



DEMOCRATIC
FUTURES

Electoral
 Reform
 Society
Scotland



STATEMENT ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY

FINDINGS: SURVEY ON LOCAL DEMOCRACY

In a poll carried out in April 2016 by BMG market research for the Electoral Reform Society, 76% of Scots felt they had no or very little influence on council spending or services. This is a worrying number for democracy; the fundamental claim of a democratic system is that the people have a say. If this claim is not felt to be true, then trust in the system itself is undermined. This is borne out by another figure from the same survey: 51% of Scots think the local council operates in the interests of the people who run it, as opposed to 26% who think the council is run in the interests of local people.

However, the survey also showed that there are grounds for hope. For example, 30% of people think their councillors work hard compared to only 12% who don't. Perhaps the most heartening thing is that people want their democracy to work better. Contrary to the 'anti-politics' narrative that is so often heard, Scots want more local representation. 78% of people would like more councillors if they were community volunteers and even more surprisingly, 68% want more councillors even if they were to be paid as they currently are.

Not only do people want democracy to work better through better representation, but many are prepared to help make this happen. 45% of people are prepared to give a minimum of half a day per month to assist their local council in making decisions, 24% a day or more, and 7% offer as much as 3 days or more.

OUR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS ARE IN TROUBLE

Some of the problems for local councils highlighted in the survey are unsurprising. Scotland's councils—like democratic institutions across the developed world—face declining voter turnout and declining faith in their ability to act in the citizen's interests. This is happening for a range of interconnected and complex reasons. Technological changes, globalisation and big changes in communication and exchange of information have meant that the design of these older democratic institutions are increasingly ineffective. While there is no easy solution to this problem, we have a huge opportunity to do things differently.

Democracy is about distributed power; structures which centralise or 'suck it up' feed a growing distrust in those past promises of freedom, democracy and equality. Across Scotland there are many examples of successful community action and self-managed local projects—but instead of getting the encouragement and support from state structures that could help these things become the norm, they are currently exceptions that have to overcome intimidating systemic barriers. This makes the lack of trust in existing democratic institutions even worse. But people doing things for each other and for themselves with sufficient resource and support is often the best way to rebuild democratic trust, and the most effective way of running the services communities need to thrive. It's not hard to imagine that involving more local people in running their community will lead to improvements.

RE-MAKING LOCAL DEMOCRACY

The survey data we have provides a snapshot: people's immediate responses to certain questions at a certain point in time, perhaps with limited consideration or information. Though the numbers tell us some important things, polling is not in itself a sufficient basis for policy. We need a considered and inclusive process of redesigning our local democracy. While local government is a central part of this, we need to extend the conversation to go well beyond these institutions. Such a process should be led by citizens and, as far as possible, involve all the small groups and organisations that make up Scotland's communities. It should not be rushed, and should be supported by evidence from the experienced and the experts—informed by them rather than led by them. We hope this is the intention of COSLA's proposed Convention on Local Democracy and we look forward to working with them and many others in design-ing such a process and making it happen.

We think that the work of the Convention should be reasonably broad and open, but with a focus on fundamentally reconfiguring our local democracy to fit with a changed and changing world.



1. First and foremost, we think it should start with purpose

What is the purpose of pooling and sharing power and resources at a local level? Is it about giving people more say over their lives and how their communities are run? Should it also be about addressing inequality and providing a foundation for a good society? How does it balance supporting social and cultural growth with economic activity? These are all things we think the convention should explore.

2. Only when we have developed a shared purpose can we begin to discuss function

What should be done to fulfil this purpose? We know about many of the services currently delivered by local institutions—do they share a bigger purpose? Are there things being done that don't add to this purpose and are there things that should be done that are not?

3. Finally we can start to look at structures

While we are clear that all of this might change once we have arrived at a shared sense of purpose and function, we think the need for more democracy—more power to more people—will be important. If this is the case, then we think any structural debate will suggest flatter networked structures and processes—a move away from hierarchies and concentrated authority in order to allow more open power sharing. Built into this will be many more democratic spaces—places, structures and processes for people to get together and talk things through to make decisions that affect their lives.

The purpose of this statement is to be clear and open about our position on the future of Scotland's local democracy at this time. We should state that we don't want to lead that process of change, because we don't think that any one organisation or agency should. We would like as many organisations as possible to initiate and lead on different elements at different times. We think a 'networked' approach to creating this change will be the most fruitful.

We are working hard to be part of conversations and discussions that will shape and develop the position outlined above. We want to join a coalition of organisations and individuals that agree that a wide ranging debate on local democracy through a convention is the next step towards change. We plan to organise and campaign together to make it happen.

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