

Cross-Party Group on Mental Health

Wednesday 22nd May 2024 at 2:00pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

- Beatrice Wishart MSP (Deputy Convener)
- Paul O’Kane MSP (Convener)

Non MSP Group Members

- Agnese Carter, Aberdeenshire Council (online)
- Allan Faulds, the ALLIANCE (online)
- Annie McCormack, The Poverty Alliance (online)
- Artemis Pana, Scottish Rural Action (online)
- Ashley McLean, Nesta (online)
- Becky Hothersall, The Poverty Alliance (online)
- Bill Scott, Inclusion Scotland (in-person)
- Caroline Hastings Aberdeenshire Council (online)
- Catherine Idle, Fife Rural CLLD (online)
- Catherine MacNeil, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (online)
- Chloe Campbell, The Poverty Alliance (in-person)
- Chris Ringland, Evangelical Alliance Scotland (in-person)
- Denise Calder, University of Edinburgh (in-person)
- Eilidh MacDonald, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (online)
- Eilidh Young, The Scottish Women’s Convention (online)
- Eireann McAuley, The Educational Institute of Scotland (in-person)
- Emma Currie, University of Glasgow (online)
- Euan Leitch, Surf (online)
- Fergus Walker, Argyll and Bute Council (online)
- Florence Burke, BBC (online)
- Jamie Simpson, Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home (online)
- Jennifer Macrae, Aberdeenshire Council (online)
- Joseph Peach, abrdn Financial Fairness Trust (online)
- Kate Cunningham, Energy Action Scotland (online)
- Kathlene Morrison, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (online)
- Kaydence Drayak (online)
- Kirstie Henderson, Scotland - Royal National Institute of Blind People (online)
- Laura Hutchison, Aberdeenshire Council (online)

- Linda Bamford, Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland (online)
- Louise Brady, Independent Age (online)
- Lydia Rohmer, University of the Highlands and Islands (online)
- Mairi McCallum, Moray Food Plus (online)
- Maria Booker, Fair by Design (online)
- Maria Marshall, Child Poverty Action Group (in-person)
- Michael Danson, Strathnairn Development Company (online)
- Michael Simpson, Caithness Citizens Advice Bureau (online)
- Mike Corbett, NASUWT (online)
- Nicky Bowman, The Poverty Alliance (online)
- Peter Kelly, The Poverty Alliance (in-person)
- Peter Seaman, University of Glasgow (online)
- Philippa Brosnan, Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel (online)
- Ralph Hartley, The Poverty Alliance (in-person)
- Ruth Boyle, The Poverty Alliance (in-person)
- Sam Stephen, Aberdeenshire Council (online)
- Sarah Rogers, Families Outside (online)
- Stephanie Millar, Citizens Advice Scotland (online)
- Stephen Sinclair, GCU - Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit (online)
- Thomas Dubberley, Evangelical Alliance Scotland (in-person)
- Thomas Mulvey, Marie Curie (online)
- Vanessa Fuertes, University of West Scotland (in-person)
- Zelda Bradley, Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service (online)

Apologise

- Ben Macpherson MSP
- Ellie Wagstaff, Marie Curie
- Jenny Marra
- Joe McCready, Carers Scotland
- Keith Robson, The Open University
- Leigh Meechan, EIS
- Lizzie Coutts, Aberlour

1. Welcome and introduction

- Paul O’Kane MSP welcomed attendees (both in the Committee Room and online), clarified both online and in-person meeting housekeeping to ensure the smooth running of the meeting and introduced the agenda.

2. Summary of the [CPG’s inquiry into rural poverty](#) (Ralph Hartley, The Poverty Alliance)

- Ralph highlighted that rural poverty is made distinctive by higher costs of living, insecure and seasonal incomes and challenges accessing services. Policy-making and service design doesn’t systemically reflect these factors.
- 15% of people in rural Scotland are in relative poverty and 9% are in severe. These statistics do not speak to the experiences of accessing fair work, safe housing and transport.
- He made clear that policy areas are connected, which makes accessing services so challenging. This is true for all people living in rural communities, but is compounded for those living on a low income.
- Two themes came out strongly in the inquiry: transport (particularly private car use) and energy (particularly in the context of fuel poverty).
- On fuel poverty, the situation is serious for a large number of people, where self-rationing has a significant impact on health. The inquiry heard that policies and interventions – like the Energy Price Guarantee and Winter Heating Payment - do not reflect the lives of rural communities. In particular, a loss of expertise in rural areas mean that policy promises cannot be delivered.
- In terms of transport, this is the most significant additional cost. It can limit access to healthy, affordable food. This has a particularly significant impact on disabled people and women, who are less likely to drive or own cars.
- Other key areas to emerge from the inquiry included:
 - Childcare: For many this was impossible to access. Where efforts had been made to improve provision, barriers caused by transport and employment continued to create challenges.
 - Food: This is a complex picture, where challenges center on cost.
 - Social security: Benefit levels do not reflect the cost of living rurally and benefit take up is low.

3. Response to inquiry (Artemis Pana, Scottish Rural Action)

- Artemis reflected that it has been 3 years since the Scottish Government published an evidence review which highlighted that rural poverty in Scotland is not recognised accurately, and is far more acute than is widely thought.
- They stated that, with evidence like this inquiry, we can stop begging the Scottish Government to care about rural poverty and start to frame the problems and solutions. But this inquiry shows that things can shift

- Artemis highlighted that challenges faced by rural communities are deeply intersectional. As such, the rural action plan should take an anti-poverty lens. Similarly, wider policy action – such as progress towards a Minimum Income Guarantee – should be delivered through a rural lens.
- Artemis identified 5 driver of challenge for those experiencing rural poverty:
 - Insecure income from employment;
 - Barriers to take up of social security entitlements;
 - Higher rural cost of living;
 - Urban-centric service design which tends to focus infrastructure development to highly populated areas and centralising services; and
 - The invisibility of poverty in rural places in terms of data and perceptions.
- The identification of all of the above drivers help us to identify areas for change, but the making rural poverty visible in policy and more generally should be prioritised.
- Poverty is complex and individual, but it can be less complex when looked at a community level through recognising community strength and taking a place based approach.

4. Response to inquiry (Paul O’Kane MSP and Beatrice Wishart MSP)

- Paul reflected that the findings of this inquiry have been eye opening, particularly in the context of the region they represent, West Scotland, which encapsulated both urban and rural areas. Stigma when people go to seek support and advice is a real challenge.
- They reflected that transport is an issue of priority, particularly for island communities in the context of ferries. It is easy for conversations to become disconnected and talk only to bigger issues, without paying heed to the individual experiences of not having the ability to move.
- Beatrice made clear that rural and island communities are not homogenous; they have individual challenges which will need unique interventions.
- Both Paul and Beatrice stated that It is up to MSPs to move the findings and recommendations on the inquiry forward in the Parliament, particularly in the work of the new First Minister. Transport is a key place to start.

5. Discussion

- Michael Simpson reflected on the aspect of stigma in the work of Caithness Citizens Advice Bureau, where those seeking advice have held off on seeking support because of fear of judgment. They also spoke of available data in that there is deprivation information in the SIMD index about Thurso and Wick as a whole, but that there is no information on very small dwellings (such as villages of 10 houses). Information like this is vital if we are to make rural

poverty visible. They further supported the inquiries conclusion that transport should remain a policy priority for rural communities as transport links are often poor or non-existent.

- Bill Scott highlighted the importance of recognising the interconnectedness of issues. For disabled people, tackling issues in isolation do not work. They stated that the National Performance Framework must be in tune with the Sustainable Development Goals, which lists ending poverty as the number one priority that all other goals flow from. The National Performance Framework sees issues in isolation which will result in interventions not working. For example, economic development seems to be totally detached from poverty at the moment from poverty.
- Joseph Peace reflected on the social security recommendations included in the inquiry, including the measures that should be taken around benefit uptake in rural development strategy. They stated that more positive experiences with Social Security Scotland. Peter Kelly responded to this, stating that this something that the Poverty Alliance would also like to think about. Their rural poverty project, TARP, has seen really proactive approaches from local authorities in Scotland around benefit take up but that there is a lot more to learn.

6. Next step for the Poverty Alliance (Peter Kelly, The Poverty Alliance)

- Peter stated that whilst the Poverty Alliance has always been conscious of the impact of rural poverty, this inquiry has been a reminder of the need to respond to the very diverse needs of those living rurally on a low income.
- He stated that the Poverty Alliance will taking the findings and recommendations of this inquiry forward in its Taking Action on Rural Poverty (TARP) project.
- He highlighted the need structural change to make progress on poverty, so rural poverty must be addressed in the interventions that we take on all policy themes including the housing emergency, just transition, childcare, transport. Important to this is that the rural delivery plan has poverty at its heart.

7. Any other business and close

- The next meeting of the CPG on Poverty will be after summer recess.