



## Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

### Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

[click here](#) to read the consultation paper

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Jewish community in Scotland to Government and other statutory and official bodies, and liaising with Ministers, MSPs, Churches, Trades Unions, and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. SCoJeC also provides a support network for the smaller communities and individuals and families who live outwith any Jewish community, and assists organisations within the Scottish Jewish community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

**1. Local Decision Making: Do you think that decisions about local issues and services are made locally enough in Scotland at the moment? If not, what does deciding 'locally' mean to you? Please illustrate your answer with any examples from your own experience.**

Both the Scottish and UK Governments have seen the many obvious attractions in a policy of local decision-making:

*“Localism is a key policy priority for the SNP government. The 2007 Concordat between Scottish Government and local government included the principle of more local control over planning and services (called 'localism').”<sup>1</sup>*

Their intention is, to quote the Prime Minister, to “create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.”<sup>2</sup> There are, however, also a number of serious problems, primarily relating to the identification of “communities” with geographic “neighbourhoods” described by David Cameron as “Rural, suburban, urban ...

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<sup>1</sup> The Opportunities and Challenges of the Changing Public Services Landscape for the Third Sector in Scotland: A Longitudinal Study Year Three Report (2009-2012) - Research Findings <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/10/4474/1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/big-society-speech>

*street level*”, when in fact many genuine communities, such as minority faith groups can be very widely dispersed geographically, but nonetheless have the cohesiveness to function in every sense as communities, providing mutual support for their members and engaging collectively with wider society.

It is sometimes the case that decisions can sometimes be made too locally. When the Localism Bill was introduced to the UK Parliament in December 2010, the Department for Communities and Local Government explained,

*“where the scale is too large or those using a service are too dispersed, they should be delivered by local institutions, subject to democratic checks and balances, enabled by full transparency.”*<sup>3</sup>

But this is the core of the problem: when the members of a community are too dispersed, they are invisible to local institutions, and can only be supported by supporting national networks to provide a local service. The situation is summed up by a Highland-region participant in our recent Scottish Government funded project *Being Jewish in Scotland*<sup>4</sup> that investigated the experience of Jewish people living throughout Scotland: *“I am a community of one – SCoJeC is my community.”*

**2. Local Accountability: How important do you think it is for locally elected people to be responsible for decisions about local issues and services? Do you have any examples of why this is the case?**

It depends which decisions: policy, resource allocation, or individual provision.

It is clearly vital for those responsible for decisions about local issues and services to have a good understanding of the situation on the ground, and also to be identifiable, accountable, and easily contactable. However, as we have already stated, devolving decision-making to the local level, risks failing the needs of minority communities unless there is some flexibility in both the decision making process and the allocation of budgets. An example given by another participant in our *Being Jewish in Scotland* project related to travel. He told us that his Council's policy is to subsidise buses to run Mondays to Saturdays, but they will not pay subsidies for buses to run on Sundays. That means that Orthodox Jews, who will not travel in vehicles during the Jewish Sabbath, which begins at dusk on Friday and ends after dark on Saturday night, are, as he said, "virtually housebound from Friday afternoons until Monday mornings." There is an analogy with disabled access: it may not be cost-effective to convert every bus in remote areas, but alternative provision can be made: more imaginative local decision-making could, for example, permit relevant people to receive subsidised taxi fares on Sundays. That, however, is unlikely to happen when decisions are made at a local level at which small minorities are simply invisible.

**3. Local Priorities: How well do you think that communities' local priorities are accounted for in the way that national and local government works at the moment? What is effective, and if there is room for improvement, how should things change?**

Currently, local planning tends not to take account of the fact that people generally take little notice of council boundaries when going about their daily lives. Lanarkshire NHS, for example, put together an excellent Spiritual Care policy – but began on the premise of the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://archive.is/DWTe>

<sup>4</sup> [www.scojec.org/jewishinscotland.html](http://www.scojec.org/jewishinscotland.html)

local census figures which showed a negligible Jewish population, and therefore ignored the significant tourist traffic on major motorways and rail lines, to say nothing of the significant number of Jewish people living in the Glasgow conurbation for whom Hairmyres is the nearest hospital.

Although national policy requires local authorities to address the needs of the full diversity of their local community by means of Equality Impact Assessments, these are not always successful, and we agree with the finding of the recent Independent Steering Group Review of Public Sector Equality<sup>5</sup> that EIAs may sometimes be “*overly long and inaccessible, enshrining a “tick-box” approach which may add little value and be resource-intensive.*”

The Scottish Government funding initiatives, such as the Equality Fund, have recognised that, in order to achieve the best possible local provision, the needs of minority communities must be addressed nationally rather than as merely scattered individuals and small groups. This does not, however, go far enough. One recent example from the Jewish Community makes the point: Jewish Care Scotland reports an increase in demand for their services from outwith Glasgow since articles about them appeared in *Four Corners*<sup>6</sup>, our quarterly newsletter, which is mainly for isolated Jewish individuals and the smaller communities in Scotland. However, they receive most of their funding for contracted services to East Renfrewshire and the City of Glasgow, where most of the Jewish community live, and even although they recognise their responsibility to Jewish people throughout Scotland, they cannot simply divert those resources to other local authority areas. But it is unreasonable to expect each of the other 30 authorities to enter into separate contracts even if they were willing to do so. So either these doubly vulnerable people in remote areas are deprived of the culturally and faith specific, support to which they are entitled, and which they would receive in Glasgow and East Renfrewshire, or else must be provided for by a centrally funded provision.

#### **4. Strengthening Democracy: What do you think should be done to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland? Do you have any ideas or examples about how this could improve people’s lives?**

Despite the serious concerns, which we have enlarged on in this response, devolving decision-making to the local level does include elements that can be built upon to counter these dangers. Since Devolution, all Scottish political parties have supported the policy of “*One Scotland – Many Cultures*”, and the First Minister frequently refers to minority communities as “*threads in the tartan*”, individually distinct but together forming a pattern; contrasting, but combining to hold the whole together.<sup>7</sup> Enabling all of those ‘threads’ to be heard, and developing services to meet their needs, can only be achieved by a combination of integrated local and national planning, combined with a willingness by individual service providers to listen, and to be flexible.

In resource terms, if all budgets are localised then there is a danger of nothing being left for the over-arching national bodies required to address the needs of small or scattered minorities. What that requires, as is already best but not universal practice, is to top slice a

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/237194/Review\\_of\\_the\\_Public\\_Sector\\_Equality\\_Duty\\_by\\_the\\_Independent\\_Steering\\_Group.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/237194/Review_of_the_Public_Sector_Equality_Duty_by_the_Independent_Steering_Group.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.scojec.org/4cs/4cs.html>

<sup>7</sup> This concept was developed in the 2006 Baillie Lecture by SCoJeC Director Ephraim Borowski [http://www.scojec.org/news/2006/06xi\\_baillie/baillie.pdf](http://www.scojec.org/news/2006/06xi_baillie/baillie.pdf)

budget to hold at HQ to deal with situations that don't fit the standard mould. That, however, may be practicable in large local authorities, but to ensure provision in the very small ones, where in fact the need may be greatest, that top slice must be held by central government.

**5. Scotland's Future: Has there been enough discussion about local democracy in the debate about Scotland's future? If not, what should be addressed and how might this be achieved?**

We recommend that there should be wider discussion about the collaboration between local and national democracy that is vital in order to ensure that all vulnerable people receive appropriate services.

**6. Obstacles and Challenges: Do you have any concerns about strengthening local democratic decision making in Scotland?**

There are many worthy reasons for devolving policy-making to the local level, such as responsiveness to local democracy. However, there are some policy areas where that is not possible, and diversity is one such. In many parts of the country, principally rural, the total minority population is a fraction of one per cent, and diverse distinct minorities are barely detectable. In fact, because the relevant census questions inhibit correct identification, individual minorities may be literally invisible. Yet the smaller and more isolated these groups are, the more vulnerable they are.

The localisation of budgetary decision-making impacts disproportionately on minority communities, and in particular isolated individuals from those communities, especially those living in rural areas, and, in consequence, may contribute to, rather than address, much less prevent, negative social outcomes. We are also concerned that localism is likely to result in a postcode lottery, whereby individuals living in one local authority area have access to effective support, whilst others from the same minority community in another area do not. For example, whilst the Jewish community in Lancashire or East Renfrewshire may be large enough to be visible to service providers, the small numbers of Jewish people living in the Western Isles are not. This is true even if local authorities are encouraged to form consortia: almost all minorities have insignificant numbers even in the entire area outwith major conurbations. The fact that educational and health provision is already effectively devolved to local authorities, results in an uneven provision, and so demonstrates that our concern in relation to budgetary localisation is not without foundation.

The only way to support these isolated individuals is to connect them with others in their own community. National networks, and national funding of those networks, are the only means by which minority communities can receive appropriate services and support throughout the country. The introduction of personal budgets for welfare service provision will enable individuals to purchase whatever service they wish, whether from within or outwith the local area, but, in order for this to be a realistic proposition, culturally-specific service providers, most of which are very small, must be funded and otherwise supported to provide services outwith their local area. We are, therefore, concerned at the finding of the Independent Steering Group Review of Public Sector Equality, that "*Many public bodies ... are adopting a formulaic 'tick-box' approach [to procurement] which they do not vary regardless of the size or nature of the contract. ... this creates a barrier for smaller charities and companies wishing to tender for public contracts.*"

Activities, whether national or local, that could not take place if not funded nationally, must be funded nationally. It is of the nature of support for smaller communities and isolated individuals, or information and advice to local authorities, health boards, the police force, etc., that, except in the larger cities, it can only be provided nationally. An isolated Jewish single mother in the Borders or the Highlands has no local support mechanism, but can only be given any sense of security by being connected to a national support network.

In order to be effective, an equality agenda must be "mainstreamed" throughout all policy and service areas in public, private, and voluntary sectors, and take full account of the diverse needs of the most vulnerable groups, but those that are a minority even among minority groups, will inevitably be overlooked when the focus is solely local. We are concerned at the Independent Steering Group recommendation that "*Public bodies should not collect diversity data unless it is necessary for them to do so.*", since "necessary" is open to a wide range of interpretations, and the recommendation would, therefore, appear to provide *carte blanche* to public bodies not to research – and therefore not to know about and provide for – minority groups in their area.

Even if data is collected, however, since, by their very nature, there are unlikely to be significant numbers of any minority community in most local authority areas, they will not be regarded as a spending priority at local level. At best, a local authority may fund an umbrella "minority community initiative" in their area, but this can be little more than a tick-box exercise. The fundamental point is that there is no such thing as a single homogenous "minority community" – indeed even some individual communities may not be homogenous. Rather there are many distinct minority communities each with individual, diverse, and sometimes even conflicting needs. An elderly non-English-speaking Chinese woman, for example, has as little in common with a Muslim teenager of Pakistani descent, as with the indigenous majority. Some, such as the Jewish and Sikh communities, have both ethnic and religious facets to their identity, whilst others may depend only on ethnicity or religion. A generic approach to consulting with, and providing services to, minority communities cannot but fail to meet the needs of those that are minorities even among the minorities; failure to take account of the diversity of diversity must inevitably condemn any project to failure.

We have, therefore, grave concerns that the blanket extension of the localisation agenda will isolate members of minority communities, including the Jewish community, particularly those living in rural areas outwith any settled community.

**7. We would like to keep the conversation going with you. Can you tell us about any events, networks or other ways in which we could help achieve this? Is there anything that we can do to support you?**

We would wish to be involved in continuing discussions about local democracy and the localism agenda. Our well-established and ongoing communications network and programme of events provide a ready-made channel of communication with Jewish people throughout Scotland, and the online discussion forum which we are setting up as part of our new CoNNeCT project<sup>8</sup> will facilitate discussion on a wide range of subjects, potentially including matters relating to local democracy.

We would, furthermore, be glad to invite the Commission to a briefing about the full findings of our *Being Jewish in Scotland* project, in order to provide you with more in-depth information about the experience of one of Scotland's minority communities.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.scojec.org/news/2013/13vi\\_scojec-connect/sc.html](http://www.scojec.org/news/2013/13vi_scojec-connect/sc.html)