Voluntary Health Scotland

Call for Evidence

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill - Written evidence for the Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Introduction

Voluntary Health Scotland is the national intermediary for a network of voluntary health organisations and workers. Our members range from large national health charities to small, local service providers, and members’ interests span service planning and provision, prevention, early intervention, self-management, advocacy, and support for service users and carers.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee’s call for evidence on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. We support the policy principles behind the Bill, as described in the Policy Memorandum, that aim to empower communities and improve the processes of community planning within public service reform.

However, there are areas that could be strengthened to ensure that communities have the capacity and support to inform, influence and shape services more effectively. The policy memorandum recognises that there are differences in levels of involvement, engagement and empowerment across Scotland, but there needs to be a stronger emphasis on addressing inequalities, and empowering and building capacity with local communities.

Consultation

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

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill has the potential to empower communities by placing 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 does not go far enough. It states 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. Following the recommendations of the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services, this should be strengthened to include a significant focus on communities coming together to not only participate, but to co-produce services.
Co-production recognises the skills and assets of people in designing and delivering services. Full engagement for the people who use support and services, and the third sector, is necessary to meet the needs and requirements of people in their local communities. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill should ensure that people are meaningfully engaged in this process, and there are mechanisms in place to monitor and report on this involvement.

In addition, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill does not detail the support needed to allow communities to take advantage of its provisions 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.”

While this legislation seeks to address this inconsistency and promote best practice throughout Scotland, it is vital that the capacity of all community groups is 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 adequately engage with the process.

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

The development of national outcomes provides a clear focus and steer to public bodies, however it is imperative 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’.

Empowering and engaging local communities will strengthen community planning processes and provide a significant focus on outcomes, and improved local outcomes.
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?

We welcome the provisions in the Bill, however, as previously stated in our response to question 1; our concern is that the legislation may unintentionally have a negative impact on inequalities. Community bodies that are already empowered or have the capacity to engage will benefit the most from these opportunities. The most marginalised and vulnerable groups might not be in a position to take advantage.

We would therefore 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/areas, to support them to adequately engage with the process. The legislation should ensure that there are 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?

Overall, we are content with the provisions of the Bill, but we would like to see a genuine focus on a human rights based approach and a real commitment to reducing, preventing and reversing health inequalities. We recommend 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/areas, to support them to adequately engage with the process.

We 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.

Further Information

Thank you for considering the comments discussed in the above response to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee’s call for evidence on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill.

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