

SCVO briefing: Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, Stage 1 debate

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Summary

We welcome the policy driving the Community Empowerment Bill and believe this legislation can help enable more community empowerment.

A starting point for any debate on community empowerment should be acknowledging that governments, public sector bodies, politicians and third sector organisations don't empower communities. **Communities empower themselves**

The role of all the agencies involved with this agenda should be a supportive one that does not seek to direct or control.

The omission of participatory budgeting from the Bill is a serious oversight. In light of the levels of participation seen in the independence referendum and the public's clearly expressed appetite for greater involvement in decision making, this would be a missed opportunity to offer greater powers to people and communities

We welcome the proposals in the Bill that will enable communities to take greater control of land and buildings. Coupled with the Strengthening Communities programme, legislation in this area will enable more communities to empower themselves.

If strengthened, the measures outlined in the Bill that legislate for community engagement could be a positive force for change.

However, it should also be clear that involving people in public sector agendas is not community empowerment and can in many instances be disempowering

Successful community empowerment cannot be driven by a top-down approach, it must be encouraged to develop from the grassroots up

For the Bill to be successful it must be part of a comprehensive strategy, with the necessary support and resources made available for communities to empower themselves

Beyond legislation

The Community Empowerment Bill is one small part of the change needed to enable more empowered communities. It is vital that this Bill is considered in those terms and not seen as the totality of the approach that is required. It is our view that the impact of the Bill itself on community empowerment will be minimal unless there is a wider strategy adopted. We support the statement from the Minister in the debate on 12 September 2013:

"We are **talking** about culture, leadership, and the practical support that can be provided to deliver community empowerment."

Engagement and empowerment

The Bill includes a mix of legislation that has been brought forward to achieve different purposes. This can make the policy objectives of the Bill seem at times incoherent. By mixing legislation on land reform and asset transfer with measures on community planning and



public service reform, the Bill adds to the confusion that exists between community empowerment and community engagement.

If it is done well, we support people and communities having a greater say in the improvement of public services and other decision making processes. However, involving people in top-down public sector-led agendas is not community empowerment and can in many instances be disempowering.

Part 1 National outcomes

We are generally supportive of the proposal to embed Scotland Performs and the National Performance

Framework in legislation. This could improve accountability of reporting mechanisms while offering greater opportunity for more people to become involved in the process of deciding outcomes. The key to the success of this proposal is the process that is developed to implement it and how participative and inclusive it is. We welcome the recommendationⁱⁱⁱ from the local Government Committee that an annual report be published showing the extent to which outcomes have been achieved. However, we would also like to see this proposal strengthened to ensure *that a wide range of stakeholders, including third sector organisations and communities, participate in the process*

