Redesign for Community Action

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

<u>Discussions with 14 groups 23.8.16</u>

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.

<u>Engagement event 11.11.16</u>

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. A draft report with the output from the day by the Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) can be accessed at:
http://www.highland.gov.uk/staffsite/info/23/staff_information/208/redesign_of_the_highland_council Analysis of the output on the right environment for community action is appended.

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.
2. **Willing and able people in communities seeking to make a difference, caring about their communities and neighbours**
3. **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
4. **A shift in the balance of power**
   - Getting the new community partnerships off to the right start

Redesign for community action

Feedback from the event with community and public bodies 11.11.16

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.

- o 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.
- o The knowledge and skills in a community were also identified as important, with a mix of skills, know-how, experience and innovation all listed.
- o 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:
   1. How we communicate with each other. Often this was described simply as listening. Reaching the right people was also included.
   2. 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.
   3. 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.

4. **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.
   1. 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.
   2. 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.
   3. For others it was also about sharing power, so that there was partnership and better equality in who gets to decide.
   4. 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.

2. **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).

3. **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).

4. **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.

5. **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.

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.