Democracy and local governance - the recording and outputs from the 2021vSRP Session on 8th March 2021

Session curated by the **Scottish Community Alliance** and the **Scottish Centre for Community Development** and chaired by **Michael Russell MSP**, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs. Attended by 109 delegates.

_____

Michael Russell opened the session by noting that democracy is never static. The Scottish Government and CoSLA are currently reviewing the future of local governance and democratic engagement in Scotland taking account of learning generated by the pandemic response. He invited delegates to draw inspiration from the presentations and use the session to identify what is needed to achieve our collective ambitions for decentralisation of power and decision-making to local communities.

Summary of Presentations

From the University of Edinburgh, **Dr Oliver Escobar's** presentation looked at the current 'crisis of democracy' but also offered a beacon of light:

Evidence suggests we are living through a period of global democratic recession. There has, for example, been a surge in autocracies in the last 20 years and a growing distrust in institutions of government. However, this is also a time of democratic renewal as evidenced by a recent growth in pro-democracy resistance.

Power inequalities, including the growing gap between the politically rich and the politically poor, are the root cause of all other inequalities including economic and health inequalities. There is a fundamental need to redistribute power and strengthen democratic governance.

Democratic governance is founded on legitimacy (having the trust and the mandate to act) and capacity (having the means and resources to act). The two go hand in hand.

The redistribution of power in Scotland needs to happen on a systemic scale. A redistribution between central and local government and between government and citizens. Democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting, mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies and digital participation operate at the interface between government and citizens.

Amongst these, participatory budgeting has the promise of bringing together the best of the public sector reform agenda, the best of the community empowerment agenda and the best of the social justice agenda but there must also be a wider commitment to building the social and community economy and investing in digital democracy - 'crowdsourcing' collective intelligence to solve complex problems.

Oliver concluded by emphasising that democratic innovations are new institutions that add capacity to existing governance systems rather than replace them. Their development should be based on evidence-informed experimentalism rather than fear of failure.

Joyce Kelly from [Strathard Community Council](#) together with **Jamie Hamilton** and **Roland Playle** from [Community Chartering](#) gave a presentation which demonstrated the subsidiarity principle working in practice:

The subsidiarity principle is a foundation of government decision-making in Scotland and dictates that decisions should take place at the level at which they will be most effective. From the perspective of a community, if a community decides that something is better done by them then there should be a handover of power and resources by authorities to enable community members deliver on their priorities.

Strathard's Community Life Plan is based on the Plan De Vida created by the Misak tribe in Colombia. It was initiated in 2018 after a long history of the community's views being dismissed by local planning authorities. The Life Plan is a vehicle for capturing the community's views on local development priorities on an ongoing and dynamic basis. Rather than a static document, the Life Plan acts as a process for participatory and proactive place-based decision-making. It gives the Community Council a mandate for representing the community's views to Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park authority and Stirling Council and is now a 'material consideration' in any local planning application.

The presenters noted the Life Plan will act as the Local Place Plan, which has a legislative footing, but with the added benefit of embedding a means to rapidly engage with all members of the community on any topic and based on a shared understanding of local needs and aspirations. This creates a shared voice for the community that enables it to negotiate the transfer of power over local decision making from the authorities to the community itself.

Jacky Niven from the [Kincardineshire Development Partnership](#) opened her presentation with a challenge: when we have seen so much evidence in support of the transformative power of citizen participation, including the example given by Strathard CC, why does common practice lag way behind accepted ideology?

Jacky suggested we collectively need to be more committed to handing over power. This applies to government handing power to communities, but it also applies to communities handing power to those who struggle to engage and be heard. Post Covid-19, both government and communities must step up in order to achieve transformational change.

Participatory budgeting (PB) could become a vehicle for transformational change, but the process needs to be more accessible to communities and the amounts allocated much higher. Few Councils put close to the 1% on the table and even 1% is insufficient. Realising the full potential of PB will give agency to communities, including minority groups and the vulnerable. Having agency contributes to wellbeing and trauma recovery, a matter of increasing significance in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The end game is not just PB but a systemic overhaul of the governance system in Scotland. This will not, however, happen overnight and in the meantime there needs to be a focus on resourcing and supporting

communities through the community empowerment agenda. This means funding Anchor Organisations and meaningfully valuing volunteers on Boards and Community Councils, not just paying lip service to their contributions. To receive this investment, expectations should be placed on third and community sector organisations to become more inclusive in their own governance.

Discussion Points

- Everyone wants more control over decisions that affect their lives but not everyone is knowledgeable about the mechanisms of democracy. **Democracy is a complex concept** and the intersection between the agendas of **local governance** and **community empowerment** and the **National Planning Framework** makes it even more so. In practice, democratic structures and processes, especially at regional and national level, are not accessible or intelligible to the vast majority of the population.

- Democratic **mobilisation is proportional to investment**. Currently, local governance is reliant on the voluntary efforts of a tiny minority of the population. Structural reforms and investing heavily in citizenship participation and democratic innovations such as Participatory Budgeting will, in the long term, mean more local and diverse democratic enactment. In the short term however, provisions need to be made to resource and support **volunteers** on Community Councils and Boards.

- Very little evidence exists regarding the public perception and efficacy of **Community Councils**. Without a doubt however, their overhaul or abolishment in favour of a new tier of local democracy cannot be engineered separately from **reducing the size of local council areas** and devolving fiscal and functional powers to local councils. This will take a long time. In the short-term therefore a strategic national approach to building the capacity of Community Councils as the most local structures of democracy should be implemented within the local governance reform agenda. New arrangements for networking Community Councils and community empowerment structures such as Development Trusts at regional level should be resourced. This approach could, in time, form the basis of a **new tier of local democracy**.

- All communities have the right to expect that community structures of democratic engagement and empowerment – their Community Council and other **anchor organisations** including Community Associations, Development Trusts and Land Trusts are valued by government partners and dependably funded.

- The **voluntarist approach** to community empowerment whereby opportunities and rights are framed and presented for communities to take advantage of if they feel so inclined is creating a tiered system of privilege. Most communities will require additional investment and support to implement fully inclusive Local Place Plans and engage with democratic innovations. Clarity is needed on where this investment will come from.

- Nobody talks about **participation requests**. They are perceived as an example of communities being expected to go to authorities with a begging bowl rather than the onus being on authorities to involve communities in the first place. Communities do not trust authorities not to reject participation requests outright and use the process to dismiss community asks.

- **Structural inequalities** prevent marginalised and vulnerable community members from having a voice. Community structures of democratic engagement including anchor organisations must be compelled to

address inequalities in participation and resourced to do so. The establishment of an external body to help communities manage conflict is also needed.

- Harnessing the **wisdom of the crowd** rather than the zeal of the herd requires platforms and systems that are well designed and facilitated. There is a gulf of difference between a participatory democracy in which people are invited to be active citizens and a populist democracy where people are expected to sign up to a dynamic of 'leaders and followers'. **Digital platforms** may offer a mechanism for bringing democratic innovations into the mainstream.

Manifesto Output from discussions and breakout rooms

The session output is available as a separate document.

Closing remarks by Brian Logan, Scottish Government lead on the local governance review

A transcript of the closing remarks are available as a separate document.

Documents and initiatives mentioned during session:

- Democracy Matters- Local Governance Review – Phase 2: https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-governance-review-democracy-matters-phase-2/
- Democracy Matters - Systems of local governance and how citizens participate: international review: https://www.gov.scot/publications/systems-local-governance-citizens-participate-international-review/
- Jacky Niven, Kincardineshire Development Partnership, The Route Map of Community Participation in the Recovery Phase: http://kdp.scot/attachments/article/197/The%20Route%20Map%20for%20Community%20Participation%20in%20the%20Recovery%20Phase%20Colour.pdf
- Andy Wightman – Renewing Local Democracy in Scotland 2016: http://www.andywightman.com/docs/RenewingLocalDemocracy_final_v2.pdf
- PB (Participatory Budgeting) Scotland website: https://pbscotland.scot/
- Wiki Survey – Crowdsourcing solutions: https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/crowdsourcing-democracy-using-wikisurveys/