

Cross-Party Group on Poverty

Monday 4th December 3-4:30pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Paul O’Kane MSP (POK)
Beatrice Wishart MSP
Rhoda Grant MSP

Invited guests

Yve Barry, Scottish Women’s Budget Group (SWBG)
Jim Hume – Change Mental Health
Anne McCormack – Broke Not Broken
Annabel Pidgeon – Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA)

Non-MSP Group Members

Allan Faulds, Amy Woodhouse, Ana Vuin, Andrea Bradley, Ashley Mclean, Becky Hothersall, Bill Scott, Cassy Rutherford, Catriona Mallows, Chris Ringland, Danielle Ramage, Dawn Exley, Fiona McAvoy, Iona Brown, James Egan, Jennifer Forsyth, Keith Robson, Kellie Thomson, Kim Dams, Leah Duncan-Karrim, Lizzie Coutts, Louise Brady, Mairi McCallum, Maria Marshall, Mike Corbett, Naomi Potts, Nicola Bowman, Peter Kelly, Ruth Boyle, Ralph Hartley, Ruth Boyle, Sarah Rogers, Sarah-Jayne Dunn, Sheena McBeth, Stephen Sinclair, Susan McKellar, Thomas Mulvey

Apologies

Monica Lennon MSP, Miles Briggs MSP

Agenda Item 1: AGM

POK vacated the chair for BW to elect new convenor. POK confirmed as Convenor.
BW vacated chair for POK to elect co-convenor. BW confirmed as Co-Convenor.
Poverty Alliance elected as Secretariat.

Agenda item 2; Presentation from Yve Barry, Scottish Women’s Budget Group (Childcare)

YB presented findings from SWBG's Childcare survey 2023 focusing on childcare provision in rural areas.

The survey was conducted in August and September 2023 with 216 responses, 43 of which were rural. Key issues included a lack of available services and affordability, geographical isolation, lack of suitable housing and transport options.

YB noted that results must be taken with caution as there is a history of ineffective data collection in rural areas meaning we may not have awareness of the full experience of childcare in a rural setting.

The survey found that women are the most likely to be the "shock absorbers" in the family. For low income households, this means taking the primary responsibility of managing limited incomes to make ends meet.

During term-time, 38% of women found accessing childcare difficult and 24% found it very difficult.

During holidays, 37% of women found accessing childcare difficult and 32% found it very difficult.

The lack of accessible and affordable childcare also creates further barriers to employment, entrenching poverty. This is compounded in rural areas as incomes in some rural households are below £20k, yet childcare costs up to £1k per month and is required to be paid upfront. The benefit of the childcare offer is failing to filter to those providing childcare, the majority of which are women and low paid.

More broadly on the childcare offer, the majority of women surveyed are unable to access hours with most citing reasons such as not meeting/partly meeting hours due to a lack of nursery availability and limited hours..

The inefficiencies of the childcare offer are having economic and personal impacts on women. A high proportion of women surveyed reported a negative impact on ability to take up paid work, mental health, choosing to have another child.

Economically, survey results showed a range of impacts on women's choices regarding employment to cope with this including: reduced hours and compressed hours (formally or informally), some giving up paid employment. In turn, men were more likely to see no changes in their employment choices but instead increasing/reducing/compressing hours (partner more likely to increase vs mother).

To make access to childcare easier, it is recommended to expand wraparound care, and work to ensure reliability, affordability, and better holiday provision suggested as ways to improve situation.

Agenda item 3: Presentation from: Annabel Pidgeon – Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (housing)

AP opens by noting that we can't address poverty unless everyone has a safe and secure home from which to access other needs.

According to evidence from JRF, IPPR and others Scotland has traditionally had a lower rate of poverty than other UK countries partly due to higher level of social housing – but the gap has closed as the density of social housing drops. Investing in social housing is a key lever to tackling poverty in both urban and rural communities.

Like poverty, SG has strong commitments in this area with a target to see 110,000 affordable homes built by 2032 with at least 70 per cent for social rent and 10% in remote, rural and islands. But we know we need to deliver that faster with too many children growing up in temp accommodation, homelessness figures are far too high and young people are being priced out of their rural communities.

Need for affordable homes is even more acute in rural Scotland. Because of a lack of homes, a high number of second homes/holiday lets; planning challenges and a lack of available land. According to SFHA members, barriers to increasing social homes in rural areas include:

- Housing – can't recruit staff without homes for them
- Land availability, type
- Infrastructure costs
- Lack of contractors – pushes costs up

The Remote & Rural Housing Action Plan was published in Oct 2023 with some measures which SFHA welcomed for example interest in exploring modular build, continuation of empty home partnership, 2nd homes council tax. However, no additional access to funding was agreed. The plan acknowledged that:

“There is limited private sector house building outside more populated areas limiting new supply options and access to home ownership: even more role for affordable housing in meeting local housing requirements.”

AP continued by noting that for those living in a rural area your housing related costs are higher – and it's more difficult to access support.

This interacts with a generally higher cost of living in rural areas: remote rural incomes must be 10-40% higher to achieve the UK average 'Minimum Income Standard' (HIE, SG)

One housing association told us that higher food, fuel and transport prices squeezed household budgets even further. They try to provide a range of support for tenants –

but that is difficult due to the remote and rural aspect of convening resources and accessible spaces. Energy costs are also higher for rural communities and recent cost spikes have meant people are pushed into poverty or self-rationing or disconnecting. Social homes are more energy efficient than other sectors in Scotland, but low levels of income mean fuel poverty -- and extreme fuel poverty— are higher among social tenants than others.

Summertime report from Changeworks highlights that on top of this, the higher levels of fuel poverty in homes is stark. And again, accessing any support is difficult. Not only higher levels of fuel poverty but extreme fuel poverty and the high 'fuel poverty gap' (the amount by which fuel bills need to be lowered to lift a household out of fuel poverty). That's because of factors such as cold and wet climates, a lack of affordable housing, and limited access to support services. Combined with general feature of lower wage economies in many rural areas, these costs constitute a higher portion of household budgets.

The realities of fuel poverty in rural Scotland must be reflected in policy design: 40% of rural households in fuel poverty compared to 24% in rest of Scotland.

SFHA asks:

- Introduce a rural uplift to energy payments - now included in Social Housing Net Zero Heat Fund but extended to Winter Heating Payment and Warm Home Discount.
- Broaden eligibility for energy bill support beyond benefits recipients and to off-gas households.
- Re-evaluate standing charges.
- Explore the introduction of a social tariff for energy bills.

Agenda item 4: Presentation from Anne McCormack – Broke Not Broken (Food)

Broke not Broken (BnB) is a charity which has grown organically over last 9 years to fill gaps. Aims to tackle effects on poverty in Kinross-shire and surrounding areas which is the 2nd smallest council. There is a significant level of hidden poverty. BnB runs a food bank and provides other support. There are a number of barriers to people accessing their support, namely:

- Acceptance and understanding (not recognising need, and value to their support).
- Stigma.
- Apathy.
- Access.
- Shame (believing poverty is their fault).

SIMD shows no deprived areas in Kinross but not accurate. Perception of poverty as “the price you access paying to live here”.

Some of the key barriers to accessing food in rural Scotland include limited choice; additional expense and lack of time to travel to access cheaper supermarkets (BUT also value of independent shops and need to support them as they are part of the community); fewer food banks; stigma to accessing food banks (many are pantries and don't offer additional support); lack of anonymity; [irony of being in a food producing areas], and finally that a lack of affordable and reliable transport exacerbates these issues.

AM emphasised utilising vouchers and a cash first approach to improve choice and dignity, plus providing additional support for things like formula, nappies, and to support people with food intolerances and other dietary requirements.

AM noted that there were a range of people who use BnB's foodbank, but the majority fell into the categories of: single parents; large families; unpaid carers; people in low paid/part time employment – mainly single women with no childcare options.

AM highlighted that women are just under 80% of food bank users are women; disabled households; children.

Lastly, AM noted the acute value of volunteers and how vital they are to communities. Volunteers largely determine what orgs and services are available rurally which can make support from organisations like BnB a real postcode lottery.

Agenda item 5: Presentation from Jim Hume – Change Mental Health

JH opened by noting that most people living on low income aren't in SIMD deprived areas, and not all who do are living in poverty. Lowest wage economies are in rural areas, especially Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. Travel costs; weekly food; fuel are all significantly higher and 1/3 of households in remote rural are in extreme food poverty.

When surveying people who were members with experience of poor mental health, people noted that:

- Lack of anonymity in rural areas was a barrier to accessing support
- People want to be supported within the community, pre-crisis, in a non-clinical setting, through trusted people and settings, avoiding long journeys.

When linking this to poverty, JH notes that living in the grip of poverty continues to be the biggest single driver of poor mental health and determinants like geography can exacerbate this:

Cyclical/bidirectional links between poor MH and poverty for example having a lack of job opportunities can worsen the poverty someone is experience which in turn can cause poor mental health which makes it more difficult to find and sustain employment.

JH explained that layers of economic and social disadvantage can affect mental wellbeing outcomes and access to support. Geographical access to physical services, digital isolation from broadband for online support; a lack of digital skills or confidence/previous bad experiences of cyber bullying? are barriers to good work and to finding support to tackle existing mental health challenges.

Challenges to money advisers and frontline workers due to increase in numbers needing support and widening range of issues, plus greater levels of need.

Agenda item 6: Reminder of final inquiry report – Ashley Mclean, Poverty Alliance

AMcL reminds attendees that the end of inquiry report will be published early 2024 and encourages members to submit pre-written evidence if they wish to do so.

POK Closes meeting.