

Area Partnerships

General

The Scottish Government is keen to enable more local community engagement and decision making. This has been policy since the introduction of the Community empowerment Act of 2015.

Area Partnerships are central to allowing local communities to have their say by raising issues and suggesting solutions; identifying projects and agreeing priorities; and providing a measure of oversight for local needs as reflected in local government decision making. Area Partnerships require to be nuanced to reflect the demographic differences between wards.

Historically, Area Partnerships have been chaired by solely by elected representatives and have operated under agendas set by Scottish Borders Council. However, from April 2021, under new legislation and as part of the Community Empowerment Act, local authorities are required to put 1% of their annual budget into Participatory Budgeting, where the communities themselves decide on how the money is to be spent.

It is five years since the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act and little progress appears to have been made by SBC in meeting the aspirations of the Scottish Government. This is not solely the view of Peebles and District Community Council, but of other Community Councils across the Scottish Borders and more importantly by Audit Scotland. Audit Scotland considered that “the council now needs to make better progress with its community planning partners in delivering crucial elements of their community empowerment obligations. It seems clear that SBC view Community Empowerment in a totally different way than that envisaged by the Scottish Government. SBC apparently view the issue, solely as engagement (communication) whereas empowerment implies involvement in the decision making process.

In 2019, Simon Cameron, Development Manager COSLA, gave a presentation on the COSLA view of Community Empowerment summarised which included:

- a) Proactively involving and engaging local people in making decisions for how public money is spent in their communities
- b) Engaging people in the design of policy and strategy that eliminates participation gaps.
- c) Empowerment is a process of deliberate dialogue that allocates resources in a way that delivers shared and individual outcomes because of direct community participation in the decision making process.

Recommended Changes

1. Re-title the Community Engagement Team and Community Engagement Officers to Community Empowerment Team and Community Empowerment Officers.
2. Revise the SBC code of Governance Scheme of Administration by referring to the Community Empowerment Act incorporating the 1973 Local Government Act as at section 20(1)(b) of the Community Empowerment Act headed

“Meaning of community participation body” “A community council established in accordance with Part 4 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973”

3. Area Partnership meetings should have a shared governance, where the agenda is agreed by SBC elected representatives and Community Councils in collaboration and subject areas should be led (chaired) by the subject area sponsor.
4. Present negativity needs to be overcome through a visible partnership between elected representatives, Community Council officers and SBC officials.
5. Only elected representatives and Community Councils together should be able to agree priorities and not SBC officials in relation to participatory budgeting.
6. Where an issue under discussion is Scottish Borders wide and therefore affects more than the local area, the Local Area Partnership should agree a common position, that is then taken forward by the elected representatives to SBC.
7. In relation to local Area Partnerships, only the elected representatives within that area should be able to vote on local issues.
8. Priorities should be judged on a) place, b) whether they meet documented local plans, c) they are an agreed benefit to the community and d) the issue would not be progressed in any other way. It is not up to SBC to identify all projects and certainly not to dictate priorities.
9. Funding needs to be seen to be fairly allocated and therefore a mechanism based on population may be considered the best.
10. The budget requires flexibility, where projects can span budget periods and unused amounts can be carried forward into future years.
11. Best practice procedures may be found in other local authority areas such as East Lothian and Lanarkshire
12. Adopt the recommendation of SCDC recognising regional and local nuances, grant them powers to manage budgets and operate like community trusts.
- 13.