



PUBLIC PETITION NO.

PE01606

Name of petitioner

Peter Gregson on behalf of Kids not Suits

Petition title

Forcing Scottish councils to collaborate regionally on schools and roads

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use its position in negotiations to set local authority budgets to ensure local authorities work together on a regional basis to provide education and transport services on a shared basis. Efficiencies could lead to staff being redeployed out of the back office and into front line services.

Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition

I have written to Ken MacIntosh MSP, Sarah Boyack MSP, Marco Biagi MSP, Cameron Buchanan MSP; Willie Rennie MSP and Kezia Dugdale MSP asking for action on Councils sharing services, to try and get it into the manifesto of every major Scottish political party- with no success.

I also published two articles in December 2015- in the Edinburgh Evening News - "Edinburgh Council needs fresh ideas not cuts" and in the Scotsman - "Shared Services are way forward for councils".

Petition background information

STATISTICS

Scotland has more public sector workers per head of population than anywhere else in Europe yet our services are no better. This is due to our having 32 local authorities to serve a population of 5.2 Million- 162,500 people per Council.

Looking at just the upper tier councils (excluding districts), England has 152 Councils for 57.5 Million – that's 378,290 people per Council.

Thus we have double the number of Councils per head of population; every authority requires administration costs, so we pay twice as much for the back office as those living south of the border.

England has fewer upper tier Councils, but their services are the same, or better. Scotland suffers from duplication and inefficiency in having so many back office Council staff for so few people.

After merging some services any savings resulting from those taking early retirement or

seeking employment elsewhere, should be ploughed into reducing school class sizes and fixing the roads. If that requires building more- and ideally smaller- schools, then the savings will help fund this too.

HISTORY

Before unitary authorities were created by the Tory Government in 1996 and the Regional Councils abolished, services such as roads maintenance and education were provided on a region-wide basis. It was far more cost-effective. A few Scottish Councils deliver some services by co-operating with neighbouring Councils- but why not all? It would cut the number of bureaucrats at Council HQ and it would allow the cash saved to be spent on the front line. (eg Edinburgh spends almost half of its £1Bn revenue budget on education. It could significantly cut administration costs for this massive department if the service was run jointly with East, West or Midlothian Councils.)

In the face of swingeing Council cuts, surely forcing large local authority departments to share services (that might function as well as, or better, at a regional level) would be something the Government would support?

The paper of 1996: "The Structure and Functions of Local Government under a Scottish Parliament" (by Veteran Council Leader Jean McFadden) noted:

"It is interesting to read what the Wheatley Commission members said, in 1969, of single-tier local government. They believed it to be unworkable: Different levels of administration seem to be required for large-scale services on the one hand and for local services on the other. In order to create all-purpose authorities an attempt has to be made to find a level that satisfactorily meets the needs of both types of service. Such a level is simply not to be found in Scotland. (Wheatley para. 677)."

McFadden continued, reflecting on Joint Boards: "There have been squabbles as to which council should be the lead authority and which should provide the convener of the board." She concluded that: "there must be at least a partial reorganisation of local government once the Scottish Parliament is established."

This has never happened.

When the Regional Councils were abolished and replaced with our current unitary authorities, we multiplied the administration of education and roads hugely, as each small authority sought to mimic the structures of the regional government they replaced. We bear those costs to this day.

RATIONALE

I am not calling for the reorganisation of local government- I do not want to create a second legislature that would generate more politicians and more cost.

However, most acknowledge that the Regions, until they were disbanded by the Conservative Government in 1996, were a far more effective way of delivering Roads and Education services.

The 2011 Christie Commission called for public bodies to become more efficient by reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible. It stated that all institutions and structures resist change, especially radical change. It observed that with the cuts faced, a comprehensive public service reform process must be initiated. Christie concluded: "Ultimate responsibility for reform rests, however, with the Scottish Government. I urge them to act quickly and decisively - as a society we no longer have time for delay."

OTHER COUNCILS SHARE SERVICES

Most Scots are unaware that a majority of English Councils share services, often on a regional basis. There needs to be serious rationalisation of back office staff in Scotland, akin to what East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire councils did when they launched the Ayrshire Roads Alliance last year to deliver a range of roads services. These include roads maintenance, winter maintenance, design and infrastructure, traffic and transportation, and road safety. The councils expect the shared services arrangement to deliver more than £8 million in savings over the next ten years. The savings will be mainly from reduced management and administrative costs and from better deals on larger orders. (see p31 of "An overview of local government in Scotland 2015" by Audit

larger cuts. (see part of 'An Overview of Local Government in Scotland 2010' by Angus Scotland).

This kind of sharing should be the alternative for all Councils to cutting lollipop ladies, removing parks funding, making kids pay for music classes, cutting funding to community groups, making museums and libraries part-time, etc.

In December 2015, Edinburgh Council decided to share services with neighbouring authorities in the delivery of roads services. It declared that it would "improve resilience and sustainability by sharing expertise, standardising processes and eliminating the duplication of joint resources."

At the same time, the Council published an option appraisal as to how different forms of joint management arrangements would work (see Appendix 1 of http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/49189/item_83_-_formal_collaboration_proposal_for_edinburgh_lothians_borders_and_fife_councils) and the Scottish Government should refer to this when planning the detail of what I call for.

BENEFITS AND DETAIL

By sharing services we can cut back office posts. Those workers that become surplus to requirements can be redeployed into front line services. Out of the back office- into the front line. These staff can work in schools (many are qualified) or roads.

As the cuts continue next year, many front-line staff will continue to seek early retirement. But if they're in what are deemed to be essential services (like homelessness), they're not getting it. With this proposal those front-line staff could leave, with the back office workers filling their posts.

I am proposing the creation of new regional education and transport authorities and I say they must deal with policy too. They could take the form of joint boards, governed by elected members drawn from participating local authorities (or a different kind of body- see Edinburgh's option appraisal mentioned above). The ratio of representation on these boards must reflect the relative populations of the authorities. To agree on policy and the allocation of resources, the onus will be on them to avoid their respective fiscal cliffs by hammering out their differences - if they each want to secure their respective block grants from the Scottish Government.

The Government might, in addition, choose to bring in other services and functions, such as social work, council tax collection, HR services and procurement. Care should be taken, though, not to emulate the suffering that has been caused by the poorly planned merger of education and social work services by Clackmannanshire and Stirling- an arrangement which has mostly unravelled.

The establishment of a Department at the Scottish Government that would assist in the planning of governance options, accountability, etc. would be a natural first step. Its task would be to evaluate potential cost savings and efficiencies and advise the Government how best to proceed, with the ultimate aim of not sacking people, but improving front-line services. This should include using cash savings to build more – and ideally smaller- schools.

As well as reducing costs, the benefits of working this way include joined up policies covering a wider area. Negotiations with bus companies, for example, should be on a region-wide basis, since the routes that buses follow cross local authority boundaries.

CONCERNS

The concerns will be a perceived loss of control over policy, and that the arrangement will not be easy where the political administrations are not aligned.

Despite the benefit of these changes, many MSPs will believe that the move to a joint management will disempower councils and they will lose control over management. This view must be challenged in the face of austerity and the over-riding need to preserve front-line services in the face of swingeing cuts.

It will be a real challenge. In 2013 the Scottish Parliament Local Government and Regeneration Committee found that well-intended efforts to pursue public service reform were not yet delivering the scale, nature or rate of change that was needed. The

reasons why not are well covered in their paper. It's an excellent document: the Committee concludes that its findings "echo the consensus of our many witnesses that the speed, scale and nature of the response to the Christie Commission is not adequate".

I have used Scottish Government data to calculate that – purely for education- if the shared services were based on the old regional council areas, ie pre-1996, it could save Scotland as much as £500M pa.

As with everything involving public bodies, significant new costs can arise if officers decide they want to get new premises, new staff, new equipment etc to set up the new "Shared Service". Creative Scotland (as was The Scottish Arts Council) and Police Scotland are examples. Four mergers creating Scotland-wide bodies were examined by Audit Scotland in 2014. Clearly, the cost of setting up new Education and Transport authorities will need to be tightly controlled if savings are to be made.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this petition aims to force local authorities to share services in the knowledge they will never do so off their own bat. (For why would turkeys vote for Xmas?). The resulting economies and redeployment of staff will improve education and roads, securing a better mental and physical environment for all.

This petition is one of a raft of Petitions to the Scottish Parliament launched in the run up to the Scottish Elections by Kids not Suits under the aegis "Vision for an emancipated healthy democratic Scotland".

(Kids not Suits is a campaign group trying to keep class sizes small and ensure back-room costs, duplication and bureaucratic demands don't hinder teachers' ability to do the job.)

Unique web address

<http://ww3.parliament.scot/GettingInvolved/Petitions/FixLocalGovernment>

Related information for petition

Savings will be mainly from reduced management and administrative costs and from better deals on larger orders.- Page 31 of "An overview of local government in Scotland 2015" by Audit Scotland at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2015/nr_150305_local_government_overview.pdf

In 2013 the Scottish Parliament Local Government and Regeneration Committee found that well-intended efforts to pursue public service reform (PSR) are not yet delivering the scale, nature or rate of change that is needed. The reasons why not are well covered here:

www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_LocalGovernmentandRegenerationCommittee/Reports/lgr-13-09w.pdf

Four mergers creating Scotland-wide bodies were examined by Audit Scotland in 2014 . Clearly, sharing service costs will need to be tightly controlled if savings are to be made. See: <http://audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/learning-the-lessons-of-public-body-mergers>

"Some councils such as the Greater Manchester councils and the West Midlands councils have long standing agreements for co-operating on transport and the economy. Recently, we have seen a move by other councils towards joint commissioning of transport and economic regeneration services." From "Responding to the challenge: alternative delivery models in local government" at www.grant-thornton.co.uk/Documents/Alternative-Delivery-Models-LG.pdf

More information at Petitioners website www.kidsnotsuits.co.uk

Do you wish your petition to be hosted on the Parliament's website to collect signatures online?

YES

How many signatures have you collected so far?

0

Closing date for collecting signatures online

22 / 03 / 2016

Comments to stimulate online discussion

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Why does Scotland have more public sector workers per head of population than anywhere else in Europe, but services that are no better?