Connected Communities

Reframing citizen relationships with the public sector in a time of austerity: community empowerment in England and Scotland

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Executive Summary

This project aimed to investigate how the differing policy stances of the Scottish and UK public sectors to state-citizen relations are being rolled out in a period of austerity. More specifically we examined the mechanisms through which the role of the state in relation to community empowerment is being changed in light of the 'Big Society' agenda (including the Localism Act 2011) in England and preparations for the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill in Scotland. To achieve this we actively engaged stakeholders and community organisations in debates around co-production and community empowerment through:

- a practitioner workshop involving grassroots organisations and community workers from the North East of England and Scotland;
- a policy symposium with key stakeholders to draw practical and policy lessons from the similarities and differences between England and Scotland in relation to community empowerment; and
- a virtual 'Community Learning and Research Network' of key stakeholders and third sector organisations.

The findings from the workshop and symposium activity reveal a shared sense of anxiety about the likely impact of funding cuts on the future of public services among the representatives of third sector organisations from both Scotland and England, although significant cuts had yet to take effect, particularly in Scotland. This report summarizes the discussions held at the two events and also identifies future directions of research.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Project Partners: Association for Public Services Excellence (APSE), Catalyst, Dundee City Council, Locality, Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service (CVS), Regional Refugee Forum (RRF), Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network (SURF), Scottish Community Alliance, Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDS), Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO).

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Introduction

According to the UK's coalition government, the Localism Act 2011 aims to reverse decades of central government control of local affairs. Framed as part of the government's 'Big Society' agenda, the Act seeks to strengthen local democracy by giving more power and freedom to councils and neighbourhoods and by reforming the planning system in favour of local communities. Most of the key provisions of the Localism Act relate only to England, and in the post-devolution UK there are signs that Scotland may be offering a different version of central-local relations and community empowerment from that emerging in England. This is evident from the Scottish government's continuing support for the joint Community Empowerment statement of 2007. The Scottish Independent Budget Review (2010) and the Christie Commission on Scottish public service reform (2011) also support the continued role of Scotland's government working with communities in the current period of austerity and playing a central role in the delivery of public services and welfare (Riddoch, 2010). There is also a strong contrast between the introduction in Scotland of Community Planning Partnerships designed to meet objectives agreed with the Scottish government and the more market-led 'neighbourhood planning' reforms being promoted by the Localism Act.

Consequently, the trajectory and composition of public sector cuts and their local impacts are likely to be different in England and Scotland (and indeed in different parts of England), leading to very different pressures on the quality of life of citizens and the quality of public services for users in different places. Our project sought to investigate these emerging trends and undertake a comparative analysis of the approach to community empowerment by the public sector in Scotland and England. In order to explore how the differing policy stances of the Scottish and UK public sectors to state-citizen relations are developing in a period of austerity, the project developed a three-way dialogue between academics, policy makers and third sector representatives via the forum of two events: a) a practitioner workshop and b) a policy symposium.

Practitioner workshop *Softening Austerity? Community empowerment in Scotland and England* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 24-25 April 2012)

This two-day workshop allowed us to collate first-hand accounts of practitioners' perceptions of the differences and similarities in approaches to community empowerment approaches evident in Scotland and England. It also raised a range of questions about the

changing nature of citizen-state relationships which we discuss as future research directions in the final section in this report.

The workshop brought together participants from the four collaborating universities (Durham, Birmingham, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt), IPPR North and representatives of third sector organisations. The third sector was represented by fifteen participants (listed in appendix). The workshop involved a combination of presentations and structured discussions to identify the main similarities and differences in approaches to community empowerment in Scotland and England. The main similarities identified were :

- The context of the economic recession and its impact.
- The vocabulary used to describe the role of the voluntary and community sector has undergone a change from the language of resistance and radical change to a language of partnership with the state.
- In both Scotland and England, governments feel more secure working with bigger organisations rather than small community groups (though the rhetoric is changing with the 'Big Society' initiative in England).
- The questions of who represents communities and how to make a positive difference in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is contested and debated in both Scotland and England.
- In both cases there is a need to renew the cycle of empowerment starting with safe trusted spaces where people can meet, social links can be formed and through which knowledge can flow. It was felt that spaces for community groups to meet are becoming less and less available.
- Funding cuts are having an impact in the support services that are needed at each stage of the empowerment process.
- Educational courses in community development are disappearing in both Scotland and England.
- Governments demand greater competition within the voluntary sector.
- Funding for grassroots advocacy is limited and insufficient.
- There is a need for long term strategy and interventions for community empowerment rather than short terms responses triggered by events such as the economic recession.
- Previously available pathways for individuals to participate (such as the path from community activist through local political parties to election as a councillor) have become fractured and less easy to navigate.
- There is increasing marketization of public services and sub-contracting to the voluntary and community sector and private agencies.

The main differences in approaches to community empowerment between Scotland and England as identified by the participants are summarized in the table below.

England	Scotland
Ideology	
Market driven/ neoliberal economy.	Social Democratic.
Response to Economic Recession	
Centralised responses to austerity (example Localism Act (passed without a preceding White Paper, the 'Big Society' initiatives).	Policy discussion on empowerment e.g. the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services
Funding cuts and their Timing	
Shorter lead-in time to cuts in local government hence the a more immediate impact.	Longer lead-in time to cuts in local government, hence scope for learning from consequences of cuts being experienced in England.
Political Discourse	
England has a more joined together, coherent political narrative, though it is often not recognised that it is specific to England, rather than the UK as a whole.	Scotland has a good 'marketing story' about itself reflected in SNP discourse but there is a lack of connection with the wider electorate and their attitudes to Scotland's relationship with the UK.
Population	
Challenges in managing service provision for a highly diverse population.	Scotland has a more homogeneous population though there are differences between urban centres and the highlands.
Impact of funding cuts	
Cuts are reducing the amount of community regeneration work.	No great reduction in community development and regeneration work to date, but not enough investment and support either.
Professionalization	
Lack of insistence on professional qualification. Community work seen as just any other volunteer job.	More stress on professional qualifications in community development and education for community workers.
Role of the State	
Impression among some third sector representatives that the state is creating barriers for community empowerment.	The state not seen as a barrier but as an enabler (or potential enabler) of community empowerment initiatives.

Policy Symposium *Fostering Citizen-State Relations in a Time of Austerity: An Anglo—Scottish Conversation* (Edinburgh, 7-8 November 2012)

The symposium provided a forum for an Anglo-Scottish conversation on the changing nature of citizen-state relations. It brought together participants from the four collaborating universities, IPPR North, the Scottish government and third sector representatives. The third sector was represented by ten participants (see appendix). The event provided a platform for sharing and triangulating different knowledges about how state-society relations are being changed in light of the 'Big Society' agenda in England and the Community Empowerment Bill in Scotland.

The symposium began with an introduction from Katie Schmuecker (IPPR North) outlining the emerging impact of the UK coalition government's localism and open public services

agenda. This was followed by a talk from Alasdair McKinlay of the Scottish government's Local Government and Third Sector directorate, introducing the aims, objectives and the desired impact of the Community Empowerment Bill. Four third sector representatives, two each from Scotland and England provided a commentaries on approaches to localism and community empowerment in Scotland and England respectively. The presentations were followed by focus group discussions comparing Scottish and English approaches to citizen-state relations.

The symposium also saw Scottish and English third sector representatives sharing stories and experiences of coping with and preparing for austerity. The final section of the event focused on the role of 'toolkits'. Andrew Paterson presented the work of the Scottish Community Development Centre in developing toolkits for community empowerment. The symposium concluded with a discussion in a 'conversation café' format on the efficacy of toolkits in delivering community empowerment under conditions of austerity.

Key Outputs

The outputs from the project include:

1. *Softening Austerity? Localism and Community Empowerment:* a collection of essays and reflections on localism and community empowerment in England and Scotland. A revised version is to be published by IPPR North.
2. A collective response to the consultation on the Scottish government's Community Empowerment Bill (www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0041/00412000.pdf).
3. Community Learning & Research Network website (www.dogweb.dur.ac.uk/CLARN) bringing together the collaborating universities, IPPR North and the eighteen third sector organisations that participated in the project events. The website includes case study materials, interviews with stakeholders and other resources.
4. *Plumbers without Toolkits: Efficacy of community empowerment toolkits in times of austerity* a pamphlet summary of insights from the projects about the value of community empowerment toolkits and their use in community organising.

All outputs are available to view online at www.dogweb.dur.ac.uk/CLARN.

Directions for future research

The project examined the different approaches to community empowerment in Scotland and England through an engagement with community practitioners from the voluntary and third sector and representatives of local government. Practitioners identified a number of differences between Scotland and England in approaches to community empowerment, arising from contrasting histories, institutional arrangements, political traditions and modes of policy making. However, a majority agreed that there are more similarities than

differences between the two nations, particularly in the current context of fiscal austerity. Participants identified a number of key questions for future research, a follows:

- How can the voluntary and community sector become a route for imagining creative solutions to the impact of austerity?
- How can we create new forms of ownership of public assets that build on existing community relationships?
- How can community empowerment be harnessed in creative ways to further co-production in public services delivery without necessarily resorting to marketization?
- What role does employment play in community empowerment and what are the implications for the voluntary and community sector?
- What are the 'triggers' or 'tipping points' that enable sustainable community empowerment and how can they be supported?
- How can participatory action research be used to address these questions?

References

The project website www.dur.ac.uk/geography/communityempowerment includes participant presentations, a detailed summary of the workshop and symposium programme, discussions and photos.

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Riddoch, L. (2010) 'Mini-councils will energise Scotland's communities' The Scotsman, 28.06.10.

Appendix: Workshop (w) and symposium (s) participants

Mo Bains	Association for Public Services Excellence, APSE	s
David Bek	Durham University	s
Nigel Bishop	Shropshire Council	w
Tony Bovaird	Birmingham University	w
Claire Bynner	Glasgow University	s
Michelle Carrahar	Locality	w
Herbert Dirahu	Regional Refugee Forum(RRF)	w
Catherine Durose	Birmingham University	w s
Stuart Fairweather	Dundee City Council	w s
Georgina Fletcher	Regional Refugee Forum (RRF)	w
Fiona Garven	Scottish Community Development Centre, SCDC	s
Martin Gollan	Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service, CVS	w s
Andrew Gray	Academic Services for Public Management	w
James Hadman	Catalyst	w
Angus Hardie	Scottish Community Alliance	w
Annette Hastings	Glasgow University	w s
Ima Jackson	Glasgow Refugee Asylum and Migration network, GRAMNet	s
Brian MacDonald	Scotland''s Independent Regeneration Network (SURF)	w
Gordon MacLeod	Durham University	s
Peter Matthews	Heriot-Watt University	w s
Alasdair McKinlay	Scottish Government	s
Duncan McNaught	West of Scotland Housing Association	w
Andy Milne	Scotland''s Independent Regeneration Network (SURF)	w
Adnan Miyasar	Arab Scottish Federation	s
Paul O'Brien	Association for Public Service Excellence, APSE	w
Andrew Orton	Durham University	w
Joe Painter	Durham University	w s
Raksha Pande	Durham University	w s
Andrew Paterson	Scottish Community Development Centre	w s
Steve Rolfe	Glasgow University	s
Katie Schmuecker	IPPR North	w s
Felix Spittal	Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation SCVO	w s
Elizabeth Sunduzwey	Regional Refugee Forum	w
Dennis Tallan	Community Matters	s
Chris Wade	Action for Market Towns, AMT	s
Jen Wingate	Durham University	w
Steven Wray	East and Midlothian Equally Well	w

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities*."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx