

WRITTEN EVIDENCE FROM WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL (WDC)

The response of WDC focuses on the areas which have been highlighted in the call for evidence.

**Housing – Affordable Housing and Housing Generally**

It is too early to comment on whether this programme has been fully successful; however Councils and RSLs seem to be engaged in delivering new housing in partnership. The level of Scottish Government funding may need to be reviewed should the construction market inflation rates start to pick-up, as some suggest may happen over the next few months.

The upcoming changes to Housing Benefit in the lead-up to introduction of Universal Credit will start to squeeze Council and RSL resources and the benefit cap and under-occupancy reduction to housing benefit start on 1 April 2013. The cap is likely to have a financial effect on Councils in relation to homelessness provision where cost of provision is fairly high and funded currently from Housing benefit. Any cut to benefit for tenants in this area will directly affect Councils. The under-occupancy cut to benefit could put pressure on Housing Revenue Accounts in Councils and on RSLs as it is likely that those affected won't all have the ability to fully fund the gap between the reduced benefit payment and the rent. The supply of one bedroom stock in Scotland is not high and therefore the ability of tenants to down-size will be difficult and often outwith the tenants hands. So further funding to generate additional one bedroom accommodation would be welcomed.

It is possible that with the introduction of Universal Credit and direct payment of the credit to tenants in future, linked with inflationary uplifts of credit being linked to CPI rather than RPI will cause ongoing increasing gaps between Universal Credit funding and rent levels. This may result in investment plans needing to be reconsidered as future investment may no longer be sustainable/affordable. This may result in pressures in relation to the ability of landlords to borrow to fund additional new affordable housing.

The Scottish Government budget states that spend on Housing is partly aimed at supporting economic growth and this makes sense. The investment in affordable housing is welcomed; however this needs to be sustained over time to meet the changing needs of the population.

Further extension of the National Housing Trust model may be of assistance.

Work on making existing housing more sustainable is also important and potentially facilitating economic growth as current wasted resources are spent differently by homeowners and tenants. The National Retrofit Programme should assist with this, but the value of work needing to be done to bring older houses up to modern standards is very significant.

**Active Travel**

Active Travel is an important aspect of the work of Road Safety Education, Training and Publicity team within WDC.

We are very pro-active in aligning our active travel programmes for children and young people, within new curriculum framework, as many of our initiatives are valued by schools

as examples of interdisciplinary topics that cover not just road safety within health and wellbeing but all other curricular areas.

We work in close partnership with our educational establishments to promote the two key aspects of active travel: walking and cycling. Through the wide range of educational initiatives we support, by training and facilitating staff, walking and cycling are central to much of the work undertaken in early years, primary and secondary schools. An example is the work of our Junior Road Safety Officers who promote and encourage walking within their school communities.

In particular, the Road Safety staff have been Lead Officers in designing our walking initiatives, such as the Travelling Green project that encourage parents to allow their children, in the middle to upper primary, to walk part or all of the way on the school journey. As a continuation Step Forward aims to encourage children in Primary 7 to increase their physical activity levels during the transition from primary to secondary schools.

We promote Bikeability project in the upper school by supporting schools to participate in multi-stage cycle training schemes. The cycle instructors are supported by road safety staff and encouraged to participate in a skills based approach to cycling before moving to off / on-road training. Our partnership working with Cycling Scotland encourages our schools to apply for Cycle Friendly Schools Award as part of promoting active schools and Sustrans have provided funding to give all interested schools cycle racks.

In conjunction, we work closely with schools to encourage them to produce School Travel Plans to promote sustainable travel choices for all members of the school community

Another aspect key to developing positive behaviours for active travel is Green Travel planning.

Westbound, the Travel Plan for employees of WDC, was launched in June 2007. The broad objectives of the Travel Plan are as follows:

- to provide greater transport choice for all Council staff and visitors, particularly to principal Council offices;
- to reduce the number of single occupancy car journeys to and from Council offices;
- to encourage an efficient use of car parking at the principal Council offices;
- to help reduce on-street parking and improve the local environment;
- to encourage staff to choose 'healthy' and sustainable travel choice, and
- to reduce car use for Council business trips;

There are links between Westbound and the Health Working Lives (HWL) scheme through support for active travel choices, i.e. cycling and walking. Westbound also supports the Council's commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and there are further links between the aims of Westbound and work on improving air quality locally.

Since the launch of Westbound, there has been a positive trend in the number of employees travelling to work as a lone car driver – from 70% in 2006/07, this has fallen to 60% in 2010/11 suggesting more drivers are car-sharing or considering alternative mode of travel. There has also been an increase in the number of sustainable travel choices –

travel by public transport has increased from 10% to 18% in the same time period, and active travel (cycling/walking) has increased from 5% to 13%.

In terms of projects to support sustainable travel choices, there has been investment in secure cycle parking and showering and changing facilities for employees. WDC operates a Cycle to Work scheme which has proved very popular with approximately 200 members of staff hiring a bike through the scheme. WDC also has a Car-share scheme to encourage employees to car-share for both travel to/from work and on business journeys. Our scheme is part of a wider regional scheme supported by SPT and hosted by liftshare (the UK's biggest car-sharing service). To further encourage sustainable travel for business-related journeys, WDC offers a Bus Token scheme providing employees with pre-paid tokens for bus travel.

The final aspect that assists active travel is a high quality cycle network.

Over the past 3 years WDC has delivered over £700,000 worth of cycle track improvement on the National Cycle Route 7. This work has been predominantly funded through Sustrans (£570k) and other funding streams including SPT and the Council's revenue budget. We have been an exemplar authority in delivering schemes on time on budget and have benefited from this reputation by attracting additional year end funding where other authorities have not delivered. The additional funding highlighted in the Scottish Government budget for cycle track improvement would allow WDC to complete substantial improvements to National Cycle Route 7 and increase the percentages of active travel within the authority and as a conduit from neighbouring authorities.

WDC would benefit from another £400,000 of cycle track improvement funding and as an authority who has achieved positive outcomes in partnership with Sustrans would ensure delivery of schemes.

## **Transport**

Transport within the budget is linked to funding of the trunk road network for which we have the A82 running through the core of our authority. There is mention of the Caledonia sleeper service which comes through the authority from the highlands, stops at Dalmuir and then continues all the way south to London. This is seen as a critical link to support business and economic regeneration. Part of our ongoing investment plan in conjunction with SPT will link to this as we are providing a new park and ride facility at Dalmuir station, which not solely focused on providing parking for this service, could be seen as an additional help to make Dalmuir a more commuter friendly location.

## **Digital Infrastructure and Broadband**

This investment is welcomed, though as it will be directed towards more rural communities is unlikely to have any impact on WDC. It seems odd that there is little or no mention of funding for this work from the mainstream digital infrastructure providers i.e. those most likely to benefit in financial terms from the extension of broadband coverage across Scotland.

**Fuel Poverty and Energy Assistance**

Funding to assist with this is always welcomed and the National Retrofit Programme should also assist. This issue is of particular concern when the percentage increases in fuel prices that have been high over the last 12 months and almost certain to continue into the future. When linked with the austerity measures being imposed by the UK government, particularly on those with already low income levels, then this must be seen as a real concern. The differential between likely inflationary uplifts to future benefit payments (CPI) and the likely price uplifts for energy will make energy use less and less affordable for much of our population, with people more likely to need to make decisions about heating compared to other essential spend items.

As a result of benefit changes and fuel price increases the target to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016 seems to be less likely to be achieved – though clearly these new pressures on people are not the responsibility of the Scottish Government.

**Scottish Water**

Though not specifically mentioned in the Scottish Government budget, the means of collection of water charges via local authorities has been proven to be unfair on a number of Councils. The current ABCD method of distributing collected water charges should be changed to the Line By Line methodology, as to financially disadvantage Councils through for collecting water charges is not sustainable in the current financial climate.

**Public Procurement**

The spending power of the public sector is significant and the potential to use this to support the Scottish economy through the Sustainable Procurement Bill would be helpful. The generation of community benefits, etc is to be encouraged and WDC will be submitting a response to the consultation on the Bill.