



# Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations

*Keep it Local!*

## **GWSF Response - Scottish Government's 'Democracy Matters' consultation.**

### **Introduction**

The Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (GWSF) is the leading membership and campaigning body for local community-controlled housing associations and co-operatives (CCHAs) in the west of Scotland. The Forum represents 64 members who together own around 28% of all RSL housing in Scotland. We have 41 members in Glasgow.

Our members provide decent, affordable housing for 80,000 households in west central Scotland and also provide factoring services to around 20,000 owners in their neighbourhoods. Crucially, CCHAs work *with* local people to make their communities stronger, and better places to live.

The community-controlled model works. For over 40 years CCHAs have been at the vanguard of strategies which have helped to improve the physical, social and economic well-being of their communities.

The Forum's key objectives are:

- To promote the values and achievements of the community-controlled housing movement
- To make the case for housing and regeneration policies that support its members' work
- To promote information sharing and mutual support among CCHAS
- To facilitate partnership working between CCHAs and external bodies, including the Scottish Government, local authorities, and the NHS.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the 'Democracy Matters' conversation and our response has been developed by members of the Forum, and reflects their experiences of working alongside local people in their communities for the past four decades.

**Q1. Tell us about your experiences of getting involved in decision-making processes that affect your local community or community of interest.**

Community Controlled Housing Associations (CCHAs) are the best established and largest example of community empowerment in Scotland. CCHAs are a unique Scottish asset which *already* provides local participatory democracy in the delivery of a key social good. However, it often feels that this community democracy is delivered *despite* rather than *with* the support of the existing democratic processes.

For over 40 years, community controlled housing associations have delivered local, democratically accountable housing and services within local communities. CCHAs have over 1,000 management committee members who control assets of over £7,000 million and employ over 2,000 staff. The employment of staff, the fair and transparent allocation of homes on the basis of need, the setting of rents and charges, investment in repairing and improving homes and building new homes are all delivered within a democratic, community setting and with high standards of governance and accountability.

For our members physical, social and economic regeneration in their communities has always been closely intertwined and they have been pioneers of this holistic approach to regeneration over the last four decades. Consequently, local community controlled housing associations have provided a vehicle for extending local democracy into other aspects of neighbourhood governance.

This has meant that services traditionally delivered by local authorities including: advice services; debt and money advice; cleansing/bulk uplift/landscape and ground maintenance; community education and community engagement and development; regeneration services; employment support and training; signposting to health and social care; health and well-being initiatives; and affordable childcare are often carried out by local community controlled housing associations and are all subject to the same good governance arrangements at a local level.

**Q2. Would you like your local community or community of interest to have more control over some decisions? If yes, what sorts of issues would those decisions cover?**

It is important to separate out the issues of local service delivery from that of local community control as in theory, more democratic accountability may not lead to services being delivered by local agents. However in reality the two issues are often inextricably linked. It is also crucial to combat the view that there is no interest or appetite amongst communities for greater local control. Very often the lack of local response to the 'dead hand' of public agencies and "consultation" events is not an indicator of a lack of community interest.

The CCHA model demonstrates that good governance and local accountability can be successfully matched with excellent service delivery. Planning decisions, schools, community safety, neighbourhood management (i.e. cleansing services), sports and

recreation, community halls and parks, are all areas where there is a demonstrable appetite for local control and where either the existing community controlled housing associations' role can be expanded or where complementary models can be developed. However any programme of moving decision making down to a local level will need a parallel programme of decentralising budgets and / or binding co-production protocols (e.g., aspects of primary health care are probably best co-produced) . We believe there are potential opportunities to do this if we can begin to have honest conversations with local authorities about *real* Participatory Budgeting and local decision making.

**Q3. When thinking about decision-making, 'local' could mean a large town, a village, or a neighbourhood. What does 'local' mean to you and your community?**

We think it is important to challenge the abuse of language in relation to community control and localism. There are many positives in the Scottish Government's push for Community Planning and in the Health and Social Care Integration agenda. However, particularly in a Glasgow context to refer to "Community" Planning Partnerships and their sister Health and Social Care Partnerships as evidence of "community" or localism is a cynical abuse of these concepts. That is not to say that there are not good examples of CCHAs being at the forefront of 'on the ground' CPP and HSCP initiatives which do work well. Thriving Places and Community Connectors are two excellent examples of these.

We strongly believe that *true* community empowerment can only be achieved as a result of action taking place at local level with local people leading, supported by trusted community anchor organisations. As the community controlled housing model demonstrates, when community empowerment happens in this way it leads to sustainable and enduring physical and social regeneration within communities.

From the bottom up, local, neighbourhood and/or community will be self-defining and have a historical legitimacy. Self-serving administrative definitions are alien, imposed and ineffective. The success of the community controlled sector is that "neighbourhood" and "community" has been locally defined and this has provided robust building blocks to ensure longevity and sustainability. The sharpest indicators of the success of this approach are where traditional community controlled housing associations are now demolishing poorly designed and maintained municipal housing from the 1960s and '70s in neighbourhoods where the traditional pre 1919 tenements (the cause that led to the formation of many of these housing associations) remain popular and well maintained.

**Q4. Are there existing forms of local level decision-making which could play a part in exercising new local powers? Are there new forms of local decision-making that could work well? What kinds of changes might be needed for this to work in practice?**

Although the community controlled housing sector has many challenges we think we can point with some pride to the success in marrying good governance, local participative democratic structures and robust and popular service delivery. We think there is value in

looking to expand the role of CCHAs with appropriate funding support. But also to expand the model of community controlled housing associations into other aspects of public life at a local level. In some communities, development trusts or similar may be the alternative delivery model. We also think that the existence of robust, community controlled institutions with sound governance track records can be a platform for delivering local democracy in a wider sense. Some local decision making does not require bespoke structures, processes or indeed need to be organised; instead it requires a trusted local delivery body that can bring neighbourhoods and/or community interest together, sometimes for very short life exercises.

For example plans to develop a new park or play area in a local community may need a short term action group or steering group established but as long as this is rooted in and linked to a robust local organisation with good governance, the democratic process is enhanced. However, this role would need to be resourced and equally important, cultural attitudes within local government from officials and elected members would need to change.

There are examples of good and developing practice in Glasgow's Thriving Places communities where co-production, cross sectoral workforce development and community/participatory budgeting are having extremely positive impacts. This is in the context of community controlled housing associations fully committing to the role of community anchor thus providing stability, accountability, additional resources and permanence to the process. Direct representative democracy has a role to play but cannot be allowed to control all key decisions. Participatory budgeting and devolution of control / ownership to local groups and local citizens' panels / juries are all crucial features.

#### **Q5. Do you have any other comments, ideas or questions? Is there more you want to know?**

Innovation and risk taking are part of a vibrant democratic process. Overly prescriptive local and central government, and disproportionate interventions by regulation can sometimes help to create a risk-averse culture that discourages participation.

The community controlled housing sector was initially borne out of a vibrant reaction to failing private housing and inappropriate government response. It involved considerable risk taking and an enthusiasm to problem solving which might be more challenging to replicate in an overly prescriptive culture. Improving local democracy is likely to be messy but as long as it is supported by good governance it is a prize worth striving for.

The myriad of projects, initiatives and services that our members deliver (either alone or in partnership) in their communities are examples of joined-up, holistic regeneration in practice. The sheer range of CCHAs' activities illustrates two key things: firstly, CCHAs' commitment to improving their communities; secondly, their appetite for innovation.

CCHAs' 'bottom-up' approach and the services and projects that they operate on the ground in their communities can help to meet or operate in tandem with bigger picture 'top-down'

structural policy messages and initiatives. Strategies which encourage a two-way 'flow' between the two can only lead to improvements on the ground for communities. We hope that the Democracy Matters 'conversation' initiates new ways of thinking about both local decision making and local service delivery. Our members want to be involved and are up for the challenge.