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| Highland Community Planning Partnership | Agenda Item | 5. |
| Chief Officers’ Group (COG) 2.2.17 | Report No | COG  02/17 |

## **Supporting more community action**

### **Report by Head of Policy and Reform, Highland Council**

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| **1.** | **Background** |
| 1.1 | At its meetings in May and August 2016 the COG provided views to inform the work underway to redesign Highland Council. It also attended and supported the event with community bodies in November on ‘Redesign for Community Action’. This report shares the feedback from that event with the COG for a discussion on how best to co-design our best possible future in community action and community planning. |
| **2.** | **Our common concern** |
| 2.1 | In several meetings of the COG the infrastructure needed to support more community action and community-run services has been raised. The COG has developed some new approaches, for example supporting partners in our response to our new legal duties around community engagement (participation requests, asset transfers), sharing the Council’s learning from participatory budgeting and in the development of new local community partnerships. |
| 2.2 | The event held with community bodies in November, which tested out some ideas from community bodies provided in August, offers another perspective and further ideas on how we can improve the infrastructure to support more community action and community-run services. The event was organised and facilitated very well by our Highland Third Sector Interface. The report from the event can be accessed on the HTSI website <http://www.highlandtsi.org.uk/uploads/1/8/4/9/18493820/final_wrap_up_report_11_11_16.pdf> Participants (over 90) fed back overall that they found the event to be well planned, thought provoking, informative, interesting and thoughtful. |
| 2.3 | Feedback from the event to the Redesign Board and to the Council meeting in December included:   * the context for seeking more community action (included in presentations on the day); * analysis of the key themes emerging from the conversations around the tables with community bodies; * a description of the most supported ideas.   This is attached at Appendix 1. |
| **3.** | **Our opportunities** |
| 3.1 | The event feedback is not of interest solely to the Council; much of it is pertinent to partners and to the CPP. Two aspects are highlighted for discussion with this meeting of the COG:   1. How to take forward the idea most supported by community bodies of a Community Gateway as a single point of contact to support more community action – its purpose and issues around it are included in pages 8 and 9; 2. Further work on getting the local community partnerships off to the right start, with a proposal of support offered. |
| 3.1 | A Community Gateway  It might be helpful for the COG to reflect on:   * How they felt about the event and what, if anything changed for them?   *Those who were unable to attend could speak to staff attending from their organisation or form some views based on the report from the event and the appendix attached.*   * What is it that we (individually and collectively) haven’t managed to do so far in supporting more community action? * How could a Community Gateway help create the best possibility for community action in the Highlands? * How might each partner and the partnership benefit from a Community Gateway in the Highlands? * To turn the listening into action, what change is needed? * How can we take this forward together? * What is our individual role? * Who can help us?   The COG might want to reflect on these questions in one group or in smaller groups and then feedback to the whole group. |
| 3.2 | Local community partnerships  The COG has developed the idea of the new local community partnerships, clarified what they should produce and identified who from their organisations can participate. How the partnerships develop, the approaches they take and who else they involve will all influence their effectiveness. Supporting the partnerships, adjusting to them in the CPP and the impact they have on our organisations are all no doubt topical issues. Having the right behaviours across everyone involved in community planning and shifting the balance of power were raised as important issues by the community bodies at the event. |
| 3.3 | An opportunity exists to bring the local partnerships and the COG together in a facilitated session. This could not only share thinking and issues at an important time for the partnerships and the COG but also offer new ways of working through the changes that are required and the new demands that are placed on us all in leading that change in uncertain times. |
| 3.4 | The Scottish Government, through the Scottish Leaders Forum has supported a range of staff from public, private and community bodies to learn about a change programme called [U.Lab](https://www.edx.org/course/u-lab-leading-emerging-future-mitx-15-671-1x) developed by the MIT. Some staff in Highland have been able to take part in the programme. The most recent event was held in Glasgow in December 2016 where participants were able to explore their own change context and challenges, and to develop new insights and practices in response.  It was action-focussed.  Both delegates from Highland found the programme helpful and left with a fresh perspective and understanding of practical next steps towards the change they identified was needed. Both were keen to see how others might benefit from the programme. The practice promoted is collaborative, personal, thoughtful and offers a supported and positive way to deal with the difficult issues we face in public service. |
| 3.5 | An offer is made by the Government to support such an event in Highland. An audience finding this helpful could be the staff involved in the COG and in the local partnerships. There is a possibility of running a 2 day event, with the involvement of the MIT and their Associates and key Scottish Government staff at the end of April (week beginning the 24th April) or early May (2nd and 3rd) before the Council elections. It could be a residential event for all attending or for those travelling far.  The COG is asked to consider their interest in this offer, the timing of it and how far any invite could reach. |

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| **4. Recommendation** COG is asked to:   * consider the feedback from the event on supporting more community action; * deliberate on how we could take forward the most supported idea of a Community Gateway; * respond positively to the Government’s offer of supporting a U.Lab event in Highland as a way of supporting the changes in the CPP, especially the emerging local community partnerships; * consider the practical arrangements of holding such an event e.g. the participants to invite, timing and residential requirements. |

Carron McDiarmid 25.1.17

**Appendix 1**

**Redesign for Community Action – Engagement Event, November 2016**

**Context**

**Council Redesign**

The redesign statement makes direct references to community action:

* ‘We will champion and support our people to take shared responsibility for the wellbeing and development of the places in which they live and work.’
* We will adapt to your changing needs with less funding. We promise to
  + Free up staff to work boldly and imaginatively with you and other bodies to find new ways of running services locally
  + Help people to help each other, with new ways of supporting community groups and bodies

It also makes another reference that could affect community action:

* ‘The whole Council will work together to remove obstruction and delay from our processes, streamlining decision-making and promoting opportunities.’

**Council affordability**

Since 2010/11 savings totalling £135m have been made (£39m in this year). Reduction in grant is expected in 2017/18 and for the medium term, with uncertainty going forward.

**Government requirements**

* Community Empowerment Act 2015 - new duties in force from end Jan 2017
  + Broaden involvement of community bodies in community planning
  + Support ownership of assets (including assets in use by public bodies)
  + More involvement of the public in decision-making – in resource allocation, new participation requests and consulting on common good funds
* Decentralisation Bill- ‘In 2016-17 the Govt. will introduce a Bill that will decentralise local authority functions, budgets and democratise oversight to local communities.’

**Community feedback**

Citizens’ Panel feedback means we know we have high levels of volunteering. In 2016 we asked new questions on involving and developing communities.

* 53% are involved in one or more community activities and/or organisations
* 62% are interested to some or a great extent in being involved in discussions about developing or improving their communities
* Favoured ways of having these discussions are (in order): informal discussion with local people; through existing groups; in online forums; and focus groups.
* 50% agree that their community could become more involved in providing the services they and their community need (only 12% disagreed, with 38% saying neither agree nor disagree)
* 55% are interested to some or a great extent in being involved in the delivery of services their communities need
* Community was most often described as a place (my village, my street/immediate neighbourhood, my town, Highland) although other types of community were also identified and related to age, club member, faith or other description.

**Feedback from community groups**

Discussions with 14 groups 23.8.16

In addition to generating 8 ideas on how to support community action, the groups fed back that:

* Community-run services work well because they are local, personal, driven, engaging and flexible
* They can reach parts the Council can’t
* Some form of Council support is still required – and where that happens now it is really appreciated
* Sometimes the Council makes it harder for community groups to get things done, often unwittingly we have obstacles in our processes, long timescales and in our decisions; other times attitudes in some services don’t help.

Engagement event 11.11.16

Over 90 delegates attended the event on 11.1.16. It was a productive day, sense checking the 8 ideas generated above and many positive comments have been received about the event. The output from the day is published by the Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI).

**Key themes and ideas**

**For community action to thrive, the feedback shows that we need:**

1. **The right supports in place**

* The most favoured option was a Community Gateway as a single point of contact to help community bodies. Its purpose and scope were confirmed but there is less agreement on what it should look like and who should be involved and lead. Building on what is there already was suggested.
* Access to expertise in the Council to help with more complicated business.
* Easy access to small grants to allow groups to move more quickly.

1. **Willing and able people in communities seeking to make a difference, caring about their communities and neighbours**
2. **Helpful behaviours across public bodies and community bodies**

* Positive attitudes about community organisations. This includes better listening across public and community bodies and building more trusting relations

1. **A shift in the balance of power**

* Getting the new community partnerships off to the right start

Full analysis of the feedback is provided below.

**What does the environment need to look like for community action to thrive?**

When posed this question, delegates at 12 separate tables identified over 140 features. They fed these back on jigsaw pieces which were then joined up to create the whole picture. Four common themes emerged from this activity; having the right supports, essential community characteristics, helpful behaviours and shifting the balance of power. These are described below.

1. **Having the right supports in place.** These are described below.
   * Knowing what other communities were doing was seen as important, so sharing that information and learning from it was seen to be a good support and inspirational. Others thought that it was important to learn from local experience too, reflecting on what had happened and evaluating it.
   * Understanding what was needed in a community was seen to be important and delegates highlighted that there could be different views about this. Differences across perceived needs, understanding the needs of others and reaching a common understanding of what is needed were mentioned. Support with resolving conflicts was noted too.
   * Knowing the right person to help and provide advice was identified across a number of groups. This included people who ‘knew the system’ and are able to offer guidance.
   * Access to funding was another common theme.
   * Having a focus for the community with a clear vision backed by plans to see them through was identified.
   * Getting organised locally was seen as important – whether that was about community leadership or about co-ordinating volunteers, connecting people with their community and community volunteers within it.
   * Seeing community action making a difference, celebrating it and finding it rewarding were highlighted as important. Supporting that ‘feel good’ factor could help.
   * Sustainable community action and succession planning were identified across a number of groups.
   * Other support mentioned for community action included help with skills development and making the most of technology.
2. **Essential community characteristics for community action to thrive.** These are described below.
   * The characteristics that drive community action within communities were regarded as people feeling motivated and enthusiastic to make a difference, having a sense of identity, duty and responsibility as well as a desire to meet local needs. Commitment and passion were often used to describe people’s feelings about being involved.
   * Others emphasised the importance of caring about their community and the people within it. Helping, supporting, including people and being aware of needs and gaps were all cited as well as being open hearted.
   * The knowledge and skills in a community were also identified as important, with a mix of skills, know-how, experience and innovation all listed.
   * The willingness of people to volunteer was also identified.
3. **Helpful behaviours and good practice.**  Three strong themes emerged in how we should all participate in community action. They were:
4. How we communicate with each other. Often this was described simply as listening. Reaching the right people was also included.
5. How we work together. This included being respectful of voluntary action and valuing it. Developing a shared vision, team work and collaboration were all mentioned. One group identified the cycle of forming, norming, storming and performing.
6. How we build trusting relationships.

Other helpful behaviours cited included the determination to see things through, to have fun in community action and being willing to change.

1. **Shifting the balance of power.**  Four themes emerged from the discussions. The first challenged the scope of decision making and the remaining three were about where the balance of decision-making should lay.
2. A challenge was made on the scope for real influence over public services. The view was expressed that community action should not just be about what the Council stops doing, and for communities to replace that; but also about how communities can have real influence over the range of public services and in particular how to challenge mediocre service delivery.
3. A strong theme was how to get people involved. This was about involving more people, being inclusive and valuing everyone as important. Removing barriers and enabling people to get involved and having more than one way of doing that were all stated. Both younger and older people were highlighted for more involvement.
4. For others it was also about sharing power, so that there was partnership and better equality in who gets to decide.
5. Another perspective was that statutory bodies should get out of the way. Local communities should be able to decide. One group described this as reverse leadership.

**Creating an environment for community action to thrive**

From an earlier meeting with 14 community bodies, eight ideas were generated to support community action. These were tested with delegates and other ideas were called for. In each of the 12 groups at the event there were discussions to agree how to prioritise all of the ideas presented.

Two ideas regarded as the best most often across the groups were:

* **A support or brokerage service in the Highlands for community bodies – ‘A Community Gateway’** and
* **Changing attitudes about community organisations**.

Each of these ideas was ranked as the best ideas across 5 groups.

**Getting new local community partnerships off to the right start** was ranked as the second best idea across seven of the groups.

Looking at the rank order of ideas across all groups, the average placings show the most supported to the least supported ideas. Those with an average rank placing them among the most supported ideas are listed below.

**Most supported ideas**

1st **A support or brokerage service in the Highlands for community bodies – ‘A Community Gateway’** (average placing 2.25, rated either 1st, 2nd or 3rd by most groups with only two groups placing it lower and at 4th and 5th places).

2nd **Changing attitudes about community organisations** (average placing of 2.3, rated either 1st, 2nd or 3rd by most groups with only two groups placing it lower and both at 5th place).

3rd = **Getting new local community partnerships off to the right start** (average placing 2.75)

3rd = **Access to expertise in the Council to help community groups with more complicated business** (average placing 2.75)

4th **Funding: easy access to small grants to allow groups to move quickly** (average placing 3.09)

**Ideas with less support**

5th A new look at Community Councils (average placing of 4.16)

6th Council leadership locally to excite, engage and enable creative thinking in communities (average placing 4.7)

7th Modern apprenticeships in community development (average placing of 5)

**New ideas**

Six new ideas were generated. Two were favoured in their groups and ranked 1st. They were: a Community Learning and Development Plan for Highland and local areas and Brokerage on empty streets. Three further new ideas were ranked lowest in their groups and were: full cost recovery funding, digital opportunities and how to get the community to take all this on board and get involved.

**Individual perspectives**

Individuals were asked to vote on their five preferred ideas. Although not everyone voted, where votes were cast, the five most supported ideas were: A community gateway (26 votes); Getting community partnership off to the right start (25); easy access to small grants to allow groups to move quickly (22); a new look at community councils (22); and changing attitudes about community organisations (19).

**Views on the most supported ideas**

As well as ranking the ideas in priority, groups were asked to note any discussion points about them. A summary of the points made on the most supported ideas could offer insight in how best to proceed with them. This is provided below.

1. **A support or brokerage service in the Highlands for community bodies – ‘A Community Gateway’**

While this was the most supported idea, discussion in groups about it generated the most comment, with 28 separate comments recorded. These focused on: the purpose of a Community Gateway, questions on how it could be developed, the importance of building on what is already there and who should be involved.

The purpose of a Community Gateway was presented as a single point of contact for community bodies offering help, advice and know-how. It would connect volunteers to volunteering opportunities locally through local coordinators, and connect volunteers to assets held by others. It would provide help in accessing funding, acquiring and accessing buildings and other assets. It would provide advice on legal, governance and human resources and enable training in a wide range of skills from business planning to community participation.

In the feedback from groups new aspects to consider included: sharing what other communities are doing and learning from it; gathering views on community needs and dealing with different perspectives, including conflict resolution; having expertise in social enterprise; supporting local employment as well as volunteers; employing people on behalf of community bodies (a brokerage service); advice and support on succession planning; and to have service standards in place (having clear response times including timescales for decisions being made was noted).

On how a Community Gateway could be developed, comments centred on how community bodies would access it (for it to cover all of Highland, be based locally to understand local issues and to be available after hours to meet requirements of groups), how it would be resourced and the need to engage further with others on what this would look like.

On who should provide the Community Gateway opinion was divided. For some this was a role for partners (including the new community partnerships) and key players, for others it was a role for the Third Sector and the Third Sector Interface while others felt it was a role for the Council or for Councillors themselves. Some felt it definitely should not be the Council or Councillors. One insight was that whoever provided the single point of contact, they needed to be very knowledgeable and with good connections to those who could help.

A common theme was that a Community Gateway should build on what was already in place. Some felt it was already in place through the HTSI while others thought there was a lack of consistency across the HTSI, that awareness of it was low and that its branding was problematic. Other views were that while there were resources and people in place they needed to be better networked and with greater consistency in service while duplication should be avoided.

1. **Changing attitudes about community organisations**

This idea was presented as developing a more supportive attitude from Council staff. It would involve being more appreciative of what community bodies do, not seeing then as a threat to Council jobs, being more open to challenge and ideas on how to do things differently even if this is more risky and being more responsive and a better listener. One way of improving was to involve community bodies in the training and development of Council staff.

The feedback provided the following new insights:

* This applied not only to the Council but also all partners, the community partnerships and HLH;
* We need to find a way of making this easier for staff, recognising it’s often about individual relationships and we can learn from each other;
* While this is critical it would take time to develop and be challenging;
* Releasing staff for volunteering could encourage staff to be more involved (identified in a later group activity).

1. **Getting new local community partnerships off to the right**

From the earlier engagement this idea would involve the community partnerships: thinking about who to involve (and not being hierarchical and a ‘partnership of equals’) and how they would operate (using Plain English; frequency and timing of meetings, engaging with each other and the wider community and being patient with the partnership process). Many of these points were reinforced and new points raised included:

* How to involve communities of interest;
* How Community Councils are involved;
* How to get real influence – see the comments earlier (section 4 page 2);
* Using digital means of engagement (Skype suggested).

1. **Access to expertise in the Council to help community groups with more complicated business**

From the earlier engagement the expertise that could help community bodies was described as: legal advice, advice on governance, support to employ and manage people and dealing with big organisations such as energy suppliers and access to Council training. In addition to affirming these areas, new ideas were:

* Public liability insurance
* Financial matters such as tax advice
* Signposting

Some comments referred to this service not being unique to the Council, with advice available already from the HTSI or potentially from other bodies. Another suggestion was that this could be provided by allowing staff time in their day job to do this. This idea, if developed further, should align with any action to be taken on a Community Gateway.

1. **Funding: easy access to small grants to allow groups to move quickly**

The original idea was for these to fund feasibility studies or to supply materials to volunteers. They would be easy to apply for, with decisions and payments made quickly. An amount of up to £2500 was previously mooted. They could come from the funding currently used for ward discretionary grants and could be re-named as a Community Investment Fund. Event feedback supported this and it would help to also:

* Share information from feasibility studies;
* Have less onerous criteria for grants of less than £1000;
* Have an audit trail; and
* Consider use for transition funding too to help projects move to the next phase.

1. **Community** **Councils**

Although the idea to have a new look at Community Councils was less supported (placed 5th out of 7 ideas), the appetite for this may be higher among Community Councils themselves as a group. In addition there are other developments that may have an impact on the future of Community Councils; the recommendations from the Commission on Highland Democracy and the Government’s plans to publish a Decentralisation Bill. More should be known about these developments by early March 2017.