

Cross Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Rural Policy in 2018-19, **Tuesday 12th March, 2019**

- The topic of the meeting was '**Rural Poverty and Health Inequalities**', chaired by Emma Harper, MSP for the South Scotland Region.
- Five speakers from different social agencies and a PHD student from Aberdeen University presented the work they carry out in different areas of rural Scotland.

Below is a summary of the content of these talks.

Zoe Laird, Regional Head of Community Infrastructure at **Highlands and Islands Enterprise**, presented some examples of the HIE's recent work on minimum income standards.

A report of 2013 showed that household budgets in Highlands and Islands are typically between 10% and 40% higher than in other parts of the UK, mainly due to factors like the higher costs of travelling, need for heating oil and larger energy bills.

To tackle this problem, the HIE supports a number of projects throughout the region that create local employment and strengthen communities, like the Gateway Lochboisdale Project, Harris Gin social enterprise, European Marine Centre in Orkney, Digital Highlands and Islands or Talla Na Mara, a Community Enterprise Centre owned and managed by the residents of West Harris.

Laura Ferguson, Operations Manager for Scotland at the **Trussell Trust** gave a presentation on Food Banks in Rural Scotland and the challenges faced by this network of resources.

In rural areas, access to food banks is more difficult for people since these are accessible only by referral and with a food voucher handed out from different local services that face their own external strains and are sometimes closed.

The lack of anonymity in these areas contributes to a sense of stigma on those people who need to access local food bank in their communities.

Also, food banks hand out food parcels that are meant to last only in case of crisis, and that only for 3 days, but food poverty is nowadays becoming a longer-term problem for more people in rural Scotland.

Sue Irving, Chief Executive of **Dumfries and Galloway (D&G) Citizens' Advice Service** presented CAS's cost-of-living campaigns.

A report from 2014, updated in 2017, showed the difficulty of accessing affordable food and basic products in D&G, mainly due to insufficient public transport links and the pricing policies of supermarkets, with significant variation on prices across the region. This lack of mobility and choice at the till results in a double disadvantage for people who are reliant on public transport and on low incomes.

Ruth Mendel, Policy Officer from **Citizens Advice Scotland** presented CAS' 'Food on the Table' campaign, from which a report was produced to better understand the day-to-day realities faced by people in Scotland in terms of affordability, choice and access to food. Key findings of this report were that 45% of respondents worry about running out of food before there is money to buy more, 37% of respondents had cut down meal sizes or skipped meals because there was not enough money to buy food, and that fresh fish and fresh fruit are considered unaffordable by a large proportion of the respondents, even those living in coastal settings. It is also noteworthy that half of respondents were in employment.

Professor **Sarah Skerratt**, **SRUC**'s Director of Policy Engagement and the Rural Policy Centre and founder member of the National Rural Mental Health Forum talked about a recent survey of Forum members ('Transforming Lives in Rural Scotland') that looked at the extent of support across rural Scotland for those experiencing mental ill-health. The main purposes of this survey were to gain an insight into the existing gaps in service provision, guide the future actions of the Forum and inform and guide policy makers.

The main gaps identified were: low awareness and poor perception of mental health issues, leading to an increase in the stigma typically associated with them; limited focus on personal experiences; limited and/or reduced access to local services; lack of pre-crisis and crisis support; weak integration with community support and ever-reducing funding.

The policy changes needed are therefore those related to providing more support for non-clinical recovery settings, and addressing the specific needs of rural communities that can help to reduce isolation and to improve access to services through collaboration.

Finally, a PHD student from **Aberdeen University** presented her work about cancer survival rates in rural areas around the world, currently working alongside Scottish Rural Action to look into cancer outcomes for rural areas covered by Aberdeen Hospital, namely North-east Scotland and the islands. The survival rates of cancer patients is lower in remote areas than in more connected ones, and the goal of the PHD research is to find reasons for this.

My personal conclusion is that the content of these talks is highly relevant to the work of the Landscape Institute, particularly its Policy on Public Health, which encourages professionals to promote and act upon the idea that high-quality landscape may increase well-being, and of the benefits of creating healthy places, as these have the potential to not only help overcome health inequalities and promote healthy lifestyles, but also increase social interaction and optimise opportunities for working, learning and development, as well as contributing to a restorative, uplifting and healing environment for both physical and mental health conditions.