

The Highland Council

Poverty and Inequalities Working Group

Minutes of Meeting of the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group held in Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness on Thursday 11 January, 2018 at 2.00 p.m.

Present:

Mrs M Davidson

Mr A Henderson (by tele-conference)

Mr A Baxter

Mr A Mackinnon

Mr R Laird

Mr C Smith

In attendance:

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

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

Mrs S McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager, Corporate Resources Service

Mr E Boyd, Energy & Sustainability Manager, Development & Infrastructure Service

Ms F Boyd, Sustainability Officer, Development & Infrastructure Service

Mr K Masson, Climate Change Officer, Development & Infrastructure Service

Mr I Kyle, Children's Planning Manager, Care and Learning Service

Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Service

Mrs M Davidson in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr J Gray.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Scottish Government Consultation on a Fuel Poverty Strategy for Scotland

There had been circulated paper by the Housing Policy and Investment Manager which provided a summary of the Scottish Government Consultation on a Fuel Poverty Strategy for Scotland together with a draft consultation response. The deadline for consultation responses was 1 February 2018.

During discussion, Members commented on the draft consultation response as follows:-

- the draft response be strengthened to reflect the evidence base which showed that the income required in rural areas of Highland to attain the same minimum living standard as elsewhere in the UK was 20% to 40% higher. Members were therefore concerned that funding could be lost to the Highlands through the use of a minimum income standard approach to fuel poverty;
- the response be amended to reflect that a higher age threshold would negatively affect many people under the age of 75 on low incomes;

- reference in the draft response to many rural areas having a higher proportion of older people than urban areas be removed on the basis this was not the case in some areas of Highland;
- the Group did not support special treatment for the island communities on the basis there were remote rural areas in the Highlands which experienced the same challenges;
- the following sentence contained in the draft response at Question 4 be removed on the basis this was not considered to have been the case in the Highlands: “While it is recognised that rural areas have received more HEEPS funding compared to urban areas”;
- it was important that the community planning partnerships had a central role in delivering fuel poverty initiatives in local communities; and
- the proposed sub targets and milestones should be kept as simple as possible and the main focus should be on outcomes. The monitoring of fuel poverty should be devolved to local authorities rather than the creation of new national bodies with the community planning partnerships having a key role in this regard.

At this point, Mr A Macleod and Ms E Matheson, Better Homes Division, Scottish Government joined the meeting by video conference for a question and answer session.

The Chair queried the purpose of the legislation and whether it was to target any new monies to be directed into fuel poverty or to influence existing strands of funding. Mr Macleod advised that there were no new monies associated with the legislation and that it was linked to Scotland’s Energy Efficiency Programme which was a long term Scottish Government led programme that would seek to draw in investment from public and private investment sources. The purpose of the legislation was also to set new statutory targets and he advised there was cross party consensus in this regard.

It was queried how the change in the definition of fuel poverty would help reduce the number of people living in fuel poverty. Mr Macleod advised that the proposal was not about reducing the number of people in fuel poverty. He explained that the legislation was designed to target fuel poverty programmes better by identifying and reaching those households in most need of help. The current definition was generally considered as being too blunt, and for example did not take into account income levels.

Thereafter, it was suggested the main concern from a Highland perspective was that studies and the evidence base showed the cost of living in rural areas of Highland to be significantly higher than in urban areas and that it had been difficult to capture this in many of the definitions and targeted funding that had come forward to date.

Mr Macleod indicated that he had been assured the minimum income standard to be used in the definition took into account the higher cost of living in rural areas. In addition, the Scottish House Condition Survey and the way fuel poverty would continue to be measured took into account the additional heating and extra fuel costs required to heat homes in rural areas. In terms of income levels, it was proposed to use 90% of minimum income standard which he suggested was a higher definition of poverty than used in many other policy areas.

The Chair then referred to the Energy Companies Obligation (ECO) and the lack of reference to energy companies within the legislation, and also to the Scottish Government's proposal to establish a publicly owned energy company. Mr Macleod advised that the announcement regarding the publicly owned energy company had followed after the consultation had been issued. The Scottish Government also had little control over fuel prices and was pressing the UK Government to do more in this area. He explained that limited powers in relation to ECO were being devolved to Scotland, but ultimately the UK Secretary of State had the power of veto. He indicated that if these powers were implemented then there was a risk of reduced activity in Scotland due to the fact apportionment may be applied. He also emphasised that ECO was only a small part of the overall package of funding associated with energy efficiency and fuel poverty in Scotland.

A point was then raised in regard to the difference the new statutory targets would make to fuel poverty given that the previous targets had not been met. Mr Macleod advised that they would provide for an additional level of scrutiny and accountability on the basis that Ministers would be required to report on progress to the Scottish Parliament.

In relation to monitoring progress towards targets and milestones, the point was emphasised that this should be devolved to local authorities and that community planning partnerships should have the key role in this regard rather than the creation of new national bodies. In addition, the Scottish Government should be strongly encouraging all community planning partnerships to pick up fuel poverty as a key element of their activity.

The Chair advised that in line with national policies, there were many more people with complex health issues living at home, including many under the age of 75 and that this should be acknowledged in the legislation. Mr Macleod advised that the proposed increase in the age threshold only excluded those 60 to 74 year olds not suffering from a disability or a long term illness/complex health requirements.

Thereafter, it was suggested that in terms of schemes such as HEEPS/SEEPS these would be better devolved to local authorities to organise and deliver in partnership at a local level. A more flexible and less bureaucratic approach to energy funding and projects should also be encouraged.

In conclusion of this item, the Chair thanked the Scottish Government representatives for participating in the meeting.

Following further discussion, the Group **AGREED** that the draft consultation response be revised to take account of Members comments and circulated to the Group prior to being submitted to the People Committee on 25 January 2017 for final approval.

The meeting ended at 3.05 p.m.