

The Independent Budget Review: Initial Call for Contributions

Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

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The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Budget Review, the more especially since we have some concerns about its impact on minority communities in Scotland.

1) Assuming a public expenditure reduction on the scale envisaged, what would be the impact upon your organisation or sector, and upon its capacity to maintain service levels and quality of outcomes for service users?

The Scottish Government's localisation agenda, particularly the proposed withdrawal of central funding in favour of block grants to local authorities, would impact disproportionately on minority communities and in particular isolated individuals from those communities, particularly those living in rural areas. This localisation of budgetary decision-making fails to address the situation of minority communities in Scotland. By their very nature, there are unlikely to be significant numbers of any minority community in most local authority areas, so they will not be regarded as a spending priority at local level. At best, a local authority may fund an umbrella "minority community initiative" in their area, but this can be little more than a tick-box exercise. The fundamental point is that there is not a single homogenous "minority community" – indeed some individual communities may not be homogenous – but rather many minority communities each with individual, diverse, and sometimes even conflicting needs. An elderly non-English-speaking Chinese woman, for example, has as little in common with a Muslim teenager of Pakistani descent, as with the indigenous majority. Some, such as the Jewish and Sikh communities, have both ethnic and religious facets to their identity, whilst others may depend only on ethnicity or religion. A generic approach to consulting with, and providing services to minority communities cannot but fail to meet the needs of those that are minorities even among the minorities; failure to take account of the diversity of diversity must inevitably condemn any project to failure.

We are concerned that localisation is likely to result in a postcode lottery, whereby individuals living in one local authority area have access to effective support, whilst those, perhaps from the same minority community, in another area, do not. For example, whilst the Jewish community in East Renfrewshire is large enough to be visible to service providers, the small numbers of Jewish people living in the Western Isles are not.

National networks, and national funding of those networks, are, therefore, the only means by which minority communities can receive appropriate services and support throughout Scotland. Activities, whether national or local, that could not take place if not funded nationally, must be funded nationally.

2) Are there constraints which would need to be addressed (and which could readily be addressed in practice) to permit you to realise savings, maximise income or increase productivity?

Most of our activities are demand led, and we already operate with only one full-time member of staff, large amounts of unpaid overtime, and a very large amount of volunteer commitment; there is no room for increased productivity. We have little scope to increase income, other than grants from government or charitable trusts that are themselves adversely affected by the current economic climate.

3) Are there new sources of finance you could develop in the short or medium term to maintain the range and scale of services offered to the public?

See response to Q2..

4) Are there innovative approaches to service provision or financing which you might consider using within your organisation or sector?

See response to Q2.

5) From the perspective of your organisation or sector, are there ways in which public sector bodies and other service providers could work better together, across existing institutional boundaries, to make significant improvements to the efficiency of service provision and the effectiveness of public spending?

As we have already stated, unless public sector bodies and other service providers do work together across geographic and institutional boundaries, service provision for minority communities must inevitably be wholly inadequate. The following examples of good practice in collaborative working and working across boundaries demonstrate what can be achieved:

Within the Jewish Community, Jewish Care Scotland¹ has developed a unique partnership with East Renfrewshire Council which enables it to provide a full range of social services with a strongly Jewish ethos not only in the settled Jewish communities of the Central Belt, but throughout the whole of Scotland.

Calderwood Jewish Education² works closely with East Renfrewshire Council and Calderwood Lodge Primary School³ to provide pupils in Scotland's only Jewish school with culturally and religiously specific education which is fully integrated with the Curriculum for Excellence Outcomes and Experiences. This is a unique example, because the localisation policy already in place with regard to schools, results in an uneven approach and so is either not replicated elsewhere, or at best requires duplication of effort across different local authorities. The resulting uneven provision demonstrates that our concern in relation to budgetary localisation is not without foundation.

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities⁴ works to provide support to the smaller communities and isolated individuals throughout Scotland, amongst other activities by providing information and advice on request to local authorities, health boards, police forces, etc. It is of the nature of this provision that, except in the larger cities, it can only be provided nationally. An isolated Jewish single mother in the north-west of Scotland has no local support mechanism, but can only be given any sense of security by being connected to our national network.

We would caution against the tendency, particularly noticeable in times of severe financial constraint, to view the third sector as a cheap alternative service provider. Whilst the work of voluntary organisations can indeed be extremely valuable, their input – as that of the public and private sectors – can only be useful if relevant to the intended recipients. Not infrequently, third sector organisations are regarded as though they were representative of all minority groups. This is simply not the case. For example, as its Chief Executive has pointed out, the Scottish Interfaith Council exists to facilitate dialogue between faith communities, and whilst it may be an address through which many – but not all – of these may be contacted, it does not – indeed cannot – speak

¹ www.jcarescot.org.uk

² <http://www.ea.e-renfrew.sch.uk/calderwoodlodge/pages/CJE/cjeaims.html>

³ www.calderwoodlodge.e-renfrew.sch.uk

⁴ www.scojec.org

on their behalves, with the consequence that engagement with the SIFC does not constitute engagement with faith communities. Similarly Regional Equality Councils cannot always be presumed to be engaged with all relevant groups in their area, and those that are a minority even among minority groups, will inevitably be overlooked when the focus is solely local.

6) Are there more fundamental changes to organisational structures or the way public services are provided which you see as essential or desirable in addressing the budgetary challenges facing the public sector in the short or medium term?

To some extent web-based resources, forums, etc may be of use in providing support to scattered minority communities – but again this has to be at a national level. A local-authority based support service for minorities cannot possibly provide adequately for all the diverse minorities in their area.

However, this is not a cheap and easy solution, since many people still do not have internet access. In particular, many elderly people do not own a computer, and, even if they are inclined to learn computer skills, the distance to public facilities, for example in a library, combined only too often with a dearth of public transport in rural areas, make this an unrealistic proposition. Unless part of a wider strategy, online networks cannot, therefore, provide genuine support across a whole community.

7) In the context of the remit and timescale of the Review and of the need for practical options, are there particular key issues which you consider should be addressed by the Panel for the purposes of its report?

We have grave concerns that the blanket extension of the localisation agenda will isolate members of minority communities, including the Jewish community, particularly those living in rural areas outwith any settled community. As the Scotland-wide representative body of the Jewish communities in Scotland, our Council is currently able to provide a measure of support to these, and to foster a feeling of community that transcends locality. We have been enabled to do this thanks to funding initiatives that view the Scottish Jewish community nationally, rather than merely scattered individuals and small groups. This cannot be done adequately by generic provision to an imagined single “minority community”, so to change that view would be to condemn many people to isolation, and, given the increasing level of antisemitism⁵, often anxiety.

Whilst we do not criticise localisation as a general policy, we urge that an exception should be made to ensure ongoing national support for minority communities.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charity SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.

⁵ *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2009* (Community Security Trust)
<http://www.thecst.org.uk/docs/CST-incidents-report-09-for-web.pdf>