

Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

Introduction

The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy has published its interim report. The Commission was set up by COSLA 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. Membership of the Commission can be found [here](#).

Interim Findings

The report makes it clear that that local democracy is under pressure as a result of "a fifty year trend" in centralising power and functions in Scotland. This is also as a result and a continuation of a "centralist mind set"; where bodies at all levels hang on to powers and resources rather than empower individuals and communities. The Commission highlights the following as the key implications from evidence they have received:

- Definite loss of trust and confidence and participation in democracy: disadvantaged communities that need the most representation are least able to participate.
- The link between representative and participatory democracy has become hard to bridge because of the gap between the scale of representative institutions and the community base for participation.
- Big government and big local government have struggled to address inequalities because they occur at a "granular local community level". Big systems also struggle to engage with the diversity of Scotland's communities because they are so geared to uniformity and standardisation.

The Commission suggests that to move forward:

- Scotland needs to change the way it thinks about democracy
- Strong democracy is both participatory and representative
- Services and decision making must fit communities
- Improving outcomes requires fiscal empowerment

The report focuses on democracy and delivering real change in communities rather than local government structures. It also gives a good overview of how local democracy operates elsewhere. What it also highlights is how uniform local government functions, responsibilities and electoral mechanisms are across Scotland. Many other countries operate very different mechanisms and responsibilities in place across their villages, towns and cities



POLICY BRIEFING

KEY POINTS:

- **The Commission believes that local democracy in under pressure in Scotland**
- **They believe Scotland needs a radical rethink on what local democracy means**
- **The report also states that improving outcomes requires "fiscal empowerment"**



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International Experience

Electoral mechanisms: Scotland has historically operated with councils as a model for local democracy but the picture internationally is much more varied with directly elected officials like sheriffs and district attorneys, executive politicians: mayors and commissioners and a range of directly elected assemblies and corporate bodies. As highlighted in various reports Scotland has a very low numbers locally elected representatives.

Functions and service responsibilities: the international picture remarkably mixed as to where functions and responsibilities lie for the delivery of services. Only in smaller North European states are most major functions delivered through single local governments. Generally there are tiers of government and local government itself is often tiered.

Uniformity and diversity of local government systems: Our system of local government with each council having exactly the same functions and empowerment is unusual. Internationally it is more common to have specific systems where cities have a range of powers and functions different from those for more towns and rural bodies or islands.

Fiscal empowerment: Scotland is at the low end of the international scale for local power over raising and spending money. In Scotland the figure is about 20% internationally 40-50% is more common and the most empowered can raise more than 50%. There is only one local tax in Scotland while internationally many can call on a range of taxes. Some can also raise capital through borrowing and issuing bonds.

The second section of the report looks at delivering decentralisation and empowering community governance. They focus on three core issues:

Rights and standards

Here they explore tensions round things being done differently locally and how we set standards and rights that all should be able to access regardless of where they live. Difference cannot be at the expense of fundamental rights and standards. We need a vision that sets high national standards that promote equality and human rights. These rights cannot be changed but the ways in which they are upheld should be designed in communities.

Aggregation and Sharing

This is about balancing where and how services are delivered. Aggregation works from the bottom up to find the best balance between local responsiveness and the need for economies of scale particularly round expensive assets.

Culture and values

Changing structures will not lead to change unless we change the culture. Decentralisation is often thought of as handing powers down from the top down, this must change. Local democracy must be about communities controlling the powers, functions and resources that will drive improvement.

Next Steps

This paper lays out what the commissions sees as the challenges facing local democracy in Scotland. The Commissions next steps will be generating further discussion and through that the production of a road map for change. UNISON will continue to participate in the process to ensure that the voices of those who deliver services are heard.

Action for Branches

The local government committee will be working together to further develop UNISON's position on the kind of change members would like to see and to build our campaigns to see this vision delivered. The next stage of this work is the policy forum in May.

Branches are encouraged to read the report and discuss the issues raised. This will also support local government branches in their preparation for the policy forum in May. All members can also feedback any ideas 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

UNISON Public
Works campaign

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



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