



Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations' Council
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Scottish Government – Community Empowerment & Renewal Bill

Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations' Council Submission On Behalf Of Edinburgh's Third Sector – November 2011

Prompted by a letter dated 20th September 2011 from Alasdair McKinlay of the Scottish Government's Housing and Regeneration, Culture and the Commonwealth Games Directorate, Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations' Council (EVOC) held an open ThinkSpace event on Wednesday 16th November to gather the views of Third Sector colleagues on their aspirations for the Scottish Government's proposed Community Empowerment & Renewal Bill. EVOC welcomes the opportunity to share the Sector's views at an early stage in the development of this Bill.

A diverse group spent the morning together considering current (Edinburgh, Scottish and UK) contexts, the story of community empowerment in Scotland, and prospects for communities to play a more active role in shaping the factors which influence our lives. Running through the discussion was the theme of change – and the shifting role for Scotland's Third Sector in actively influencing positive change on behalf of the communities we serve.

Given the range of influencing factors leading up to the present interest in Community Empowerment, the group particularly considered two key drivers: the role of Asset Transfers in empowering communities, and the desire to reshape Public Services with communities at the heart of service design and delivery.

We have not attempted to reproduce here the full detail of the conversation, but have drawn out the key themes which clearly evoked significant interest from Edinburgh's Third Sector.

DEFINITIONS

The group clearly felt that definitions were important, calling for clarity in communications. Particularly, it was felt essential that all parties were clear about the terms Assets, Community and Ownership.

Assets

Whilst much of the focus in discussions so far has been on physical assets, it is the Sector's view that this definition could be broadened out. It was felt important to answer questions like: Under what conditions might a service be an asset? or When might a physical 'asset' actually be a liability?

Community

The Sector clearly recognises that 'community' is a flexible and contested concept. Depending on the context, people will identify with different communities at different times and for different purposes. A narrow and inflexible definition of community could inhibit ownership and belonging rather than growing community cohesion.

CoProduction

Third Sector voices welcome the growing interest in a CoProductive approach which puts people at the heart of service re-design and helps create the conditions where people (seen as 'reservoirs of value' rather than merely as 'bundles of need') play an active and engaged role in service delivery.

Democracy

The broad Community Empowerment agenda should be framed in the context of enabling an Engaged and Informed Democracy that enhances citizens' agency and voice. Third Sector voices consistently call for the balance to shift from a remote representative democracy to a pluralist participative democracy.

Ownership

This term is seen to be central to the whole process of Community Empowerment. The Sector recognises clearly the divergence between two linked definitions of the term – Ownership as 'belonging to' (Hands off *my* cake!) and Ownership as 'belonging with' (Welcome to *our* place!)

Placemaking

Beyond re-designing *services* with people and communities at the heart of shaping change, the Sector has a powerful aspiration for *places* to be shaped and structured for people rather than for the convenience of planners – or, worse, for powerful vested interests.

Subsidiarity

The group felt strongly that the *locus* of decision-making was of central concern. Recognising that certain decisions had to be made on a wide geographical basis (city-wide, national and international) it was the group's view that communities generally felt a greater ownership of decisions that were made at a level 'close to the ground,' exemplifying a 'human scale.'

KEY THEMES

With considerable experience in engaging with communities, articulating a voice for those least often heard, and responding to needs by creating and shaping the services that people need, Edinburgh's Third Sector clearly sees itself as rooted in communities. Increasingly the Sector engages with public agencies – and, importantly, with Community Planning Partnerships (at local and city level,) but this engagement is only seen as useful insofar as it brings about change for those communities traditionally denied a voice. Given the range and diversity of Third Sector organisations, groupings and interests it is unhelpful to pretend that the Sector is one homogenous entity. There are, however, certain key concerns which bind the Sector together, and certain key themes most in the Sector would recognise as their own – it is EVOC's role to explicate and articulate these key concerns and themes.

Role for the Third Sector

The Third Sector traditionally sees itself as rooted in communities and as articulating a voice for those least often heard. This ethos of being responsive to changing community needs and of being an intermediary between citizens and the State continues to resonate. The Scottish Government's support for Community Planning and its Change Funds (to pick two examples) presume an enhanced role for Scotland's Third Sector. EVOC's view is that the Third Sector is more than willing and able to play a more active and engaged role in shaping national social policy and local delivery. This enthusiasm for a stronger role in public service design, service delivery, and 'bridging the gap' between communities and the public sector requires support and resourcing – just as expectations of Third Sector organisations are growing, many groups are experiencing a reduction in funding. The Sector plays an important role in Scottish civil society which – while cost-effective, is not cost-free.

Prompted by pressures on funding brought on in large measure by the global financial recession and its continuing impacts, the role of Local Authorities appears to be changing – with some explicitly 'retreating' to statutory services and leaving the Third Sector to respond to broader social needs and pressures. Unless such changes are managed so as to lessen the negative impacts on our most vulnerable citizens, it is likely that pressures on the Third Sector will increase to unsustainable levels.

Never particularly well-resourced, Community Councils are also 'feeling the squeeze.' While opinions on the effectiveness of these statutory bodies will vary, Edinburgh's Third Sector is alive to opportunities to engage more effectively with Community Councils, working together to deepen democracy.

Democracy

The prevailing narrative suggests that people are increasingly disengaged from politics, that voter apathy continues to drive low turnout at elections, and that most people have come to have low expectations of public authorities and public services.

Edinburgh's Third Sector tends to view that narrative as partial, inaccurate, and – possibly - politically expedient for certain interests. While citizens and communities can often be dissatisfied with their local councils and/or councillors, their desire for an active engagement with – and influence over – their communities is obvious, with volunteering levels rising and engagement with 'non-traditional' politics growing.

Possibly people are disengaged from traditional representative democracy (where the only 'engagement' expected of citizens is that once every five years they 'choose' between very similar-seeming candidates)

and have a hunger for a more participative democracy which reflects a more active and informed engagement built to create real change.

The Third Sector continues to be staunchly apolitical – in the sense that we are not aligned with one political party or another. The Sector *is*, however, deeply political - in the sense that it wishes to play an active role in shaping the socio-politico-economic context within which it operates.

CoProduction

The language of CoProduction - which presumes equal and respectful, trusting and purposeful relationships - increasingly resonates with the Third Sector. This approach has the potential to empower communities, deepen democracy and reduce inequalities – all issues of enduring importance to the Third Sector.

Evidence suggests that involving people meaningfully in the CoProduction of services can deliver better, more sustainable services and enhance people's sense of agency and control. This model should not, however, be seen as replacing excellent quality universal services. The Third Sector, similarly, should not be seen as 'a cheap option,' in the delivery of public services.

CoProducing policies, services and budgets will go a long way – in our opinion – to empowering communities and ensuring that people have the wherewithal to exercise the range of their human capabilities. The Third Sector will wish to play a pivotal role in enabling the development of this form of engagement.

Community Ownership of Public Assets

While ownership can be empowering, not all ownership empowers. Owning a derelict building which soaks up resources can be a profoundly disempowering experience.

It is quite right to concentrate on the relationship people bear to the physical assets they use – but presuming that ownership is the only way to enhance 'belonging with' is overly reductive. Most communities wish to 'belong with' their local library or school or community centre – but not all communities expect the centre to 'belong to' them.

In this context the differences between urban and rural communities in Scotland need to be more clearly understood. An enabling environment which encourages people to have greater control over how local assets are used might include a community right to buy, but this one size will not fit all communities.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, Edinburgh's Third Sector is enthusiastic about the opportunities for the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill to enable a more active and engaged role for citizens in determining their life circumstances.

An assets-based, appreciative culture informs the Third Sector ethos – but this can often be seen to be at odds with the risk-averse, over-cautious culture which can influence Public Sector thinking. The Third Sector seeks to move away from the model where services are designed for administrative convenience to an approach which meaningfully puts people and communities (their needs and their assets) at the heart of service design and delivery.

In drafting the Bill Scottish Government needs to consider the differences between rural and urban communities, and must pay particular attention to the needs of those communities which are traditionally disengaged and disempowered.

The Third Sector sees itself as belonging with Scottish Civil Society and thus sees itself as having a vital role to play in shaping the relationships between citizen and state.

Any community empowerment activity will aim to deliver a deeper and more meaningful democracy, and this will require better engaged and informed communities. Capacity will need to be built within communities, but equally the capacity of the statutory sector will need to be built – equal and respectful, trusting and purposeful relationships must be developed in order to CoProduce social value.

The Third Sector continues to see a role for itself in Community Engagement and Empowerment. Firmly located within Scottish Civil Society, we see our role as facilitating and supporting change and as enabling agency and voice for those people and communities who are least often heard.

As Scottish Government progresses towards publishing its Community Empowerment & Renewal Bill, EVOC will continue to engage. Any questions on this submission, particularly, should be addressed to Milind Kolhatkar in the first instance.

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