1 SUMMARY

1.1 In January 2008 the Scottish Government issued a discussion paper on tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation in Scotland as part of their overall Economic Strategy. They are seeking the views of a range of stakeholders including local government on (a) how best we can achieve economic growth and reduce poverty and inequality in Scotland and (b) what can be our respective roles in achieving this.

1.2 This report summarises the main elements of the discussion paper and also proposes a Stirling Council response. The deadline for consultation responses has been extended to 30 June 2008.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Council is asked to:-

2.1 Note the Scottish Government Discussion Paper and;

2.2 Approve the Council’s response as appended at A to be submitted to the Scottish Government by 30 June 2008, along with a copy of this report.

3 CONSIDERATIONS

Background

3.1 In January 2008 the Scottish Government issued a discussion paper (the paper) on tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation in Scotland. The paper was designed to ‘spark discussion and debate’ amongst a range of stakeholders and to assist the Scottish Government in developing a framework to improve co-ordination of actions to tackle poverty in Scotland, as part of its plans to take forward the Government’s Economic Strategy.
3.2 A copy of the paper is available electronically at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/01150409/0 and a hard copy has been placed in the Member’s Lounge. A copy of the Scottish Government’s Economic Strategy is also available electronically on www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/12115041/0 and a hard copy has been placed in the Member’s Lounge.

3.3 The paper is set in the context of the overarching Purpose of the Scottish Government: ‘to create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth’ and therefore needs to be considered as primarily an economic perspective on the issue.

3.4 As poverty, inequality and deprivation are multi-faceted problems, a group of officers from all services met to discuss the Scottish Government's paper to enable preparation of a Stirling Council response. (Appendix A).

Report Content - Summary

3.5 The paper has been widely consulted upon by the Scottish Government and the deadline has been extended to 30 June (originally 2 May).

3.6 The paper is based on the premise that Scotland’s future economic growth must not be achieved at the expense of the most disadvantaged people in our community. It further recognises the ‘strategic role of local authorities in pursuing their own policy priorities for tackling poverty and providing services to address the needs of the most vulnerable’ (paragraph 11 of the paper). Although titled ‘tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation’ the paper primarily refers to poverty rather than inequality and deprivation.

3.7 Poverty is technically defined as when a person’s household income (adjusted for the size and composition of the household) is less than 60% of the UK median income. According to the Scottish Government there are 670,000 adults and 210,000 children who are in relative poverty in Scotland.

3.8 However the paper acknowledges that poverty is about more than income and that strategies that focus on boosting income alone will not reduce the gap between the haves and the have-nots in society.

3.9 Poverty is also about improving access to what is termed in the paper as “material and non-material resources” such as education, health and housing. The lack of access to services in remote areas is also highlighted. Access can also however be limited for people who live in areas which are not geographically remote, but who may have to deal with other issues such as disability, ethnicity (e.g. inability to speak English) mental health or other health problems.
3.10 The paper also states that ‘there are strong correlations between poverty and a lack of environmental sustainability’. It does not explain this statement but we understand this to mean that any national poverty framework must also focus on outcomes that are sustainable, specifically in relation their environmental impacts. For example, by building affordable housing which is (a) of a good quality and which minimises harmful environmental energy emissions and (b) which is sited near local employment and services to reduce dependence on polluting modes of transport, where it is safe to walk and which in turn can have positive health benefits (a virtuous circle).

3.11 The paper outlines ‘key areas for action’ at paragraph 43 of the paper and asks how the Scottish Government should ‘balance their efforts’. The three areas of action identified are:-

3.11.1 Prevention of poverty and tackling the root cause
3.11.2 Helping to lift people out of poverty
3.11.3 Alleviating the impact of poverty on people’s lives.

3.12 Regarding these key areas for action by the Scottish Government, we are of the view that much of this work is also being done by local government and the third sector already. In terms of long-term sustainability, the Scottish Government’s emphasis must be on preventing poverty and tackling the root causes. This may require significant national research on the causes of poverty. Research on a Scottish wide basis requires the Scottish Government’s resources.

Considerations

3.13 The Scottish Government can add value to everyone’s work in tackling poverty by undertaking research, identifying best approaches and provide the Scottish co-ordination framework. This will ensure there is no conflict in national policy agendas (housing/planning/economy/energy/sustainability etc) and that we can achieve desired outcomes at local level that will contribute to a wealthier, greener and fairer Scotland. The Scottish Government can then ensure that the necessary resources are made available at the appropriate local levels to tackle poverty and that national policies do not inhibit local activities.

3.14 The Scottish Government is best placed to undertake comparative international research on what is being done elsewhere. Ireland is an example of a country with a booming economy and yet the paper confirms that this has not reduced the incidence of poverty or income inequality, suggesting that going for growth does not benefit all members of our community equally.

3.15 The Scottish Government may also need to specifically consider and model the impact of all proposed policy initiatives on poorer households e.g. Local Income Tax.
3.16 The consultation paper asks if devolution of fiscal policy to Scotland would improve the situation in Scotland. Areas for negotiations with the UK Government could include issues such as raising of the minimum wage, greater flexibility in the benefits system regarding employment or changes to the winter fuel allowances to respond to variation of demand across the UK specifically within Scotland and within specific communities (e.g. older people).

3.17 The Scottish Government needs to ensure that economic opportunities available in Scotland will improve everyone’s well-being and not just those already best placed in society. Local Government could become active partners in the development of greater skills capacity within our most disadvantaged communities by targeting and co-ordinating existing resources to achieve this and securing additional resources where appropriate.

3.18 Many of the solutions require service providers to work alongside communities themselves as well as with local employers, third sector organisations and other partners e.g. local food producers. This work is resource intensive but can yield better results longer-term due to community empowerment and the development of capacity and resilience.

Conclusions

3.19 The Scottish Government’s paper considers the nature of poverty in the context of the Scottish Government’s economic strategy. Although it does not cover in any detail the nature of inequality or deprivation or how to tackle it, the Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a national framework to tackle poverty and a copy of Stirling Council’s response is appended at ‘A’.

4 POLICY/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS AND CONSULTATIONS

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Policy Implications

4.1 None arising directly from this report.
Resource Implications

4.2 None arising directly from this report.

Consultations

4.3 This paper has been developed following input from all services of the Council.

5 BACKGROUND PAPERS

5.1 Taking Forward The Government Economic Strategy: A Discussion Paper on Tackling Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation in Scotland. A hard copy has been placed in the Member’s Lounge.

5.2 The Government Economic Strategy. A hard copy has been placed in the Member’s Lounge.

Author

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Date 11 June 2008 Reference
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Stirling Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Scottish Government’s discussion paper on ‘Tackling Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation’. This was considered by Stirling Council at its meeting on 19 June 2008 and a copy of the Council paper is enclosed.

1.2 We are concerned at the apparently intransigent nature of poverty, inequality and deprivation in Scotland. The stark reality of the numbers of people, particularly children, who continue to live in poverty in 21st century Scotland, as identified in your report reveals the need for a co-ordinated strategic approach to tackle this problem.

1.3 Poverty acts as a significant brake to economic development across Europe and much activity takes place to deal with it: at EU level (through structural funding); at the UK level (through welfare and other benefits); at Scottish level (through health and education policy) and at local government level (through direct service provision and working alongside other public sector community planning partners) and also with the resources of the third sector and by working alongside communities themselves. Despite the best efforts of all tiers of government and other stakeholders, we recognise that the life chances of some members of our community remain significantly reduced by poverty.

1.4 Members of the Council feel it is important however to acknowledge that much good work has been done in Stirling to tackle this multi-faceted problem. For example within Stirling we have invested significantly in improving education facilities and in providing after-school care and childcare facilities to allow parents to seek paid employment opportunities.

1.5 Stirling Council will continue to focus effort on reducing inequalities through completing the physical and social re-generation of Raploch, Cornton and Cultenhove with active community involvement, ensuring targeted support for individuals, families and communities in areas of regeneration through allocation of the Scottish Government Fairer Scotland fund and through the continued work of the Community Planning Partnership.

1.6 As stated in our Single Outcome agreement we are focusing advice services to provide options and solutions to a range of serious financial and quality of life problems and focusing our Employability services on those most in need. We will continue to support young people to make a successful transition from schools to jobs, further education or training and independence.

1.7 Given that the discussion paper primarily concerns itself with tackling poverty as part of the Scottish Government’s overall approach to improving Scotland’s economic performance we have highlighted the dominant features of poverty in Stirling (section 2 below) as well as how we can work with the Scottish Government to tackle poverty (section 3 below).
POVERTY IN STIRLING

2.1 Poverty, inequality and deprivation affect a range of our client groups (children, families, lone parents, jobless people, homeless people, low-waged people, older people with inadequate or no pensions, people with disabilities, people from minority ethnic groups, migrant workers, asylum seekers). Some communities’ experience of poverty has become so entrenched that it has become intergenerational which creates a culture of poverty of aspiration.

2.2 Poverty also has specific impacts on particular people in our community, not all of whom are clients of the public sector. For example, anecdotally we are aware of people with a disability who may be reluctant to contact the Council or other statutory agencies for support and benefits they are entitled to for fear of losing their independence. This may also be the case for asylum seekers or refugees who fear deportation. Poverty and inequality can also be gender-specific – e.g. young mums, lone parents; ethnic specific – e.g. asylum seekers and migrant workers; disability specific – national research confirms that people with disabilities are the group least likely to be in employment. More could be done by the Scottish Government to compel and/or encourage employer flexibility to recruit these groups and to stress that this is not solely a role for public sector employers as part of their statutory equality duties.

2.3 Poverty is also made worse by the current economic climate of fuel and food price rises. We cannot predict the future economy with any certainty. However the context of decline in supply means we all need to be realistic in our expectations and clear in our priorities. The Scottish Government has already demonstrated its commitment to research and investment into alternative sources of energy but must also identify resources to assist with adaptation of agriculture to ensure adequate local food production and to introduce the necessary framework to allow us to change both our levels of energy consumption and the types of energy we consume.

2.4 Poverty inhibits access to services for people who live in rural areas particularly when coupled with inadequate and/or expensive public transport provision to get people to areas where services are available.

2.5 Poverty can be made worse by the low skills and attainment levels in some communities. Low educational attainment is a feature particularly for young people leaving care often with inadequate support structures to develop necessary life skills to help them have decent futures.

2.6 Poverty is exacerbated by the increasing polarisation of our communities in terms of income/wealth, life expectancy, access to services, health & well-being and housing availability and adequacy.

2.7 Housing affordability, or the lack of it, has created significant debt problems, which, coupled with easy access to credit finance are major contributors to poverty in the Stirling area. This may of course become worse due to the ‘credit crunch’, rising interest rates and the impact on household budgets.
2.8 Poverty, inequality and deprivation can be made worse by **inadequate housing**. Decent affordable housing is needed to secure Stirling’s economic future. Lack of housing of a decent quality and condition is compounded by inadequate supply; unaffordable cost of available housing; lack of choice of tenure; rising cost of heating ‘leaky’ homes which contributes to **fuel poverty** as well as contributing to unnecessary energy use and increased carbon emissions.

3 TACKLING POVERTY

Stirling Council felt that the following issues were key to tackling poverty in Scotland and should therefore be included in any national policy framework.

**Developing Community Capacity**

3.1 Tackling poverty, inequality and deprivation is something that everyone has a stake in and a national framework should therefore also involve people who are experiencing poverty, both individuals and their families, using appropriate community engagement standards with the aim of ‘local people leading’ to improve community empowerment. A culture of lifelong learning, without stigma, needs to be further embedded and resourced. In the context of lifelong learning significant resources have been invested in FE and HE. Unfortunately this won’t engage people who do not see themselves as lifelong learners and consequently their opportunities to contribute in any way to the economy may be limited.

3.2 The Scottish Government can provide resources to enhance engagement and involvement with communities of **geography** and of **interest** to foster community cohesion. By providing adequate resources for community based activity in learning, health, and capacity-building, we can raise the aspiration and engagement of people who don’t value their own contribution and don’t have the confidence or skills to change their lives. (This includes: children/families/ people with disabilities/lone parents/ ethnic minority people/ old people//students/young adults/faith groups/asylum seekers.) The Scottish Government could give a firm commitment, for example that Community Learning and Development and voluntary sector adult learning activity will be well-resourced to engage people in their communities and require FE and HE to engage fully in Community Planning Partnership arrangements to ensure this.

3.3 One of key principles highlighted in the paper specifies the ‘adoption of policies and services...founded upon user involvement, consultation with people experiencing poverty, and community engagement and empowerment, so that policies and practice are informed by the real experience of those whom we are trying to help.’ Scottish (and Stirling Community Planning Partnership) Standards for Community Engagement exist. The challenge is to ensure that they are effectively and consistently implemented across the board. This should become a feature of public sector evaluation frameworks. Regarding services we also need to build and extend appropriate, localised information and guidance services. A review of Careers Service engagement with schools and an outcome on the right of all children to have a career advice plan would help reduce the inequalities in employment opportunities and make them more ready to succeed.
3.4 There is also a need to develop family centred approaches to tackling poverty and associated problems (often drug and alcohol misuse), including effective public campaigns on the links between food and health. Universal free school meals across Scotland merits consideration as a means of tackling poverty and health.

Housing

3.5 Decent affordable and sustainable housing is needed to secure Stirling’s and Scotland’s economic future. Lack of housing of a decent quality and condition is compounded by inadequate supply and the unaffordable cost of available housing. We face particular problems regarding the lack of choice of tenure. For poorer households the rising cost of heating ‘leaky’ homes contributes to fuel poverty as well as to unnecessary energy use and increased carbon emissions.

3.6 The Scottish Government could therefore ensure that housing in Scotland is more sustainable and affordable and improve the energy efficiency of housing to address fuel poverty. This could be done by tightening building standards as well as by allowing local authorities more flexibility in financial support to assist families facing difficulties in paying for their homes (see Finance below).

3.7 Stirling has its own ‘micro housing climate’ in respect of rental accommodation. The average rent is £400/450 yet local housing allowance benchmarks are fixed at £350. This is because Stirling is banded with ‘cheaper’ housing areas when allowances are set by the UK Department for Work and Pensions. Tenants therefore have to find the £100 difference if they wish to live in Stirling. This system needs to be made more flexible based on local economic circumstances and this is a matter that the Scottish Government may wish to raise with the UK Government.

3.8 Existing planning frameworks could be reviewed to permit more social housing to be built in areas that are close to public transport and other services, minimising the need for alternative more polluting modes of transport.

3.9 Regarding inadequate housing, Stirling Council would like to tackle this by building more affordable and sustainable housing. In the Council’s Strategic Outcome Agreement we have stated that Stirling Council ‘would be able to make significant progress in increasing its own social rented housing provision if the same rules on debt redemption applied here as they do for areas where tenants have voted to transfer ownership to an alternative social registered landlord. A commitment from the Scottish Government and Westminster on this issue would be welcomed.’
3.10 The suspension of the Right-To-Buy in certain pressurised areas in Stirling will have a limited impact as it only applies to post 2002 tenancies. We would suggest that the planning framework therefore needs revision, that building regulations need to be tightened up to ensure that new housing is of high standard (compatible with Passiv Haus or similar design standards) and housing which exceeds this standard could incur zero fees for building warrants. This would have an income generation impact for local authorities that would need to be offset financially by the Scottish Government but which would reap longer term environmental and well-being benefits.

3.11 Not only do we ask the Scottish Government to make it easier for Local Government to invest in social house building, we would also ask it to consider the creation of a significant prize to build exemplary affordable and sustainable housing equivalent to the £10million Scottish renewable energy prize.

Employment

3.12 The quality of available employment has an impact on poverty and inequality. Seasonal, low-paid and low-skilled jobs in key economic sectors such as tourism and agriculture contribute to the relative poverty of those working in this sector. The seasonal nature of such work creates specific difficulties in transition from benefits to work, particularly if there are time lags in payment.

3.13 Low pay and temporary contracts are also a feature of large public sector organisations such as local authorities and the NHS. The paper therefore raises questions for the Scottish public sector in general and Stirling Council in particular in terms of our role as a major employer. How can we address directly people’s poverty and inequality in employment— in terms of low wage jobs in expensive-to-live areas, especially in rural areas where affordable housing is scarce? How can we make employment better paid, more flexible and therefore open up job opportunities to ‘excluded’ groups such as carers, lone-parents etc without creating additional burdens for them in terms of negative impact on family life/work balance, their caring responsibilities etc?

3.14 The Scottish Government should work with the UK Government as appropriate to ensure that minimum wage levels are increased to adequate levels. There should also be more emphasis given to public and private sector employers to consider more flexible working hours and make the benefits and pensions system flexible enough to achieve this. Part of this approach will include making employers aware of flexible employment options and their value – via publicity campaigns – and also letting people know about flexible working arrangements. There needs to be an improvement in the bureaucracy people face when making the transition from welfare benefits to employment (particularly in an economy which relies on tourism where employment can be of a seasonal nature). There needs to be work undertaken with the relevant public sector and Third Sector agencies to ensure that pensioners (especially women pensioners) receive all the benefits they are entitled to in an attempt to address poverty in old age.
3.15 The paper needs to specifically acknowledge the responsibility of employers across all sectors to tackle poverty, inequality and deprivation and the emergent framework must ensure that public, private and third sectors engage in this agenda.

3.16 An estimated 42,900 working age residents in Stirling were in employment for the period July 2006 - June 2007, representing a working employment rate of 75.2%, slightly lower than the Scottish average of 75.9%. Total employee jobs were 46,400 in 2006, showing a significant net inflow of workers into the area and conversely confirming the strong pressures on the Stirling housing market.

3.17 The anomaly of the varying salary levels of those who live in Stirling (but work elsewhere, e.g. Glasgow and Edinburgh) of £469/week compared to £412/week for those who work in Stirling obviously has longer-term economic and environmental impacts.

3.18 Planning frameworks need to be reviewed to require local authorities to create appropriate local employment opportunities close to where people live to reduce dependency on polluting modes of transport.

3.19 Regarding benefits, if we are to ease people into work we need to understand that for some people a realistic starting place may just be a few hours a week. The benefits system needs to be (a) simplified and (b) to be flexible enough to accommodate a range of work patterns without penalty. For example the loss of entitlement to housing benefit when entering full-time Higher Education needs to be addressed as this restricts opportunity to move out of poverty.

3.20 There is also a need for the Scottish Government to provide more robust and regular reporting of information on households with a net income of less than £10,000 per annum.

Finance

3.21 Regarding access to credit/ debt management – the Scottish Government should work with COSLA, the Third Sector and financial regulatory bodies to develop appropriate mechanisms to enable local authorities to keep families in their homes, including the provision of alternative sources of credit such as credit unions. They could also encourage and publicise initiatives such as LETS (local economic trading schemes).

3.22 There must also be a culture change that can permit decision-makers to be less risk averse. If a household is in rent arrears we may use Council Tax money to pay off rent arrears rather than make a family homeless with all the negative impacts that can bring. However it is unlikely that it would be considered appropriate to do the same for a family with mortgage arrears/repossession who may be facing similar impacts, possibly living in the same street.
3.23 Such a scenario highlights the need for local government to consider creative ways to deal with growing the indebtedness of our communities to less responsible financial lenders. To avoid perpetuation of a ‘dependency culture’ local government should be encouraged to develop new approaches, perhaps in partnership with other agencies, to help lift affected individuals, families and communities out of financial debt and to prevent them getting into debt in the first place. This is particularly pertinent in Stirling Council area as we have the largest number of debt arrangement schemes pro rata than any other Scottish authority. The Scottish and local government could together facilitate such a culture change emphasising the outcome of enhanced well-being of our communities using the existing powers available to us. This does not require change in legislation as powers exist but rather requires a positive change in culture to enable local decision-makers to think beyond their direct service-provision role.

Access to Services

3.24 The paper refers to a key principle of providing ‘Targeted support for the most disadvantaged – but within a framework of universal service provision and a minimum ‘offer’ that we expect everyone to be able to access’. The ‘minimum offer’ is not specified and it is not acknowledged that peoples’ needs and expectation as to what this should be may vary across and within different groups, geographical areas and communities. In terms of health inequalities, we need to move away from a centralisation of health services with more localised access. If people have to travel significant distances on inadequate public transport to attend appointments such as antenatal classes, unless they’re particularly motivated it’s unlikely to be a priority for them.

3.25 Our Single Outcome Agreement also emphasises the need to ensure a co-ordinated approach to supporting rural communities in Stirling including: development of local transport strategies; support to develop a diverse, sustainable rural business base; investment in support for rural businesses and communities through the Forth Valley and Lomond LEADER programme; improved access to learning opportunities for school leavers in rural areas and provision of sufficient affordable and social rented housing to meet needs.

3.26 One of the key principles raised in the paper is ‘the need for need for gendered analyses – and, where necessary, gendered approaches’ to address poverty. We would agree that whilst the gender aspects of poverty must be addressed the paper does not mention other groups who experience poverty – e.g. people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups etc.

3.27 Recent research by Joseph Rowntree Foundation challenges the stereotypes around poverty and workless-ness. Disabled people are more likely than other groups of people to be without work. Lack of educational attainment also impacts on one’s likelihood of experiencing poverty and this has a significant impact on certain minority ethnic groups (whilst other minority ethnic groups have the highest educational attainment). Consistent and robust research data on a range of equality strands needs to be available for analysis at a national level, possibly working with organisations such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission.
3.28 The Scottish Government should review the impact and uptake of Educational Maintenance Allowances and engage with the client group to evaluate the initiative and identify improvements. Consideration should be given to the introduction of universal free school meals – to reduce stigma and improve health and foster equality. The Government should also ensure that primary health and mental health services are available close to where people live. Also the Scottish Government should ensure that mechanisms are in place to permit arts/cultural resources to be made available in disadvantaged or remote communities as access to such facilities have been shown to have a beneficial impact in the development of self-esteem.

3.29 The paper specifically asks what are the key barriers to partnership working and how can these be overcome?

3.30 In our view the most effective partnerships are properly resourced, have ownership of their plans, agree a shared vision, allocate their resources and are accountable and evaluated not only in terms of their outcomes and activities but also in terms of how they operate together.

3.31 A major barrier to partnership working is capacity – all parties are committed in principle but have insufficient resources to divert attention away from their core activity. An additional barrier can be the service-specific ways of working.

3.32 A key role for the Scottish Government is therefore to make available the necessary resources in order improve partnership working and to compel its agencies to participate fully.

3.33 The Scottish Government’s emergent framework to tackle poverty should ensure effective co-ordination and oversight mechanisms and also remove unnecessary, cumbersome and diversionary reporting regimes. This will ensure that all stakeholders focus attention on stated and agreed priorities with clear outcomes and timeframes.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 We also welcome the emphasis on partnership as evidenced by the Concordat between the Scottish Government and COSLA and wish to signal our willingness to work together to tackle poverty and improve Scotland’s economic future.

4.2 We would wish to restate the ‘Subsidiarity’ Principle as part of any emergent framework to tackle poverty – ensuring appropriate resources are made available at the most appropriate level of government or the wider community and to create a framework that enables local decision-makers to become less risk averse.
4.3 There is also the long-standing issue of reporting performance on a range of national statutory performance indicators. This distracts organisations from the ‘big picture’ challenges such as tackling poverty that cut across service-specific ways of working. Targets and measures need to be more outcomes focussed. The Scottish Government’s Concordat with COSLA on an outcomes-based approach to local government settlement is therefore welcome as contributing to the necessary culture shift, enabling decision-makers to be less risk averse and more creative in delivering outcomes that matter. The Single Outcome Agreement is consistent with developing an outcomes approach to policy planning and service delivery and Community Planning already provides a framework for multi-agency working to improve outcomes.

4.4 The Scottish Government should remove the burden of unnecessary and diversionary Performance Indicators. Instead the new framework could create incentives to foster greater partnership with local authorities to make things better for our communities and their futures.

4.5 Although the Scottish Government’s discussion paper considers poverty we feel it does not cover in any detail either the nature of inequality or the extent of deprivation in Scotland. Stirling Council however welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a framework to tackle poverty and trust our comments are of value.