

# Edinburgh MSP in praise of the Community Empowerment Bill



by Marco Biagi, MSP for Edinburgh Central and Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment

Last week I visited the Craggs Community Sports Centre, a fantastic community led facility in the shadow of Arthur's Seat. The centre, which lies between Dumbiedykes and St Leonard's in the southside of the city, was mothballed by the local authority before being taken over and now run by a charitable community trust.

The Craggs is a small but excellent example of the benefits of local communities taking control of local facilities. This is the intention of the Community Empowerment Bill, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament this week. This Bill will give communities the right to buy abandoned or neglected land and buildings – meaning examples like the Craggs could become the rule rather than the exception.

The Craggs is a home for sport, events, shows, workshops and classes. The centre operates by providing many of the groups who use it with keys – a trust based model unlikely to be used by Council services. This encourages a sense of shared ownership, and brings clubs together with the common interest of having the best centre possible.

When the social-enterprise the Engine Shed closed this year, itself a short walk from the Craggs, the Craggs became part of a bid to keep the building in community use – cooperating with other organisations and sharing vital experience. This is an important example – by building knowledge and capacity within

local communities, this sort of community-led takeover can become completely normal.

There is still a role for local government to provide many of the services we use and enjoy, and often these services are the best model. But there will also be times when it's best for ordinary people to pitch in and get the services and facilities they want by doing it themselves. This can unleash new energy by involving people who feel more connected to community services precisely because they are directly in charge.

That spirit can achieve things at grassroots level that council management often simply can't. It's a way of ensuring that services reflect the needs and aspirations of residents. Run by local people, for local people, a community run facility can really focus on the priorities in their area. Whether it's running a city-centre sports hall, saving a much-loved community asset, or using abandoned land for the public good, the Community Empowerment Bill will help turn problems into opportunities.