

RETHINKING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: It is time to do better things not just different things

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CRNS faces the same funding issues as its members. Whilst its work gains recognition there still remains tension between funding streams and long term sustainability.

CRNS has a large, diverse and growing membership spread throughout the 32 Local Authority areas of Scotland. Each of these members work within reuse, repair and/or recycling of resources and focus on the prevention of landfill through diverting materials into reuse streams. CRNS as the lead body for the sector aims to support members in a variety of ways:

- Representing the views of the sectors at local and national level
- Lobbying for change to regulation and legislation to increase reuse and improve the overall context in which members operate

New initiatives

We have put in place a number of new initiatives to dampen the effect of any loss or reduction in funding, however we recognise that as with any new venture there are risks and no guarantee of success. That said, CRNS has a positive outlook and has excellent working relationships with our strategic partners and other stakeholders.

At a recent meeting of The Scottish Community Alliance in Edinburgh attended by a Scottish Minister there was a very positive and welcome discussion around the issues that the community sector faces. From the discussion it was evident that the issues CRNS and its members face are replicated in varying degrees in many of the groups represented at the meeting. As a relative newcomer to the community sector I am constantly struck by the amount of goodwill and generosity of spirit I encounter. I am also struck by the need to be a little more direct in selling the advantages and strengths of community engagement.

A clear need to change the conversation

The imbalance between large publicly funded bodies and small community based, grant funded organisations seems to me to be a bit of an oxymoron in that the basis of funding appears to work from an assumption that large public sector organisations should rightfully be funded because they innately do something that the community needs, while small community based organisations need to apply for funding and prove their value. Having worked in the public and private sector there is, in my view, a clear need to change the conversation and the set of assumptions upon which funding decisions are made. A mature decision making process should allow for rational discussion and challenge of old assumptions, at the very least on the basis that if we keep doing the same things we will keep getting the same result. So, if a community based organisation, with the support of its community, wished to maintain its own landscape and plant edible crops instead of having parkland I would ask why it needed to prove that this was a worse option than allowing the Local Authority to simply continue to main that piece of ground as a park?

The notion that communities can and should make decisions for themselves begs the question of how to engage and what methods of participation would provide for legitimate actions. The concept of Community Councils was, in part, created to fill a perceived democratic deficit however their structures, powers and influencing abilities have proven to be patchy at best and ineffective at worst. I would argue that it has not been a lack of effort or determination that has made Community Council operation so ineffective but the overall framework in which these bodies sit that have had the impact shown so far.

The Community Empowerment Bill

The Community Empowerment Bill, currently progressing through Parliament aims to give Community Planning Partnerships more powers and requires stronger engagement with local groups and Community Councils. However laudable that plan is there is still an imbalance in that relationship. In an STV news programme it was reported that Scottish film directors had had twenty eight meetings with Creative Scotland and Scottish Enterprise without a positive outcome. Twenty eight days of discussion with fully funded bodies by individuals operating as freelancers or small businesses is an expensive example of how difficult it can be to negotiate effectively and how unbalanced such negotiations are. This example is,

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no doubt, one of many that could be cited and is merely referenced to show that governance assumptions and funding mechanisms need a rethink if Scotland is to become the vibrant and democratically engaged country that it so easily could be.

Scotland is on the brink of a paradigm shift in its cultural attitudes and societal change is clearly underway. The Independence Referendum created a paradigm shift in political understanding and was a truly remarkable process to be part of. Regardless of the outcome people across Scotland began to see politics as relevant, interesting and something with real meaning. Community groups have enjoyed that sense of engagement for many years but have lacked the ability to capitalise on this because of scale and fragmentation. We now have an opportunity to use a listening government to change the rules of engagement and make headway in rebalancing the playing field to a more equal and equitable space.

The Christie Renewing Public Services report talked about People, Place, Prevention and Productivity and is a start point for a more open dialogue on how to improve the way Scotland works. If serious about change we need to begin to rethink our investment priorities and the way in which we measure the return on those investments. Community groups and intermediaries like CRNS might ask, what would happen without our input? Would the underfunding or removal of such groups create greater democratic deficit, would the public pound go less far and be less effective in creating the society in which we want to live?

It is time to do better things not just different things

We need an overhaul of how to fund those aspects of community work that can't and arguably should not make money. Some things need to be done for the sake of it and not because they will generate revenue. If we argued that education should be sustainable and revenue generating we would quickly have a society that was intolerable. The same can be said for many aspects of community work, it is fundamentally a good thing and should not be diverted into activity that simply aims to generate funds.

Maybe it is time to reverse engineer funding streams and begin with a different premise; one that accepts that not all community based activity should aim to be self-sufficient. There are many practical ways that things could change, for example annual funding rounds create bureaucracy and divert energy and resource into creating applications. The knock on effect is not just eating into the value of the funds available, it has a very direct impact on those people employed on rolling or annual contracts. Financial institutions are reluctant to provide services (mortgages) to people employed on short term contracts and this limits the choices that people have in their personal lives. We are creating an industry out of funding applications and planning and the impacts on the ground are diluted as a result.

Perhaps the community sector is too shy in telling its story, perhaps it feels it won't be heard or that the language it uses to describe success isn't valued in the same way as the corporate speak of larger organisations. Should community groups begin to talk publicly about investment prospectus, return on capital employed, portfolio management key results areas, and adopt other such terminology to fit into the corporateness of government? I wonder if it is incumbent upon our sector to make these adaptations or is it a reversal of approach that is needed. As with many things in life the middle ground is most likely, however the status quo will deliver only what it has in the past, it will not allow for innovation or creativity and community will stifle under the need to fit the current agenda.

Community groups must constantly search sources of funding to maintain employment

Instead of focusing on delivery many community groups have to divert time and energy into chasing money to keep them afloat and if unsuccessful the investments previously made are lost. Too often community groups chase funds through pots of money made available simply because it is available and not necessarily because it is the focus of their real need. The growth in food banks, it could be argued is an example of this. There is clearly a need to support people in need through the provision of food and food banks are clearly needed, however addressing food poverty in this way might not be the only or best solution. Community groups are constantly searching sources of funding to maintain employment created through hard work and effort so that this investment is not lost. It is a self-defeating process and one that we can change.

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