

**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 Wednesday 18 January 2017 at 10.00am.

**PRESENT**

Mrs M Davidson  
Mr A Christie

Mr B Fernie  
Dr A Sinclair (Items 1-4)

**NON MEMBERS PRESENT**

Mr R Laird  
Mr M Reiss (items 5-7)

Officials in attendance:-

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  
Ms S Harrington, Senior Manager Early Years, Care and Learning Service  
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 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 November 2016.

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

**4. Reducing Poverty and Deprivation – Service Reports**

Care and Learning Service

There had been circulated Report No. WR/01/17 by the Director of Care and Learning which outlined activity to address poverty within the Care and Learning Service.

During discussion on the report, the following points were raised:-

- that while the report provided a summary of the Service's activities, more detailed information was required particularly around looked after children and their parents/families;
- in relation to the above reference was made to the significant level of interventions and work ongoing around looked after children, and further details of activities and initiatives were provided in this regard;
- it was requested that a further report be submitted to the next meeting on transitions both within the Service and also between Children's Services and Adult Services;
- reference to the need for there to be a greater focus on interventions around the working poor;
- it was suggested there was a need for a more joined up and holistic approach to be taken by services and agencies in relation to people affected by poverty; and

- issues around the fact the educational outcomes for children living in poverty remained a national concern and the need for there to be a continued focus on raising attainment levels as a means of reducing poverty.

During further discussion, it was proposed that the Director of Care and Learning and the Head of Education be invited to attend the next meeting to allow further discussions on the actions being taken by the Care and Learning Service to break the cycle of poverty, particularly in relation to children, and also to consider the way forward in terms of further activity.

Thereafter, the Group **AGREED** that the Director of Care and Learning and the Head of Education be invited to attend the next meeting on 8 March 2017, and that a report on transitions also be provided to the next meeting.

## **5. Examining Poverty in Highland Workshop – Update**

There had been circulated Report No. WR/02/17 by the Benefits and Welfare Manager which provided an update following the successful event on 2 December 2016 to examine poverty in Highland. It also provided proposals for lobbying and for working with partners and external organisations to reduce poverty for Highland residents. The report invited the Group to consider the suggested improvement actions made by participants at the recent workshop, and the lobbying actions and proposals to work further with partners and others to reduce poverty.

In terms of the key improvement actions listed under the 'Families and Communities' section of the report, the Chair advised that she would seek to explore at forthcoming meetings with SSE, the aim of removing the 2p premium on electricity bills in Highland. In this regard a point was raised for the need for the UK Government to require charges to be levelled across the country, and it was suggested that the opportunities to lobby on this matter be explored.

In connection with the above, the Chair advised that she would issue an open invitation to Members of the Group to attend any meetings she was involved with over the next couple of months which related to welfare reform.

Discussion then followed on the proposed next steps in terms of lobbying as outlined in the report during which Members expressed their support for the suggested improvement action that the housing element of Universal Credit would be better devolved to the Scottish Government. This was on the basis that the housing element was currently proving problematic for tenants, social landlords and landlords in the private sector. In this regard the Group expressed concern at the ongoing problems being experienced in respect of direct payments to landlords, delays in DWP decisions and current delays with payments.

Thereafter, the Chair suggested that an action plan be developed by officers which would identify key recommendations for services and the new Council going forward, and suggestions which the new Administration could consider incorporating into the Council's programme, following the Council elections in May 2017. She also invited contributions from Members of the Group in relation to the action plan.

Reference was also made to the measures announced by Jeane Freeman MSP, Minister for Social Security around the tenant's choice to have payments re-directed to landlords and fortnightly payments of benefits to assist budgeting. The Chair confirmed she would write to the Minister welcoming the above measures and encouraging the Scottish Government to do more. In this regard, reference was made to lobbying being undertaken by Citizens Advice Scotland to have payments split so that an element went to the woman in households.

In addition, the Chair suggested that a meeting with the three Highland MPs be arranged to discuss issues around welfare reform and plans in relation to lobbying on universal credit/welfare reform with a view to continuing to exert pressure on the UK Government. She advised that it would be helpful if the Benefits and Welfare Manager prepared a briefing paper for the MPs on the key changes which would make the most significant difference in terms of

mitigating impacts.

In relation to the next steps, the Chair suggested that there was a need to consider the performance measures that would be required to help achieve the step changes set out in the report, for example the need to continue to increase supply of appropriate social housing. She therefore requested that the Corporate Audit and Performance Manager be invited to attend the next meeting to discuss this matter.

Thereafter, discussion followed on the next steps around working with partners to develop a higher wage economy and implement the living wage. It was suggested it would be helpful if an update on activity could be provided by Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

In terms of improving broadband facilities, the view was expressed that the focus should be on measuring the availability of IT and online facilities to customers in public places such as libraries. The Acting Head of Policy reported that High Life Highland would be presenting the service report to the next meeting, and that this matter could be discussed then.

The Group **AGREED** that:-

- i. an action plan be drafted for consideration at the next meeting setting out recommendations for the new Council going forward;
- ii. the Corporate Audit and Performance Manager be invited to attend the next meeting to discuss performance measures to support the action plan; and
- iii. arrangements be made to meet with the three Highland MPs to discuss lobbying activity and the key changes which would make a significant difference in terms of mitigating impacts, and a briefing paper circulated to them in this regard.

## **6. Welfare Reform Working Group – Focus of Next Meeting**

Following discussion, the Group **AGREED** that items for the next meeting should include the following:-

- Director of Care and Learning and Head of Education to be invited to attend;
- Report on transitions;
- Service report from High Life Highland;
- All service reports to be re-circulated;
- Draft action plan to be submitted and considered, potentially in the form of a workshop;
- Corporate Audit and Performance Manager to be invited to attend; and
- Summary of Fuel Poverty Taskforce report and recommendations.

## **7. Date of Next Meeting**

The Group **NOTED** the next meeting would be held on Wednesday 8 March 2017 at 10.30am.

The meeting closed at 11.15am.