Post-legislative scrutiny of Part 2 of the Community Empowerment Act 2015: Community Planning

Summary of responses to survey

In addition to a formal call for views – which was aimed at Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs), individual statutory partners and other organisations – the Committee launched an online survey targeted more at community groups and individuals. Live from November 2022 until January 2023, the survey was promoted by the Parliament's social media and communities engagement teams.

We received 78 responses and of these, over 40 were from interested individuals, 12 were from community council representatives, 11 were from third sector organisations and 4 were from individuals who had previously participated in local CPP groups. The remaining responses were from other community bodies, development trusts and resident groups.

Analysis of results

Around 75% of respondents were familiar with their local CPP and 25% weren't. This is unlikely to be representative of the general population though, as those choosing to participate in our survey will naturally have some awareness/involvement of community planning. Around 58% of respondents had some experience of working with their CPP, with a similar number were aware of Local Outcomes Improvement Plans and associated Locality Plans.

*Q1. Are you familiar with your local community planning partnership?*
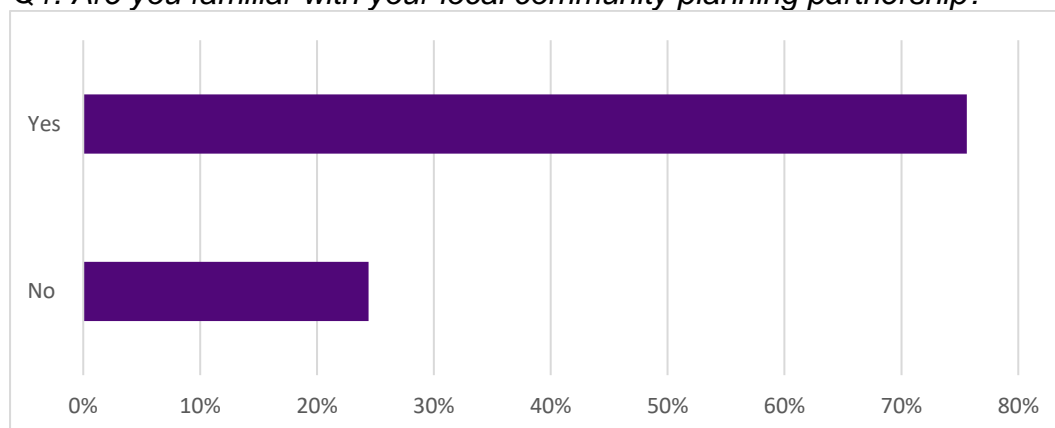
A number of respondents unfamiliar with CPPs are still quite active in local community projects and some are even community councillors. One person from a third sector organisation believes the general public "would not have a clue about the CPP or the LOIP".

Impact on inequalities

The Committee also asked about the impact of the 2015 Act on tackling inequalities.

Q2. Has community planning contributed to a reduction in inequalities in your local area in recent years?
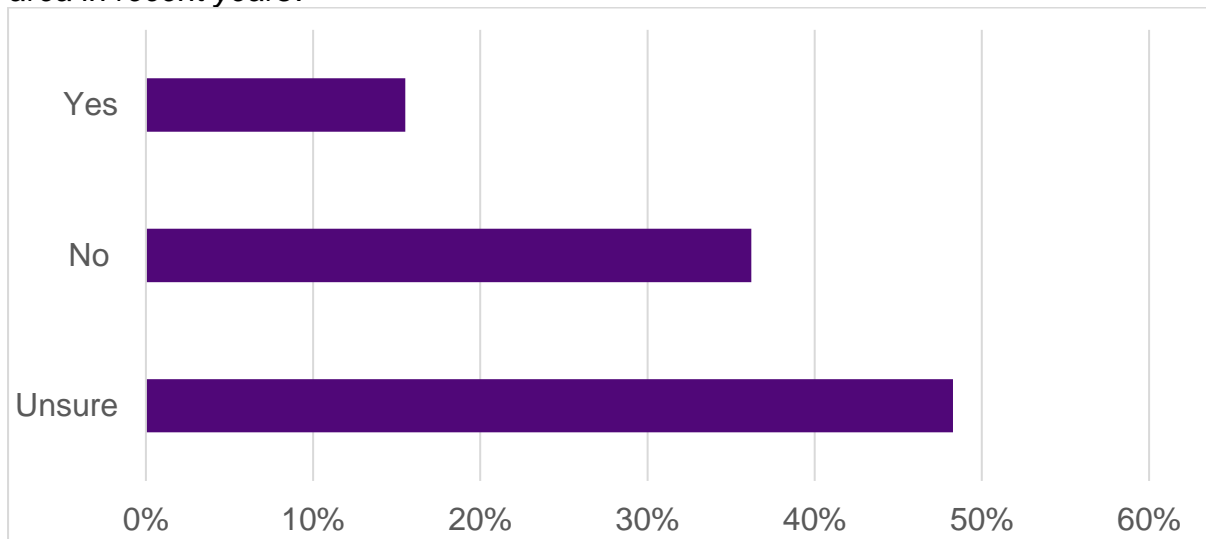
When asked about impact on inequalities, the above graph shows respondents were unconvinced that CPPs are living up to the aspirations of the 2015 Act. Almost 50% were "unsure" when asked if CPPs had reduced inequalities, and of the remainder, more people answered "no" than "yes".

One North Ayrshire resident stated:

> "I regularly review committee papers and local authority papers and publications and the fact remains that North Ayrshire, and in particular pockets within, remains one of the most deprived areas in the country."

Another response, from a development trust based in the Highland area, acknowledged some progress whilst also highlighting limitations:

> "By engaging and understanding our communities we have been able to target funding to support those most in need. However, we are only scratching the surface given the levels of poverty seen in Sutherland today. In 2019 42% of households in Sutherland were in fuel poverty, 33% were in extreme fuel poverty. These figures will be close to 100% in 2022."

A number of respondents acknowledged that tackling inequalities is a major aim of CPP and subgroup work, but few provided evidence of inequalities actually reducing. One respondent in North Lanarkshire noted:

> "Unfortunately inequalities have increased over the past few years and while there has been multiple factors contributing to this, community planning has definitely not made any reduction and in some cases has probably increased inequalities in the area...There are a lot of people being paid good money, and we are yet to see many outcomes for communities."

Several respondents accepted that many of the drivers of inequalities are external to what CPPs are able to do, and others highlighted a lack of data available to say whether or not inequalities at a local level are improving or deteriorating.

Q3. In your view, do locality plans focus on and support those areas in your council area needing the most support?
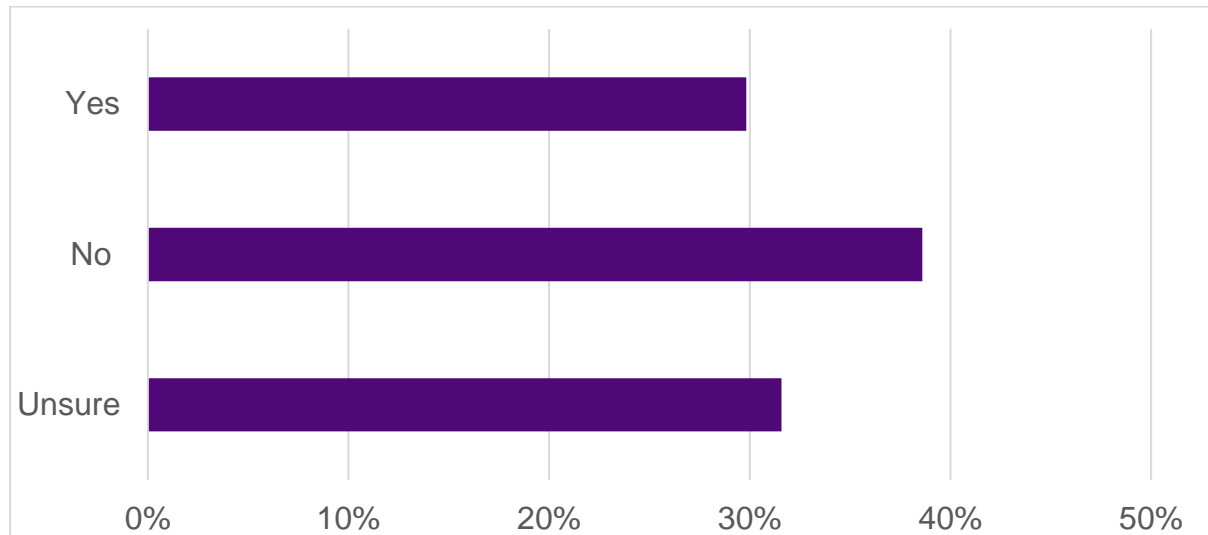
The 2015 Act and accompanying guidance require CPPs to identify smaller areas where people experience significantly poorer outcomes as a result of socio-economic disadvantage. Each CPP must prepare and publish locality plans for these areas setting out how improvements will be made in these localities. The survey shows that, once again, the majority of respondents are unconvinced about the extent to which locality plans are supporting the most deprived areas.

Nevertheless, there is some acknowledgement of effort at a local level, especially from local groups or CPP sub-groups, but there may still be barriers to locality plans achieving impact. If plans are focussed on tackling a specific issue – for example fuel poverty - then they sometimes do demonstrate impact. One individual working for a statutory partner in Fife highlighted improved partnership planning and some successful targeting, "but there are limitations linked to existing resources and degree of silo working".

The Committee heard in formal evidence how inequalities are a "moving target" and this is also reflected in responses to the survey. For example, one respondent from Glasgow said that existing locality plans "require to be updated to reflect the changing needs of our communities". One development trust in the Highland area believes that the plans were appropriate prior to Covid and the cost-of-living crisis. But now "all rural communities are equally suffering so I don't feel singling out communities is helpful or the fairest use of resources". A respondent in South Ayrshire made a similar point, stating that locality plans "focus on the SIMD areas and forget the rest of the population".

One Fife-based respondent described how there are pockets of deprivation even in "wealthy areas" and the locality plans aren't therefore appropriate. The appropriateness of locality plans in dispersed, rural communities was also raised by a number of respondents in the Highland area.

Some respondents believe that the locality plans are failing to evidence impact, with one from North Ayrshire stating that many lack SMART objectives:

> "…they tend to either not be measurable directly or very 'lofty' and more about how they will do things rather than what they will achieve. Thus I truly find it hard to assess the real impact... I can point to the number of meetings held or workshops or indeed what grants or funds may have been given out but not what impact this made."

Various respondents highlighted a lack of awareness of Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs) and locality plans amongst the general public, with a feeling that they are only successful if communities are fully engaged. And there is also a question of who represents communities, especially more marginalised or vulnerable households. One response from Argyll and Bute summarised the situation quite succinctly (about LOIPs and Locality Plans):

> "I'm not sure that individuals or groups within communities are particularly aware of these [LOIPs] or see them as relevant to the work they do. I suspect larger organisations will be well versed and will recognise aspects of their work within them."

One respondent from Govanhill in Glasgow stated that they received no direction whatsoever from the CPP on how to go about developing a locality plan. In this instance, the Scottish Community Development Centre provided the support needed. Moreover, the respondent from Govanhill suggested the resulting Locality Plan may not have had much impact:

> "Because there has never been any governance structure put into place with clearly outlined responsibilities, targets, and monitoring. There was no real buy-in from the vast majority of the people who sat on the so called 'steering group'. And there has never been any budget within Thriving Places for the implementation of the recommendations from the Locality Plans meant to be coproduced with local people. Therefore the residents involved in the process have been left feeling disappointed and frustrated that all their work and time went for nothing with some calling the Locality Planning a 'lip service'."

Community engagement and participation

A key ambition of the 2015 Act was to improve opportunities for communities to participate in decisions on local service delivery. This was to involve greater partnership between public bodies and communities. As such, the survey asked whether people believe engagement and participation have improved since 2015:

Q4. Have opportunities to engage with community planning partnerships improved in recent years?
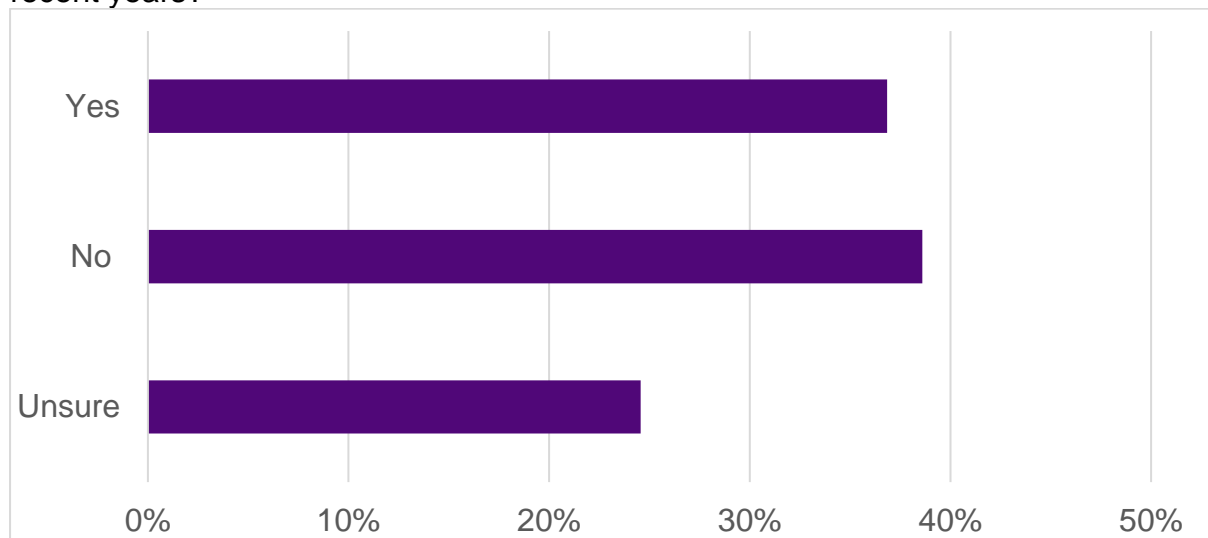
Although people were generally more positive about this than about the others aims of the Act, a majority of respondents still answered "no" or "unsure" to this question.

One respondent in Tain in the Highlands was very unimpressed by the local CPP's engagement with communities stating that "apart from a survey 6 years ago there has been no broad community involvement in the development of plans". One respondent from Glasgow claims that "the locality plan in Drumchapel was written without any prior involvement of the community, in other words, back to front".

Some highlight an almost tokenistic approach to community engagement, with community organisations feeling that CPPs at best provide opportunities for "consultation" rather than "empowerment". One Glasgow community councillor stated that community engagement is seen as a "tick-box exercise" and the results are not properly listened to. Other communities, including some of the most deprived in Renfrewshire, feel that they have been deliberately excluded from various initiatives. This is because of:

> "…a local hegemony existing amongst third sector organisations masquerading as the providers of great solutions but who in fact often entrench the very issues they were tasked with challenging, creating further inequality however inadvert."

Others claimed that many consultation exercises fail to engage with the wider community and are dominated by the "usual suspects". Likewise, a respondent from Thurso believes that engagement "has been very patchy" with little attempt made to get views of the more marginalised in communities.

Although developments in digital communication in recent years – in particular the growth of MS Teams and Skype – have made participation easier for some, other respondents expressed concerns about growing digital exclusion. Surveys and online meetings are organised under the assumption that everyone has internet access. This is not the case, especially for some in more vulnerable households.

There was a real sense in several responses that meaningful community engagement requires skilled organisation and facilitation. This skills-set is not as apparent in CPP public bodies as it should be and training of public sector staff is required, as well as capacity building within communities:

> "There needs to be an acceptance that Community Engagement is a skilled job. Training is necessary. Even among people employed in a professional capacity receive minimal if any training."

In addition to lack of facilitation and community development skills, various respondents highlighted community apathy as being a barrier. One respondent was keen to stress that poor community participation is not always the fault of the CPP, but may also be caused by community apathy and a "real lack of community spirit". However, one respondent from Strathaven believes there are ways around this:

> "I don't see or experience any open discussion forums which are appealing for local people to attend. Gatherings should be a fun and enjoyable session with food and entertainment with relevant local information and problems solving focussed on action."

Local groups and individuals may also be confused, or suffering from "consultation fatigue" with the sheer number of plans, groups, sub-groups and consultations taking place. This "cluttered landscape" means that community planning is becoming more (not less) complicated.

Challenges facing local area

Almost all respondents described the multiple challenges facing their local communities. These were varied and clearly show that local responses are required to local problems. Most respondents mentioned poverty, including food poverty and other inflationary pressures which may not have been so pressing when the 2015 Act was passed. As well as widespread concerns about access to good quality housing and good jobs, many respondents also highlighted growing mental health and loneliness issues throughout their communities. From Ayr to Thurso, these issues came up repeatedly.

Digital connectivity is clearly a huge issue for many in our more remote communities, as are depopulation and reduced public transport links. Energy costs and fuel poverty also came up again and again, especially from people living in the Highlands and islands areas.

Equitable access to good quality public services, regardless of where people live or their community of interest, was mentioned by a high number of respondents. There are concerns about health and care sectors being able to recruit and retain staff. There is also particular concern about services and facilities for young people, as well as older people. Many responses highlight the impacts of reduced local authority spending in their areas with some stating that the preventative and transformational ambitions of CPPs will not be met unless there is enough funding available.

Some expressed frustrations that spatial planning decisions are made by the Scottish Government which go against the wishes of local communities. This makes people feel *disempowered* rather than more empowered. Others expressed dismay at the derelict state of some town centres which has negative impacts on community spirit and a sense of local pride.

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