



Response to the Scottish Community Empowerment Consultation Paper

Introduction

The Jimmy Reid Foundation is Scotland's left wing think tank, independent of any political party. We welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to reviewing and seeking to enhance community empowerment in Scotland. There are several aspects identified in the consultation paper which we agree need to be tackled. However, we believe that the nature of the problem is far greater than that the paper outlines. Our own findings (which come from ***The Silent Crisis: Failure and Revival in Local Democracy in Scotland***, submitted with this response) **show Scotland to be the least democratic European country at local level**. The Foundation therefore believes that deeper structural issues around the democratic element of local government need to be addressed.

Why empowerment must mean democracy

We must refocus our attention on the very nature and importance of local democracy and how to resolve the structural nature of our current democracy deficit. There is no better time than now to engage with this issue as its crux of local autonomy strikes at the heart of the independence debate. Therefore, **we recommend that the Scottish Government goes further than the consultation paper and sets up a commission to address the fundamental issues at play here and create a system of genuinely democratic local government.**

There are several laudable aims of the Scottish Government present in this consultation. As identified by the paper there is a widespread demand for local communities to have more control over their own areas. In response to this, an overarching aim of the bill is to strengthen community empowerment and it is positive that the Scottish Government has already outlined initiatives for achieving this such as the Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan. In addition, we welcome the paper's dual aim of preserving localism and granting communities more scope to take independent action. We believe, however, that these proposed solutions do not address the root causes of the problems we face at local democracy level in Scotland. It is important, first of all, to examine the silent crisis of local democracy.

If we look at each of the seven key indicators in ***The Silent Crisis***, it is hard not to conclude that Scotland is the least democratic nation at local level in the European Union. We have the fewest councils, the fewest councillors, the largest constituencies (even including sparsely populated countries such as Finland), the highest ratio between the population and councillors, the lowest proportion of the population engaged in local politics, the least competitive elections and (barring England and even with the distorting effect of dual elections) the lowest turnout.

The consultation paper rightly highlights the poor turnout at the last local elections (39 per cent) and that this needs to be investigated. The proposals offered for this, such as engaging with the Electoral Commission, however, will not tackle the underlying causes of this lack of local engagement and voter apathy. In the current system, even if an issue motivates a community

strongly enough to rally round and seek action through the democratic process, the best it can hope for is to elect a couple of officials to sit on a much larger local authority where they can do no more than lobby for a particular issue. We believe the current structure means that 'local' authorities are thus not representative of individual communities as they are too big. The number of people it takes to elect a single councillor is ten times the European average. This helps to furnish voter apathy as people become frustrated as it seems nothing can be achieved for their community specifically. Thus what is produced are low turnouts, reduced numbers of candidates and weak debate and discussion of community interests.

There is one overwhelming issue that cannot be ignored in asking the question about turnout: as is carefully referenced in the study, the turnout in elections is directly proportionate to the importance voters perceive the election to have. Since they do not believe voting in local elections is likely to change anything locally, they do not vote in high numbers. There is no short-cut to resolving this – make votes count by reviving local democracy or see continued atrophy in voting rates.

Voluntarism is no solution: the response must be universal

The consultation paper also indicated that community councils should be reviewed. There are currently around 1200 community councils in Scotland, all of which are composed of elected volunteers from the community. However, many of them are elected unopposed, have an average budget of £400 and have very little power. The primary problem with these groups is that they are mainly consultative bodies and the local authorities have no duty or requirement to reflect what they are told by these community representatives.

The Jimmy Reid Foundation welcomes the creation of the Short Life Working Group on community councils and awaits their recommendations. However, while its aims are valuable, it is not foreseeable that this will properly address the scale of the democracy deficit at local level. For example, currently only one person in 4,270 in Scotland is an elected community politician. This is in comparison to one in 125 in France, one in 200 in Austria, and even England manages one in 2,860. The current voluntarist approach, which allows communities to organise small local initiatives, does not address the fundamental democracy deficit at the heart of local government. It merely favours those communities where people have time, self-confidence and experience – often this means affluent areas.

We welcome that the Scottish Government is open to the idea of community engagement and participation becoming a more significant part of the remit of Audit Scotland. However, **the fact that so little attention is paid to the democratic element of local government when so much is given to the administrative side, reveals a deep and misplaced lack of concern**. We believe that without a fundamental review of the democratic element of local government, there will be both the continued erosion of the kind of localism of which Scotland is proud and an undermining of effective decision-making. Localised democratic decision making is an integral part of a thriving democracy and the question of autonomy goes right to the core of the current Scottish independence referendum.

It is clear, therefore, that **deeper structural change is necessary to address the root of this problem**. Our report recommends the Scottish Government establishes a commission to address this issue by seeking to devise a system of genuinely local democratic government. This would function beneath the existing local structure, as current local administration is pretty strong, without creating unnecessary disruption.

What we are proposing is not a radical, expensive and demoralising overhaul of the whole local authority system. It would require little additional bureaucracy; rather, the existing bureaucracy would simply be governed by different elected bodies according to the allocation of powers and functions. It should be for a Scottish Government commission to decide exactly how this will look. However, our report outlines a number of principles which should be at the heart of this new structure. Above all it is imperative that local democracy should be universal and not reliant on a community 'opting' for democracy.

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