

# SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES

## Introduction

The Scottish Government is keen to bring together views and ideas from a wide range of sectors and to explore the priorities Scotland's fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) should address.

The opinions expressed in the think pieces will be those of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion. Think Pieces will be published over the coming weeks.

In the latest of a series of Think Pieces, Angus Hardie, Director of the Scottish Community Alliance, sets out his thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically empowered communities.

## Empowered communities in 2050?

*Community empowerment* first entered the lexicon of government a decade ago with the publication of the [Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan](#). Although producing little in the way of action, this document served the more important purpose of attracting the attention of public policy makers, really for the first time, to the idea of community empowerment. And although since then, the term has often been used interchangeably (and confusingly) with a distinctly different set of activities, namely *community engagement*, it nevertheless was a signal that the tectonic plates of top-down, old school municipalism had started to shift and the debate about where all this might lead to had finally begun in earnest.

As the Communities Minister Alex Neil MSP mused while launching the Action Plan, *community empowerment* is best understood as a journey still to be travelled. Needless to say, he stopped short of elucidating on what it might look or feel like for the community traveller on arriving at their destination. And there's the rub. Ten years on from setting out on that journey I'm not sure we're any the wiser as to where it's all headed. Despite primary legislation to inject impetus and focus to the debate and Scottish Government investing heavily along the way, the wholly grail of understanding what a truly *empowered community* might look like remains as elusive as ever. Instead, rather than the Minister's much vaunted journey of discovery, the term *community empowerment* has become so ubiquitous with casual and often careless overuse as to render it virtually without meaning.

And this is the challenge we now face – to restore some real meaning and understanding to a process that still has such a key role to play in delivering many of the [outcomes](#) that Scotland has set itself. But before any progress is made in this respect, there's one myth about community empowerment that really has to be dispelled. And this is the idea that community empowerment is not a 'zero sum game' - that it can occur in such a way that somehow leaves everything else as it was. The idea that community empowerment is wholly benign and that those institutions that hold power can lend their support and even actively promote it, safe in the knowledge that their world will remain unaffected, is, in my opinion, plain

wrong. Whether as a tactic to draw these institutions into the debate in the first place, or to avoid the sort of hysterical reactions that greeted the first land reform legislation – that it would lead to Mugabe style land grabs – the result has been both to tone down the level of our ambition for community empowerment, and to a large extent obfuscate its meaning, particularly when conflating it with other, very different activities related to community engagement.

And so if we go along with the analogy of community empowerment as a journey, it will have to be a journey that takes us to a very different place than we are now, where some of the fundamentals of power - in particular control over decision-making and resources - have been shifted irrevocably towards local people and away from the existing institutions of power. And this means that empowered communities will look very different from one another in different places. It will involve trial and error, an appetite for risk, an acceptance of failure and a willingness to learn. But with appropriate support and further enabling legislation from Scottish Government to back their aspirations, all communities will eventually settle to a level of *empowerment* that reflects their circumstances and aspirations.

*Community empowerment* will cease to be the preoccupation of the chattering classes. It will instead become the new 'normal' for communities and our society will reap the benefits. That said, 2050 may be a tad optimistic for this particular journey's end.

## **Biography**

Although originally trained in accountancy and then social work, Angus Hardie's principle interest is community work. He spent 20 years helping to establish and support community organisations in and around the peripheral housing schemes of Edinburgh before moving to establish the national umbrella body for development trusts (DTA Scotland). In 2011, he initiated the Scottish Community Alliance - a broad coalition of the major community based networks operating in Scotland – with the aim of promoting the interests of the community sector more widely and encouraging cross-sector collaboration.