

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 14 January 2026
1st Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE2075: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

Introduction

Petitioner	Stewart Noble on behalf of Helensburgh Community Council
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prioritise local participation in planning decisions affecting their area by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• providing a clear and unambiguous definition of the word "local" insofar as it applies to planning legislation• giving decision-making powers to community councils for planning applications in their local areas• ensuring that the way in which decisions on planning applications are taken is compatible with the provisions and ethos of the Community Empowerment Act 2015.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2075>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 19 March 2025.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Minister for Public Finance and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICE briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 31 January 2024.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 214 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
January 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2075: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

Petitioner

Stewart Noble on behalf of Helensburgh Community Council

Date Lodged

20 December 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prioritise local participation in planning decisions affecting their area by:

- providing a clear and unambiguous definition of the word "local" insofar as it applies to planning legislation
- giving decision-making powers to community councils for planning applications in their local areas
- ensuring that the way in which decisions on planning applications are taken is compatible with the provisions and ethos of the Community Empowerment Act 2015.

Previous action

In 2018, we wrote to Argyll & Bute Council requesting a review of its Planning Committee, but no action resulted.

In 2021, we submitted a Community Participation Request to Argyll & Bute Council. This led to a meeting and exchange of emails with the Council's chief executive and an executive director, however, no change resulted.

In 2022 we wrote to and received an email of support from Jackie Baillie MSP.

Background information

Due to Argyll & Bute being a large and sparsely populated area, the Council has 4 Area Committees for localised decision-making, however, the Planning Committee has councillors from all 4 of these areas.

In recent years, 3 controversial Helensburgh planning applications have been decided by the Planning Committee. All 3 were opposed by Helensburgh Community Council and by the majority of Helensburgh and Lomond Area councillors serving on the Planning Committee. Nevertheless, they were passed by a majority of councillors from other areas, none of whom could be considered truly local.

In our discussions with the chief executive and executive director of the Council, our proposals were dismissed because of the "quasi-judicial" nature of the planning process.

Helensburgh Community Council feels that our role as a statutory consultee has in practice been a statutory right to be ignored – contrary to the Community Empowerment Act. Hence the need for this petition.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2075 on 19 March 2025

The Convener: PE2075, on prioritising local participation in planning decisions, was lodged by Stuart Noble on behalf of Helensburgh community council, the members of which are with us again in the gallery this morning.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to prioritise local participation and planning decisions affecting their area by providing a clear and unambiguous definition of the word “local” in so far as it applies to planning decisions, giving decision-making powers to community councils for planning applications in their local areas and ensuring that how decisions on planning applications are taken is compatible with the provisions and ethos of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

We are joined once again for our consideration of the petition by our colleague Jackie Baillie. Good morning, Ms Baillie. We have missed you on a couple of occasions when we very much hoped that you were going to be with us, but other parliamentary business intervened. It is nice to have you back with us.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you very much, convener.

The Convener: We last considered this petition at our meeting on 1 May 2024, when we agreed to write to relevant stakeholders seeking their views on the asks of the petition, and copies of the responses that we have received are included in the papers for today's meeting.

The response from the Scottish Forum of Community Councils states its belief

“that Community Councils should be given more responsibility in relation to their existing involvement with local planning applications.”

The forum notes that councils could amend their standing orders to devolve power “to a sub or ward committee”

to determine routine planning applications affecting a particular council ward. It also suggests a process be developed that would enable planning applications to be allocated to one of the four following groups for decision: the full planning committee, a ward-specific committee, a community council or a planning officer.

In its response, the Scottish Government indicated that it expected to publish guidance on

“effective community engagement in local development planning”

later in the year, and it did so in December 2024.

We have also received a response from the Royal Town Planning Institute, which outlines its support for community involvement in the planning process. Although it acknowledges

“concerns about community engagement being a box-ticking exercise”,

the response offers examples of meaningful community engagement practices that are being carried out across Scotland. It goes on to state:

“The role of Community Councils in the scrutiny of planning applications is well established”,

but it does not

“see any justification for the relocation of decision-making powers from local authorities to Community Councils.”

There is therefore a slight contradiction in the responses that we received. Before we consider what we might do next, I invite Jackie Baillie to offer her thoughts to the committee.

Jackie Baillie: I am grateful for the committee’s continuing interest in the petition. The fundamental issue is one of local democracy in planning. I will centre my remarks on Argyll and Bute, because that is the setting for the case that the petitioner brings to you.

For members who do not know the area covered by Argyll and Bute Council, it is very disparate in nature. It includes small rural villages, island communities and substantial conurbations such as Helensburgh. The committee will not be surprised to hear that local elected members understandably take different views in different areas, based on the needs of their local communities. That causes a sense of frustration when local community members are clear about their thinking, but the planning committee, the majority of whose members do not represent their views or their area, takes an entirely contrary position.

I will give a recent example. Helensburgh community council opposed the siting of the new leisure centre in the town, because it felt that that the proposed location was wrong. Members might have seen footage of the same leisure centre losing its roof during storm Éowyn, which was captured beautifully on social media. Unfortunately, open-air swimming is now back in Helensburgh as a consequence of that storm.

On a serious note, that decision was taken by a planning committee the majority of whose members were not from the local area and in the face of almost unified local opposition to the siting. In its petition, the community council suggested that it be involved in planning decisions at local area committee level. I am very sympathetic to that. Indeed, the submission from the Scottish Forum of Community Councils talks about the ability to devolve power to local areas. I am in favour of that, but I understand that the Government does not want to legislate in that area.

I wonder whether the committee could ask a specific question about whether an easier way of achieving that aim—certainly in the case of Argyll and Bute, which would meet the petitioner’s objective—would be to have the local area committee make such decisions. There are four such committees in Argyll and Bute, which are based locally. The one for the town is Helensburgh and Lomond, which is made up entirely of local elected members. I wonder whether final planning decisions could be

made there and devolved to them, rather than their being made by councillors who represent entirely different areas.

There is merit in that, if the Government would be willing to compromise even a little to enable local decisions to be taken by local elected members. I note that the convener said that the Scottish Government has issued guidance, but I am not sure that it covers that point. I wonder whether the committee would invite the Government to think again.

The Convener: Ms Baillie has emphasised a point in the Scottish Forum of Community Councils' suggestion about the different ways in which local concern could be expressed.

I did not see the footage to which you referred, Ms Baillie. You are not here to give evidence, but if the community thought that that was the wrong place for the facility, I am interested to know whether it had in mind a different place that would have offered more protection in the circumstances of that storm.

Jackie Baillie: My recollection is that it did. It pointed out that although having the building on the peninsula offered people who were in the gym dramatic views of the Clyde outside, its position left it very exposed and prone to flooding and events such as the one that we saw. I cannot recall the exact position, but there are plenty of development opportunities in Helensburgh where the leisure centre could have been placed.

10:15

The Convener: It definitely is a consideration. Some of our communities are quite disparate, and the planning process seems potentially a bit ham-fisted in some instances, because representation cannot possibly be localised in that way by the time that a majority is taken into account.

Do colleagues have any comments or suggestions?

Foysol Choudhury: We should take the suggestions from Jackie Baillie to the Scottish Government and ask it to reconsider. We should write to the Government to seek its view on the suggestions from the Scottish Forum of Community Councils on a way of allocating planning decisions to the most appropriate level.

The Convener: Are colleagues content with that suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will keep the petition open and proceed on the basis of Mr Choudhury's recommendation and that of the Scottish Forum of Community Councils.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Minister for Public Finance written submission, 28 April 2025

PE2075/G: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

Thank you for your letter of 24 March 2025 on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee with regard to the above petition. This response supplements our earlier responses of 31 January and 4 June 2024.

The Scottish planning system recognises that places matter to people. There are opportunities for community engagement built into the whole system including development planning and the development management process. There are also opportunities for communities to set out their own priorities for their places in local place plans. How and when people can get involved in planning is set out and enshrined in legislation. By engaging in planning, people have an opportunity to help shape the future of their places and influence outcomes.

Community councils have a long-defined role within the Scottish planning system, with status as statutory consultees to be notified of applications that affect their area. As such they have the opportunity to make comments and representations on planning applications that affect their community, before a decision is made.

Community councils have extensive opportunity to contribute and express local views and concerns, not only through commenting on individual applications, but also in influencing the creation of the local development plan. These opportunities for involvement were increased through provisions in the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 to include creating local place plans.

The Scottish Forum of Community Councils, in its written submission to the Committee of 3 June 2024, suggested that community councils could have a role in the planning system as the determining body for certain applications in line with the petition call for community councils to be given decision making powers for planning applications within their areas. This would require significant changes to both primary and secondary legislation, to alter the long-established role of local authorities as the planning authorities for their areas, acting on advice of their professional planning officers.

Under planning legislation, the person or body determining a planning application – whoever that is – is under a statutory duty to determine applications in accordance with the statutory development plan which includes the relevant local development plan, unless there are material planning considerations that justify a departure from the development plan.

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 refers, at various parts, to community councils being engaged in decisions on the matters covered by the Act. However, it reinforces the current statutory position of community councils as consultees on matters which affect their area of representation – rather than statutory decision-takers. The Democracy Matters process is designing more empowered community decision making processes and will be moving to an implementation phase early in the next parliament.

Extending the definition of 'planning authority' to include community councils for certain applications would fundamentally change the role of community councils in the planning system and their relationship with the community they represent. Extending planning decision-making powers (and associated statutory duties) to community councils would in our view be incompatible with their current role to provide community views on applications, which would then be considered by the decision-maker if material. Therefore, the proposed measure could potentially reduce opportunity for community participation in the planning system, contrary to the spirit, aims and intentions of the 2015 Act.

The Committee also asked for the Scottish Government's view on a suggestion by Jackie Baillie MSP that decisions on planning applications could be devolved to the relevant local area committee. There is nothing in existing planning legislation that would prevent a planning authority from adopting such an approach for most applications. It is our understanding that such an approach is already operated by some planning authorities, for example at Aberdeenshire Council. This would be an operational matter for individual planning authorities to consider.

Yours sincerely,

IVAN MCKEE

Petitioner written submission, 3 June 2025

PE2075/H: Prioritise local participation in planning decisions

I am disappointed with the written submission from Ivan McKee, the Minister for Public Finance.

He stresses "community engagement", involvement, "comments and representations", and the role of community councils as statutory consultees – all of which can be and have been ignored by Argyll and Bute Council in its dealings with Helensburgh Community Council.

The Minister also lays emphasis on local place plans, but these too can be ignored.

In the last paragraph of his evidence, the Minister refers to the "suggestion by Jackie Baillie MSP that decisions on planning applications could be devolved to the relevant local area committee". In an online conversation with Argyll and Bute Council's chief executive and one of her executive directors, the late convener of Helensburgh Community Council and I made exactly this suggestion to them.

We were told that that had been done before but had been given up in favour of the Council's present system, namely the Planning, Protective Services and Licensing Committee, with membership drawn from throughout the whole of Argyll and Bute Council. We were also told that they would not go back to the previous system, but no reason was given. We were left with the impression that to do so would have been an admission that the current system is not working.

Lastly, the Minister states that to give decision-making powers on planning to Community Councils "would require significant changes to both primary and

secondary legislation, to alter the long established role of local authorities as planning authorities for their areas". In other words, to make the planning system fairer for the people of Scotland would involve too much hassle. I find that very sad.