Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill
RESPONSE TO CALL FOR EVIDENCE BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT & REGENERATION COMMITTEE

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

Personal Introduction
I am active in the community of Linlithgow, being the chairman of Burgh Beautiful Linlithgow, one of the town’s leading environmental groups. I have been involved with Linlithgow Civic Trust for over twenty years, am a member of the town’s community council and am a director of a trust aiming to redevelop the site of a prominent derelict building for a community-owned performance venue. In my professional life, until my recent early retirement, I had nearly thirty years’ experience of planning and regeneration experience with Glasgow City Council. I have a particular interest in Scottish local history, including the past organisation of local government.

General View on Community Empowerment
In my submission to the Scottish Government’s initial consultation on community empowerment, I expressed the view that community councils were ineffective, that ‘community planning’ (in itself a misnomer) was a top-down bureaucratic process and that true empowerment of local communities could only come through devolution of power to localities through re-establishment of bodies akin to the old town and district councils which were abolished in 1975.

Since 1975, Scotland has not had any proper form of ‘local’ government; there has been a mistaken belief that larger authorities are somehow more ‘efficient’ in the use of resources when in fact money is squandered on unnecessary activities and staff, unseen by the local populace. Matters were made worse in 1996 when the present, fairly irrational, distribution of unitary councils were created. It is often quoted that the average population served by a ‘local’ authority in Scotland is 163,000, around 30 times that of the European average (5,620). The Community Empowerment Bill could have been regarded as a golden opportunity to restore local democracy and accountability to Scotland and it is very disappointing that no steps have been taken towards remedying the lack of community empowerment in this country. Of course it
is not surprising that leading councillors and officials in the unitary authorities wish to maintain their power and prestige and thus will not have made representations supporting devolution of their power to a more 'local' form of government.

Two examples from my own experience of how devolved local power could become manifest for the benefit of local people are social housing and the operation of local parks and gardens. Here in Linlithgow, not a single mainstream house for social renting has been built since the Town Council was abolished in 1975. This for a population now over 13,000 and during a time when most properties have been sold and several have been demolished to make way for private flats! It is hard to imagine that a local authority with a direct and focussed interest in the town would have allowed such a lack of provision over such a long period.

With regard to parks and floral displays, I have personal knowledge through the Britain in Bloom competition that most entries competing against Linlithgow have been submitted by town or parish councils south of the border. These communities are able to coordinate grass-roots action without the need to worry about the level of support from a more remote 'local' authority. These councils raise their funding from a supplement to the Council tax charged by the larger authorities; equally, if local town or burgh councils were re-established in Scotland, they could collect the Council tax and pass on the relevant share to the larger authorities as was the practice in Scotland before 1975.

With regard to the Community Empowerment Bill, I must confess that I am somewhat bemused by the constant repetition of the word ‘outcomes’, a meaningless term without any reference to standards or quality. Are we looking for the best standards or fulfilment of objectives, or will any result suffice?

The Committee’s Five Questions

My response to questions 1, 3 and 4 is as follows.

1. I do not believe that the Bill, as proposed, will ‘empower’ communities except in regard to their assuming ownership of property assets. It has to be said that disposal of property is not really ‘empowerment’, it is transfer of responsibility, generally to volunteers who are not renumerated for such responsibility and cannot afford to pay staff.

3. The capacity of communities, or rather local volunteers, to take on responsibilities varies from place to place. ‘Middle-class’ towns and villages, or parts of cities, can
provide a greater range of professional skills than more disadvantaged communities. This disparity can be addressed by the proposals below.

4. I would like to see the bill making provision for, or at least paving the way towards, the proposals set out below.

**My Proposals for Community Empowerment**

All communities in Scotland over a certain population size should have the right to apply to the Scottish Government for devolved local government in the form of burgh councils, whether urban or rural. Any such application would require to be accompanied by a petition signed by at least, say, 10% of the local electorate. It is suggested that the minimum qualifying population might be 5,000 (close to the European average), perhaps less for islands and remoter rural areas.

The general spatial pattern of these towns or areas would have to form a logical subdivision of the current ‘local’ authority areas, laid down at the initial stages, although there would have to be provision for appropriate boundary amendments, sub-divisions or amalgamations. The ‘new burghs’ might be termed ‘royal burghs’ where historical precedent existed. Any relevant community councils within the new burghal areas would be entirely superseded by the new, empowered, truly ‘local’ authorities.

The devolved responsibilities could include parks, cleansing, maintenance/lighting of minor roads and car parking, tourism, housing (akin to the idea of community-based housing associations) and determination of building warrants, minor planning applications, etc. The finance would come from a relevant share of Council tax, collection options for which have already been mentioned. In order to attract a better cross-section of the communities to stand for election, the new burgh councils would be strictly non-political.

The new system might be accompanied by the revision of the existing unitary authority boundaries in certain areas – for example extending Glasgow’s boundaries to take in truly suburban areas might be more palatable if accompanied by opportunities for burgh councils to be established in places like Bearsden, Giffnock, Clarkston and Newton Mearns.

Overall, the devolution of certain powers to local burgh councils would give true local empowerment, increase local accountability and foster the sort of civic pride that is much lacking in many towns and villages. At the same time, the more strategic
services would continue to be provided by the current (or perhaps slightly amended) unitary councils.