

**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 8 March 2017 at 10.30am.

**PRESENT**

Mrs M Davidson (Chair)  
Mr B Fernie

Mrs D Mackay  
Mr D Millar

**NON MEMBERS PRESENT**

Mr M Reiss

Mr D Kerr

Officials in attendance:-

Mr B Alexander, Director of Care and Learning  
Ms A Clark, Acting Head of Policy, Chief Executive's Office  
Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Finance Service  
Ms E Johnston, Corporate Audit and Performance Manager, Corporate Development Service  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

In Attendance:-

Mr I Murray, Chief Executive, High Life Highland  
Mr D Wilby, Head of Performance, High Life Highland

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr A Christie, Dr A Sinclair and Ms M Smith.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Minute of Previous Meeting**

There was submitted for confirmation as a correct record the minute of the meeting of the Group held on 18 January 2017.

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

Arising from the Minute, the Chair reported that since the last meeting she had met with Drew Hendry MP, and provided him with a briefing note prepared by the Head of Revenues and Business Support and Benefits and Welfare Manager on the key areas for mitigating the impacts of welfare reform. She requested that the briefing note be circulated to the Group and confirmed that arrangements would be made for the note also to be circulated to the other Highland MPs.

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

i. High Life Highland

There had been circulated Report No. WR/03/17 by the Chief Executive, High Life Highland, which provided a summary of the ways in which the services delivered on behalf of the Council by High Life Highland contributed to tackling poverty.

The Chief Executive and Head of Performance, High Life Highland (HLH) gave a presentation on this item during which they expanded on the areas of activity highlighted in the report including HLH's universal services and all inclusive and budget schemes; the provision of free public access computers at libraries; early years literacy including the Bookbug scheme and 'Every Child a Library Member', part of a national scheme which aimed to support reading and

literacy from an early age. Information was also provided in relation to corporate parenting with specific reference to HLH's participation in the work of the CHAMPS Board which had been set up to support looked after children, and on HLH's youth work and adult literacy and numeracy activities including work with offenders, and modern apprenticeships programme. Finally reference was made to the provision of services by HLH in remote and fragile communities and the organisation's involvement in the development of locality plans by the new local community planning partnerships where there was a focus on areas of deprivation.

During discussion, Members raised a number of issues as follows:-

- a query in regard to the age profile of those using free access to computers at libraries; the Head of Performance advised that he did not have figures in this regard but would investigate the potential for this information to be provided;
- reference to the importance of sustaining libraries going forward, taking account of the figures set out in the report which advised that 44% of library customers surveyed said that they did not have access to a computer at home and 39% said that they would not have access to the internet without their local library;
- a point that while the Bookbug scheme was aimed at young children, parents with literacy and numeracy issues also gained from helping their children through the scheme;
- the Group welcomed the fact that HLH would be operating the library at HMP Inverness from the end of March 2017 and it was queried whether there would be Bookbug sessions for the children of offenders visiting the prison; the Head of Performance advised he would seek to clarify this point;
- in relation to the above clarification was sought in regard to whether HLH would have an input into the Community Justice Partnership in future in terms of supporting offenders both inside and outside of prison; the Director of Care and Learning confirmed that HLH had not been involved to date and undertook to follow up on this item after the meeting;
- the opportunities through the new local community planning partnerships to bring HLH and medical/physiotherapy staff together to consider social prescribing and in particular using exercise, for example through supervised gym sessions, to improve health and wellbeing while also generating savings for NHS Highland through this type of prevention activity;
- in regard to the above concern that some GPs were reluctant to refer patients due to perceived liability issues despite the fact this approach had been shown to be working well and delivering health benefits in other areas; and
- a point in regard to whether HLH had a strategic plan which could help support the new community planning partnership locality plans; the Chief Executive confirmed that HLH had an overall Business Plan which provided staff with the framework to contribute proactively and make decisions at a partnership level including the ability to target those on lower incomes where this was one of the local partnership's agreed priorities.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the contributions made by High Life Highland to tackling poverty.

ii. Care and Learning Service

The Director of Care and Learning gave a verbal report on this item during which he referred to the complexities around dealing with poverty at a Highland and Scotland wide level. He reported on the contribution of the Service in terms of the core day to day activities of many of its staff, the challenges which existed in terms of social work as profession in its ability to deal with the effects of poverty in the longer term and in relation to prevention, and the focus of the Service on early years interventions given that children who experienced poverty in their early years were likely to experience lasting effects. He advised that recently published research had highlighted that looked after children and children deemed to be at risk of harm disproportionately came from families in poverty, and analysis was continuing in regard to the complex reasons for this, including propositions that the system was better able to intervene with working class as opposed to middle class families or alternatively that families in poverty were more likely to face challenges which resulted in children going into care. He explained that

nationally and within Highland, there had been considerable improvements in equipping families experiencing poverty to be more able to deal with the challenges in future. However a key focus of the Service was to equip looked after children so that they themselves did not go into poverty. This was through the provision of support with social skills, life skills, employability, further education, and housing. He reported specifically on the service developed in Highland and run by Barnardos which focused entirely on that area of activity. He also referred to the support provided through the CHAMPs Board action plan including proposals to take forward in conjunction with Community Services, a specific action to provide discounted transport for care experienced young people. The work being undertaken by High Life Highland in terms of access to leisure facilities and activities for young people was also extremely important.

Thereafter, the Director of Care and Learning reported on transitions during which he explained that looked after children did not transition into adult services unless they required specific ongoing personal care and support. Looked after children generally transitioned into a life where they did not have the level of support available in the care setting. Therefore, significant work was ongoing to ensure these young people had ease of access to support services if required going forward. In this regard, he referred to the new drop-in facility at Clachnaharry, which would provide a one stop shop for care experienced young people, and also to other types of support being provided in Highland through the Council's employability service, colleges and Skills Development Scotland.

In conclusion, the Director of Care and Learning reported on the support being provided by the Service to the local community planning partnerships in the development of locality and community learning and development plans, children's plans and adult plans with a focus on inequality and poverty. He further reported on activity around attainment levels and in particular the Scottish Government's Pupil Equity Fund and the opportunities to target looked after children and children with additional support needs in future. In addition, the Director welcomed the opportunities under the ESF Poverty and Social Inclusion funding stream to do more work in primary school and early year settings, to build on a multi-disciplinary approach to providing practical support to families in poverty.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the opportunities going forward within the Council and through cross service working to put in place plans to support families of looked after children to improve their situation; in response the Director of Care and Learning referred to the challenges in this regard and particularly the impact of significant reductions in the community learning and development resource over recent years;
- a point in regard to the percentage of looked after children from working class families compared to middle class backgrounds; the Director of Care and Learning advised that the relevant research on this matter could be made available to the Working Group;
- concern at the situation where young people were made homeless by their families and the pressure this was placing on the Council's housing support teams and need for a more holistic approach to be adopted to target these young people;
- it was suggested that going forward there was a need to continue to improve the support services available to care experienced children;
- discussion around the fact that children in foster care tended to have better outcomes than children in residential care, while noting that foster care generally involved a slightly less challenging cohort;
- the fact that housing and other types of support for young people across Highland tended to be patchy and ad hoc, reference being made to initiatives in Caithness which provided funding support to allow youngsters to attend the local youth club; the Director of Care and Learning advised that it had been planned to develop an organised community based model of service provision across Highland but that due to budget reductions it had not been possible to take this forward to date; and
- reference to the challenges experienced in placing the children of travellers in care settings and providing interventions within households given the different norms around the notion of substitute care within the travelling community.

Thereafter, the Group **NOTED** the update.

## **5. Workshop – Draft Action Plan**

There had been circulated a draft action plan by the Benefits and Welfare Manager and Acting Head of Policy which was based on discussions and feedback from the Welfare Reform Working Group over the last 12 months.

The Chair advised that a workshop would be held at the conclusion of the meeting to consider and inform the draft action plan, and that copies of the poverty service reports had been re-circulated to assist with this process.

The Group **AGREED** that officers revise the draft action plan based upon feedback from the workshop which would then be passed to the new Council to consider how best to take forward.

The meeting closed at 11.30am.