



COMMISSION ON STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Local People. Local Power. Local Purpose.

WE'VE GOT SOME QUESTIONS...

HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT STRONG LOCAL DEMOCRACY MEANS TO YOU

We are an independent Commission that has been set up to look at what democracy in Scotland might look like, whatever the result of the referendum in 2014. The Commission is chaired by Councillor David O'Neill, President of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and we have set out its main tasks at the end of this document.

Our starting point is that we believe that local services and local accountability matter. That is why we want to begin our work by hearing your views and suggestions about what happens now, and what the future might be.

This is only our first step in listening to you. Any information that you give us now will help start the debate, but we also want this to be an ongoing conversation. Over the next few months we will be setting up different ways in which you can meet us or tell us what you think. A good way to find out about these is by signing up to our newsletter at www.localdemocracy.info and by following @localcommission on Twitter.

Tell us what you think

We have not provided a long list of questions to answer, but we do want to hear what you have to say about some themes. Please respond to as few or as many as you wish. However, it would be helpful to keep your overall response to eight pages or less.

Please provide evidence or examples in support of what you say. This will help us understand and explore your ideas further.

1. LOCAL DECISION MAKING: Do you think that decisions about local issues and services are made locally enough in Scotland at the moment? If not, what does deciding 'locally' mean to you? Please illustrate your answer with any examples from your own experience.

There is a great deal of evidence, from opinion surveys, changes in levels of participation in elections and other sources, that many people do not feel involved in decision-making processes or that there are clear routes for them to influence decision-making.

It is not necessarily the case that making decisions more locally will in itself resolve these issues of disempowerment and disengagement. However it does seem clear that if more decisions are made locally, this will provide opportunities to at least find starting points for addressing what appear to be very widespread and deep-seated challenges, since it will be less difficult for decision-makers and citizens to work together to create opportunities for people to engage directly.

There are many examples of local communities, and communities of interest, engaging effectively with decision-making and influencing the delivery of services in ways that have resulted in positive outcomes. Democratic decision-making is in a sense a collective process by definition, however active involvement by communities brings the collective element to life. It can make the learning dimension of the process far more powerful because it is shared and linked with active involvement. When participants' learning from the process is supported this helps to ensure that it informs and stimulates future involvement.

From the CLD Standards Council's perspective, developing collective, community involvement in decision-making should be seen as a core part of what is meant by "deciding locally". Equally, local decision-making needs to take place within a framework that ensures a focus on broadly-agreed outcomes, and the framework should ensure that appropriately-skilled support is available to enable communities to develop the skills needed to engage in decision-making, in particular those communities that are most disadvantaged. The focus on those providing support to communities having the required skills is essential to its effectiveness.

2. LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY: How important do you think it is for locally elected people to be responsible for decisions about local issues and services? Do you have any examples of why this is the case?

People who are elected locally are likely to have a greater understanding of the impact of local issues and services than those responsible for national decision-making, and accountability to those affected by decisions is likely to focus attention on this impact.

Local accountability promotes dialogue over decisions, likely to be beneficial in terms of the quality of decision-making and in terms of the learning process for both elected representatives and those to whom they are accountable. This has the potential to create a virtuous circle of greater involvement leading to greater understanding that in turn stimulates involvement. A lack of local accountability tends to produce the opposite, negative, effect in an equally self-reinforcing way.

3. LOCAL PRIORITIES: How well do you think that communities' local priorities are accounted for in the way that national and local government works at the moment? What is effective, and if there is room for improvement, how should things change?

The Scottish Government, and previously the Scottish Executive, have made significant efforts to enable communities' local priorities to be accounted for, most recently through the development of the proposals to legislate in support of community empowerment.

There are good examples of local government and national government agencies working with local communities so that their priorities are reflected in local decision-making and services. In our experience, key factors in making this effective are:

- Willingness on the part of local and central government for communities to have a real and not tokenistic role in decision-making;
- Recognition that this requires significant changes in attitudes and culture;
- Readiness to learn from experience and in particular from what doesn't work;
- Ensuring that communities have access to skilled and impartial support for their involvement; and
- Sustained and consistent commitment to the change required.

Equally it is important to recognise that there are also many instances where despite efforts being made to work in ways that take account of communities' local priorities national and local government have had great difficulty in doing so.

Change can be driven by consistently addressing the factors outlined above. Initiatives to engage communities in decision-making have tended to be neglected when attention and priorities shift, rather than being maintained as core, long-term commitments. Good practice in community engagement and in building the capacity of communities to engage, and the principles that underpin it, is well-documented but may not always be given the same attention as evidence of "what works" in areas that have traditionally been regarded as "core statutory priorities".

The organisation, skills and experience of communities themselves, and investment by national and local government in supporting them to develop these capacities are key factors in improvement. This investment again needs to be seen as part of the core business of public services rather than an add-on.

4. STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY: What do you think should be done to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland? Do you have any ideas or examples about how this could improve people's lives?

Some (although not all) of the changes required to strengthen local democracy need to take place at community level, that is, within neighbourhoods and also through more dispersed groups based on interest and identity. Our comments focus on these changes needed at community level.

Democratic change, like services, needs to be co-produced. Government, in particular local government, has a role in strengthening democracy at community level; but it is essential that it recognises communities themselves as equal partners in developing better ways of making decisions.

This means that listening to what communities say they want done, what they see the issues as being and what they want to do about them themselves are essential starting points for strengthening local democracy. Key to this is an assessment of needs, of existing community strengths and of support needed to develop these further, carried out with communities by staff with the appropriate skills. So also is ensuring that all staff see the people they provide services to and the communities they work in as active partners in change.

From these starting points, structures and processes for stronger democratic decision making at community level can be developed around the organisation of the community itself, with accountability of all decision-makers built into the process, rather than by government and service providers seeking to engage people in structures and processes that they have developed without the involvement of the communities who are expected to engage with them.

5. SCOTLAND'S FUTURE: Has there been enough discussion about local democracy in the debate about Scotland's future? If not, what should be addressed and how might this be achieved?

The debate about Scotland's future appears to have focused heavily on whether Scotland should remain part of the UK or become independent. In one sense the development of proposals for community empowerment can be seen as an exception to this, but while these have figured strongly in the policy agendas of central and local government they have not achieved prominence in public debate.

The CLD Standards Council's main interests in relation to strengthening local democracy relate to what happens at community level, however, there is interaction between what happens at different levels and it is hard to avoid a conclusion that the types of development of democracy in communities that we have aimed to outline in responses to previous questions are best fostered by strong, democratically accountable civic leadership at local authority level.

The idea that "people want more say" seems to have underpinned much of the discussion about Scotland's future, but often with an assumption that this can be straightforwardly achieved through one or other constitutional arrangement. In order to achieve a more productive discussion of local democracy, more searching exploration is needed of the barriers to wider engagement in democratic processes, of how these can be overcome and of how democratic processes can be invigorated as the means for addressing real and concrete challenges.

6. OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES: Do you have any concerns about strengthening local democratic decision making in Scotland?

A significant barrier to achieving stronger local decision-making, particularly in terms of decision-making "below" local authority level, may be aversion to risk and uncertainty, resulting in reluctance to "let go". Developing the skills required to support effective decision-making in localities, and for enabling leadership at all levels, can assist in overcoming these barriers, and enable those involved to establish mutual trust.

It is important to have an open and honest discussion about which decisions should be made at which level. The siting of hospital-based health services, for example, may have direct consequences and implications for a large number of local and interest-based communities, so that making decisions at a very local level is unlikely to be appropriate. There is a definite need for a stronger democratic framework for decisions such as this, including opportunities for engagement and influence at local level, but localising the decision-making is not always the key factor.

Clarity and openness about which decisions are to be made where, with criteria based on maximising democratic accountability, can provide a framework within which local democratic decision-making can be strengthened. Development of skills in engaging with communities, and in supporting communities themselves to engage effectively, is essential if a framework of this sort is to be developed and utilised in a productive way.

7. We would like to keep the conversation going with you. Can you tell us about any events, networks or other ways in which we could help achieve this? Is there anything that we can do to support you?

Community learning and development practitioners have an important role in enabling people to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding for engagement in local decision-making, to articulate the issues they see as important in their community and to develop organisations that can influence these.

These practitioners are potentially an important resource in developing the conversation on strengthening local democracy, but are dispersed through a wide variety of organisations in the public and third sector, so that to mobilise this resource depends on using a range of networks.

The Standards Council for CLD's own membership and committees provide one useful network, and members in turn are also part of others. These include the Community Development Alliance Scotland, the membership of Learning Link Scotland and Youthlink Scotland, the CLD Managers Scotland group and the Scottish Community Development Network. Including these networks in the Commission's communications and seeking opportunities for more direct engagement will help to keep the conversation going.

The Commission could potentially assist the Standards Council by jointly sponsoring an event for CLD practitioners as part of the conversation on strengthening local democracy, which could assist in legitimising the involvement of practitioners in this discussion.