



Summary Position Statement on Community Empowerment in Scotland

5th Draft

April 2008

Local People Leading – Summary Position Statement on Community Empowerment

1. Introduction

- 1.01** Local People Leading (LPL) is an alliance of community sector national and regional networks, local community groups and individuals that has come together to campaign for a strong and independent community sector in Scotland.
- 1.02** The Scottish Government has committed itself to doing more to empower local people to have more control over issues which affect their communities and more choice in how their needs are met. Following a consultation on community empowerment, they have announced a Joint Commitment with COSLA to community empowerment and an intention to produce an action plan.
- 1.03** LPL has chosen to produce a position statement on community empowerment because it believes that the community sector should establish its own position on this issue. This statement is intended as a contribution to this process and to influence the development of the Joint Commitment and Action Plan on community empowerment over the coming months. It was produced with the voluntary contributions of a working group of individuals drawn from supporters and reflecting a range of community sector organisations and interests.

2. Summary

Community empowerment is the development of strong active communities which can take action by themselves or with others to tackle issues which concern them. It cannot be given or provided by external organisations but communities can be helped to become empowered. There is a broad political consensus that community empowerment can play major role in policies to overcome poverty and disadvantage, improve public services and revitalise representative democracy. This must involve more than effective community engagement by public bodies. The devolution of leadership and power to communities must be the ultimate aim of community empowerment.

To achieve this, LPL asserts that the community sector must have its own independent identity and voice at national level and the Scottish Government needs a specific development strategy for the community sector. There are many current opportunities which can be taken now based on successful established practice. One critical element of this should be increased community ownership and control of assets.

The Scottish Government's and COSLA's Joint Commitment to community empowerment and an Action Plan is a welcome beginning to a long journey of community empowerment but the scope and ambition needs to be significantly enhanced.

3. Community Empowerment – definitions and first principles

3.01 What we mean by Community Empowerment

We define community empowerment as the development of strong, active communities in which local people within a geographical area are able to come together and have the capacity to do things for themselves. They can define the challenges they face and tackle them either independently or, if they choose, in partnership with others.

3.02 Local people empower communities.

Community empowerment is not something that can be given or provided by external authorities or agencies. This was a common and important message from the Government's consultation. If the circumstances are right and the appropriate support and resources are made available, communities will take on an increased level of leadership and responsibility.

3.03 Community development work

Communities can, however, be helped to become empowered by community development work, often referred to as community capacity building. In 1997 the Community Development Foundation defined community capacity building as:

“Development work that strengthens the ability of community organisations and groups to build their structures, systems, people and skills so that they are better able to define and achieve their objectives and engage in consultation and planning, manage community projects and take part in partnerships and community enterprises.”

3.04 The degree of community empowerment varies and is a process

The type and degree of community empowerment varies. It can be expressed as a simple continuum which is shown and explained in the appendix. Where on that continuum a community chooses to locate itself - the extent to which a community becomes empowered – will vary considerably and will be determined by levels of capacity, local leadership etc. Communities will also vary in their interest and desire to move along this continuum. It involves continual learning, working with others and building the community's capacity to do more – there is not 'an end point' to the process.

4. Why it is important to empower communities

4.01 Communities represent a huge untapped national resource.

They should be valued and nurtured to enable deep rooted problems to be tackled effectively because:

- People are enabled to take action themselves as a community.
- There is clear evidence that community empowerment and involving local people in the design and delivery of local services leads to improved services and better outcomes for everyone.
- In addition, the empowered community develops - by mobilising the energies and developing the skills of residents - an economic asset for both the local and the national economy.
- Empowered communities, and the active citizens within them, are also more likely to engage with wider civic life and will result in the civic institutions and decision-making becoming more relevant and accountable.

4.02 Communities have been weakened.

Enduring cycles of poverty and disadvantage, mean that many communities are excluded from being able to fully participate in, and contribute to, the economic, social, and cultural life of the Scottish nation. Municipalism and the steady centralisation of power by government over the past thirty years have also resulted in the pool of creativity and energy that lies within our communities being largely ignored.

4.03 Our representative democracy needs to be revitalized.

There is ample evidence that the health and vibrancy of our democratic system has deteriorated in recent years. Voter apathy and widespread scepticism towards our elected representatives points to the existence of a serious democratic deficit. (The Power Commission 2004).

5. Creating the conditions for community empowerment in Scotland

Scottish Government is committed to doing more to empower individuals and communities to have more control over their lives. There is also now a broad consensus among all political parties that community empowerment can play a major role in the renewal of active citizenship and the legitimacy of civic institutions. Most immediately this can be seen in relation to Scotland's National Performance Framework.

If community empowerment in Scotland is to become widespread and effective at a local level, LPL asserts that the following conditions need to be in place:

5.01 A distinct identity and independent voice for the community sector

The community sector - the web of local groups, networks, and traditions that exist amongst those who share defined neighbourhoods - needs to be acknowledged as having a distinct identity and needs within the wider Third Sector.

In order to thrive, it also needs to acquire its own independent voice and identity at a national level. Local People Leading has made some progress in this respect but more needs to be done, especially to ensure that the community sector voice is influential in the development of the Action Plan to take forward the Scottish Government's and COSLA's joint commitment to community empowerment

5.02 A Government strategy for the community sector

In recognition of the distinctiveness of the community sector, the Scottish Government needs a specific development strategy (as per the Social Enterprise Strategy), with appropriate budgets and responsibilities apportioned across the Third Sector, Housing and Regeneration Teams. The joint commitment and action plan on community empowerment is a step in this direction but will need to be developed in scope to be effective.

5.03 More than community engagement will be needed

Although, effective community engagement (involving local people in the decisions which affect them) is important and necessary, it will never by itself be enough to galvanize local energy and enterprise. Particularly when communities need to break through entrenched patterns of poverty, poor health, and economic disadvantage, more is needed than providing opportunities for community engagement.

For local people to feel a sense of ownership – “this is my community and I’m proud of it” – it will require government, both local and central, to get serious in their willingness to devolve leadership and power beyond local councils to communities through “double devolution”.

5.04 Double Devolution

It is widely accepted that Community Planning Partnerships have not succeeded in meeting the aspiration to engage local communities effectively. (Audit Scotland Report 2006). However, LPL recognizes that CPPs will have a crucial role in shaping the quality and extent of community empowerment. LPL contends that this should be reflected in an enhanced Concordat between the Scottish Government and Local Government which places a requirement on councils to continue the process of devolution of power and responsibility beyond local councils and into communities. This will be essential if the aspirations expressed in the Joint Commitment by the Scottish Government and COSLA are to be achieved.

5.05 Community development

Over the past twenty years, the community development function has been largely mainstreamed within local authorities and is now used to promote ‘engagement’ between local councils and local communities. Council-employed development workers understandably favour council policies rather than the promotion of community independence. Communities need the option of employing their own workers. A community empowerment strategy should include a national training

programme for community activists and community based development workers aimed at refocusing community development practice back to the community empowerment agenda.

6. Community Empowerment - The Opportunities

LPL contends that in addition to the preconditions for community empowerment identified above, there are opportunities for action based on successful established practice. We see these opportunities as falling under two broad headings - Democratic Renewal and Ownership and Control

6.01 Opportunities for democratic renewal

Whenever citizens, communities and government come into contact, there are opportunities to revitalise the democratic process. We need to renew and refresh the quality of both our representative and participatory democracy simultaneously because the health of one is inextricably linked to the health of the other.

6.02 Community Planning Partnerships

CPPs with statutory status, offer a unique opportunity for the democratic empowerment of our communities. Local councils have been slow to ensure that community representation on CPPs is meaningful and effective and a specific requirement could be included in the concordat between local and central government. The National Standards for Community Engagement should be the benchmark against which progress by all public bodies on community engagement should be assessed.

6.04 Elected and selected citizen representatives

They are a key part of our democratic process. From local councils, schools, health boards etc there are hundreds of statutory bodies and civic institutions which depend on voluntary citizens' participation. There are opportunities to expand the pool of citizens engaged with such bodies.

6.05 Delegated management and budgets for local services

These provide a potent opportunity to engage with communities. Such services can include; local parks, street cleaning and maintenance, community safety wardens, kerbside collection of recycled waste, the quality of these services.

6.06 Community Councils and other local representative bodies

They provide an important opportunity for nurturing democratic skills at a level between the citizen and the local authority. There are 1200 community councils in Scotland with statutory recognition, but with varied effectiveness.

6.07 Petitioning/Community Calls for Action

Calls for action provide a practical opportunity for citizens to connect with democracy. The Scottish Parliament has already instigated public petitioning and some councils are beginning pilots which enable citizens to take the initiative to get important local issues discussed at the next level up.

6.08 Opportunities for ownership and control

As a community becomes empowered – when it has the capacity to do things for itself and exert real influence over local issues – more often than not tangible assets of some sort will also be under community ownership and control. There are few examples of sustainable community empowerment which are not underwritten by an independent, locally controlled income stream. In recent years the policy climate has not always been in favour of communities acquiring assets, but several models are now shown to work and offer opportunities for expansion.

6.09 Community owned housing associations

Particularly when they diversify into wider activities and services, COHAs can be the engine to regenerate struggling communities. Housing and regeneration strategies should be built on the community empowerment potential of the community owned HA's which are unique to Scotland.

6.10 The ownership of commercial and social buildings

This is probably the most common trigger for community empowerment. This can vary from a single shop or even a hut – to thousands of square feet of workspaces. This model has high potential as there will always be some surplus and underused council properties.

6.11 The ownership of land

Particularly in rural areas, this can be a catalyst which galvanizes communities into action. With the 2003 Land Reform Act, Scotland leads the field in this area – but aspects of the Act don't work well and needs revisited along with legislation relating to the management Common Good funds across Scotland's ancient royal burghs.

6.12 Control and ownership of renewable energy production

This presents a unique opportunity for communities to establish a long term income stream and thereby a degree of financial sustainability. Highland & Islands Community Energy Company (HICEC) is proving the success of this model in rural areas and there is no reason why it could not be replicated in our cities.

6.13 Community owned social enterprises

Community owned social enterprises are active across Scotland in a variety of markets including: transport, recycling, childcare, training, care of vulnerable

citizens, recreation, education, land management etc. Community businesses help communities build their capacity and confidence and can help to establish a local culture of enterprise and entrepreneurship.

6.14 Community anchor organisations.

The most common characteristic of communities which empower themselves is that they have been able to unite under the leadership of one locally owned organisation which acts as an 'anchor' for future progress. LPL has made the promotion of the concept of community anchors across Scotland a key objective of its campaign.

7. The Scottish Government's and COSLA's Joint Commitment to Community Empowerment

7.01 A start on a long journey

As the Joint Commitment itself makes clear, it is the start of a long journey. LPL welcomes the joint commitment of the Scottish Government and COSLA to community empowerment as a key element of what they are both about and their intention to produce an Action Plan in partnership with the community and voluntary sectors. Against the background of the views expressed in this statement, we also welcome the intention to include in the Action Plan the development and improvement of capacity building for community groups and communities, developing support to help communities own assets and investment in an integrated programme to develop skills, learning and networking in relation to community empowerment and engagement. The nature and scale of the Action Plan will be important and LPL looks forward to helping to shape them.

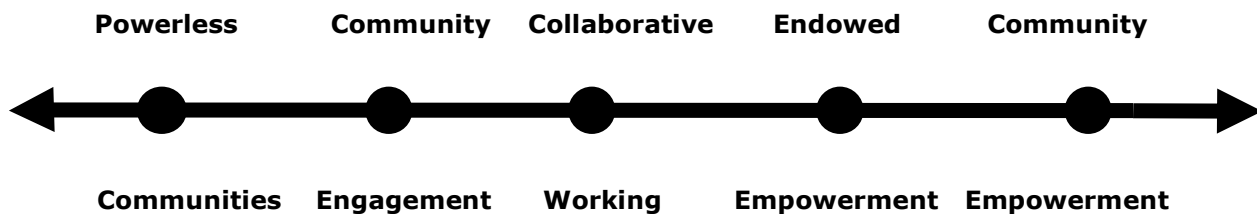
7.02 Going further

However, LPL considers that the thinking behind the Joint Commitment needs to be developed significantly in a number of critical areas. Most importantly it must recognise that the ultimate aim of community empowerment should be to devolve leadership and control beyond local authorities. This seems to be entirely lacking in the Joint Commitment.

The momentum for further devolution of power to and within Scotland is gathering pace. The rationale which underpins arguments for an extension to the Devolution Settlement and the recent Local Government Concordat is the same which drives the case for community empowerment. The greatest benefits of community empowerment will only be achieved if local devolution beyond councils takes place.

To this end, LPL is committed to building a broad base of support from within Scotland's community based networks to achieve this.

APPENDIX: THE EMPOWERMENT CONTINUUM



Powerless communities.

“Scottish local government, above all in housing, is preoccupied with control and a condition of silent, divorced dependence is what it prefers from its tenantry – an archipelago of undemocracies, run by power cliques who want as few people as possible to participate in running their own lives” - Stone Voices by Neal Ascherson, 2003.

Community Engagement.

Scotland's community planning process comes under the heading of community engagement. “The process of involving communities in the planning, development and management of services aimed at improving understanding and performance.” – Communities Scotland, 2003 This can include **communication** which is when government tells communities what it plans to do (and sometimes explains why) and **consultation** which is when government asks communities what they want to do (and sometimes listens)

Collaborative Working.

Joint working practices between community agencies with or without statutory authorities. Involves a degree of delegated powers and/or budgets from statutory authorities. May take the form of area agreements, partnership initiatives, service level agreements etc.

Endowed Empowerment

“Community empowerment is the giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them” – Department of Communities and Local Government 2007. In this model power is ‘endowed’. A level of independence is encouraged but within the framework of policies laid down by the statutory authorities.

Community Empowerment

An empowered community is a community which possesses the capacity to make its own decisions about the changes it would like to see in its local conditions of living, along with control of sufficient resources to implement its decisions. An empowered community is likely to have the following characteristics – strong local leadership – financially self sufficient in respect of core costs – assets under community ownership – capable of dissenting from local council's position – a high degree of resilience and resourcefulness in the face of adversity.