

Supporting Communities to tackle health inequalities



CHEX Policy Briefing

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Communities at the heart of a healthy democracy

The Scottish independence referendum on September 18th 2014 mobilised community activity and social action across the country. With the Smith Commission's further devolution of powers from Westminster to the Scottish Parliament, and calls for strengthened participatory democracy, there is a growing demand for communities to have more influence at both a local and national level. This briefing captures some of the debate, highlights existing policy drivers and points to the significant opportunities for community-led health organisations to use their extensive experience and expertise to help ensure that decentralisation tackles health inequalities. It also highlights the opportunities for community-led health organisations and their public sector partners to capitalise on the energy and ideas that have flourished since the 18th September vote.

Background

In 2013-2014 CHEX produced briefings on the contribution of community-led health to tackling health inequalities¹ and to the integration of health and social care². These highlighted the significance of community-led health organisations and community-led approaches in respect to achieving direct positive impact on health outcomes. We concluded that greater resourcing of community-led health organisations should be part of any shift in approach to tackling health inequalities, recognising the unique and complimentary contribution our sector makes to preventative, long term and sustainable solutions.

¹ CHEX (2013) *'Tackling Scotland's health inequalities: A time for radical change?'*
<http://www.chex.org.uk/media/resources/publications/briefings/CHEX%20Policy%20Briefing%20-%20A%20Time%20for%20Radical%20Change.pdf>

² CHEX (2014) *'Integration of health and social care: opportunities for community-led health'*
http://www.chex.org.uk/media/resources/publications/briefings/CHEX%20policy%20briefing_integration%20of%20health%20and%20social%20care.pdf

The March 2014 report from the Ministerial Taskforce on Health Inequalities³ comes to similar conclusions, arguing for a more preventative, community-oriented, approach to tackling health inequalities. This builds on other recent policy developments, from the Christie Commission⁴ to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill,⁵ in recognising that prevention, partnership, participation and performance are key to improving our public services and the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland. Most recently, the Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee has published its Report on Health Inequalities, calling for preventative, collaborative approaches to tackling health and socio-economic inequalities⁶. Community activity around the Scottish independence referendum shows that an appetite for political change and involvement exists in Scotland, and the Smith Commission should hopefully offer an opportunity to develop this movement further. Finally, the newly appointed First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon has stated that tackling inequality and poverty will be a “sharp focus” of the Scottish Government over the coming years⁷ as well as her “personal mission”.⁸

A healthy democracy?

The referendum generated a great deal of debate about Scotland’s future and there was substantial increase in the level of democratic participation in the build up to the referendum. Grassroots political groups, community events and social media conversations sprung up across the country,⁹ with an eventual voter turnout of 84.6%¹⁰; unprecedented in recent British election history. What is more, many of the groups and campaigns around the referendum had a clear focus on social justice.¹¹ For those of us working in community development and related fields, this is a welcome reminder of how organised communities can be in working towards positive social change.

³ Scottish Government (2014) *Equally Well Review 2013*

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0044/00446171.pdf>

⁴ Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services in Scotland (2011) *Report on the Future Delivery of Public Services* <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/352649/0118638.pdf>

⁵ Scottish Parliament Bill (2014) *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill*

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_Bills/Community%20Empowerment%20%28Scotland%29%20Bill/b52s4-introd.pdf

⁶ The Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee (2015) *Report on Health Inequalities*

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_HealthandSportCommittee/Reports/her-15-01w-rev.pdf

⁷ Campbell, G. (2014) ‘Nicola Sturgeon promises ‘strong focus’ on inequality’ BBC website, 11th November 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-30000812>

⁸ Peterkin, T. (2014) ‘Sturgeon vows to tackle inequality and poverty’ The Scotsman website, 15th November 2014 <http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/sturgeon-vows-to-tackle-inequality-and-poverty-1-3606261>

⁹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-29630077>;

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/referendum-news/it-failed-to-win-independence-but-yes-transformed-politics-in-scotland-and-.25385088>;

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/16/in-scotland-streets-politics-is-back-whatever-the-outcome.html>

¹⁰ <http://scotlandreferendum.info/>

¹¹ E.g. Yes LGBT and LGBT Together [http://www.scotsman.com/scottish-independence/lgbt-referendum-](http://www.scotsman.com/scottish-independence/lgbt-referendum-groups-present-cases-ahead-of-glasgow-pride/)

[groups-present-cases-ahead-of-glasgow-pride/](http://www.womenforindependence.org/); Women for Independence

<http://www.womenforindependence.org/>; and Socialists for Independence

<https://www.facebook.com/SocialistIndependence>;

The challenge, of course, is how to build on and learn from these popular movements. The Smith Commission was set up to oversee the transfer of further powers to the Scottish Parliament in the wake of the referendum. Although criticism¹² has been levelled at the commission for not going far enough in its recommendations,¹³ they at least go part of the way towards creating the opportunity to build a more socially just society. The recommendations include new powers over welfare, taxes and unemployment, all of which have until now been controlled by Westminster and are crucial to reversing growing social, inequalities and cuts to welfare.

But a largely top-down political process is not enough on its own. To ensure power inequalities are addressed, and also that any transferred powers are used progressively, communities must be part of the process of change. The Christie Commission, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill and the integration of health and social care are all predicated on values such as participation, prevention and partnership. Most recently, the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy has argued that investment in participation, including community development approaches, is an investment in a healthier democracy more generally.¹⁴

In line with this policy, the post referendum discussion and decisions need to involve those who were so active in the referendum campaigns and, importantly, those who were not. In this regard, CHEX supports the submission to the Smith Commission from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), which states:

“Lastly, we must build on the participative culture which emerged during the referendum campaign. We cannot ignore the views and interests of Scotland’s people. It is imperative that any proposals for devolution are put to a people-led review before they are enacted.”¹⁵

Community-led health

Opportunities for community-led health have arisen out of these developments. A positive policy environment helps us to make the case for increased investment in community-led health. At the same time, communities in Scotland and the services designed to support them are being placed under increased strain as a result of the UK Government’s austerity measures. There is, for some, an uncomfortable link between government spending cuts and the growing political interest in community-led approaches. Notions of community empowerment, according to this view, are seen as a panacea for a cut-back in services. We

¹² SCVO (2014) ‘Piecemeal package of powers doesn’t go far enough to fully tackle poverty & inequality’ SCVO website 27th November 2014 <http://www.scvo.org.uk/media-release/piecemeal-package-of-powers-doesnt-go-far-enough-to-fully-tackle-poverty-inequality/>

¹³ The Smith Commission (2014) *Report of the Smith Commission for further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament* https://www.smith-commission.scot/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Smith_Commission_Report-1.pdf

¹⁴ The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (2014) *Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with communities* <http://www.localdemocracy.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Final-Report-August-2014.pdf>

¹⁵ SCVO (2014) SCVO response: Smith Commission <http://www.scvo.org.uk/long-form-posts/scvo-response-smith-commission/>

would argue that community development approaches bring people together around local issues, building capacity and confidence to engage in the fight against growing power and wealth inequalities. These methods are part of the long-term solution to reducing health inequalities, alongside structural measures addressing income and power inequalities. Moreover, the community activity, confidence and organisation that community-led health helps to develop is similar to the grassroots energy that was so well mobilised in the build up to the referendum. Therefore, community-led health organisations have an important contribution to make in helping to increase participatory democracy in Scotland.

CHEX regularly documents the work of community-led health organisations and the impact they have on a range of outcomes, including the ability of communities to influence change. Our last collection of case studies, *Communities at the Centre*¹⁶ documented the community development process of Stepping Stones in West Dunbartonshire, which has led to improvements in people's mental health and wellbeing and given people the confidence to further influence and develop the organisation's future. Members who have been helped by the service go on to provide peer support to others and the organisation has grown enough in stature and confidence to agree formal delivery partnerships with statutory agencies. The report also highlights how parents who have come together to form PAGES (Parent's Advisory Group for Education and Socialisation) in Aberdeenshire, with community development support, have taken collective action to turn a former school building into a thriving resource for local children and teenagers with a range of complex needs.

Examples such as Stepping Stones and PAGES illustrate how community development approaches help to give people more of a stake in their communities and stimulate involvement and activity. They show the impact a small community group can make over a sustained period of time. Community-led health is therefore a means to achieving the empowerment and participation sought by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill and Commission for Local Democracy respectively. Moreover, by contributing to people having more control over their lives and what happens in their communities, community-led health can help to tackle entrenched inequalities in a way that "work[s] with people rather than targeting initiatives at [them]."¹⁷

A way forward

The spontaneous political activity and campaigning around the referendum was inspiring to those working in community-led health and related fields. Some community-led health organisations in CHEX's network have connected with this activity by hosting information and discussion events with both sides of the debate represented,¹⁸ or by submitting their own responses to the Smith Commission.¹⁹ Importantly, the increased participation has shown us that an appetite exists in Scotland for campaigning around issues of social justice

¹⁶ CHEX (2014) *Communities at the Centre: Evidencing Community-led Health*
<http://www.chex.org.uk/media/resources/publications/Communities%20at%20the%20Centre%20-%20Case%20Studies.pdf>

¹⁷ Scottish Government (2014) *Equally Well Review 2013*
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0044/00446171.pdf> p76

¹⁸ <http://www.reachhealth.org.uk/news-detail.php?id=42>

¹⁹ www.edinburgh tenants.org.uk/etf-responds-smith-commission/

at the level of local communities, including reducing the huge health inequalities prevalent in our society. As CHEX's parent organisation, SCDC, has recently stated,²⁰ there is also growing policy backing for investment in community development and capacity building support.

Community-led health organisations can further build on these developments by raising awareness of their work which ties in with current concerns about inequality, welfare reform and democratic participation. The challenge for our sector is to work to create the conditions that enable community-led health to thrive throughout the country, not just in areas, where skilled interventions, political support and resources have consistently underpinned the approach. This could pay dividends both in terms of increasing local activity around health and wellbeing and also in making the case for support and investment from decision makers and funders.

CHEX will continue to promote and advocate at all levels for community-led health. Key to this is the engagement of our network in the development, and continually consulting on the best way forward to influence policy and practice. News of opportunities to do this throughout 2015 will be promoted through our seminar exchanges, national conference, 'Health Issues in the Community' training programme, CHEX-POINT Newsletter and CHEX-POINT Snippets and consultative processes. In addition to information being made available on the CHEX website www.chex.org.uk, e-mails will be circulated directly to all community-led health organisations on the [CHEX searchable database](#). If you are not already on it, please join today!

We welcome comments on this paper. Please direct them in the first instance to Andrew Paterson, CHEX and SCDC Policy and Research Officer, by emailing andrew.paterson@scdc.org.uk or phone 0141 222 4837.

²⁰ SCDC (2014) *Community development in a different Scotland: Opportunity and challenge for Community Learning & Development planning and practice*
<http://www.scdc.org.uk/media/resources/documents/Why%20is%20community%20development%20important%20CLD%20briefing%20Oct%2014.pdf>

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