

Commission on Parliamentary Reform – 30th January 2017

Background

There is an appetite from people across the Highlands to be more involved in democratic and decision making processes. However, we know that people in the region do not feel that they are involved in how the Council spends its money, or that they have influence over decision making in their local area. A survey of Highland residents in 2014 showed that:

- 77% were interested in the democratic process;
- 69% would like to be more involved in decision-making in their area or in the country
- 48% agreed that every citizen should get involved in democracy if it is to work properly.

However, the survey also showed that only:

- 20% agree that the Council involves people in how it spends money; and
- 18% feel that they have any influence over decision-making in their local area.

The Commission on Highland Democracy was established to continue conversations locally about the kind of democracy we want to have in the Highlands and to follow up on the work of the National Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy.

Highland Council has supported the establishment of an independent commission, and Rory Mair was approached to be the independent chair. A further 14 Commissioners were appointed, including six Councillors representing all political groups at the Council. People were approached to be on the Commission who have the skills to ensure that it is able to understand and interpret the wishes of the people of the Highlands. The Commission met for the first time in September 2016, and it is expected to produce its final recommendations in May 2017. More information on the Commission can be found at: www.highlanddemocracy.wordpress.com

Engagement Approach

The Commission's work can be viewed as three main phases of work.

• Phase 1: Listen and Understand

This first phase involves open discussion about what people think about the state of local democracy in the Highlands. This phase of the work is intended to inform and direct the work of the Commission. The Commission has been careful not to define the terms of the conversation or restrict what people want to talk about.

Call for Evidence

The initial call for evidence is attached, Appendix 1. It contains 8 open questions on local democracy and was designed to help people say what they wanted whilst allowing the Commission to easily spot and interpret any common themes that responses contained. However, it was also stated that if the questions were not helpful and people had something quite different to say to tell the Commission anyway and that all responses would be taken into account. 500-1,000 people have

responded to the call for evidence online or have emailed or sent their comments to the Commission.

Public events

The Commission have attended public events across the Highlands, and through these has spoken to hundreds of people. This has included a focus on speaking to young people through area youth forums. The Commission has been pragmatic in taking opportunities to attend and become involved in locally organised events where people are meeting for a variety of reasons. At these events, Commissioners have held open discussions, allowing people to give their views.

Opportunities for people to submit their views to the Commission have been publicised through local networks, social media (Facebook and Twitter), through the local press/ press releases, and through the website.

● Phase 2: Reflect and Test

Having collected the views of people in the Highlands, this phase involves trying to understand any common themes that are arising about the state of democracy in the Highlands. These themes are based solely on what the Commission has heard and not on the professional or personal views of the commissioners. The Commission has carefully discussed the content of the written responses and the views they had heard at the public meetings.

These themes will now be published and a second round of engagement will occur, both on-line and through public meetings. This will make sure that the Commission has heard correctly what the issues are in Highland, and will start the process of further in-depth discussion.

● Phase 3: Solve and Recommend

The final phase of the Commission's work, whilst not yet fully defined, will involve open and collaborative discussion and investigation to find solutions and recommendations to improve local democracy in the Highlands. A final report will be published in May 2017.

Initial Findings

The Commission met on the 12th December and discussed what they have heard so far from people across the Highlands. Findings which may also be relevant to the Commission on Parliamentary Reform include:

1. In general, people agree that four things are needed to have strong local democracy in the Highlands:
 - i. People are well represented through the local democratic process.
 - ii. The process of how decisions are made by those who have been elected is clear.
 - iii. Communities and individuals should be able to influence these decisions.
 - iv. Communities should be able to make local decisions for themselves.

This is not to say that people agree that this is being achieved.

2. The Commission has not found a large amount of support from citizens/communities to take over complete control of services. So far there has been greater demand from people to be able to better understand how services are delivered and how decisions are made, and to be able to influence this (empowered consumers of services rather than active participants).

3. People are highlighting there is a big and important difference between consultation and involvement in decision making. Involvement is on-going and authentic. There is a feeling that consultation happens when a decision is at the point of being made and it is therefore very hard to influence.

4. There is an issue around feedback. The Council consults on various decisions but then does not feedback how this affected the decision making process. This has contributed to a feeling of “consultation fatigue”, and has made consultations less empowering than they should otherwise be.

Three main points we would like to make to the Commission:

- Much of what the Commission on Highland Democracy has heard relates to people wanting to be more empowered consumers, rather than taking on services directly. People want to see a better balance between the role of the professional, representative, and local community in local decision making.
- The balance between representative and participative democracy needs to be reevaluated. Often consultation and engagement exercises focus on being representative, and this can overlook a range of valuable views and opinions.
- There are a wide range of existing networks which could be better made use of in terms of hearing the views of local people and communities.

Appendix 1: 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?

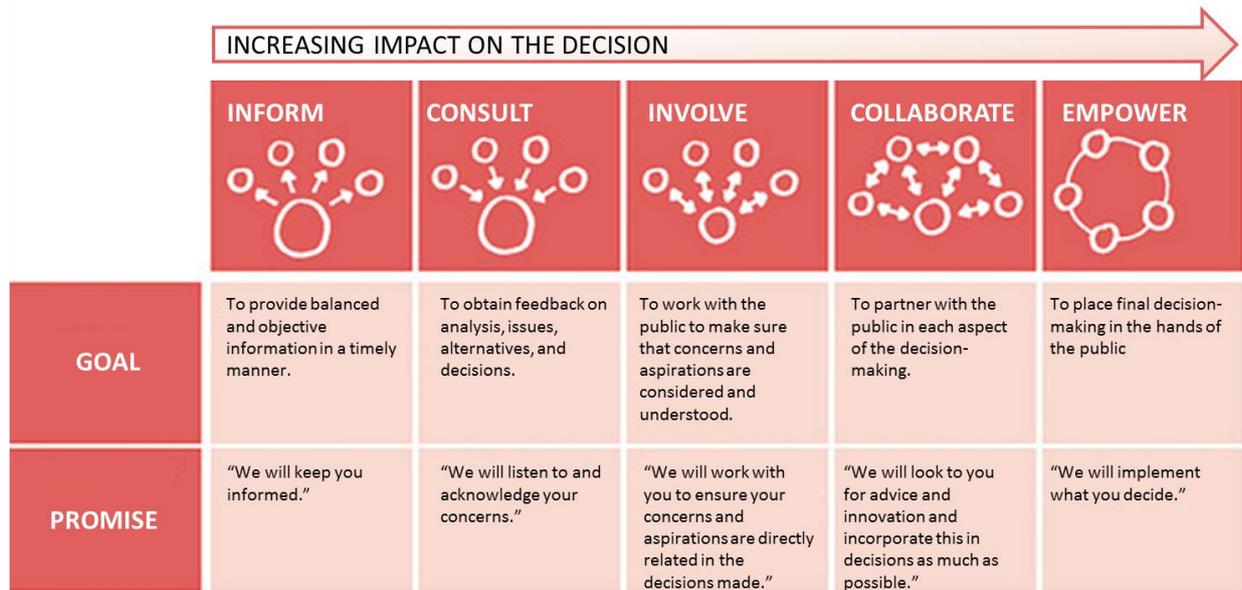
Q3. Is it clear how decisions that affect you have been taken?

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