

MSP & Councillor Briefing from the LINK Local Governance Task Force

Defining Community Empowerment

Summary:

- This briefing offers ideas from LINK and its members as Scotland begins to discuss the proposed Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. It is written to promote thinking on the basic nature of the communities in which we live and to try to provide solid foundations for the debate – and for the Bill.
- The health of our democracy relies on recognition of the existence of communities of both place, and interest, and the representative function of people who have the assent of both types of community.

Introduction

Within political and public policy discourse in Scotland the terms “community” and “communities” are regularly used, but what we mean by these terms can be widely divergent. In particular, the habit has emerged of defining “communities” as only those at a very local, geographically restricted level. These matters of definition cause problems when the participants in a conversation, consultation or debate apply different meanings to the terms.

Within Scottish Environment LINK we use the term “community” and “communities” to describe complex, concentric, or overlapping groups of people, with the underlying identifiers of:

- **communities of place**, where people live together in a geographically delineated area; and
- **communities of interest**, where people join together on the basis of shared interest.

Communities are self-identified, and can co-exist at several levels at the same time. We believe that this definition is in conformity with definitions in national and international law.

Communities of Place

People identify the communities of place in which they live in several ways and levels. A village, housing estate, a town or city might be a community. A nation or a state might constitute a community. From each individual, the sense of identity at the heart of every community can spread outwards to local, regional, national, state, continental and global levels. Each and every level can be described as constituting a “community”.

In our view, a person is not limited to a single community. An individual child can be brought up in more than one local community of place, and can retain identification with several communities as he or she grows up. There is no rule to say that you are only allowed to be from one place at a time. There is no rule that a person born of parents from different nations cannot be a member of both “communities” – even where there is a law saying you are only allowed a single passport.

Communities of Interest

People form communities of interest in several ways, and they too can be formed and organised at different geographic levels. People of a similar cultural background or origin might form a community. People of similar innate characteristics or abilities might constitute a community. People of similar social, political, economic and environmental ideas might join together to form a community. Communities of interest can form for recreational, intellectual or social pursuits and activities.

Within even the tiniest community of place, overlapping communities of interest might be formed. In the modern world, with the aid of our many communication technologies, communities of interest can be conjoined from the local to the global levels without great difficulty. It is, also, far easier to obtain a sense of identifying with one, two or many more communities of interest than might have been the case in earlier ages – and people have never been limited to a single interest.



Who Represents a Community?

Communities are self-identifying and their leadership and representation can be identified formally or informally. At a formal level, within a democracy, elections are the method of selection - but they are not the only way for the representatives of communities of place or interest to emerge. At an informal level, most representatives of local communities of place emerge through a wide variety of community organisations - and can achieve the informal, but very real, assent of that community. Similarly, within communities of interest, a representative function can be properly performed by people who achieve effective assent of a congregation, a club or a wide variety of organisations.

Friction between formal and informal representatives in a community is all but inevitable – but it is essential to the proper functioning of a democracy that elected representatives accept that they do not have a monopoly over the representative function. They should be prepared to work with the informal representatives of all communities. Equally, informal representatives must recognize the mandate and legal powers of elected representatives.

Community Assets

Community assets include property owned by both communities of place and communities of interest – but the social and intellectual capital of any community is, perhaps, its greatest asset. LINK regrets the limitation of the term “community assets” to only the physical assets of local communities of place. We believe that the property and capital of councils and both Scottish and UK Governments should be considered a “community asset” too. We deplore the idea that local and national government are corporate entities, somehow separated from the community. At the same time we welcome, warmly, ideas to bring unused physical assets into use for local communities.

Empowering Communities

LINK is of the view that economic, social and environmental power in our society has been “sucked upwards” in recent decades. As a response to economic globalisation, states and supra-national entities have taken greater powers. Scotland may have had power devolved to it in this period but it too has seen a concentration of power. If the Community Councils are ignored (as all too often they are) then each unit of Scottish “local” government has a larger population than any other country in Europe. Scottish councils are dependant for over 85% of their funding on higher tiers of government and are tightly constrained by several layers of legislation. Power has been centralised.

We believe that to re-empower communities it will be necessary to return power to the social and environmental fields from the economic, but also to seriously pursue subsidiarity. Decisions should be taken, in our view, at the practical level nearest to the individual if we are to attain sustainability. In Scotland this includes returning real powers of decision to localities well below the units of our local government. This will require both the decision making powers and the control of assets of local communities to be increased. – and we warmly welcome the start of discussions on both these issues. We hope that community empowerment (and the Bill) will extend much, much further though, than to the control of greater assets alone.

Empowerment requires, essentially, full recognition of the complex nature of community, and a full recognition that communities are strongest when the elements of place and interest are taken together. Sadly, we have witnessed an increasing tendency to divide and separate these aspects of community, as when the Climate Challenge fund excluded any participation by communities of interest.

Conclusion & Recommendation Based on the ideas and definitions suggested in this briefing, LINK intends to participate fully in the discussion of the forthcoming Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. We recommend, however, that its title be the first thing to be considered. If the Bill is almost exclusively about local communities of place, this should be reflected in the title of the Bill to avoid confusion.

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Scottish Environment LINK is a network of over 30 organisations working together for the well-being of Scotland’s natural and cultural environment.



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