

The Highland Council Budget Consultation 2014 Phase 2

Report: Equalities Focus Groups: The Budget Consultation 28th November 2014

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1. Introduction

Ten focus groups were organised by the Highland Council staff (See Table 1). Nine focus groups took place. Overall 67 adults participated and two children accompanied their mother at one of the consultation group sessions.

Table 1: Focus Groups

Focus Group	Numbers attended
Older people	7
Sight Action	4
Highland Multicultural Friends	14
Pulteneytown, Wick	13
Seaboard Villages	9
Mental ill health/HUG	7
Learning disability	5
Merkinch	No attendance
Race and Faith groups	4 & 2 children under 16 years of age who accompanied their mother
Deaf Forum	4
Total attended)	67 (Plus Two Children)

The groups were facilitated by staff from the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, UHI-Inverness College and note taking was provided by the Highland Council staff.

The framework for the focus group discussions used a thematic approach focusing on topics drawn from the on-line questionnaire and on services that most groups would have some experience of. Each group was provided with information about the background and purpose of the consultation as stated on the questionnaire. .

The note of each focus group meeting stands as a report in its own right. These are included in Appendix 1.

Drawing on the individual notes this report focuses on the following:

- key messages that have emerged consistently across the groups on the topic areas that were discussed;
- specific issues that emerged in relation to particular groups where relevant;
- Examples of initiatives taken by communities and groups where these were mentioned.

In addition the report concludes by making some observations and comments that have to be borne in mind in relation to the focus group findings.

2. Focus Group Views

2.1 Waste collection and recycling

Most participants across all focus groups strongly supported the current arrangements for the collection of general waste and recycling. However, a number of participants across the groups recognised that waste collection and the optimum frequency for collection of different types of waste was contingent on household size, as well as whether people lived in flats or shared accommodation.

Although some participants felt they could manage with their recycling bins being collected once every three weeks, the support for the current arrangement (once every second week) for residual and general waste collection was unanimously supported by all. Participants expressed concern about the less frequent collection of residual and food waste (this applied to Inverness residents only) on the grounds of health and hygiene; concerns about an increase in fly-tipping was more widespread beyond Inverness.

There was unanimous support across all focus groups for recycling. However, not being able to put glass into the kerbside recycling bins was identified as problematic by some (e.g. older people and disabled groups). This was identified as especially problematic if glass recycling collections points were not easily accessible and required a car or some means of transport to get to the collection point.

Some communities (two examples were cited) have organised local solutions, though these were not sustainable due to costs and factors out with their control:

- A community/a local community council hired a skip as an alternative to a recycling point. However, this was seen as an expensive option and was not affordable and therefore could not be sustained.
- A local small business (SEPA registered) had been established to collect and transport recyclable waste from households to the Council provided recycling point in the nearest town. This enabled people without transport to recycle their goods. However, the business was classified as a commercial enterprise which made it not viable for it to continue. This resulted in a loss of a valued service to the local community.

Current waste collection points for households from the main road rather than directly from an individual household may cause some (e.g. older people) households difficulties, especially if they cannot call upon neighbours to assist.

Whilst some participants felt that they had sufficient information about recycling, a number of participants felt that the information provided was not always clear on the recycling of plastics.

The appropriateness of information provided on recycling was raised by participants in the mental health group and the learning disability focus group in particular. For these groups recycling can be a stressful experience because of lack of understanding of what and how to recycle appropriately. Suggestions for improvements that would benefit all residents included:

- Involving groups and individuals who experience disability in the design of brochures would help to make the information accessible not just to these groups but to all members of the community.
- Accessible information using images/pictures and the use of positive and encouraging language to 'educate' the public about recycling was identified as a more effective approach to encouraging recycling behaviour. This was contrasted with what was identified as the current 'punitive' language used with regard to consequences of not recycling appropriately.

2.2 Art, Sports and Culture

Participants commented generally on leisure, sports and community facilities as well as making specific comments on Eden Court and libraries.

Leisure, sports and community facilities

In general participants across groups expressed concerns that individual and groups most likely to be affected by closure and charges with regard to arts, sports and culture facilities were those who were most vulnerable. There are groups, such as the Deaf Forum, Learning Disabilities and Visually Impaired whose access to arts and sports facilities are already fairly limited at present.

Most of the participants who currently access sports/leisure facilities and activities provided in community centres and halls felt that increasing the costs of using such facilities or removal of subsidies for some groups (e.g. Learning Disabilities) or shutting down facilities would have an adverse impact on the health and wellbeing and quality of life of a number of groups.

It was suggested that accessing sports, leisure and community facilities is not an extra but vital for overcoming social isolation and maintaining the mental and physical wellbeing of a wide range of groups (e.g. Multicultural groups, those on low incomes, people with mental health illness, people with learning difficulties and young people as well as old people).

The impact of increasing charges and/or withdrawal of facilities it was felt were going to be exacerbated for the vulnerable groups living in remote and isolated areas of Highland where the facilities and transport options are already very limited. It was highlighted that the Council should undertake a

review of how all its buildings are used and focus on encouraging more use of its current facilities rather than increasing charges.

There was also concern that a reduction in funding to Highlife Highland could jeopardise partnership initiatives established or being developed with local communities and the centres (e.g. Balintore) to deliver services to communities who would otherwise not be able to access leisure activities.

Eden Court Theatre

Those that accessed activities (e.g. toddler groups) felt that the costs were already high and any increases would reinforce the exclusion of low income families who probably don't access these activities at present. A number of groups felt that the facilities and events provided by Eden Court were not accessible to them in any case. For example:

- Those living in remote rural areas (e.g. Sutherland/Caithness) felt that they did not benefit from the investment in Eden Court because of the costs incurred if attending events (travel, overnight accommodation and fees for events).
- The participants at the Deaf Forum meeting were not particularly concerned with prices going up at Eden Court as they get a discount with the Plus 1 card. However, few people within the Deaf community were reported as using Eden Court due to lack of signed performances. The lack of consultation with the Deaf community by Eden Court on their preferences as to what performances they would like to be signed meant that most of what was provided was of little or no interest to the group.

Library

Participants across a number of groups (e.g. Senior Citizens, Multicultural /faith groups and Deaf Forum) all valued the access to the library. There were broadly two views:

- One that suggested that the library hours have already been cut and there was concern about a further reduction in hours;
- The other view expressed was the need for more flexibility in hours to suit the needs of the users.

In addition it was recognised that accessing internet facilities in the library was an important service for those who don't have access to internet.

2.3 Roads and Winter Maintenance

Participants across some of the focus groups expressed concerns about potential changes in gritting policy affecting rural roads and housing areas in towns in particular, as it was felt that it is important for emergency services to travel safely at all times.

Participants in the Sight Impaired group (including those dependent on Guide dogs) expressed specific concerns about the lack of clearing of snow and ice on roads and pavements. This can result in not being able to go out to work or access other facilities, thus reinforcing their social isolation and excluding them from participating in activities that may be considered 'normal' everyday activities.

2.4 Car parking charges

Views on increasing car parking charges and increasing the number of car parks where charges could be made varied across all focus groups. A small number of participants felt that increased charges could result in having an adverse impact on businesses in the town centre.

More participants across focus groups expressed the view that the charges in the Highland Council area were reasonable when compared with other cities and that some increase in charges could be implemented. Suggestions included levying a standard car parking charge across the Highland Council area for all Council car parking and ensuring that the car parking charges in Inverness are standardised.

There were concerns expressed by some participants about access to disability parking in general, and all day parking in particular in the centre of Inverness possibly by those who are disabled and are in work. This has meant that the accessible parking bays are not available for those who wish to park for short periods of time to access facilities in the centre of the city.

One of the groups also suggested that income could be generated through stricter operation of fines for illegal parking and use of clamping. This was of particular relevance in relation to parking on pavements or other inappropriate places which create dangerous barriers for visually impaired and other disabled people.

2.5 Public Toilets

The overall views on the importance of keeping public toilets open and who should take over their running varied across groups and participants.

Some identified public toilets in communities as an essential service that should be provided by the Council, others emphasised the importance of these for tourists and the wider economy of an area.

With regard to sustaining or funding these facilities views included:

- Charging for using public toilets rather than shutting them down;

- Negotiating access to these facilities in other local premises (e.g. community halls, local businesses);
- Communities taking over such facilities could be used as a positive opportunity to build and / or increase a sense of community identity.

2.6 Burials, Cremations and Lairs

Most participants across all groups, and those who have disabilities in particular, expressed concerns about whether they would be able to meet the increased costs associated with burials, cremations and lairs.

Concerns were also expressed about the stress this is likely to cause, especially for those who are disabled, those on low incomes, those who may not have savings, as well as on the families that are left with having to deal with funeral arrangements. In addition, insurance may not be accessible to some because of their illness which increases the risk of not being able to meet funeral costs and can be a cause of considerable emotional stress. Finally, for those who live in remote areas of the Highlands and choose to be cremated transport costs are already significantly high.

Overall most participants seemed to have a fairly low level of awareness of funerals costs in general. It was also recognised that there is a taboo about discussing death which requires to be addressed. It was suggested that there may be a role for the Council in raising awareness about funeral costs and the different options available in arranging a funeral as well as removing the taboo of talking about death.

2.7 Grass Cutting, Verges and Flower Beds

For some participants **grass cutting** was not seen as a high priority and cutting grass less frequently except in cases where road safety issues was involved was perceived as something they could cope with.

There were concerns expressed about grass cutting being taken on by the community where large parks were involved, as well as concerns that in some communities volunteers are already stretched.

It was suggested that the Community Challenge Fund might be used to encourage local communities to take on grass cutting but there would have to be some way of ensuring continuity of service.

Suggestions for saving money on cutting grass made by participants included:

- Employing people on community service and those who were unemployed;

- Encouraging the use of students on horticultural courses to gain 'real ' experience;
- Growing gardens /meadows which would encourage insects and birds and therefore cutting grass could be reduced to being undertaken once a year in some places.

Most participants emphasised the importance of **floral displays** (and cutting grass) for maintaining a good visual appearance, as well as being important from a tourism point of view.

A number of participants mentioned the fact that in some communities volunteers were already involved in establishing and maintaining floral displays.

Generally there appeared to be a positive view towards communities taking responsibility for flower beds and gardens, but it was felt that there had to be some recognition that volunteers are already stretched to the limits.

Suggestions were made for encouraging 'guerrilla gardening' and vegetable growing.

There were also concerns expressed across a number of groups of the negative consequences for the people (e.g. those with disabilities) employed in the nurseries if these were to be shut. One group suggested the possibility of establishing a social enterprise to maintain the nurseries.

2.8 Employability Services

In the discussion on employability services it was often difficult to disentangle the extent to which participants were referring to Jobcentre Plus in their discussions or the Council run local work clubs.

While for some groups (e.g. HUG) being in employment was difficult due to their illness, overall views on employability services veered between two positions:

- On the one hand, scepticism about the extent to which the current service was helpful with regard to facilitating people into work; for example participants in the Learning Disability group in particular felt that going to the job clubs felt like a 'tick box' exercise especially as the employment opportunities were very limited or non-existent.
- On the other hand, participants including those in the Learning Disability group felt that a focused approach that enabled people to gain meaningful skills and employment was to be welcomed.

However, it was felt that there was a need to focus beyond the long term unemployed in specific geographical locations. It was also important to

include those disadvantaged because of their disabilities (learning disability, visual impairment, etc.). In this context enabling these groups to access meaningful employment (and volunteering opportunities) to help them to overcome isolation and to earn a decent income was emphasised as equally important as the focus on the long term unemployed in specific geographical areas.

2.9 Schools

Across the board most participants expressed concerns about the proposal related to reducing Primary School hours. The main concerns centred on:

- The potential negative impact on children's education and access to other activities (e.g. music lessons, sports, etc.) as teachers were described as already struggling to fit in the requirements of the curriculum;
- Implications for childcare arrangements;
- Negative impact on mothers wishing to work.

There were varied views across the groups and participants on the possible impact of closure and/ or the combining of schools:

- Some especially those in remote areas felt that concentrating primary schools in towns could threaten the sustainability of some rural communities.
- Others felt that combining Secondary Schools as well as the delivery of education by distance learning could enhance both the learning experience and student choice.

One group suggested that pupils should be consulted on this issue as well as on the issue related to school closure.

2.10 Childcare

The few participants who did comment on childcare suggested that the over provision may be in towns but in rural areas there was little or no provision.

2.11 Local Grant Funding

Overall there was little awareness among most of the participants about the Council's Discretionary Ward funding and the types of activities it supports.

However, in the case of those who had accessed the funding it was seen as an important lever in accessing other external funding, and was used for a

variety of purposes to help communities sustain local activities. Therefore, cuts to the Discretionary Grants Budget were identified as potentially having a significant (negative) impact on local organisations and could jeopardise their ability to raise additional funding.

2.12 The Provision of Services

On the question as to how services should be provided, most participants felt that one solution will not fit all and delivery should be tailored to specific needs and the complexity of issues being dealt with.

Some participants were happy to use online services for specific purposes, such as paying council tax or bills. However, it was felt that face-to-face contact was important when dealing with issues of a confidential nature and for those whom using a phone or online service was not a feasible or appropriate option.

Some groups were identified as less likely to use online services such as the elderly, visually impaired and those that don't have access to the Internet.

Face-to-face contact was identified as essential for some disabled groups such as those with learning disabilities, visual impairment and those who were deaf with regard to accessing services. Participants felt that some groups may not understand what is being said to them in the case of phone contact and this lack of understanding is unlikely to be picked up on the phone due to lack of cues such as facial expressions or body language.

Some members of the Deaf Forum use online services. However, those that relied on face-to-face contact were very positive about the service points which they used for a variety of purposes as phoning is not an option. The use of interpreters was seen as essential to accessing services .

3. Final comments

The report has sought to draw out some of the headline/common issues that emerged from across the diverse groups involved in the consultation process and some issues specific to particular groups without repeating in detail what was said in each group.

Across the board the main concern was that the proposed changes were likely to have a negative impact on the most vulnerable. Many reported already experiencing diminishing front line services.

Issues related to the inadequacy of public transport, especially for those in rural locations was a major barrier to accessing employment and services.

A number of communities felt that they were already stretched and volunteer capacity was stretched to the limit.

Overall both formally and informally many participants expressed scepticism about the consultation process and its outcomes. The timescale, some felt, did not allow for more people across the Highlands to be involved in the focus group consultation process and there was a tendency for the same participants to be involved in consultations. Thus reinforcing a tendency to listen to the same voices.

Some participants were unhappy with regard to the way in which the online survey questions were articulated and the topics consulted on. For example, participants were unhappy that respondents were given no option for expressing concerns about the 'significant' negative impacts of some of the proposals. In addition, participants felt that some topics that they may have liked to comment on were excluded from the overall consultation process. For example, 'could further back office/technical savings be made to reduce the impact on delivery of services?'

Overall it was difficult to assess the extent to which participants had sufficient information, experience or evidence to comment on some of the proposals presented. For example those related to the use of distance learning /video in schools.

Budget Consultation – Phase 2:

Individual Focus Group Reports

Focus Group - Deaf Forum, Inverness

19 November 2014, Deaf Centre, Kenneth Street

4 people attended; all of working age, from the inner Moray Firth area.

Bin Collection

The group discussed the frequency of bin collection and whether they could cope with a reduction in frequency of collection. The consensus was the current 2 weeks was right and this was for all households present. Even for those living on their own, because they live in a flat, they find their bins are full at the end of the 2 weeks. This was the same for both the general and recycling bin. There was strong support from the group for recycling.

Culture/Leisure Facilities

Sports

The group indicated that in general the Deaf community struggle to access leisure facilities. In the main this is because of public transport difficulties. However the group would be concerned if charges for facilities were to go up as this could impact upon health and wellbeing and specifically mental health. Some people do have cards – plus one card – which makes access to leisure activities cheaper but they often have to rely on private facilities.

People in Dingwall/Fortrose can only come in to Inverness on a Saturday therefore no access to any other social activities. They come for the Deaf social club meetings which is their main social focus. There is a small club in Wick but no other facilities out there.

Eden Court

The group reported that few people within the Deaf community use Eden Court as there is a lack of signed performances. Eden Court will decide what will and will not be signed so often it is not of any interest to the Deaf community. It was noted that it would be better to ask the community what they want. The group was unconcerned if the prices were to go up as with the plus 1 card they get in for half price.

Libraries

One of the participants noted that he made use of the library for access to a computer. He has found the staff very friendly and do their best to help. He did note that they had already reduced the opening hours but that this had not caused any problems. None of the others use this service.

General

The group noted how important it is for good mental health that there is access to culture and leisure activities but the difficulty is that there isn't much out there for the community.

It was noted that the college seems reluctant to make any signing available for evening classes. The impression given is that they are happy for Deaf only groups but are almost embarrassed at having someone who is Deaf in an ordinary group.

Challenge ultimately is the lack of signing available to be able to access any activity. The group noted that they want to do things but they need to rely on family or pay for an interpreter themselves.

Winter Maintenance

The group was asked about winter maintenance and the proposed changes to the approach to gritting. In the first instance the group noted that it would be helpful to be able to access information about what the condition of the roads is like.

The group was concerned that any proposal to reduce gritting on smaller rural roads would impact upon the ability of the emergency services or carers to access people safely. The group felt there should be no distinction and that all roads should be gritted.

Car Parking

The group reported that the charges in Highland are already very reasonable when compared with elsewhere in Scotland therefore it would not be unreasonable to increase the charges. It was noted that it may encourage more people to walk.

Public Toilets

It was noted that there was a need to put things in place to make sure toilets weren't vandalised or misused. It was felt important to have these facilities in place and that they were maintained well. Some businesses will not let you use their facilities unless you buy something. It was reported that some of the toilets already run by communities were very good and so this is something that should be encouraged. It was also felt that people would be happy to pay a small amount to be able to use a toilet.

Burials

The group was surprised at quite how expensive it was and did feel that it would be a large jump to increase the charges up to the Scottish average all at once.

Grass cutting

In general the group felt that this was neither a high nor an important priority and cutting the grass a few times a year should be quite enough. They did note however that it was nice to have flowers around, especially for the tourists, but that communities could do more just like they do in Alness.

Employability

At the moment the Deaf community have no access to these services. They would like to as they find that the Job Centre won't provide them with interpreters or assist them access the service. One of the group noted that he hadn't worked for years but would really like to but struggles to find anyone to help him get work.

Schools

Distance learning

In general the group did not agree with the proposal for video conferencing. It was noted that this technology goes down a lot which meant there would be no access to the facility for the children. It was also noted that Deaf children are now integrated into mainstream classes. There is already not enough access or support available with often interpreters not qualified to levels required. They would be concerned at the lack of face to face contact and how Deaf children would be able to access this type of teaching.

However there was the alternative view that this sort of approach would be fine but it would be important that the quality of the video was high in particular for Deaf children to be able to see what is being said.

Length of the pupil day

There was concern that if this meant changing the end of the school day then it would be likely to impact upon parents the most.

Discretionary Grants

It was noted that the group find that the processes in place are 'too English' i.e. all are based on written documentation. The majority of the Deaf Community finds it difficult to access English given that BSL is a separate language with its own grammar etc.

How the Council provides services

The group noted that face to face contact is really important to be able to access services. It was reported that having a relationship with a person at the Service Point is important for some members of the group.

The group reported that Service Points were very good. They use it for Council tax payments, bus passes and paying for other services. Some noted that they used online payments but others that they had struggled with this payment method. Without the Service Point the Deaf community would not be able to access services due to also inability to use the phone. The Council has been very good and services are generally accessible.

The group was concerned however at the lack of access to the tax office, Job Centre, Police, utilities services, NHS 24. A lot of the problems also stem from the fact that Deaf community is not allowed to use a third party to access these services.

There was resentment that interpretation access is provided for foreign workers but not for them – the Police and Job Centre were particularly noted.

The group's main plea was for interpretation not to be cut as part of the budget savings.

Focus Group – Seaboard Villages

22 November 2014, The Pavilion, Balintore

9 participants attended, including the local tenant participation officer. Some were unable to stay for the full 2 hours due to childcare responsibilities.

There were some initial concerns expressed about the consultation exercise:

- The consultation only applies to £15.4 million of the target of £64 million. It would have been of interest to some to find out how other efficiency savings were identified and to have the opportunity to comment on them, e.g. could further back/office/technical savings be made to reduce the impact on delivery of services.
- Concerns over the long-term impact on the economy of loss of Council jobs.
- Participants asked about how people's comments would be dealt with. It was suggested that a link to the Council debate in December would be sent to those who helped arrange the focus groups.
- There was not always enough clear information to make informed decisions/comments about the proposals, for example how is the saving in the reduced school day estimated?
- Survey responses do not allow for significant concerns to be recorded.

Schools

Reduction in school hours

It was commented that pupils should be asked about the proposal to reduce the hours spent in class by 30 minutes each day and what impact it would have on them. One participant had asked their school-age child who felt it could lead to an increase in play-ground bullying.

Some felt that this proposal would be a major mistake and would further contribute to issues such as literacy problems and would impact on attainment and, at a later stage, employment opportunities. Teachers already have to deal with pupils with a range of support needs and any reduction in teacher contact time or other support could cause difficulties.

If it means a shorter day at school this will impact on parent's ability to work, particularly mothers.

One solution proposed is for volunteers (parents) to help out at local level to supervise at lunch breaks. This raises a number of issues – is there enough capacity for people who already volunteer to do more, it needs to be recognised how much volunteers already do in communities. There are also (funding) threats elsewhere in the budget proposals to local groups that support volunteers.

One participant suggested a savings idea in relation to facilities management in schools. Contractors are now brought in to carry out tasks that janitors have previously done (cleaning, basic maintenance). Reduced use of contractors and fewer constraints on janitor responsibilities could reduce costs. Another participant queried whether this work could be done by a 'local person' rather than Council employee.

It was felt that the Curriculum for Excellence was starting to have a positive impact on basic literacy and numeracy of younger children, but that older children have struggled. Reducing teacher contact may have negative impact. Generally, it was felt that frequent changes to education systems have caused difficulties and that teachers are not getting basic resources.

Childcare

Access to childcare has been very limited locally; however the school has just started wraparound childcare facilities. This is paid for by parent but is subsidised, but is the only facility other than one child-minder. Lack of childcare and poor public transport has a big impact on people's ability to work.

Rationalisation of school buildings

There has been some discussion about a new complex planned for Tain but people were unsure of what stage it was at and felt there had not been meaningful consultation. Generally, it was felt that it was acceptable to close some rural schools as long as facilities were kept locally, although it was recognised that people's views on this depended on where they live. A

comment was made that some rural schools which may close have had significant amount of money spent on them ('sticking plasters').

Access to courses by video conferencing

Some participants felt this sounds a good option but does not replace the benefits of face-to-face teaching; it also relies on good broadband access – which is not great locally. However, others felt this could be beneficial especially when it is a choice between a restricted curriculum and the option to offer certain courses.

Leisure and community support

Funding of local halls

The local hall (the Pavilion) relies on income from the Council and High Life Highland, e.g. rent for the use of facilities for the employability club and the HLH youth club. HLH also support the youth workers who use the hall. There is a lunch club for older people which is run by volunteers who provide innovative solutions, but their capacity is at risk through proposed reductions in grants.

Reductions in support to High Life Highland

This could have a significant impact for some local groups. An example was provided of a partnership between a Community Council and HLH to develop a post to support local older people – posts such as this would be at risk, and would negate considerable development work. Access to leisure facilities is already poor due to limited transport facilities. Concerns were raised about the potential impact of further reductions in CLD work.

Access to Discretionary Ward Grants

Reductions or removal of DWG would have a considerable impact on the local community. All local community groups use these. Examples of support at the local hall include – hearing loop, new projector and floor cleaning equipment. The play-scheme has received £1000. DWG are often used to match other funding and is an important enabling pot of money to help local communities do things for themselves – it bolsters local communities.

Services

Service Points

Older people are concerned about the increased automation of services, and already feel restricted by what can be asked about at SPs. Not everyone has a landline due to costs. Some people prefer face-to-face as it can 'hide' literacy issues.

Grass cutting

This is already done by the community. In one instance the Council wished to extend a community grass cutting programme which is managed by volunteers. However, the funds available did not cover costs and it did not go ahead. Participants questioned the value put on volunteer management, and the commitment to support community led schemes – funding is not

guaranteed. Some participants suggested that Community Service Work could be extended. Suggestions about tenants taking on grass cutting generated comments about volunteer fatigue and lack of capacity. One suggestion for children to be encouraged to do this was rejected as it would actually need additional resource to support it. The visual impact of reduced grass cutting or floral displays would be very poor for the area. One participant suggested that wild gardens/meadows should be planted with year-round plant and cut once a year – this would have a positive environmental impact for insects and birds.

Income generation

It was suggested that the Council needs to consider more innovative approaches to income generation. Examples were given of housing projects in Europe and elsewhere in UK where improvements to insulation and heating resulted in reduced energy costs; this could lead to realistic increases in rental income. There should be more examples of district heating schemes, using energy from waste.

Participants commented that many leisure facilities were built with 'subsidy in mind' and commented that there are limited options for alternative sources of funding.

Communities can also set up local initiatives – e.g. local oil club which has meant savings for a number of people.

Charges for burials/lairs

One participant commented that the Council needs to ensure it does not provide these services at a loss. It was generally felt that many in the local community will not have insurance to cover costs, and that people are not always aware of options available to them as the topic often arises very suddenly. People would like more information on what the costs actually cover. Some people felt that grass was not always cut often or well. For those living outside of Inverness, having to travel for cremation entails additional costs.

Tourist Tax

This would only benefit more populated areas or those with high numbers of visitors.

Waste

Refuse collection

Concerns were raised that if collections were reduced there would be a significant increase in fly-tipping. Generally, participants felt that the fortnightly collection for recycling and general waste was fine, although they were aware of some in the community that struggled with this frequency.

Recycling

The local community is very positive about recycling and area has a good record for doing so; any reduction in service would likely have a significant negative impact. An example was given of a local small business (SEPA

registered) who had effectively collected and disposed of waste, but classification as a commercial enterprise meant it was not viable for him to continue.

Additional comments

Access to facilities for older people is especially limited by transport. Generally, there are limited resources to make things happen which is why the Ward Discretionary Grant and HLH support is so important.

Areas that need investing in should include Community Learning and Development and in particular development support to get communities and volunteers involved. This needs professional support and skills, time, effort and additional resources. CLD activities are largely carried out by the 3rd sector – HC and HLH focus on youth work.

Reorganisation has resulted in too much centralisation in Inverness.

Wasted money - Some local examples were provided of instances where improved performance could save money – 3 people filling salt bins and spilling most of the salt outside the bins; 7 people tackling removing one shrub, ineffective spraying of weed killer. There was a comment that contracting out work from the Council often resulted in poorer services.

While not referred to in the general discussion, afterwards a comment was made about the importance of the local job club and the impact that any reduction would have on the wider community if this service was affected. Around 60 jobs have been created as a result of work of the local job club.

Focus Group – Sight Action

27 October 2014, Spectrum Centre, Inverness

4 participants attended. One worker at Blindcraft with a relative, 2 staff/service users from Sight Action. From the Fortrose, Invergarry and Inverness areas but use services or work in Inverness.

Bin collection and recycling

When asked about the collection of general waste (green/gray) bins participants had some concerns if there were to be reductions in the frequency of collection of residual and food waste on the grounds of health and hygiene, mentioning the danger of rats especially in warm weather. It was felt this would impact more negatively on larger families rather than affecting

those present. One participant recalled less frequent collections when younger and that people coped. People with transport can take waste to public bins where available. **Remain at once a fortnight.**

All felt that it would be acceptable for recycling (blue) bins to be collected less frequently as these are rarely full and that this would have little or no impact. **Once every three or four weeks.**

Some participants have garden waste (brown) bins; one did not. In summer these fill quickly but not the rest of the year. Not a big issue for participants, there are other ways to deal with garden waste. An example was given of sharing a neighbour's brown bin when it was underused.

There was little use of recycling centres by participants and it felt there would experience little adverse impact if hours were reduced, and **is a change that could be coped with.** An example was provided of a local community council hiring a skip as a pilot project as an alternative to a recycling point, however the skip is expensive and there are issues of waste being left nearby rather than deposited in the skip.

Art, Sport and Culture

Some participants did not regularly use local facilities but felt they were well used by others locally; in this case they were unsure the impact would be. One participant is involved with an independent village hall which receives little Council funding so any reduction would not make a huge impact – their community would carry out additional fundraising activities to meet any shortfall, and in this instance it was **a change that could be coped with.**

Roads and Winter Maintenance

This issue generated much discussion about some specific impacts on disabled people, especially around clearing of both roads and pavements as there is a considerable impact on sight impaired people when snow and ice appear. If these are not addressed safely in the winter months it can be particularly isolating for those affected by visual impairments. For those with guide dogs, the dogs need to be able to see the kerb edges to be able to work effectively. If guide dogs are unable to work this disadvantages blind people. Poor roadside trimming of branches and foliage can also be a danger – sometimes these are cut by members of the local community, but not on a regular basis.

Participants' related experiences of people (sighted and visually impaired) having to walk in the middle of the road because pavements are too dangerous. Snow is pushed onto pavements and left to pile up in both rural and urban locations, in one instance piled on a participant's driveway. There were examples of people not being able to go to work, and one participant had been told 'not to go out' by their boss.

There may be a need to reconsider the priorities for secondary routes – pavements at Sight Action and Blindcraft (previously both situated in urban residential roads which would be classed as ‘other’) have been cleared in the past only after managers have complained. A lesser priority on ‘other’ roads and adhering to policy is **likely to cause some difficulty** and a resultant impact on visually impaired people which may mean they are unable to go to work or elsewhere resulting in further isolation.

Car parking charges

There were **mixed views** on increasing car parking charges and increasing the number of car parks where charges would be made. Some felt it was reasonable to do both and it may be a helpful change, others felt it would cause some difficulty and that parking problems would be spread elsewhere though people using free parking areas.

There was a suggestion that income could be generated through stricter operation of fines for illegal parking and use of clamping. This was of particular relevance in relation to parking on pavements or other inappropriate places which create dangerous barriers for visually impaired and other disabled people, as well as improper use of accessible parking bays.

Public Toilets

There was a general feeling that if facilities are allowed to close that this could generate complaints and impact negatively on tourism. There is still an impression that businesses frown upon use of toilets unless purchases are made.

Again, there were differing views about rural toilets in particular. There was a view that there should be a seasonal approach to keeping these open, but on the other hand it was felt they should be kept open irrespective of who runs them.

One participant is involved with a local village hall which currently receives a comfort grant. It was remarked that this does not cover the full costs once running, cleaning and supply costs are accounted for – probably about 75% covered.

Generally, it was felt that public toilets should be kept open, if some facilities were to close **this would cause some difficulty**.

Burials, Cremations and Lairs

When asked about proposals to increase charges for burial and cremation services, those present expressed the opinion that **this could cause some difficulty**. It was felt that even in circumstances where people have made some provision; the increasing costs of bereavement mean that many people already struggle, and this is an additional burden on families at an emotional

time. This may impact on those who try to put money aside, or to families who are left to cover costs.

There were a couple of additional comments:

- This can be a worrying topic of concern for disabled people in terms of bereavement of parents.
- In some areas there are few lairs left, and there can be additional costs associated with trying to arrange burials if family lairs are in a different area.

Grass Cutting, verges and flower beds

There were examples of rural areas where grass cutting is already addressed as low priority, e.g. once a year, and that generally this is **a change that can be coped with**, although in some areas individual members of the community will cut main road verges in between Council cuts.

However, we also heard about existing instances of cutting vegetation on road verges for road safety reasons and that this is not always effective as patches of long grass are often left and visibility remains restricted and **could cause some difficulty**.

As participants are visually impaired this is not something they would take on personally. Some participants were aware of instances where community volunteers already take on grass cutting, but volunteers are not always available. This was very much seen as a Council responsibility (something we pay our Council Tax for).

It was generally felt that if other communities were not able to take on the maintenance of flower beds that this would have an adverse effect on the visual impact and would be detrimental to tourism in particular.

Employability Services

It was felt that targeting employability services **could be a helpful change** as long as targeting was considered beyond just long-term unemployed and geographic disadvantaged areas. By this, it was meant that there should be an element of preventing people getting to the stage of becoming long-term unemployed; young people and disabled people were mentioned specifically in this context.

There was some discussion around the impact of employment and unemployment on disabled people and specifically on those with a visual impairment. It was stated that 'able-bodied' people have more employment opportunities, and a plea that anyone affected by disability should be given the support they need. A number of those present work for a 'disability' organisation and that they would have limited opportunity of finding employment in the mainstream labour market.

It was suggested that the demoralising impact of long-term unemployment on people's mental health and general well-being is not recognised – and this needs to be considered were support to be reduced. There are not always jobs available locally, not everyone can relocate easily. For everyone shortlisted for jobs, many people hear nothing further beyond application stage. There was also a comment that individual needs should be considered not just 'areas' as mentioned in the proposal.

Schools

While the initial reaction to closing schools was reluctant and recalled experiences of young children staying in hostels and having long journeys, following discussion the participants felt that this could result in **a change for the better** in areas where existing schools were close by and that it could be a beneficial learning experience for pupils for schools to be combined.

The question about reducing the hours spent in class by 30 minutes had no direct impact on those participating. Generally they were of the opinion that if this did not mean less hours in school and resulting associated increases in childcare this was **a change that could be coped with**, otherwise it could **cause some difficulty** to some families.

Distance learning for secondary schools could be **a change for the better**, especially for senior pupils who are likely to be more self-reliant. One participant discussed the benefits they and their peers found in using video conferencing and other technology – as well as the frustrating experience of not having courses on offer when this form of delivery could have provided a solution.

Childcare

Not applicable to those participating

Local grant funding

Only one participant was aware of the Council's Discretionary Ward funding and the types of activities it supports. In this instance, it was felt that while it was useful to be able to access the funding, their community could 'live without it' and therefore for this participant it was **a change that could be coped with**.

How we provide services

When asked about their levels of agreement or disagreement with a set of six principles, participants gave the following responses:

- Need to offer a face-to-face point of contact for those who don't want to use or cannot use technology, or for more complex enquiries.

All strongly agree

Very few (visually impaired and often older) clients can use PCs. We have an aging population, and not everyone hears well on the phone as hearing

deteriorates with age. Need face-to-face and understanding contact – really important for visually impaired people.

- One solution will not suit all communities

Strongly agree

- It is about providing services not keeping buildings

Strongly agree

- Consider potential for moving work out of Inverness to support staff working from home or other local locations

Neither agree or disagree.

Depends on the service and whether there is any impact on customers.

- Adopting an appointment based Registration Service to enable a mobile service to replace a dedicated Registrar in some communities

Agree.

Already aware of part-time posts with an appointment based system which works well, especially in areas where use is infrequent.

- Address the need for dealing with complex and confidential issues where there may not be a dedicated service point

Strongly agree.

Especially where it is appointment based, there needs to be a separate room available for appointments and privacy respected.

Additional comment

There was an additional comment about income generation. One participant was concerned by the number of shops closing in Inverness and felt that by reducing rates for small businesses there would be an effect of encouraging occupancy and thereby increasing income.

Focus Group - Highland Multicultural Friends

30 October 2014, Cameron Centre, Inverness

14 participants attended including 2 group's coordinators (all female attendees, from countries including Pakistan, Turkey, Czech Republic, India)

Bin collection / recycling

All the group attendees recycle using current Council bin collection schedule. The group liked the current bin collection schedule but said that they would like more information on what can be recycled particularly around some plastics materials.

In terms of reducing refusal collection the group agreed that the current system is working very well and they would not want to see any changes to it. Only one person said that the current collection schedule was not sufficient. It was highlighted that refusal needs varies depending on an individual household needs with potentially some being able to cope with fewer collections. The group agreed that food waste bin could not be collected only once a month and that some would potentially cope with one collection per fortnight; ideally with one weekly collection. General waste could be collected more often and plastic (blue bin) could be collected less often. It was acknowledged that the reduction in food waste collection could create a health hazard with also possibility of residents putting food waste in a general bin.

The need to increase people's awareness including information on what happens to our waste, through Council website, schools and groups was also highlighted. Important is however to reduce packaging and encourage producers to use more cardboard.

Art, sports, culture

Leisure

5 participants regularly use leisure facilities with some using it during reduced charged hours. The group agreed that the current price, especially its family package, offers a very good value for money. The group felt that an increase in charges would make more difficult for them to access the services and as results they would use it less often. But this would not mean stopping using the service all together. Packages should be introduced with different pricing for example for swimming or classes only and a full package inclusive of all the services.

Venue hire

Increase in venue hiring charges would significantly and adversely impact on this group. The group uses Cameron Centre 3 days a week with 1 or 2 classes daily. The group's classes can be attended by up to 30 participants. Increase in hiring charges would have a big impact on this group impacting on number of classes available (fewer of classes).

It was highlighted that Cameron Centre is a very good venue for this group; alternative venue was sought but the group was not able to find such which would meet all the requirements and offer a good value for money.

It was highlighted that the Council should review how all its buildings are used and focus on encouraging more use of its current facilities rather than increasing charges. It is important to keep the building occupied rather them staying empty.

Eden Court

Some group's attendees have never used Eden Court; some do occasionally (e.g. baby classes, films) and one person use the facility very frequently like 1 or 2 times a week. Those who attend different classes commented that the costs are already high, particularly for baby classes. Despite that these classes are very busy.

Libraries

The majority of participants use library services. When suggested shortening library hours, the group felt that the hours were already short, comparing for example with libraries in other cities like Chicago. The group however praised what is already available that the fact that the use of libraries is free of charge.

Car parks

The group felt that increasing parking charges is counterproductive as people will not access the service as much as they did and that most in need will be affected the most. Some suggestion was made to charge everyone £1 towards parking (no details were given on what basis and for what period of time).

Participants acknowledged however that parking in Highland is not as expensive as in other cities. It was highlighted that increase in parking charges will adversely impact on high street shops which are adversely affected by the growth of online shopping. Public transport was shortly discussed alongside the topic of parking fees with attendees mentioning the issue of poor or lack of communication around public transport times.

Schools

(most of the group attendees have children school or pre-school age with some having also grandchildren)

Extending lunch time

For one person there was not a problem with extending lunch time the perception was that children already don't have enough time to eat their lunch.

Reducing teaching time

The group strongly opposed reducing teaching time and highlighted that education should be excluded from any cuts; it was emphasized that more resources should be made available to education in Highland. Group felt that direct comparison should not be made in terms of teaching times between our school system and those in other countries; instead delivering on curriculum for excellence and wider education should be compared.

Reducing number of secondary schools

Group did not think that it was a good proposal and concerns were raised that this could potentially lead to all the pupils needing to travel to Inverness, as it was done in the past.

Use of video conference

Group felt that students themselves should be asked if learning through the use of video conferencing would be acceptable and useful for them. Some of the attendees thought it was a great idea as it offers additional value of blended learning. Some highlighted however that it could cost more money to introduce it.

Service Points

Participants contact the Council mostly to pay Council tax at the Service Points. They felt that it is acceptable to close some of the Service Points but not all. They are happy to pay by direct debit or do some business online or by phone. Particularly they would be happy to do payments online however for some of the services, especially of a confidential nature; they would prefer a face-to-face contact. The group acknowledged that older people would prefer a personal contact as oppose to younger generation who would be happy to contact the Council online. It was highlighted that not all the people have phones.

Other Comments

Increase Council tax and water charges

Focus Group - Mental ill health / HUG

12 November 2014, Spectrum Centre, Inverness

7 participants attended from Inverness, Isle of Skye, Caithness, Nairn, Dingwall, Inverness, Kinlocheven; most of them volunteer with HUG.

General comments on the consultation

It was highlighted that online survey is not always the best form of consulting people with mental health illness due to limited access to internet and also preferred face-to-face contact or postal form of consultation. It was suggested that similar focus groups should take place across Highland with local groups working in the mental health field. Concerns were raised that people mostly affected by the Budget savings proposals will not have an opportunity to express their opinions. Some uncertainty was also highlighted around what budget cuts, if any, were planned around social care provision. This is caused by limited knowledge around division of responsibilities between the Council and NHS Highland in the provision of services for people with mental health illness

Bin collection / recycling

Some participants would not mind having less frequent bin collection. It was highlighted however that for some of the people, particularly people with

disabilities, recycling can be stressful because of lack of understanding how to recycle appropriately. More information would be beneficial highlighting not only environmental benefits but also health aspects of recycling. The use of pictures is also a good way of educating the public how to recycle; it was suggested to consult hard to reach groups when designing brochures on recycling to ensure such materials are understandable to all members of the communities. Also using more positive language in communication with the public was advocated by the group members. Such should focus more on helping the public and providing information rather than punishing for inappropriate behaviour (e.g. information who to contact where the bin is over full). Information on what happens to the recycling materials and assurance that these are been recycled would also be an incentive for the public to recycle more.

It was also noted that the Council already saves money by collecting bins in many areas in Highland from the main road rather than directly from an individual household. This means that many people require assistance in delivering their bin to the main road which is often done as a neighbour's help.

It was also noted that some area stigmatisation takes place where more deprived locations including those known for particular issues like antisocial behaviour, do not receive similar recycling facilities as other more affluent household estates.

Art, sports, culture

The group pointed out that there is an impression that many of non-statutory services like arts, sports and culture provision, are not needed; as advocated by the focus group these are very important especially for people with mental health illness, young people, those living on low wage, in remote and isolated areas of Highland with very limited facilities and transport available.

It was highlighted that already many project and facilities, like Arts in Merkinch, Art Gallery, Stepping Stones in Thurso and The Haven in Wick are under significant financial pressure; many others have already been shut. These places are classed often as 'safety nets' by people with mental health illness providing the only opportunity for many of them to socialise; they are seen as something vital and necessary in communities.

The group highlighted that introduction of charges for the use of such facilities or increase in charges would adversely impact on people's mental health and wellbeing meaning reducing or stop using the services all together. Such places are very important for people with mental health illness especially for those living in remote areas where there is already none or very limited number of such facilities and opportunities available. On the other hand it was noted that for people on a good wage charging for these services or increase in charges would not have a detrimental impact.

Partnership working and share of resources was discussed as a way forward to efficient delivery of public services. Number of suggestions was raised like keeping rural schools open and running them also as a community centre, or

using these in partnership with NHS H as a health clinic. Also designing social housing around the idea of corporate housing.
Physical activity was also highlighted to be a very important element in good mental health and wellbeing.

Eden Court

The participants occasionally visit Eden Court however they feel that the use of this facility decreases the further away you live from Inverness. Issue of transport and accommodation cost was one of the main reasons for the above. Increase in charges would mean for the group members using Eden Court less often or stop using it all together. It was mentioned however that Eden Court is used quite a lot by HUG particularly when delivering outreach projects with young people.

Roads / winter due to maintenance

Dealing with emergency situation and delay of getting people to work was highlighted as one of the issues around winter maintenance, especially in many rural areas.

Car parks

Some group attendees would not mind paying more for parking charges. Better access to blue badges and also more disabled parking spaces available was advocated during group's discussions. Also requirement for a local consultation was noted on increasing parking charges. The group also noted the need for a balance approach in terms of increasing parking fees, meaning for them to be not too high.

Public toilets

Taking over the management of public toilets was recognised as a good way to develop or increase sense of belonging to the community. At the same time it was noted that some sense of community was required in order for these communities to take over an initiative like toilet management. It was noted that local tourism and wider economy can be affected by lack of appropriate toilet facilities in the area. If such were to be closed, local consultation was required in order to look for an alternative facility. Also closures of public toilet could mean an increase in public offences.

Burial, cremation and lairs

It was noted that for some of the people with mental health illness increase in burial / cremation charges could have a negative impact because of lack of sufficient savings available and also inability in obtaining an appropriate insurance due to their illness.

Need for more information about funerals and wills was also highlighted.

Grass cutting

No comments were raised.

Flowerbeds

Some participants would not mind if the grass was cut less frequently. Where the grass remains to be cut, the group noted that such could be done by young unemployed members of the community. It was noted that some communities or individuals would happily take over looking after flowerbeds as long as appropriate infrastructure and guidance was provided by the Council.

Employability services

It was noted that many people with mental health illness are not able to work due to their illness and very little support is available to them in terms of finding employment which would meet their needs.

Schools

It was noted that many mental health problems start at the early stage and schools/education plays an important part in either preventing these problems or recognising them at an early stage and if required referring them to an appropriate agency service. The group noted that a shift is required to move from addressing the need to prevention. Also lack or limited services available for people at the transition stage from children to adult services.

It was also noted that there is a need to change attitudes towards mental health illness at schools.

Supporting Trainees

Comments were raised around training social workers on the job with a concern that this will lead through lack of sufficient experience and diversity to deteriorating of service provided.

Other Comments

Around strategic services provision

- Limited knowledge around division of responsibilities between the Council and NHS Highland on the provision of services for people with mental health illness; this impacts on uncertainty around what budget cuts, if any, are planned around social care provision.
- Importance of good governance and management of available resources in order to deliver good services for people with mental health illness.
- Reduction in services for people with mental health problems; the group felt that such decrease was a result of following on best value ethos.
- Interpreting mental health recovery only as independence.
- Need for credible career structure and appropriate training for carers; opportunity for UHI to create a pilot professional carers' training program.

Around operational service provision

- Issue of stress and overwork of carers' staff; the group felt through their own experience and from feedback from others that carers are stressed

through work overload and as a result of all the changes that are happening around welfare reform, and budget cuts.

- Services provided are less people focused
 - Often inappropriate dealing with significantly distressed people by some of the agencies like the Police, NHS, Council; sometimes certain type of behaviour caused by mental health problem is treated by the Police as a criminal offence and classed as e.g. breach of the peace.
 - No continuity of care.
 - Reduced numbers of Mental Health Officers (from 3 to 1) which effects on delivering on Mental Health Act.
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Focus Group - Learning disability

19 November, Spectrum Centre, Inverness

5 participants attended; 3 adults with learning disabilities and 2 people that work with adults with learning disabilities

General points

It was noted that there was cynicism about the consultation and that it had been difficult to engage people. The focus groups and consultation generally felt like a tick box exercise and there was little belief that any views expressed would be considered when decisions are made.

The group felt that there should be less/nothing spent on firework displays. Generally it was felt that the people who are already disadvantaged have to deal with the worst of these cuts, even though the impact will be greatest on these groups.

There need to be wider, more meaningful changes across the whole system of local and national government: austerity needs to be fairer. The public sector should be focussing on grass-roots, frontline staff such as nurses and social workers as they help ordinary people. There are too many middle managers and they should be paid off instead.

It was suggested that the Council should focus more on generating income and running services more creatively, and that the Council should ask people that use the facilities and services about savings ideas.

Roads

All participants felt that roads needed to be a priority as many are already in a poor condition with many potholes. Many participants also felt that winter maintenance was of a poor standard and that bus routes aren't being gritted

at the moment. Therefore any more cuts would have an impact on vulnerable adults who would need to walk to busy main roads to catch a bus.

It was highlighted that grit bins are not regularly re-filled so people cannot grit their own roads and pavements. Generally people are happy to do this if grit is available.

There was also concern that emergency vehicles would not be able to access people and that there may be more accidents around housing areas if roads were not being gritted.

Community Life

One of the participants who works with adults with learning disabilities said the subsidies for Highlife memberships that are offered to these groups make a huge difference. They allow people to access a health and social side to life and that the removal of any subsidies or an increase in price would reduce access, having a huge detrimental impact on quality of life in general.

The group felt that there are limited opportunities for people with disabilities as services have been removed in earlier cuts. Everyone is meant to have access to Skills Development Scotland but due to changes in criteria, fewer people are getting this and even if they do, there is nowhere for it to be spent. The criteria for a free bus pass have also changed and people in the group had lost theirs. This has a big impact on people who are not working, as travelling can be expensive. It is also a barrier to finding work, as it can be too expensive to commute.

Access to work and work experience (relates to employability services, maintaining flowers and Highlife Highland)

The group expressed that many people on benefits, especially those with learning disabilities want to work and would be happy to work for the minimum wage. They felt that the Council should ask these people to take on work such as flower and grass maintenance, as this would be beneficial to both groups.

It was highlighted that social isolation is a real problem for adults with learning disabilities and that working helps with this. Volunteering would also be beneficial for many people in this group, if the opportunity was there. However, it was suggested that there is too much red tape that makes it difficult for employers to consider adults with a learning disability. There should be more support for employers to employ people with learning disabilities.

One participant said he volunteers at the Floral Hall and enjoys this work. It was suggested that by introducing a fee would allow the Hall to stay open, and that it should try and diversify to attract more tourists this attracting more income. This would have a positive impact on the people who volunteer there.

There was a very poor opinion of work clubs in this group. One of the people that works with adults with learning disabilities had to put in a complaint about how someone had been treated. Generally, the group felt that work clubs are

a tick box exercise: they force people to apply for a certain number of jobs each week even if they are completely unsuitable. As there is very little work out there generally, the group highlighted it is even more difficult for someone with a learning disability to get a job. The group felt that funding for jobs clubs should be cut, and remaining money should be spend on something more useful and meaningful, such as building skills or enterprise clubs.

Generally the group was unhappy with the introduction of Universal Credit, as they felt this was setting people up to fail: claimants will be able to spend rent money on other things, which could deter landlords from renting to people who are on benefits.

Rubbish collection

Everyone in the group said they recycle and they felt that recycling bins could be emptied once every three weeks. Residual waste tends to be full after two weeks, especially in blocks of flats so these couldn't be emptied less frequently. If there were any changes, someone suggested that the Council would have to be willing to take bins that did not fully close and also to take extra bin bags beside bins (this is not done at present). However, less frequent bin collections could result in an increase in fly-tipping which would have an associated increase in cost. One person suggested improving the efficiency of the bin collectors, so that less people are needed in each lorry.

In terms of improving recycling, the group felt more information was needed about what could be recycled, especially in relation to plastics. One person suggested leaflets with pictures, which would be particularly beneficial to adults with learning difficulties but also useful to the general public.

The lack of glass recycling bins near residential areas was also considered a problem. The adults with learning disabilities in this group did not drive and had to walk quite far to recycle glass. One person noted she often puts glass in her general waste bin as she cannot carry it to the glass recycling bins.

Toilets

The group was happy for communities to take these over rather than see them close. They also stated they would be happy to pay to use these facilities, but only up to 30p.

Car parks

One person noted that disabled parking should be improved in the city centre, as people that work all day are taking up these spaces for long periods of time. There was little discussion around car parking charges.

Burials

The group was unaware of the costs of burials and cremations , and felt more information is needed about these charges. One person that works with adults with learning disabilities suggested that the Council should offer advice what needs to happen after someone dies to allow people to save for these costs. The Council could also recommend funeral directors that are transparent about costs.

Customer services

The group felt that face-to-face service delivery was very important for this group of people. They may be less willing to say when they do not understand something but this can be picked up through body language and facial expressions. This is not possible over the phone or online.

One participant also said he had built up a relationship with a member of staff at his local Service Point and he would ask to speak with her whenever he was in. He also said he could take his support worker in with him to aid communication- again something that would be more difficult over the phone.

The two adults without learning disabilities said phone and online services would be fine for them, and that the general public should use these services to allow vulnerable people to be prioritised for face-to-face services.

Flowers and grass cutting

The group felt this should be taken on by the community. Although flowers are nice, when funds are limited they are not a priority. However one person did note that trees and branches need to be trimmed to make sure they do not fall down during stormy weather.

The following comments were made by the two people who work with adults with learning disabilities, rather than the participants with learning disabilities: Responsibility for flowers and grass should be devolved to Community Councils. This would make communities feel more empowered.

Highland Council should also work with the college so that people taking courses in subjects like horticulture, painting and decorating can practise on Council land and property. This would allow work to be carried out cost effectively and would allow for pupils gaining 'real' experience.

Focus Group - Race and Faith Groups

12 November, Highland Council HQ, Inverness

6 participants attended; 4 adults and 2 children

It was acknowledged that unpopular decisions will need to be made to save money and that politicians should not be thinking about votes when they are making these decisions. One person also felt that politicians were unable to make business decisions to save money.

Bin collection

All attendees said they recycle and they understand what they can recycle.

One person said the service was good as it is, but he did say he has a small household. Another person said that general waste cannot be collected less frequently than it currently is due to health hazards. She also highlighted that people living in flats in Inverness do not have access to food recycling.

Schools

When the children were asked if they would want to use distance learning, they did not really understand what this would mean. However, they did comment that it could be boring to learn in this way. An adult had used video conferencing for business and felt the lack of interaction would be detrimental to learning. However, she felt that it would be better to have distance learning than to not have the subject available at all.

It was suggested that there will be a variation in how different children adapt to using this technology to learn, but it was also acknowledged that children need to have access to as many subjects as possible. One person thought that Video Conferencing was already used in schools in the islands. It was also felt that introducing distance learning could free up money for other use within schools.

When asked about a decrease in primary schools hours for children in P4-7, one adult commented that when she picks her children up from extra-curricular activities at 5pm, many teachers are still there- how will this proposal save money?

Highlife Highland and Eden Court

One participant felt we should provide areas outdoors for sports and exercise that people can use for free. This would mean people on all incomes can exercise, improving health and decreasing costs for the NHS.

Another person felt that HLH is unfairly priced at the moment- the cost of a family membership is much cheaper compared to individual memberships and this should be balanced. However, there was also an acknowledgement that increased prices could restrict access for families on lower incomes. The family in the group said they used the swimming pool occasionally and would be likely to continue to do so if costs were increased.

In terms of Eden Court, one member of the group highlighted the importance of inspiring children and adults through events that are on at Eden Court. People are less likely to use Eden Court if costs increase. The family said they have used the cinema at Eden Court.

Libraries

The library is not well used by this group for borrowing books, and it was suggested that this was because books are going out of fashion due to increasing internet use. HLH could make more books available online to encourage use. Another reason for not reading is a lack of time.

However the group did say they knew a lot of people who go to the library to use the internet. For many people, including many immigrants, this is the only

way to access the internet. Across Highland people cannot rely on broadband or mobile access.

Tourist Tax

This should be introduced over reducing spending for local people. It would be good for the economy and lots of other countries already do it.

Car parking

This could generate income but we need to be aware that it is an added cost for families. Running a car is very expensive and for many people, it is a necessity.

Free parking after 6pm is valued by families and is good for businesses. There was disagreement over whether a charge would affect businesses- one person felt it would have a detrimental effect whereas another person felt that an additional £1 wouldn't make a difference to people who are already spending £50 on a meal out. However there was agreement that this could be unfair on people who need to park for work purposes.

There is currently a variety of prices for parking in car parks and on street parking so this should be standardised. It would be better to have a standard, fair charge in all car parks rather than have some that are free and some that are expensive. It was acknowledged that because prices are quite low just now, people will complain about any increases but prices should still be increased.

Public toilets

Proposed changes would not have any effect on this group.

Burials

Rather than increasing the costs for the public, we should tax funeral directors who make a huge profit. The group agreed that there needed to be easily accessible information about what options people have for funeral arrangements, which should include options for people from different cultures and religions.

The group also agreed about making burials more expensive than cremations.

Grass cutting/ flowers

One community has a 'community day' where they all do work in a garden. Some communities will not be able to take work over from the Council, due to a lack of knowledge.

One person commented that although flowers look nice, these could be replaced with artificial flowers or different plants that require less work. We should avoid concreting over too many areas as this is bad for flooding.

Childcare

No one in this group uses childcare. One woman said that because childcare was so expensive, it was better economically for her not to work than to pay for childcare,

Ward Discretionary Grants

One person has made use of these grants in the past but only for relatively small amounts of £200-£300 for putting on events. However it was acknowledged that getting these grants can be a lever for getting other funding.

Customer services

One person felt it was good to have information and services online given that this is common in everyday life. By moving services online, there will be a reduced need for manned Service Points.

However, other people in the group highlighted that not everyone can access online services. They also suggested that it can be difficult to have a conversation over the phone if your first language is not English and so it is necessary to speak with someone face-to-face.

Someone also said that when emails and phone calls don't work, you still have to go and speak to someone in person. There was also a concern that encouraging people to go online for everything will result in problems with teaching young people how to communicate- communication skills are being lost.

Other comments

We need to try and change people's pre-determined ideas about what the Council provides. People are used to receiving a certain type of service, but we need to move with the times.

Instead of introducing cuts, the Council should be finding ways of generating revenue. The example given was to increase how the Highlands are advertised in China to increase tourist visiting from this area.

Focus Group - Older people

28 October, Spectrum Centre, Inverness

7 participants attended: 1 from outside Inverness (North Kessock); 2 were representing the views of Highland-wide groups

General points:

There was concern about the Council tax freeze and suggestions that this should be lifted. There were also questions raised about how unpaid Council Tax is being reclaimed.

One person commented that there is a decreasing number of young people and an increasing number of older people in Highland and therefore there should be a greater share of money spent on older people. They have paid into the system their own life, and there is a greater need for spending in this age group.

There should have been greater advertising of these focus groups, particularly in the newspaper.

Recycling

There seemed to be differences in how many bins and what type of bins people had: one woman said she has 9 bins, another mentioned an elderly neighbour with a smaller general waste bin.

Everyone said they recycle. There was frustration that glass couldn't be recycled at home.

There was acknowledgement that different households have different needs, particularly older households compared with households with children. Older people could cope with fewer collections (for example, collecting the recycling every three weeks) but families wouldn't be able to.

There was a suggestion that people could only put their bin out when it needed to be emptied but others in the group pointed out this wouldn't save much money as the lorries would still need to go round.

There was also a suggestion of having different sized bins for different households, so families could have a larger bin and therefore it would need to be emptied less frequently.

People thought a street bin system would not work for older people, as they would struggle to take their rubbish this far.

Funding for arts, leisure etc.

There is a real need for community halls and community centres. These help address social isolation, especially in rural communities. Even in urban areas, these are important as people can't always afford to socialise in coffee shops. These places are especially expensive for older age groups.

Local leisure services are well used but costs are increasing. How can we encourage people to keep healthy, active and social when costs continue to increase? This has an impact on Inverness as well as rural areas. Could people who are working pay more, for example, different tariffs for different age groups? It was acknowledged that the cost of means testing could equal any savings made.

We are trying to integrate health and social care but cutting rural services goes against this. We need to set up more "men's sheds" so there is a need for community halls and centres. Someone suggested making use of legions halls, which are in danger of closing. There could be some Council tax/ rate relief to encourage the use of these halls.

Community Development Officers would be a good source of intelligence to work out where there is isolation and so the need for services.

There are a huge number of resources, like libraries but they have limited opening hours. We need to make the best use of services through convenient opening hours- are we meeting the needs of people? There should be flexibility, especially in rural areas.

Transport needs to be a top priority. The services might be there, but if there is no suitable transport then people can't use them. Transport is the "lifeline of rural communities".

This needs to be addressed at a local and a national level. Some things will work in one community but not another as all communities are different, especially geographically. But only so much can be done at a local level, as there are national constraints e.g. ambulances and post vans can't be used any more due to national restrictions.

There are new restrictions for Dial-a-bus services which have led to a lack of continuity- it was felt there is a lack of common sense a lot of the time. Transport should fit in with other services e.g. visits to the doctor's surgery: transport services need to be adaptable.

The Council should support community transport as services will need to be run at a loss which private companies won't do. Suggestions for how the Council could help included sharing a minibus between a school and the local community, helping with insurance and ongoing maintenance costs. Transport for Tongue is an excellent example, but it still relies on volunteers. We need to increase the participation of younger people as older volunteers won't be able to help forever.

Roads

If roads aren't gritted, can decisions be defended? Vital services need to be able to travel safely at all times of day and night, particularly to help older people. If we want to be discharging people from hospital earlier, we need to make sure they can be cared for properly in the community.

Local farmers could help with clearing snow, but need to make sure it's cleared safely and that snow piles do not block roads.

Car parks

The Council are trying to encourage people back in to town centres and this will have the opposite effect. It will have an impact on older people as charges have the biggest impact on people with the smallest incomes. It could lead to an increase in social isolation if people can't afford to park. It will also affect people who are attending church services on a Sunday, who tend to be older. There was a suggestion of a small flat charge for everyone of 50p to £1 to stop higher costs.

Toilets

These are an essential facility- the Council has to provide these. People on long journeys need them. Charity funding is becoming much more difficult to access so there may not be funding for communities to take these on.

Burials and cremations

These costs are already too high and older people worry that they haven't put enough aside to pay for their funeral costs.

The Council has a role to play in raising awareness about funeral costs and options, as well as removing the taboo of talking about death.

Grass cutting

There is a very good service for grass cutting in parks just now and communities wouldn't be able to take on large parks. One person felt grass could be cut less regularly in most places.

The Council could use the Community Challenge Fund to encourage communities to take on grass cutting, but there needs to be continuity of services and safeguards in place for when something goes wrong. We can't only rely on communities though, as some won't want to take it on and other won't be able to.

Overgrown paths could be a hazard for older people, as they may be more likely to fall.

Flowers

Flowers give pleasure to the community, are uplifting and also attract tourists. Communities wouldn't be able to take care of the larger displays, but threatening to stop doing the smaller displays could encourage groups to take these on,

Closing the nurseries would be detrimental to the people who work there, many of whom are disabled and for whom the work has a real impact. Could nurseries be taken over and run as social enterprises?

Could we encourage people to grow food rather than flowers, which could then be used by the community?

This could be a good opportunity for intergenerational learning- get older people to teach younger people how to garden. This is beneficial for the people involved and would be a way to continue with floral displays. Other suggestions included a wild gardening fund or guerrilla gardening.

Employability

There was a feeling that work clubs are a paper exercise and the people who attend them have no chance of ever getting a job.

Funding support

The removal of grant funding would cause community groups that offer vital services to close. This funding is often the seed for more funding and for other

local initiatives, so there would be a knock-on effect of losing this funding. This funding should be seen as an investment as the work these groups do can prevent other costs.

Disadvantaged groups are more likely to experience negative impacts as a result of these reductions.

How will the criteria for funding be set? Has there been close scrutiny of the criteria? Are groups monitored to see how the grants are being used, and the impact they are having?

How to provide services

The group agreed that there needs to be an awareness of people who are not using internet. The representatives of the Senior Citizens Network said that you can't get the right information unless you go online. There would also need to be consideration of the variable internet service in rural areas.

A mobile service would be welcomed as long as it was organised well and services were co-ordinated properly. Could a mobile service link with other services that are already delivered in this way? Examples of good outreach services were DWP and the Money Advice Service. The Council needs to ensure people are not deprived if Service Points are closed- mobile services need to offer a comparable service.

Someone in the group had had a poor experience of using an appointment based registration service for registering a death in Stirling. They suggested it had been very distressing to not be able to walk in and register the death. The group felt this would have a large impact on the elderly population who are more likely to have to deal with this. One person called it a 'shocking proposal'. It was acknowledged this could work for some services, like renewing car tax or similar, but should not be used for registrations.

There was some support for using video conferencing, if this was based in a library or school. However, there were concerns around broadband connections in more rural areas and if it would be appropriate for people to use school facilities.

General comments:

Schools: One attendee was very concerned about cutting the school day, as this would add up to 16 weeks of education being lost over 4 years. He felt this was a terrible signal about our society, if we were willing to cut education to save money.

There were also concerns about the effect this would have on childcare and the difficulty parents could have if picking children up from different schools and nurseries.

There was some support for introducing distance learning in secondary schools.

Contacting the Council: Some participants felt it was very difficult to contact the Council and that the quality of service from the call centre was poor. They had called the Service Centre but it had taken a lot of time to get through to the right person and it felt like going round in circles.

Focus Group - Pulteneytown, Wick

10 November 2014, Pulteneytown People's Project

13 participants attended. 5 of working age. All local

Amalgamating Primary Schools

There was general support for this approach within the group. This has already happened in Wick and there was a feeling that if the schools were close by then there was no objection.

However, there was some concern expressed at what may happen in the future with the nearby rural schools and whether they will be closed and children bussed to Wick. There was concern at the impact this would have on rural communities.

Length of the Pupil Day

Concern was expressed at the potential impact this proposal could have on parents if the end of the school day was to be moved. There was a recognition that childcare was not the responsibility of Highland Council but it was identified as an issue.

The group was primarily concerned at the impact the proposal could have on children's education, particularly if it was visiting music and/or PE teachers that were reduced. This would impact on children taking up music and participation in music festivals and involvement in sports activities. Both were identified as positive experiences and it was felt any reduction in sport could have wider implications on health.

Participants noted that teachers were already struggling to fit Curriculum for Excellence into the existing 25 hours and therefore the suggestion to reduce the time available would have a negative impact. Some members of the group felt that the level of education currently received was not as good as it should be and that this proposal would be a backward step. There was recognition that budgets are tight but it was noted that retention of the existing service levels was important.

An alternative view from one participant was that children are too molly coddled and that people always want more.

Childcare

In relation to the proposal to reduce overprovision in childcare, the group reported that whilst there may be overprovision in towns which could be reduced, this was not the case in rural areas. It was felt that in rural areas there is often no provision at all and that parents have to take children into town to access any form of childcare.

Recycling/Bin Collection

There was a strong feeling that people in rural areas should get a rebate on their Council tax as they don't receive the same recycling service as they do in urban areas.

There was support for recycling and it was felt that the information available was clear regarding what can and cannot be recycled at present. There was support for glass to be recycled as part of the kerb side collection.

There was no support for changing the current frequency of bin collection. The group reported that both their recycling and general waste bins were full every fortnight. This was a view across the group from all household compositions. Should the frequency of collection be reduced, there was concern expressed about overflowing bins and an increase in fly tipping.

The group did express concern about the level of packaging for food and felt there was a need to tackle/fine the supermarkets in order to address the problem and reduce the level of waste.

Leisure Facilities

There was a strong feeling from the group that people in Caithness do not get the benefit of facilities like Eden Court and Inverness Leisure. It was reported that it was very expensive to attend anything in Eden Court and a feeling that people in Caithness should not be paying for/subsidising Inverness facilities.

It was reported by some of the group involved in local halls that there was very little benefit from the village hall grants as they were so small. However, it was noted that as a principle, should the Council be cutting funding to small local groups then they should also be cutting to large organisations like Eden Court.

Discretionary grants

The group reported that any cuts to the discretionary grants budget could have a big impact on local organisations as this often provides the match funding to access other funds. Any reduction in the availability of these funds could therefore jeopardise bringing additional funding in to Caithness.

It was suggested that through these grants groups feel that they are getting some recognition from the Council for the work that they do. It is that sort of support that helps groups to continue. It was also felt there was a rural dimension to this; that given the distance from the centre, the importance of recognition was more significant.

Public Toilets

The group reported that many of the toilets in rural areas are already only open in the summer and that this was unsatisfactory. There was some discussion around this but the general feeling was that communities wouldn't want to take this on and it would be better if businesses were prepared to do so.

There was a suggestion that charging be introduced locally and there was a preference for this over closure of facilities.

One view expressed was that use should be made of alternative local facilities e.g. toilets in village halls, however there was concern at how this might work and the impact on the hall.

Roads and Winter Maintenance

There was a strong view from the group that the decision to grit is predicated upon the weather in Inverness. This therefore resulted in unnecessary gritting locally. It was felt decision making should be made locally to prevent waste.

There was concern expressed about the existing policy of only gritting from 7am and that many people go to work before this. It was felt that the roads would be even more dangerous if there was no gritting the night before. The group felt that the decision of whether to grit or not should not be made on the basis of the number of cars as this would negatively impact on rural areas.

Car Parking

The views of the group were divided on the issue of car parking charges. Some participants felt that the cost implications of introducing charging in an area that doesn't have it, for example the need for machines, and then the costs of people enforcing, would outweigh any savings. Concerns were also expressed that this could discourage people from shopping within a town and instead favouring an outskirts supermarket.

However, some of the group felt that charging would be reasonable. £1 was suggested as reasonable and that people have just got used to having it free. There was also a view expressed that it could be beneficial to disabled drivers as it would mean people having to park in regulated parking bays to pay. At the moment disabled drivers often cannot park on the street as so many others are already parked there.

Burials and Cremations

Concern was expressed that the proposal to increase charges will impact upon those who can least afford it.

The proposal to change the approach to make cremations cheaper than burials was felt unfair. For those in rural areas cremation is already a significant cost as there are the transport costs to Inverness and often the need to have 2 services – one locally and one in Inverness. It was suggested there should be reduced rates for cremation for people who live in the north.

Grass Cutting and Community Involvement

The current grass cutting is poor – they don't pick up the grass in parks therefore it's very messy – therefore there were concerns at the proposal to reduce the standard any further. It was noted that if there was going to be longer left between cuts, then each cut would take longer and whether this would ultimately save money? It was noted that rural areas don't have their grass cut and a point made that Council tenants should not be getting their grass cut.

In relation to grass cutting, the group were asked whether communities could take on this and other sorts of services within their community? There was a general view that communities are doing enough already. It was always elderly people in an area and there was concern about volunteer fatigue. There was a need to encourage younger people to get involved with this but also noted that cutting the grass of parks/sports fields was too much for communities to take on.

It was suggested that individuals who weren't working should be doing this and/or people undertaking community service.

The group were also asked about cutting verges and whether this could be reduced. There was concern at the impact this would have on the visibility on rural roads, especially on the side roads.

Flower beds

It was reported that volunteers already do flower baskets and tubs in Wick. It was felt they do a good job already but taking on more would be a big commitment and, as expressed already, there was concern about volunteer fatigue. The importance of flowers for tourism was noted and also the view that this would result in cuts elsewhere but that Inverness would be protected.

Employability

It was felt that it is important to maintain the service in Wick given that it was a significant area of disadvantage. There was a need to keep money in the town and focus on unemployment.

An alternative view expressed was that this service was not needed and that if an individual has to work for nothing then they will soon get a job.

Customer Services

A strong view was expressed that some people, especially the vulnerable, need the reassurance of a face-to-face service, especially for complex issues. It was reported that sending forms out and asking people to complete them, will not work for everyone.

An appointment based registration service already operates in Caithness and works well.

A mobile service is not necessary or needed in Caithness as everyone comes in to either Wick or Thurso. There are no shops in the rural areas therefore there is a need to access them in town.

General Comments

Efficiencies

It was queried whether the Council should be building new buildings rather than refurbishing old ones. The opposite view was also given that new buildings are often cheaper.

Concerns were expressed about procurement process and the approach of employing contractors from elsewhere in Scotland. It was felt this must be more expensive. It was felt that using local people would be quicker, more efficient and cheaper.

It was reported that there was a need to cut back on Councillors expenses. They should use video conferencing more and change the rules to allow them to vote over video conferencing.

It was reported that there was no need for Gaelic signage in Caithness and that this should be stopped.

Impact on rural areas

The group reported that rural areas were more likely to be impacted upon by any cuts given the limited services already available.

There was a general feeling that people were happy to pay higher Council tax but that they did not want to pay for activities in Inverness. There was a strong feeling that people in Caithness were subsidising Inverness.

There was a call for the return of Caithness District Council as there was currently a lack of decision making at a local level. There was a general feeling that decision makers in Inverness don't realise quite how far away Caithness is.