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ALLIANCE**

WORKING TOGETHER TO COMBAT POVERTY

Tackling Poverty Stakeholder Forum

*Report of First
Meeting*

September 2009

Report of the First Tackling Poverty Stakeholder Forum Meeting

Background

The Tackling Poverty Stakeholder Forum is one of two dialogue groups that are being set up as a part of the wider Poverty Alliance project, Evidence Participation Change¹. This Forum aims to bring together a diverse range of participants including senior officers from central and local government working in areas of anti-poverty, and associated social policy, senior staff of third sector organisations working on poverty issues and experts on the realities of living in poverty –those who have direct experience of it themselves. There are 40 members in the Forum and the members are evenly proportioned between these three groups.

The Forum has a strong focus on the Scottish Government and COSLA joint anti poverty strategy 'Achieving our Potential' and aims to assess the impact of this strategy over the course of the four year project. The Stakeholder Forum will meet twice a year for the next 4 years and hopes to provide a place where relevant stakeholders, including those directly affected by the policies put in place, can come together to discuss progress in tackling poverty and disadvantage. The Forum aims to provide a valuable mechanism for creating more effective policies that better reflect the realities lived on the ground through using a partnership approach and supporting meaningful public involvement.

A planning group exists for the Stakeholder Forum and is made up of representatives from Scottish Government, COSLA, grassroots activists and relevant organisations. The planning group met three times before the first Stakeholder Forum and gave generous and very helpful input into the strategic and practical elements of the Forum.

The first Stakeholder Forum meeting took place on the 18th September 2009 and its aims and objectives were as follows:

- 1) To reflect on aspects of the current situation of poverty in Scotland.
- 2) To consider the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) response to the situation

¹ http://www.povertyalliance.org.uk/projects_detail.asp?proj_id=1

- 3) To consider three of the main areas in Achieving our Potential ('Tackling income inequality', 'Longer term measures to tackle poverty' and 'Supporting those experiencing poverty') to identify priorities that the Stakeholder Forum will focus on.
- 4) To explore how to best use the Stakeholder Forum as a tool for dialogue between all levels of Government, civil society and those with direct experience of the issues in order to strengthen the 'Achieving our Potential' approach and to identify concrete methods for future working.

This Report sets out a summary of the presentations and discussion points from the Stakeholder Forum meeting and identifies the key messages that emerged from the event.

Morning Plenary Session

The Morning Plenary session consisted of four speakers: **Jim McCormick** – Scotland Advisor to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, **Anne Lynch** – grassroots poverty campaigner, **Ann Thomson** – (then) Deputy Director of the Social Inclusion Division in the Scottish Government and **Lindsay McGregor** from Community Resourcing in COSLA. Lindsay acted as Chair of the first Forum meeting.

Jim McCormick started off the presentations with an overview of poverty in Scotland today. Jim illustrated that there had been significant improvements in poverty levels in the first half of the decade – where investments were made in good policy initiatives. However the progress began to unravel in the second half of the decade mainly due to the slowing down of public spending in this area. Although there was progress made, this remained modest in comparison to the scale of the problem.

Key messages:

- There has been progress in child poverty but we are still some way from reaching the 2010 target of halving child poverty;
- Pensioner poverty has halved but there are still 1 in 6 pensioners in poverty;
- More than half of people living in poverty are in working households – many people are now earning their poverty rather than claiming it;
- Half of people living in poverty live in council housing and half live in private housing.

Jim also noted that despite progress in cutting worklessness, there remains enduring inequality in this area, with people in 'elementary' jobs still more likely to be unemployed. He also illustrated the potential that Scotland has in terms of tackling poverty by comparing it to Denmark which has had the same rate of economic growth as Scotland yet maintains low levels of poverty. He then went

on to make detailed recommendations on the 'Achieving our Potential' Framework. For more details please [click here](#)

Anne Lynch is a grassroots campaigner from Drumchapel and has direct experience of poverty issues. Ann spoke about her campaigning career and the situations of poverty that she has experienced and campaigned against in the past 30 years. She mentioned great health inequalities, the difficult situation of fuel poverty and the unacceptable effect that new conditions now being placed on people claiming benefits because they cannot work due to illness or disability is having.

Ann Thomson introduced the 'Achieving our Potential' framework and explained it in greater depth drawing particular attention to the fact that this framework works in close connection with the 'Equally Well' and the Early Years frameworks in order to deliver long-lasting transformational change and to tackle poverty at the root of the problem looking at preventative measures. For more details click [here](#).

Lindsay McGregor then spoke on behalf of COSLA and drew attention to the new context that we are in today. Both climate change and environmental pressures will be of great concern in the near future alongside economic pressures and cuts in funding. Both of these will have a large impact on poverty issues. She spoke about the importance of participation, independence and agency for people who are living in situations of poverty but also recognised the difficulty that this poses for people who are struggling to keep their lives together. Lindsay highlighted the relationship between COSLA and Scottish Government with their shared vision and the need to take a leadership role in taking things forward. For more details click [here](#).

The Plenary Session was followed by questions and comments from the floor which included questions around the risk of missing the very poorest by focusing on the bottom three deciles and the need for Scottish Government to be looking at what it can do with regards to the difficulties that people face with the benefits system despite not having any devolved powers in this area. A question was also raised in terms of what has been done so far since the launch of the framework in November 2008 and also in relation to the changing future that we face and how the framework fits into this context. A statement was made emphasising the fact that people do not want to have to beg for 'hand outs' they want a decent income – whether it be a wage or pension so that they can live not just survive.

Afternoon session – World Café Group Discussions

The first half of the afternoon session was organised in World Café-style where Forum members were allocated to different tables, each with a different theme. Participants were given 30 minutes to discuss each theme. This was repeated allowing participants to discuss three different themes with a mix of different people. The themes were taken from the three strands of 'Achieving our Potential': Tackling income inequality; Longer-term measures to tackle poverty and the drivers of low income; and, Supporting those experiencing poverty. Snapshots of the discussions are detailed below. In keeping with the World Café style, members were encouraged to write comments on the paper tablecloths as well as to contribute views and experiences to the group discussion.

The following statements are the individual views and perspectives that were expressed by members of the Forum.

i) Tackling income inequality

Benefits and stigma:

- **Action:** Benefits need to be flexible, stigma needs to be reduced and they should be seen as rights rather than handouts.
- **Action:** There should be more awareness raising activity on entitlement to benefits
- 'People assessing claimants of incapacity benefit are not trained – this is prohibiting'. This comment reflects the concerns that many people have due to their experience with workers who assess incapacity benefit eligibility. More evidence of this can be found in 'To Banker from Bankies', Oxfam, 2009

The strong focus on employment

- Work is not always appropriate for everyone. This needs to be recognised in all anti-poverty policy, rather than seeing it as an afterthought
- There is a strong focus on work but there are many *barriers to work* including lack of flexible childcare (particularly during school holidays), financial inclusion – information and support in budgeting.
- Lone parents are targeted to get into employment but they have complex needs beyond simply childcare which make the move into employment difficult for some. For example, the education system (particularly primary education) is structured with the assumption that one parent (usually the woman) is at home all the time. Given the nature of the jobs that are now available – shift work, part time employment – many lone parents would struggle to take on such work.

- There is a need to *value* the roles that people play in society such as unpaid work; parents, carers etc
- There are many jobs of poor quality leading to bad experiences in work which does not always benefit the employee. There is a need to introduce more incentives to employers to improve the quality of work.
- 'Pushing people into jobs does not support people experiencing poverty. If they do not get the job they are capable of they will not keep working and then it is straight back to square one'. People often feel pushed into unsuitable work that they cannot sustain, which as this comment demonstrates, leaves people demoralised with no improvement in their situation.

Role of employers:

- There were many questions about the role of employers in addressing poverty. Clearly, having a decently paid job is a key way to get out of poverty, but are enough employers giving opportunities to the most disadvantaged. What more could employers do through recruitment policies and approaches to ensure that opportunities are being made available to those living in poverty?
- There have been improvements in employment rights over the last 10 years such as increases in annual leave entitlement, minimum pay, maternity and paternity leave. However, are most people aware of these rights? There were questions about who should be responsible for raising awareness about this for employment rights.
- **Action:** There needs to be in work support and training opportunities. This is particularly the case for people who have returned to the labour market after a longer absence. Such new workers may need additional support to remain in employment. People also drew attention to the lack of prospects that many jobs offer them in terms of moving on to better pay and conditions.
- **Action:** More employers should be paying the Living Wage. The National Minimum Wage should be increased.
- **Action:** The greater levels of support to create more apprenticeship were welcomed by many participants in the forum. This type of action needs to be continued and the number of apprenticeships should be expanded in the future.
- **Action:** Identify training gaps e.g. renewable energy. Link these training gaps to what employers need and then train people to fill them.

Poverty premiums:

- We shouldn't be paying more for services. This was a big issue in relation to fuel poverty. The impact of the higher cost of living combined with the relative difficulty in accessing services in rural areas.

Income inequality:

- Income inequality was seen as a problem. It was asked if the existence of very high incomes were appropriate alongside the Scottish Government's solidarity target. Is it possible to reduce income inequality by only looking at the incomes of those at the bottom of the distribution?

Financial Inclusion

- **Action:** There should be more concerted action to tackle loan sharks to prevent people from falling into debt.
- **Action:** Education should include financial literacy so that people can manage the work system and benefits.
- **Action:** More needs to be done to promote the work of credit unions in Scotland.

ii) Longer-term measures to tackle poverty and the drivers of low income

Children and Young people:

- The issue of language barriers was raised and it was stated that access to English as a second language training was not sufficient. People highlight lack of affordable childcare as being a barrier to people participating in language classes. This in turn can prevent people from succeeding in education.
- The cost of council provided childcare has increased but it still falls below childcare which is privately run. Although there is more availability in private nurseries, these are not accessible due to the high prices.
- Children who arrive at school do not start out at an equal level. Evidence exists that shows that children from better off backgrounds start off at a very different level to those from poorer families. Achieving our Potential does not address this educational inequality.
- There should be more focus placed on the family unit and how this can support children.
- Support for parents needs to be provided in a joined up context. There is a lot of focus on 'parenting skills' but this is not enough if you have no money and are struggling to make ends meet.

Community issues:

- **Action:** The Scottish Government community empowerment action plan needs to be assessed to check that it is delivering.
- Many questions were raised about the Community Planning Partnership processes across Scotland – do they provide an adequate framework for engaging local communities?

Health

- Health – relationships – health and housing – damp, overcrowding. Need a good environment.

- Improve diet – share practice across Scotland.

Education link to employment

- Participants made the link between employment and future skills. One participant drew attention to the issue of climate change and how future green technologies need to be linked with education.

Housing

- Housing was seen as a central issue which was not given enough prominence in the AOP Framework. Generally housing seems to be low down the list of priorities in relation to tackling poverty. But issues related to housing remain central to the experience of poverty. If there is not access to decent and affordable housing then other aspects of quality of life suffer. Health was highlighted in this respect as well as space for children to study.

Action: There is not enough monitoring of the framework. Many participants asked if this was taking place and suggested that pilots should be set up on some of the points in the framework

iii) Supporting those experiencing poverty

Poverty Premiums

- There is a poverty premium – people pay more for basic essentials - *fuel poverty* is a prime example. People are living with no fuel at all or are living in one room as they can't afford to heat the whole house. Good work is being done but regional variations in climate/exposure need to be taken into account.
- *Profits of energy companies* whilst the most vulnerable pay most. People choose pre payment meters because they do not want to end up in debt with direct debit. But this option is more expensive.
- **Action:** Government needs to put more pressure on energy companies to reduce prices where they happen and not allow them to benefit.
- Under the Energy Assistance Package, expensive energy systems such as gas boilers are still being put in place that people can not afford to run – there should be more investment in renewable energy such as heat pumps that will save people money over time.

Benefits and stigma:

- Benefit uptake is low, access to benefits is lower than it should be– this is related to the **stigma** that is attached to benefits. People are proud and do not want handouts. Stigma is something that everyone can be involved in.
- **Action:** We can work together to change attitudes, but Government must take the lead in developing practical actions to address stigma.

Health:

- Anticipatory care and pro-active health provision can be preventative and direct people to services e.g. 'Keep Well'. Commitment to *prevention* needs to be strengthened.
- 'Looked after children' have poor health outcomes.

Outreach:

There needs to be *pro-active outreach*. Services need to be provided to the most vulnerable. There are trust and confidence issues with people who are perhaps afraid to seek out help due to fear that if service providers were to find out about their situation then their children would be put at risk. There are difficulties in engaging people – how do we overcome this?

Changing face of poverty:

There are different faces of poverty – now we have middle class people with high debt and who are not used to living on a low income becoming poor. These people, if they find a job can pull themselves out of poverty quite quickly but this is not necessarily the same for everyone.

Positive initiatives that worked:

Participants gave examples of a variety of initiatives that were having an impact on people living in poverty, and were helping to provide direct support to them e.g.

- Participants referred to the 'Working for Families' initiatives as being very good practice and highlighted a good model of integrated support for families. Some participants were under the impression that the end of ring-fenced funding meant that WFF was lost and this may have been the case in certain areas. However what is perhaps not so clear is that elements of the initiative still remain in some local authority areas. This statement reflects the desire for this initiative to be continued across Scotland.
- 'We should involve individuals in finding the solutions and not just delivering things to them. We should be better at basing policy responses on people's real experience.'
- The work of the Scottish Fuel Poverty Forum and the introduction of the Energy Assistance Package
- The provision of free school meals to P1-P3
- The expansion of credit unions and money advice services.
- 'There should be more intangible services which provide socialising and support – in addition to the 'traditional' services in place.'
- 'There are some very good financial inclusion initiatives but it is not managing to deal with the large scale problem.'

Suggested future actions

- Banks, pension plans, procurement. Why are banks not offering free banking to poor people – we own them!!
- Scottish Government needs to make reducing poverty a flagship measure and core expression of national identity/pride to win over sceptics and critics. E.g. CBI, 'Daily Mail' etc.
- Improve policy co-ordination between health and poverty policy
- Issues need to be reviewed by the Government that has been laid at our door in relation to potential cuts in housing, Commonwealth Games rail link. What's going to happen now and in three years time?
- Sounds good in framework - but how? How will the government follow through on plans as described in Achieving our Potential?
- Priority: Early Years, Health and Housing and reducing fuel prices
- Financial education training for young people
- There needs to be a mechanism to make a judgment on what the impact on poverty is as a result of the framework. Should be mechanism to look at politics and evaluate in a rational way.
- Providing children with best start in life (page 13). Bullet points need to be road tested. Is a Pilot a possibility? Would be good to see the evidence.
- School clothing grants should be increased (£48 for several years) and more than once per year
- Tax credits should be based on a 3 year calculation of income
- Do not waste a good crisis – opportunity for significant reform, e.g. do not 'carefully consider' school clothing funding but **act** on it
- Develop Food Co-ops

End Plenary Session

The End Plenary Session focused on action planning and approached ideas on how best to use the Stakeholder Forum to help progress. The main ideas that came out were as follows:

- A short-life working group focusing on poverty and health inequalities was proposed by Kay Barton from the Scottish Government. This group will be made up of members of the Stakeholder Forum and selected others and will help review the 'Equally Well' framework on Health Inequalities. This will be fed back into the main Stakeholder Forum and the internal programme board of 'Equally Well' within the Scottish Government.
- A standing group focusing on employment issues was proposed. This group would look at employment issues raised under 'tackling income inequalities' within the 'Achieving our Potential' framework and would invite outside stakeholders such as employers and trade unions to contribute.
- A member of the Forum suggested looking at how to better use the resources and mechanisms that Scottish Government already has in

place. A lot exists but it does not seem to be reaching the people who need it.

- It was suggested that the Stakeholder Forum could monitor 'Achieving our Potential' – what's happening and what's not happening? There is a need for more information on what changes have already taken place and what Scottish Government can do in its remit.
- Other main issues that came out of the discussions were around: fuel poverty, benefits and stigma, healthcare and financial inclusion. There was strong support for looking at how to change attitudes to poverty
- It is yet to be fully decided on how the Stakeholder Forum will follow up on the outcomes of the discussions and the proposals made.

It was noted that this work should also be fed into other existing networks such as the COSLA Tackling Poverty Officer Group and the Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty Learning Network.

The Stakeholder Forum meeting ended with people being invited to write personal commitments and responsibilities contributing to the work of the Stakeholder Forum on postcards which will be sent to them in three months time. These commitments are listed below.

Postcard Commitments

Scottish and Local Government

I will work with a health sub group of the forum and feed their views into the 2010 review of Equally Well.

I will collaborate with SG colleagues to join up outcome frameworks for social policies so we can monitor progress with AoP etc.

I will take the information gathered today back to Shetland to inform our local work on poverty.

I will also feed that into the poverty officers network at COSLA

Feed back discussion to Fife groups and seek to influence their discussions from

To think through how I work with others to _____process and best practice for local implementation.

Think about other communities.

Feed back to the Chief Executive on the stakeholder forum event and highlight things that are relevant to Glasgow

Activists

To look at Equally Well in our own areas and feed this back to the main group

I commit to sending in all my moans about the Welfare Reform Bill and fuel poverty to Scottish Government. I have done a draft copy highlighting 6 people (real cases) who have committed suicide (2 young, 1 middle age). 2 folk who are terminally ill and 2 folk who waited 8 weeks for their giro – not fair at all!

Raise awareness in department or Urban Studies and relevant departments about the ongoing work of the forum and what comes out of it.

Disseminate the work of the forum to students of Public Policy through tutorials.

A commitment to stay on board for poverty stakeholder forum.

Find out more about issues of poverty that affect the community I live in and raise awareness of the help that there is.

I commit to taking the views of my community into this forum.

Organisations

Commitment: Provide research and analytic support, if requested/required etc.

I endeavour to ensure the participatory research is fed into the stakeholder forum

Commit to promoting poverty stakeholder forum messages to VHS network

Happy to give detailed financial inclusion input and participate in any short life working group where financial inclusion issues feature

- 1) Raise awareness of outcomes from today's event with CHEX networks*
- 2) Explore potential for following up priorities identified today with CHEX networks.*

After confirming with my manager I can feedback on the fuel poverty forum and the Scottish consumer forum both of which deal with issues of poverty and rights and responsibilities of stakeholders. Anything additional will be e-mailed.

We may be interested in feeding into the short life working group but this is dependent on confirmation and a look at the report.

I commit to:

- 1) Serving on the EPIC Steering group for the Stakeholder Forum*
- 2) Appropriate serve on one of the working groups*
- 3) Contribute ideas from the other networks in which I'm involved.*

Happy to be involved with focusing on the role of employers

Main messages

Tackling income inequality

- ❖ If the Scottish Government and COSLA want to tackle income inequality, more focus should be placed on the top earners as well as those at the very bottom. As long as there is no limit to what top earners can accumulate inequality will continue to exist. This is not sustainable for society or for the planet.

Employment

- ❖ Achieving our Potential regards helping people into employment as the main way to increase people's income. With the current recession and lack of jobs there are 1.61m people claiming jobseekers allowance (Office for National Statistics, Dec 09) in comparison to 448,000 number of vacancies (Office for National Statistics, Dec 09). Taking this into consideration, what more can the Scottish Government and COSLA do to support people who are long term and newly unemployed and currently living in poverty?
- ❖ Over 50% of children living in poverty live in working households (JRF, 2009). Only by being able to earn certain levels of income will help families get out of poverty and this should be recognised by Scottish Government.
- ❖ People are not taking up income that they are entitled to. What role can Scottish Government, COSLA and the Third Sector play in increasing benefit uptake for those both in and out of employment?
- ❖ Scottish Government, COSLA and the Third sector should increase their relationship with the private sector in nurturing the role that employers should be playing in tackling poverty.

Financial Inclusion

- ❖ More work needs to be done on tackling loan sharks, promoting credit unions and including financial literacy in the curriculum.

Child care

- ❖ Affordable and accessible childcare places need to be increased to enable parents to take up employment, education and training opportunities

Support for non English speakers

More English as a Second language classes are needed.

Housing

- ❖ The link between poverty and housing needs to be made more strongly

Fuel Poverty

- ❖ More pressure needs to be put on energy companies to reduce prices, The energy assistance package should install more renewable energy sources to keep costs down

Stigma

- ❖ Stigma needs to be urgently addressed. Scottish Government should take a lead on this.

Process

- ❖ The community planning process needs to be assessed to see if they provide an adequate framework for engagement.
- ❖ More monitoring of the 'Achieving our Potential' framework needs to be carried out.

For further details about the EPIC project or about the Tackling Poverty Stakeholder Forum please contact:

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