

RURAL PARLIAMENT – LOCAL GOVERNANCE REVIEW

Introduction

1. I was asked to help draw this session to a close by talking about the possibilities ahead for a stronger and more vibrant local democracy here in Scotland.
2. These are possibilities that will only take shape and come to fruition with the knowledge and experience of people from across Scotland.

Local Governance Review

3. Some of you will know about the Local Governance Review. Many more of you will have joined *Democracy Matters* conversations as part of the review process.
4. These conversations asked a small number of big questions about whether communities are able to access the right levers of power in order to thrive.
5. Over 4,000 people from a wide range of backgrounds took part. This involvement brought the debate to life and gave it direction from the ground-up.
6. Rural Scotland was very much involved. Scottish Rural Action, among others, mobilised conversations across an impressive array of networks.
7. People – whether based in rural or urban areas - overwhelmingly thought that communities work best when able to shape their own future.
8. We also heard frustration with current decision-making arrangements. These have developed over the years with good intentions but in reality often do not provide a clear path for community action.
9. What we heard offered a clear diagnosis: there is a disconnect between decision-makers and what happens in our towns, villages and neighbourhoods.
10. And a prescription: get more power and resources into the hands of local people and positive change will happen.
11. One of the few bright spots of these last 12 months has been seeing local people coming together to help each other.
12. The latest - and very real - demonstration of how much communities can achieve when they are trusted to take important decisions and marshal vital resources.

13. But we must recognize how much of this still relies upon often small bands of dedicated people.

14. Whether those making our many community organizations tick, helping bring it all together in community anchor organizations like Development Trusts, or providing democratic legitimacy in our community councils.

15. This vital contribution to community life needs to be made sustainable and that means backing it with real powers and resources.

Proposed Joint statement

16. The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government and the President of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities will soon publish a joint statement on the progress made through the Local Governance Review to date.

17. We can expect this to reflect the Scottish Government and Local Government's shared belief that we need a more localised approach to decision-making.

18. This statement will be accompanied by material which is the culmination of a lot of hard work by communities and a range of partners.

New publications

19. COVID meant that we had to delay a planned second phase of Democracy Matters engagement.

20. Instead, we will publish an ambitious scenario for the future. It describes how communities in different settings might establish autonomous and democratically accountable decision-making bodies.

21. They would represent a modern sphere of democracy for our communities, imbued with real powers and associated resources; work in ways designed to enhance equalities and human rights; and promote widespread participation from local people in agreeing priorities.

22. We will also publish an International Review of local governance systems and how citizens participate in local decision-making.

23. This analyses six well-functioning democracies: Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Quebec, Uruguay, and England.

24. Governance is complex but most definitions emphasise three dimensions: power and authority, decision-making, and accountability.

25. Scotland provides a foundation for comparison across these three dimensions. The findings are presented in an accessible way to support learning and reflection.

26. The analysis very deliberately looks at how powers and resources are shared across national, regional, local and community spheres of control.

Community empowerment and fiscal & functional empowerment of Local Government

27. The Local Governance Review asks how communities can reclaim power. But this involves also ensuring our councils have the right suite of powers to work with the communities they represent.

28. A number of councils have submitted proposals for empowerment in their places through the Local Governance Review process.

29. Preparation has begun so that political dialogue on these ideas can begin soon after the Scottish parliamentary elections.

30. In addition, a Bill on the European Charter for Local Self-government is now in the final stages of its passage through the Scottish parliament. If passed, it will place the autonomous status of local government in Scotland on a firm legislative footing. Joint work on a fiscal framework will also shortly begin.

Wider calls for changes to local democracy

31. The Citizens' Assembly for Scotland was a place where over 100 Scots had been listening, learning and deliberating about the type of country Scotland should be.

32. The Assembly report envisages a transformative change where active participation of people in decision-making goes far beyond voting in elections - and leads to better outcomes for everyone.

33. The Scottish Government's Social Renewal Advisory Board identified the same theme when taking advice from wide variety of perspectives on how to build back better from the terrible impacts of COVID.

34. The Board's central recommendation is the importance of decisions being taken in the places and by the people they most affect.

Conclusion

35. Rebalancing power across the system - and reimagining the relationship between citizen and state – is a big part of how we will navigate the considerable challenges ahead together.

36. This will require ambition, creativity and determination. But we are not starting from scratch. Rural communities in particular have a long and proud history of coming together to get things done.

37. The burgeoning rural movement can help us transform local democracy in a way that works for everyone for generations to come.

38. Look out for the joint statement which we can expect to see within the next couple of weeks. Please share it across your networks and with your friends, families and neighbours.

39. And stay up to date through our [newsletter](#); email any questions to democracymatters@gov.scot; and follow us on Twitter [@CommEmpower](#).