

Introduction

Thanks Ian

I'm delighted to have the chance to speak to the VOCAL conference today, and particularly pleased to see the wide range of organisations with an interest in culture represented.

As many of you may know I worked for a time in local government, including a period in North Lanarkshire when Councillor McGuigan was leader, so I am particularly pleased to be sharing a platform with him here today. Currently, I am responsible for the Culture and Gaelic policy areas within the Scottish Government.

You are fortunate to be getting a double-helping of the Scottish Government today! As the Minister, Linda Fabiani, will be addressing you later, I do not plan to deliver words on her behalf. I know that she will be keen to set out for you herself her thoughts on the way forward and she will be sharing these with you just before dinner this evening.

Instead I shall, hopefully, shed some light on the issues we are considering in the wake of the consultation on the previous administration's draft Culture Bill and the statutory guidance.

The consultation

First, I want to thank VOCAL and COSLA for helping us deliver that consultation package. Although I took over the Cultural Policy brief only in January this year, and therefore after the consultation had been launched, it very quickly was clear to me that a strong relationship had been established between my team and your representatives. I hope that you would recognise that as well.

We also had Sue Selwyn from Falkirk Council on secondment, who helped us develop a guidance document intended to chime with the practical realities of cultural provision in local authorities. I am grateful to Sue for her efforts and enjoyed working with her.

I am keen to keep that constructive liaison with CoSLA and VOCAL active through regular meetings about policy, strategy and ways to work more closely together and we do meet regularly to discuss these issues. These meetings also include members of the Sport Policy team, which I think is important in terms of us working in government in a way which reflects the way that services are grouped and delivered within local government.

Ministers' approach to business

Returning to the consultation, some clear messages emerged from the many helpful responses we received. As you can understand, that was enormously helpful to the new Ministerial team as they found their feet. Ministers have signalled that they are in the business of consensual politics and want to listen and respond to evidence and sound advice.

You avid Parliament watchers may have been watching the Parliament's website and have seen the report of Minister, Linda Fabiani's first meeting with the Committee for Europe, External Affairs and Culture which was extremely constructive. A really good start.

You would be able to detect there that the Minister is not interested in process, or regulation, for its own sake. She is keen to arrive at solutions based on evidence and experience, which should therefore have a fair chance of achieving the Scottish Government's objectives efficiently and successfully – solutions which are based on the principles of effective delivery and what people want and need.

The practicalities of 'minority government' only serve to underpin that approach.

They bring into sharp focus the need to select deliverable and essential actions that match the policy brief - as opposed to other possible, but less certain, delivery routes.

Our Ministers clearly have a genuine respect for the role of local authorities to lead decision-making at local level. Both the recent draft bill consultation, and the report of a recent survey by CoSLA and VOCAL about how to increase local participation in culture and sport, demonstrated that local authorities really don't need the Scottish Government to tell you what needs to be done!

It follows that Ministers agree with the view that we should focus on outcomes and impact, *not* outputs. This is re-enforced by the Scottish Government's focus on its 5 strategic objectives – healthier, wealthier and fairer, safer and stronger, greener, and smarter.

The 'trick' in all of this appears to be how we can work together to streamline delivery approaches, while ensuring consistent, high quality cultural provision for all the people of Scotland. I think there is also a big opportunity here for all of us in looking to identify ways where we can work together effectively to deliver on these high level strategic objectives in a way which improves local provision.

There is a unique opportunity to do this through the local government outcome agreements currently being developed and I would urge you to engage constructively with this work.

Consultation themes

I said that some themes emerged from the consultation. Let me just give you an overview of these now.

As for what people thought were the best processes for widening access, it seems that the methods described in the draft guidance chimed with local authorities' own views. There also appears to be a widely-held belief that community consultation and feedback from users are vital tools in attracting new audiences and participants from the 'hard to reach' groups.

We also received a clear message from consultees about the importance of Community Planning, as a key means of widening local access opportunities. I know the Minister is interested to see what can be achieved through that route, and we look forward to exploring practical ideas with you.

If Community Planning Partnerships respond positively to current opportunities, it is clear that they have a lot to gain.

And culture would find its place at the top table of local business planning.

The Scottish Government is clear that local commitment is essential in making that happen. If we are serious about local empowerment, we must also be realistic about the timescales involved as you know. The challenge of bringing culture to the Community Planning table is, I suspect, for many, a new departure. And new processes need space for experimentation, acceptance and refinement. They also need to prove their worth.

That challenge of 'proof' should be advanced through the experiences of the Pathfinders. It can also be assisted by gathering and sharing information from the growing body of research and good practice that is central in 'making the case' for culture.

The Scottish Government will look at ways we can help the local authorities. As regards, 'evidence', I know there is a lot of good practice around that deserves to be shared. We want to work with you to collect that information and to make sure it gets noticed.

The consultation responses contained copious, generic observations about culture's many policy roles and benefits.

Let's work to turn that confidence and enthusiasm into real evidence - of specific projects and initiatives. That will help us all to encourage other managers and service planners to include culture as a way to deliver their priorities. Don't blame them for asking about 'the evidence' before they invest. That's simply good business practice after all.

It's clear that local authorities hold strong views about culture's intrinsic qualities. For the record – so do we!

That's exactly why we'd like to see those intrinsic qualities used, far more often than they are, to enrich regeneration, lifelong learning, community safety policy, healthcare and other relevant activity.

A number of consultees suggested we could contribute to this effort by directing new guidance on cultural delivery not solely to the local authority culture departments, but to the range of public sector stakeholders who are responsible for relevant services - in Community Planning and elsewhere. That's a fair point – and we're considering it further!

Consultees clearly concurred on the importance of quality and accountability. That was why local authorities welcomed the proposals for a new strategic Quality Assurance Framework.

There's a unanimous view that the new Framework should be user-friendly, focused on outcomes and self-assessment, and consistent with the approaches already in use for other local services – in particular, community learning and development. We also want to ensure close linkages to the similar work now taking place in relation to sport.

A small team of local government and Scottish Government officials is currently taking related work forward. And national cultural bodies, including the Scottish Museums Council, are helping develop tools for specific cultural sectors to function - beside the popular Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix Library Matrix - within that strategic framework .

The hope we share with VOCAL is that the new Quality Assurance arrangements for local accountability will help deliver high standards of cultural provision across the spectrum of local authority services – and an exciting new focus on community engagement.

Partnerships

I've mentioned the ongoing liaison between me and my team and the teams within VOCAL and CoSLA. As sponsor of a wide range of national cultural organisations, I also look to promote the kind of national-local partnerships that were wanted by many consultees.

At national level, already, our cultural bodies – the Collections, and Performing Companies – are operating more and more as an accessible, and truly 'national' asset, highly skilled in outreach work, and ways to increase access opportunities. I am keen to see how these organisations can work more closely with local government in order to improve the quality of local provision and to maximise opportunities to access cultural opportunities at local level. I think more could still be done on this.

Current developments connected to the advent of a new national cultural development body, known as "Creative Scotland", will ensure that strategic advice - and targeted local support of talent – can be sought from the organisation.

I know that Richard Holloway, Chair of the Joint Board of Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen is very keen to enter into a dialogue with local government at how best to work together and to ensure that that influences the remit of Creative Scotland as it develops. I would urge you to engage with Richard and his team on this.

At a local level, you have many assets and partner bodies who also are well-placed to assist. I am thinking about the independent, voluntary and community sector culture bodies, whose valuable contribution could be further developed.

It's always important to remember how many different approaches and sources of help are available – not all local provision has to be delivered directly by the local authority. I am very aware of that from my own local government experience where local organisations were often best placed to provide services to the geographical communities they were located within or the communities of interest that they represented.

Cross-local authority working can also provide efficient and highly effective solutions. When we invited bids to run Pathfinder projects, not a lot of proposals for joint projects were proposed.

But we are very pleased to have the 2 projects of Aberdeen & Aberdeenshire, and Inverclyde, Renfrewshire & East Renfrewshire. Joint-working to deliver those Pathfinders is resulting in some useful and interesting lessons for us all to watch and learn from.

Next steps

I have attempted in the last few minutes to give you a flavour of key themes from the consultation, and some thoughts about the issues they raise, and which we are actively considering with the Minister at the moment as she decides her priorities for delivering the commitments in the Government's manifesto.

The Minister will no doubt share with you some thoughts about that tonight and be looking to engage in a discussion and debate with you on all of the issues. This will be helpful to her I am sure as her thinking develops.

In terms of legislation, the First Minister announced the legislative programme for 2007-8 in Parliament yesterday which includes a bill on Creative Scotland. Following this, later in the year, there will be a statement by the Minister about her plans for both Creative Scotland and for the other areas of cultural policy that were included in last December's consultation which I have been drawing out the key themes from today.

In the few minutes that remain I am happy to answer any questions.

[ENDS]