

Additional comments

There was some general concern about the Council's plans to switch off every second streetlight. This related to safety concerns, although it was noted that some people do not go out at night, and a concern that "some people who are blind or disabled might find it difficult."

Two participants expressed concern about gypsy travellers camping near to the Floral Hall. They said that they are making a mess and throwing bottles, dirty nappies and litter over the wall. On being asked they said that they hadn't actually seen who had done this but it happened when the travellers were there.

Emerging Themes

- Lack of accessible information available - most participants required assistance to identify the services the Council provides
- Overall most reported being happy with Council Services
- Most dissatisfaction was expressed in relation to removal of day centre places
- High levels of volunteering and wanting to volunteer, but crossover with sheltered employment and volunteering noted
- No participants had heard of a Community Council
- More opportunities to mix with other people with learning disabilities would be welcome
- People were concerned about people dropping litter
- People were concerned about gypsy travellers

Additional information on views about removal of day centre places, forwarded by Christine Fletcher following the Focus Group

Regarding the closure, or cessation of the service to certain people, of the Corbett Centre (and other centres too) many people are concerned about not

being able to keep going. The main concerns are around losing contact with friends and not having anything to do. Below are a few comments.

"It's not fair on the people in wheelchairs not to see their friends. They're stuck in the Corbett Centre now. There's not enough staff to take them out. We don't see them anymore. I miss the craic. It's not the same now."

"It's not up to me my social worker told me. You've got to do your own thing."

"As far as I can see the Social Work aren't caring what you are going to do, they're not organising anything. Our key workers have to look for things for us to do. Are we just going to sit staring into space? It's hurtful and upsetting."

"It's terrible; we don't get enough to do"

Another PF member who had been told they had to leave said that she didn't want to leave, that she wanted to use her own money to keep going, She was worried that she would not have anything else to do because she does not get 1-2-1 support all the time.

The East Ross group spoke about the Isobel Rhind centre. Some people are being told they can no longer attend and also the buses to and from the centre may be stopped. People are concerned about the difficulties of getting to the centre from out-lying rural areas. Taxis are expensive and many parents are elderly and do not want to drive.

One said: "It would be difficult. I would be bored at home. I'd just spend time with my mum and dad. I'd be upset. We all would be."

Another added that she would be upset to be alone in her house all week. Another said he wanted to leave and get a job - but was struggling to find one.

Notes of Focus Group: Sight Action

13th July 2011

Lead – Philomena de Lima, scribe – Cath King

7 participants present (2 for part of session), 2 additional participants had passed comments by email and telephone to be included in the discussion. Geographical spread of home addresses of attendees covered Inverness, Conon Bridge, Fortrose, Invergarry and Alness.

1. Contact with the Council

Issues regarding a chip shop in Fortrose using advertising boards on pavement which forced the participant (who uses a guide dog and cane) onto the road, resulting in a near collision with a passing car. This led him to report the incident and the use of the boards to both the police and Council. The proprietor was given a warning but has used the boards again. He also allows an ice cream van and motorcycles to use the pavement so the Council have been contacted again. The participant felt that the Council and Police should “clamp down harder” on the proprietor.

This raised a general discussion about the use of sandwich boards which is an ongoing issue in Inverness. Sight Action’s Rehabilitation Officer contacts Councillors on an almost daily basis regarding this.

It was felt that the Council communicates fairly well, but that part time workers can present difficulties with continuity and access.

Contact is OK by telephone or letter, but third sector organisations such as Sight Action are experiencing difficulties with email contact if they are contacting the Council on behalf of a service user due to lack of encryption that matches the Council’s. The costs of encryption are too high for most small third sector organisations and it was recognised that the costs would be too high for the Council to meet.

One participant had used a Council Service Point (Dingwall) to process a housing application and renew a bus pass. They reported being happy with the service provided and added that they found contact easier on a face to face basis than by telephone.

One participant reported near accidents on Friars Bridge with cars driving through red lights at pedestrian crossings to Council. They spoke with a Council official who advised that they would pass this on, but to date they have not had any feedback. Another participant noted that one of the talking messages is not working. Sight Action has been campaigning about Friars Bridge and has had some press coverage. It was clarified that this is a Trunk road which is the responsibility of Transerv rather than the Council. This raised a communication issue as it did not seem that this had been communicated effectively to the participant.

2. Satisfaction with Council Services

Council as a landlord: “not too bad”, “The service in general is fine”

Housing repair service: “sometimes needs a bit of motivation to initiate the work getting done”. Whilst one participant said he had a positive experience dealing with Council contractors, he knew of others who had a very bad experience.

Adaptations: It was generally agreed that it is difficult to get adaptations for all types of disability, but worse from January to April when budgets are running out. It was felt that the tension between individual service user and budget restraints were difficult to reconcile, and that there was difficulty in co-ordinating across services and organisations.

Travel cards are issued by the Council on behalf of the Scottish Government. It took four years to agree the terms of eligibility caused by issues such as Scotrail operating across regions. It was stressed that this must never happen again at renegotiation of contracts.

Bus passes can now also double up as library card but the Plus One card cannot currently be incorporated. Using different cards presents significant difficulties for people with sight impairments, so it would be helpful to address this.

One participant contacted the Council to report a collapse in the road (Invergarry). She left a telephone message at 8pm, received a reply by 10pm and a temporary fix was in place by 10am the following morning.

Last winter the lack of clearing of ice and snow from pavements presented significant difficulties. This is a serious issue for people who are blind or partially sighted. One participant had to call to be picked up 2 – 3 times. Guide dogs need to see the kerb edges and snow is “blind man’s fog” as it muffles sound so other pedestrians are not heard.

Comment via email: responses to requests for large print are good however there is an issue about letting people know what is out there to request. The example given was the introduction of a new Development Plan, which the participant only heard about whilst chatting to someone else. It was suggested that announcements could be put into talking newspapers, even if it just the headline news with contact information.

There was general agreement that getting information out to people who are blind or partially sighted could be improved.

Blue Badge Scheme: One participant applied for renewal in plenty time. She had a discussion over the phone during which the Council officer filled in the form to send out for signature. It did not arrive. On chasing it up, the participant was informed that the Council were waiting to hear from her GP. She contacted the GP who told her the information had been sent to the Council by email.

Another took 3 months to get their blue badge renewed and the last Council officer they dealt with was “not very pleasant.”

It was agreed that the Council’s Service Centre was quite successful and directed calls well.

It was felt that an acknowledgement of receipt of application would improve the process.

Blue Badge payments can only be made by card payment. This presents some difficulties for some, but is found to be easier by others.

Sections 1 & 2	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
Overall communication with Council is good	Explore mechanisms to widen encryption to third sector organisations
	Check that clear messages are given to service users about responsibilities for trunk/local roads
	Develop mechanisms to smooth transitions/communication where p/t workers are utilised
Overall the Council was viewed as a satisfactory landlord	
Overall the Council was viewed positively as a service provider	Explore ways to avoid the perceived end of financial year lack of funding for aids and adaptations
	Explore possibility of incorporating Plus One Card into bus pass/library card
	Council could lobby to ensure that renegotiation of travel card contracted is not protracted
Lack of clearing of ice and snow from pavements causes particular issues for this group	Ensure that all decisions about rationalisation of ice and snow clearing services are subject to an equality impact assessment
Obstructions on pavements present particular issues for this group	Explore if approach to preventing local businesses from use of sandwich boards could be improved
	Explore if pavement parking is adequately controlled (Private Member Bill in progress on dropped kerbs and pavement parking)
Getting information out to people who are blind or partially sighted could be improved	Place announcements in talking newspapers to alert people to what’s new to enable them to know what to request in other formats

Delays in Blue Badge Scheme application processing	Introduce acknowledgement letter for Blue Badge applications and ensure that appropriate payment mechanisms are in place
--	--

3. Community Life

“Boy racers” at the Chip Shop (see section 1).

Don't feel safe due to lack of street lighting (lights at crossroads then nothing (Invergarry)).

Concerns were raised about increased drug use and the impact on children coinciding with reduction in Police patrols.

Another participant said the area in which he lived was quite quiet, but his family had moved from a Council property in another less quiet area due to constant disruptions. He reported that this move went quite smoothly although it took years to achieve.

Most participants reported that they felt that they belonged to their community. Neighbours were seen as important, although one participant said they disliked their neighbours. One is on the Community Council and participates in a range of other voluntary activities. Overall there was more involvement with Access Panels rather than Community Councils. There was a concern raised about lack of AP resource to cover the Highland area. The role of the Community Care Forum in assisting involvement was discussed and concerns were raised about the reduction from 7 CCFs to 2 to cover the Highlands. There was a strong expression of feeling that “Blind and disabled are always hit the hardest (when there are funding cuts)”.

The hidden nature of blindness and sight impairment was discussed as most people do not use canes or dogs. It was noted that deafness and hearing impairment is also an invisible disability.

Other activities: Allotment gardening; use of leisure centre – Dingwall leisure centre “horrible and too small” but Inverness too far.

Public transport:

There was general agreement on the view that bus timetables were rearranged to suit drivers' hours and shift patterns.

A lack of “low rise” buses in areas where most of the population are over 65 years of age was mentioned.

“Stagecoach is unreliable”

“An issue for young people”

Section 3.	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
The hidden nature of blindness and sight impairment and deafness and hearing impairment	Consider impact upon people with sight impairment when making decisions about street lighting

General concerns about community safety	
Most felt that they belonged to their community	
Feelings that people with disabilities are hardest hit when there are funding cuts	Ensure that equality impact assessments are always carried out on any proposed service cuts
Public transport has a major impact on ability to participate in community life	Ensure that equality impact assessments are routinely carried out when issuing bus contracts. Ensure that service providers demonstrate that they meet the requirements of legislation

4. Volunteering

One participant volunteers as a Community Councillor, is on the Community Hall Committee, WRI, working age Group, Lochaber Visual Impairment Group and the Lochaber Credit Union. She was unable to give an estimate as to how many hours per week, but acknowledged that it made up a lot of her time.

Two participants collected money for charities - Guide Dogs and Sight Action.

Two participants would like to know what volunteering activity is available in his area (Conon and Fortrose).

Section 4.	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
	Increase information about volunteering opportunities at area level through talking newspapers

5. Voting Experience

All participants bar one vote in elections. The person who did not use their vote said it was because “last time was too complicated and he needed help to read the names (of the candidates)”.

Phone message: Would always vote and found the template (Tactile Voting Device or TVD) excellent, but felt that staff needed more training. When requesting help the staff at the Polling Station said “Do I have to read this to you?”

It was felt that proxy or postal votes were not ideal as they impacted on confidentiality. However one participant had been assisted by his father, but he was happy for him to know what his vote was. Some participants were unaware that this was available and felt that communication could be improved. It was suggested that information could go into the Sight Action newsletter.

At Polling Stations information about which desk to go to should be clearer. One participant was sent back out to check the postcode list at the entrance.

It would be helpful if there was both general and specific information for people with sight impairment on how to fill in forms before polling day.

Section 5.	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
Voting seen as very important	More training required for election staff at polling stations
	Ensure that information is clear and accessible at polling stations
	General and specific information on how to fill in forms prior to polling day (in partnership with Sight Action)

6. Equalities

“Legislation is complicated. You would never get to grips with it unless it was part of your job, had lots of time and interest and were quite intelligent. It has gone far enough.”

“Every culture is diluted so incomers wouldn’t dilute it further. It’s evolutionary. It adds to the culture”

Comment from a black man “We feel like Highlanders. There have been issues over the last 40 years but they have been negligible.”

“I had prejudice against me because of my disability as a child, but not as an adult.”

One participant (Fortrose) said that he’d been told they fitted in because they “had the right tongue”; he said that “people say that English people come in and take over.”

It was noted that there had been a vast improvement since the introduction of the DDA. Prior to this guide dogs were not allowed in many places. Now they are permitted in taxis, aeroplanes and restaurants.

Employment:

There was agreement that there is a problem with employers viewing people with a disability as an insurance risk. One participant reported that a previous employer took this view following her Consultant’s decision to register her as partially sighted and terminated her employment. She said “One day I was seen as able to do the job and the next it was too much of a risk.”

The requirement for a driving licence rather than access to transport in job advertisements was seen as discriminatory.

Section 6.	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions

The legislation is fit for purpose	
The introduction of the DDA improved circumstances for people who are blind or sight impaired	
Very low levels of discrimination have been experienced by the group	
Issues with some employers viewing people who are blind or sight impaired as an insurance risk	

7. Climate Change

Bad winters: Last winter the lack of clearing of ice and snow from pavements presented significant difficulties. This is a serious issue for people who are blind or partially sighted as it is difficult for them to get about in ice or snow. One participant had to call to be picked up 2 – 3 times. Guide dogs need to see the kerb edges and snow is “blind man’s fog” as it muffles sound so other pedestrians are not heard.

Road collapse – see 2.

Flooding on the railway.

Wind farms: most were happy with them and one said “I don’t like NIMBYism.”

“Villages could have their own watermills like they used to. That power could be harnessed again.”

Solar panels were seen to be a good thing but were viewed as too expensive.

It was generally agreed that there should be more encouragement about renewables.

“Highland Council cars and vans could be run on electricity or gas.”

“Firework displays are very nice but what are the pollutants and costs?”

Recycling:

One of the participants had been told that he couldn’t put Braille documents into his recycling bin as they are bulky and fill up the bin too quickly. Others in the group thought that this was not the case. This led to a discussion about the general confusion around what can be recycled in different types of bin and areas.

Section 7.	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
Bad winters present additional difficulties for people who are blind or sight impaired	Ensure that all decisions about rationalisation of ice and snow clearing services are subject to an equality impact assessment

Some confusion over recycling rules	Clarify information on recycling through talking newspapers
	(Philomena - Most actions on renewables/HC cars etc are covered by Carbon Management Plan)

Additional comments

The reduction in painting road markings to save costs is an issue for people with sight impairments, particularly yellow lines which provide an effective warning.

A strong plea for there to be more rigorous action taking against people parking in bus stops as it is very difficult to get onto buses if they are unable to properly park at the stop.

Parking in disabled spaces was also highlighted as an area where the group would like to see stronger action taken. The example of a £250 charge to have clamps removed in Glasgow was cited as an example of good practice.

The number 12 bus route to the aquadome has stopped. This has caused problems as the nearest bus stop is now at the cemetery on Glenurquhart Road and it is “an awkward walk for a cane user” from there to the aquadome. The costs of using a taxi as an alternative are too high.

The possibility of a discount scheme for people with disabilities using taxis was discussed, the model used in Glenrothes cited as good practice. It was acknowledged that the distances covered in Highland would be likely to make this too expensive.

Additional comments	
Emerging Themes	Potential Actions
Parking in bus stops/disabled spaces is a great concern	Explore if sanctions could be increased
Road markings have greater significance for people with sight impairment	Ensure rationalisation of repainting road markings is subject to equality impact assessment
Public transport is an important issue	Explore if a taxi discount scheme could work in Highland
	Ensure that equality impact assessments are routinely carried out when issuing bus contracts

Notes of Focus Group: The Scottish Highlands & Islands and Moray Chinese Association (SHIMCA)

21st July 2011

Lead – Philomena de Lima, scribe – Struan Charters

8 participants for full session, with 1 more arriving later in the session. Geographical spread outlined initially- 5 from Inverness, 2 from Kirkhill and 1 from Alness.

Focus group conducted bilingually.

1. Contact with the Council

Most of the group had had contact with the Council for routine issues such as Council Tax and other payments. It did however take some time for them to respond as they seemed to lack clarity as to what services were covered by the Council.

One participant owned her own home yet due to her age (over 70 years of age) had someone from the Council round to fix insulation in her roof.

A younger member of the group (who spoke English fluently) also was in contact with the Council regarding housing benefit and help with school uniform payments. (*Her English was very good*).

Much of the contact between the council and participants was via SHIMCA, with one lady getting assistance with regard to her care package. She found it frustrating that in her late 70s and with a bad back and eyes she could not get some assistance with cleaning and grass-cutting. This was because her 'level of income' was considered to be high enough however she felt that with bill paying etc, there was very little left for such areas. She also found this was unfair as she has been using her savings whilst other people appear to be spending more but receiving more benefits. Another asked at the session if she was exempt from paying council tax, being also in her late 70s and living in a private house alone- [NOTE we could not answer her at the time, perhaps a response is required- Philomena]. One lady voiced her concern over the lack of Council feedback in general and being asked similar questions- there appeared to be some research/ consultation fatigue.

Only one member of the group was aware of the service points that the Council operates, from time to time visiting Church Street, Inverness. She found there was 'usually no problem' at the service point (*however her English was very good*). The group were very interested to know if the Council provided translation services at Service Points (*NOTE from Highland Council : Members of the Association should have been aware that the Council regularly provides interpreter appointments and telephone interpretation services, and cards with details for such instances were distributed to the Association*).

All of the members had lived in Highland for at least 20 years, the longest living here for 34 years. However it was clear that although they had lived here for a long period there was little knowledge of the services that the Council provides. This prompted a discussion into what the Council could do to increase the knowledge that the Chinese community has of its activities. There was a suggestion that the Council could send a bulletin from time to time in Chinese/English directly to individuals/households rather than always through SHIMCA on services. It was suggested that the Chinese Association could provide the Council with the relevant addresses. However, it was recognised that the affected people would have to consent to such arrangements. Further to this it became clear that while many spoke Chinese, in particular Cantonese/ Hakka, few could read Cantonese/Hakka or Mandarin. While written Chinese was largely the same throughout China, spoken Mandarin and Cantonese differed in pronunciation. In addition it was felt that SHIMCA has limited funding and volunteers to provide 'middle-men' and that knowledge given directly would be preferable.

Another suggestion was to translate Council leaflets and posters etc. However, given the issue regarding the level of reading for some it was felt that if one could get people of different abilities in communicating together that would be beneficial. One of the group said that she had very helpful neighbours who often assisted with correspondence in English, if required. Regarding translation it was suggested by one member to have English and Chinese side-by-side. A suggestion was made by participants for the Council to provide some updates regularly through SHIMCA similar to what is available at Service Points. This information could be disseminated by SHIMCA at their lunch clubs etc.. Another suggestion was that there could perhaps be a Chinese interpreter in place for a set time at the service point; the Chinese community would therefore be able to go to the Service Point in the knowledge that they would be understood and be able to understand. [NOTE: *Potential to look into Chinese translation/'Service Point' provision*].

2. Satisfaction with Council Services

One member of the group was satisfied with the level of action from the Council, given her interaction - she had schoolchildren and was on income support. She commented that 'recently they have been quicker'. However, she was fluent in English.

Council as a landlord – two of the group lived in Council housing. They found the council 'ok' as a landlord.

A particular issue was highlighted from one who lived at Dalneigh in Inverness who found it had taken around 2 years for the Council to fix a broken fence, having phoned at least 10 times after it was flattened having been kicked down by vandals and a subsequent storm.

The other reported a better experience, living in Alness where maintenance issues took around 1 to 2 weeks to be dealt with. She felt this may have been due to being 'away from the centre' (i.e. Inverness), there thus being less

demand for such services leading to her being dealt with more quickly. She had had her roof fixed and a new heating system installed. Being older, it emerged that this help was arranged through her son, who had better English. Another elderly woman spoke of the need for heating even in the summer, and that hers was solely electric; it being too expensive (£600 per quarter) to have gas installed.

Another issue that it was felt the Council could apply some pressure on was transport issues, in particular more regular and quicker services to the Central Belt and improvements to the A9. The reinstatement of the Inverness-Heathrow link was also mentioned; it was recognised that these were costly projects yet seen as 'a good investment'. [NOTE: *he was informed that the Council was probably in contact regarding such issues but that other bodies such as the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Government were probably also involved*].

3. Community Life

The group were asked if, given that they had all spent over 20 years in the Highlands, whether they felt a part of the community. They all gave their experience as mainly positive. They said with jest that they didn't really like the weather ('can't do anything about that!' they said). They also felt that Chinese food suppliers were rather limited in the area [NOTE : *potential to be looked into?*].

Asked whether they felt safe in their community they said that they did, stating that 'the crime rate is low' and emphasised that their quality of life was better than in more urban areas. They felt that although it was mainly Scottish people who live in the area in general 'most are friendly'. They did discuss name-calling (such as 'Chinky') that they and /or that their children had experienced but seemed to think that this was an inevitable part of life.

4. Volunteering

Asked about their involvement with or in Community Councils there was no real knowledge of their activities and no involvement. One reason given for this was the language barrier.

Regarding general involvement within the local community this was widely limited. They said this was not because they didn't want to be involved, however the language barrier was again raised, particularly as an issue for older people, as well as the working hours of the many employed in the catering business, (i.e. predominantly younger people), and consequently lack of time was an issue.

Most community /voluntary activity was largely confined to the Chinese community and within SHIMCA in particular. Most were very willing to be involved in the Chinese community. One member stated that the Association provides demonstrations of Chinese culture at local fairs and charity events, highlighting one such at the Inverness Highland Games.

5. Voting Experience

Four out of the eight in the group voted in May's election. Some comments regarding voting were: not being able to understand the election material (particularly from older group members); not understanding the voting process; lack of understanding of what the different political parties are about in terms of policies; and not knowing who to vote for. It was felt that the younger members of the Chinese community were more likely to vote, compared to those who were 60 and over. One comment was that they did 'not really want to be involved in politics'.

6. Equalities

Being from immigrant backgrounds all felt that 'Equal opportunities is a good thing'.

Sometimes they came across prejudice they stated, however they felt that this was largely inevitable, and was not a major issue. One interesting comment was that drunk people seemed to be more honest in their opinions about such issues (i.e. name calling etc.) 'talking the truth', while others may keep such thoughts to themselves.

A lady had said that her children had been name-called though this was rare, the term 'chinky' one that most in the group had been called at one time or another. A comment from another felt that recently the situation was 'getting a lot better'.

They felt that because they themselves are immigrants or from immigrant families it is ok that people from outwith the Highlands are moving here. There was also a general feeling from the participants that the Eastern European immigrants are generally good- 'hardworking' etc.

7. Climate Change

Discussion here focussed on multiple areas. An initial comment from an Inverness resident 'there is no flooding in this area'. Another, echoing a previous comment said it's 'always cold', though again they laughed when they said they couldn't do anything about it. A more serious point was made related to this when a participant felt that there had been a change with summers being milder and winters much colder.

One comment, related to the transport concerns above, was that the quality of life in Inverness was better than other cities; the only thing that could really be improved is the transport links to elsewhere.

Out of the group one was very aware of climate change, with most having some awareness of the issue.

All have and use recycling bins and all recycle food waste. One highlighted his use of energy saving bulbs stating that it 'saves a lot'.

A mother stated that she felt her children were more aware than many and that this should be encouraged, given that they can communicate to parents

and that 'they are the future'. The role of education was emphasised in this respect.

There was also a general approval of improving cycle paths in the city area, to make it easier for people to get around and that this would benefit both the city through easing traffic, as well as the environment as a whole. Further green energy developments were also highlighted as requiring support.

Notes of Focus Group: Highland Users Group (HUG)

22nd July 2011

Lead – Philomena de Lima, scribe – Struan Charters

10 participants at start, with 5 remaining for full session. Main geographic focus was Inverness, with at least one living outwith- e.g. in Tain.

1. Contact with the Council

This discussion started with a general chat about people's recent experience with the Council, however discussion also crossed into their general satisfaction with Services.

One participant, who lives in a Council flat in Tain, said he had not found the Council particularly timeous in their responses: "The council wastes a lot of money". For example he had reported a leaking roof 'about 2 months' ago and said that he was *also* 'still waiting for soundproofing to be done' and nothing had been done as yet. He noted that whilst the Council says that it will compensate individuals where there are delays in being responsive, he said 'looking at compensation is a waste of time'. He also said that he phones the Council rather than visits the Service Point, as this was a more effective way of getting things done, by going to the individuals directly. He also finds going through his Social worker effective; a theme that other participants also highlighted. Working through a 'mediator' (mental health worker was mentioned) rather than being seen as a mere 'number' increased the chances of getting their issues resolved effectively.

Another participant said he had a more positive experience with the Council, for example in getting his Council flat in Inverness damp-proofed as well as getting central heating installed and painting refurbishment. He was also delighted, 'when yesterday they wrote to consult me over getting a new kitchen'.

Another participant had their attendance at the education and rehabilitation centres part-financed (along with other bodies such as the NHS). Activities include dance therapy and word-play sessions, and she describes this as a 'progressive experience', and as a result 'has been doing a lot more'. She goes to facilities in Inverness assisted by the Council such as Bruce Gardens, Highland House and Spectrum Centre, and says 'it's a case of using what's available'. She's very grateful for these services, and also finds the writing groups great for expression.

Another stays at Bruce Gardens and says, quite simply, that 'it gives me a life', and is very happy at the Council provision, grading his general satisfaction with the Council at 80%: "I would say 80% of the time I have found the Council to provide a good service."

Another participant who also lives in Council housing, and when asked about the Council as a landlord said that although they are quite quick at little repairs she has been looking to get the exterminators in for rodents, and has been waiting for over 4 months. She finds this frustrating, particularly given antisocial neighbours leaving rubbish in the communal garden, and is still waiting to see her housing officer regarding this. She also stated that she 'has been trying to be moved for the last 10 years', in Inverness.

Another charts his contact with the Council in three spheres- for mental health offices, free bus pass and blue recycling bin. He states that he has found the Council 'really nice', 'going out of their way' to help him appeal against his sections and the bus pass allows him to do his job, travelling around the Highlands.

2. Satisfaction with Council Services

Regarding Council housing, participants highlighted apparent errors of judgment and 'wastes of money' such as regular kitchen refurbishments and ripping out radiators with inadequate replacements etc. Also, it was felt that the artworks in town, although perhaps brightening the area, were a waste of money, particularly when facilities such as 'the Bike Shed' were under threat. There was also a feeling that to get the best chance of a better outcome, it was best to contact the Council at the start of the year, due to their financial position- one said that it took them 2 years to get a new shower, though perhaps this would have taken less long had they 'played the system' better.

One gets Housing Support through the Council, whose care package is administered via Highland Home Carers. She 'couldn't fault it'; a particular example given was when 3 men tried to get in to her home for routine maintenance, however this was overwhelming for her, so her Community Psychiatric Nurse allowed only one in, and that worked much better for her. She also uses the Bike Shed (which the users are trying to keep open), MP33 and the Merkinch Community Centre, all supported by the Council. She is frustrated however at the threats of closure stating 'we get them then they get taken away'. A similar comment from another participant expressed unease at the status of Inverness Library, a service that he likes, particularly given that 'you can order almost any book', (he feels that this is a very good service and so few ask for it). He also likes to borrow DVDs and uses the Reference Room.

Regarding the Service Point at Church Street Inverness, it was generally felt that the service, when seen, was very good, however most felt they often had to wait for very long periods to be seen, with appointments only given for payments. In general however, those who use the Service Points leave with satisfaction. The man from Tain said that the wait is one reason why he just simply phones: "the service point staff are helpful, but it is a waste of time, so you may as well as phone directly". Another participant said that he found the Council admin 'tip-top'. However there were also concerns expressed about that the many forms and boxes to be ticked in order to 'fit into the system'- 'Mediators' such as mental health workers were again generally seen as being more efficacious mechanisms in assisting them to access services. "It is

easier to be taken seriously if your mental health worker approaches the Council “.

None of the group uses the Council website, the participant from Tain said that if he needs information he simply phones up and asks. It was however felt that if they could use the website then you would get to what you wanted to get to quicker. One comment from a participant was that they were disappointed not to still receive the Council calendar (for Council tenants), which they said was ‘very good for information’.

One of the participants revealed an issue regarding an absent support worker from the Community Mental Health Team, and that when he went to chase it up had the service withdrawn, because the worker claimed that the participant was not at his home when he had arrived at the arranged time. The participant claimed that he had been there all the time and the support worker was not turning up on a regular basis. He was frustrated at this saying ‘there are two sides to every story’, and felt his side had not been taken into account. He also seemed not to be aware of how to complain. Another said that they had a similar experience- for example of a support worker claiming they had turned but had not. Another mentioned a neighbour was mistakenly given an instruction from the Council that she shouldn’t have, and this has caused friction between them. Regarding complaints, there was a general feeling that you expect the issue to be followed up (‘9 out of 10 times it is’), and that form-filling and working out who to complain to are disincentives. ‘It’s like the police investigating the police’ was one comment.

3. Community Life

The question of ‘what does community mean?’ was raised . Most don’t feel a part of their local /placed based community; one participant said ‘I only use the mental health services’, what he calls ‘a community of interest’. He feels that while he may not belong to the community, he is comfortable in himself. He has heard of recent incidents including a killing, knifing and assault in his one street, although this does not appear to faze him particularly, saying ‘it’s really just something you read in the papers’.

One felt that in the 5 years he has been in Inverness, he has been ‘chauffeur driven’ and has not been exposed to the wider community.

The man from Tain feels he is ‘doing well’ in his community. Another felt that initially when they moved into their flat they talked to their neighbours and mentioned his mental health problems, yet now feels ‘a stranger in the community’. Another does not feel a part of his community, given that where he stays there are a lot of loud younger people and a great deal of drug using taking place, and so he feels he does not fit in and does not feel safe there.

The lady from Merkinch says she feels a part of her community, highlighting in particular the amenities around Grant Street. She says that a large part of this is feeling that ‘we are all in the same boat’.

There was a general feeling in the group that there were always going to be 'idiots', however, and generally they tend to spend time with people they know. One comment was that the community around HUG was 'almost enough', adding that 'people can flourish here'.

Another lives in Nairn, and says that he has recently started to lock his door, although he says it feels wrong to lock it, feeling as though 'you are locking yourself from the outside world'.

4. Volunteering

Regarding volunteering, initial questions regarded Community Council involvement. One member of the group said he was in his local Community Council, where he felt 'with the movers and shakers'. However he did say that others were just happy to 'sit there' at meetings. He says that community councils are a really good idea, giving power to local people, which in turn increases respect for those in office.

However another participant who was on his local Community Council for one year felt that the issues were 'blown up out of all proportions'. Another sometimes said that he sees their activities in the paper yet 'they never seem to do anything relevant to me'.

Regarding volunteering in general, one went into Volunteering Highland on Millburn Road and tried to get an interview but was refused and the organisation calling the police. He wants to get back into scouting, and also to work in a charity shop such as Shelter, given that he used to sleep rough in Inverness. One does distance befriending, and enjoys this, looking to putting something back into the system that they have utilised.

One used to help drive a minibus for shopmobility, however in 2005 there was a change in the law and, with a previous conviction in 2001 the organisation were unsure whether he could be kept on, so they terminated his volunteering. He appeared not to bear a grudge towards shopmobility.

One is registered to volunteer, however given his irregular and long hours finds that the time when he could help out, e.g. a Saturday, is more a day where he relaxes.

5. Voting Experience

Of the five remaining participants, four voted in the May election. They found it a relatively easy process to vote.

HUG has produced a draft report on access to voting [NOTE: not clear as to where the report was sent]). This charted issues such as the potential intimidation of polling stations etc. A query was however made about the arrangements for voting in New Craigs for example, particularly if they were originally from outwith the constituency (an example given of being from Caithness) [NOTE : would be good to have a response to this _ Philomena].

There were concerns regarding information about the elections, with many feeling there was an overload, for example 'voting for voting systems' (i.e. the AV referendum) was not seen as something of particular interest. It was also felt that with hindsight it was inevitable that the SNP would win, with many feeling 'let down' by the other parties. Similarly, there was a general feeling of disillusionment with politicians and the system, lack of confidence and lack of clear information, with an example given of TV debates perhaps ironically adding to this.

6. Equalities

A general comment- 'some are more equal than others'.

One said that women are becoming/remain less equal, however others disagreed, and one citing an example that there are now more women doctors than men.

Regarding funding, there was a comment that, with particular reference to Gaelic, 'they should still remember they are a minority'. Regarding signage, a comment was that perhaps there should be signs in Polish or Chinese, given that they are the major ethnic minorities in the area. HUG had also recently been invited to talk to the Chinese community about mental health. Regarding road signs, it was felt that there was an overload, and it was more a case of keeping minorities happy at the expense of road safety and clarity.

Regarding ethnic minorities, there was a feeling however that many natives are less willing to work, particularly in the hospitality trade. Another was confused; he himself is an incomer, yet when he went to the Ullapool Book Festival saw precious history and culture that really should be preserved – he concluded that it was not simply a case of 'either/or', yet required careful thought. Another knows the value of cross-country experiences, yet can understand the anxiety of 'the working classes', feeling that the middle classes perhaps can afford to take a more liberal view on issues of equalities.. She also commented that she wouldn't have expected to go abroad and receive benefits and felt it reasonable to assimilate to the local culture such as making efforts to learn the language. There was also a comment of the hypocrisy of the British, given their record of 'cultural imperialism'. The Australian or American systems of immigration etc. were put forward as potential models in this area.

There was also a comment that the LGBT prejudice was quite extreme, with a comparison made to similar stigma for mental health.

One comment regarding prejudice -'there should be zero tolerance'. She also said that she has seen some changes, with Asians mixing more in the community for example, as well as stating 'we are more tolerant up here'. There was also a comment that research from VOX, the national users group network, that discrimination among ethnic minorities was more marked in the mental health community.

One feels that the whole issue has gone too far the other way, there now being a 'rule for one, not for the other'.

It was felt however that the term 'community' etc. made such questions of belonging and identity quite complex.. There was also a general feeling that what was important was what people felt of themselves and value base, rather than 'others' and their own background (ethnicity etc.) and the Highlands should be welcoming to all.

7. Climate Change

Initial talk of climate change and related issues focussed on recycling. It was generally felt that there was 'a lack of recycling in Inverness', and that 'people should be educated into it'. One felt that recycling more bottles in blue bins should be looked into.

Looking more specifically at climate change, one participant felt that the economic crisis might mean less of an emphasis on climate change. He also felt that there had recently been a marked 'change in psyche', and that the issue wasn't so 'big' nowadays. He felt that there should be both a 'carrot and stick approach to changing people's attitudes and behaviours ..."people should be made to do things differently "

Another felt that companies should be obliged to change their behaviours and bear the burden, for example being charged for wasting too much or using too much fuel- this would then have a knock on effect and may help to change the public's behaviour. It was felt that if people had to pay more for transport this would negatively impact on transport to places such as HUG. This led to a call for improved public transport and concessionary incentives.

Another comment was that the old TVs with the Digital switchover should be recycled to developing countries. Most felt it was the Council's obligation to educate the public on climate change and the practical steps possible.

However, one felt that, good as it was to help protect our environment, ultimately 'as long as the world isn't'- large industrial economies such as China and India effectively cancel out any advances that the UK makes in these areas, in fact such climate change measures by their very nature damage our own economy- 'A story of undercutting and consumerism'. Another felt that littering should be looked at before the wider issue of climate change.

In general the following view was endorsed by all: "climate change is a big problem and the council should do more about this ... it should make people do more, educate people more "

Notes of Focus Group: Deaf Forum

6th August 2011

Lead – Philomena de Lima, scribe – Struan Charters

8 participants throughout the session. Main geographic focus of Inverness, with 2 from Dingwall and one from Fortrose.

1. Contact with the Council and 2. Satisfaction with Council Services

Initial discussion focussed on the participant's contact with the Council. It quickly became clear that this was rather limited, the reasons for which led on to their satisfaction with Council Services. One participant has a hearing husband and is reliant on him for passing on information. She says that if he is not at home it is very difficult and thinks 'it's awful if, god forbid, he passes on- if I was on my own what would I do?' Another is reliant on information from her daughter, who she says is great for this. Others have recently had contact with the fire service for a deaf assessment, and their bank in relation to rent issues, though little direct contact with the Council. Most of their interaction with Council and other services seemed to be mediated through informal support- e.g. family and friends. There was a comment that Council information is predominantly in English, however for the participants their first language is British Sign Language. It was felt that correspondence such as Council tax, although in English, also used complex English which is difficult for those whose first language is not English, and so an 'easy-read' version would be better (*potential to be looked into?*). One participant said she is often embarrassed in such situations (mentioned accessing evening classes and services in general). She said she has not had access to the English language having been born profoundly deaf - words have no real meaning to her.

Regarding Bus-passes, the participants want independence, which bus passes can provide, however the mandatory form filling is a disincentive and can lead to considerable embarrassment. One participant lives in Fortrose and so went to the Service Point in Inverness in order to apply, however she found it difficult given the form filling. She had to rely on writing things down (something she found difficult to do given that English was not her first language anyway) in order to communicate with the member of staff. The lack of consistency- dependent on individual members of staff - in the provision of good quality service was cited.

There was recognition that the wider understanding of deafness and communication was perhaps not widespread; a potential action that they felt that the Council could implement was to provide rudimentary sign language lessons to receptionists at Service Points, as well as raising awareness that English is not the deaf community's first language. Regarding usage of the Service Point network in general, 4 of the group have used this facility. One has someone from a social work support team who often phones for her. Interpreters at Service Points were also discussed as a possibility, however

one commented that often information was private, and so having an interpreter was not ideal. Added to this was the fact that interpretation by its very nature often means that 'you don't get the full picture'. None of the participants were Council tenants, so discussion of their satisfaction with the Council as a landlord was not relevant.

3. Community Life

Discussion then moved to the participant's experience of 'community'. Asked whether they felt that they belonged in their community, one said that her experience had been very good, having moved back to the Dingwall area in 1972. Another, her sister, moved back from New Zealand around 15 years ago and has a similar view of her community, with another agreeing that it also reflected her own experience as well. Another said that in her community of Fortrose she knew some people who would say hello when they passed in the street, however commented that 'there are a lot of new people moving in' and the lack of ability to speak in English was consistently cited as a barrier.

Regarding safety, most felt safe in their community; however one was not so sure, particularly at night. Another agreed, particularly when people had been drinking, feeling safer only really when she was with her husband. There was however a general feeling among the participants that it depended on the areas; the area around King Street in Inverness was highlighted as one such location where people tend to 'keep a distance' /avoid at night.

4. Volunteering

Discussion on community life followed into discussion of wider community activity and volunteering. One participant used to go to a sewing and crafts group, however now the venue has changed; she does not appear to feel much regret at this, stating that 'I've plenty to do at home with sewing'.

The key issue of communication access again reared its head in this regard, with one saying that she had paid up and joined a sewing group as well, however communication issues meant that she spent the majority of her time there waiting and waiting, feeling it was 'a waste of money'. The experience of feeling or being marginalised in groups was also endorsed by others and most felt most comfortable mixing with other members of the deaf community.

Indeed, although their involvement in activities in the wider community was limited, a comment made by one of the participants and which everyone agreed with was that 'the deaf club's great'. Regarding their activities, most in the group were involved in them, it being very important to many deaf people across the region, with some regularly coming to Inverness from the Elgin or Ullapool areas. One comment was that if the Deaf Club did not run 'I would feel lost'. Activities include 10-pin-bowling, travelling in the summer months (including trips to Landmark in Carrbridge and a trip on 20th August to the Edinburgh Tattoo). There is also a women's deaf club, and every 2 months the younger members travel for nights out to cities such as Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

Another general comment regarding community was that their community was their family and close friends (one lady included her dog too!).

Asked about involvement in Community Councils, none of the group had contact with their local organisation. One participant knew one person on their local Community Council but their connection only went that far. Another commented that they got ballot papers etc. through their door for the Community Council elections but due to communication difficulties and a lack of involvement there was no engagement with the Community Council.

5. Voting

A participant also divulged that a long time ago she had made a DVD in BSL to her Councillor (or MSP), about deaf issues, at which they promised to come to talk to the deaf club regarding such topics. She now feels it wrong to vote, given that she has not heard anything since and they have not come. Her hearing husband understands and agrees with this position and does not pressure her to vote. Another says her daughter also understands her position in this regard as well.

Out of the 8 who were present, only one voted in May's election; the main issues for this being those of disillusionment and, again, of communication. Overall the feelings were that the politicians and the political parties showed no interest in the views and experiences of the deaf community. The one who did vote could be understood without using BSL and said that she picked up information regarding the elections from her family etc, as they discussed politics at home a lot; she was still reliant on others. Specific comments regarded money problems, disapproval of David Cameron, as well as Charles Kennedy's 'broken promise' of further integrating the deaf community. Generally they felt that 'nothing is changing'; an older group member saying generally that in her experience 'everything is the same' as before.

Another comment showed confusion with the process in general. 'One says this and one says that'. Another did not understand what it means to vote, given that nothing appears to happen when they do; another stated 'it's a lot of hot air!'

Another issue that was brought up regarded access to information, commenting that none of the correspondence is in BSL, and that politicians only send information in English. Comments regarding this and in general - 'Deaf people are always bottom of the list of priorities' and 'Deaf people are always left out'. The issue of the actual voting process was one of concern to the participants, with communication worries and panic regarding this - 'it's not easy', was one comment, 'particularly now that there is a new form with so many options'. One summed up much of the preceding conversation by saying that she simply prefers to watch soap operas on television.

6. Equalities

One comment regarding deaf equality stated 'it's going backwards', acknowledging that society is still behind with equal access. Another agreed with this.

One participant commented on the gypsy/traveller community, saying that she feels it is wrong that they don't pay taxes etc. She feels that the equality legislation has gone too far in the respect that some groups have benefited more than others, with the deaf community being one group that has been left behind in particular. Another commented that 'the deaf community is clever', herself working from the age of 15 and-a-half to 72 in social work and as a teacher, 'but left out'. Another spoke of being paid less due to her deafness; however this was rectified and was a number of years ago.

The wider issue regarding equality was again identified as that of communication. One participant said that she has tried to get in touch with the Council and other organisations, yet that the communication barrier leads to her being frustrated and giving up. Regarding work, it was felt that their deafness was a barrier to accessing employment and although they could perhaps not do some types of work – e.g. being on telephones- there were many other areas where they could work. An example was that of being a hairdresser, where customers could point to the style they wished out of a manual.

Regarding meetings with people who can speak, many felt left out and forgotten, with people saying 'we'll tell you later', and in the end they got a 2-minute summary of an hour meeting, when they really wanted a full summary. 'Deaf people are always the last to know' was a similar comment from another participant, another saying 'That's why deaf people suffer'.

The deaf community feels 'invisible'; given the nature of their impairment as well as the general level of awareness, it was widely agreed. Regarding the possibility of a campaign, one commented 'We definitely need deaf awareness'. To tackle prejudice of all 'marginalised' groups one idea was to educate children of all such groups at an early age.

Regarding whether the participants would welcome more people from outwith the Highlands to the area, there was a general feeling of unease at the idea. One commented that 'some are fine, but not too many'; primarily this was due to the fact that they felt that there were not enough job opportunities for those already living in the area. Another commented that the deaf community themselves find it difficult to get jobs, and so should be prioritised ahead of migrants. Looking at housing as an example, one participant commented that the Polish are housed 'just like that', while others from the areas have to wait. She also gave an example she read in a newspaper of a Latvian dentist who retired to Britain, where instead of receiving a £50 per month pension in Latvia he now receives £130 a month, despite having never worked here. Another commented 'It's just not fair'. A participant who lives in Dingwall said that there are a lot of Poles who live in flats nearby, and she is 'always meeting them'. She also stated that given that others have no housing 'it is heartbreaking to see others suffering'. Another said it is often difficult to tell Polish people from natives.

Regarding deafness in particular, one participant from Dingwall said that she was very proud of her community, and that people had learnt some sign language from within the wider community; however with the influx of foreigners with no such communication this has inevitably deteriorated. There was a more positive comment from another participant who said that the teasing of deaf people had reduced.

One participant, from Dingwall, is proud of her community, yet also finds Inverness friendly and enjoys the shops. She says she finds the shop assistants etc. friendly. Another finds the assistants ok when she is with her husband but if she is on her own she has problems, with another finding the smaller community shops more accommodating.

One participant - of Jordanian origin- says that being from an ethnic minority makes it additionally difficult. An example she gave was when in a shop she asked for the price of an item that did not have a ticket on it, yet the assistant was very unhelpful. She was also name-called on a bus and finds bus drivers 'push her on' when they ask 'where are you from?' She therefore feels vulnerable without her speaking husband. A comment from another- 'it's not nice to be pushed aside'. There was a general feeling however that some people just have rough attitudes and that some, such as bus drivers, have a 'don't care attitude'. Another woman, from Fortrose was trying to get to Inverness and tried to voice her destination, however the driver was not accommodating and also pushed her on. The woman sitting beside her on the bus was also aware of it, the participant commenting 'it's awful to be in that situation'.

7. Climate Change

When asked whether they had been affected by severe weather events recently, the general response was 'not really'. One participant's job required her to travel around the Highlands, yet with road closures given snow and ice she relied on text messages from family and friends to know if she could travel (*Potential for text alerts?*). Another ideally would require assistance to clear the paths outside her home, with her husband also being disabled; however the Council refused this on the basis of it being a private property. Another, in Dingwall, recalled a similar situation, living alone yet owning her home. One, who is 78, requires her son-in-law to cut her grass. However with budget cuts etc. there was some understanding of the need to 'do your bit'. Another example given was of a high tree beside one of the participant's properties which, given concerns over bad weather, would ideally need to be cut down; however it was felt excessive that the 2 households were to pay £100 each to cut it down.

Regarding the 'green agenda' in general, the participants felt that this was important to pursue, however a lack of information on issues such as light bulbs and recycling bins etc. was highlighted. There was no specific information on such issues in sign language. Most were dependent on their hearing husbands, families etc. for such information. It was felt that the Council could do more in this area, particularly given that there is a lot of rubbish that is still thrown away. Another was sent a letter by the Energy

Saving Trust, but could not understand it given that it was in English. A suggestion made was that the Council should provide information through focus groups/deaf club and should explain the agendas – e.g. green/recycling - that the Council were pursuing. There was one such meeting happening on 3rd September- one comment on this 'I don't want to get in trouble with doing things wrong'. Jean Gunn (Pentland) was named as a point of contact in this regard of better access to information.