



Reader's picture of the day

MOTHER DUCK: A pair of ducklings, under the watchful eye of mum, have a rest in the grounds of Fyvie Castle in this photograph taken by William Elliott from MacDuff.

Amateur photographers are invited to submit pictures for inclusion. Please send high-quality prints to: Scottish Life, The Press and Journal, 1 Marischal Square, Broad Street, Aberdeen, AB10 1BL. We are sorry that we are unable to return them. You can email your photographs to: pictures@pressandjournal.co.uk

Injustice of poverty for rural residents



Peter Kelly

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We should all be able to fulfil our potential and live a decent and dignified life, regardless of where we live.

So, how can we best help people living in rural Scotland build a life beyond poverty? Because, among our handsome towns, idyllic villages and beautiful landscapes, some 15% of rural households have incomes below the poverty level.

The Scottish Parliament cross-party group on poverty has been inquiring into the reality of poverty in rural Scotland, and its report was published earlier this month. It clearly shows how we can reduce poverty.

We can make sure anti-poverty strategies take much better account of rural experiences, and key rural policies – like the Scottish Government's forthcoming rural delivery plan – can have an anti-poverty mission at their core. We can create focused, ambitious and joined-up plans to tackle the key structural causes of rural poverty highlighted in the report: transport, energy and childcare should be among the early priorities.

The cross-party group heard about the enormous strengths of people in rural communities, and about exciting possibilities around improving community access to assets such as land and renewable energy. We found evidence of enduring entrepreneurial spirit, community cohesion, a strong voluntary ethos, and a willingness to embrace new opportunities.

One new idea that could support those strengths and provide greater security and freedom for people in rural areas is the

minimum income guarantee – a level that no one will be allowed to fall below.

The guarantee is more than a social security proposal, and is made up of complementary parts. It would be delivered through reform to public services, changes to the world of work and improvements to social security, including a targeted payment for anyone who falls beneath the minimum income guarantee level.

We found support for the idea of piloting the guarantee in rural communities, which could help business, and give people greater freedom and security to pursue their goals and build a better life for themselves and households.

The evidence we heard shows how much that change is needed, and highlights the injustice that leaves people in rural areas facing higher living costs. On average, they pay £50 a week more on travel than people in urban areas. Poor, expensive and non-existent public transport cuts too many off from employment, education, social lives, and access to essential services. Rural shoppers have fewer opportunities to buy low-cost and affordable groceries, adding to food insecurity.

The inquiry heard that access to good-quality, affordable housing is sadly lacking. This contributes to the cycles of depopulation, which further weaken rural economies and put more people at risk of poverty.

Rates of fuel poverty are higher in many rural areas. In the Western Isles, this affects more than half of households. Some households might have incomes above the

poverty level, but are still pulled into fuel poverty by these extra costs.

The focus of local rural economies has moved towards hospitality and service industries, where the nature of seasonal work means household incomes are at their lowest in the winter, when energy costs are highest.

Economic challenges in rural Scotland both contribute to and are compounded by trends of depopulation and demographic change. The results are ageing rural populations, leading to overall population decline and reduced economic activity.

Access to key services which can help people into paid employment – including public transport, healthcare, and childcare – is just not good enough for many rural residents, creating a barrier to work and training.

Education has a vital role in allowing people living on low incomes to access higher wages and escape poverty, as well as in the broader economic development of rural Scotland. However, access to education and wider training in many rural areas can be scarce, particularly at higher and further levels.

We hope the report helps put rural poverty higher up the political agenda. We hope it will lead to real change. And we hope it strengthens the voices of people in rural communities when it comes to challenging the injustice of poverty in wealthy Scotland.

■ **Peter Kelly is director of The Poverty Alliance, Scotland's anti-poverty network**