1. To what extent do you consider the Bill will empower communities, please give reasons for your answer?

Given the strength of the voluntary sector within the North East, Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership is supportive of the overall direction of the Bill. In many cases the Bill will place into statute many approaches which are already well established in Aberdeenshire, such as in community planning and asset transfer. It should be recognised that many of the best examples of empowerment we have seen have taken place where community bodies have had the opportunity to grow through time to develop the confidence and capacity to take on large-scale projects.

It is significant that much of the current good practice around asset transfer has been enabled through a variety of different national grant and investment schemes. There are numerous examples in Aberdeenshire of active community-led organisations that have developed assets as a result of this:

- Fraserburgh Development Trust worked to renovate a blight sight in the town centre and funded this through Town Centre Improvement funding. This asset has since been used as security to purchase a bakery in a rural community thus sustaining existing jobs and leading to the creation of further training opportunities.
- Huntly Development Trust have recently purchased a farm with Scottish Land Fund support and are developing renewable energy projects.
- Udny Community Trust have set up a community grant scheme with the funding from a wholly owned turbine. They now have a Big Lottery (Growing Community Assets) funded Development Officer and are delivering on needs identified through ‘Planning for Real’ completing a virtuous cycle of identifying and meeting need.

2. What will be the benefits and disadvantages for public sector organisations as a consequences of the provisions in the Bill?

Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership is committed to community engagement and partnership working and as such welcomes the thrust of the Bill. Ensuring that all partners will support and allocate resources towards the delivery of a shared plan is an important step in empowering community planning partnerships.

In terms of disadvantages, it is possible that the Bill will be perceived nationally as a means of dumping responsibilities on to community bodies. It is important therefore that there is sufficient support in place
for communities to get what they need out of the Bill. On that note, there are resource implications arising from the provisions in the Bill. Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership through its Single Outcome Agreement and Local Community Plans remains committed to focusing on outcomes and it is important that the administration of certain provisions within the Bill do not take resources away from delivering improved outcomes for communities. While specific concerns raised by officers of Aberdeenshire Council are set out in section 4, the Bill will require additional resources to implement.

3. Do you consider communities across Scotland have the capabilities to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill? If not, what requires to be done to the Bill, or to assist communities, to ensure this happens?

There is an ongoing process of capacity building that happens as organisations grow. This process of building capacity involves a range of partners and agencies but to succeed must be driven by the vision of local people themselves.

Clearly, access to funding streams is an important factor in this as the examples in Fraserburgh, Huntly, Udny mentioned earlier demonstrate. The long-term process of creating anchor organisations has also been evident through the work of some local Rural Partnerships such as Buchan Development Partnership who were case studied in the original Community Empowerment Action Plan.

The Policy memorandum makes reference to Participatory Budgeting and the desire of the Scottish Government to see this approach more widely utilised. There is an opportunity to link a new national participatory budgeting seed-corn fund to support the implementation of this Bill – perhaps utilising the ‘Change Fund’ approach which has previously been used in relation to enhanced outcomes for older people.

Inevitably some communities will be better placed to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill than others. To reduce against any potential for increasing inequalities between communities, it is important that public bodies continue to target resources to the areas of greatest need.

4. Are you content with the specific provisions in the Bill, if not what changes would you like to see, to which part of the Bill and why?

The proposed core duties are welcomed and support the high-level messages expressed in the Christie Commission and Statement of Ambition. It is important that these duties are placed on an equal footing with other duties that partner organisations hold. Driving a shift
from participation at meetings to participation in delivery and resourcing is a significant step forward. There will of course remain a tension between the existing lines of accountability that public bodies hold with the newer responsibilities funnelled through the Community Planning Partnership. There is no easy way around this and it has proved a barrier to partnership working so far.

For the provisions relating to common good, the Bill as drafted requires the Council to consult every community council in Aberdeenshire for every possible sale, rather than the local community council. Given the number of community councils in Aberdeenshire, this would be very time consuming for both the Council and community councils. It may be beneficial to amend the wording of the legislation to focus on the local and relevant community council. In addition, there are significant resource implications arising from the creation of a register of common good assets. While there is an existing audit obligation to maintain such a register, CIPFA acknowledges that current practice of dealing with common good issues as title queries rise is acceptable. The geographical area of Aberdeenshire Council and volume of titles means it would require significant resources and time to complete a full and comprehensive review of the Council’s titles. This is the position reported to, and accepted by, the Council’s Policy and Resources Committee. The draft provisions relating to common good have financial implications for the Council as these would require significant legal and archivist resources to take forward.

There needs to be clear links between any wider Scottish Government work to develop the role of community councils and the contents of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. It should be acknowledged that community councils along with other community bodies have a role to play in supporting the implementation of the Bill. The capacity and will of community councils to take on these provisions can vary significantly across Scotland. Further clarity on the role of community councils in the context of the Bill would be welcomed.

5. What are your views on the assessment of equal rights, impacts on island communities and sustainable development as set out in the Policy Memorandum?

It is worth highlighting that equalities considerations will need to be built into future policies and practices that emerge to help implement the provisions in the Bill. Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership has previously responded to the consultation highlighting the need to carefully manage the implementation of the Bill. This is important to ensure that those areas well placed and capable of taking advantage of the provisions do not further pull away from areas with less capacity and knowledge of community development.