

SURF 2013 Annual Conference Speech

3pm Friday 5th July 2013

Verity House

'National Goals/ Local Action'

Introduction

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for the invitation to speak at today's conference and I hope you've enjoyed today's event hosted here at the COSLA Conference Centre.

I'm COSLA President, Cllr David O'Neill. COSLA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as you may be aware, is the political umbrella body for local government in Scotland, representing the interests of Scotland's 32 councils.

Prior to taking up my role as COSLA President last year, I served as Leader of North Ayrshire Council between 1999 and 2012, and have been a Councillor for 32 years. I also previously served as vice-chair of Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire, and was the West of Scotland representative on the Programme Monitoring Committee for EU structural funds for a number of years.

During my time as Leader of North Ayrshire Council I was also heavily involved in the work of Irvine Bay URC, and therefore I would hope that all this experience combined gives me a solid understanding of regeneration activity at a local level. I'm a firm believer in improving our communities and regenerating local areas, and I'm very interested in SURF's Alliance for Action work and how local government can engage with this agenda going forward.

Local Government Vision

I was keen in taking over the role of COSLA President to promote the role of local government within the wider governance structures of Scotland and the UK, and to consider how to strengthen local democracy within either the UK or an independent Scotland. I'm an advocate of local democracy and local service delivery which is responsive to the needs of local communities, and now is the ideal time to take stock of what we want local government to be, and what we want it to achieve.

This is being taken forward through COSLA's Vision for Local Government in Scotland. This includes enshrining local government as an equal partner in the governance of Scotland via constitutional protection.

Looking to our European neighbours, Scotland is at present one of the most centralised countries in Europe, with almost all other European countries having more councils than Scotland, which cover smaller populations. As such our European counterparts are often more successful at improving local outcomes, and perhaps as a result of that, have a higher turnout at local elections.

While I'm not calling into question the legitimate role of national government to set priorities given their democratic mandate: or the obligations on local government to use local policy and service delivery to generate benefits for Scotland. My opinion is that local government is at the heart of government's focus on prevention, service integration and 'place' and that it should be national government's objective to enhance local government's ability to deliver those benefits as effectively as possible.

Firstly, we need to empower local democracy. Scotland's identity is to a large extent the sum of its localities and people's expectations are similarly defined. Locally delivered and accountable services are sensitive and responsive to local issues. This includes decisions and work around regeneration activity.

Secondly, we need integration and not centralisation. It cannot and should not be assumed that centralisation and re-structuring is an effective response

to service variation, effectiveness, or efficiency. The complex multi-layered problems that we face in society cannot be solved by simplistic structural change and any reading of history demonstrates to do so is costly and high risk, with no significant improvement in outcomes.

Thirdly, let's be clear, and you all know this, communities are interested in results: they focus on outcomes rather than inputs. People want better outcomes from the public sector in Scotland, and COSLA and our member councils, have been the driving force behind an outcomes focussed approach to service delivery in Scotland.

Finally, councils are relentlessly focussing on performance and new opportunities for improvement. Some argue that current local democratic arrangements fail to deliver and lead to so called 'postcode lotteries'. I'd disagree with that enduring and misguided perception.

Variation across Scotland in service delivery reflects legitimate local democratic choice and control about priorities and circumstances. That is not to say that all variation is acceptable and where caused by poor decision making or service quality, local government collectively must be prepared to self-analyse through effective benchmarking.

The credibility of our case will be determined by our collective ability to focus and demonstrate real performance on the issues that matter to local communities and championing our successes.

So this might be an appropriate juncture to pose some questions. For instance, could local authorities do more in terms of regeneration if they had enhanced powers and more control over regeneration and economic development functions? I would argue they could.

Again, could councils taking on more responsibility and powers in relation to regeneration lead to increased social justice? Currently our enterprise agencies focus on sustainable economic growth and rightly so, that is the Scottish Government's main policy objective. However, they fail to consider issues of re-distribution of wealth or opportunities, social injustice and deprivation; which many councils spend huge amounts of money addressing such failure demands.

Could or should local government have a greater say in economic development, and should this be devolved down to local level, as opposed to national agencies like Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise taking the lead? Again I would argue we should have greater say and responsibility, and given that responsibility, I'm sure while focussing on growth, local authorities would enhance the regeneration of communities, and

therefore reduce inequality, and in turn reduce the money spent on addressing failure demand. Currently the enterprise agencies do not have such re-distribution aspects to the fore in their thinking; I ask the question perhaps they should.

Some regeneration and economic development functions were previously transferred to councils, but could more be done at a local level, rather than by national enterprise agencies, if we had enhanced powers? Business Gateway is a good example of a service being taken on by local government and being successful, there is no reason we couldn't have a similar situation with other regeneration or economic development functions.

Again should councils be given more control over tourism in their local areas? At present what local authorities can do in relation to tourism is somewhat constrained, could giving councils more control over how tourism is developed and promoted in their local areas, help to regenerate local communities?

These are pertinent questions to consider particularly in relation to the regeneration of local communities, and we need to think innovatively about how local authorities could better contribute to the regeneration agenda now, or with further powers or responsibilities, and how communities are engaged in this process.

At the heart of all these questions is the need for empowerment in order to deliver local services; and that empowerment does not have to stop with councils, but should filter down to communities, who really are the experts in terms of what is required in their local area.

I know of examples of good work already underway in terms of community engagement in decision making. For instance through the Scottish Sustainable Communities Initiative, the Charettes which took place in Lochgelly in Fife, Ladyfield in Dumfries and Galloway, and Grandhome in Aberdeen, provided an innovative approach to sustainable planning, and enabled a new enhanced level of public engagement in the place making process. We should build on good work such as this in terms of engaging with communities in the future.

National policy context and work of COSLA and local authorities

While local government has a clear role to play in regeneration at a local level, much national policy also has a regeneration focus, such as the National Planning Framework 3, Infrastructure Investment Plan, to the Scottish Government's Regeneration Strategy itself.

I'm interested to learn more about the Town Centre Review, which Malcolm Fraser spoke about this morning, and COSLA is also involved in the Regeneration High Level Group as well as the Regeneration Stakeholders Group in relation to the strategy.

Furthermore, I am heartened by the joint work between Scottish Government and COSLA on the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund, which I launched with the Deputy First Minister in April. This fund is important as for the first time all councils can bid for funding, and will be required to demonstrate strong regeneration outcomes in terms of physical, social, and economic aspects in order to be awarded funding. Therefore, highlighting the holistic nature of regeneration.

While COSLA is in principle opposed to challenge funds, this fund is a good example of joint working between both levels of Government, and I look forward to seeing the projects which are awarded funding and the real difference that these will make within local communities across Scotland.

Likewise COSLA is also committed to working alongside Scottish Government at political and officer level in the development of the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill to ensure the legislation is meaningful, practical, and does not raise unrealistic expectations or create unnecessary burdens for local authorities.

I am also aware of individual local authorities leading the way on regeneration activity in Scotland. From Dundee's cultural-led approach to regeneration, with it being a finalist for the UK City of Culture 2017, and its waterfront regeneration project, and progress towards the V&A. To Glasgow and South Lanarkshire's work as part of Clyde Gateway, which I was fortunate enough to be invited to tour last year. To my own council North Ayrshire, where through Irvine Bay URC we have made improvements to stations, parks, and churches, with the involvement of local young people and provided them with employment opportunities. Other initiatives in North Ayrshire include: work on the historical centres of Kilbirnie and Irvine; community capacity building by the Council and Cunninghame Housing Association; and programmes to tackle unemployment by working with companies to discuss their recruitment and skills needs. These are just a handful of examples and I know there is plenty more good work going on in councils across Scotland, and also via the work of SURF itself.

Work of SURF

I'm very interested in SURF's Alliance for Action Programme which was launched today, and how COSLA and our member councils can engage with this important piece of work.

To me it seems that COSLA and our members could both contribute to and benefit from the work being undertaken as part of the Alliance for Action, and there are clear linkages to the wider reform work which COSLA is driving through the Community Planning Review. The focus for us all has to be on bringing together relevant partners to join together their work locally in order to improve outcomes for the local communities, and we shouldn't lose sight of that goal.

Creativity may well be the key to unlocking the resources and joint working needed to deliver effective regeneration activity in communities. This is even more important due to the on-going economic problems, and it is crucial we get the best outcomes we can out of the resources that we have at our disposal, and partnership working and joined-up thinking is vital to achieving this.

I'm keen to hear how the Alliance for Action work progresses, in terms of demonstrating the reality of what's happening in communities, their resources, how communities can be more resilient, and highlight how a pattern of investment can be undertaken in a more co-ordinated way, and I would hope you would come back and update us at an appropriate time.

Conclusion

You'll be pleased to hear I'm almost finished, and not much stands between you and your onward journey (other than Andy and Brian that is). As I said earlier I'm a firm supporter of local government and local decision making which gives councils flexibility to deal with local issues, meets the needs of local people, and improves the lives of our communities.

Effective local regeneration has a vital role to play in this by helping improve economic, social, and environmental outcomes for local communities and delivering the Vision for Local Government in Scotland.

That said: partnership is also needed across local authority boundaries; and with Scottish Government, Enterprise Agencies, other CPP partners, and organisations like SURF all contributing to the regeneration of communities across Scotland. The economic climate is still harsh and partnership working is now more important than ever.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak today.