

Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy Final Report

Introduction

COSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy has published its final report. The Commission aimed to "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." UNISON Policy [Briefing 48](#) gives more detail on the Commission, its remit and UNISON's initial submission to their work and [Briefing 52](#) covers the Commissions' interim Report.

The Report

The report is called [Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities](#). The Commission has "not set out to prescribe everything that should happen." Instead the direction of change has to be driven by and decided in communities. The report instead contains principles which they believe will enable the process of change to begin and grow.

Seven Principles for Stronger Democracy in Scotland

- **Sovereignty:** democratic power lies with people and communities who give some of that power to governments and local governments not the other way round
- **Subsidiarity:** decisions should be taken as close to communities as possible, and the shape and form of local government has to be right for the people and places it serves
- **Transparency:** democratic governance should be clear and understandable to communities with clear lines of accountability
- **Participation:** all communities must be able to participate in the decision making process that affects their lives and their communities
- **Spheres not tiers of governance:** different spheres of democratic governance should have distinct jobs to do that are set out in "competencies" rather than depend on powers being handed down from "higher" levels of governance
- **Interdependency:** every sphere of governance has to support others, and none can be, or should seek to be, self contained and self sufficient
- **Wellbeing:** the purpose of all democratic governance is to improve opportunities and outcomes for the individuals and communities that empower it



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POLICY BRIEFING

KEY POINTS:

The commission calls for a fundamental review of the structure, boundaries, functions and democratic arrangements for all local governance in Scotland

Moving from 32 uniform authorities to between 60 and 80

The new bodies to have raise approx 60% of their budget through increased tax powers

The new structures to be designed by communities, No more top down change



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Key points

The report recommends a fundamental review of the structure, boundaries functions and democratic arrangements for all local governance in Scotland. While the commission emphasise that they believe that the outcomes are not for them to prescribe it is clear that they feel that more not less local government is the way forward. The report suggests the commission favours moving from the current 32 unitary authorities to between 60 and 80 bodies with differing structures to suit local circumstances.

Making Democracy Local

The report recommends a holistic review which allows the people of Scotland to determine which forms of local democracy they want. The commission offers four guiding principles for the review. This will need time and must be a process of engagement, analysis and then reengagement with communities. The proposed timescale is for delivery post the 2020 Scottish elections. Groups who face barriers to participation must be encouraged and supported to take part.

Creating local tax and spending choices

The lack of fiscal powers at local level is severely limiting choices at a local level. The commission recommends that local people should decide on levels of local taxation in relation to the services. "It is completely inconsistent with a strong local democracy for this to be determined or enforced nationally". They also believe that local government should have full control over **all** property taxes (council tax, business rates, land and property transaction taxes). This would see local government having full control of approx 60% of its budget. Local government should have a general competence to set and raise new taxes as long as that did not duplicate taxes set elsewhere.

Securing local democracy

The European Charter of Local Self Government should be adopted into Scots law. An independent Office of Wellbeing should be established to monitor and report on the wellbeing impacts of fiscal and macro-economic policy. A clear duty placed on all public authorities in Scotland to support and resource community participation in local decision making.

Making participation work

The commission recommends a significant re-investment in community development services to support communities who are likely to face barriers to participation. This should be supported by a Centre for Participatory Democracy to consolidate current expertise and support the knowledge and practice in the public sector. The commission calls for work to start quickly to put in place deliberative arrangements to allow communities to engage in both the process of change for local democracy in Scotland and in making the changes they want in their communities.

This will of course require resources, public sector workers will need to be able to participate in this process from their own point of view and also have the training and resources to support the participation of the communities whom they serve.

Conclusion

The report is proposing a radical new form of local government and the service delivery in Scotland. This is also a substantial change in how that reform will be designed and implemented. This means that there is an opportunity for members to participate in the process of designing that change over the proposed six year timetable. Changes will also impact on UNISON internal structures.

Action for Branches

Experience tells us that workers tend to be the last thought in times of reform. Branches need to discuss the issues raised in the report and begin to identify the key issues for members in both the process and period of reform and the type of local government they wish to see emerge. 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

UNISON Public
Works campaign

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



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