Overview

Faith in Community Scotland (FiCS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee’s call for evidence on the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. This response is based on the insights and expertise of the local communities we have worked with, as well as the observations of our community development practitioners and discussions we have had with a range of other interested parties including Oxfam, SCVO and the Third Sector Forum.

Key Points

- A wider cultural change is necessary for effective community empowerment in Scotland, with legislation being a small, but not insignificant, part of it.
- People are our greatest assets.
- Communities empower themselves. Local and national governments, public service bodies, politicians third sector and voluntary organisations should all play a supportive, not a directive, role in building the capacities of communities towards this.
- Power cannot be given to one section of society without another party losing it. This needs to be clearly articulated in the bill.
- More participatory models of decision making are required. Participatory Budgeting and other schemes have a proven track record of enhanced outcomes, not least for areas with low engagement and constrained finances.
- A human rights and equalities based approach should be adopted, which places tackling inequality in particular as a core objective of the legislation.

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

Whilst recognising the importance of legislation for the promotion of community empowerment, it should be placed within a wider need for seismic change in our decision making culture. What is lacking from the legislation in this regard is a genuine commitment to more participatory models of decision making and clear transfers of power to local communities.

Agendas which are top down will not empower communities and can often in fact disempower them. Instead, what is required is a bottom up approach with governments, civil servants, politicians and those in the third sector playing a supportive, rather than a directive, role.

Communities empower themselves. In discussion with some of its commissioners, the Poverty Truth Commission has heard the successes and broad appreciation for previously participative mechanisms, such as the Neighbourhood Forums. Participatory Budgeting was strongly welcomed by the commissioners, who saw it as an opportunity to overcome many of the barriers which currently prevent them from meaningfully engaging.

We support the SCVO’s call for 10% of the total public sector budget in each local authority to be decided by Participatory Budgeting. The predicted benefits are numerous, including:

- Better decisions being made and improved outcomes
- Outcomes which authentically reflect people’s priorities
Local Government and Regeneration Committee

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- Improved collaboration between public agencies
- Greater participation in democratic processes
- Greater transparency and accountability in public spending decisions
- Improved trust between communities and public bodies
- Greater understanding of the public’s views
- Greater understanding of the reach and limitations of local authorities
- Increased Social Capital

FiCS welcomes the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracies’ commitment to participatory democracy:

‘The right of individuals and communities to local democracy needs legislative expression through a clear duty in law to support and resource participation in decision making. Democratic innovations such as deliberative assemblies, participatory budgeting and citizen scrutiny of public services should also become the standards by which this is delivered in Scotland.

‘Implementing arrangements for participatory budgeting that go beyond a consultation on predetermined options for budget cuts, and instead focus on local tax and spend priorities.’

Power cannot be given to one group in society without another section losing out. This must be more clearly articulated in the legislation.

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

Better decisions and thus improved outcomes will only be achieved through genuine engagement which places local communities at the heart of the design and delivery of services. Public sector organisations, as well as broader society, must recognise that people are our greatest asset and not a hurdle to decision making to be overcome.

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?

In the legislation as it stands there is an underlying risk of increased inequality. Without recognising communities of interest, and providing resources accordingly, the bill could favour those communities already well-resourced and currently better placed to act.

Significant capacity building is required to overcome this. Needs, however, must be identified by the communities themselves. Development Trusts or similar mechanisms are vital to properly support local groups to both make a bid to take control over services and to call local authorities to account.
Development Trusts and Community Land Trusts have been successful examples of a community coming together collectively and pursuing shared objectives. There seems to be a lack of recognition of these already functioning positive structures in the bill.

FiCS supports Asset Transfers in theory but these must only be followed when communities genuinely desire them. Vital information must be provided to communities as prior to purchases, with details such as the predicted maintenance costs and requirements being outlined.

A key litmus test for the bill would be to measure if participation has increased for areas currently experiencing low engagement rates.

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?

In keeping with the findings of the Christie Commission, there should be a deeper focus on ensuing meaningful participation during community planning. The ‘right to request participation’ needs to be made stronger, in order to reflect the inherent right of communities to participate in the decision making process.

FiCS supports the call from the Poverty Alliance and others for the creation of statutory regulations for engaging and empowering communities. These would be for all public bodies to follow and report on.

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?

A human rights and equalities based approach should be adopted. This places tackling inequality in particular as a core objective of the legislation, not as merely a welcomed addition as the bill currently implies it to be.

Notes about Faith in Community Scotland

Faith in Community Scotland walks together with people of faith in support of our economically poorest communities. We are committed to working hand in hand with all who share the desire to challenge and overcome poverty and exclusion.

http://www.faithincommunityscotland.org/

Contact

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