

The Highland Council

15th December 2016

Agenda Item	3
Report No	HC/51/16

Commission on Highland Democracy - Update

Report by Acting Head of Policy

Summary

This paper provides an update on the progress of the Commission on Highland Democracy. A progress report has been prepared by the Chair of the Commission, Appendix 1.

1. Background

1.1 The Highland Council took a keen interest in the work of the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy and the report it published in 2014. Members are also aware that our survey results show that there is an appetite from people across the Highlands to be more involved in democratic and decision making processes. But also that that few people in the region feel that they are involved in how the Council spends its money, or feel that they have influence over decision making in their local area. In the Council's programme, "Highland First", the Council has committed to:

Strengthening Local Democracy

- We will be at the forefront in Scotland of bringing democracy closer to our communities.
- We will create new and better ways of involving communities in decisions affecting them.
- We will deliver new arrangements to deliver decentralised local decision making, prior to the Local Government elections in 2017.

1.2 At the Council meeting on 10th March 2016, Members were advised of proposals to establish an independent Commission on Highland Democracy. Following this, Group Leaders met with the proposed Chair, Rory Mair, to consider the issues associated with a commission. It was agreed that further progress should be reported back to the Council.

1.3 An update report was presented to Highland Council on 8th September and detailed progress to establish a Commission on Highland Democracy. This highlighted how Commissioners had been identified, the timescales the Commission expected to operate over, and the methods it intended to use.

1.4 An update report has been prepared by the Chair of the Commission on the progress of the Commission on Highland Democracy, Appendix 1. The Chair will be in attendance to present the report and answer any questions.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the progress of the Commission on Highland Democracy.

Stephen Carr, Principal Policy Officer, 30th November 2016.

Appendix 1
The Commission on Highland Democracy

Progress Report – December 2016

Rory Mair



Summary

This progress report summarises the work to date by the independent Commission on Highland Democracy. It will be accompanied by a verbal update to the Highland Council on the 15th December 2016 by the Chair of the Commission.

Information on the work of the Commission can be found on its website or through Twitter, and people can respond to the Call for Evidence at the link below.

Website: www.highlanddemocracy.wordpress.com

Twitter: [@Highland_Dem](https://twitter.com/Highland_Dem)

Call for Evidence: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/2YZ788R

1. The Commission on Highland Democracy

- 1.1 The job of the Commission is to find out how local people want to be involved in decisions and services that directly affect their lives and their communities.
- 1.2 People were asked to be part of the Commission who have the skills to ensure that the Commission is able to understand and interpret the wishes of the people of the Highlands. Commissioners are expected to bring their perspective to the process; scrutinise evidence; listen to the will of Highland communities; and challenge the current state of democracy in the Highlands.
- 1.3 The people on the Commission are:

Rory Mair	Retired Chief Executive of COSLA, Chair of the Commission
Peter Peacock	Former Leader and Convener of the Highland Council and Labour MSP for the Highlands and Islands
Mhairi Wylie	Chief Officer at the Highland Third Sector Interface
Andrew Thin	Chairman of Scottish Canals and non-Executive Director, Scottish Government
Calum MacIennan	Highland Youth Convener
Sheila Fletcher	Community Transport Association
Philomena de Lima	Director of the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, UHI-Inverness College
Ian Ross	Chair of Scottish Natural Heritage
Sarah Bruce	North News Editor, Aberdeen Journals
Cllr Margaret Davidson	Leader of the Highland Council and Independent

	Group Leader
Cllr Isobel McCallum	Convener of the Highland Council, Independent Group
Cllr Richard Laird	Depute Leader of the SNP Group
Cllr David Alston	Lib Dem Group, and Chair of NHS Highland Board
Cllr Deirdre MacKay	Labour Group
Cllr Thomas MacLennan	Highland Alliance Group

1.4 The Commission met for the first time in September 2016, and has met three times to determine the focus of the Commission's work, to start to identify its methods, and to discuss and analyse evidence that has been collected.

1.5 The Commission believes that to have strong local democracy in the Highlands four things are needed, and this is the basis of current evidence gathering:

1. People are well represented through the local democratic process.
2. The process of how decisions are made by those who have been elected is clear.
3. Communities and individuals should be able to influence these decisions.
4. Communities should be able to make local decisions for themselves.

2. Call for Evidence

2.1 One of the main ways the Commission is looking to collect people's views on local democracy in the Highlands is through the Call for Evidence, Appendix A. This was made public in November and is available on-line at:
www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/2YZ788R

The Call for Evidence contains 8 questions which are designed to help people to say the things they want to say and to allow the Commission to spot and interpret any common themes that arise.

2.2 The Call for Evidence has been promoted through a variety of networks to date, including a Council press release, targeted marketing on social media, contacting community councils and community newsletters, and through a variety of networks by Commissioners.

2.3 There has been a good response rate to the Call for Evidence, with over two hundred response received in the first fortnight of it being public. On the 1 December 2016, a total of 445 written responses had been received.

3. Public Meetings

3.1 The Commission intends to host and attend a series of geographic and thematic meetings. To have legitimacy, the Commission needs to be able to demonstrate that it is collecting evidence from across the Highlands. To ensure good attendance the events will need to be well timed, well promoted, and local networks and advocates used.

- 3.2 The Commission are trying to partner with as many existing events as possible. This will help to ensure events have a good turnout, but also allow the Commission to meet with people who otherwise might not engage with their work.
- 3.3 In 2017, the Commission is also considering having local focus group meetings across the Highlands. People will be invited to attend these meetings who are part of the Council's Citizen's Panel.
- 3.4 So far, the Commission have attended nine events:

Event name	Location	Date
Redesigning for Community Action	Smithton	11/11/2016
Lochaber Partnership Marketplace	Arisaig	22/11/2016
Meeting with Tain Community Cllrs	Tain	24/11/2016
Inverness Youth Conference	Culloden	27/11/2016
Caithness Youth Conference	Wick	30/11/2016
Nairn, Badenoch, and Strathspey Youth Conf.	Aviemore	02/12/2016
Lochaber Youth Conference	Fort William	06/12/2016
Ross and Cromarty Youth Conference	Alness	07/12/2016
Portree and Plockton Youth Conference	Broadford	07/12/2016

- 3.5 The Commission also intends to invite expert witnesses to give evidence. This may include people, groups, or organisations with particular expertise from across Highland and Scotland.

4. Linking with Similar Work

- 4.1 Since the launch of the Commission, many other similar pieces of work have emerged across Scotland and the Highlands. This includes:
- Electoral Reform Society Scotland – Our Democracy. Act as if we own the place
 - Inclusion Scotland – Our Voices, Our Choices
 - Commission on Parliamentary Reform

The Commission is speaking with these organisations to understand whether there would be any collaborative benefit to working together.

5. Arising Themes and Future Work

- 5.1 The Commission has already started to collect a large volume of evidence as set out in this report. Looking at this growing body of evidence, themes are starting to arise from the work of the Commission. These will be presented verbally by the Chair of the Commission at a meeting of the Highland Council on the 15th December 2016.
- 5.2 The Commission will continue to collect the views and opinions of people across the Highlands through the call for evidence, public meetings, and expert witnesses. The Commission intends to publish an interim report of its initial findings in March 2017. It will then publish its final report following Local Government elections in 2017.

Appendix A: Call for Evidence

The Highland Council, like every other Council in Scotland, makes daily decisions about everything from home care to bin collections and from building schools to cutting grass. But are they making these decisions in the right way for you or might you be making them instead?

We believe that people's lives are better when they have more control over decisions which affect them. We want your views about what happens now, and what the future of democracy in the Highlands might be.

The job of the Commission on Highland Democracy is to find out how local people want to be involved in decisions and services that directly affect their lives and their communities. We believe we should not even start our work without asking local people what you think of this issue and how we should move forward. We hope your answers will direct our work and tell us what problems, if any, you want to get sorted.

The 8 questions we are asking are designed to help you to say the things you want to say and to allow the commission to easily spot and interpret any common themes that your answers contain. However, if the questions are not helpful and you want to say something quite different, please tell us anyway, as we promise that every response will be taken into account as we move forward.

In the Highlands, decisions are made based on democratic processes. We believe that to have strong local democracy in the Highlands four things are needed:

1. People are well represented through the local democratic process.
2. The process of how decisions are made by those who have been elected is clear.
3. Communities and individuals should be able to influence these decisions.
4. Communities should be able to make local decisions for themselves.

Q1. Do you agree with the comments above?

Q2. How do you feel about the current state of local democracy in the Highlands?

Q3. Is it clear how decisions that affect you have been taken?

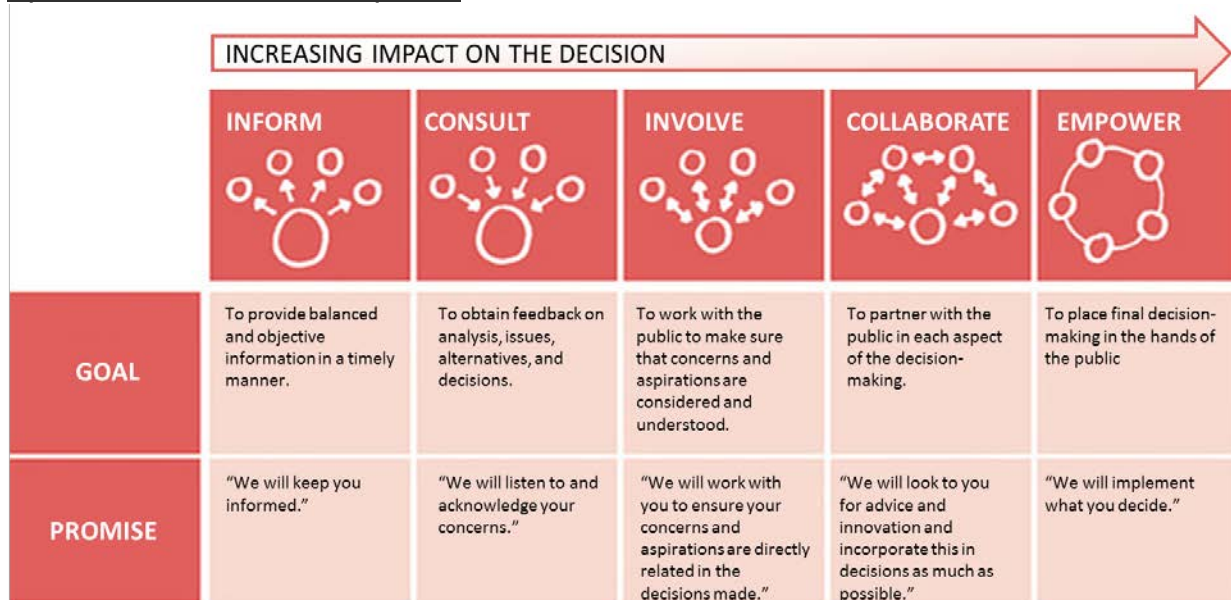
Q4. Once you have elected a representative (Councillor, MSP, MP etc), do you think they should be expected to make decisions on your behalf without any further consultation?

Q5. Do you want to be more involved in local decision making? And if so, what would help you to do this?

We have included a diagram on the “spectrum of public participation”. This gives a range of options for how public bodies (such as the Council) and communities work together to reach decisions.

We feel that all these approaches have value in different circumstances. Looking at this diagram, and thinking about decision making in the Highlands please answer the questions that follow.

Spectrum of Public Participation



Source: International Association for Public Participation. www.iap2.org.uk

Q6. How do you feel about the ways in which the decisions that affect your community are made at present?

Q7. In the future, how would you like decisions to be made in your community?

Q8. What do you feel would need to happen to improve the current processes of decision making in your community?

Thank you for taking the time to respond to our questions. We may want to contact you in the future to discuss some of the things that you have raised. If you would be happy to speak about these in more detail please fill out your contact details.

Your response will count just as much whether you provide contact details or not. We guarantee that any information that we receive from you will be treated in the strictest of confidence and will not be used for any purposes other than the work of the Commission.

Q9. Name

Q10. Email address

Q11. Contact telephone number