Kate Thomson-McDermott
Community Empowerment Unit
Scottish Government
Area 3H South
Victoria Quay
Edinburgh
EH6 6QQ

25th September 2012

Dear Kate,

Community Empowerment consultation response from Voluntary Action Scotland

Recently Voluntary Action Scotland (VAS) in one its network meetings for Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) asked TSI representatives to take part in an engagement exercise to set out their views on community empowerment. The following response is therefore on behalf of VAS but is informed by their experience and opinions.

Each local authority area has a TSI, invested in by the Scottish Government to support, develop and represent the third sector across community groups, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and volunteering. TSIs have a significant role to play in community planning and single outcome agreements. Whilst TSIs interest in community empowerment will go far beyond community planning and its infrastructure this is a critical area of concern for TSIs and an area where reform could contribute to greater community empowerment.

Much of the TSIs comments related to the need for public bodies to 'cede power' and respect the third sector as an equal partner and for the third sector to be sufficiently well supported in terms of resources and expertise in order to fulfil both a community engagement and representative role in decision making.

As a pre-legislative consultation the Scottish Government has in its gift the opportunity to apply fresh thinking when it comes to community empowerment and the role the third sector, and TSIs in particular, can take. VAS alongside our TSI colleagues look forward to playing a constructive role in developing that agenda in the coming months and years.

Our comments at this stage don't fall neatly into the questions the consultation asks but do fall into the following categories;

national voice local impact

1. Reforming community planning - realigning power
2. Capacity in the third sector
3. Community and third sector engagement
4. Tensions that need to be explored
5. The role of the Scottish Government

These categories suggest a great deal of work is required yet to allow civic society to engage with this debate and for Government and Parliament to be able to consider just how greater community empowerment can be delivered.

Reforming community planning – realigning power

How community planning currently works and how it should work in the future was fealt to be a vital consideration: a basic starting point to unlocking the potential for more co-decision making between public bodies and the community.   CPP boards need a greater mandate and authority to make decisions with one suggestion being that making CPP boards independent might estblish greater authority and ability to consider wider views. Beyond the status of CPP boards measures need to be developed that make it easier for partners other than the NHS and local authority, such as the voluntary sector, to take part on equal terms. A less cluttered landscape with a more simplified and accessible decision making structure could assist more equitable participation.

A cultural change in public bodies where oficials are more willing and able to 'cede power' is vital. Respecting the third sector as an equal at the decision making table is the first step to developing stronger community empowerment. Requirements need to be clarified which ensure that CPPs share information (such as minutes and forthcoming decisions) in a timely and accessible fashion so that the third sector alongside communties have time and the ability to consider issues and fulfill a role that affords a parity of esteem. Public duties could lead to such a change but whatever the mechanism developed community empowerment can only take place in an environment where communities are trusted to be part of decision making structures.

This is an area of huge importance to TSIs and one where it is fealt more development of routes to achieving these goals is required. One comment from a TSI representative summed up the challenge well;

"Don't think of people in the community as a problem or a negative. Don't patronise the capacity of the community."

Capacity in the third sector

In some regards the third sector can play a greater role. For example; the comprehensive nature of TSIs and their fit with local authority boundaries allow them a considerbale 'read-across' community concerns and the opportunity to give a view beyond any single concern. Equally though this puts a considerable responsibility on TSIs to engage with the whole community: a task for which resources are currently limited.

Community and third sector enegagement

These are different but both important when it comes to achieving greater community empowerment. Responsibility for greater community engagement can't rest alone with TSIs or any set of third sector bodies alone. TSIs and colleagues in the third sector can be an effective conduit to more and better community engagement but this responsibility needs to be shared with with CPP members to ensure timely and accessible engagement. Timely in that it needs to be at the inception of policy and not close to or after decisions have been made and accessible in that the time and expertise of the community needs to be valued, possibly by payment for time committed but more importantly by demonstrating how engagement has affected decisions. Developing a stronger partnership approach in this way could also help ensure a clearer mandate for TSIs and voluntary sector partners when asked to convey a view on behalf of local communities.

Reaching people less well engaged is important and mentoring people to take part or consideration of approaches to community enagement which are educative and deliberative could afford more people the confidence and knowledge to take part on equal terms. Such approaches suggest the possibility of reaching beyond community forums, community councils and other more established structures and in time leading to more 'community empowerment'.

Just as importantly the difference between engagement and consultation needs to be clarified in the mindset of public officials and CPPs. Consultation fatigue is now an estbalished phenomenon for the thrid sector and any forthcoming bill creates the opportunity to move to a culture which engages more than it consults. One comment summed this up well;

"Engagement is continuous – consultation is sporadic".

Tensions to be explored

The opportunity to explore tensions further before drafting legislation is important to VAS and TSIs. Who the legitimate representative of communities are and how accountaility can be secured are tensions that TSIs recognise. Where community empowerment sits alongside representative democracy, the role of community councils, the role of grass roots organisations and the role of established community voices and the capacity of each to be fully involved in decision making all need further debate and consideration. Seeking a single 'community view' is not possible and decision making structures including CPPs need a better understanding of that complexity and greater clarity on how to navigate through it. One comment summed up just one aspect of a potentialy complicated picture;

"How can the third sector be accountable for delivering single outcome agreements without the resources of 'command and control' organisations?"

TSIs are involved in helping third sector organisations to scale up their ability to provide services on behalf of the public sector and are in many cases themselves playing a major role in public policy through for example the Change Funds. A tension between recieving funding from communtiy planning partners and participating in decision making on behalf of the wider community is another area that requires exploration.

The role of the Scottish Government

Whilst localism is a principle that must be retained and is essential to ensuring that local communties and the third sector can be empowered, the Scottish Government is right in bringing forward potentially comprehensive legislation focussed on increaisng community empowerment. In so doing however it must consider how it can meanginfully require the community planning structures to work in way which is genuinely empowering. Whether this is best achieved by public duties, or what any such duties would determine, is not clear to VAS at this stage but what is clear is that community empowerment measures need to be linked to reform of community planning with which VAS is already engaged.

The opportunity to take a more joined up view of how communties can be better empowered should not be lost and to this end more work, analysis and discussion would help clarify what any bill should and shouldn't contain. The Scottish Government itself may wish to take the opportunity to conduct more thorough engagement with those less well engaged across Scotland to ask a very open question;

"how would you like to have more influence over decisions that affect your community?".