

CLD Standards Council Scotland Response

Question 1: Tell us about your experiences of getting involved in decision-making processes that affect your local community or community of interest.

The registered members of the Community Learning and Development Standards Council (currently over 2,200 in number and steadily increasing) are involved in supporting communities to be involved in decision-making processes across Scotland. This response reflects their experience; it does not seek to speak on behalf of communities. Enabling communities to be involved in decision-making is not a secondary part of Community Learning and Development (CLD) practitioners' work, but a core remit, and by registering with the CLD Standards Council (CLDSC) they commit to a primary responsibility to the individuals, groups and communities that they work with, and for enhancing their capacity for positive action.

From the perspective of CLD practitioners, it is apparent that many people already active in their communities recognise that there have been significant efforts made to improve the ways that decision-makers and public agencies engage with communities, for example through participatory budgeting, and, as a result, positive experiences of influencing decision making in ways that benefited communities.

At the same time, it is clear that a range of basic issues remain to be effectively addressed. These include:

- The need for clear communication in a range of media, and tailored to the various needs of groups and individuals within communities.
- Within the overall issue of communication, the need for consistent and clear feedback including information both on progress and action taken, and on what isn't considered achievable.
- Public agencies often lack the competences needed to engage openly, respectfully and systematically; there is a need for training/professional development for staff at all levels in public agencies, extending beyond individual skills and knowledge into the competence of the organisation.
- The provision of practical support for example in relation to transport, child care, the costs of involvement in these and other respects, and accessibility of venues, which continues to be inconsistent and often absent.

Some of these points are vividly illustrated in comments made in relation to the Review and shared with the Standards Council (in particular from extensive consultation carried out by the Garioch Partnership in Aberdeenshire): "Feedback what is doable, but also what isn't achievable – it's an adult conversation". A young disabled woman reported that, having been invited to join a key decision-making body, she was informed that a support worker (needed for mobility purposes and assistance for example with turning the pages of documents) could not attend the meeting with her. A group of people with learning disabilities who commented positively on opportunities for involvement and resulting influence on decisions

affecting them made the point that an “easier-read” version of the *Democracy Matters* materials was needed, and that the existing easy-read document made assumptions about prior knowledge. A group of Syrian refugees highlighted that for them voicing any form of critical comment on those in authority is a frightening concept. At a locality-based meeting, there was comment that: “Community planning can work well when staff are located and rooted in the community and get out and work and engage with folk where they are, in language they understand.”

People active in community groups are often familiar with the National Standards for Community Engagement. This is important evidence of the effectiveness of the work previously carried out by government and partners to develop and promote the Standards. However, arising from this familiarity, there is concern that progress is still needed in applying and implementing the Standards and that if this were happening, it would address the types of issues referred to above. A more general point arising from this is that real progress is most likely to arise from building progressively on existing foundations, rather than a proliferation of initiatives.

There are some concerns over the apparent variety of initiatives and how they fit together (“lots of tiers – already cluttered – too many levels of decision-making”). There is a degree of uncertainty as a result of the emphasis from government on more local decision-making, alongside decisions to, for example, centralise police and fire services.

For many communities, poverty is a fundamental issue in relation to involvement in decision-making, both in itself and in sharpening the impact of the other issues identified above. One comment, from someone living in an area that would not be generally considered among the most deprived, sums this up:

“This is all fine and well, but we’re seeing an increase in our area for access to foodbanks, folk living with high levels of debt, in poverty and not having their basic needs met – until we get the balance right where no-one is left behind in our community, then for some being engaged in local democracy is a far-fetched idea – yet to exclude them widens gaps in our communities”

In other areas in Scotland, this comment could be extended to apply to whole communities. If changes in local governance are to be relevant to people and communities affected by poverty, they need to be designed and understood as tools for practical, positive change in relation to these fundamental issues; if they are used largely by more advantaged communities, then they will result in increased inequality.

Question 2: Would you your like your local community or community of interest to have more control over some decisions? If yes, what sorts of issues would those decisions cover?

It is generally recognised that there is an important distinction to be made between “control” and “influence”. The decisions that a community can potentially have legitimate control over can be identified as those that it “owns”, that “belong” to it, that is, those that exclusively or at least primarily affect it and not others. For

example, a community can't legitimately have control over the budget allocated by a public agency for services in its area, because by definition, this would impact on other communities. It may of course seek to influence this. A decision on where a publicly-funded facility is sited within its area is an example of one that a community can potentially have legitimate control over.

It's important to note also that there are different forms of "control" over decisions. The Review focuses on formal control over decision-making; but powerful actors in a situation may have influence, overt or otherwise, that in practice amounts to control. The implication of this is that the power that a community is able to exercise (and who within a community the power resides with) may be as, or more, important than the degree of formal control it has.

Following from this, in relation to the Review and the specific question, the CLDSC suggests that:

- The development of the capacity of communities themselves (to work together effectively, to develop sustainable, democratic, inclusive organisations, and to establish methods of reaching decisions and conclusions that reflect the views of the broader community and respect minority views) is an indispensable means of progressing the aims of the Review. Strong, inclusive, democratic community organisations can work across administrative and political boundaries for the benefit of their communities in ways that they determine themselves.
- If devolving power to more local levels is to act as a means of reducing inequality, and not increase it, adequate resourcing for the provision of competent community development support to enable areas experiencing poverty and deprivation to develop their own capacities is essential.
- The potential to increase inequality between and within communities should be acknowledged and ensuring that it doesn't happen should be an explicit focus for the Review at all stages. This applies in relation both to poverty, income inequality and geographical areas where these are concentrated, and to members of groups who are protected under equalities legislation. More groundwork is needed to ensure that decentralising power to more local level does not simply result in the more advantaged communities, and the more powerful people within communities, further increasing the advantages that they already have.
- "Greater control" and "greater influence" for communities should not be considered as mutually-exclusive alternatives. Both can have a role in improving democracy and achieving better outcomes for communities; neither should be considered as a universal solution.
- If public agencies have not developed a culture of respect for communities, in which the value of building the capacity of communities and working in partnership with them is understood, and a strategic approach to community development, then the rhetoric of empowerment is likely to become confused with efforts to offload responsibilities and liabilities. In undertaking asset

transfers, for example, public agencies need be clear whether and in what way the land or building concerned constitutes an asset.

- Control, whether by communities or public agencies, needs to be underpinned by acceptable decision-making processes and matched by accountability for decisions taken. The transfer of control to groups who are already powerful within communities, but are not adequately representative of them, does not increase democracy. Where communities have taken responsibility for decisions, public agencies should recognise their right to take them while ensuring that appropriate support is provided.
- Public agencies should respond constructively and respectfully to communities seeking to influence decisions, consider views, arguments and evidence carefully and recognise the unique expertise of those living with an issue; this does not absolve the public agency from responsibility for decisions made or for explaining them to all affected.

Question 3: When thinking about decision-making, “local” could mean a large town, a village, or a neighbourhood. What does “local” mean to you and your community?

Discussions on the Review have highlighted that “one size doesn’t fit all”: there isn’t a single type of decision-making structure that can be used in or for all communities. Equally it should be recognised that people experience the community or communities that they live in in different ways. A car owner and a non-car owner may experience what is local in very different ways; someone who feels safe and comfortable leaving their street, or their house, is likely to have very different perceptions to someone who, for whatever reason, doesn’t.

Community organisations developed by people with a common interest can reflect these varieties of communities and individual experiences; when a range of these organisations, within a shared geographical area or on some other basis, co-operate, they can provide a way of joining up, and where necessary reconciling these various interests. This is not necessarily a straightforward process and where the issues of concern are pressing and the participants faced with multiple difficulties in their lives it is likely to be complex and challenging; but there is no alternative means of developing strong and inclusive communities able to contend with very adverse circumstances, shape positive change and further the ambition of the Review. There is no short-cut via changes in structures that avoids the need to support communities to achieve this type of change. This again highlights the fundamental importance of competent community development support.

Question 4: Are there existing forms of local level decision-making which could play a part in exercising new local powers? Are there new forms of local decision-making that could work well? What kinds of changes might be needed for this to work in practice?

As suggested earlier, it is important to build on what is already working and this applies in relation to forms of local level decision-making; at the same time it seems clear that innovation is also needed. The need to build on what is working in itself presents some difficult dilemmas, for instance in relation to Community Councils, which in some places are seen as positive and important and in others arouse dissatisfaction or indifference.

Local governance structures cannot have an equivalent flexibility to that outlined in relation to community organisations in answer to Q3 above; if they reflect one set of community boundaries and perceptions of locality, they will inevitably transgress others. Having different structures in different geographical areas will not overcome this limitation, or will only do so to a limited extent. While it is clearly important that political and administrative boundaries and units at all levels are designed in a way that is as respectful as possible of community identities, it should be recognised that it is community organisations themselves that will have a major role in ensuring that these are reflected in decision-making. Decision making structures that are responsible for decisions with significant implications require a degree of formality and continuity, and clarity over the boundaries of their authority; this is unlikely to be compatible with fully reflecting the diversity, overlaps and untidiness of communities.

Fundamental changes that are required to develop local decision-making that works well include improvements to the practices of public agencies, as referred to above in answer to Q1, and provision of community development support to build capacity and assist in redressing inequalities of all sorts, as referred to in answer to Q2.

Question 5: Do you have any other comments, ideas or questions? Is there more you want to know?

This response focuses on the community decision-making/Democracy Matters strand of the Local Governance Review, in line with the way in which the consultation is structured. However, it appears to us that the two strands are very closely linked and that progress in each is in key ways dependent on the other. Clearly the knowledge and experience of local councils and other public sector agencies has a vital part to play in reviewing public service governance, however it appears to us that an opportunity may have been missed in not inviting communities to contribute to this aspect of the review at this first stage. Nonetheless many of the comments received in response to Democracy Matters are sure to carry insights relevant to the public service governance strand. It seems to us important that these are made use of, and that the design of the next steps in the process reflects the close interconnection between community decision-making and public service governance, and supports the involvement of both communities and public sector agencies together.

We have referred to the need for competent community development support in progressing the aims of the Review. The CLDSC's Competent Practitioner Framework is available here <http://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CompetentPractitionerFramework.pdf>. Registration with the CLDSC requires a commitment to practice in line with this framework and to undertake professional learning to ensure that skills and knowledge are updated. The CLDSC has a key role in supporting and assuring the quality community development practice that is essential to fulfilling the ambitions of the Review and ensuring that devolving more power to local level supports the drive to reduce inequality.