Paper on capacity building, community resilience and local governance as requested by Deputy First Minister, John Swinney MSP

Background to paper

The paper has been prepared following a meeting with the DFM to discuss community resilience and his particular concerns as to why some communities seemed to fare better than others when faced with the significant challenges brought about by the pandemic.

The paper starts from a proposition that beyond immediate family and friends, most citizens have a concern for the health and wellbeing of others within their community and that their ability or willingness to act on this concern, both individually and collectively, is determined by a number of factors. This paper aims to explore these factors and considers the extent to which they constrain or enable citizens to self-organise in response to sudden shocks (such as severe weather incidents or pandemics) as well as to determine priorities for local action to advance the collective interests of their community over the longer term.

Primarily, this paper addresses issues that are largely systemic and apply to all communities. However, because each community is unique in terms of socio-economic context, local tradition and history of community activism, it means that a community's response to any given situation is to some extent unpredictable. With that caveat, if the issues raised in this paper were to be addressed, the current variability of communities' responses to major shocks would be considerably reduced and a greater level of resilience across the board achieved.

It is worth noting that the policy landscape has become progressively more supportive of community action over the past 10 -15 years, in large part consolidated with the passing of primary legislation in the areas of community empowerment and land reform and an undiminished commitment (albeit with little implementation) to the recommendations of the Christie Commission. That said there is also a growing recognition within the sector that the context within which communities operate and organise themselves is reaching the limits of what can be achieved. This has a number of consequences. On the one hand there is frustration for some communities who aspire to achieve more but feel constrained in doing so. And at the same time, there is a risk for other communities who feel under pressure to overextend themselves by undertaking roles and responsibilities for which they are ill equipped and under-resourced. In short, the community sector is at a crossroads and significant changes are required in both the operational and policy context if a more predictable and consistent set of responses to future traumatic events is to be achieved.

Three systemic issues that need to be addressed:

1. Funding for communities

There are some fundamental problems with the Scottish Government's approach to funding of the community sector. A recent survey of ten national networks with community-based memberships revealed some common themes:

- Different parts of the Scottish Government apply very different criteria and assessment procedures for the funds they disburse.

- Tried and tested funded approaches to tackling issues within communities are frequently lost due to a constant focus on innovation.

- Competitive and highly centralised assessment procedures and decision making excludes any consideration of local knowledge and the potential to develop collaborative and shared approaches at the local level. This centralised approach consistently favours 'well written' applications over genuine need.

- Unrealistic (from a community perspective) short timeframes for submitting applications favours communities with capacity to respond quickly.

- Lack of coherence across the funding landscape. Communities are required to constantly scan and monitor a wide range of unrelated local authority funds, multiple Scottish Government funding streams and more recently, numerous UK Government funds - each demonstrating little awareness or connection with the other funding streams.

In addition, the Scottish Government's strategic investment in the ecosystem of infrastructural support for the sector appears uneven. While some national intermediaries appear to be informally regarded as 'strategic partners' of the Scottish Government with a funding settlement to match, many other intermediaries who are instrumental in supporting communities to achieve key national outcomes do not benefit from the same level of support. (See appendix on Scottish Men's Sheds Association.)

The fundamental question that arises from all this is – 'what does the Scottish Government aim to achieve by its current approach to funding for communities?'

Evidence of a lack of clarity of purpose lies in the inconsistencies in the different mechanisms that the Scottish Government applies to the distribution of its funding, the variations in the guidance that accompanies different funds, and the ways in which applications are assessed and final funding decisions are made.

In summary, the key issues are that the funding system is too centralised, lacks a coherent narrative and fails to utilise the existing national and local infrastructure which contains detailed knowledge and understanding of the community sector that would improve decision making.

This is not a call for more funding to be made available but instead for existing funds to be invested with greater effect and for there to be a more consistent and coherent narrative that runs across all funding decisions.

2. Rural and urban - a differentiated approach

To state the obvious, most of Scotland's land mass is rural while most of its population is urban and it is in urban Scotland where the greatest concentration of socio-economic disadvantage lies. This dichotomy has long bedevilled government policy that relates to the community sector as it fails to recognise fundamental differences in the issues that communities face, which are often determined by the extent of their rurality. This issue is, in part, driven by a concern that tackling poverty and inequality is the overriding priority and so to distinguish between urban and rural risks obfuscating that focus. Yet, not to recognise these distinct differences is to undervalue a significant strength which is the diversity of Scotland's community sector.

The more remote a community is in terms of physical distance from the administrative centre of local government, the more likely it is to have designed and developed its own responses to local needs simply because no one else is able to do so. In urban areas, where the councils have a more immediate presence, there is a very different dynamic to the process of communities taking responsibility for what otherwise might traditionally be considered as council responsibility. It is these differences that often determine how communities respond to traumatic events. If these fundamental differences are not recognised in the Scottish Government's approach to how community capacity is developed we cannot expect to see well thought through solutions to enable the levels of resilience that are need to exist across Scotland's geography.

In summary, the national approach to supporting community action and building local resilience needs to be more nuanced to specifically account for the differences experienced by communities in different parts of the country.

3. Where civic meets civil - bridging the trust and confidence gap

Most activity at a community level consists of the myriad informal associations between friends and neighbours. Where communities are well defined and relatively small, it is the many acts of neighbourliness and a concern for the welfare of others that creates the vital social glue that generates a certain level of local resilience - but probably not sufficient to respond to a traumatic shock such as the pandemic, or to sustain a resulting need for specialist services.

Often these informal associations choose to become more formalised, by adopting a constitution and perhaps seeking some funding, to undertake activities that require extra resources. This process may lead to some groups within the community developing more ambitious plans that would serve the community's interests in a particular way and this is when organisations such as development trusts and/or local alliances, begin to emerge. Thus, it is possible to observe a spectrum of increasing complexity and sophistication of community development activity over time.

Over the years, organisations such as community development trusts, community controlled housing associations and community associations have become recognised in the lexicon of policy makers as community anchor organisations. In some parts of the country, local authorities have recognised the potential of these community anchors to act as local strategic partners in the delivery of public services and have devolved a measure of responsibility and resource accordingly. Where these relationships exist, they are typically informal and ad hoc. In other parts of the country there are no such relationships and instead, to a large extent, the council and the community will co-exist but with little or no effective collaboration. However, even in the most positive of environments, where collaboration between the local authority and communities routinely occurs, the relationship is inevitably a precarious one because of some fundamental tensions in the different perspectives that underpin it. To generalise, these different perspectives are:

● the community view of civic Scotland (principally local authorities) is that the centres of administration are at too great a distance from communities to be able to relate to easily, and consequently the common perception is one of decision making and service delivery being top down. This is seen by many as a problem with local democracy, with the term 'democratic deficit' routinely referred to across the sector.

● the generalised perspective of civic Scotland is that the community sector does not possess the necessary competence or capacity to deliver many of the more complex projects that it aspires to. Local authorities (and others in the public sector) simply do not have sufficient trust or confidence in the community sector's motivation or capacity. Note: this view is not one which would be openly shared but it nonetheless most certainly predominates.

There is enough truth to these generalised and divergent perspectives to suggest that something needs to be done to unlock the inherent impasse that has been created and to enable communities to reach their full potential as critical partners in Scotland's future.

Two key actions are required to unlock the impasse:

1. A community right to local governance

Lessons from pandemic: experience of the community response to the pandemic demonstrated the ability of some communities to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of local people. The best examples of this were where there was already an 'organised' community infrastructure in place and where there was a confidence on behalf of the community in their ability to act.

The pandemic is still with us and we know that our public services are under strain. We face a further set of challenges on health, the economy, our exit from the European Union and the threat of the climate emergency. A simple reliance on communities stepping into the breach whenever crises hit is insufficient. We are entering into an even more unpredictable future and, without adequate support, this level of response will quickly become unsustainable in the longer term. We need to protect, sustain and build our community sector to help us withstand whatever comes next and help us build a better future. Part of

that 'building' of the community sector means more power to act independently and to have a say over how local resources are deployed.

Democracy Matters 1.0: The key message from the first round of national conversations on Democracy Matters was that people wished to have more say over the decisions which affected their community. Many participants highlighted their frustrations that the centres of administration currently sit far away from community influence and that the prevailing culture does not proactively encourage or welcome community participation in decision making processes.

Democracy Matters 2.0: Recognising that there is no appetite for formal reorganisation of local government, the Scottish Government's manifesto commitment to complete the Local Governance Review and, if desired, to bring forward a Local Democracy Bill, is therefore crucial to addressing this locally based democratic deficit. The early work on the LGR had begun to explore some interesting possibilities which would, in effect, enable a community to invoke a variable right to local governance. This could be represented by a spectrum of 'democratic mechanisms' ranging from those activities we are already familiar with - asset transfer, community right to buy, Participatory Budgeting - to mechanisms that Scotland has only just begun to experiment with, such as mini-publics and citizens' assemblies. After a period of experimentation and adjustment, a new model of participatory, community-led democracy would emerge which, over time, would develop into a hybrid of community and local council governance.

NOTE : The importance of embedding equalities: Scotland benefits from many policies intent on reducing inequalities but, with the immediate and longer term challenges imposed by the pandemic, Brexit and global events, there is a danger that those inequalities will be further exacerbated.
In the first phase of Democracy Matters, people engaged in equalities work justifiably raised concerns that those who were already marginalised from large parts of society and political life could experience further marginalisation from local services if decision making was devolved to a more local level.
The intent of any new legislation designed to reform governance must be to ensure the participation of those furthest away from democracy and how decisions are currently made, and to distribute power more equally. Certain conditions designed to support full participation should be at the core of any attempt to consult on and reform local governance.

2. **Regulation and scrutiny**

Confidence in the regulatory regimes that apply to the community sector (principally through OSCR) will inevitably have a bearing on the extent to which the sector is taken seriously when it aspires to the more complex and ambitious projects. Although not openly acknowledged, as highlighted earlier, both the public sector and sources of private finance will typically consider the community sector too high risk to engage with. Therefore, it is necessary to seek some process that de-risks the activities that communities who are most advanced in their ambitions wish to undertake.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to design a means of demonstrating the 'value' of community ownership and control (social audit, SROI, PQASSO and so on) All

have been controversial and ultimately dropped due to their complexity or the additional burden of bureaucracy and cost placed on community organisations and public officials.

This is not a proposal to reopen that debate. It is, however, to suggest that where communities choose to move into the realm of public services or to undertake some activity that has a profound impact on the lives of the people living in that community, then there should be a greater level of scrutiny on their performance than currently exists. The intention here is that, through public scrutiny, the community would be demonstrating their competence and more likely to gain the confidence of the wider community and trust of their potential partners.

History demonstrates that fundamental tensions and opposite perspectives between communities and public sector partners can, and have been in a limited number of circumstances, resolved. The community-controlled housing associations that emerged in the late 1970s and 80s operate within a regulatory framework laid down by the Housing Regulator. This has enabled a degree of trust and confidence amongst their public sector partners to be established and, because there is a degree of public confidence in the inspection regime of the Regulator, it has enabled these community-based organisations to access development funding from Government and to raise finance from the markets. One could imagine a similar set of arrangements being devised, for instance, for community landowners with extensive landholdings whose land management decisions directly impact on the people who live on that land. By submitting themselves to externally validated scrutiny, the community landowning movement might gain more credibility in certain quarters and in the long run face less opposition in achieving their goals.

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Appendix 1 Case study - Scottish Men's Sheds Association

The Scottish Men's Shed Movement was started in 2009, with the Scottish Men's Shed Association (SMSA) becoming a registered charity in 2014. The first 'Shed' opened in Aberdeenshire in 2013. A Men's Shed is a safe gendered space where men – from all walks of life - attend voluntarily to socialise in a supportive 'gendered' environment to find camaraderie, conversation and friendship. Men's Sheds help to address social isolation and loneliness, regenerate and build sustainable communities, re-employment and improve men's health and wellbeing without being therapised or medicalised.

Today, the SMSA supports over 200 Shed groups across Scotland and works with a range of third sector partners, including social prescribing and veterans' organisations. It also produces the Scottish Shedder Magazine and runs a national membership movement

(2900+ members) engaging over 10,000 men. It is the largest male health movement in Scotland.

In spite of its exponential growth and its proven success record in Scotland over the last decade, SMSA has consistently been unable to attract the level of statutory funding to provide adequate support to this growing health movement.

A number of Scottish Government Ministers have shown interest in the work of SMSA over the years, paying tribute to its work (including setting up a dedicated Working Group) – yet, SMSA is still surviving on 12 month funding deals (circa £70k) from Scottish Government. In order to cover three staff salaries and other overheads, the balance is met by funding from The Robertson Trust and The William Grant Foundation. In contrast, the Shed movement in Ireland receives 500k euros p.a. from the Irish Government to meet its needs.

In 2021, SMSA published its own manifesto in advance of the Scottish elections – asking politicians to recognise the Men's Sheds movement's contribution to the mental health and wellbeing of men across Scotland. The manifesto called for 'five actions'. Amongst them was a call for a long term funding programme at both a national and local level, that would embed enough grassroots development, localised partnership building and mentoring (through an SMSA Shed Ambassador programme) to create a model of self-sustainability and good governance across the national Shed network.

This led to the submission in 2022 of a three-year £1.3m proposal to provide funding for its core staff and for a developmental programme backed by research findings from the Men's Shed Sustainability project carried out by Glasgow Caledonian University. In spite of being encouraged to submit the proposal, SMSA was informed the day before a Men's Sheds parliamentary debate, that its proposal was not going to be supported. Instead, it would receive, for the last time, a 12 month funding allocation of £75,000.

SMSA's situation reflects that of other SCA members who do not have a 'designated' Government department with which to deal with. The nature of its work addresses priority areas for Government in terms of health and wellbeing, social isolation and loneliness; community wealth building – yet, regardless of the scale of its impact over the last decade and the range of issues it addresses that are all seen as priorities by Scottish Government, funding remains both uncertain and, even when secured, short term.