**Coalition, cooperation and culture-change**

I want to outline three main points, as part of this evening’s Fringe Event, which will debate whether co-operation can empower communities to help shape devolution?

1. Some general background from Edinburgh and Scotland
2. Some specific experience/examples from City of Edinburgh Council
3. The importance of cultural change to help embed devolution

Some of these lessons, from north of the border, may not be directly applicable to Local Authorities right across the UK … but I expect that the general principles will indeed be transferable.

1. Some general background from Edinburgh and Scotland

A lot has changed since the 2015 General Election – but in other ways, much is unchanged … we still have the only Labour/SNP Coalition Council Administration out of Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities; we still have a majority SNP Scottish Government at Holyrood; and we still have a Conservative Prime Minister in London.

And I think you’d need to be inhabiting a wholly different world from the one I live in, not to be aware that trust between the electorate and those of us either elected, or employed, to serve that electorate, has broken down badly in recent years --- no matter how you perceive what happened at the recent General Election?

And it was clear when we formed our local Labour/SNP coalition administration in Edinburgh, following the May 2012 Scottish Council Elections, that business as usual wasn’t an option; we had to change the way we did things.

As an incoming Council Leader, I knew there was no time to waste in ensuring that we had a clear, unambiguous programme for governance. So – we agreed a clear set of *some* 53 commitments, in a new ‘Contract *with* the Capital’.

That contract was openly published, and within weeks, the *‘monitoring against delivery’* of our promises was live and very visible via the front-page of the main Council website … and continues to be so, with six-monthly reports going to Full Council Meetings.

Scottish Local Government had already changed substantially, back in 2007, with the introduction of a proportional voting-system: STV-PR with multi-Member wards.

But that change was mostly in terms of political make-up (structural change) … and deeper cultural change, in the way politics was conducted, was clearly going to take a little longer; and much more effort to instigate.

That’s why we knew that we had to radically alter the way we worked with our local communities – and we had the perfect backdrop, of multi-Member wards, to ensure that the widest possible involvement was forthcoming.

1. Some specific experience/examples from City of Edinburgh Council

So, we committed to becoming a ‘Co-operative Capital’ – using our multi-Member wards as the foundation for a new neighbourhood approach that would help put communities back in control.

We wanted to encourage not just local communities, but our many partners and those using our services, to become more involved in how these are planned, managed and delivered.

And, just by way of example, that *new approach* to the way we worked, and the way we engaged with others, has included some definite actions in making the vision of a cooperative council a reality:

* **We have established** the first Petitions Committee, and petitions process, in Edinburgh. That Committee is chaired by a Member of Edinburgh’s Opposition Green Group. This has all helped enable local residents to have an additional channel to raise issues of concern, with their elected representatives, and directly with the Council.
* **We have completely overhauled our scrutiny function**; and established a new Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee; again Chaired by a Member of Edinburgh’s Opposition Conservative Group.
* **We have also** completely revised our budgetary process, which has led to the publication of a draft budget – for the first time in decades, in Edinburgh. For the current 2015/16 Budget we published our draft before the end of September 2014, allowing a full 3-months of public consultation prior to the Christmas-break, with the eventual setting of the final budget in mid-February 2015.
* **We’ve also created** a renewed focus on *neighbourhoods and communities* within our decision-making structures, and ‘worked-up’ proposals for the next stage in the development of our *Neighbourhood Partnerships (Neighbourhood Committees)* will be put before the Full Council for decision soon.
* **We’ve also ensured** direct, parental representation within our Education’ decision-making processes, by placing a Parental Rep. on our main Education Committee, with the same voting-rights as any other Member on that Committee.
* **And last – but by no means least –** we’re webcasting (both live and archived) all of our Full Council Meetings, and an increasing number of our regular Committee Meetings.

The cumulative impact of all these considered-changes has been fairly significant … and, I would argue, we have re-gained some degree of trust and a renewed sense of engagement with residents.

*There is* a new political narrative within the City Chambers in Edinburgh.

1. The importance of cultural change to help embed devolution

Three key points are clear. Firstly, for local devolution to be successful, there has to be a fundamentally new relationship between councils and citizens. Secondly, as part of this, there needs to be a different form of local leadership, where elected members and others are willing to ‘let go’ and become less risk averse. And thirdly, we need to create appropriate platforms for devolution that align with the key needs, relationships and resources of local areas.

But even if all of these actions are undertaken, and I believe many local councils the length and breadth of the UK have indeed embraced this agenda, the outcomes from this innovative new approach to local service delivery will be severely muted if local government is not re-empowered with meaningful economic policy and funding levers.

If we’re serious about providing the basis for a radically new approach to local service delivery, which subsequently leads to the creation of thriving local economies, then we must surely give our local councils the tools in the toolbox to make this happen?

And, in recent months, we’ve seen the publication of two important studies; both of which have charted a path for the further devolution of financial freedoms to local councils.

In Scotland, the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy has laid out radical new proposals to re-empower Scottish democracy; and in England, the [Independent Commission on Local Government Finance](http://www.localfinancecommission.org/documents/iclgf-final-report) has outlined a programme for reform that would lay the foundations for a local government funding system which would be stable for the long term, stimulate economic growth and enable local people to invest in their own local priorities.

In a nutshell, these two sets of proposals would ensure local councils were given the funding levers to make a real local difference.

So, for me we need to implement this double-devolution of economic policy powers and funding powers straight to local councils.

Conclusion

All the blueprints exist; if the political will existed to carry them through to reality, I am certain we would see a complete transformation of local democracy and local economies for the better

**Cllr Andrew Burns**

**Leader of the City of Edinburgh Council**