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The Highland Council

9th March 2017

Commission on Highland Democracy – Interim report

Report by Acting Head of Policy

Summary
The independent Commission on Highland Democracy was established in 2016 to find out how local people want to be involved in decisions and services that directly affect their lives and their communities. An interim report has been prepared by the Commission and is attached to this paper for Members to consider.

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. However, feedback shows that fewer 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 10 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 A short update report was presented to Highland Council on 8 September 2016 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 A more detailed progress report was presented to the Highland Council on 15 December 2016. This included detail on who had been appointed to the Commission, how it was collecting evidence, and also the intended reporting

timescales. This report was accompanied by a verbal update by the Chair of the Commission, Rory Mair, who outlined some of things that the Commission had found out so far.

1.5   At the Council meeting in December 2016, the Chair of the Commission committed to bring an interim report to this meeting of the Council so that it could be considered by Elected Members. This interim report is attached at Appendix 1. The Chair of the Commission will be in attendance to present the report and answer any questions.

Recommendation
Members are asked to consider the interim report prepared by the Commission on Highland Democracy.

Stephen Carr, Principal Policy Officer, 27th February 2017.
Background papers: "Commission on Highland Democracy – Update", 15 December 2016; "Commission on Highland Democracy – Update", 8 September 2016; "Proposal to establish a Commission on Highland Democracy", 10 March 2016.

The Commission on Highland Democracy

Interim Report

March 2017

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1. INTRODUCTION – BY RORY MAIR

There is an appetite from people across the Highlands to be more involved in democratic and decision making processes. However, we know that very few people in the region feel that they are involved in how public money is spent, or feel that they have any influence over decision making in their local area. 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.

This frustration with the current system, and a desire to be better involved in local decision making, has led to lots of people sharing their views with us. I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank the thousands of people who have spoken to the Commission to give their views on local democracy, and how they want to improve it. I really have been overwhelmed by the number of people who have turned out to give their views online and through public meetings across the Highlands. I feel that this represents the strength of feeling that people want real change, and want to be involved in this process.

The evidence collected from this Commission should be the starting point for how public agencies look to reform local democracy, as it is based on the views, opinions, and wishes of people across the Highlands. This is not to say that it is perfect, but it should be given as much, if not more value, than new approaches being developed from the top-down.

We are probably about half way through the work we have set out to do. This report is our attempt to bring together the hundreds of things we have heard so far, and report these back to the people of the Highlands. It is too early to make final conclusions from all these experiences, and this report is not designed to do so. However it is an opportunity to share what we have heard so far, and what we think this means. We will now set out to test this thinking through speaking to people across the region. This will allow us to make our final conclusions and recommendations for how to improve local democracy in the Highlands.

We want to continue these discussions about local democracy in the Highlands, and would be delighted to hear your views.

Rory Mair
Chair of the Commission on Highland Democracy

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Commission on Highland Democracy was established to continue conversations locally about the kind of democracy we want to have in the Highlands. We have had thousands of conversations with people across the region to better understand what the current state of local democracy is, and what people want to happen about this. Our key findings so far are:

1. Decision making is exclusive

Decentralisation/ centralisation is not seen by local people to be primarily a geographical issue although it does encompass some spatial aspects. People consider decision making to be centralised not because it takes place a long distance from them. Rather, they feel that centralisation occurs when a small group of highly empowered individuals take decisions in a way that has little reference to anybody outside the decision making group and in an exclusive way. With this view of centralisation, it matters little where decision makers are situated and much more how they go about their business.

2. People want involvement and engagement

People have told us time and again that they want a relationship with decision makers in which they are involved and engaged on an ongoing basis. In this situation, decision makers can regularly ask communities for their views for a variety of subjects but equally communities can decide to make their views known on the issues that concern them.

3. Empowered consumers

Almost nobody has said they want to take decision making from their elected or appointed representatives and make them themselves. Quite the reverse, most respondents want to be empowered consumers of services and decisions rather than deliverers or decision makers themselves. And they understand the importance of having elected and appointed representatives to take the final decision in important and difficult matters. They do, however, want decision makers to arrive at their decisions in a much more open and involving way.

4. Integrated local democracy

People want engagement and involvement in the democratic process to happen as part of their day to day living rather than as a separate thing. The Commission takes this to mean that conversations about community aspirations, public services and infrastructure are taking place in communities throughout the region. There seems to be a demand that these conversations are captured and used in decision making, rather than a separate consultation exercise being contrived around these same issues which it is unlikely many people will have the time or inclination to participate in.

5. Balanced decision making

Communities hold the view that for good decisions to be made there is a necessary balance between three different inputs. They recognise the need for high quality professional officer advice. They understand the role of the elected and appointed decision makers and the important perspectives this brings. However, they want to see a third component which is a strong element of community input. The view is that if any one of these elements is missing, less good decisions will be made.

The Commission will now test and interrogate these key findings, and will publish a final report with a final set of conclusions and recommendations which reflect the views and opinions of people across the Highlands in May 2017.

If you have any comments or to keep updated with the work of the Commission please visit our website: www.highlanddemocracy.wordpress.com; follow us on Twitter: @Highland_Dem; or email us at: Commission@highland.gov.uk

3. THE NEED FOR A COMMISSION ON HIGHLAND DEMOCRACRY

There are many reasons why local democracy in the Highlands needs to be thoroughly reviewed to ensure it meets the needs of people living in the region. This part of the report reflects on many of the factors which led to the Commission on Highland Democracy being established in 2016.

Public feedback on local democracy in the Highlands

There is an appetite amongst people in the Highlands for greater involvement in decisions that affect them. The results from the Highland Council's Citizen Panel in 2014 showed that:

- 77% were interested in the democratic process;
- 69% would like to be involved in decision-making in their area/ in the country; and
- 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;
- Only 18% feel they have any influence over decision making in their local area.

There are high levels of civic engagement in the Highlands. In a survey conducted in 2015, 39% of the population said that they volunteer in some capacity, compared to a national figure of 28%.

National Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

In 2014, the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy aimed to bring together local government, civic society and a range of experts to consider what it would take to put local democracy at the heart of Scotland's future.

Fundamentally, the Commission set out to challenge our concept of democracy and the value we place upon it. It highlighted that local democracy has no status or protection in law and is subject to the will of the national government of the time.

The Commission found that we regard democracy as being about institutions of government, forgetting that in a democracy power lies with the people. This is connected to citizens being viewed only as being "passive" consumers of public services, and not being "active" participants.

The Commission's final report is available here. It is based on seven principles, which the Commission felt should underpin Scotland's democratic future:

1. Sovereignty
2. Subsidiarity
3. Transparency
4. Participation
5. Spheres not tiers of governance
6. Interdependency
7. Wellbeing

The report identifies four focal points for reform:

1. Democracy from the community up, not top down – built around subsidiarity and empowerment and clarity in the different 'spheres of Government' each with clarity on their democratic mandate;
2. Community accountability for all locally delivered services;
3. Variation instead of one size fits all – different contexts need different responses; and
4. Decision making at the right scale.

The report presented 25 recommendations. Most require consideration nationally (some now feature in the Community Empowerment legislation) and others are aimed at local government and Community Planning Partnerships.

Importantly the Commission saw its work as the start of a process and called for new conversations to rebuild democracy, and for that to bring in many voices and perspectives "to come together to learn, challenge, and explore inspiring ideas. To be effective that must be genuinely inclusive of communities of interest and place, and with cross party buy in." The Commission sees the work required as a long term endeavour, over a 10 to 15 year period, and called for new democratic experiments across Scotland.

Christie Commission

The Christie Commission was set up by the Scottish Government in 2010 to develop recommendations for the future delivery of public services and its findings were published in June 2011.

The Commission recognised that the pressure on budgets is intense and public spending is not expected to return to 2010 levels in real terms for 16 years. In addition, new demographic and social pressures will entail a huge increase in the demand for public services. The economic downturn will also intensify and prolong demand. It stated that unless Scotland embraces a radical, new, collaborative culture throughout our public services, both budgets and provision will buckle under the strain.

The report highlighted that a cycle of deprivation and low aspiration has been allowed to persist because preventative measures have not been prioritised. It was estimated that as much as 40% of all spending on public services was accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by prioritising a preventative approach. It recommended tackling these fundamental inequalities and focussing resources on preventative measures to be a key objective of public service reform.

The Commission stated that the public service system is often fragmented, complex and opaque, hampering the joint working between organisations which we consider to be essential. As a whole, the system can be 'top down' and unresponsive to the needs of individuals and communities. It lacks accountability and is often characterised by a short-termism that makes it difficult to prioritise preventative approaches.

Local Government Boundary Commission Scotland review

Arrangements for local government elections are reviewed periodically by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. The most recent review in 2016 aimed to increase parity of representation between different voting wards across Scotland. The boundary of a ward and the number of Councillors is based on the population and geographic area of coverage. In contrast to previous reviews, levels of deprivation were also factored in to the 2016 review. This was on the assumption that areas with higher levels of deprivation lead to higher workloads for local members and therefore require higher levels of representation.

The final recommendation of the Boundary Commission was approved and there will be a reduction from 80 to 74 Councillors in Highland for the Local Government election in 2017. This means that the ratio between the number of electorate and Councillors will increase, especially considering the relatively high population growth that Highland is experiencing[1].

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015

The Community Empowerment Act is intended to be a significant step towards communities having greater influence or control over things that matter to them. In particular there is an emphasis on addressing disadvantage and inequality enshrined in the Act. It commits government and public services to engage with, listen to and respond to communities. This should help communities to have greater influence over decisions affecting them, and how land and buildings are managed and used. Three pertinent elements of the Act are:

- Community Planning - The strengthening of community planning to give communities more of a say in how public services are planned and provided;
- Participation Requests - New rights enabling communities to request to participate with public sector organisations to improve outcomes; and
- Asset Transfer Requests - The extension of the community right to buy or otherwise have greater control over assets.

The Government's Programme for Scotland, 2016/17

In September 2016, the Scottish Government published its programme "A plan for Scotland", setting out its ambitions for the current parliament term. This includes a number of commitments related to local democracy, and extracts from the programme are included below.

"Local government is a key partner for the Scottish Government in delivering improved outcomes. We have committed to work with local authorities to review their roles and responsibilities. We will discuss with key stakeholders the scope and timing of the review before the end of the year."

"The Government is clear in its support for more decentralisation of power from city and council chambers. Every community in Scotland has different needs and challenges and we want to see more decision-making handed to local people, especially in choosing local spending priorities."

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[1] The population of Highland in 2011 was 232,000, an increase of around 23,000 (11%) from the 2001 figure of 208,914.

"In this Parliament we will also introduce a Bill that will decentralise local authority functions, budgets and democratise oversight to local communities."

"By the end of this year we will have listened to the views of a wide range of people, including local government and communities themselves, and this dialogue will shape the detail of how we will bring control over budgets and services closer to local communities."

"We will continue to work with local government and communities on delivery of the target of councils having at least 1% of their budget subject to Community Choices budgeting. This means that tens of thousands of people will have a direct say in how tens of millions of pounds are spent by their councils and will be involved in innovative community action. We are determined to give people a real voice in the decisions that matter to them and be a world leader in promoting community choices in budget decisions."

Highland Council Localism Action Plan
In the Council's programme, "Highland First", the Council committed to:
<u>Strengthening Local Democracy</u>
- 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.

In October 2015, Highland Council agreed a localism action plan that includes:
- The establishment of seven new local committees with new and emerging local powers.
- New joint work with partners to develop local community planning arrangements.
- Trialling participatory budgeting in several locations across the Highlands.
- Establishing a strategic Committee for Communities and Partnerships with a remit that includes overseeing the approach to implementing the new duties on the Council arising from the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act.
- Developing transformation projects that support community participation in service delivery.
- The development of a training programme for staff, partners and Councillors to support local community planning and new public participation methods.
- Campaigning activity that seeks further devolution of power to Highland.

Council Redesign
Following difficult budget decisions in February 2016, and anticipated future budget reductions, Highland Council agreed to undertake a redesign of the Council in 2016/17.

The step change in resource levels and the localism agenda, taken together with the need to modernise and continuously improve performance, should be recognised as a watershed moment for the Highland Council.

The purpose of the redesign includes:
- Renew the Council's purpose and ambition;
- Refresh the Council's priorities;
- Develop proposals for affordable services and delivery options; and
- Explore the best options for public participation.
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As part of establishing the redesign process, it was noted that it should proceed in parallel and in collaboration with the Commission on Highland Democracy.

The section was intended to highlight the driving factors and pressures as to why a Commission on Highland Democracy is needed. These factors are wide ranging and happening at all scales – national, regional, and local. Many commentators highlight that local democracy in Scotland has been eroded over the past 40 years. We are at an opportune point to discuss and reimagine collectively what we want from local democracy in the Highlands, and what needs to change to allow this to happen.

4. COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

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. Rory Mair, former Chief Executive of COSLA (the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities), was approached by Highland Council to be the chair of the Commission.

People were asked to be part of the Commission who had the skills to ensure that the Commission was able to understand and interpret the wishes of the people of the Highlands. Commissioners were expected to bring their perspective to the process; listen to the will of Highland communities; scrutinise evidence; and challenge the current state of democracy in the Highlands. The membership of the Commission is detailed at Appendix 1. There are 15 people on the Commission, including six Highland Councillors, representing all the current political groups at the Council.

The Commission met for the first time in September 2016 and one of their first priorities was to consider whether it had the right people on the Commission. It was agreed that the composition of the group was appropriate, given that their primary role was to listen, understand, and interpret the views, opinions and desires of people across the Highlands.

Support for the Commission is being provided by the Highland Council, mainly through the provision of secretariat support (staff time), but also in terms of providing meeting venues and providing travel expenses to Commissioners.

5. METHODOLOGY

The scope of the work the Commission could investigate was extremely wide. The Commission met for the first time in September 2016 to refine this focus. Through discussion, the Commission agreed 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 decisions; and
4. Communities should be able to make local decisions for themselves

These four statements were used as the basis to start collecting evidence from the public mainly through an online survey (call for evidence) and through speaking to people at public meetings.

The Commission has been working through three broad 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 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. The Commission has discussed the information that was gathered and has tried to understand what the key issues affecting local democracy in the Highlands are.

Phase 2: "Reflect and Test"
The second phase of work involves reflecting back what the Commission feels it has heard and why it thinks these themes are arising. These will be tested through a second round of public engagement to ensure that the Commission has heard and interpreted correctly what the main issues affecting local democracy in the Highlands are. This stage will also allow discussion about what people want to happen about these issues in terms of practical solutions.

Phase 3: "Solve and Recommend"
In the final phase of work, the Commission will clarify what the main issues affecting local democracy in the Highlands are, identify how these can be improved, and make a series of recommendations to improve local democracy in the Highlands. A final report will be published in May 2017.

At the time of writing, the Commission has just about completed phase 1 of its work, although it remains open to hearing people's views, as people continue to become aware of the work. The Commission is now focusing its efforts on the second and third phases of its work.

During the first phase of its work, the Commission took evidence in a variety of ways. The main communication channels used were an online survey (call for evidence) and discussions at public meetings. The Commission has also taken evidence through e-mail, phone calls, and by post.

The Commission is also extremely aware of the need to try and speak with those who are the most disengaged from local democracy at present, and that the success or otherwise of the Commission will more likely than not be judged by both this, and the ability of the Commission to capture views from across the whole of the Highlands. In the first phase of its work, the Commission made a concerted effort to speak with young people through attending youth forums across the region. This was because the Commission felt that young people are not presently well represented in local democracy.

Call for Evidence
The initial call for evidence is attached, Appendix 2. It contains 8 open questions on local democracy and was designed to help people say want 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. Over 500 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 (Appendix 3 details a list of meetings the Commission has attended so far). The Commission has been pragmatic in taking opportunities to attend and become involved in locally organised events. At these events Commissioners have held open discussions with the public. Up to three Commissioners have attended each event, and have then fed back what their heard to the wider Commission through regular meetings and discussions.

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

From the outset, the Commission has tried to be extremely practical in its approach to collecting the views and opinions of people across the Highlands, taking advantages of opportunities to speak with people as they arise. What this means however, is that the evidence gathered is unlikely to be properly representative of the whole population of the Highlands. The role of the Commission has been to try and give appropriate weight to the evidence it has gathered, and to carefully capture the range of views being presented, to ensure that any "unusual" voices are also heard.

In the second phase of the Commission's work, efforts to improve the representative nature of the evidence collected will increase. The Commission will ensure it is taking evidence from all the regions across the Highlands, the survey will be sent to the Highland Council's Citizens' Panel (a sample which is representative of the Highlands), and thematic groups and networks will be used to ensure a wide range of responses.

Also in this second phase, the Commission will go back out to individuals and communities through a series of public events and a second survey. A concerted

effort will be undertaken to speak with as many Community Councils as possible given their important role in local democracy, and also because combined they cover the whole of the Highlands. Public meetings will also be organised across the Highlands. As noted above, the survey will be sent to members of the Citizens' Panel, but it will also be an open survey so that anyone can contribute their views. It will also be promoted through a number of networks to ensure a high response rate.

As an additional source of evidence, the Commission has also considered information gathered by the Highland Council's Citizens' Panel 2016 Performance and Attitudes Survey. This survey collects a wide range of information from over 1,000 people on how the public feel the Council is performing, and uses a sampling methodology which is representative of the Highland population. Questions and responses which relate to local decision making and local democracy have been collated in Appendix 4. Some additional survey data is also presented alongside this from Scotland's Household Survey 2015. This allows perceptions of local democracy in the Highlands, to be compared to Scotland as a whole.

Local democracy is a very active policy area, with many other similar pieces of work being undertaken across Scotland, such as:
- Electoral Reform Society Scotland – Our Democracy - Act as if we own the place;
- Scottish Government – Local Democracy Bill/ commitments in the Programme for Government;
- Inclusion Scotland – Our Voices, Our Choices; and
- Commission on Parliamentary Reform.

The Commission has been speaking with these organisations to understand, and make the most of, any collaborative benefits that arise.

6. ANALYSIS

The Commission has had thousands of conversations with people in the Highlands about local democracy through the online call for evidence, public meetings, and through other forms of communication. We feel this presents a good response rate on which we can start to draw out our initial findings.

One thing we cannot say is whether the methodology we have used means that we have collected a representative view from people across the Highlands, and in fact it almost certainly hasn't. However, we have collected a rich source of information which can be used to tell us something about local democracy in the region.

The questions in the Call for Evidence were purposefully very open and allowed people to say what they wanted. This led to a large amount of qualitative data for the Commission to listen to and understand. All the Commissioners read this information and discussed it in combination with the views they heard at public meetings. These meetings allowed for much deeper discussion with people, in a face to face manner, and in the community in which they live. These discussions gave a much richer source of information than the online survey, but the two complement each other well to provide both a breadth and depth of understanding of the key issues affecting local democracy.

On reflection, most of the discussions the Commission has had with people have focused on the Highland Council, and decisions taken within Highland. Through the next stage of its work the Commission will need to make sure these conversations are widened out. This will help to ensure that people give their views on all the public agencies, and also consider decision making processes that happen out with the region that affect local communities.

The Commission have met regularly to analyse the evidence that has been gathered, and agreed that the following themes are coming through from what people have told the Commission so far.

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 communities to take over control of delivering public services. So far there has been greater demand from people to be able to better understand how public services are delivered and how decisions are made, and to be able to influence these.

3. People are highlighting there is a big and important difference between consultation and involvement in decision making. 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. Involvement is seen as on-going, involves discussion, and it can be shown how it affected the decision making process.

4. There is an issue around feedback. Public agencies consult on various decisions but then do 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.

5. Public bodies are seen as remarkably self-denying about what it could already do to improve local democracy. For example, Highland Council has a network across the whole of the Highlands through its dispersed workforce, but there is no transfer of information within the Council. This is often interpreted as the Council doesn't want to listen. It is also felt that views are often not listened to as they are not seen as being fully representative of the community, and valuable information is being lost. It has also been highlighted that there is a lack of connectedness across public bodies in the Highlands, and information is not transferred between the agencies.

6. The people we have spoken to identify three important parts of the decision making process – the role of the officer, the councillor/ board member, and the views of the public. There is a concern that any imbalance leads to poor decision making.

7. The process of how public bodies make decisions in Highland is seen as confusing, unclear, and complex. This means it is difficult for people to understand on what basis a decision has been made, who made it, and how and when it could have been influenced.

8. People have highlighted that public agencies need to be better at involving local communities in strategic decision making - as these ultimately will affect local issues and local services.

9. The important role of Community Councils has been raised, and that whilst there are many excellent examples of Community Councils, others have been going through a cycle of decline. Community Councils have been highlighted as having real potential to improve local democracy and tackling a "democratic deficit".

10. Public bodies are seen as having a centre of power, this means that:

  i. People feel that power is focused on a small number of committees/ boards, and in the hands of a small number of decision makers. There is a feeling that if you are not at the centre, then you are less involved in decision making.

  ii. If power is focused in one area in Highland (and people have said quite strongly that it is in Inverness) it is viewed that the decision makers will know more about this area and that it will benefit as a result.

11. The size of the Council area has been raised as an issue, with this leading to a feeling of being disconnected, overlooked, and ignored. People have called for more decisions to be taken in their communities, to allow for more local input, and for decision making processes to be more inclusive and collaborative.

Specific themes arising from discussions with young people in the Highlands include:
  1. A tendency to invite young people to meetings, or approach them for their views as a tick box exercise – lack of authenticity.
  2. Young people only get invited to discuss issues specifically related to young people, where as their interests are much wider.
  3. It is often not clear what public bodies are planning to do and people are only informed of the final decision that has been made. Young people want to be involved in the process much earlier – at the point that the policy is being developed, not at the end to respond to the decision.
  4. Young people who are "allowed" to be involved in decision making are quite often hand-picked, and are the "responsible" or "academic" young people. This is not representative and is alienating.

7. KEY FINDINGS
Overall, what we have heard from local people who have contacted us seems to back up what previous local, and some national, survey work tell us about how the public view democratic engagement in the Highlands. Put simply, responses confirm that democratic engagement and involvement in the Highlands is not as good or as healthy as people would like it to be. People are also fairly cynical about whether there is any real appetite to change that situation.

There seems to be a clear feeling from the public that having been elected, representatives believe they have been mandated to make decisions about a wide variety of matters without any further reference to the communities that elected them. People do recognise that being elected does give representatives a very special status democratically and some very clear responsibilities. But they don't believe that representatives should have the right to act without taking their views into account.

It is no surprise that a lot of the focus in response to the Commission has been on the role of those who are elected to represent us on various bodies. Equally, given the range of day to day functions they are responsible for; it is not surprising that considerable attention has been paid to the role of local Councillors and their responsibility for how democracy works after they are elected. There is no doubt that the role of the local Councillors and the Council overall is central to Highland democracy and discussing that role in some detail will no doubt form a part of the Commission's final report. However in this interim report it is important to note how important the role of the Councillor is to local Highland democracy and how clearly that role is recognised by local people and communities.

It would be wrong, however, not to note the role of other representatives in the democratic process. Many public bodies, other than the Council, deliver important services to Highland communities e.g. NHS Highland, HIE etc. Many of these agencies are governed by boards which are not elected but directly appointed. They should nevertheless be seen to be democratically accountable and local people must be able to see how this accountability is exercised. Further work is therefore needed to explore the role of MSPs and MPs whose role it is to hold these agencies democratically accountable.

A final focus for further attention may be to look at the growing role of "community" representatives appointed to a variety of decision making boards and committees on the basis that they can then directly represent "community views". If more such positions are created, how should the people who fill them be selected? How should they be supported if they are to be effective, and most importantly how are they accountable for the views they express?

From our work so far there is an understandable concentration on the role of local Councillors and this merits further exploration. However it is important to recognise that they are not the only people in the Highlands with a clear representative responsibility. It would be entirely wrong and unfair to expect Councillors to carry the whole burden of local democracy in the Highlands or to hold only them accountable if it is believed the process is not working as well as it might. Other representatives are equally accountable for some public services in the Highlands and their role is worthy of equal scrutiny

There is also a growing tension between representative democracy and participative democracy in the region. The direction of travel both nationally and regionally is for more participative methods of people being involved in democratic processes. But from what we have heard we feel this is starting to cause strain in public bodies who are used to working in either a representative, or a bureaucratic nature.

In addition, many people believe that their elected representatives/ board members are advised, and potentially guided, by a very strong professional technocracy (e.g. Council officers) which leaves little room for community views to be taken into account.

Having said all that, very few people have taken a "cheap shot" at decision makers or suggested that public bodies in Highland are simply useless. People certainly don't want to see the current democratic process disbanded and some other process put in its place. People want democracy to work better in the Highland area and they believe that more open engagement and involvement with communities is fundamental to making that happen. Part of this includes a better understating of how the current system works and what the can be expected of different elected representatives. This process works both ways, with public bodies needing to make their processes more transparent and communicate these more clearly, and for people engage with this.

Methodological Findings

There are three main points on how people want to be involved in decision making that we have heard quite clearly.

The first is that people have told us consistently that they want involvement and not consultation, and they have been very clear that there is an important distinction between the two. Consultation by its nature is a controlled discussion and the power is with the organisation designing the consultation process. Involvement is more dynamic, personal, discursive, and is on-going. This is what people have been telling us that they want. Importantly, through involvement the individual and the community also have the opportunity to have control over what is discussed, rather than just the consulting authority.

Secondly, people have told the Commission that they want this involvement to be part of their everyday life, in that, they are already contributing to many formal and informal networks both in person and online. There is discontent, that if the views of the public are so valuable, as if often stated, then why are these views not gathered to inform decision making? People have told us that they want local and national organisations to tune into these networks. This can be through attending these meetings or by using new forms of technology to get a better understanding of what is happening at a local level, and not just by imposing an additional form of communication, such as a consultation.

This starts to challenge what public bodies choose to consider in their decision making processes. It could be viewed that a risk adverse culture has developed to only consider information that can be shown to be representative of a community's views. Meaning that more participative, and informal feedback, which is messier in its nature is somewhat disregarded. What we are hearing so far, is that decision makers should weigh up all available sources of information, including those which do not pass a test of representation. And public bodies should be actively seeking out people's views and opinions through formal and informal networks.

And thirdly, people have told us that when they are involved they want to know how that involvement affected the decision making process, or why their views were discounted. And this does not just mean feedback on what decision was taken, but rather how views made a difference, and what value was given to their involvement, and this is often missing from the consultation process.

Specific Findings

From the careful consideration of the evidence we have gathered so far, the Commission believes that there are five main findings that can be drawn. These interim findings are based on the views of the people who have taken part and spoken to the Commission so far. These ideas should not be viewed as facts, or to be accurate representations of what everyone in Highland thinks about local democracy. These findings will be tested through the next phase of the Commission's work, to understand if these are an accurate representation of what people think, and if so, how people want things to change.

1. Decentralisation/ centralisation is not seen by local people to be primarily a spatial or geographical issue although it does encompass some spatial aspects.

People consider decision making to be centralised not, primarily, because it takes place a long distance from them. Rather, they feel that centralisation occurs when a small group of highly empowered individuals take decisions in a way that has little reference to anybody outside the decision making group and in an exclusive way. With this view of centralisation, it matters little where decision makers are situated and much more how they go about their business.

Fundamental geographical dispersion of decision making would have little impact on this if decision making remained exclusive and in the hands of a small number. Equally, a huge change could be brought about regarding people's view of centralisation without geographical dispersal but with fundamental change in the decision making process.

There are, however, two spatial elements people have mentioned. Firstly, there is a belief that numbers and concentration of population count more than it should. The result of this is a feeling that rural and dispersed parts of the Highlands suffer a lack of investment that is concentrated in more populated areas. Secondly, there is a concern that if the exclusive group of decision makers all live in and around one place, then, that place will benefit from their greater knowledge of and commitment to it.

2. The evidence would suggest that people have a clear understanding of the difference between involvement/ engagement and consultation. People have told us time and again that they want a relationship with decision makers in which they are involved and engaged on an ongoing basis. In this situation, decision makers can regularly ask communities for their views on a variety of subjects but equally communities can decide to make their views known on the issues that concern them.

Each side of this relationship knows that they will be listened to by the other and that decisions will be taken that reflect the conversations and debate that has taken

place. Very few people believe that this is the nature of their relationship with decision makers just now. Instead, they believe they are the subject of consultation initiatives. This is not an equal relationship with decision makers. People believe that in this consultative relationship, decision makers decide when to consult, what to consult on, what questions to ask, and what to do with the answers. The view is this leaves the balance of power in the hands of the decision makers and disempowers communities.

From the evidence we have seen, people understand that from time to time, consultation on some specific major proposals will, and should, take place. However, these consultations should fall into an environment of ongoing engagement and involvement rather than being the only relationship with decision makes that ever happens.

3. In responding to the call for evidence and in discussions we've had with community groups, almost nobody has said they want to take decision making from their elected representatives and make them themselves. Quite the reverse, most respondents want to be empowered consumers of services and decisions rather than deliverers or decision makers themselves. And they understand the importance of having elected representatives and appointed board members to take the final decisions in important and difficult matters. They do, however, want decision makers to arrive at their decisions in a much more open and involving way.

A clear theme arising from the evidence we have gathered is that local people fully understand the difference between representative and participative democracy. They value representative democracy and don't want to see it diminished in any way. They do, however, want to see those involved in participative democracy (almost never elected) treated much more seriously than they are at present. Indeed, one of the concerns that people have raised is that decision makers will only treat them seriously if they can pass the test of being democratically representative. Most people have no interest in going down this route and simply want to participate in decision making as individuals or small groups that make no claim to represent any broader constituency. People know that they can't be representative and they feel that one of the ways that decision makers exclude them from the process is to demand that they are. The Commission also notes that the national Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy found evidence throughout Europe that where there was the best balance between representative and participative democracy, not only was democracy enhanced and better decisions made, but participation in elections and support for representatives also increased.

4. Although it's not entirely clear what communities mean by this, they say that they want engagement and involvement in the democratic process to happen as part of their day to day living rather than as a separate thing. The Commission takes this to mean that conversations about community aspirations, public services and infrastructure are taking place in communities throughout the Highland area. However, they're not taking place as part of any formal engagement or consultation process. For example, parents, when they meet at parent and toddler groups or outside nursery are of course discussing the quality of education, primary school buildings and facilities for their children. There seems to be a demand that these sorts of conversations are captured and used in decision making rather than a

separate consultation exercise being contrived around these same issues, which it is unlikely many people will have the time or inclination to attend. This idea of capturing community interest, involvement and views when and where they happen is a key theme that has been raised with the commission to date.

As an addition to this, we have received two further comments. Firstly, communities and individuals are aware that because of the geographical spread of the Highlands, public sector bodies in the region have a very dispersed workforce. This workforce lives in communities and is involved in the kind of conversation and discussions outlined above. Communities are at least asking the question of whether this workforce properly supported and empowered could be one of the ways in which community conversations are carried back to decision makers.

Secondly, as a result of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and agencies' own policies, it is clear that most bodies have made a public commitment to treating the views of the community seriously. If this is genuinely the case, local people are demanding that their time, effort and willingness to engage with agencies is treated as a resource and managed as seriously as finance, capital assets or staffing.

5. Finally, it is clear from responses to our call for evidence and resulting conversations that people in the Highlands see many important decision making processes as very heavily centralised and officer led. Communities hold the view that for good decisions to be made there is a necessary balance between three different inputs. They recognise the need for high quality professional officer advice. They understand the role of elected and appointed decision makers and the important perspective this brings. However, they want to see a third element which is a strong element of community input. The view is that if any one of these elements is missing, less good decisions will be made.

At the moment, the perception is that professional officer input is exceedingly strong and often overpowering. The view of representatives struggles to balance this and the community input is almost entirely missing. The effect of this is that the two elements of democracy; representation and participation, are missing and what we are left with is a system that is more technocratic than democratic.

8. NEXT STEPS

This interim report will be published and presented at a meeting of the Highland Council on the 9th March 2017. Following this, work will continue to discuss local democracy with people across the Highlands to feed into a final report which will be published in May 2017. The Commission will continue to meet regularly to discuss the evidence they are collecting.

As detailed in the methodology section, the work of the Commission can be viewed as three distinct but overlapping phases of work. The Commission will now focus on testing out what it has heard so far, to make sure that this is an accurate reflection, and to better understand how people want local democracy to be strengthened. To do this, a second round of public engagement will occur, using a survey to capture a

broad range of views, and a series of public meetings to have in-depth conversations with people.

The survey will have two main purposes. The first will be to communicate what the Commission believes are the key issues affecting local democracy in the Highlands from the evidence it has collected so far. The second will be to test these issues, and to get a better understanding about how people want local democracy to change.

There will also be a series of public meetings across the Highlands to allow for more in-depth discussions to occur. There will also be a focus on speaking with as many Community Councils as possible through this phase. This for two reasons, firstly to make the best use of their views and expertise, and to recognise their important role in local democracy. And secondly because in the first round of public engagement there was a lot of discussion about the important role that Community Council's play, and a view that many could be a lot more effective than they currently are. The Commission will also continue to be pragmatic and take advantage of opportunities to speak with people in the Highlands as they arise.

In the final phase of work, the Commission will clarify what the main issues affecting local democracy in the Highlands are, identify how these can be improved, and make a series of recommendations to improve local democracy in the Highlands.

If you have any comments or to keep updated with the work of the Commission please visit our website: www.highlanddemocracy.wordpress.com; follow us on Twitter: @Highland_Dem; or email us at: Commission@highland.gov.uk

9. APPENDICES
Appendix 1: Commission Membership

Commission on Highland Democracy: (L-R, Back row) Calum Maclennan; Philomena de Lima; Cllr Thomas Maclennan; Peter Peacock; Cllr Deirdre MacKay; Sheila Fletcher. (L-R, Front row) Cllr Richard Laird; Andrew Thin; Cllr Isobel McCallum; Rory Mair (Chair); Cllr David Alston; Mhairi Wylie. (Not pictured: Ian Ross; Sarah Bruce; Cllr Margaret Davidson)

- **Rory Mair** (Retired Chief Executive of COSLA), Independent 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 Maclennan** (Highland Youth Convener)
- **Sheila Fletcher** (Community Transport Association)
- **Philomena de Lima** (Director of the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands-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)

Appendix 2: 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?
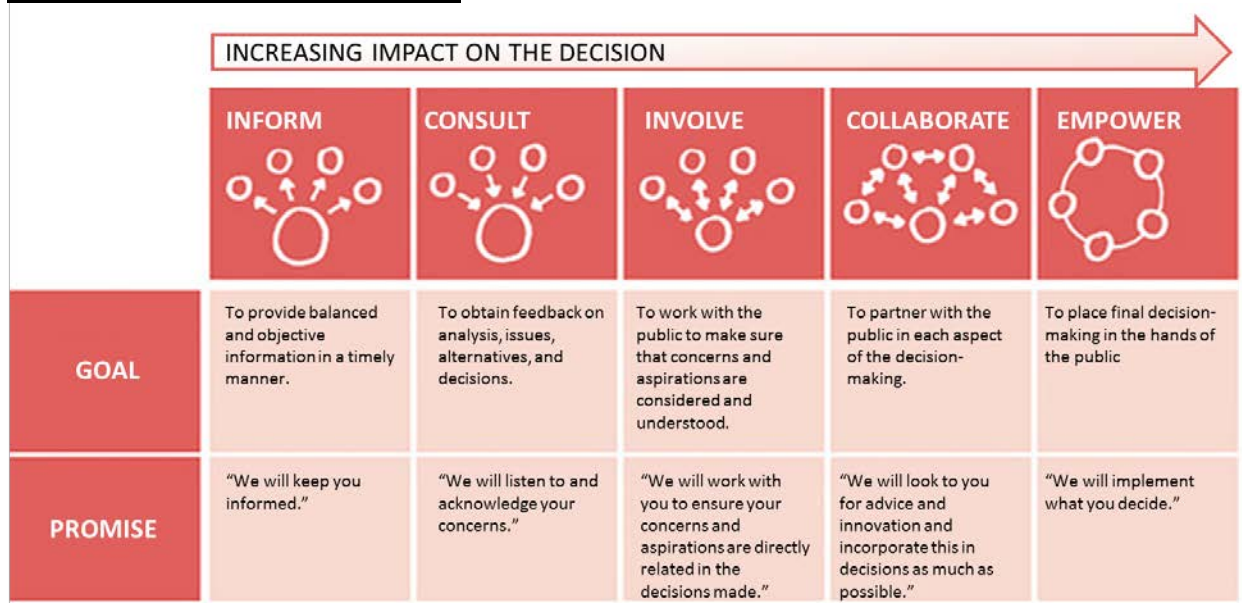

Q3. Is it clear how decisions that affect you have been taken?

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

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
GOAL	To provide balanced and objective information in a timely manner.	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions.	To work with the public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
PROMISE	"We will keep you informed."	"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly related in the decisions made."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible."	"We will implement what you decide."

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

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

Appendix 3: Who the Commission has spoken to

The Commission has attended and spoken to people at the following meetings/ organisations

- Redesigning for Community Action, hosted by Highland Council, Smithton.
- Lochaber Partnership Marketplace, Arisaig .
- Meeting with Tain Community Cllrs, Tain.
- Inverness Youth Conference, Culloden.
- Caithness Youth Conference, Wick.
- Nairn, Badenoch, and Strathspey Youth Conference, Aviemore.
- Lochaber Youth Conference, Fort William.
- Ross and Cromarty Youth Conference, Alness.
- Portree and Plockton Youth Conference, Broadford.
- Commission on Parliamentary Reform
- Cairngorms National Park Authority
- Scottish Government - Civil servants working on the Local Democracy Bill and other relevant policy
- Inclusion Scotland
- Highland Council Redesign Board
- Inverness Community Council Forum

Appendix 4: Secondary Data - Citizens' Panel 2016 Performance and Attitudes Survey

A driving factor in establishing a Commission on Highland Democracy was survey data collected on public attitudes to local democracy. The results from Council's Citizen Panel in 2014 showed that:

- 77% were interested in the democratic process;
- 69% would like to be 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;
- Only 18% feel they have any influence over decision making in their local area.

Whilst the Commission is mainly focused on collecting evidence by speaking with people across the Highlands, it is also prudent to use information that has already been collected in other ways. An excellent source of data which can help to inform the Commission of people's views in the Highlands is the results from the Citizens' Panel 2016 Performance and Attitudes Survey.

The Annual Performance and Attitudes survey of the Citizens' Panel provides information on satisfaction with Council services, Council qualities, and perceptions of community life in the Highlands. There is high confidence that the results are representative of the Highland population and the maturity of the survey means there is information on performance trends over several years.

There were 1,084 responses to the 2016 Performance and Attitudes Survey from the Council's Citizens' Panel of just over 2,340 adults (46% response rate). The number of responses along with the sampling method used provides good validity in the results. Questions and responses from this survey that particularly resonate with the work of the Commission are presented. These focus on Highland Council and its local democratic practise, civic participation and community involvement, and community-led services.

<u>The Highland Council and local democratic practise</u>
In the survey, people were asked for their views of the Council on thirteen different qualities, Table 1. Some of these have strong links to local democracy and local decision making, such as whether the Council listens to local people, is approachable, and involves people in how it spends its money.

Table 1: Views of The Highland Council against thirteen qualities, 2016.

Qualities	2016					Difference between % who agree and % who disagree in		
	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither Agree/ Disagree (%)	Dis-agree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	2016	2015	2014
Is approachable	8	46	34	9	3	42	49	57
Is environmentally friendly	8	48	32	9	3	44	44	49
Maintains good quality local services	6	51	22	19	2	36	47	57
Is helpful	6	42	36	12	4	32	43	47
Is a fair employer	6	29	60	4	1	30	29	30
Treats all residents fairly	5	33	37	18	7	13	14	11
Is aware of people's needs	4	31	36	22	6	8	11	15
Tells local people what it is doing	5	33	31	25	6	7	4	11
Listens to local people	3	28	35	26	8	-3	12	11
Provides value for money	3	23	38	28	8	-10	4	10
Is efficient	3	24	35	30	8	-11	-2	10
Represents your views	3	19	43	27	8	-13	-5	-1
Involves people in how it spends its money	2	18	32	36	12	-28	-17	-18

n=1,062 to 1,075 in 2016

There are five qualities (three in 2015) where the total percentage of people who disagree (either strongly disagree or disagree) with the statement exceeds the total percentage of those who agree (either strongly or just agree) with it. Three of these (emboldened) relate quite strongly to local democracy, representing public dissatisfaction with local democratic practise:

- "**Listens to local people**" (the margin is -3%);
- "Provides value for money" (-10%)
- "Is efficient" (-11%);
- "**Represents your views**" (-13%);
- "**Involves people in how it spends its money**" (-28%).

The quality which scores lowest using this analysis is "Involves people in how it spends money", to which 20% agree (2% strongly so) while 48% disagree (12% strongly so) leaving a margin of -28%. The Council has consistently scored poorly

against this quality, but the view in 2016 represents a significant reduction in public opinion. The declining trend in the public opinion on this Council quality, along with others strongly related local democracy is presented in Figure 1.
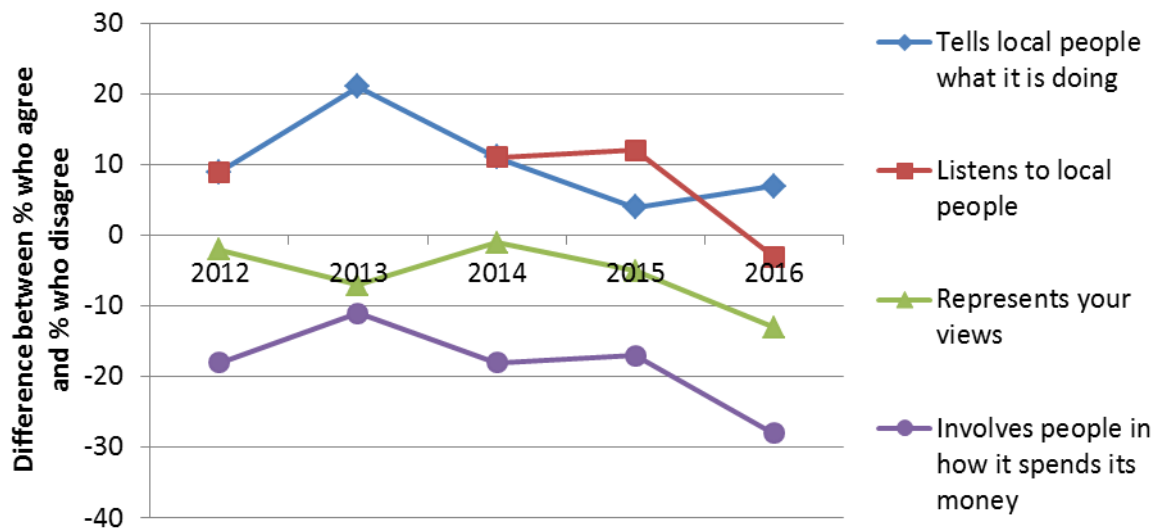

Figure 1: Public opinion on Council qualities which are strongly related to local democracy, 2012-2016.

There has also been consistently negative feedback on the statement "represents your views" since 2012, and this follows a declining trend. In 2016, 22% agreed with this statement (including 3% strongly so) while 35% disagreed (8% strongly so) leaving a margin of -13%.

The number of people who agree that the Council "listens to local people" declined notably in 2016 compared to 2015, and in 2016 more people disagreed with this statement than agreed.

The results from the Council's Citizens' Panel survey indicate that public perceptions of the Council's local democratic practises are largely negative and are declining.

The Scottish Household Survey also contains questions on satisfaction with local democratic practise and service provision. In 2015, 29% of the survey respondents in Highland agreed that they "can influence decisions affecting my local area". This represents an increase over previous years and is higher than the Scottish average, Figure 2.
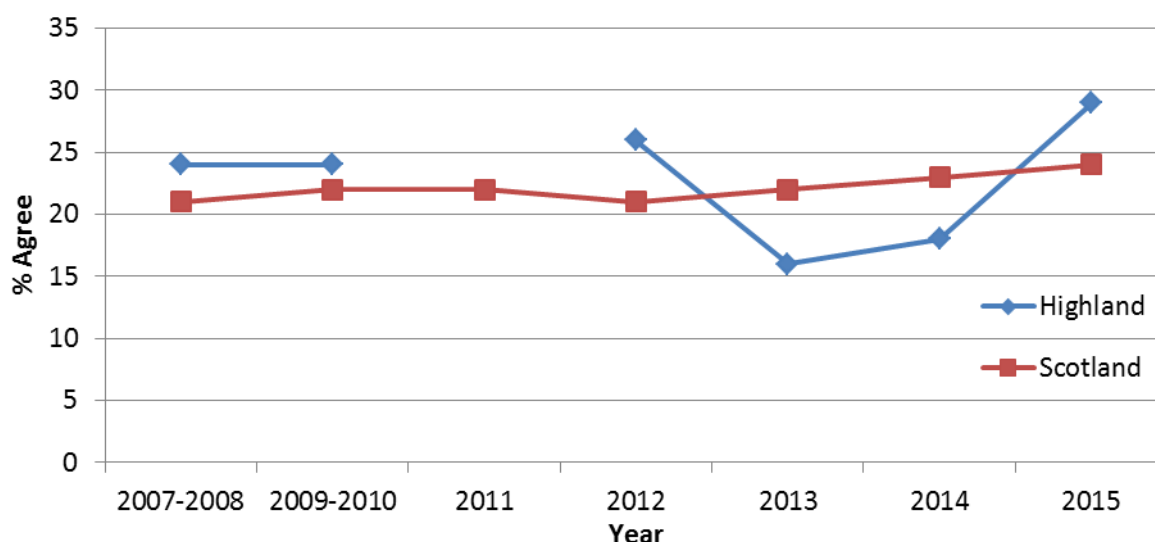
Figure 2: Percentage of people who agree with the statement "I can influence decisions affecting my local area" by year, Scottish Household Survey.

The Scottish Household Survey also asks questions about Local Authority services and performance, Table 2. Highland Council scores highest for "does its best with money" and also for a couple of statements linked to the provision of services: "good at communicating services", 46%, and "high quality services", 40%. It scores lowest for being good at listening, 25%, and for communicating performance, 27%, for which it far below the Scottish average of 38%. Highland Council only scores higher than Scotland on two statements: "I can influence decisions" and "Does its best with money." Only 30% of respondents in Highland want greater involvement in decisions.

Table 2: Percentage agreeing with statements about local authority services and performance, 2015, Scottish Household Survey.

	Highland 2015	Scotland 2015
Good at communicating services	46	46
High quality services	40	46
Good at communicating performance	27	38
Services designed for needs	38	40
Does its best with money	42	41
Addressing key issues	30	36
Good at listening	25	25
I can influence decisions	29	24
I want greater involvement in decisions	30	34

Civic participation and Community Involvement
The survey also includes a number of questions which relate to civic participation and community involvement, these are important components of local democracy, potentially forming part of participative or direct democracy.

When asked about being involved with community activities or organisations, 47% selected that they were involved with none, Table 3. This means that over half (53%) of people who responded are involved in one or more activities and organisations in their community.

The highest percentages of those selecting "none" are found amongst: council tenants (68%); people who are unemployed (58%); and those who are disabled (56%). Conversely, the lowest percentages selecting this option are found amongst: respondents with school aged children (36%); and people aged 16-24 (36%).

Table 3: Community activities/ organisations in which respondents have been involved in the past year.

Activity/ Organisation	(%)
None	47
Participating in a leisure/ sports/ music/ youth or other organisation	28
Volunteering in the running of a leisure/ sports/ music/ youth or other org.	25
Taking part in a local consultation – excluding the Citizens' Panel	13
Involved in a local campaign	10
As a director of a local group	7
A member of a community council	3
Involvement in a development trust	3

n =1,084.

28% of respondents said that they had been "participating in a leisure/ sports/ music/ youth or other organisation" in their communities in the past year. The highest level of such participation is found amongst: those aged 16-24 (51%) and people with school aged children (39%). The lowest level is found amongst people who are disabled (14%).

Some 13% said that they had "taken part in a local consultation – excluding the Citizens' Panel". Just 2% of council tenants said that they had taken part in such a consultation.

The survey also asked: "To what extent are you interested in being involved in a discussion about how to develop or improve your community i.e. talking about what is important to your community?" The survey found that 62% are interested (16% to a great extent and 46% to some extent) in being involved in discussions about developing or improving their communities, Table 4, Whilst 38% were not interested in such involvement.

Table 4: Extent of interest in being involved in discussions about developing or improving their communities

	%
To a great extent	16
To some extent	46
Not really	27
Not at all	11

n=1,061

Across all categories of respondents, interest in involvement was highest amongst respondents who have school aged children (71%). By age group, interest is at its highest level amongst those aged 25-44 (69%) followed by those aged 16-24 (66%), then those aged 45-64 (63%) and finally, those aged 65+ (52%).

Those who gave a positive response to being involved in discussions about developing or improving communities were then asked in what form they would prefer that involvement to be, Table 5. All options that were presented in the survey are find similar levels of support, though there is a slight preference for involvement to be through informal discussions and using local groups and organisations.

Table 5: Views on the means by which respondents would like to be involved in discussions about improving their communities. (multiple responses allowed)

	%
Informal discussions with local people	53
Through using local groups/ organisations	48
Through online forums	45
Taking part in focus groups	41

n=598

The only means of involvement which gained the backing of more than 50% was "informal discussions with local people". The highest levels of support for this are from: people who are disabled (73%); and those aged 65+ (65%).

48% of respondents answered "through using local groups/ organisations". By age group this means was supported by 59% of those aged 16-24, 54% of those aged 25-44 but by 43% of those aged 45-64 and 38% of those aged 65+.

Online forums was selected by 45%, and was particularly favoured by those under 45 – selected by 68% of those aged 25-44 and 59% of those aged 16-24. 40% of those aged 45-64 and only 25% of those aged 65+ selected this option.

41% of the sample selected "taking part in focus groups". Again there is a difference by age group for while 48% of both those aged 16-24 and those aged 25-44 and 42% of those aged 45-64 opted for this choice, it was selected by just 27% of those aged 65+.

People who responded to say they were not interested in being involved in discussions about developing or improving their community (Table 4) were asked why, and given six options to select from, Table 6.

Table 6: Reasons for lack of interest in being involved in discussions about improving or developing their local communities. (multiple responses allowed)

	%
Not enough time	53
I don't think this would make a difference	35
Don't feel I have the skills or knowledge	25
I'm not comfortable in these situations	23
Public bodies don't listen to communities	19
Other	14

n=417

Just over half (53%) responded "not enough time", and this was chosen by 69% of those aged 25-44, 62% of those aged 45-64, and 61% of those respondents with school aged children.

35% responded "I don't think this would make a difference", whilst a quarter chose "don't feel I have the skills or knowledge", 23% selected "I'm not comfortable in these situations", and 19% - chose as a reason for their lack of interest "public bodies don't listen to communities".

The most common reasons people gave under the "other" option were: "old age"; "health"; and caring responsibilities. Others cited reasons such as: having been involved in the past and now feeling it was the turn of others; frustration with the functioning local groups; the absence of effective executive powers and/ or financial resources at a local level; and feeling unwelcome and unwanted as an "incomer".

The survey shows that civic participation in Highland is high, with most people being involved in some form of community activity or group. There is some support from people to be more involved in developing and improving communities, and there was support to do this through informal discussions, through local groups and organisations, and online forums.

Community led services
The Performance and Attitudes survey also contains questions on communities providing services for themselves. Half of those responding to the survey agreed that communities should become more involved in providing services, Table 7. The highest levels of support for this are: people aged 16-24 (62%) and council tenants (62%).

Table 7: Views on communities providing services. Response to: "Do you agree that your community could become more involved in providing the services you and your community need?"

	%				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree/ Disagree	Dis- agree	Strongly disagree
Community involvement in providing services	15	35	38	10	2

n=1,063

Those who disagreed, were asked why they felt their community could not be more involved in providing services locally, Table 8.

Table 8: Reasons for feeling communities cannot be more involved in providing services locally. (multiple responses allowed)

Reasons	%
Lack of financial resources	64
Lack of people resources	56
Lack of lead body	40
The need for access to suitable facilities	37
Don't have the skills and knowledge locally	36
Lack of community transport	20

n= 112

The survey also included a question on: "To what extent are you interested in being involved in the delivery of services that your community needs?" The results show that 7% are interested to "a great extent" in becoming involved while 48% are interested "to some extent", Table 9. Interest levels are highest amongst respondents with school aged children (64%).

Table 9: Interest in being involved in the delivery of the services.

Extent of Interest	%
To a great extent	7
To some extent	48
Not really	30
Not at all	15

n=1,036

30% responded that they are "not really" interested while 15% are "not at all" interested in becoming involved in delivery of such services. Those who are "not at all" interested are found to the greatest extent amongst people who are disabled (26%) and those who are aged 65+ (23%).

Those who responded that they were not interested in being involved in the delivery of services, were asked what would encourage or support them to be more involved. The two ideas that received most support were: "flexibility to participate" (47%); and "being clear what is needed locally" (42%), Table 10.

Table 10: Support to be more involved in the delivery of services. (multiple responses allowed)

Ideas	%
Flexibility to participate	47
Being clear what is needed locally	42
Some project funding	20
Training	17
Signposting/ guidance	8
Other	18

n=328

Most prominent amongst the ideas that were detailed under "other" (which was selected by 18%) were: "time"; and "health". Other suggestions included: "financial incentive e.g. discount on council tax for volunteering"; "ensuring funding and quality of service." A small number of respondents felt that the services being discussed were what the council was paid to do. One said: "That's what the Council is for. If communities take initiative on something organically that's fine. But it should not be assumed." Another said: "Stop trying to get community groups to work for nothing."

Whilst the survey found support for communities to be more involved in providing services, only 7% were interested in being involved in the delivery of services in their community to a great extent.