

PE1587/A

Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee

SCVO response

18 January 2016

Summary

We welcome the interest expressed in the petition to building greater social cohesion and democratic governance in Scotland. However, SCVO does not agree with the petition to re-instate a Scottish Civic Forum as the route to achieving this.

Our response

SCVO welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee's request for a view from SCVO on:

CONSIDERATION OF PETITION PE1587

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reinstate the Scottish Civic Forum and to fund the Forum at a level which will allow it to develop and succeed as an instrument of social cohesion and democratic governance in Scotland.

SCVO's response:

- SCVO welcomes the interest expressed in the petition to building greater social cohesion and democratic governance in Scotland.
- SCVO is particularly interested in ensuring more citizens in Scotland are empowered to participate in the big decisions that affect their lives.
- SCVO does not agree with the petition to re-instate a Scottish Civic Forum. We are not convinced that the Civic Forum is the best way to achieve the above or add to the other ways in which people engage with the Parliament.

Our analysis:

The Civic forum was an institution of its time. In the early years of the Scottish Parliament it was important to ensure a strong channel for external organisations including civil society to feed into the Parliament's deliberations. In recent years, this channel has been replaced by much more direct input to Scottish Parliament Committees and through the Parliament's cross-party groups, many of which are supported by civic groups directly.

Key points:

- There isn't only one way or one route to getting your voice heard.

- More people have more access to Parliament (and more influence over what it does) than, for example, Westminster.
- Civil society is heterogeneous and pluralistic and its relationships with the Parliament are diverse and multi-layered.
- We also do not see value in a Forum which seeks to impose a unified view on civil society which we believe would be too corporate for the Scottish culture.

For the future therefore, we believe the real opportunity is to build on the high levels of participation and political awareness that came from the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. This participation agenda, shared by SCVO, Scottish Government and many of SCVO's members, is about building more direct links between citizens and the Parliament, rather than trying to mediate this through civic institutions such as the Civic Forum. So in this domain it is difficult to see where a revived Civic Forum could add value.

Conclusion

We welcome the petitioner's interest in an ambitious approach to Scotland's governance and democracy. If there is an ambition to invest more in participative democracy (which there should be) then we argue that it is not best directed at re-establishing the Civic Forum.

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