

**Local Governance Review – Feedback from the Big Listen Event in Helensburgh.**

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**1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The programme for Scottish government 2017-18 set out the intention to “decentralise power to a more local level in Scotland and launch a comprehensive review of local governance ahead of a Local Democracy Bill later in this Parliament”. The Scottish Government’s local governance review consultation was launched 28 May 2018 and entitled ‘Democracy Matters’ and will close 14 December 2018.
- 1.2 The first phase is aimed primarily at communities to better understand how decisions and their impacts are best taken at community level. The second stage of the consultation is aimed primarily at Community Planning Partnerships and public sector organisations who are encouraged to offer proposals for improved governance arrangements at their level of place.
- 1.3 In preparation, the Chief Executive embarked on an extensive engagement programme with communities across Argyll and Bute and online to inform the Council’s response which will be considered by the Council at its meeting on 27 September 2018.
- 1.4 This report sets out the background to the consultation and more explicitly provides a narrative on the key themes and comments captured at our event in Helensburgh and the online webchat session.
- 1.5 It is recommended that the Helensburgh and Lomond Area Committee:
  - a) Consider the content of this paper, the views expressed by local communities in relation to the local governance review consultation and advise of any comments members may have;
  - b) Notes that an overarching report which will contain a draft response to the Scottish Government consultation ‘Democracy Matters’ will be submitted for consideration by the Council on the 27 September 2018.

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**2.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The programme for Scottish government 2017-18 set out the intention to “decentralise power to a more local level in Scotland and launch a comprehensive review of local governance ahead of a Local Democracy Bill later in this Parliament”.
- 2.2 The first phase is aimed primarily at communities to better understand how decisions and their impacts are best taken at community level. The second phase of the consultation is aimed primarily at Community Planning Partnerships and public sector organisations who are encouraged to offer proposals for improved governance arrangements at their level of place.
- 2.3 In preparation, the Chief Executive embarked on an extensive engagement programme with communities across Argyll and Bute and online to inform the Council’s response which will be considered by the Council at its meeting on 27 September 2018.
- 2.4 This report sets out the background to the consultation and more explicitly provides a narrative on the key themes and comments captured at our event in Helensburgh and the online webchat session.

**3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that members of the Helensburgh and Lomond Area Committee:

- 3.1 Consider the content of this paper, the views expressed by local communities in relation to the local governance review consultation and advise of any comments members may have;
- 3.2 Notes that an overarching report which will contain a draft response to the Scottish Government consultation ‘Democracy Matters’ will be submitted for consideration by the Council on the 27 September 2018.

## 4.0 DETAIL

- 4.1 The programme for Scottish government 2017-18 set out the intention to “decentralise power to a more local level in Scotland and launch a comprehensive review of local governance ahead of a Local Democracy Bill later in this Parliament”. The Scottish Government and COSLA jointly announced the consultation in December 2017 and it was launched in May 2018. Entitled ‘Democracy Matters’, the consultation is in two phases and will close 14 December 2018.
- 4.2 The first phase is aimed primarily at communities to better understand how decisions and their impacts are best taken at community level. The second phase of the consultation is aimed primarily at Community Planning Partnerships and public sector organisations who are encouraged to offer proposals for improved governance arrangements at their level of place.
- 4.3 Given the significant importance of this consultation to the future of public services in Scotland, in preparation the Chief Executive committed to an extensive programme of engagement across Argyll and Bute with communities to inform the development of the Council response. Initially entitled the ‘Future of Public Services – Your Voice’, it received the additional title of ‘The Big Listen’ to reflect the focus on hearing the views of residents within our communities.
- 4.4 Between April and June 2018, Council officers hosted evening engagement events in Coll, Campbeltown, Lochgilphead, Helensburgh, Mull, Islay, Bute, Dunoon and Oban. In addition a ‘webchat’ event followed to allow anyone unable to attend one of the above events to participate in a session online. A final event was held on Jura at the end of July 2018.
- 4.5 Format

Each event commenced with a one hour ‘open doors’ session where people could drop in for an introduction to the event, have an informal discussion, meet council staff and raise issues relevant to their communities. The formal event commenced immediately afterwards and lasted two hours commencing with a short presentation to set some context before the topics were considered in detail through a series of focus groups. Each group was facilitated by council staff but the focus was on the views of attendees. At the end of the session, feedback was provided from each group so that all attendees were party to the points raised within other groups. Each group worked through 5 key themes aligned to the focus of the Democracy Matters consultation as set out as follows;

1. How would you want to contribute to making decisions for your local community? And what would help you to become more involved?
  2. How effective are arrangements for making decisions about your public services? What could be improved? Is it more influence over decision making by public bodies, is it the transfer of services and budgets to community control or something else?
  3. Would you support community control over any services? If so, which ones? Are there any areas where community control should not be considered? If not, why not?
  4. How should organisations that run public services be accountable for the decisions taken to those who reside in our communities? Who should monitor performance of those services?
  5. What would you like public services to look like in Argyll and Bute in 5 years' time?
- 4.6 For each event, a summary of the key points and view expressed has been prepared in a narrative form – the summary for the event held in Helensburgh is attached as an appendix to this report. Also appended is a short overview of the webchat session. Over the events over 220 residents participated in an in depth consideration of the issues which will assist with forming a council response. The relevant event reports are being used to inform an overarching report to be considered by the Council on the 27 September 2018 as the Council's response to the national consultation.
- 4.7 It is unknown at this stage what the proposed Local Democracy Bill will look like however it is noted that it has the potential to have a long term impact on how decisions are made affecting our communities in Argyll and Bute. It also has the potential to generate organisational or structural change or introduce the transfer of powers between or from spheres of government and communities. It is important that the Council (and any other public organisation, community group or individuals from the area) makes a full submission during this consultation phase to influence the best possible outcome for our communities.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 The programme for Scottish government 2017-18 set out the intention to “decentralise power to a more local level in Scotland and launch a comprehensive review of local governance ahead of a Local Democracy Bill

later in this Parliament”.

- 5.2 In preparation, the Chief Executive embarked on a programme of engagement with communities across Argyll and Bute and online to inform the Council’s response which will be considered by the Council on the 27 September 2018.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 Policy; none at this stage.
- 6.2 Financial; none at this stage
- 6.3 Legal; none at this stage
- 6.4 HR; none at this stage
- 6.5 Equalities; none at this stage
- 6.6 Risk; none at this stage
- 6.7 Customer Service; none at this stage

**Chief Executive;** Cleland Sneddon

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**Date;** 10 August 2018

Appendices:

1. Future of Public Services – What You Said in Helensburgh 01 May 2018
2. Future of Public Services – What You Said via the Webchat 18 June 2018

## **Appendix 1**

### **THE BIG LISTEN Future of Public Services – Your Voice What You Said in Helensburgh 01 May 2018**

Fifteen residents turned out for the event at the Victoria Hall and key themes that emerged over the evening was young people, remoteness from centres of decision making, participatory budgeting, citizen's panels, sustainability of the third sector and partnership working.

Not unlike the event in Campbeltown, some attendees felt that young people were conspicuous by their absence and efforts should be made to engage them directly either in schools or other venues where they gather. There was a suggestion that education in schools should include learning about active participation in 'town hall' activity and voting systems; apparently this was traditionally taught as 'civics' which is no longer a formal subject. A different attendee was of the understanding that this is now taught in school under Modern Studies.

Regarding consultation, one attendee was of the view that the public sector is currently consulting too much and often too late and what is actually required is less consultation and more focus on coproduction. Relationships need to be further developed between the public sector and communities to ensure meaningful engagement with audiences targeted for optimum engagement. However, whilst the benefits of extending engagement into all our communities was broadly acknowledged as a good thing, at least one attendee was of the view that if this means staff spending more time engaging at a time of reducing funding then the cost was potentially prohibitive.

One resident lamented the loss of Burgh's (abolished in 1975) resulting in a lack of local leadership. There can be a lack of awareness or familiarity with who elected representatives are plus it can be confusing making a distinction between elected representatives of the council, the Scottish Parliament, UK Parliament, European Parliament etc.; it can be confusing to know who to contact.

A representative from the community council feels that a key development that should happen is much closer liaisons between the community council and the council and there should be an organisational chart with names of local contacts; an organisation chart for the council does exist online and could be promoted better.

For the Helensburgh area, decisions around health was deemed by some attendees to be confusing with some matters being decided in Inverness and others in

Glasgow. The Council committee that decides on planning application contains committee members from across Argyll and Bute and make important decisions about applications in specific locations. At least one attendee was concerned that committee members don't always have sufficient local knowledge to influence decisions i.e. committee members residing on Islay influencing decisions about Helensburgh and vice versa.

Is Argyll and Bute too big and too remote? One attendee cited that Helensburgh is 73 miles from Kilmory, Lochgilphead, the administrative headquarters for Argyll and Bute and suggests that this distance is too remote for effective decision making regarding local matters. One suggestion was a town mayor, an elected leader with devolved powers who is accessible, has a clear position on policies and can make decisions.

With regards to contributing to making decisions, a different question proposed by a resident is why would you want to? In other words, what is the individual's motivation to get involved and it is assumed it is when a matter affects them (either directly or indirectly).

Participatory budgeting was explored as a means to increase democratic involvement in how public money is spent. The Council has just completed the vote count for the public vote for the £120,000 Strengthening Communities Fund which is a participatory budgeting pilot. It was noted by attendee's that the online system to vote was very good but only accessible online and efforts should be considered to allow people to vote in different ways. It was emphasised that the online system was selected after careful consideration and due to the sheer size of Argyll and Bute, assuming it would not be possible to hold an event in every locality, that an online system was actually more accessible. Could an online system be provided in settlements for people that do not have sufficient online capability at home?

Participatory budgeting was described by one attendee as a modern style of democratic decision making to which people simply vote yes or no to single questions. However, at least one attendee was of the view that simplistic voting could be viewed as a 'dumbing down' of democracy and not enough people will be able to make 'educated' decisions i.e. are aware of all the facts, have consistent knowledge of the political and policy environment in which they reside, and have an awareness of the impact and consequences of the outcomes of decisions.

One attendee talked about a model in Ireland where a cross representative of 100 people from across the community agree to form a citizen's panel around a specific issue. The group would meet regularly and debate all aspects and become informed of the subject matter and eventually agree a decision.

The Council currently has a citizen's panel which contains 1,000 people from across Argyll and Bute. Two attendees are members and described how they periodically receive a questionnaire normally based around three themes which changes each time. It has been at least 6 months since the last one which is an unusually long time. There was general agreement that the Irish model seemed in principle an idea that should be explored to improve decision making.

When asked about community control over services, there was a general resistance to the idea for clearly articulated reasons with the principle one being concern over sustainability. Control means responsibility and when difficult decisions are required to be made, this can create stressful situations, particularly for volunteers and third sector organisation. A key point is the lack of a 'safety net' when things go wrong (e.g. key people leave or budget is over spent), how is this resolved? Some attendees are aware of a number of third sector organisations in Argyll and Bute struggling financially and/or lacking capacity and it causes stress in communities.

When exploring the suggestion further, a distinction was made between statutory, and regulatory services on one hand and any other activity relating to non-confidential information and non-statutory on the other hand e.g. libraries and toilets. One resident suggested that in time non-statutory services will disappear due to public financial difficulties but even if there is a retreat of the state, this should not mean it is acceptable for communities to take control due to the concerns described above. It was suggested that residents could undertake activity in exchange for a reduction in council tax, however, as it was pointed out, this is a tax and not a payment for services rendered.

An alternative that appeared to receive a broad consensus was increased partnership working between the public sector and the third sector. Already a well-established model, this allows for local decisions for local services whilst providing the safety net of the public sector and in some cases may also allow continued economies of scale currently provided by the public sector.

When exploring accountability to communities, one resident had clear views that there are too many quangos (or other public organisations) in Scotland and as they are only accountable to Scottish Ministers, there is no accountability at local level and asks if there could be?

Monitoring of performance is such a dry subject, who would wish to do this? One attendee feels that at present that decisions by the public sector (including Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service) is driven by budgets and not what is best for our communities. Campaigns around the provision of accident and emergency services at the Vale of Leven Hospital was suggested as an example of where national policy was affecting local services, where there is no local accountability and a real challenge for residents to challenge decisions.

In local government, not only can residents speak directly to their elected ward members about services, ultimately councillors are accountable at the ballot box if standing for re-election.

In 5 years' time the group would like to see greater responsiveness from the public sector including developing sustainable partnership models and making (more) extensive use of citizen's panel for improved decision making.

One attendee was of the view that future council's should be de-politicised and work as direct agents of national government.

A different attendee was of the view that Community Planning Groups are not working and need to articulate the actions from their meetings and have 'teeth'!

To summarise key messages from this event, currently the public sector is engaging with communities too late and too often. It is suggested there needs to be more of an ongoing relationship (particularly with community councils) with much earlier engagement in the form of coproduction. Where appropriate, specific areas of activity needs to be targeted at the right audience who will be more motivated to be involved. Engagement cannot be online only and consideration needs to be given to widening accessibility to participation.

It can be confusing to know 'who's who' with regards to elected representatives suggesting (as described by one attendee) a lack of local leadership. Delegated powers to an elected town mayor with capability to make decisions to ensure local solutions for local issues and is accountable at the ballot box is possibly one way of interpreting these suggestions.

However, as touched upon during the evening, increased engagement may incur costs that are potentially prohibitive in the current financial climate.

It was clear that there was not overwhelming support for increased community control over services but certainly greater support for sustainable partnership working between the public sector and community groups and third sector organisations. This model may provide the opportunity for local solutions to local issues whilst providing the safety net for sustainable working and economies of scale which comes from a larger organisation.

## Appendix 2

### **THE BIG LISTEN Future of Public Services – Your Voice What You Said via the Webchat 18 June 2018**

The online webchat was held on the 18 June 2018. Key themes to emerge from the conversation may be summarised as follows. A big challenge to communities is a sufficient local labour market to support employers and sufficient affordable housing. These two are interlinked not only to encourage young people to stay but also to increase in-migration into the area.

One participant was of the view that through small interventions, communities can make big differences which can play a key role in improving demographics. Examples included communities' development of care services for early years, supporting the maintenance of good health of residents as a preventative measure and the development of outreach services.

Other activities communities can participate in were suggested as including the provision of exercise facilities, eco/environmental issues, road safety, providing young people with a 'voice' and meals for the elderly if village halls had good community kitchens. However, one participant raised concerns over liabilities which discourages willing and enthusiastic residents to taking on public service activities and concerns they might be sued. 'Accountability' was viewed as a scary word as it puts people off voluntary activity which may need to be covered by codes of practice. Another contributor suggested a different view which was that this should not prohibit or curb community activities and can be dealt with by careful consideration of insurance and other measures.

This raised the suggestion of jargon free guidance and a help line to support communities in becoming empowered to 'take stuff on themselves' and utilise skills available from within the community. It was noted that there is existing guidance on the Council website in relation to community empowerment and could be a starting point.

The participants appeared to agree that, whilst there is enthusiasm for increasing community control with small interventions, communities would not want control over regulated activities but do want to increase influence. Looking ahead to 5 years' time, one participant suggested that the council should continue to be responsible for core activities (e.g. protection, security and emergency activities) surrounded by a softer outer ring that could be entirely outsourced to business and/or enabled by community partnerships delivering statutory services. All of this would hang on a core set of principles around 'livability' i.e. making the area attractive for young people and families. Added to this is measuring activity

against a 10 year impact plan and clear messages from the community on what shall be delivered and who shall do it.

One comment received was that success in maintaining community involvement is the evidence of results and a perception they are being listened to; this takes time and commitment. Key messages need to be embedded within the community. A separate comment was that people need to see the point of getting involved and understand that communities can collectively make lives better for themselves but that education is often required as people are unaware of possibilities.

The online webchat demonstrated a willingness by community representatives to engage in a dialogue on doing things differently that allows communities to be empowered in a measured manner to support improving outcomes for communities. Whether this is 'doing things for themselves' or increasing influence over more statutory activity, it requires an element of education to ensure everyone are aware of the opportunities that fit their circumstances, evidence of the benefits, and time and commitment.