OUR DEMOCRACY

ACT AS IF WE OWN THE PLACE.

Govan
4 Feb 2017

COUNCIL REPORT

The Our Democracy Campaign

Our Democracy is a coalition of agencies and campaigners determined to make Scotland's local democracy work better. The campaign is based on a simple principle; that people flourish when they have the most control over their lives. Do current cultures and systems of local democracy act to encourage or to limit this? Our Democracy is helping to organise a series of 'Act As If Councils' around Scotland. These 'Act as if Councils' are local, self-selecting, deliberative forums organised in partnership with a broad range of different local organisations, where people can discuss and imagine what it would be like to run their place and what they might do if they had the power.


Showcase positive actions & groups on social + local media
Break up GCC Give community tax raising power
Vote
ENCOURAGING THOSE WITH POTENTIAL


SUPPORT


local
Community
community
people
People
Lack
space
History
develop
enterprises
Confidence
Good
Make
Kelvingrove
Housing
Common
awareness
etc
Engagement
Outdoor
Planning
Parliament
Recognise
representation
time
hope
create
facilities
Money
meeting
Councils
Centre
Structures
power
action
need
Park
Children's
Govanhill
know
networks
hubs
pick
charge
Responsibility
see
places
Bank
Resources
groups
poo
Focus
proper
social
vote
chaos
Network
Public
Spaces
spaces
Austerity
common
Empowerment
free
politicians
GalGael
democracy
Communication
Democracy
play
land
happening
disempower
things
Social
others
involved
e.g
put
engagement
organisations
real
resources
Local
baths
stage
Building
use
already
existing
i.e
money
Scotland
barriers
Job
positive
communities
Young
sort
story
Children
system
decisions
Education
Collective
listened
Society
Kinning
trust
Ownership
Clear
Meadows
Time
media
Purpose
Participatory
Baths
Solidarity
Need
Setting
wake
involvement
structures
campaign
councils
Inequality
Capacity
permission
ways
Free
ideas
Challenge
Kelvinside
take
together
place
lack
engage
Southside
Meals
issues
Castlemilk
Events
parochial
make
getting
services
children's
Take
factor

The Place and the Process

Glasgow Southside is a large community, consisting of a collection of smaller neighbourhood communities. The boundaries of what constitute 'The Southside' are fluid and can even constitute areas which are not part of Glasgow City Council. While there is a parliamentary constituency with the same name, at the event, held in Govan, we allowed people to self-identify as Southsiders. For the purposes of the event we decided to define the Southside area as all of Glasgow South of the river; this has a population of around 200 000 and is represented by 8 council wards and 29 councillors. Our Democracy worked with local partners GalGael, The Centre for Human Ecology and Pollokshields Trust in organising and running this Act As If Council.

The event was divided into three main sections:
1) A learning phase. In this case a presentation from the Neighbourhood Community Network of South India and dynamic governance expert John Buck. On the day Skype problems cut this section short.
2) Problem identifying. The ways that a lack of local democracy impacts on the community and why.
3) A future focus. Looking at proposals that would improve local democracy.

The participants formed four smaller groups to allow in-depth group discussion. We gave careful thought to how the questions for each phase were framed, in order to help pin down abstract ideas into something more practical The day concluded with an in the round discussion to ensure that everyone had said everything they wanted to.

Problem Identification

Groups were asked to discuss the ways that they could see a lack of local democracy impacting on their communities. These have been summed up below.

-Disempowerment
People felt like they weren't being listened to about local issues and that there wasn't proper consultation. This has caused widespread culture of alienation, hopelessness and anger. There is the feeling of a failure of trust, money often goes to the 'wrong' places. There appears to be no collective power and an acceptance of it. People often don't know that decisions can be challenged or know that it will be exhausting to do so.
- Communication
It was observed that information and decisions are badly communicated. Even positive actions have low visibility. There is a lack of local awareness, compounded by an absence of community owned media and the resources for it. People in local areas often don't know or communicate with each other.
- Structures
There was perceived to be a problem with the existing 'structures'; too many gatekeepers who can disempower and discourage wider participation. This has often resulted in either people looking for a non-constructive way to protest, or apathy that there is no point in even beginning to engage. This has meant more arguments and less cooperation. - Community councils are not generally trusted and are thought to be unaccountable, disconnected, powerless and always the 'usual suspects'.
- Resources
There is a lack of public and free spaces, and community locations are being privatised and gentrified. Meeting facilities are too expensive. Job centre have closed and people struggle to travel further. Resources being allocated from above has led to conflict and competition between local organisations. Inequality is rising.

Next people deliberated on the reasons behind why democracy wasn't working fully within their community. There were thought to be multiple reasons for this, often overlapping with previously identified problems.

- Consultation
Planning and use of resources were thought to be poor. These bad decisions are often made because of a lack of proper consultation at an early enough stage i.e. at the concept. The events that take place are often un-inclusive and not in accessible spaces. Young people in particular are often not listened to enough.
- Communication
Decisions made and opportunities were thought to be poorly communicated within communities. There is a lack of proper networks and of local awareness. Not enough is done to educate people.
- Finances
There is not enough money to deliver what is needed. The resources that are there are not appropriated well enough. There need to be more affordable spaces for community events and less red tape required to use unused land.
- Knowledge
There is a lack of confidence and self-reliance. This has been reinforced through inequality and a concerted action to take away democracy. People lack the time to develop a skill set when issues arise that impact on community wellbeing. People do not know the structures and how to engage with them. Overall, there is a lack of hope.

Some pertinent questions arose out of identifying these problems:
1. How do we become bold?
2. How do we develop 'a sense of village' within local urban communities?
3. What activities / actions must be developed to pull communities together?

Learning Phase

Neighborhood Parliaments in Kerala:

Culture
- If we want to ensure the 'small' person has a say then the forms have to be small.
- Decision making groups have to be small enough to be face-to-face and all of a similar size.
- Only decisions that can't be actioned at a local level are passed upwards.

Structure
- There are 3 tiers of neighbourhood parliaments below the lowest rung of state governance.
- Each parliament sends one representative to the next layer up and the parliaments formed in that layer do the same. Every time they meet they must reaffirm this representation, so recall is easy.
- There are also similarly sized parliaments for different issues (women, environment, children etc) and people can be in more than one at a time.
- There are c.260 000 neighbourhood units in the state of Kerala, which has a population of 35 million.

Outcomes
- Provides a vehicle into state governance for representatives. E.g. at the last elections the womens' parliaments mobilised with the result that more women than men were elected to the local Panchayatis.
- Is a successful model that has been studied by others and is spreading.
- Because actions converge to the base of the system, the bottom-most groups stay active as they have lots to do.
- In the future the purchasing of goods and services (banking, insurance, supermarkets etc) could be done using this structure and its mass bargaining power.

As a continuation of this learning phase and to connect people directly with the issues, we asked what other ways they could see local democracy flourishing in their communities and to share examples of groups that are already 'acting as if they own the place'. This produced lots of good case studies, connected people on a practical level with local democracy and got people thinking about constructive solutions as they went into the problem identification phase.

Improving Local Democracy

We asked people to discuss in general terms what they think it takes to create the kind of spaces and communities that those who believe in community empowerment would like to see. The solutions people thought it would take included:

Goals - An awareness of purpose, with clear objectives. A plan that gives everyone a role. Identifying the need - must be relevant and shaped by/to the local community. A simple, focused message.

Resources – Acknowledging the financial needs and also the needs of people. Time is required, with stamina and patience to persevere. A physical anchor to hold neighbourhood groups in place; buildings or a piece of land.

Independence – It was thought that communities needed to take matters into their own hands and not ask for permission. To have the courage to challenge the status quo. Examples of this might be community ownership or going back to basic roots organising. There is a role for everyone within the community. Not too independent to be afraid to ask for help when needed though.

Community – People coming together (like at this event). Showing solidarity and encouraging collective action, with trust and the honesty to admit mistakes. Listening to others and building each other up. Empowering people to make change - giving hope, a sense of control and the belief they can make a difference. Making it fun, engaging and positive. Building networks and community resilience.

Engagement – Listening to others' stories. Educating each other about politics, citizenship and good practice. Effective communication, to those both on and offline. Reaching out to those most often ignored and giving them responsibility. Community projects and ways of bringing people together e.g. the arts.

Political – Using existing networks and channels effectively. Having access to politicians. Being apolitical and inclusive / non-confrontational. Challenging lip service and spin.

Groups then deliberated on many ways of improving local democracy, specifically on the Southside. Everyone fed back their proposals and these were then grouped by theme. Next we asked people to vote for those they thought were best. These are the proposals that received votes, in order of the most popular themes:

Spaces
- Community cinema, meal, play, sports
- Reclaim Public Spaces
- Occupy Job Centres
- Multi-art spaces/Youth hubs
- Booze free, cheap social space/regular meeting
- Need of community for housing and local street amenities
- Fun Public Events

Capacity Building
- Encouraging those with potential
- Training on fundraising

Culture/Climate
- Own research in our own communities
- Trusting Kids
- Building trust
- Enquiry into recruitment, pay and efficiency into GCC
- Getting rid of fear

Bank of Southside
- Skills bank/Things library (tools, toys, etc.)
- Common Good Fund Income spent /decided locally
- Local Investment Ban

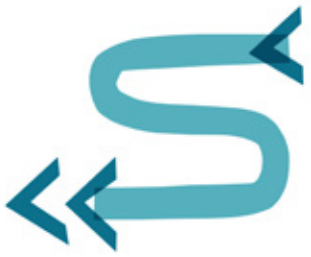
Linking Up
- Stronger Networks/ways to share stories/history
- Something to knit existing initiatives together (P2P)
- Way to Link Shared Resources

Communication
- Engaging the public/sharing ideas
- Showcase positive actions and groups on social and local media
- Good News
- Community internet and other facilities
- Leafleting Collective-up-to-date, in time, and networked

Interacting with Existing Structures
- Break up GCC-Give community tax raising power
- Make it easier/support teachers, doctors, politicians, police, support groups, gifts
- Stand as a candidate

Working with what works
- Setting up social enterprises
- Recycling-practicalities and points
- Participatory Budgeting: community in charge

Solution Focus
- Take action on small things we can solve - litter pick, leaves and graffiti



What now?

This report, having been collectively edited with attendees, will be used to inform any submission to the Scottish Government's 'Decentralisation Bill' consultation process. Our Democracy will combine these ideas with the many others that are coming out of events like this around Scotland.

It is up to those that took part in the event what form - if any - that this Act As If grouping will continue to have in their area. One potential avenue that the group might wish to pursue is seeking meetings with various officers of the council or government to share their findings.

Our Democracy and The Electoral Reform Society Scotland will hold a national Act As If gathering at the end of the summer, inviting everyone who was involved in the local Act As If councils as well as international experts. This will be an opportunity to exchange and share experiences and ideas and to plan for what next.

Feedback

At the very end of the event we asked attendees two questions and used the whole room as a scale of how to express their answers.

In this first photo we asked ‘Can the people of the Southside run it themselves’? The right wall indicated that no outside help whatsoever was needed and the lefthand that it should be run entirely from outside the area, with the middle being a 50/50 balance between the two.

In the second question participants were asked ‘Are you feeling more inspired to act as if you own the place’? The middle meant no change and the lefthand wall that they would take action the moment they left the event.

As you can see the majority feeling was one of we can and will run our own communities.