The Children's Wood Project is located in one of the last community wild spaces in Glasgow: the North Kelvin Meadow. The project is designed to provide children with the opportunity to experience the natural environment, learn within it, and to build resilience and well-being. The project also brings the entire community together by organising a wide range of community activities and events. The project has participation from sixteen local schools, over 100 local volunteers and provides numerous activities for pre 5s’ – in support of Scottish Government policy. We have experienced difficulties in ensuring that the land is preserved for future generations, and we have experienced a lack of consultation with regard to the land, and barriers to the community making change.

It is within this context that we respond to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's call for evidence on the Community Empowerment Bill, which aims to support communities and improve the processes of Community Planning.

Though we fully support the Community Empowerment Bill, we believe that there are certain areas within the proposal, which could be made more robust to better achieve the aims of the Bill. In particular, we believe that greater emphasis should be given to the principle of reducing inequalities through empowering and building self-sufficiency within local communities. Key to this, in our view, is the issue of community ownership and lease, the legislation for which should be framed to focus on the interests of the communities the legislation is supposed to serve. We hope that the Bill will ensure that communities like ours will have a voice.

**Consultation**

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

It is accepted that the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill sets out and has the potential to empower communities by placing the community planning partnerships (CPP) on a statutory footing. This will place a stronger emphasis on delivering better outcomes for people using public services and should complement outcomes established in the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014.

However, the legislation is somewhat weak. It records that a:

> CPP must make all reasonable efforts to secure the participation of any community bodies considered likely to contribute to community planning, and take reasonable steps to enable them to do so.

Given the recommendations of the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, legislation should be made more robust by including a significant focus on communities coming together not only to participate, but to **co-produce services**. We would like to see more communication and co-production between the local authority and the community. We support the proposal put forward by Oxfam, Barnardos and the Poverty Alliance who suggest that each Community Planning Partnership set aside a percentage of their yearly budget “to be decided upon through an appropriate community participation process or processes, and assess the impact of doing so..."
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with a view to further embedding this approach. “

Co-production both recognises the skills and assets of people in designing and delivering services and helps technically inexperienced community members develop those capacities. This kind of ‘full engagement’ is critical for the people who use the services, and the third sector more generally to be able to meet the needs and requirements of people in their communities. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill needs to ensure that individuals are meaningfully engaged in this process. To that end, mechanisms should be established to monitor and report on levels of engagement, and to address any difficulties.

A key concern of ours is that the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill does not detail the support needed to allow communities to take advantage of its provisions on an equal basis. The policy memorandum acknowledges that, to date, there have been variable levels of empowerment and engagement between public sector organisations and community groups, stating that:

Where communities want to do something for themselves this has often been facilitated by good practice guidance, funding being available and the attitudes, skills and commitment of many people working in many different organisations.

The positive view expressed in the memorandum, conflicts with our experiences of running the Children’s Wood which have often been more negative. While this legislation seeks to address issues like this, and promote best practice throughout Scotland, it is vital that all community groups are supported at local levels by public sector partners to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are not further marginalised, and in turn, inequalities are not strengthened by the legislation.

Our concern is that there are no provisions for how public bodies should support less empowered community bodies, or those who are unable to mobilise their own participation to take advantage of the routes of engagement. We support the addition of provisions to ensure that there are mechanisms and resources in place to support, empower and capacity-build with local communities and organisations to support them to engage adequately with the process.

We would like to see provision for increased communication and co-production between the local authority and the community. We agree with the proposal put forward by Oxfam, Barnardos and the Poverty Alliance who suggest that each Community Planning Partnership set aside 1% of their yearly budget or something similar “to be decided upon through an appropriate community participation process or processes, and assess the impact of doing so with a view to further embedding this approach. “

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

Whilst the development of national outcomes is well received, as it provides a clear focus and conduit to public bodies, it is singularly important that communities have the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of those outcomes.

The policy memorandum states that:

Scotland’s people are its greatest asset: they are best placed to make decisions about our future, and to know what is needed to deliver sustainable and resilient communities.
We believe that by empowering and engaging local communities that has major dividends, which will strengthen the community planning processes and provide a significant focus on all outcomes, but particularly local ones.

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?**

Although we broadly welcome the provisions in the Bill, our concern is that the legislation may unintentionally have a negative impact on inequalities. Clearly community entities that are already empowered or have the capacity to engage will benefit the most from these opportunities, but little provision is made for those communities where such entities don’t exist, or are too disadvantaged to get the greatest benefits from the Bill. For example, even though the Children’s Wood as an organisation has the advantage of being based largely in a community with many socio-economic strengths, we have struggled with getting any formal assistance from the statutory sector, and do feel somewhat marginalised even though the statutory sector make use of our programmes. Thus, even more vulnerable marginalised even though the statutory sector make use of our programmes. Thus, even more vulnerable marginalised even though the statutory sector make use of our programmes. Consequently, we strongly support the addition of provisions to ensure that there are mechanisms and resources in place to support, empower and capacity-build with all local communities and organisations, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, to support them to engage adequately with the process. The legislation must also ensure that there are transparent mechanisms in place to monitor and report on community involvement.

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 general we are encouraged by the provisions of the Bill, but would like to see a genuine focus on what we would refer to as a ‘human rights based approach’ with a real commitment to reducing, preventing and reversing health inequalities. The Children's Commissioner for Scotland, Tam Baillie, visited us recently and gave strong support to our activities, our approach to the wellbeing of children, the attendant positive outcomes for teachers and parents, and community involvement and participation. Mr. Baillie was asked if we could state in our response to the bill that he was supportive and believed that it should find a manifestation of policy position for pre-5s. He was happy to confirm this.

Based on our experience over the past three years we recommend the inclusion of provisions to ensure that there are mechanisms and resources in place to support, empower and capacity-build with all local communities and organisation, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, to support them to adequately engage with the process.

We particularly welcome Section 25 of the Bill, which deals with reporting, and believe this reporting requirement will ensure a robust planning and evaluation process. However, we would also like to see a provision to ensure that people and communities have the opportunity to report on their experiences of their involvement and engagement in the process and whether this has contributed to delivering national outcomes.
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Further Information

In conclusion, our direct experience of attempting to involve the Local Authority in supporting our endeavours both within the Children’s Wood set in the North Kelvin Meadow in Glasgow has been one in which, at best, we have experienced indifference and at worst a complete disregard in the face of controversial evidence that bringing children into their natural environment is vital for their wellbeing and that of the community.

We are not the only stakeholders in what happens here. If getting outside into nature is duplicated across the City, this will have an impact on health, well-being and success. Places for children to play and learn in are an important part of the jigsaw in delivering immediate and long-term benefits to society. It challenges perceptions that all fun is to be found indoors, on screens or in sedentary activity, while also addressing some of the most serious immediate and long-term issues within society.

The Bill is in its general profile reveals for us a realignment of community ownership which can deliver a human rights that every child no matter who they are or where they live, has the right to grow up safe, happy and health. The Community Empowerment Bill is a signal towards that and we ask that our contribution be part of that endeavour.