Aberdeen Futures:

Whose Community Planning?

Aberdeen TGWU

Researched by

European Services Strategy Unit
(Continuing the work of the Centre for Public Services)

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Executive Summary

The objectives of the study were to assess the extent to which the scope of participation had resulted in a shift of power in the decision making process and to identify the extent to which Aberdeen Futures has involved trade unions and community organisations in its activities.

The study consisted of desk-based research analysing Aberdeen's community planning reports, analysis of the minutes and documents of TACA, Civic Forum and Challenge Groups, and an analysis of local press reports. Confidential semi-structured interviews with several key participants in the City Alliance, Civic Forum and City Council elected members was an important part of the research.

The first part of this report examines the structure of Aberdeen Futures – the community planning framework - The Aberdeen City Alliance (TACA), the Challenge Forums, Aberdeen Civic Forum and the City Assembly.

Most of the interviewees reported that there had been no shift or re-alignment of power in the city to community organisations, with one stating that it could be argued that they had even less power now although many more people are involved in the consultation process than before 2000.

In other words, despite the organisational structures and the different participatory methods adopted, there has been little change in who makes decisions and holds power in Aberdeen. Elected members interviewed clearly felt that they had not lost power and continued to have an important role in the city council's decision making process.

Many of the Challenge Forums tended to operate as 'technical/policy committees' which community representatives found difficult to engage with and some found intimidating.

It would appear that Aberdeen Trades Council did little more than 'badge' the first community plan. A few members of community planning organisations are trade union activists (as distinct from being a trade union member), but we do not know how many. There is no evidence of trade union involvement in the minutes of meetings. Trade unions have no formal representation on the Alliance, the Civic Forum or the Challenge Forums.

Trade unions failed to challenge exclusion from community planning organisations. One interviewee commented that trade unions only responded when their members were threatened and were less forthcoming when required to participate in discussions about the future of the city and its economy. Yet the City Council's 10,000 employees are also service users, as are the many thousands of other trade unionists in the public and private sector in Aberdeen. They have the right, like all citizens, to be represented and organised in the community and at work and by more than one organisation. The city's trade unions also have an analysis and views about the causes of current problems and ideas and policies to enhance Aberdeen's economy.

There is a danger of 'continuous participation' leading to 'overload' and a confusing array of organisational structures. The process of engagement and partnership can be depoliticising and disempowering. Community organisations can be sucked into bureaucratic ways of working in which they are forced to temper their demands and take account of city wide interests and rely on procedures and processes which are frequently slow and impenetrable. Many are drawn into citywide consultation in the belief that this could improve the chances of getting their demands met, but this happens infrequently. Organising citywide campaigns with the same/similar types of organisations or through alliances and coalitions of interest are likely to be more successful.

The evidence from Aberdeen raises two other important questions.

Firstly, is the community planning participation ideology, structures and processes simply a means of containment of rank and file or grass roots community, civil and trade union action by the combined use of inclusion and exclusion strategies?

Secondly, does it stop or slow the trend towards a corporate welfare complex which consists of a contract services system, private ownership of the infrastructure and increasing business involvement in the public policy making process? The evidence to date suggests that the answer must be 'no' to this question.

Will community planning participation help to re-engage people who have turned-off politics and become alienated from the political process? Several interviewees stated that people want tangible change and there is a need to reinvent methods of engagement and to implement effective change at the frontline.

There appears to be little connection between the community planning participation strategy and the government's/city council's modernisation strategy.

Recommendations

The recommendations are based on three objectives:

- To increase public sector trade union organisational capacity in Aberdeen to defend and improve public services and jobs.

- To change the ideological and organisational separation of trade union interests and community participation in developing policies and strategies to improve living and working conditions in Aberdeen.

- To provide new opportunities for TGWU members to play an active part in their community and city-wide policies for jobs, health, education, housing, transport and other services.

The TGWU should, possibly in cooperation with other public sector trade unions, set up a working group to map out a trade union perspective on the city's community planning process and recommend appropriate strategies.

One option is for the TGWU and other unions to demand representation on the key Challenge Forums such as Prosperity and Jobs, Transport, Health and Social Care. In order to make this effective, representatives would need to be supported and have an agreed reporting back arrangement.

It may be advantageous to demand a fundamental review of community participation in the community planning process if there is resistance to fuller trade union involvement. It must start from the position that trade union members are entitled to be represented by their respective trade unions in the community planning process.

If the City Council, TACA and the Civic Forum are not responsive to trade union involvement then the TGWU should consider establishing a Commission to draw together a trade union perspective and policy agenda.

A Public Service Alliance is another option. It is a city-wide coalition of trade unions and community organisations which meets regularly to discuss, analyse and plan action to defend and promote public services.

1. Introduction

Aberdeen TGWU ACTS Branch commissioned the Centre for Public Services to undertake a critical evaluation of Aberdeen Futures and the city's community planning participation framework.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were:

- To assess the extent to which the scope of participation had resulted in a shift of power in the decision making process.

- To identify the extent to which Aberdeen Futures has involved trade unions and community organisations in its activities.

- To better understand the rationale and ideology underpinning Aberdeen Futures and the implications of this model for other Scottish cities.

Methodology

The study combined a number of methodologies consisting of desk-based research analysing Aberdeen's community planning reports, analysis of the minutes and documents of TACA, Civic Forum and Challenge Groups, an analysis of local press reports over the last five years and a review of Scottish community planning guidance and research. Confidential semi-structured interviews with several key participants in the City Alliance, Civic Forum and City Council elected members was an important part of the research. The study also drew on the Centre for Public Services experience of working with community organisations, trade unions and local authorities over the last thirty years.

A small group of TGWU branch officers/members formed a project management group.

We would like to thank all the people who agreed to be interviewed for their cooperation and discussion of key issues in community planning participation and the role of the constituent organisations of Aberdeen Futures.

This study has sought to challenge the status quo and ask fundamental questions. It was not the intention, nor were the resources available, to provide answers to all the questions raised or to detail alternative solutions. It is an opportune time, after more than five years of community planning in Aberdeen, to pose some hard questions, which will hopefully lead to a fuller and open evaluation.

City economy

Aberdeen has a declining population which is expected to decline faster than anywhere else in Scotland. It has an ageing population and the number of people of working age is forecast to reduce at a rate higher than the national average.

The city is over dependent on oil and gas which employs 25% of the working population. The unemployment rate is between 1.9% and 2.1% but there are skills gaps in certain jobs with some businesses having to depend on migrant workers.

The city's economic development strategy is to focus on the energy industry, with the promotion of Aberdeen as a global energy capital, life sciences (Aberdeen has a high proportion of research scientists and is "a centre of excellence" in many fields), health and education and retail and distribution to improve shopping facilities given its regional importance. It plans to attract inward migration to address the declining population.

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2. Aberdeen Futures

Introduction

The first community plan in 2001 was branded under the 'Aberdeen Futures' title which is now used as an umbrella name encompassing the community planning and modernisation agendas. This section describes the organisational structure of the community planning partnership in Aberdeen.

There are three main community planning organisations – The Aberdeen City Alliance, the Aberdeen Civic Forum and the annual City Assembly – see Figure 1 organisational structure.

Aberdeen City Alliance

The Aberdeen City Alliance (TACA) is the Community Planning Partnership body in Aberdeen, equivalent to a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in England. The Alliance is responsible for organising the community planning process in the city, identifying strategic issues, targets and community participation. It is accountable to the Scottish Executive and to the people of Aberdeen.

The Aberdeen City Alliance has sixteen participating organisations:

- Aberdeen City Council
- Aberdeen Civic Forum
- Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce
- Aberdeen College
- Aberdeen Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Aberdeen Harbour Board
- Aberdeen Trades Council
- Aberdeen University
- Communities Scotland
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Grampian Police
- Grampian Fire Brigade
- NHS Grampian
- The Regional Ecumenical Team
- Robert Gordon University
- Scottish Enterprise Grampian

Principles

The Alliance adopted the following principles:

1) To strengthen leadership for the city, listening to the views of all the people of the City of Aberdeen.

2) To promote a clear vision for the City of Aberdeen now and for its future.

3) To secure equality of access to all public services provided by the partners of the City Alliance.

4) To recognise and respect our people's rights to individual wellbeing and community wellbeing.

5) To promote social inclusion and sustainability through planning and policy development and in the services we provide.

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6) To be transparent and accountable in our relationships with each other and when engaging with the citizens of Aberdeen.

7) To be accessible to the people of Aberdeen, to listen to them and consult with them by meeting directly with community leaders by establishing a civic forum and holding city debates on major issues for the city and its people.

8) To treat each other with respect and trust, to enable all partners to bring forward creative and innovative ideas for a joint approach to developing and meeting the agreed aims, objectives, action plans and policies of the City Alliance and its forums.

Objectives

The Alliance has five key objectives:

- To lead and drive forward joint actions which address the Challenges of the Community Plan of leadership, neighbourhood action, getting involved and being informed and through the Forums established in the City, to address the Challenges of - Health and Social Care, Homes, Safety, Land use and Environment, Clean City, Transport and Connections, Prosperity and Jobs, Aberdeen's Image, Learning and Arts, Heritage and Sport.

- To recognise the strengths of working together in partnership and to use this opportunity for the benefit of the city by directly negotiating with the Scottish Executive and other bodies on national policy and resources issues; wherever appropriate drawing the combined resources of our organisations together to meet the aims and objectives set out in the Community Planning challenges; setting joint priorities for the city and agreeing shared outcomes and targets to achieve these; and supporting the development of communities which are active, informed, empowered, caring and tolerant.

- To engage with the Civic Forum and other Forums established by the City Alliance.

- To ensure community planning reaches into neighbourhoods by completing neighbourhood plans for every neighbourhood in the City.

- To make sure that accountability can be demonstrated for plans and actions across the City by regular reporting on progress made towards achieving our vision by publishing an annual review.

Challenge Forums

The Challenge Forums have responsibility for specific priorities and any funding delegated to them by TACA. Each Challenge Forum must prepare an action plan to help the city achieve its targets. Action plans consist of initiatives supported by the contributing partners. Challenge Forum meetings are intended to focus on the implementation and review of the action plan.

- Being Informed Challenge Forum
- Getting Involved Challenge Forum
- Locality/Neighbourhood Planning
- Health & Social Care Forum (now Community Health Partnership)
- Aberdeen Housing Strategy Forum
- Community Safety Partnership
- Land Use Forum
- Environmental Challenge Forum

- North East Transport Consultative Forum

- Network Aberdeen & North East Scotland Economic Forum (Prosperity & Jobs)

- Aberdeen*futures* Promotion Group

- Aberdeen Learning Forum

- The Culture Forum (Arts & Heritage)

- Active Aberdeen (Sport)

The role of Civic Forum representation on the Challenge Forums has been fraught with difficulties. Initially the transport group, based on an existing Grampian inter-agency roads and transport network, used 'commercial confidentiality' to exclude community representation. Community representation was eventually agreed after some considerable debate. However, the Prosperity and Jobs Challenge Forum has consistently opposed community representation at its meetings. Network Aberdeen was formed as the Challenge Group to increase prosperity and jobs in the city. It is "a collaboration between Aberdeen City Council and business leaders in the city who meet on a regular basis to address the aim of developing Aberdeen's economy and creating a sustainable and prosperous future for the city" (www.tradecentre.com).

A new Business Forum of the Aberdeen City and Shire Economic Forum, formerly North East Scotland Economic (NESEF), has recently taken over the Prosperity and Jobs Challenge Forum role. Following negotiations with the Leader of the Council, three Civic Forum representatives will be members of the Business Forum and be non-voting 'special advisers' on the City Council's Economic Development Sub-Committee. In October 2005 the Business Forum had still not met and hence there was still no community involvement in the Prosperity and Jobs Challenge Forum.

But community representatives are also having difficulty in the other Challenge Forums. A Civic Forum Lead Group meeting "discussed once again some of the difficulties experienced by Civic Forum reps on the Challenge Forums, and several members felt that the community input to the work of the Challenge Forums was not working as well as it might. It was noted that the function of Civic Forum reps and the contribution expected of them was rather different from that of other members, and that this was almost bound to lead to difficulties" (Minutes of Lead Group Meeting, 20 September 2005).

Examination of the minutes of the Challenge Groups highlights some of the conflicts between having policy forums which are organised on a city-wide basis. For example, the Housing Challenge Forum (the Aberdeen Homes Forum), meets regularly and has the following 'participating partners':

Aberdeen City Council

Registered Social Landlord Forum

Homes for Scotland

Private Landlords

Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations

NHS Grampian

Scottish Enterprise Grampian

Communities Scotland

Lloyds TSB

Aberdeen City Centre Partnership at home Nationwide

Environmental Forum

>Robert Gordon University

>Bancon Developments

The five sets of minutes for 2005 illustrate the policy/technical discussion, for example, the Housing Needs Assessment, the Scottish Housing Standard Delivery Plan, Monitoring and Evaluation of the Local Housing Strategy. The meetings are attended by one or two Civic Forum representatives but there are no representatives of tenants and residents organisations. The membership of the Housing Forum means that it is an officer group providing a coordination/cross tenure housing function and an opportunity to share housing policy perspectives. But it is not a vehicle for community participation (nor has it claimed to be) for representatives of tenants and residents organisations in Aberdeen. Whilst the Housing Forum undoubtedly makes a contribution to the community planning process, it means that there is no relevant participation structure in the community planning process for housing campaigns. Council tenants have an annual conference organised by the city council.

Lead Officers Group

The Lead Officers Group consists of about 20 Civic Forum representatives who manage the business of the Forum.

North East Networks

This consists of six public sector networks covering Datashare, ICT, Property, Performance Management, Finance and Personnel although only the first three appear to be meeting on a regular basis. Their remit is to develop joint working and shared services within the public sector. They also bring together the main public sector partners to share information and good practice and to support the delivery of the Community Plan.

Aberdeen Civic Forum

The Civic Forum was formed in May 2002 and aims to enable communities "to participate fully and formally in the Community Planning process" and to "bring the voice of the community to the decision making table" (Civic Forum Information Pack, 2005). It meets quarterly to "bring communities together to promote discussion and dialogue on issues of common interest in order to present a balanced view to The Aberdeen City Alliance and its member organisations." It also aims to help build links between communities. A Lead Group or executive of 20 representatives plans meetings and deals with urgent business. The Civic Forum has 4 representatives on the Alliance and 1 representative in each of the Challenge Forums.

The remit of the Forum is "to discuss issues arising from communities or the Alliance; to prioritise and comment on issues with a view to influencing the decisions of the Alliance and its constituent partners; to monitor the work of the Alliance and ensure that issues are progressed; to receive feedback from the Alliance on progress in relation to the Community Plan, and in particular the achievement of targets contained in the Plan; and to act as a consultative forum for the Alliance and its constituent partners on proposals for the development of their services."

Civic Forum membership is composed of area representatives (3 representatives from each of the 31 Community Council areas in Aberdeen plus one additional representative from each of the 10 largest Community Council areas in the city). In areas where there is no Community Council, representation is via other community organisations. The Forum also has communities of interest representation with 3 representatives from each of the established Consultative Forums – the Disability Advisory Group, Ethnic Minorities Forum, Great Northern Partnership, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Forum plus four representatives from the Senior Citizens Forum, the Women's Forum, the Youth Action Committee and two representatives from the Gypsy Traveller Community.

The Civic Forum currently has 90 members, leaving 40 places unfilled (Progress Report, January 2006). The Civic Forum is supported by the Community Development section in the Chief Executive's Office of the City Council. This was initially funded by Shell UK but has recently been jointly funded by community planning partners.

A review of the Civic Forum in autumn 2004 posed several questions such as "how can we fill more of the Civic Forum seats? how can we increase attendance at Forum meetings? What format of meeting should we use in future? What would help members report back to and from their communities? How could the influence of the Civic Forum be improved? and how good has the support been, and what more is required? (Review of Civic Forum, 31 August 2004).

These are important internal questions and the answers or solutions lie within the organisation and are based on a genuine attempt to make it more effective. But there are surely more fundamental questions which must be asked which challenge the community participation structure. It should not simply be a matter of making the existing organisations more effective but assessing the purpose and functioning of the whole structure.

City Assembly

The City Assembly is an annual citywide event, which commenced in 2004, to provide an opportunity for the wider public to discuss the future of Aberdeen. About fifty people attended both events held to date.

The November 2005 Assembly, chaired by the Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, debated and voted on six propositions:

Proposal 1: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is to recognise that the oil fuelled economy of the City is changing and that we must plan now for continued growth and prosperity in the years to come.

Proposal 2: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is that those responsible for planning facilities and services should seek and listen to the views of both children and older people and that to enhance the quality of life in Aberdeen the contributions of both young people and older people should be used.

Proposal 3: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is Aberdeen sorely needs a vibrant, dynamic and co-ordinated approach to comedy and the other arts.

Proposal 4: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is to urgently make local services more responsive to the needs of the people who use them.

Proposal 5: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is to put sustainable development of communities at the top of the agenda for the whole of the Aberdeen City Region.

Proposal 6: We propose that the most important thing to make Aberdeen a continuing success is greater and more effective community involvement in deciding what needs to be done and doing it. Initiatives to be investigated include teaching school pupils civic responsibility and the value of community activities as part of the education curriculum, exploring with the public and private sectors in Aberdeen and encouragement of time off for employees to pursue volunteering activities, encouraging the business community to supply more information on social responsibilities/ethical matters and requesting Aberdeen City Council to rationalise/merge its various websites.

Propositions 1 to 4, not surprising given their general nature, were agreed unanimously whilst propositions 5 and 6 were agreed by a majority. All propositions were referred to the relevant Challenge Forum.

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Dr Philip Muinde, Deputy Lord Lieutenant, chaired the first City Assembly in November 2004 which also debated a number of propositions such as "A living community welcomes and celebrates differences to make its members feel accepted": "Aberdeen believes that differences and diversity present opportunities and not barriers to the building of a successful City"; and "there is scope and opportunity for everyone in Aberdeen and its communities to make a difference to community life by rising above personal needs to revitalise the City". The event was also attended by the Leader of the City Council and the chair of the Civic Forum.

The Assemblies have been attended by a very small number of people (50) in a city of 215,000 population event though the organisers claim they represented a variety of community interests.

Aberdeen Voice

This is a 1,400 strong Citizen panel set up with European Commission funding in 2002 as part of a project with Edinburgh City Council and cities in the Netherlands, Greece, Finland, Poland and Belgium. The panel was a representative cross section of the city's population. A second questionnaire was completed in April 2004 but there have been no further outputs from 'the voice of Aberdeen City'.

The community planning framework

Figure 1 sets out the organisational relationships in the community planning framework. Community Councils, the Community Council Forum, the City Assembly, the Citizens Panel and the Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations have been added to diagram of the basic community planning framework established in 2002.

Figure 1: Aberdeen's Community Planning Framework

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      │  Challenge   │   │  North East  │
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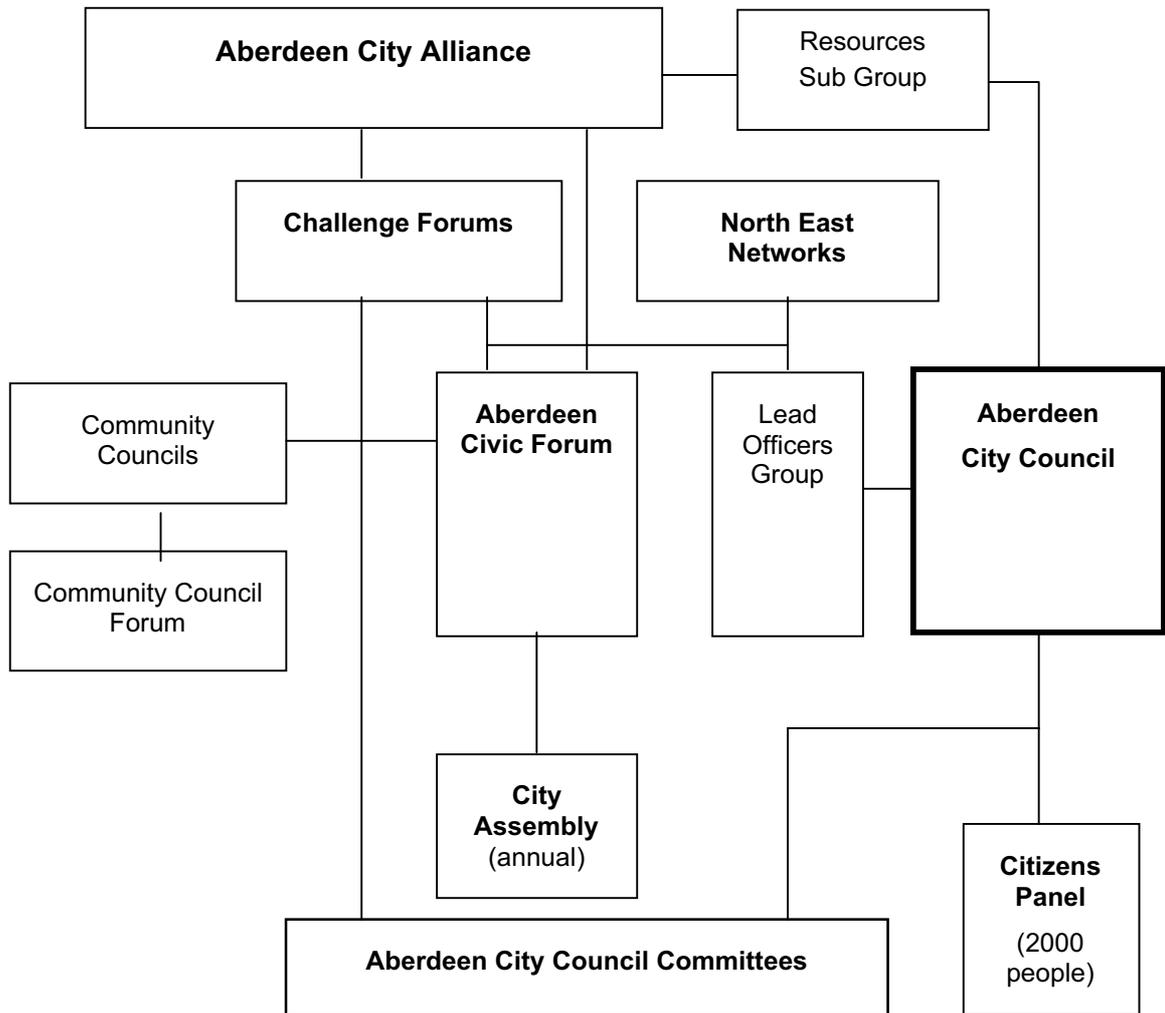
3. Key issues of community involvement in Aberdeen

Introduction

The community planning framework has been in operation since 2002. This section raises some key issues, which should be addressed as part of an assessment of the success/failure of community participation in Aberdeen.

Transfer of power?

Most of the interviewees reported that there had been no shift or re-alignment of power in the city to community organisations, with one stating that it could be argued that they had even less power now. Many more people are clearly involved in the consultation process than before 2000 but this does not necessarily translate to involvement in the public policy making process, or more precisely, to involvement in decision making processes. Individuals and organisations may believe they are having a greater influence in the decision making process but a more cynical view is that the community planning process is intended to create the illusion of power and influence without challenging the power structure in the city.

In other words, despite the organisational structures and the different participatory methods adopted, they have not resulted in any change in who makes decisions and holds power in Aberdeen. Elected members interviewed clearly felt that they had not lost power and continued to have an important role in the city council's decision making process. One interviewee pointed out that real power does not lie with elected members nor even with MPs but with the establishment in Britain.

Some interviewees were uncertain whether there had been any change in power. One interviewee believed that little will happen until community organisations become better organised and take action. Several interviewees stated that the constituent parts of Aberdeen Futures had had little influence in how the modernisation agenda was implemented in the city.

'Empowerment' is widely used in community planning participation documentation by local authorities and academics but it is ill defined and a misuse of language which can create false expectations.

Influence of the Alliance

There is a view that key decisions are still made by the city council with little influence by the Alliance. "The City Alliance has no influence in policy making" claimed one interviewee. Alliance minutes go to the city council, and whilst some members may take a passing look at them, their influence is at best marginal.

Opinions were sought on the extent to which the Alliance had influenced two key policy issues – the future of council housing and the city council's modernisation agenda. In both cases most interviewees believed that the Alliance had had little influence over these two policies. This was considered inevitable given that the Alliance has no control over resources, is not involved in decision-making and has little or no influence over the outcomes of decisions.

The Alliance started out as a grouping of public sector organisations such as the City Council, NHS, Police Authority, Grampian Enterprise and the Universities which were spending and investing large sums of public money in the city. Community involvement came later. The basic idea was to examine how this money was being spent to avoid duplication and to maximise opportunities for joint initiatives and develop a community

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planning methodology. In the beginning the meetings were attended by Directors and Senior Managers (the movers and shakers!) who could make decisions but the Alliance is now attended by lower tier officers who have to report back and, as one interviewee described, it has lost its clout!

One interviewee stated that the Alliance is chaired by the Leader of the Council, is run just like any other council committee and is administered by council officers and meets at the Town House. It is a widely held view that the Alliance should be chaired by someone outside of the city council and should be serviced by an outside body.

Other comments stated that the Alliance had not had any influence at grass roots level, and that the few advances have come directly from city council initiatives such as employing tenant participation officers.

Role of the Challenge Forums

The community planning web site illustrates the wide divergence in the work and degree of continuity of the Challenge Forums. Some have examined issues, strategies and policies in detail. Others have, according the records on the web site, have met infrequently and some have no minutes dating back to 2004.

Interviewees commented that those Challenge Forums which had carried out a lot of work were commended on the one hand but also criticised on the other hand because they tended to operate as 'technical/policy committees' which community representatives found difficult to engage with and some found intimidating. Some considered that community representation was drowned out.

"Challenge Working groups have very little teeth" and there is scant feedback from them stated one interviewee. Few elected members are reported to attend the Challenge Forums.

Civic Forum

The Alliance started out as a public sector group with no community representation. After it was opened up to community representatives, the city council realised that the community representatives on the Alliance had no mandate and no one to report back to. At that point the City Council established the Civic Forum.

A few elected members are reported to regard the Civic Forum with a degree of suspicion because they believe it is doing a job that Councillors are elected to do!

One interviewee suggested that one function of the Civic Forum should be to identify people who could become 'good' community representatives with an understanding of the needs of deprived communities

City Assembly

Whilst the event may provide a meeting place for some people to express their views, the format of the event is clearly failing to attract any mass attendance. The propositions have been of the 'apple pie and ice cream' variety which are so vague and general that consensus is guaranteed. It is difficult to identify the contribution the City Assembly makes to the community planning process in its current format.

Community representation

One community representative identified a number of problems which restricted the level and quality of community involvement because representatives frequently:

- have to use holidays to attend;

- have to have confidence to challenge officers and professionals in a meeting where you are out numbered;

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- read and understand a thick package of papers for each meeting;

Whilst this is less of a problem for those who are retired or not working, it is a vicious circle because young people will not get involved for the same reasons.

The interviewee also commented that people do not see change at the frontline or in communities so why should they commit themselves to something where they could be wasting their time and effort – if it's a rational decision on where to put their effort (assuming they are committed in the first place which is a big assumption), then they are right!

Community Councils

Community Councils form the basic membership of the Civic Forum, accounting for three-quarters of its membership. However, 10 of the 31 areas of Aberdeen do not have a Community Council (Aberdeen City Council, 2004). Although 'community councillors' are supposed to be elected, in practice many are not because of lack of interest and the belief that they cannot influence matters. Interviewees noted that the leadership of Community Councils varies widely – some are very good but others less so.

The City Council has launched a development programme to "increase the effectiveness and influence" of Community Councils in Aberdeen. The Policy Committee increased the grant to Community Councils in 2003 plus gave them access to ICT support in local libraries and a printing allowance. An improved training programme was also planned (see capacity building section below).

Trade union involvement

Aberdeen Trades Council signed up to the original Community Plan in 2001 and is listed as one of the 14 partner organisations. However, there is no evidence of trade union involvement in the minutes of meetings. It would appear that the Trades Council did little more than 'badge' the first community plan. A few members of the community planning organisations are trade union activists (as distinct from being a trade union member), but we do not know how many.

The community planning participation structures were set up without trade union representation, for example, trade unions have no formal representation on the Alliance or the Civic Forum. One interviewee believed that the City Council considered that there should be a clear separation between the trade unions with the 'internal' negotiating machinery and the 'external' community participation.

The absence of trade union involvement is summarised below:

- No evidence of a trade union perspective in the minutes of meetings.

- An absence of trade union representation in the Challenge Forums – not only has there been no community representation in the Prosperity and Jobs Forum for four years but equally there does not appear to have been any input from Aberdeen's trade union movement.

- No evidence that the community planning organisational structures formally commented on the equal pay dispute in 2005 when the City Council attempted to cut the wages of 20% of the workforce!

- The ideology underpinning the separation of community and trade union participation has wider implications for all trade unionists in the city who are not council employees. The City Council is, in effect, practising social and political exclusion.

- The PFI/PPP project for new and refurbished schools (3Rs) has involved consultation with council trade unions. The project appears to be treated as an internal matter for trade unions regarding the PPP structure and

exclusion/inclusion of facilities management services but there is no evidence to suggest that the project, which could have far reaching implications for schools, has been considered by any of the community planning organisations. The City Council did carry out a 3Rs consultation process with teachers, support staff, parents, elected members and community organisations on the design and development of schools in 2003 but again there was no reference to trade unions in the final report (Spicker, 2003).

This may also be due to trade unions failing to challenge exclusion from community planning organisations. One interviewee commented that trade unions only responded when their members were threatened and were less forthcoming when required to participate in discussions about the future of the city and its economy.

This separation of trade union and community interests is compounded by the lack of involvement of business representatives in Aberdeen Futures which means that key sets of interests in the city have not been represented in the community planning process.

The City Council's 10,000 employees are also service users as are the many thousands of other trade unionists in the public and private sector in Aberdeen. They have the right, like all citizens, to be represented and organised in the community and at work and by more than one organisation. Experience in Scotland and elsewhere has demonstrated the potential for change is maximised when workplace and community organisations combine to further common interests. The trade unions also have an analysis and views about the causes of current problems and ideas and policies to enhance Aberdeen's economy.

None of the interviewees referred to the claim that trade unions represent 'producer interests', a common position adopted by New Labour advisers. They claim that trade union participation or joint consultation between trade unions, staff and service users is not fruitful because the 'producer interest' always dominates resulting in minimum change. It is a simplistic and negative attitude used to divide public sector employees and staff from developing more meaningful modernisation and challenging the current drive to marketise public services.

But the exclusion of trade unions from Aberdeen's community planning process is a wider issue.

Aberdeen, together with Stirling and Edinburgh, was a case study authority in a research report for Communities Scotland on the implementation of community planning (Communities Scotland, 2004). The city was also a participant on the EU Demos Project which in addition to funding the Aberdeen Voice Citizens Panel also drew on research into urban governance and community planning in the seven participating countries. The project produced a literature review and several discussion papers in addition to a final report culminating in a EU conference in Edinburgh in 2004.

The Communities Scotland and Demos Project documentation is significant for the following reasons:

- Trade unions are not mentioned in the Communities Scotland Research Report 44 on implementing community planning in Scotland and there are only a handful of references in the Demos reports. They are referred to only to the extent that local authorities must work in "partnership with representatives from business, community groups, the voluntary sector and players in civil society such as churches and trade unions" (Demos Final Report, 2004 and Research Findings: Literature Review, 2004).

- A Comparative Audit of the City of Aberdeen for the Demos project, which described the political structures in the city, the arrangements for decentralised

> participation and management, and participation arrangements, did not refer to trade unions;

- Community planning is defined as planning by the local authority, other public agencies and by the 'community' as defined by community organisations. Workplace organisation in either the public or private sector is not regarded within this term and thus has virtually no role in the community planning process.

- Audit Scotland is currently carrying a baseline study of community planning partnerships (the final report was originally planned for publication in January 2006). The study is focusing on the objectives, governance, performance and impact of community planning partnerships. It will be interesting to see whether trade union involvement is part of this study.

Role of the local authority and elected members

Several interviews described how the City Council had a dominant role in the community planning participation process. Council officers supported and serviced the Alliance and Civic Forums.

Business involvement

Several interviewees commented that the Alliance is a prime forum for public sector agencies to air problems to the rest of the public sector. This is said to scare business people away as they do not want to hear about public sector agency problems but want to discuss strategy and the way forward. The attitude of business representation on the Prosperity and Jobs Challenge Forum was discussed above and has not provided a bridge.

Grass roots organising

There is a lack of grass roots organisations and campaigns representation in the community planning participation structures. One interviewee fundamentally believed that little will happen unless the community is organised at the grass roots and takes independent action outside of the community planning partnership structures.

Community consultation

Community interviewees thought there were too many consultation groups and the approach is often 'this is what we are going to do' which is not consultation.

The first community plan consultation – You Said It! – and the community plan covered all aspects of city life. This has many advantages in terms of presenting the complexity of issues facing the city and its institutions and the inter-relationship between policies. However, the downside is that many community representatives find it hard to embrace and understand the whole agenda which makes it difficult to participate. They also believe that the issues which they are concerned with are 'lost' in the overall agenda.

Community capacity building

All the interviewees emphasised the importance of community capacity building. However, they also recognised that many people do not have the time, because of family, caring and other commitments, to be both actively involved in their local organisations and campaigns and to be involved in city wide level organisations and meetings which are equally time consuming.

The Alliance and Civic Forum have discussed capacity building and organised some training for members. The Community Council Development Programme also plans to increase training for community councillors on city planning, ICT, secretarial, running events, publicity, newsletters, finance, funding and on the role of a community councillor. There can be no dispute that this training will be beneficial. One interviewee noted that it

was now accepted that council staff also needed training in community participation techniques and other forms of capacity building.

However, it is only one type of capacity building. There is also a need for community organisation and campaigns to gain organising skills and strategies and technical/policy analysis support from advisers selected and engaged by community organisations. Council officers, with the best will in the world, are not the most appropriate source for this type of capacity building. There should also be more targeting of resources to particular communities and equality groups.

Democratic accountability

Many interviewees were concerned about the lack of accountability in the community planning participation process.

There is a danger of 'continuous participation' leading to 'overload' and a confusing array of organisational structures. Views varied from wanting more participation to some comments that the overload was deliberate to ensure that no change takes place.

The process of engagement and partnership can be depoliticising and disempowering. Community organisations can be sucked into bureaucratic ways of working in which they are forced to temper their demands and take account of city wide interests and rely on procedures and processes which are frequently slow and impenetrable. Community representatives/organisations are forced to make choices about whether to continue to make their demands and take action or to sit at the 'citywide table' and perhaps water down their demands and expectations. Many are drawn into the citywide consultation in the belief that this could improve the chances of getting their demands met but this happens infrequently. Organising citywide campaigns with the same/similar types of organisations or through alliances and coalitions of interest are likely to be more successful.

The evidence from Aberdeen raises two other important questions.

Firstly, is the community planning participation ideology, structures and processes simply a means of containment of rank and file or grass roots community, civil and trade union action by the combined use of inclusion and exclusion strategies?

Secondly, does it stop or slow the trend towards a corporate welfare complex which consists of a contract services system, private ownership of the infrastructure and increasing business involvement in the public policy making process (Whitfield, 2001).

The evidence to date suggests that the answer must be 'no'.

Sustainability of participation

In one sense the present structure could continue for sometime before it became ossified and bureaucratic. However, sustainability should be measured by the following:

- The inclusion of trade unions in the participatory process;

- Organisational structures which ensure activists from grass roots community campaigns can participate if they choose to do so.

- That capacity building is not confined to training and awareness but also includes the provision of technical advice and support to community and trade union organisations to ensure them to prepare critiques of proposals and policies, where appropriate, draw up alternative plans.

- Producing more effective community leadership.

- The effectiveness of community planning participation is not measured by the degree of cross-party, cross-interest group or cross-community consensus but by

the extent to which living and working conditions are improved for Aberdeen's poor and working class families.

Will community planning participation help to re-engage people who have turned-off politics and become alienated from the political process? Several interviewees stated that people want tangible change and there is a need to reinvent methods of engagement and to implement effective change at the frontline.

Review of the Aberdeen City Alliance

TACA commissioned Prof Michael Carley, Heriot Watt University, to review its operations and make recommendations. On the basis of his report TACA drew up a development plan in early 2006.

The review concluded that TACA had lost sight of its focus and recommended that it develops a 'new clarity of purpose and priority' to enable it to use the knowledge and skills of the partners more effectively. It recommended a refocus with a more strategic approach to "identify key priorities where joint working between partners will give value-added in the achievement of a clearly articulated development strategy" which should be expressed in a refreshed Community Plan (TACA Draft Development Plan, 2006).

The style and content of TACA meetings were also a concern and more away days and open seminars were proposed. The review recommended that TACA establish a Partnership Executive Committee to shape the agenda and monitor the Challenge Forums whose role and performance are also to be reviewed. The Civic Forum is considered to be at the 'leading edge' of community participation in Scotland. The review recommended that the city council's Citizens Panel and the Virtual Panel could make a bigger contribution to TACA decision making and strategic planning.

TACA has decided to move to a more arms length relationship with the city council and will hold meetings at different city venues with the chair rotating rather than being the council leader. It is also to get its own officers – a Partnership Manager and assistant with the costs shared between partners – another review recommendation.

The review also considered the role of the city council's Area Committees, neighbourhood action plans and the proposal for an Urban Regeneration Company which was promoted by the regeneration strategy outsourced to Tribal HCH. Another consultant, DTZ Pieda, is currently preparing priority regeneration area masterplans.

4. The city council's modernisation agenda

Introduction

There appears to be little connection between the community planning participation strategy and the government's/city council's modernisation strategy. This viewpoint was endorsed by several interviewees.

The question is whether the failure to develop the interrelationship between the modernisation and community planning strategies was intentional (for example, senior management imposing a right to manage attitude) or whether it happened by default as a result of the separate 'internal' and 'external' organisational structures or because of ideological and political motives.

A detailed examination of the city council's modernisation agenda is not within the scope of this report. However, it was briefly discussed with interviewees and we highlight some key issues.

The city council has held regular meetings with the trade unions (TGWU, UNISON, GMB, UCATT, EIS) in connection with the continuous improvement programme. It also drew up a communications plan with the aim of promoting a positive image of the city council, protecting its image and reputation and to "boost morale and loyalty to the Council by keeping staff well informed, giving them a voice, and making them feel a valued part of the organisation" (Continuous Improvement Programme, Report to Full Council, 19 April 2005).

Four months later the city council announced that 2,000 staff, 20% of the workforce, would have a pay cut as part of the move to single status. The pay cuts ranged from £1,000 to £16,000 although low paid workers would benefit from the scheme. Following mass meetings and industrial action the Council was forced to withdraw the proposal and issue a public apology to all staff. The Council agreed that a job evaluation plan would be jointly agreed between the council and trade unions.

The City Council had adapted the CoSLA Job Evaluation Scheme by reducing the number of factors taken into account for each generic job and by identifying a number of generic groups of jobs. It commissioned the Hay Group to carry out a review of the adapted job evaluation process, which made a series of recommendations on the methodology for implementing job evaluation.

In March 2006 TGWU women catering and cleaning members in the city council organised a 48 hour strike which closed over half the city's schools in protest at the failure of the city council to agree an equal pay settlement. The council was offering 2,000 staff a total of £13.5m but this was rejected at a mass meeting. A second strike was suspended after negotiations continued. In April the offer was increased to cover 2,500 staff and a total of £15m. The council also agreed to spend £250,000 providing staff with free legal advice and HR advisers. In May 2006 the council claimed that 750 staff had accepted the latest offer.

Restructuring into neighbourhoods

The City Council has been reorganised into three Neighbourhood Office (based on Scottish Parliament constituency boundaries). It is a decentralisation of services to district level but it has not been accompanied by political decentralisation. The number of council committees have been reduced from 16 to 7 but any decentralisation of political decision making to the Neighbourhood level is unlikely before the local election in 2007.

One interviewee pointed out that the three Neighbourhood Management Areas are controlled from the centre and the current administration has no interest in political control at neighbourhood level because they can only muster a majority in one area. Another noted that because there are no meetings of elected members at Neighbourhood areas level, area directors can still divide and rule. The lack of democratic accountability at Neighbourhood level was considered a problem that had to be resolved. Other interviewees also commented on their experience that no process is ever completed – initiatives always start at top but never get to the frontline.

Urban Regeneration Company

The Tribal HCH consultants report on a community regeneration strategy recommended that a new multi-agency strategic body be established to oversee the regeneration process across the city (TACA, 2004). It recommended that an Urban Regeneration Company (URCs) be set up similar to the URCs in England and Scotland's Clydebank Re-built. It would be run by a Board comprising three private sector representatives, three city council representatives, two Civic Forum representatives from priority neighbourhoods, four other TACA members and one URC employee representative.

The URC would be responsible for physical, social and economic regeneration using Scottish Executive regeneration and city council funding plus private sector finance and would be embedded in community planning and neighbourhood service delivery.

The TACA 2006 development plan noted that the proposed regeneration delivery and strategic decision making role of the URC would be confused with TACA and city council responsibilities. The case for a URC is not proven.

The establishment of arms length companies for the development of growth areas in the south east, housing, hospitals, leisure services and the Education Bill proposals for school trusts are key parts of New Labour's modernisation agenda. They further erode democratic accountability and transparency as well as having a significant impact on services and jobs and would reduce the technical and intellectual capacity of the city council.

This modernisation strategy also increasingly promotes the future of local government to be limited to commissioning services ie outsourcing and privatising delivery to the private and voluntary sector. It is evident that Aberdeen already has a plethora of partnerships with different roles and responsibilities, many of which exclude formal trade union representation. The establishment of more arms length companies may provide new opportunities for private and voluntary sector involvement and contracts but will further fragment local government. Partnerships, and arms length companies and contracts cannot substitute for a democratically elected and well-resourced local authority.

Transforming public services

A new policy paper published in June 2006 on the next phase of 'transforming public services' in Scotland identified a number of challenges including "our challenge to local communities and public services is to work with us to identify the reforms that will transform service delivery in their area" (Scottish Executive, 2006). It refers to community planning as "the mechanism which underpins joint working. It has four key objectives, which are central to our ambitions for reform:

- People and communities should genuinely be engaged in decisions about the public services which affect them;
- Public sector organisations should work together to improve services;
- There should be better co-ordination of initiatives and partnership working;
- The links between national priorities and those at regional, local and neighbourhood levels should be improved."

The report referred to the review of Community Planning Partnerships by Audit Scotland which raised "serious issues which need to be tackled if Community Planning is to become everywhere a real driver for better, more joined up service planning and delivery" (ibid). It raised five key questions about the future role of Community Planning in the transformation of public services:

- "How best to ensure that local communities are aware of and involved in the Community Planning process;

- What more needs to be done to ensure that appropriate organisations engage fully in Community Planning. This may include extending the statutory duties to other organisations – but we also wish to consider how to strengthen the engagement of bodies already subject to a statutory duty;

- Whether Community Planning partnerships could play a more direct role in planning and co-ordinating integrated services – perhaps through outcome agreements to achieve agreed priorities, which are shared amongst different Community Planning partners;

- How we strengthen the democratic accountability of Community Planning building on local authorities' democratic mandate and community leadership role – including through ways in which local councillors can participate in and scrutinize the work of partnerships;

- Whether Community Planning can help to rationalise the many partnerships and structures which operate at a regional level" (ibid).

The Audit Scotland review, also published in June 2006, recognised that it was too early to judge the effectiveness of Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) in improving public services and hence focused assessing the processes put in place to deliver community planning. The study did not include an assessment the effectiveness of CPP approaches to community involvement (Audit Scotland, 2006).

However, after taking account of the restricted scope of the Audit Scotland study, there are a number of shortcomings.

Firstly, whilst the study did not assess community involvement there are fundamental questions about just who is involved in the plethora of community planning partnerships. The report makes no mention of trade unions – there seems to be a cartel agreement never to make any reference to trade unions in policy and research reports on community planning. Yet the report makes many references to public sector staff who provide invaluable support to the community planning process (at a cost of between £0.4m and £1m per annum in Aberdeen based on £2-£5 per head cost identified by Audit Scotland). The absence of trade unions and a trade union perspective makes the much heralded objectives of community planning to be vacuous.

Secondly, the review recommends that "the expectations of what should be delivered through community planning need to be clarified" (para 56, ibid). With so many agendas, the wide community well being and improving service delivery frameworks and attempts to join-up delivery across a range of public sector bodies, there is clearly a lack of priorities and no assessment of capacity.

Thirdly, the review notes that "community planning has not helped to rationalise the number of or complexity of partnerships in any significant way" (para 83, ibid). This is not going to be achieved until the current obsession with forming 'partnerships' for everything, and branding contracts as partnerships when they are clearly, not is changed. In this context it is not surprising that community partnerships end up with a complex structure of mini-partnerships which spurn more sub-groups, forums and so on. Reducing the number of partnerships is also dependent on clarifying priorities and

defining the scope of community planning based on the capacity to achieve rather than imposing grandiose agendas which also limit community participation.

Fourthly, community planning partnerships "need to move on from developing processes to demonstrate the impact they are having on services and the well-being of local communities" (para 9, ibid). They need to "develop performance indicators to track their progress in achieving the outcomes they desire. This is proving a challenging area for partnerships" (para 117, ibid). We do not need more layers of performance management, particularly at a time when there is finally a consensus that performance management has become over-complicated, bureaucratic and costly.

Finally, some elected members "see community planning as a threat to their control of council services and funding" (para 80, ibid). This is an inevitable consequence of the four points discussed above. The review also found that "a consistent theme from our case studies was the lack of involvement of elected members, other than council leaders, in the community planning process. In some areas there was minimal participation of members" (para 72, ibid). Add to this the fact that there is a total absence of formal trade union involvement in Aberdeen's community planning process and the failure of the Audit Scotland review and community planning guidance to address this shortcoming, then community planning has a crisis of direction.

The absence of elected member participation and the exclusion of trade union representation are highly significant and must be addressed if community planning is to be relevant and effective.

5. Future strategies

The final section of this report sets out a number of options for the TGWU. They are based on three objectives:

- To increase public sector trade union organisational capacity in Aberdeen to defend and improve public services and jobs.

- To change the ideological and organisational separation of trade union interests and community participation in developing policies and strategies to improve living and working conditions in Aberdeen.

- To provide new opportunities for TGWU members to play an active part in their community and city-wide policies for jobs, health, education, housing, transport and other services.

Developing TGWU strategy

The TGWU should, possibly in cooperation with other public sector trade unions, set up a working group to map out a trade union perspective on the city's community planning process and recommend appropriate strategies. This should not be limited by existing organisational structures and could use this report as a starting point.

Seek representation on selected Challenge Forums

One option is for the TGWU and other unions to demand representation on the key Challenge Forums such as Prosperity and Jobs, Transport, Health and Social Care. In order to make this effective, representatives would need to be supported and have an agreed reporting back arrangement.

Demand a fundamental review of the community planning process and organisational structures in Aberdeen

It may be advantageous to demand a fundamental review of community participation in the community planning process if there is resistance to fuller trade union involvement. Such a review should be collaborative and should not be hived-off to consultants who are likely to deliver a status quo response to their client. This review must start from the position that trade union members are entitled to be represented by their respective trade unions in the community planning process.

Trade Union Community Planning Commission

Another approach may be necessary if the TGWU (and other unions) decide that there is little evidence or likelihood of the City Council, Alliance and Civic Forum being responsive to trade union involvement. One option would be to set up a Commission to draw together a trade union perspective and policy agenda. Support and assistance would almost certainly be forthcoming from by the STUC's Scottish Trade Union Research Network and other organisations.

Joint trade union and community organising

The public policy, modernisation and community planning agendas in Aberdeen provide many opportunities to develop joint trade union and community campaigns. The TUC's Organising Academy and examples of joint action such as the Relatives Action Group for the Elderly (RAGE) campaign which started in Birmingham but grew into a national campaign against residential home closures and Birmingham's joint trade union/tenant campaign which succeeded in a clear 'no' vote against a stock transfer of council housing are just two recent examples.

Public Service Alliance

A Public Service Alliance is a city-wide coalition of trade unions and community organisations which meets regularly to discuss, analyse and plan action to defend and promote public services. At a time when different sectors such as education, health, social care, housing and other services are facing a common challenge of the modernisation agenda there are many advantages to drawing together trade unions from different public sector organisations and potentially with community organisations.

Aberdeen Trades Council

Resource constraints have meant that we have not been able to have discussions with the Trades Council on its current role in the community planning process. It may be possible that some of the options discussed above could be carried out in conjunction with the Trades Council.

Capacity building

Depending on the strategy adopted, the TGWU should identify the type of training and support that representatives will require to make the strategy effective.

Membership and organising

All of the above options will provide new opportunities to build TGWU membership and strengthen organisation in particular workplaces.

European Services Strategy Unit

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