

# How islands are facing up to the challenge of poverty

## Report by Katie Macleod

In the midst of a global economic slowdown, poverty holds a high place in the headlines. People might assume that poverty is only experienced elsewhere, but the problem is a complex one that is impacting the lives of families right here in the Western Isles.

Cities show very clear concentrations of poverty, and as such "poverty tends to be understood to be an urban problem" says Dr. John H. McKendrick, Senior Lecturer at GCU's Glasgow School of Business and Society and an expert on Scottish poverty. "Rural areas look nice, and people can find it difficult to accept that poverty is a problem."

Yet it is a problem, particularly here in the Hebrides. Rural poverty can be 'invisible' as there is no concentration of deprivation in one area, but that doesn't mean poverty is not present. The islands are in fact one of the most deprived areas in rural Scotland, with relative poverty at 25% and fuel poverty at 58% - the highest figures in the country.

If a family is experiencing relative poverty, they will be unable to take part in activities that are an acceptable part of daily life. They can't afford to have a hobby, go on a family holiday for even one week a year, or have their child's friend come to the house for a snack. "It's not about those who are choosing not to do these things, but those who can't afford to make the choice," says Dr. McKendrick, who attended the Comhairle's October seminar called 'Understanding Poverty and Welfare Reforms in the Outer Hebrides.' "It's about what these factors represent - the type of life that is so far removed from the accepted standard of living."

Fuel poverty is exacerbating the issue. If a family spends more than 10 per cent of its household income on energy bills and fuel, they are classed as fuel poor. With high electricity and petrol prices and poorly insulated homes, some local families are being left with the stark choice of paying their bills and heating their homes, or eating. "These are serious levels of poverty," says local councillor and Chair of the Western Isles Poverty Action Group, Angus McCormack. "The figures are staggering."

High levels of unemployment and low levels of income also contribute to local poverty. Employment in the Western Isles stands at 65.3% compared to 71% in Scotland as a whole; employment rates have dropped by more than 7% here since 2011, compared to just 0.1% in the rest of the country. Income levels are also lower here than elsewhere in Scotland, yet the cost of living is higher.

The shock at the situation on our own streets has led to a number of initiatives aimed at raising awareness and ameliorating the issue. The Western Isles Poverty Action Group (WIPAG) was formed in October 2011 by six like-minded individuals who were concerned at the effects of poverty on the health and well-being of local families. As Angus McCormack explains, the group "aims to be an irritation, in the nicest possible way, in the sides of all organisations who might help."

The initial members of the group were drawn from the Health Board, Community Planning

## Foodbank set to ease pain of choice between paying bills for food or power

This February will see Stornoway's first foodbank become fully operational, thanks to the work of national charity The Trussell Trust and Stornoway's New Wine Church

The Trussell Trust have launched more than 250 foodbanks since 2004, partnering with churches and communities across the country in their effort to open one in every town. These foodbanks provide a minimum of three days emergency food to those who need it: between 2011 and 2012, they fed 128,687 people - double the number in the previous year.

"A lot of people are only one pay cheque away from poverty," explains Gavin Lawson of New Wine Church, who has been involved in setting up the service in the Western Isles. "We're there to help you. We don't want anyone to have to make that choice, we don't want a mum to have to choose between paying the electricity bill or feeding her kids." With food, fuel and relative poverty rates among the highest in rural Scotland, it's a choice that some local families are worried about having to make.

Around 3000 people in the Western Isles are living on or below the poverty line, and it's not only those who are unemployed that are at risk of going hungry, but people who have jobs and suddenly face pressures like unexpected bills or illness.

Frontline care professionals - whether doctors, social workers or CAB advisers - identify people in crisis situations at risk of going hungry, and issue them a food voucher that the individual can then bring to the foodbank in exchange

Partnership, Citizens Advice Bureau and the Comhairle, but the group has grown in size as more and more people have shown an interest in helping. "Individual employees of these organisations are volunteering in their own time to help our group," adds Angus.

Raising awareness and ensuring local organisations adopted the issue as a key part of their agendas were the initial priorities, and progress has been made throughout the year. "We had no idea what it might lead to," says Angus. "We were in fact pushing at an open door, people really did want to help."

Two successful seminars covering benefit changes and the action to be taken on poverty were held in 2012, and it was decided by the Comhairle that the Community Planning Partnership would be the vehicle by which the campaign against poverty will be taken forward. An officer group has been created with key officers from local organisations in the sector, which meets regularly to discuss how they can work together to deal with the issues.

Training is also underway, courtesy of WIPAG representatives. As Angus points out, "all front line staff who engage with the public must be trained to look for signs of poverty, to offer to seek help, to reassure people that it is alright to accept

for three days of nutritionally balanced, non-perishable food. The foodbank also acts as a signpost for other avenues of help.

The New Wine Church had already operated an emergency food delivery service through social services for two years, when in the summer of 2012 they decided more needed to be done. After speaking to The Trussell Trust, Gavin says they quickly understood that they shared the same philosophy on the issue.

A training course took place in October, and a meeting was held in the council chambers so local organisations such as the CAB could learn more about the work of The Trussell Trust. These local agencies wanted to know what could be done to help local people in the interim period before the foodbank was up and running, so the New Wine Church extended their delivery service to include these organisations.

"There has been a dramatic increase in referrals to these agencies," says Gavin, adding that the numbers using the foodbank are unpredictable. The highest rate to date has been four calls in a week - a lot for a population this size. Operating out of the New Wine Church, on a busy street in the centre of town where a client won't stand out, means volunteers can make sure they reach everyone who needs it.

"We're not there to judge or express an opinion," says Gavin. "The fundamental question we ask is: are you hungry? This is not a handout, it's a helping hand."

Those interested in volunteering at the foodbank can contact Gavin Lawson at the New Wine Church at 37-39 Point Street.

help and to ensure that help is given."

The latter is an important issue in the fight against local poverty, and in rural areas more generally. As Dr. McKendrick explains, the culture of independence and reliance common in rural areas means people can be reluctant to ask for help. Help is not a handout: "We need to instil the mindset that if you're providing help, you're investing in people's future, providing an opportunity to choose a different path."

Roddy Nicolson of the Western Isles Citizens Advice Bureau presented a similar sentiment at the October seminar, explaining that benefits should be seen as a right and not handouts. "At some time in our lives most of us here this morning in one way or another need the welfare state, and claiming benefits can be necessary," he said in his presentation.

It is these poverty myths that WIPAG seeks to dismiss. If you're in a steady job at a local company, and the company goes down, "you've gone from earning a good wage to nothing, and then you really are in trouble," says Angus. "Not through any fault of your own, you're cast into a difficult situation. It's tragic, and we're trying to start people thinking in a more positive way about helping people."

Stopping the stigma will be important when the local foodbank becomes operational in February. First set up by the New Wine Church as an emergency food delivery service, national charity The Trussell Trust got involved at the end of last year and is aiding the roll out of the Eilean Siar foodbank. Even now the number of locals receiving food parcels has increased. Dr. McKendrick notes that this is an instance of direct action in dealing with a very specific local problem, a "model example of an appropriate measure" in tackling local poverty.

Raising awareness and encouraging local action is essential in tackling rural poverty - and the two go hand in hand. "It's about local people making local contributions. Delegation of responsibility is important. Local authorities need to make sure the decisions on the core services they are providing are not inadvertently negatively impacting people's quality of life," says Dr. McKendrick. "Whether it's the school budget, or transport budget, you need to ask 'How will this affect those struggling?' You need awareness of the impact of everyday decisions."

The work of local role holders - such as community partnerships and local authorities - is important in making sure decisions do not negatively impact those who are struggling, and the work of these organisations in the Hebrides shows that action is being taken to tackle poverty. The poverty statistics for the Western Isles are shocking, but work is ongoing to fight this modern day scourge.

## January Budget Consultation Meeting Dates

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is holding the next round of budget consultation meetings on the following dates:

**Wednesday 9 January 2013**

**Castlebay School, Barra 7.30pm**

**Thursday 10 January 2013 Carinish Hall 7.30pm**

**Thursday 10 January 2013**

**Southend Community Hall, Daliburgh 7.30pm**

**Tuesday 15 January 2013**

**Sir E Scott School, Tarbert 7.30pm**

**Thursday 17 January 2013**

**Town Hall, Stornoway 7.30pm**

**Tuesday 22 January 2013**

**Balallan Community Centre 7.30pm**

**Tuesday 29 January 2013 Barvas Hall 7.30pm**

**Thursday 31 January 2013**

**Uig Community Centre 5.30pm**

**Thursday 31 January 2013**

**Bernera Community Centre 8.00pm**

All are welcome to attend to give their views on the latest consultation proposals.

Further information on the budget is available at <http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/fcr/budgetstrategy.asp>

or you can email your views to

[budgetconsultation@cne-siar.gov.uk](mailto:budgetconsultation@cne-siar.gov.uk)

The Comhairle will set its budget for 2013-15 in February 2013.



## Finding the right number to contact your council...

Business Gateway..... **01851 822 775**

Harbour Office/Marine Fuels..... **01870 604992**

Stornoway Bus Station..... **01851 704327**

Council Tax: Stornoway..... **0845 600 2772**

Council Tax: Balivanich..... **01870 602425 ext. 857/885**

Roads and Pavements/Street Lighting ..... **01851 822656**

Cleansing Services/Refuse Collection..... **01851 822669**

Recycling..... **01851 709900**

Planning (Stornoway)..... **01851 822690**

Planning (Balivanich)..... **01870 604990**

Social Work Offices:

Stornoway..... **01851 822708**

Tarbert..... **01859 502973**

Balivanich..... **01870 604984**

Castlebay..... **01871 817217**

**General Number:**

Tel: **0845 6007090**

e-mail: **enquiries@cne-siar.gov.uk**

*Ag Obair Còmhla Airson Nan Eilean - Working Together For The Western Isles*

**EMERGENCY OUT OF HOURS**

**Phone FAIRE 01851 701702**