

PE2075/C: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

Scottish Forum of Community Councils written submission, 3 June 2024

The Scottish Forum of Community Councils in general supports the devolution of decision making to communities and Community Councils and has expressed that view in the recent Democracy Matters 2 consultation undertaken by the Scottish Government.

We believe that Community Councils should be given more responsibility in relation to their existing involvement with local planning applications. Planning applications which only affect one community should be considered and decided on by that community.

We also support the efforts of some Local Authorities to enhance local democracy through ward-based subcommittees. However, these committees should be composed exclusively of elected councillors from the respective areas, ensuring decisions are made by those directly accountable to the community.

There are regular examples of issues coming before Scottish Council Executive Committees that relate to only one ward or area where there are no councillors from that ward represented on the Executive Committee. This reveals a democratic deficit in the current system, often due to political manoeuvring that prioritises party interests to retain decision making to themselves and exclude the opposition. Devolving some responsibility to local areas or wards on local issues would give those councillors a democratic role in their communities and enhance community representation.

The issue of the "quasi-judicial" nature of the planning process can be addressed by the council through its standing orders by devolving that power to a sub or ward committee. After all, many routine planning applications are currently devolved to officers, under the Council's Delegated to Officers arrangements.

Planning applications vary in size and complexity from strategic to routine affecting many people or just a few. Consequently, it would be relatively simple to devise a matrix that would allocate the decision to A) The full planning committee, B) a ward planning committee, C) a Community Council, or D) a Planning Officer.

We recognise that an increase in responsibilities for Community Councils probably needs legislation from the Scottish Government as not one Scottish Council has increased responsibilities for any Community Council in the fifty years of their existence. Yet they all profess to be in favour of community decision making.

Helensburgh Community Council rightfully raises a crucial question: Does true local democracy exist in Scotland?

We support the actions called for by Helensburgh Community Council as it is consistent with our view on local participation and community empowerment.