

# **Advice to inform Scotland's Open Government public participation strategy**

**Based on the findings of the  
Covid Public Engagement  
Expert Advisory Group**

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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	3
Overview.....	5
Background.....	7
Challenges to delivering an improved public engagement strategy.....	8
Tensions between main governing bodies .....	8
Challenges for public compliance.....	9
Messaging and misinformation.....	10
Digital exclusion .....	10
Excluding new voices .....	11
Lack of long-term investment.....	12
Effective and proportionate engagement.....	13
Recommendation 1 .....	15
Implement existing resources and action plans .....	15
Recommendation 2 .....	16
Embed public participation and community engagement into how politics is done in Scotland.....	16
Recommendation 3 .....	17
Capabilities approach.....	17
Recommendation 4 .....	19
Implement subsidiarity in order to develop community empowerment and in the longer term community resilience.....	19
Recommendation 5 .....	20
Move away from year on year grants and develop sustainable funding streams .....	20
Recommendation 6 .....	21
Encourage collaboration, partnerships and trust between sectors.....	21
Recommendation 7 .....	23
Reduce bureaucracy not just for voluntary organisations but for local authority .....	23
Recommendation 8 .....	24
Invest in the skills necessary for the delivery of this vision .....	24
Recommendation 9 .....	25
Provide an inclusive message and communication between political actors and the people by diversifying the channels of communication .....	25
Overview of action plans.....	27
Short term.....	27
Medium Term .....	28
Long term.....	29

References .....	31
Appendix 1 .....	33

## Overview

1. **Implement existing resources and action plans and value those already working in community engagement.** Practical toolkits, action plans and standards have been designed and published: they should be actioned. Recognise the service delivery and regeneration activity stemming from the work of anchor organisations operating out with the traditional third sector and resource those organisations to implement a wider independent community development role. Employ and encourage community researchers and neighbourhood development plans.
2. **Embed public participation and community engagement into how politics is done in Scotland.** Communities are critical to the fabric of a good society, they provide opportunities for participation, and for people to have agency. Ensure that participation matters, communities need to be at the forefront of how public policy is shaped, implemented and evaluated.
3. **Capabilities approach:** Community empowerment starts with individual empowerment - this requires a long-term commitment from the Scottish Government to action their vision for change including tackling poverty and other systemic inequalities.
4. **Implement subsidiarity in order to develop community empowerment and in the longer term community resilience.** Power should be appropriately and proportionately decentralised to local authorities and communities in order to allow them to apply flexible and responsive solutions to problems experienced within their communities. Engage in direct neighbourhood work designed to stimulate new activity, enhance existing activity and create social connectedness. This will go some way to creating communities that are better equipped to survive the next crisis.
5. **Move away from year on year grants and develop sustainable funding streams:** Scale up mechanisms for community 'investment' as opposed to grants to provide stability in terms of funding and initiatives.
6. **Encourage collaboration, partnerships and trust between sectors.** Join up sectors of interest by encouraging partnerships, connections and collaborative working practices which will avoid duplication and competition, and ensure that funding can be focused beyond communities of place to include communities of interest and identity.
7. **Reduce bureaucracy** not just for voluntary organisations but for local authority too.
8. **Invest in the skills necessary for the delivery of this vision.** Provide support for building the capacity of community organisations by enhancing their

skills, organisational effectiveness, their inclusion and equalities practice, their influence over services and their participation in decision-making processes.

9. **Establish wider and better communication with the public by diversifying the channels of communication.** Include wider groups of people to be part of the message, in communities, in the media and in expert advisory groups. Take participation to communities, allow them to get involved in their terms. It doesn't all have to be formal participation for it to count.

## **Background**

In Scotland, there is an impressive narrative surrounding community empowerment, community engagement and public participation. The Covid pandemic has highlighted the value of a community response, and the need for a joined up and networked approach to tackling the crisis (South et al. 2020). In order to build resilience and wellbeing, community engagement and participation needs to be 'built into the bones' of how we do politics in Scotland. Covid has refocused attention on equalities issues and brought the issue of fairness and inclusion to the fore. The community response has been extraordinary but has been overburdened by demand.

The Scottish Government has done much to offset inequalities. They have apportioned funds (for instance, the Third Sector Resilience Fund, Scottish Welfare Fund) and set up expert groups drawing evidence and expertise from science, social science, business, economics, and many more. Bold visions have been set out, which are commendable. Yet, now is the time for action. We cannot take community responses for granted and instead, need to invest and embolden local authorities and the third sector to work alongside government to provide a more robust response to pressing social and economic issues.

Implementing and integrating a joined-up participation strategy in Scotland requires further investment into the lives of communities and people. If citizens are struggling to live, political participation will not be a priority for them. Innovative practices, such as Citizens' Assemblies (CA), Citizens' Panels and Participatory Budgeting (PB), need to be linked with local initiatives and representative processes. The media also has a role to play in publicising participatory processes and reporting what comes out of these processes.

The public needs to see that the government is not just listening but responding to calls for funding and for greater investment in community development schemes. This must be linked in the long-term to urban regeneration, social renewal and a real commitment to include citizens in the decision-making process. Citizens should be supported to shape policy, scrutinise the work of the Scottish Parliament and policy-making process, and also be involved in reviewing policy and feeding back on decisions that affect them. Further signposting must be done around action that has been taken in response to prior participation to demonstrate that public input is valued and in order to develop trust in the process. Without trust, the public is unlikely to comply with government guidelines on Covid-19 or in the event of another crisis, on matters of public health or in many other areas.

People have felt the loss of community more acutely than ever before and that the Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted how alienated people are. Limited access to green spaces and amenities, and isolation of single parents, people shielding and

vulnerable people has driven home problems of infrastructure, urban planning and underlined the need to reinvigorate communities and public ownership of goods.

Public participation, community empowerment and the development of trusting relations between the main actors is a good investment and will stand Scotland in good stead to establish a resilient foundation for coping with the pandemic. Long-term security and investment in communities will strengthen our response to future crisis.

The following report discusses public engagement in the form of information receiving, compliance with guidelines, and political and community engagement. The strategy set out is based on the findings of the Open Government's advisory working group and has been supplemented by a series of interviews with leading experts. The first section of the report discusses the main challenges to facing an improved public engagement strategy – the tensions between main governing bodies, challenges for public compliance, messaging and misinformation, digital exclusion and how certain voices are being prioritised. In the second section, nine key recommendations are introduced, with action points. Finally, short, medium and long terms goals are identified in order to achieve this action plan.

## **Challenges to delivering an improved public engagement strategy**

### Tensions between main governing bodies

The policy lexicon towards communities has been favourable in Scotland. Since around 2011 there has been enabling legislation, and participation is embedded in law and national strategies. However, this has not always been reflected in practice. The development of key skills and frontline community facing workers have not been invested in over the years, resulting in a gulf between national government policy and local government's (and communities') capacity to deliver. Community Learning and Development departments in local councils have faced significant cuts throughout the UK for the last decade. Local government has much of its identity and capacity to respond to community needs. According to Oliver Escobar:

it's a game of mutual assumptions and paralysis because local government feels squeezed from the top and squeezed from the bottom and so all these different levels of governance are blocking one another.

The little power they (local authorities) have - communities are wanting to take it from the bottom and the Scottish government keeps making impositions from the top...no minister has wanted to spend political capital on this matter for the last 10 years.

Community groups are constrained by a lack of funding, heavy loads of administration and/or lack of power over the outcomes of initiatives (Lightbody 2017).



The third sector has lost a lot of capacity – while they have strong narratives and agendas, they do not have the workers to deliver these on the ground. There has been a succession of initiatives which Fiona Garven refers to as a ‘sticking plaster’ effect over the years, often caused by funders stepping into the spaces which they can add value to.

New opportunities have been offered by Covid, but with it, different issues have been raised, as there has been some retrenchment into centralised decision making and funding. Tensions exist between short term and long term approaches and solutions. Short term requires wide scale consultation and information gathering. Long term requires wide and deep engagement including investment, deliberation, and a networked approach. In order to effectively look into challenges, there is a need for a community led data gathering, which we have seen an increase of during Covid (eg Carnegie Trust UK, Corra Foundation 2020).

### Challenges for public compliance

What has often been a ‘one size fits all’ approach to Covid guidelines has resulted in compliance being more straightforward for some than others. Challenges such as job loss, precarious employment or ability to work effectively, childcare, physical and mental health make complying with rules more problematic for some. A letter to the Scottish Government from the Lived Experience Leadership Group in Dec 2020 called for an increase of £20 to social security and increased levels of Child Benefits – ‘social security is not a nice thing to have, it’s a human right’<sup>1</sup>.

Coutts (2020: 13) tells us that, ‘A combination of fear, language barriers, and a lack of trusted intermediaries might inhibit the community accessing available support’. Signing up for Test and Protect increases the chance of being told to self-isolate which many cannot afford to do. Fear of vaccines comes from an abundance of misinformation and lack of trust of experts and politicians, it is vital that people can receive information and reassurance from people that they can relate to or view to be like them. The Scottish Government was consistently rated higher than the UK government ‘doing a good job for Scotland, ‘providing advice and information’ people could trust’ and for ‘working in Scotland’s best interest’ (ScotGov 2021) and a poll showed just 19% of Scots were satisfied with Johnson’s leadership, compared with 72% for Sturgeon and 44% for Starmer (IpsosMORI, 2020).

We have to hear from people and better understand what prevents them from complying, but this has to be done on their terms. Recognising that social and economic inequalities in Scotland have made responding to the crisis more complex

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<sup>1</sup> [SHRC Statement from the Lived Experience Leadership Group on the right to social security](#)

and more difficult for people. Most importantly, we have to be realistic and sensitive about what emboldens or enables people to comply or get involved. People who are struggling financially, mentally, or who are time-poor, simply cannot get involved.

### Messaging and misinformation

Talat Yaqoob says that she is really impressed by the government's investment in public health messages. She says it is clear what is going on, using civic messaging which is easy to understand has helped keep the public informed. The message, she feels that comes out of the daily briefings is – 'this is your parliament, this is your politics, this is your Scotland'.

Yet, the divisive nature of politics is problematic for those watching. Politics is oftentimes perceived to be adversarial and politicians agreeing or finding common ground is interpreted as being weak. The media often polarise opinion and dumb down complexity and nuance instead of taking time to move beyond surface level politics. Social media has been a breeding ground for misinformation and polarising of opinions. Important legislation and guidance need to be explained in more detail in quieter spaces (ie not FMQs), and misinformation online needs to be flagged up and appropriate sources signposted. The First Minister addressing the public helped address some of these issues (Thiers et al. 2023, Garland & Lilleker 2021).

The media has had a significant role to play within the pandemic. It is responsible for sharing the key messages – guidelines, evidence, rules - and has a responsibility to tell the truth and scrutinise public facing actors. However, mixed messages and sensationalist headlines can, and have, driven polarisation and scepticism. It is right for a critical citizenry to question politicians and political parties but 'alternative facts' are driving an alarming agenda.

Denisha Killoh highlights that people are angry and want to latch on to the facts that justify their actions and feelings. She believes that propaganda used by the media, and shared on social media, has ignited much of this anger.

### Digital exclusion

For consenting and compliance there are digital limitations – not all citizens have the digital infrastructure to sign up to test and protect for instance. It is estimated that 800, 000 people (300,000 households) were not online at the beginning of lockdown.<sup>2</sup> The Scottish Government has made considerable efforts to bridge this gap and correct this inequality by working with third and public sector organisations,

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<sup>2</sup> [How Scotland is bridging the digital divide](#)

32 local councils and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). Connecting Scotland believes they will have reached 50,000 people by the end of 2021 (Lyne 2020), which is quite a feat, but not for those that are left for 18 months without this valuable information source, the ability to communicate with others during lockdown, and access to basic necessities.

Groups like the Glasgow Disability Alliance (GDA 2020)<sup>3</sup> reached out to over 6000 disabled people through 8000 phone calls, send out 20,000 mail shots, and collect 2,100 in-depth responses to their COVID-resilience survey. This allowed them to launch a rapid response to the pandemic by listening to lived experiences and honing in on what was needed. Organisations like this need to be supported to carry out work like this. But as Fiona McHardy, from the Poverty Alliance points out, the ability to pick up and respond to social cues and body language is diminished online or via telephone. And loss of visual cues makes it difficult to identify anxieties, fear, confusion and bewilderment. Where physical settings may have once been a lifeline to individuals, they are no longer available, and to many that is a significant loss.

The Covid pandemic has enforced a 'digital-only' approach which comes with accessibility issues for those with no or limited access to the internet and related technology and those who struggle with digital literacy (the digital divide). Digital exclusion can also relate to not knowing how to navigate misinformation and feeling daunted at the prospect of knowing who to believe and trust. All of this creates barriers to inclusion which highlights the need for innovative and affordable ways to participate.

Further to this, the channels of communication used can vary between generations, on where people live and what access to technology people have. People go to trusted sources which may be national, local or community tv, radio, newspapers, on- or off-line sources.

### Excluding new voices

There are many expert groups working on different areas in different contexts and it is vital that these voices join up. Fiona Garven wonders if Scotland is too small to have this many expert groups. While it is important to consider what can be learned from each other it is also appropriate to consider if these expert groups' tasks overlap and could be streamlined. A joined-up and networked approach is required. Importantly if the government is seeking input from experts and citizens, the government needs to be bold enough to act upon their advice. Experts must also be prepared to step aside or make room in advisory groups for seldom heard or easy to

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<sup>3</sup> [Glasgow Disability Alliance: Our disabled people-led COVID response](#)

ignore groups or individuals (Lightbody 2017). Particularly at the implementation and review stage of policy making, communities and community workers can be at the forefront in order to feedback what is actually happening on the ground, as Talat Yaqoob (2020) reminds us, 'Lived experience experts are there to not only share their stories, but evaluate whether a policy or initiative is fit for purpose when the times comes for it to be implemented'. Experts can be brought back in periodically as part of the evaluation, or part of the process as an equal to those new voices.

In the past, some participatory processes or engagement exercise have been perceived to be tokenistic and ministers can be reluctant to share power with citizens (Lightbody and Escobar 2021). Furthermore, Fiona McHardy says that often these participatory initiatives do not have impact beyond the people that they involve. The government needs to recognise when not to consult or hold participatory processes – resulting in a smaller number of higher quality engagement exercises, and be prepared to listen if people are willing to engage. This collaborative way of working has to continue right through the policy cycle – as Sally Witcher warns, 'a fantastically designed policy can fall down if it's poorly delivered'.

With this, comes a need for greater accountability, legitimacy, and transparency in terms of where investment is going and what action is taken as a result of community engagement. Transparency is also required for participatory processes - people need to know who is involved, what is done with the information that is gathered and the resultant recommendations, and what impact those recommendations will have on decision making. People should be incentivised, supported and valued for taking part. Better publicising is required to ensure that the purpose and the impact are more widely felt and to ensure that 'new voices' are more inclined to get involved in the long term.

#### Lack of long-term investment

In order to foster a climate of participation and inclusion, we need to rethink how we do politics in Scotland. Community organisations are critical to the fabric of a good society, they provide opportunities for participation, and for people to have agency. Fiona Garven and Sally Witcher highlight that the people that do those jobs are tired and need to be supported and resourced. For many people working in these roles, knowing they have the resources to implement change in the long terms would allow them to plan and work strategically rather than 'lurching from year to year'.

Fiona McHardy here highlights programmes and initiatives which have been effective in the past but had limited lifespans and funding– such as civic skills training and community research. Investing in political education is a vital step in adapting Scotland towards participatory governance. Political education needs to be done

within communities – this is why investing in youth centres, youth workers, community centres and community development workers is so important.

Similarly, Denisha Killoh notes that often initiatives are funded and could be improved as they go along, rather than evaluating at the end. Being more flexible and responsive to user feedback would strengthen the initiative or policy going forward.

Fiona Garven too believes that it important to build a skill base amongst citizens, communities and service providers, and this starts to become more cost effective once that learning is there to tap into:

Unless you've got an ongoing culture of citizen participation and participatory policy making, you can't suddenly assemble when a crisis hits, it is easier to bring in expert advisory groups but I think this is one thing that we need to learn. What we need to do is build this into the bones of how we go forward and then that doesn't need to be a scramble.

A risk is created by using the wrong sort of engagement which leads to frustration, delays and disengagement, according to Sally Witcher, 'Engagement should be designed to be transformative, not performative'. More often than not, poorly designed and actioned engagement processes will actively disincentivise people from getting involved in the future.

The Scottish Government has made use of democratic innovations such as Citizen's Assemblies (CA) and Participatory Budgeting (PB). While these democratic innovations have been welcomed for the most part - the overwhelming feeling is that these need to be linked with wider forms of participation and at a local level. All experts call for investment in a Centre for Participatory Democracy or equivalent to provide consistent and ongoing research, guidance, training, standard setting and advice.

### **Effective and proportionate engagement**

Participation and engagement activities have taken place all round Scotland. Some problems worth noting were created by the Covid-19 response and not Covid itself. These include:

- Consultation fatigue which was exacerbated by online delivery.
- Exacerbated existing inequalities – digital exclusion, mental health, poverty, and lack of key resources: time, confidence, language, knowledge, information.
- Increased burden on women has resulted in many women, especially carers/parents, being unable to engage in any sort of consultative process.

- People losing jobs, in precarious work, living in poverty, childcare issues, disabled people, older people, black and minority ethnic groups unequally getting the virus but also impacted economically, socially and mentally.
- Place based grants – Coutts (2020) report that funding which is limited to particular geo-spaces means the scope of the response in some areas has been limited.
- Linking up groups undertaking similar processes/volunteers has been difficult due to the difference in language used to describe what they are doing – community action, community engagement, community development, voluntary, social action, democratic and social innovations - people do not necessarily know what these are and what they mean for them.

While there is a need to engage the public more widely in thinking about how they understand Covid, not just in terms of public health but also the wider long-term implications, much work already exists. A huge amount of data has been generated by the third sector, research centres, local government, ScotGov and community groups – the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Corra Foundation, GDA, Inclusion Scotland, Enable, the Poverty Alliance, Edinburgh Poverty Commission, Child Poverty Action Group, Carnegie Trust, Scottish Community Development Centre, Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, the WISE Centre and Engender, and this is just the tip of the iceberg. Researchers have gathered people’s lived experiences, sent out surveys, consulted, gathered and analysed. There is rich and varied sources of evidence on how peoples’ experiences of Covid and importantly, it is being told in people’s own voices<sup>4</sup>.

The Scottish Government has itself gathered 4,000 ideas and 18,000 comments (Webster 2020)<sup>5</sup> over Summer 2020. This consultation, combined and supported with what has been gathered by ‘people on the ground’ means that they the government is well prepared to co-produce and collectively work with communities to inform and feedback suitable solutions for gaps in their areas.

Participation is not always required or appropriate. Tokenistic, tick boxing exercises are to be avoided if there is not a strategy for taking the findings from that consultation or process further. There needs to be a plan and an understanding that something will come from taking part – not necessarily that everything that was recommended will be implemented, but that people’s time is valued.

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<sup>4</sup> [Corra Foundation: Community stories Articles](#) ; [Community research — together, we help](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Public discussions on COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland: Reflections from government on the challenges of digital engagement](#)

## Recommendation 1

### Implement existing resources and action plans

Clear guidelines on best practice and lessons learned have been set out by the National Standards for Community Engagement (NSfCE 2016); the Community Engagement 'How To' Guide; the Community Engagement Community Planning Toolkit; the Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement (VOiCE) online platform; Education Scotland and Learning Connections Guide on Community Learning and Development activity with equalities groups (2010); Community Engagement: A Critical guide for Practitioners (2017) and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act introduced in 2015; What Works Scotland (2017) report; Health Care Improvement Scotland's 'Engaging Differently' (2020).<sup>6</sup> Oliver Escobar believes that unlocking the potential of all these resources would be 'quite powerful'.

Efforts were made to achieve the National Standards in Scotland and examples can be seen through organisations and planned events such as the Health and Social Care Integration consultation; the Diversity and Equality Alliance; 'Our Rights, Our Voices' and many community-based projects.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is a feeling that the Scottish Government invests a significant amount of money in developing the resources but do not use them internally (Fiona Garven). There was also a feeling amongst the experts that the advice has already been given to the Scottish Government and it was time to action it.

Further, there is a need to stay abreast of good practice elsewhere. Drawing international parallels, we can learn from good practice, share resources, evidence and fund further research into participatory governance.

Weighing up the benefits of different consultation or engagement processes can and should be undertaken by experts and expert advisory groups. Public servants and local authorities can be supported to identify this for themselves. There are myriad of tools and methods from which the public can be engaged, and an ambitious strategy would be to implement a diverse 'menu' of engagement processes.

#### Action:

- Implement the guidelines and utilise the resources that are already there.

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<sup>6</sup> The guidelines can be found at the following: [Developing an engagement strategy - Participation Framework - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#) [SCDC - Community Engagement](#) [SCDC - Visioning outcomes in community engagement](#) [Community Planning Toolkit](#) [What Works Scotland - 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement – Evidence review](#); [Healthcare Improvement Scotland - Community engagement](#)

<sup>7</sup> For examples of the projects and democratic innovations in Scotland and how they are supported see: [National Standards for Community Engagement - Voice](#) [Community Development Alliance Scotland](#) [Communities Channel Scotland](#) [Participatory Budgeting Resource Hub](#) ; [Development Trusts Association Scotland](#) [Health and Social Care Alliance](#) [Scotland's Regeneration Forum](#) ; [Inclusion Scotland](#)

- Work more closely with those that are doing the job and trust that they know what they are doing.
- Action what comes out of groups like the RSE's Post Covid 19 Futures Commission group, Social Renewal Advisory Group.
- Recognise the service delivery and regeneration activity stemming from the work of anchor organisations operating out with the traditional third sector, for example, Development Trusts, Community-led Health initiatives, community-based Housing Associations, and resource those organisations to implement wider independent community development.
- Support public servants by providing them with access to the skills, tools and methods so they have capacity and confidence in all forms of engagement with stakeholders and the public.

## **Recommendation 2**

### **Embed public participation and community engagement into how politics is done in Scotland**

Engaging the public in politics requires deliberation, participation and community engagement to be embedded into the political landscape includes joining up participatory processes. Fiona Garven highlights the danger of starting processes then walking away to the next new shiny innovation, she says about PB: 'Done badly they're rubbish but done well it's a game changer'.

Political actors need to recognise that the returns from participatory processes can benefit for longer than the process itself. Talat Yaqoob reminds us that following these processes citizens often find themselves unsure what to do with their newfound skillset next. She warns that there is two ways engagement can go: participants can become engaged and go on to do other things, or become more disillusioned with the state of political participation.

Talat and others believe that we need to invest in lifelong learning in political education. Build a network of political educators, not just at time of a vote, but invest in ongoing engagement and deliberation to develop understanding, citizens that can be critical of information and curiosity within communities.

#### **Actions:**

- Government needs to encourage COSLA to mainstream cultural orientation to participative working
- Employ community workers



- Support participants of bigger participatory processes (like CA) to utilise their skills moving forward, ie in their communities, set up their own processes, or continue in a policy shaping role.
- Continue with FM (or senior politicians and key actors) daily or weekly briefings
- Enable citizens to feed into all points of the decision making – don't just consult, feed into implementation and evaluation stages too.
- Invest more in the local governance review and continuing participatory initiatives, as well as the need to rethink our system of power, finance and governance.
- Develop community support services: Community Development Services or in the formation of a Centre for Participatory Democracy in Scotland as recommended by the COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (COSLA 2014). For instance, in the past the Community Empowerment Network did this or Link up programme<sup>8</sup>
- Go into the communities in order to support people taking part. Do not expect citizens to want to or have time to get involved in formal and lengthy processes – but if they do, pay people for their time and work.
- Invest in a Centre for Participatory Democracy or equivalent to provide consistent and ongoing research, guidance, training, standard setting and advice. This would be supported by the government but is ultimately outwith their control.

### **Recommendation 3**

#### **Capabilities approach**

Scotland needs a long-term commitment to social and economic rights. Communities need to be at the forefront of public health, the economy, welfare, education and urban regeneration.

The spectrum of community engagement and community empowerment is too narrow according to experts. Oliver elaborates and explains that we need to start with individual human and social rights. Community empowerment doesn't start with a collective process, it starts with individual empowerment to be part of social life, and then you can be part of political life (see Brunner & Watson 2015).

John Beaton highlights the value that social capital and developing a reciprocal cycle can add to communities' sense of wellbeing and to help get, and keep, people involved. He highlights that often these communities are enthusiastic and committed.

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<sup>8</sup> See: [Inspiring Scotland](#)

Others warn of burnout and the burden of responsibility that lies on communities to fight for themselves and help to protect others. Denisha Killoh supports an assets-based approach, emphasising that wellbeing should be at the forefront of how we approach community empowerment in Scotland. Both John and Denisha highlight the importance of experiential experts in decision making, and the importance of empowering people to be involved, as Denisha says, 'working with and on behalf of the person, rather than doing stuff to them'.

Experts warn that communities and community organisations should not be taken advantage of, or leant on to respond to food insecurity and poverty. We need to value community responses for what we can learn from them but recognise that in the long term, voluntary responses and community action cannot be expected to stem these systemic failings. It is disingenuous to rely on charitable responses to provide basic necessities to families and communities facing hardship.

A further issue raised by Denisha Killoh of the sudden use of the term 'communities' throughout Covid may be conceived to be tokenistic. Where many individuals find themselves without community support and that is due to the isolation many people suffer in modern society. Communities are not always there to be used or tapped into, and can often be tokenistic attempts to create social capital when the infrastructure is not there, can be alienating for individuals living without connections and bonds. She highlights the need to break down barriers, ensuring that equity is felt and evident within the key players.

Part of creating an equitable society, based round wellbeing, is recognising that those involved also need supported. Often contributors and participants are asked to speak on personal and traumatising issues: as Yaqoob (2020) writes, 'Lived experience is not simply a case study, it is not simply someone sharing their trauma of inequality, of distress or discrimination to a room of people, only to be thanked and shown the exit'<sup>9</sup>. We need to ensure that they have been invited into a safe space which continues after they have given evidence, shared lived experience or taken part in deliberation. This also includes those that are supporting people on the ground. Invest in Community Development officers and workers, who are trained in their roles and equipped to deal with challenging circumstances.

Denisha Killoh calls for greater support, counselling and signposting to be adopted as part of any process where people are discussing their lived experience. Particularly ensuring that the questions are thoughtful, non-intrusive and dealt with empathetically. Fiona McHardy agrees, and highlights the support needed for those at the receiving end too. For community researchers and front facing volunteers and third sector workers, the pandemic has been traumatic. Receiving crisis calls and

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<sup>9</sup> [Ideas for Equality: Policy, Participation and Power Sharing](#)

seeing the effects the pandemic has had with limited ability to respond had taken its toll.

Further, those getting involved in participatory processes – feeding back lived experiences, community researchers, CA and PB participants- are doing more than their civic duty. This is unpaid labour which is not an incentive for getting people involved or for future participation – all the experts noted that people should be compensated for their labour, time and recognised for the development of new skills. Those most impacted by the crisis are the homeless, migrants, refugees, and those on disability or universal income, young people, single parents and if we hope to hear from these people during participatory processes or community outreach, we will need to do more to incentivise and to facilitate their involvement. Denisha Killoh too feels like we should be working with participants, experiential experts and volunteers to help them to recognise their new skills, and to showcase them through CV writing, providing references and signposting opportunities, grants, funding and how they may utilise this new skillset in employment. People will feel valued and as a result, people are less likely to become disenfranchised.

#### **Action:**

- Employ community development workers (many are already in place but pay them)
- Allocate funding for collaborative applications for community projects based on rolling out best practice
- Incentivise/pay the public to take part in participatory processes and value them when they are good enough to share their experiential knowledge and expertise
- Living wage/Universal Basic Income – recognise that to be a citizen of a country, people must have their basic needs met, at the least
- Subsidiarity (see rec. 4)
- Long-term funding (see rec. 5)
- Invest in skills training and development (see rec. 8)

#### **Recommendation 4**

##### **Implement subsidiarity in order to develop community empowerment and in the longer term community resilience**

The wider feeling from the experts is that instead of government funds bypassing local partnerships and going to desperate community organizations, there should be much more local buy-in and support for local authorities and other local public bodies to work alongside the community sector to respond.

Power should be appropriately and proportionately decentralised to local authorities and communities in order to allow them to apply flexible and responsive solutions to problems experienced within their communities. Implementation should be as local as possible (Talat Yaqoob), we need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and allow local authorities, with the third sector, to adapt as needed.

According to Oliver Escobar, real subsidiarity is connected to responsiveness but responsiveness that comes with the power to act. He believes that communities, third sector organisations, and some local authorities were empowered to act during Covid, 'the power to act was devolved defacto and the question is whether that's going to be called back or whether people will be able to keep operating in those ways'. The collective action and networked approach witnessed is not new, but the context of Covid enabled new practices to fulfil those principles.

Community groups are adept at changing priorities in response to the needs of the wider communities. Carnegie (2020) report that while initially food and medicine was required for those shielding, the community groups then needed to adapt to offer social support in terms of those living in poverty and mental health.

**Action:**

- There needs to be national investment and national strategy, but implementation should be as local as possible
- Examine where groups and local authorities have done well and let them retain the power to act
- Be bolder about decentralising power

**Recommendation 5**

**Move away from year on year grants and develop sustainable funding streams**

Recommendation 5 is strongly linked to recommendation 4 and 7. All experts highlighted the need to scale up mechanisms for community 'investment' as opposed to grants to provide stability in terms of funding and initiatives. Fiona Garven reflects, 'What would be truly innovative would be to stick with a long term vision of how to build participation into the way we do public services in Scotland' and to do this, long term funding is required. Services have been cut and the ability to organise across the public and voluntary sector has diminished due to staff restraints (Asenova and Stein 2014; Hastings et al. 2015).

A clear message is that investment in community facing roles, community development workers and groups who provide training and technical expertise is required. These vital roles help to coordinate and join communities with public sector partners, supporting communities to be effectively engaged in community development. Fiona Garven warns though, that these people should not necessarily

be employed by the state.

Much of this depends on how funds are located. In the past they tend to all have been based around outcomes associated with particular policy areas, for instance regeneration outcomes or health outcomes, but Fiona says that support for the core of the community sector to grow and develop has not been funded and this is where we see gaping holes in service provision and inability to respond to need.

National government needs to avoid 'dumping funding' but it needs to be a conversation from the ground up about where and how funding is spent. Third sectors, local organisations, communities and local authorities have to be part of strategizing round where funding is allocated.

John Beaton too says that it is vital that public authorities engage in socially-responsible public procurement by buying ethical products and services, and by using public tenders to create job opportunities, decent work, social and professional inclusion and better conditions for disabled and disadvantaged people.

#### **Action:**

- Invest funds into community empowerment and employ community workers
- An ongoing governance review will help to identify how decision-making processes and powers can be devolved much more locally to be able to then respond to local need and the people who populate those local places
- A cross party agreement on long term plans for funding plans for health, climate stability and tackling poverty
- Ensure that funding results in job creation
- Pay those who take part in labour intensive participation and deliberative processes

#### **Recommendation 6**

##### **Encourage collaboration, partnerships and trust between sectors**

Joining up sectors of interest by encouraging partnerships and collaborative working practices will avoid duplication and competition, and ensure that funding can be focused beyond communities of place to include communities of interest and identity.

Integration and coordination between governments to avoid duplication and effective use of resources. To build a common infrastructure going forward we have to prioritise a way to avoid duplicating costs, information provision, network membership, facilitation. Instead of investing in high cost experiments, we should adopt more mainstream approaches. To build on the current community and social action momentum, key messages must be amplified across sectors, making strategic

and co-ordinated links. A common approach and language must be adopted to ensure all parties understand the scope of what is taking place and how engagement activities will be used.

Local Authority responses such as that of Renfrewshire offered a 'super service', drafting staff from other areas into help with humanitarian effort. This service redesign meant that those answering the phone could adapt to the needs of those calling, speaking to them, referring them across services which included community hubs. A similar response was taken up by Three Towns Community Hub, in North Ayrshire. Councils were viewed as responsive, knew their community better and provided a better service. Following the immediate crisis, staff were relocated to test and protect services and strategic and business recovery. This creates a closer network within community development where Local Authorities and council staff are visible and reportedly more fulfilled by their role at work (Coutts 2020: 19). Coutts (2020:30) says 'It highlights again how siloed our public sector is and how we could achieve so much more if performance management, operating incentives, and career reward structures were altered to support partnership working'.

We have to build those local trust relationships as well as working relationships: 'Once we've got those systems in place you then just call on them to help you through whatever the next crisis is, as opposed to trying to invent them on the hoof' (Fiona Garven). It is important to note that while some local partnerships were strong and relationships were good, and there was exemplary community action and response, in other areas the response was weak, and communities will have suffered as a result.

Further work in collaboration needs to be done with the public. It is time to think of citizens as partners or power-sharers in political decision making and to demonstrate the Scottish Government's commitment to listening to the public through an effective feedback loop on a fast progressing public policy issue. As Stephen Reicher rightly comments– 'Government's ability to listen to the public is a form of strength and crucial to good leadership'.

Following a two-pronged engagement process that engages citizens quickly and effectively but set longer term more reflective groups that can think longer term. When it comes to long-term input from citizens on crisis management and planning, citizens need to work closely with experts and policy makers to ensure that their inputs are valued, but similarly so that decisions made by the government are accepted and adhered to: 'ask citizens to work closely with experts and policy makers, as equals rather than add-ons - and as collaborators of long-term planning' (Lightbody 2020). Those engaging need to see themselves in what is produced as a consequence of their engagement.

## Action

- Link volunteer and community groups on the ground who can identify and draw together various community action groups or hubs who are doing things<sup>10</sup>
- Join partners together, signpost where resources are, institutionalise this response to all councils and LA so in the crisis, this response can happen faster and across all regions.
- Make sure the information already acquired by various third sectors, local authorities and community workers is pooled and applied to an action plan.
- Pay community workers, community researchers and members of the public who are dedicating their time to increase learning and knowledge
- Bring members of the public and community responders into decision making through expert groups, participatory and deliberative processes, and evaluation processes to review Covid response.

## Recommendation 7

### **Reduce bureaucracy not just for voluntary organisations but for local authority**

With less funding available and more competition for funding bids, having the knowledge or expertise to apply for funding or knowing what funding is available is challenging.

Those in the third sector who may have previously been competing for funding have had to work together as part of the Covid response. Joined up responses have been most effective. This has led to stronger bonds between local authorities and the third sector, including the community hubs set up in response to emergency needs across localities. For instance, Inspiring Scotland's Link Up programme report that they were able to persuade local authorities to let communities undertake some roles, 'forgoing bureaucracy and red tape' in favour of trusting communities thus freeing staff up for other things.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore:

Local authorities were (and are) concerned to support local businesses and we heard that many were able to deliver grants to business in a matter of days or weeks, whereas generally it would have taken months. One area talked about how existing good relationships between the Chamber of Commerce, the town and local authority meant the latter released the £10,000 and £25,000 Small Business Grant Fund payments to local businesses prior to the money reaching the council from the Treasury (Coutts 2020: 22).

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<sup>10</sup> [Together We Help - Community Research](#)

<sup>11</sup> For more about Link Up in Scotland see [Inspiring Scotland](#)

This was not the case all over Scotland however.

According to John Beaton the bureaucratic landscape of participatory democracy is quite crowded now, Community Partnerships, Locality Groups, Local Place Plans (all from different pieces of legislation). He believes that participation should alleviate this problem. For instance, the SCDC's Community Channel online helps the public navigate it.

**Action:**

- Consider where barriers were removed from local authorities and community groups and decide whether it is necessary to reintroduce them.
- Reduce bureaucratic form filling and replication
- Signpost where help and training is available
- Trust people to do their jobs and actively encourage and facilitate partnerships between local authorities, third sectors and communities

**Recommendation 8**

**Invest in the skills necessary for the delivery of this vision**

Capacity and skills building are required at all levels to ensure that opportunities available to communities can be made use of. Learning and training around facilitation techniques needs to be supported outside of government.

Support and training should also be available for organisers and facilitators who play a crucial role in driving, shaping and supporting community processes. The skillset facilitators need has widened beyond steering participation and chairing meetings to encompass different approaches to collaboration and interaction (see Bynner et al. 2017; Escobar 2011). Facilitators in formal process are inherent to creating equitable and inclusive experience. They need to support those sharing personal experiences, draw out those more reticent to getting involved and ensure that participants understand and feel part of the process.

Talat Yaqoob would like to see people becoming engaged in what is happening in Parliament in different ways, and as a consequence, becoming critically aware 'politics is theirs to own' but also develop an anti-fake news population that are able to recognise misinformation. Fiona McHardy too is concerned about the spread of misinformation and lack of trust in scientific evidence. The anti-expert agenda is finding its feet during Covid as people struggle to align guidelines with their lives.

Developing critical skills that allow people to review evidence, recognise false information and become politically savvy citizens along with setting higher standards for the media to do a better job of reporting news and political actors to speak a language that people understand. Again, here Fiona McHardy emphasises the need



for jargon busting, policy learning, and political education. Such schemes and initiatives cost money but as Fiona Garven says, it builds a skill base which starts to become more cost effective after a while because you've got learning and critical skills in the public and in communities.

**Action:**

- provide training for civil servants and local authorities about what form of participation is appropriate, how to work with communities and join up various organisations
- provide training and signposting for community responders to develop the skills they already have by linking up their findings with the right resources and able to feed into a wider strategy
- a Scottish Centre of Participatory Governance which oversees and provides this form of training and support would be entirely appropriate. Countries like Denmark, Belgium and France invest in participatory skills in these ways.

**Recommendation 9**

**Provide an inclusive message and communication between political actors and the people by diversifying the channels of communication**

Recognising that communities don't just refer to geographical places so place based solutions do not always work. This requires us to think more widely about communities of interest and identity, and action those community leaders and influencers. A geo-spatial approach to participation can miss disaggregated data, and affect the results.

Democratic innovations can accommodate the inclusion of different groups of communities. Organisers can use sortition to get random or stratified samples of a geographical community; but organisers can also use targeted groups to get together people from communities of interest or communities of identity. Successful community engagement projects can be witnessed when a particular section of society is chosen to take part, rather than the wider population. For instance, using a stratified selection process to include young, senior or LGBT+ groups (see Lightbody 2017: 18 and refs therein). Yet these processes will not work for everyone. They take time, are often held at the weekend and as they are not commonly used are still intimidatingly unfamiliar. We need to continue to be innovative but ensure that we look closely at community led participation, held close to home and able to adapted between locales and different types of communities.

Digital participation is convenient and can overcome barriers from disabilities, child care, travel, space/time while being cost effective for organisers. It can be considered a safe space as people can communicate ideas anonymously and test

out ideas and suggestions without feeling vulnerable. It can improve transparency and responsiveness and can work at any point of the decision-making process, accounting for levels of power sharing – consultation, involvement, collaboration and co-production. But we must recognise that digital involvement does not provide safe spaces for all people, especially women. The very anonymity that encourages some people to get involved is the very reason that some people are able to dominate and intimidate.

A recommendation from What Works Scotland's (2017) report called for creating spaces where young people can go and interact with friends but also other groups of people (the police, third sector workers, youth workers). This can foster feelings of mutual respect and empower young people to shape their futures and communities while harnessing tools and skills which will benefit them in life (Lightbody and Escobar 2021). People need to see themselves in the people providing information and guidance which will increase trust.

Do not expect all citizens to enter formal processes. For some, it is just not practical, for others it is intimidating.

Participation needs to go to the people. Do it on their terms and recognise that those living in the most vulnerable or precarious positions cannot engage – create a society where they can. An important message from Fiona McHardy is the need for political actors (politicians, civil servants, councillors) to be visible in communities. Not just as a visit, but to go there, experience them, working within them: 'if you want to understand communities, be in communities'. Here, a better understanding of what the community's needs are will arise and help to reiterate that political actors are not so far removed from citizens.

If Scotland wishes to push itself beyond rhetoric, moving from the performative to transformative action, we must look to provide long-term and inclusive delivery of services. Transitioning to a just society which is prepared to develop a wellbeing economy and centre social justice at the very heart of our society. For long-term planning and big spending development such as infrastructure – new National Care Service, future of health, climate agenda – the government needs to ensure that local solutions are possible, but in doing so we don't develop a postcode lottery approach. Recognising where the need is and who should be involved could help to identify the government's role in participation to deliver these policies.

**Action:**

- Provide translational services
- Mix up recruitment methods for informal process and sampling methods for more formal processes
- Simplify policy language and reduce jargon

- Organisation such as Pass the Mic should be operationalised at all levels. A localised expert lists, hyper local lists, interest groups, which signposts people they can talk to if they need to find out more. Highlight people in communities who can help people unpack information or help them to get involved.
- Use the channels appropriate for specific locales – ie local radio, newspapers, social media platform, community centres, community groups to spread the word. People in that area can help to identify what to use.
- Determine which decisions are to be made by government and where there is a need for public input.

### **Overview of action plans**

Here we set out an action plan in the short, medium and long-term. For these things to happen there needs to be a concerted effort within government to recognise the needs of citizens and to drive the policy forward with senior acknowledgement and commitment, as well as investment. It cannot continue to be done on an ad-hoc basis, it is currently clear that there is little collaboration or consistent support.

#### Short term

- Review existing data and evidence, ensure that it is easily accessible and practice transparency as a matter of course.
- Close feedback loop participation, go back to communities and highlight what impact their participation has had, to keep them involved and show their value.
- Create specific interface points for small community groups / leaders to be able to feed in what they are hearing about concerns for compliance or non-compliant behaviour patterns to help inform policy and messaging, including communities of interest and identity.
- Build on what is already underway by plugging into existing community networks (for example disability networks, faith groups, migrant support groups etc) who are already finding ways to keep discussions open with their members to host these conversations.
- Ask community representatives and networks to facilitate a conversation and highlight important information.
- Simplify policy language.
- Ensure public know there will be no negative outcomes of asking for help, for example refugee or asylum seekers without residency, who are often unwilling to give their address to any organisation and therefore aren't eligible for government and non-government help and support.

- Include people from diverse backgrounds in the debate on TV, radio and in publications so that communities feel represented and build trust
- Ask veterans of engagement about the results of their efforts. Use the feedback to build evaluation criteria in the engagement process, to learn from the engagements and inform subsequent participation, and achieve better outcomes in the communities.
- Consider where barriers were removed from local authorities and community groups and decide whether it is necessary to reintroduce them.

### Medium Term

- Reimagine what 'good' participation looks like. Not everyone has time to commit to CAs, PB and consultation. Participation needs to go to the people. Do it on their terms and recognise that those living in the most vulnerable or precarious positions cannot engage – create a society where they can.
- Those developing policy, need to be well versed and trained in effective and accessible participation methods – that are tailored to communities
- Create a network of places where engagement happens to emphasise the place-based approach in a systemic way. But:
  - Build the capacity for meaningful engagement by supporting communities that are already organised. Communities support other communities - horizontal rather than vertical. Peer to peer, horizontal and transferable learning. Shifting community participation and public engagement.
  - Funding requires control from the locale, the needs and the best ways to get resources to people differs and therefore need different approaches depending on transport links, population, community. Co-create solutions with these groups.
- Local authorities should share good practice, especially effective partnerships and coproduction.
- Do not take advantage of communities and volunteers, where it is possible, provide payment and incentives. Ensure funding opportunities create jobs.
- Signposts how participants can use their skills moving forward, ie in their communities, set up their own processes, or continue in a policy shaping role.

## Long term

- Articulate a vision for where Scotland will be in 5 - 10 years in the Programme for Government and explore the steps to get there; the points where blocks need to be removed; who needs buy in at different points in the trajectory; key places to input; and the success criteria.
- Invest in a Centre for Participatory Democracy or equivalent to provide consistent and ongoing research, guidance, training, standard setting and advice. This would be supported by the government but is ultimately outwith their control.
- Embed participatory and engagement processes. Work with media and other information outlets to ensure that wider population understand purpose, format and responsibilities of members.
- Foster genuine partnerships and make it easier for these partnerships to be set up and maintained, encourage it through funding applications – including partnerships between volunteers and public sector, they can complement one another rather than replace.
- Relinquish control from the centre: trust the public, third sector and local authorities to do more. It is more flexible and responsive from there.
- An ongoing governance review will help to identify how decision-making processes and powers can be devolved much more locally to be able to then respond to local need and the people who populate those local places
- Increase funding for local and hyperlocal groups so that they can continue to do the work they have done during the crisis. They will then be well placed when the next crisis hits.
- Greater training and development in running/commissioning participation and engagement exercises for policy makers would result in higher quality engagement.
- Investing in long-term funding, high quality training for community development and ensuring that information from the participatory processes reaches parliament and government.
- Articulate and publish an exit plan for dealing with the mental health pandemic which is an inevitable consequence of this pandemic.
- A cross party agreement on long term plans for funding plans for health, climate stability and tackling poverty

- Wider conversations have to be had around 4-day weeks and Universal Basic Income in order to carve out the type of society which we are calling for. Trust is created in a society where people can live and work in a dignified and fair way.

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## Appendix 1

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- Angus Hardie, Scottish Community Alliance
- Anthony Zacharzewski, Democratic Society
- Talat Yaqoob, Independent expert
- Erica Reid, Independent expert
- Diarmaid Lawlor, Scottish Futures Trust
- Nasar Meer, Edinburgh University
- John Beaton, Inclusion Scotland

Chair - Professor Stephen Reicher

For more information, please see: <https://www.gov.scot/groups/coronavirus-covid-19-public-engagement-expert-advisory-group/>



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