The Finance Committee of the Scottish Parliament has called for the submission of views on how to more quickly and effectively progress reforms of Scotland’s public services along the lines laid out by the Christie Commission.

This response constitutes the views of Grow Trust on this subject. Grow Trust is an umbrella organisation for community organisations and Development Trusts. The aim of the Grow Trust is to support local communities move from the revolving door of small-scale grant dependency to income-generating self-sufficiency. In this aim Grow Trust is looking to encourage transformational change.

In terms of both aspirations and delivery Grow Trust is therefore aligned with the recommendations of the Christie Commission.

This response is based on the experience of two Community Development Trusts, Linwood and Beith, whose work has been guided by community participation, consultation and an enterprising approach. This work has taken place in working class areas experiencing the adverse impacts of inequality. For these reasons Grow Trust is well placed to provide insight into how the recommendations of the Christie Commission might be realised.

**Failure to implement key Christie Commission recommendations**

At a fundamental level the progress of the recommendations of the Christie Commission has been hampered by a lack of adherence to the core principles outlined by the Commission. The Commission’s report called for “nothing less than a thorough transformation of our public services”. It called for “public service organisations [to] engage with people and communities directly, acknowledging their ultimate authority in the interests of fairness and legitimacy”. It recognised what it described as “Producer dominance”; a situation in which government and government agencies, as the primary providers of public services, demonstrate a tendency to prioritise “the interests of organisations and professional groups […] before those of the public”, leaving the capacities, ideas, initiatives and voices of the public underutilised. The report called instead for a bottom up approach which involved genuine community participation. It is the view of Grow Trust that insufficient action has been taken to make this bottom up approach a reality.

It must be acknowledged that transformation of the kind advocated by the report is unlikely where the institutional arrangements of knowledge gathering and sharing as well as power over decision-making remain unchanged and where the same voices and institutions continue to dominate. With little attempt to reach out to those not previously heard the formation of new perspectives and the development of new approaches is hampered. Without providing confidence that voices will be heard there will be little motivation for those who have previously been excluded to
participate. The lack of progress in terms of innovation, integration of services and collaboration in provision must be understood to stem from this fundamental failure.

From Arbuthnott to Christie: setting the agenda

In 2009, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the Clyde Valley Community Planning Partnership (CVCPP) commissioned an independent review which resulted in the Arbuthnott Report of November 2009. The report called for shared services amongst the eight West of Scotland councils which had commissioned the report\(^1\) as a response to anticipated financial constraints and demographic change. In 2010 the Local Government and Communities Committee asked for clarification of the Scottish Government view on the involvement of the third sector in discussions on shared services. In August it received a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney:

“The creation of a third sector interface in each local authority area will help strengthen the voice of the third sector within the Community Planning Partnership and will be an effective way for the third sector to engage in discussions around shared services. The ‘interface’ is the term used to describe the more formalised arrangements, designed at local level, by which the third sector is recognised at the Community Planning Partnership as an equal partner. This will also provide support for volunteering, voluntary organisations and social enterprises.”

In this way John Swinney announced that third sector interfaces would be set up in 2010. But there was no consultation with or participation by communities. This decision undermined the Christie Commission before it even came into existence. It exemplified a top down approach from a government whose policies, on face value, promoted participation and a bottom up approach. Because of this decision a structure was now in place tied to the existing community planning structures which had already failed to produce significant change in terms of participation and had had no significant impact on relieving the impacts of inequality on working class communities in Scotland.

At the same time “Producer dominance” has not been tackled but has merely changed in nature. From a situation where local and national government had accepted their role as providers of services, their role has increasingly morphed into a managerial one. This has resulted from the rise of arm’s length organisations set up by local authorities with the blessing of national government. These took over key services and assets from the local authorities. Whilst communities had previously had an opportunity for some influence over decision-making through the ballot box, ensuring a degree of public accountability, the arm’s length companies have become both unaccountable to local communities and, to a certain extent, local councils. Communities’ capacity to participate in decision-making has been therefore undermined, rather than strengthened as the Commission desired, because key services and assets have been taken outside any community influence.

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\(^1\) The authorities in the CVCPP are Glasgow, East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, East Renfrewshire, Renfrewshire and Inverclyde.
Nonetheless, the model whereby local authorities reduce their role as service providers and, in appropriate areas, act more as service coordinators has the potential to be undertaken in such a way as to facilitate community participation. The successes of Grow Trust and affiliated community trusts testify that such areas include community asset ownership and local economic regeneration. If the community organisations are constituted in such a way as to be led by the community, following the Grow Trust model, this would result in a significant step towards the Commission’s objective of a new way of working.

Both Arbuthnott and Christie emphasised the need for a step change in how services were delivered and developed and who was to deliver them. The need for involvement of users and the wider community was crucial. The Commission’s basic principles and objectives were not implemented at the beginning. Measures that have been taken which have resulted in the growth of unaccountable arm’s length bodies have only served to undermine local influence. These issues need to be addressed if the objectives of the Commission are to be realised. In the following section the key principles of the alternative approach to community engagement deployed by Grow Trust are outlined.

The experience of Grow Trust in participatory development

Based on the experience of Beith and Linwood community development trusts, three key points can be made about fostering truly participatory community engagement. First, there should be no ‘pre-set’ agenda. Participants must be able to drive the process from the outset with no restrictions imposed or topics which are off limits. If participants are assured that they are not being used merely to legitimise decisions made elsewhere, if there is confidence that they are the true drivers of the process or that their voices will be heeded, participation is facilitated. In practice this has involved an iterative process whereby engagement is conducted in a number of phases. A first phase is required to form the general principles of the process, followed by the distillation of the ideas generated. These ideas are then presented back to the community. This process continues until a workable set of proposals is formulated.

Second, effort must be made to bring new voices into the process. This requires more than announcing meetings and discussing issues with those who show up. It involves literally going out into the community: setting up stalls in community hubs, pop-up shops, drop-in centres, informal discussion with residents, identification of and dialogue with all stakeholder groups, etc. It involves creating discussion forums on social media sites, leafleting with information, local press bulletins. It involves multiple methods of acquiring community knowledge.

Third, spaces must be created for community deliberation. For example, many people may know little about planning policy. Yet they are affected by planning decisions. Therefore spaces must be made available which help people think the processes involved through and come to their own conclusions. It is an old adage that knowledge is power. As such, for community empowerment to be real, resources have to be devoted to educating communities about local issues and how they might go about contributing to or challenging local decisions. It is not sufficient
to simply announce proposals and solicit feedback. As with the previous point, community engagement must literally be taken out into the community itself.

Such an approach could form the basis of the “thorough transformation” envisaged by the Christie Commission. However, as of yet government agencies and councils in Scotland have failed to build such partnerships with the local community. It is therefore the view of Grow Trust that third sector interfaces should be replaced by fora agreed by local people in their localities and based upon these three points.

Recommendations

1. Public organisations need to go back to the original conclusions and core objectives of Christie and learn together with locally controlled organisations as to how to proceed.
2. There needs to be a shift in the practice and policies regarding capacity building in communities. The view of communities as being in a deficit situation must shift to one in which there is recognition of a capacity, both at community level and public sector level.
3. Third sector interfaces should be replaced by forums agreed by local people in their areas.
4. All public and quasi-public bodies operating within a geographical community boundary should be accountable through local elections to the local community.
5. Support organisations for enterprise development in working class areas should be replaced by support organisations based on the Grow Trust model.
6. Participatory budgeting should be implemented at a scale which will have impact. This should be applied across the public sector. Recommendations of financial levels and participatory system should be agreed within a set time scale.
7. In service days should be compulsory within the public sector regarding the principles of Christie and the associated practices to implement these practices within the daily workings of the organisation.