

# Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

## Introduction

COSLA has set up a Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy. The Commission “will bring people together with a common resolve to consider how local democracy and accountability in Scotland might be improved and empowered, and provide advice on what is needed for that to happen.” Membership of the Commission can be found [here](#). The Commission’s work has two phases: Why Local Democracy is important and what it can achieve and a route map to delivering stronger local democracy. This briefing gives an overview of UNISON’s submission to the commission. A final report will be presented at the COSLA Convention in spring this year.

## UNISON Submission

UNISON believes that local government must be more than a means to deliver services cost effectively. It must ensure that citizens participate in decision making and engage with each other. Services must be designed through democratic processes to ensure that they meet the needs of all citizens not just those with the most money and power. Local government developed over many years as a response to the failure of the private and voluntary sectors to deliver the infrastructure and services required. People wanted control over services not just taking what the great and the good thought they needed.

UNISON supported devolution in order to bring decisions making closer to ordinary people. This requires more than the devolution of more powers to the Scottish Parliament; more powers need to be devolved from the parliament to local government and those powers further devolved into communities.

UNISON campaigned against the current 32 authority system, but has generally been opposed further structural reform because of the costs and disruption involved. Big reorganisations tend to focus on structures not democracy and ensure that organisations spend time not on what people want, but instead inwardly focus on themselves. The big questions we face are how we drive change to make services responsive to citizens and whether this requires better ways of making the current structures work or is it time for those structures to change. Despite the Christie Commission’s recommendations for bottom up change, what we are currently seeing is increased central command and control.

**Local decision making:** Decision making in Scotland is moving away from local towards national decision making. Local government is at real risk of becoming an administrative arm of central government. The council tax freeze and substantial budget cuts and imposed targets in return for council tax freeze subsidy are limiting local choice.



## POLICY BRIEFING

### KEY POINTS:

- COSLA has set up a Commission to look local democracy and the future direction of local government in Scotland
- UNISON believes that local democratic control of public services is essential
- This briefing gives an overview of UNISON’s submission



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**Local accountability:** While we still face many challenges particularly round the impact of wealth inequality on the quality of life of our citizens, democracy has served Scotland well. Our substantial public services and welfare state paid for through taxation and national insurance (and direct charges) are the result of increased franchise and the demands of ordinary people for both direct services and a reasonable safety net. They have been hard battles to win and trade unions are rightly proud of the role they have played in achieving and defending the public sector. We see people in other countries struggling for the right to vote, not so they can turn up every few years and tick a box but so they can have power over their lives.

Spending choices are they key choices that politicians make. It is funding that determines what gets done. The debate should be about whether we need new structures: smaller councils or an extra layer of government as suggested by the Liberal Democrats or whether the current structures can accommodate more local decision making. Decision making will need to include actual spending decisions. We need to explore imaginative ways of pooling resources in communities to fund local choices. This doesn't have to undermine the setting of national priorities. So for example an overarching aim of reducing health inequalities can involve a range of different projects depending on how those issues appear in a community.

**Local priorities:** UNISON believes that decision making is becoming increasingly centralised. While we welcomed many of the findings of the Christie Commission and the call for a bottom up reform of public services there is little sign of this being implemented. Indeed we see the creation of national police and fire services, regionalisation of colleges centralizing further education and increased control by central government of local authority budgets through cuts and the council tax freeze. Key to making the change we need will be:

- Bringing services back in house to ensure democratic control where ever the services are placed in a structure.
- Elected councillors/MSPs/MPs need to become more diverse too many are still male and white. Much more needs to be done to ensure that a wider range of people are able to take up these positions
- Local government needs to have more power over its finances. This includes a local tax base, regaining control over business rates and exploring new forms of borrowing like Tax Increment Finance and borrowing from pension's funds for capital spend.
- Spending decisions need to be made more locally and over a broader range of budgets. It cannot just be about local government budgets, people should have a say over all spending in their communities

**Scotland's future:** The current debate is too focused on powers for the Scottish Parliament rather than powers for the people of Scotland. Also missing is how to use all the powers we currently have. There is for example widespread agreement that the council tax needs reform but instead of taking this forward the tax is frozen. Local authorities currently have a "power to advance well being". The Westminster Localism Bill gives their authorities a Power of General Competence. The Liberal Democrats argue that extending this to councils and a redefinition of Best Value would help free local authorities to make more innovative use of their resources including brown field sites.

#### Action for Branches

The UNISON submission supports our ongoing work to further develop our position as we seek to influence parties' 2016 manifestos. Branches are encouraged to discuss the issues raised and feedback to the Bargaining and Campaigns team. The Bargaining and Campaigns Team are available to support discussion in branches. Please contact Kay Sillars 0141 342 2819.

#### Further info

**Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy Homepage**

<http://www.localdemocracy.info/>

**Who's who on the commission**

<http://www.localdemocracy.info/who-we-are/>

**UNISON Submission**

[http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/response/CoSLA\\_LocalDemocracy\\_submission\\_Dec%202013.pdf](http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/response/CoSLA_LocalDemocracy_submission_Dec%202013.pdf)

**UNISON Public Works campaign**

<http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/public-works/index.html>



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