Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee:

Community Planning Inquiry

Summary of engagement event with Third Sector and community organisations

Background

On 30th January 2023, members of the Committee met online with representatives from across a range of national and community organisations. The session explored their experiences of engaging with community planning and looked in particular at the perspectives of community organisations, health organisations, Third Sector Interfaces, community member based and interface organisations and the rural and islands perspective.

The event formed part of the evidence gathering which the Committee is undertaking during its inquiry into Part 2 of the Community Empowerment Act, on Community Planning. The Act brought in changes to Community Planning, and seven years on the inquiry provides an opportunity to examine whether its ambitions are being met.

This report provides a summary of the main issues that were discussed during the event. It will help inform the Committee's inquiry and the development of its recommendations which will be put to the Scottish Government in a report in Spring 2023.

Participants discussed three particular questions:

- What has your experience been of community planning and the impact that Community Planning Partnerships have had on local areas?

- What could be done to strengthen Community Planning Partnerships?

- How can the inquiry reach the communities it needs to in order to create a properly informed view?

The summary below is structured around these three areas and draws out the key themes that emerged during discussions.

1. **What has your experience been of community planning and the impact that Community Planning Partnerships have had on local areas?**

Key themes

<u>Accessibility/equalities</u>

- Disabled people are sometimes excluded from the community planning process, for example people with learning disabilities.
- Community planning is not accessible for community groups who are asked to go to spaces they aren't comfortable in.
- Covid has improved the way that community groups can engage online with community planning.
- Place-based approaches can sometimes unintentionally increase inequalities.
- There can be practical barriers to people attending and engaging with, for example navigating the bureaucracy, accessing meeting papers, managing the IT required to join online. People need support to do this, but there's no capacity or funding available.

<u>Community involvement and awareness</u>

- The language around community planning and the amount of documentation isn't accessible.
- Communication with the wider community needs to improve.
- There is a lack of knowledge in communities and the third sector about the role and function of community planning.
- What is the role of Community Councils? Has this been downgraded due to the development of other forms of representation?
- The Act was seen as a catalyst to foster a more integrated approach and maximise funding, but was it unrealistic to expect communities to work with councils?
- Community planning seems to be more officer-led than by communities themselves.

<u>Relationships and influence</u>

- There can be an unequal distribution of power amongst community planning partners, with local people and the third sector sometimes feeling they are unheard. This varies considerably though between local authority areas
- It can seem more like 'corporate planning' rather than genuine community involvement. The system serves itself rather than being responsive to community needs.
- Community Planning should be re-named 'agency planning', and an interface in place between agencies and communities to address a democratic deficit. The Act was an attempt to join the dots between partners and sets the conditions for that to happen, but can't deliver it in reality.

- There is a lot of variability across local authority areas in their approach to community planning and engagement.
- At its worst, community planning can actually disempower communities.

Community Planning processes

- CPP processes can be convoluted, formulaic and indirect, with little scrutiny of agenda items.
- CPP structures are not always set up well to engage with the third sector or community members.
- There can be disparity about how thematic groups work, and there need to be other layers of engagement.
- There is a danger of CPPs taking one-off responses/approaches rather than a strategic approach

Resources

- There are financial pressures which mean that communities' needs are not being met.
- Busy-ness and a lack of resources means that CPPs can't deliver.

Third sector experience

- National organisations can face a challenge engaging with 32 CPPs.
- Some TSIs have stopped engaging with CPPs as their voice is being ignored.
- The third sector itself often works in silos, with funding creating a divide between them. They need to work better together across shared priorities in order to give the sector more influence and a greater voice.
- There are too many organisations in each area for CPPs to be able to engage with each, and it's impossible for TSIs to fully represent hundreds of local organisations.
- CPPs could benefit more from third sector expertise, both local and national. Expertise in community work now lies with the sector rather than local authorities and is vital to effective community planning.
- There has been a mixed experience among TSIs of the interaction with local authorities and councillors. There is generally a willingness to engage, but never enough resource to do so effectively.
- Capacity is a challenge, with small organisations competing for limited funds and struggling to engage in community planning.
- Community planning does at least give the third sector a role and a seat at the table, although it is far from perfect.
- It can be easier for the third sector to convene meetings itself rather than wait for local authorities to, though it does create a cluttered landscape.

<u>Benefits of community planning</u>

- There are opportunities to tackle prevention through community planning, for example the issue of healthy weight cuts across environmental control, school meals, access to green space, and local planning decisions.
- An example was given of a local authority supporting participatory budgeting, and voluntary sector networks meeting to identify community concerns to feed into community planning.
- The Act was a step in the right direction, and although far from perfect the position would be worse without it.
- One local authority is trialling new approaches to help build capacity in CPPs and TSIs.

<u>Locality Planning</u>

- Locality planning has been a challenge in a large geographic area like the Highlands. It's worked well at a strategic basis but on the ground is hampered by a high turnover of staff, private meetings, travel distances.

<u>In rural and islands communities:</u>

- There is limited scope to shape policies tackling inequalities, and a lack of involvement by community councils.
- There is a lack of continuity in leadership. They are usually drawn from statutory partners and often in post for a short period of time. Leaders lack the facilitation skills to lead CPPs.
- CPP priorities are not being realised in other organisations.
- The good experience of partners working well together during covid has not been maintained.
- It can be helpful with elected councillors are involved.
- Action is needed – there is consultation fatigue in identifying the problems which are already known about.

2. **What could be done to strengthen community planning?**

<u>Relationships</u>

- CPPs need to engage with communities of identity, not just focus on geographical communities
- Improved co-design with communities through participation and empowerment
- Parity of esteem between local authorities and third sector.
- There needs to be more than just a seat for the third sector at the table at CPPs; the sector needs respect and the ability to have a real influence.

- There needs to be a greater devolution of power to the lowest (community) level.

Resources and funding

- Many people highlighted that CPPs need increased funding and resources in place, in particular Community Development Workers who could help bridge the gap between the partnerships and communities.
- Funding for TSIs was also highlighted – some local authorities currently don't provide this.
- Community Planning Officers in local authorities need more capacity to provide genuine support and to enable less formal engagement. Previously Community Learning and Development teams filled that function.
- CPPs need to trust communities to spend resources wisely.
- Resources from sources other than just public funds.
- Successful income generation (eg by a local development trust) shouldn't be penalised by then barring access to other funding streams.

Communications

- Better understanding of what community wealth building means, and social enterprises.
- Ongoing engagement and consultation could be supported through multiple pathways, rather than just the formal CPP Boards.
- Honesty is needed with communities about what can or can't be achieved.

Other

- The Local Governance Review (being undertaken by Scottish Government) and development of a Community Wealth Building Act need to go hand in hand with community planning and conversations better joined up.
- Council areas can learn from each other – there are example of good practice and strong community engagement.
- CPP Officers need to be empowered to engage and involve communities.
- There needs to be a shared vision among CPP partners and communities about what empowerment and community planning is.

Access/inequalities

- There needs to be a more creative approach to hearing from the 'seldom heard' voices.
- CPP meetings need to be more user-friendly, with support provided where needed.
- Improved knowledge and understanding of equality issues and of disabled people's issue.
- There needs to be equal access to CPP discussions.
- CPPs need to go to communities, rather than vice versa.

Processes

- Too much bureaucracy in Locality Partnerships leads to lack of meaningful engagement with communities and third sector.
- Processes that aren't working should be removed or changed.
- Action Planning is a more active and positive process for communities to contribute to community planning.
- When tackling cross-cutting issues such as climate change, CPPs need to learn from the flexibility and work during the pandemic.
- There needs to be better connection from Locality Plans into CPPs.

In rural and island communities:

- Leaders need training to engage and lead CPPs, particularly in facilitation skills. A local community member could be Chair or Vice Chair.
- Meetings need to be opened up to allow more public engagement.
- CPPs should take a more strategic role, with community councils focusing on meeting local issues.

3. **How can the inquiry reach the communities it needs to in order to create a properly informed view?**

- Take the time and resource to listen to third sector organisations
- Speak to people in community-led organisations (of place and /or of identity and interest)
- Don't just speak to the people who are easy to work with.
- Go to people where they are and not expect them to come to you
- Leadership (to accept the need for changes to the system
- Provide authentic messages to everyone who is entitled to take part in a way that best supports them to do this.

Committee Clerks
Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
February 2023