

Briefing on ERS Scotland's 2021 Local Democracy Campaign

April 2021

1 <https://ourdemocracy.scot/>

The Our Democracy¹ campaign arises from the simple idea that human beings flourish when they have control over their own lives. We think that the vast majority of Scots realise that freedom and power is best exercised as a community. As lone individuals we can potentially do some good things but as groups of individuals we have so much more power, can create and build better, and have more fun. Working and organising in the interests of our friends and neighbours means they work in our interests too. By doing this we find out how capable we all are, building trust in ourselves and in each other to run our own places.

The pandemic has given us a fresh insight into what we already knew about Scotland's communities; people will sacrifice their time and resources to aid their neighbours. But that sense of community cannot be taken for granted. Now, more than ever, we need to revitalise and remake our local democracy.

2 <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/parliamentary-briefings/a-quick-guide-to-citizens-assemblies>

Electoral Reform Society Scotland, in campaigning for stronger local democracy, has run mini publics in towns and villages,² advised the Citizens Assembly of Scotland and the government's Local Democracy Review, and spoken to communities, councillors, MSP's and Ministers across Scotland about how to revitalise our institutions of local democracy.

3 <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/parliamentary-briefings/democracy-matters-response-from-electoral-reform-society-scotland>

Our proposal submitted to the Government's Democracy Matters review³ builds on this experience and the work of COSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy and recent blueprint for local government ahead of the election.⁴ It calls for greater subsidiarity and for communities to have regular local citizens' assemblies to develop plans and to hold politicians accountable for delivering them.

4 https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/19551/LG-Blueprint.pdf

In the run up to the May Holyrood election we have launched an online campaign with the Our Democracy coalition (appendix - coalition members) to put local democracy on the agenda.

This Holyrood election, we are calling for parties to:

- Back a new way of doing local democracy – by letting communities set up local Citizens' Assemblies to plan their areas' futures.
- Introduce an ambitious Local Democracy Bill, that makes it easy for people to take power back to where they are.
- Sign up to the Declaration on Local Democracy, enshrining a principle of local community power

Our message: A Future Built By Us And For Us, encourages people to see themselves and each other as collective, active agents in our democracy. We can all play a part in making sure communities are at the heart of a people-powered recovery by supporting mechanisms for people to get together to make decisions for themselves. This not only makes for better decisions, but as the pandemic has shown, these very acts strengthen the bonds of care and support. This is 'strength training' for Scotland's democratic muscle. Strong, supportive, democratic communities are the best foundation on which to rebuild a resilient Scotland.

Local democracy in Scotland: statistics and public opinion

The campaign seeks to raise awareness of the fact that Scotland has some of the largest, most distant councils in Europe. The average local authority in Scotland has to cover an area of 2,435 square kilometres, making it 50 times bigger than the EU average.

In addition, on average Scotland has just one councillor per every 4,453 residents. Denmark, which is quite similar to Scotland in size and population, is half that at 2,216. Norway is far ahead at 572 while citizens in England are far better represented at one local representative per 2,814 people.

Our tool, which we have shared with councillors and the general public, allows individuals to see how many elected councillors there are per person in their local authority.⁵ The result is shown in comparison with Norway, Denmark and England to highlight Scotland's divergence from European and UK averages.

⁵ <https://action.ourdemocracy.scot/page/77814/action/1>

Polling we have commissioned reflects these statistics - people feel a geographical and political distance from local government.⁶

Over two thirds of people surveyed feel they have little or no influence over decisions that affect their local community but four in ten respondents (44%) said they would be willing to give up their free time to help their local council make decisions on issues that affect their community.

⁶ Polling by Savanta ComRes: 1,009 Scottish adults online from the 5 to 10 March 2021. Data weighted to be demographically representative.

The polling also shows that people want more power locally and believe it will help with rebuilding from Covid-19. Three quarters of respondents (76%) think that local communities should have some say in the decisions around how Scotland re-builds from the Covid-19 pandemic. By contrast, fewer than one in 10 (8%) of respondents think that the recovery should be directed entirely from the national government with no direction from local communities.

Yet it highlights that people also want the mechanisms and structures to be able to rebuild locally. A total of 81.1 percent think that citizens' assemblies could be effective in deciding on local community priorities. This demonstrates broad popular support for citizens' assemblies as a mechanism for decision-making.

Declaration on Local Democracy (full declaration in appendix)

Following this, Our Democracy has launched a 'Declaration' – backed by community groups across Scotland - calling for a new way of doing local democracy, so that communities can have a proper say in how we rebuild after the pandemic.⁷ Thousands have signed up to our Declaration calling for a bold Local Democracy bill and a new way of doing politics.

⁷ <https://action.ourdemocracy.scot/page/77784/petition/1>

Community Support

Our coalition and work is informed by communities already 'acting as if they own the place'. Here are some statements from our network on the election campaign:

Empty Kitchens Full Hearts mutual aid group: "An uptake of much more localised democracy will allow for actual communities to look after themselves and one another...The power to achieve healthy and sustainable communities is at our fingertips and all that's stopping us is the perception that we need to ask permission, we are not powerless."

Martin Avila, Director - Kinning Park Complex: "Community land trusts, democratically owned businesses and citizens assemblies must be at the forefront of the reform of a system where private profit and private interest

has crowded out collective wellbeing. There can be no tackling of inequality and climate change if we don't tackle the imbalances in the system that created these problems. Local people, acting together in local and national interest can revitalise our country and our communities. It is our democracy, let's start making it work for us."

Evie Love, founder of Earth In Common: "Local Democracy should of course be fully embraced, this is vitally important for healthy communities. People do tend to know what solutions are needed in their local area. I'd like to see this developed alongside well researched and highly informed citizens assemblies, particularly for complex issues."

Campaign Coverage:

- The Herald⁸
- The Nation⁹
- Source News¹⁰
- Drivetime with John Beattie 24.03.2021

⁸ <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/19214733.covid-scotland-poll-finds-scots-want-local-decision-control-recovery-pandemic/>

⁹ <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19182312.groups-bid-reform-local-democracy/>

¹⁰ <https://sourcenews.scot/willie-sullivan-only-real-local-democracy-can-rebuild-our-communities/>

Appendix

Declaration on Local Democracy in full:

Democracy is the right for people to decide how the place where they live is run. For a hundred years this right has built our communities, our society and our sense of justice. But too few people now believe that this right is being honoured, too few believe that they decide and too many believe they are powerless and voiceless. So, we call for a new democracy which is ready to help us build for a hundred years to come.

First, decisions must be made for each place, in that place by the people who live there. Our towns and villages must decide for themselves just as our nation must decide for itself. Power must exist at the scale of the community which is affected. We need our democracy much closer.

Second, the right to decide should not disappear each time the brief flicker of an election is over. Delegating our right to decide is not, in itself, enough. We must create a democracy that involves us all the time, where citizens do not just choose rulers but shape the rules.

Third, democracy must be powerful. The right to choose must be matched by the power to do – and the power to do must be matched with the resource to do it. Democracy is not gifted from above but from below, so power and resource must rest in the places where people live.

This is our simple vision for our future; a truly local democracy, a truly participatory democracy and a truly powerful democracy.

We have learned the lesson of our last hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built, it must be built for us. We must now learn a lesson for our next hundred years; it is not enough that the future is built for us, it must be built by us.