

WELFARE REFORM WORKING GROUP

Minutes of meeting of the Welfare Reform Working Group held in Committee Room 2 at Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Monday 21 November 2016 at 10.30am.

PRESENT

Mrs M Davidson

Mr A Christie

Mr B Fernie

NON MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr R Laird

Mr M Reiss

Officials in attendance:-

Ms M Morris, Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development

Mr A Gunn, Head of Revenues and Business Support, Finance Service

Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Office

Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Finance Service

Mr S Carr, Principal Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office

Mr D Greig, Policy Co-ordinator, Chief Executive's Office

Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy and Investment Manager, Community Services

Ms G Ward, Housing Policy Officer, Community Services

Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs D Mackay, Mr D Millar, Dr A Sinclair and Ms M Smith.

2. Declarations of Interest

Mr A Christie as General Manager of Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey CAB declared a non-financial interest in each of the undernoted items but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

3. Minute of Previous Meeting

There was submitted for confirmation as a correct record the minute of the meeting of the Group held on 21 September 2016.

The Minute was held as read and **APPROVED**.

4. Poverty Summit

The Benefits and Welfare Manager provided a verbal update on the poverty summit to be held on Friday 2 December at Council HQ, Inverness advising that it would now take the form of a workshop with the title 'Examining Poverty in Highland.' She reported that the speakers lined up for the event included representatives from the Council, UHI, Joseph Rowantree Foundation, Scottish and Southern Energy, and also the Director of Public Health.

In discussion, the Chair requested that the Group be circulated with the links to a recent report published by the Joseph Rowantree Foundation in regard to targeting money at women to alleviate poverty, and a report by CAB Scotland on energy prices. She also suggested the focus of the workshop should be to make recommendations for the new Council to consider.

Both reports are available on the following links:

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/we-can-solve-poverty-uk>
<http://www.cas.org.uk/publications/paying-more-be-poor>

In response to a question, it was confirmed that invitations had been issued to each of the community planning partner agencies. It was also proposed to widen the net in terms of invitees and in this regard Members agreed that reminder invites should be circulated to MPs/MSPs for the workshop. The Chair undertook to follow up on this matter.

The Group **NOTED** the update.

5. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation - Update

There had been circulated Report no. WR/08/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which advised that the 2016 release of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) had been published by the Scottish Government on 31 August 2016. The report highlighted a few of the key findings from this data release. A Local Authority report was expected to be released later in 2016.

The report advised that Highland had 20 data zones in the most deprived 1046 data zones (15%) in Scotland, an increase of three from SIMD 2012. It explained that SIMD was designed to measure concentrations of deprivation but in Highland, 83.4% of people who were income deprived and 83.8% of people who were employment deprived lived outwith the most deprived (15%) data zones.

During discussion, the following points were raised:-

- concern at the number of data zones spread across Highland within the 15% most deprived in Scotland, and the fact it appeared the Highlands was slipping backwards compared to other areas in Scotland;
- it would be helpful if information was available on trends within the data zones, for example in relation to numbers of people who were income deprived or the health of people in communities so that any changes could be observed over time;
- reference was made to the impact of public sector budget reductions and Brexit and the loss of European funding on the most deprived areas in the Highlands;
- a point in regard to Appendix 1 to the report which showed the data sources used in SIMD16, and the potential for a breakdown by domain to be provided in respect of the data zones in Highland; The Policy Co-ordinator confirmed that he would arrange for this information to be made available;
- issues around the weighting given to housing in terms of the data sources used in SIMD16 and the fact this may be explained due to the lack of housing indicators around poverty which may be more difficult to quantify;
- clarification was sought in regard to how the SIMD compared with the Socio-Economic Performance (SEP) Index in terms of the communities identified; it was noted that the Policy Co-ordinator was undertaking further work on this issue;
- a request that further information be provided on the methodology used to develop the SEP index; the Acting Head of Policy confirmed she would circulate Members with the report submitted to the Community Planning Board which described the methodology used.

The Group **NOTED**:-

- i. the publication of the 2016 release of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and that data is available on a data zone, multi-member ward and local authority level on the [Scottish Government website](#);
- ii. that SIMD16 shows that Highland has 20 data zones in the most deprived 1046 data zones (15%) in Scotland, an increase of three (SIMD12); and
- iii. that SIMD was designed to measure concentrations of deprivation but in Highland, 83.4% of people who are income deprived and 83.8% of people who are employment deprived live outwith the most deprived (15%) data zones.

6. A Strategic Approach to Poverty in the Highlands

There had been circulated Report no. WR/09/16 by the Acting Head of Policy which advised that the Council had a programme commitment to develop an "Anti-Poverty strategy", and that the development of this has been considered through the Welfare Reform Working Group. The report outlined options for advancing this work.

In discussion, there was a consensus that taking account of the discussion at previous meetings of the Group, the development of a pan-Highland Anti-Poverty strategy as outlined in Option 1 in the report should not be taken forward.

During further discussion on the other options set out in the report, the following issues were raised:-

- a point in regard to how strategic decisions made at a Highland wide level in relation to poverty would be reconciled with local level strategies which may not be compatible with each other or any Highland wide policies;
- in regard to the above it was suggested that the new Council should retain the Working Group in some form so that it could regularly review what was going on at a Highland wide and local level;
- there was a need to create an environment and framework where there was flexibility within certain parameters to make local decisions to address the issues around poverty and effect change in localities without creating the scenario of a postcode lottery;
- concern about the use of language in relation to poverty proofing so it was clear this was a poverty impact tool designed to make officers and Members aware of the impacts and quantifying the risk in terms of poverty when making decisions; it was also important the tool was reviewed regularly;
- it was suggested that all Directors be reminded of the requirement to undertake poverty proofing in considering the budget proposals for the next financial year; and
- to recommend that Option 2: 'Poverty Proofing The Highland Council' as set out in the report should be progressed and that this be combined with Option 3 which related to new strategic planning arrangements through the Community Planning Partnership.

The Group:-

- i. **AGREED** to recommend that Option 3 would best achieve the Programme commitment highlighted in this report i.e. new strategic planning arrangements through the Community Planning Partnership (i.e. Local Outcome Improvement Plan, Locality plans) and that this be combined with Option 2: 'Poverty Proofing The Highland Council';
- ii. **NOTED** the draft Poverty Impact Screening template; and
- iii. **AGREED** that all Directors be reminded of the requirement to undertake poverty proofing in considering the budget proposals for the next financial year.

7. Council's Role in Poverty and Deprivation - Service Reports

(a) Housing

There had been circulated Report No. WR/10/16 by the Director of Community Services which detailed how Housing Service initiatives were contributing to reducing poverty and deprivation in the Highlands.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- clarification was sought on the timescale for completing the review being conducted in respect of temporary accommodation and the likely outcome of that review, reference being made to the fact that rent levels for temporary accommodation were not affordable

- for homeless people in low paid employment;
- concern at the figures which showed that a high percentage of Council tenants were worried about being able to afford their rent next year and therefore that careful consideration required to be given to whether rent increases were appropriate going forward;
- the potential to address the issues around those tenants who were unable to sustain a tenancy given the significant time and resources which had to be invested by the Council and other agencies in dealing with those individuals, and the opportunities to learn best practice from other areas; in this regard the Chair requested that a short update be circulated to the Group on this issue;
- in regard to the above it was suggested there was a need for NHS Highland to put in place the infrastructure and intensive interventions required around those individuals;
- the need for the Council to undertake more lobbying in regard to the distribution of wealth and the widening gap between the wealthiest and poorest in society and increasing numbers of people in poverty;
- issues around experiences of people when presenting as homeless in Highland given the constraints on the choices available to them due to the lack of housing stock; in this regard reference was made to a consultation event involving users of the homeless service in Highland held in 2015, and details of the event to be held in December 2016;
- in regard to the above it would be helpful for the Group to receive information on the action taken in response to the consultation event held in 2015;
- the need to have further discussions with the Scottish Government in regard to measures to increase the number of Council houses being built in the Highlands, with specific reference to the need to increase the rate of subsidy for each Council house to that received by RSLs; and
- the need to clarify former tenant rent arrears to help inform the overall bad debt provision for next year in preparation of the HRA Programme for 2017/18.

The Group:-

- i. **NOTED** the content of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** that Members be circulated with an update on the review being undertaken in relation to temporary accommodation;
- iii. **AGREED** that Members be circulated with an update on the work ongoing around those individuals who were unable to sustain a tenancy and to investigate the potential for further discussions be held with NHS Highland in regard those individuals with a view to additional support being provided; and
- iv. **AGREED** that the Group be provided with information on the consultation event involving users of the homeless service held in 2015 together with the follow up actions arising from that event, and details of the event to be held in December 2016.

(b) Corporate Development

There had been circulated Report No. WR/11/16 by the Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Development which advised that the Corporate Development team supported, strengthened and developed the way in which services and partnership agencies work together to tackle poverty. It contributed through working with individual customers and communities at Service Points and Service Centre, through the access and information provided by Digital Services, the support role of Human Resources as a major employer in the Highland area and through direct work with Members in ward and community engagement.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- concern that the work being undertaken to tackle poverty in Highland may be overtaken by the multiplier effects on the wider economy associated with the Council and other public sector organisations continuing to reduce their staffing levels;
- a point in regard to the ability of the current interim ward management structure to support the level of work set out in the report, particularly given the loss of staff under

- the voluntary redundancy scheme and additional community planning obligations;
- it was noted that issues around how the Council dealt with its community interface would be considered as part of the redesign process and that this may impact on the ward management structure in future; and
 - confirmation was sought and provided that additional ward management support would be directed to those areas where the Council was the lead agency for the new local community planning partnerships, with specific reference to Inverness.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the content of the report.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The Group **NOTED** the next meeting would be held on Wednesday 18 January 2017 at 10am.

The meeting ended at Noon.