

Information Literacy for Democratic Engagement (IL-DEM)

Public General Report – issued January 2017

Overview

Between October and December 2016 a team from the Centre for Social Informatics at Edinburgh Napier University investigated the information practices of community councillors in a research project funded by the Information Literacy Group¹ of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

This report is intended to be read by community councillors and those interested in their success, including the Improvement Service, community council liaison officers and public library staff who support the work of community councils.

The main project findings are as follows:

- Many community council activities are motivated by information needs. Community councillors use digital and traditional channels as tools to gather, process and share information. Facebook plays a significant role in this.
- There is a low awareness of some official sources of information such as TellMeScotland and the national community council website.
- Community councils face a number of obstacles when carrying out information-related activities.
- Some community councils are unable to use information effectively due to a lack of resources.
- Public libraries provide accommodation for community council meetings and are a source of information for community councillors. However, there is little evidence of provision of information literacy training specific to community councillors.
- Community councils may be unable to perform their statutory duties in part because their information skills are under-developed.
- It is recommended that
 - Community councillors should lobby for suitable training, and take part in an audit of their information skills and practices, with leadership and support from the Improvement Service.
 - Community council liaison officers should do more to emphasise the value of information skills in supporting community councils' statutory role of representing citizen opinions.
 - Public library services should extend their roles in supporting community councils.

¹ <http://www.cilip.org.uk/about/special-interest-groups/information-literacy-group>

This report covers:

- the background to the research
- the research methods deployed in the implementation of the project
- further detail on the research findings and recommendations summarised above.

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1 Background

Scotland has approximately 1200 community councils. They exist to

‘ascertain, co-ordinate and express to the local authorities for its area ... the views of their community ... and to take such action in the interests of that community as appears to be expedient and practicable’ (Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1973)

Government and local authorities employ paid information professionals to support information channels designed to engage citizens. However, at the community (or hyperlocal) level, unpaid community councillors are obliged to take on this role. They face their information challenges on their own, whether or not they have the requisite professional background or training to do so.

There are three main information challenges that community councillors face:

1. accessing and understanding information on their duties and rights;
2. keeping up to date with local developments of relevance to the communities that they serve;
3. disseminating information to their communities through appropriate channels. (For example, many citizens use the web and social media, whereas many community councils do not use such channels at all).

Previous research has uncovered a related democratic deficit in this area. For example, it was found in 2014 that only 10% of Scottish community councils have active online presences that facilitate dialogue with citizens (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2014).

As a means of understanding some of these challenges, community councillors’ levels of information literacy might be considered. Information literacy has been defined as ‘knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner’ (CILIP, 2004). One widely used framework of information literacy is the 7-pillar model (SCONUL, 2011):



It is also worthwhile including in such a consideration an analysis of public library support of community councillors. This is not least because librarians have become the ‘proprietors’ of information literacy (Crawford, 2013), and because it has been suggested that public libraries should ‘become champions of community engagement and empowerment’ (SLIC, 2015, p. 25). Such declarations from the library and information community raise expectations that public library staff might support community councillors further, e.g. through information literacy training.

Six key questions were thus addressed in this project:

1. How do community councillors access and understand information on their duties and rights?
2. How do community councillors keep up to date with local issues of relevance to the communities that they serve?
3. How do community councillors disseminate information to their communities?
4. Where do future efforts need to be directed to improve the skills and practices of this group?
5. What are the roles of public library staff in the training of community councillors?
6. What is the impact of the levels of information literacy amongst community councillors on the communities that they serve, e.g. in terms of building social capital and contributing to a sense of citizenship?

2 Data collection

Interview data were collected from 19 community councillors based in a range of localities from the very urban to remote rural, and from deprived to wealthy. Demographic details of these individuals are listed in the appendix at the end of this document. Twenty-five community councillors who expressed interest in the project but were unavailable for interview were invited to complete an online survey. Ten usable completed surveys were returned and analysed. Additional data were obtained from five community council liaison officers and six public librarians. Desk research that focused on identifying local authority policies on library support for community councils also contributed to the study.

3 Findings

3.1 How do community councillors access and understand information on their duties and rights?

Community councillors' main source of information on their duties and rights is local authority guidance. From this guidance, they learn that a principal duty is to identify and then deliver citizens' opinions to the local authority (or bodies such as the NHS) as required. Some local authorities, however, are seen as reluctant to provide community councillors with all the information that they need to carry out their duties. Other information sources used by community councillors to explore their roles include other community councillors, community bodies (such as architectural preservation societies), *Planning Democracy*¹, *Planning Aid Scotland*², 'official' web sites (such as the national web site for community councils³), and Facebook groups. In general, however, information on duties and rights is accessed in unstructured manners.

It should be noted that community councillors have also been tasked with transmitting information in the other direction i.e. from local authorities (or related bodies) to citizens, and are sometimes also involved in the delivery of government services.

3.2 How do community councillors keep up to date with local issues?

Spatial planning information forms the basis of a significant element of community councillors' work. This is because community councillors are statutory consultees on such matters (although not on *community* planning (SURF, 2016)). A key source of information on planning is the local authority: community councillors automatically receive lists of planning applications from local authorities. However, not all information perceived by community councillors as necessary to their duties is supplied by local authorities. One participant in the study said that he had resorted to Freedom of Information requests⁴ to access information required on local issues. Two others noted that they also supplement the information received from the local authority by consulting the Scottish public information notices portal⁵. Informal consultations with citizens, the local press and Facebook – and to a lesser extent developers and construction workers – serve as sources of information to supplement the more 'official' sources.

'Information skills are vital. We don't transact actions on the ground. We don't have any financial power. Our currency is information.'

Interviewee 9

¹ <http://www.planningdemocracy.org.uk>

² <http://pas.org.uk>

³ <http://www.communitycouncils.scot>

⁴ Through the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act, 2002

⁵ <https://www.tellmesotland.gov.uk/> – a Scottish Government web site that lists active planning and travel notifications.

The participants' experiences voiced in the interviews indicate problems in both obtaining planning information and registering opinion on it, as has been previously reported elsewhere (Improvement Service, 2015). A lack of clarity around local authority structures, for example, means that some community councillors do not know the location of information relevant to their needs. Participants also expressed frustrations that higher tiers of government do not act on the information they supply. This may indicate a need for the improvement of the presentation skills of community councillors.

Citizen opinions about local issues are particularly important here. Opinions are often gleaned from social media, principally Facebook. The findings of this study reveal, however, that community councillors' Facebook use varies from case to case, from complete avoidance to high usage. The study found no indication that particular demographic factors serve as determinants of adoption or practice. Two participants in this study who wish to exploit online information sources such as Facebook face opposition from their colleagues: the reasons for this would merit further investigation. Citizen opinion is also gathered face-to-face (e.g. through local networking) and through the use of more traditional means such as comment boxes and surveys. One participant in this study regrets the decline of regional newspapers because these were previously important information sources in the context of local democracy.

3.3 How do community councillors disseminate information to their communities?

Some digital channels such as email and selected social media (Facebook and blogs, but not Twitter) are commonly used by community councillors to disseminate information to their communities. Non-digital channels include those which are used for keeping up to date with local issues (as noted in section 3.2 above) plus – in some instances – dedicated newsletters.

There are obstacles to sharing information. These range to straightforward issues such as poor communication to problems associated with personal modes of operation of community council members who hold prominent roles, such as autocratic chairs. A further point, which has parallels with the uncertainty around where to source information from local authority structures noted above, is that community councillors are sometimes unsure of the target audience for the information that they have gathered.

3.4 Where do future efforts need to be directed to improve the skills and practices of this group?

The current focus of the training opportunities offered by local authorities to community councillors relates to the functional roles of community councils. Thus courses available train community councillors in the skills required to be effective chairpersons, secretaries, treasurers etc, and aid efficient running of community councils. In addition, there is some training provision on planning consultations. However, up-to-date training designed to improve the information skills and practices of community councillors is not currently offered by local authorities.

The findings related in sections 3.2 and 3.3 above indicate that there is a need for community councillors to improve their information skills and practices so that they fulfil their prime information-based statutory role of gathering and then providing their citizens' opinions to authority. However, it should be recognised that the community councillor population is a very diverse group in terms of their knowledge and aptitudes, and that their abilities to meet the requirements of their roles is highly dependent on a range of factors that include their work or life based skills, and the contexts in which they operate. This means that future efforts to improve the information skills and practices of this group need to be carefully tailored. A limitation of this study is that the participants who came forward

to take part were all well-educated and are likely to be better skilled than community councillors who lack such professional backgrounds.

Just under half of the interviewees who took part in this study are aware of their information skills gaps, particularly in respect of the use of particular tools (such as social media) and their application for activities (such as digital engagement in general, and more particular aspects of this, e.g. analytics to understand online audiences). There is also acknowledgement of a lack of awareness of the extent to which this cohort of community councillors is under-skilled.

A further, and long-standing, issue of relevance here is that many community councils lack sufficient members to undertake all their roles (Goodlad, Flint, Kearns, Keoghan, Paddison, & Raco, 1999; Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012, 2014). This was also identified by project participants who related how limited human resources have a negative impact on community councils' tasks that require information handling.

3.5 What are the roles of public library staff in the training of community councillors?

As ordinary citizens, community councillors have access to public libraries and the services that they offer, e.g. free Internet access, and basic IT training, elements of which might be conceived as information literacy education. In addition, public libraries support community councils by offering space for hosting meetings, displaying information and helping with research. However, none appear to directly address community councillors' information literacy needs. This may be at least partly due to a lack of recognition of the needs: this research uncovered just one local authority that has published a policy on library support for community councils⁶.

'I suppose I just use my life skills to find out what I need. I haven't ever felt the need to go to the local authority'

Interviewee 9

3.6 How do community councillors' information literacies contribute to their communities, to building social capital, and to their or others' citizenships?

There is some recognition amongst community councillors that information skills are important in an environment where information serves as a form of currency that should be 'spent' for the good of the community. The findings of this research indicate that a community council that comprises a membership with strong information skills can build social capital and contribute to citizenship in a variety of ways. For example, information skills underpin work that contributes to broad issues such as the development of the built environment⁷, retention of public facilities, pollution control and the support of disadvantaged groups. These skills also help community councillors address more particular concerns of individual citizens, such as the support of victims of attack. In applying their information skills in these ways, the information literacy of community councillors can contribute to social cohesion.

⁶ http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/info/20133/community_planning/731/community_councils_-_library_support

⁷ Example of a Community Council mapping such factors: <https://myleith.shinyapps.io/myedinburgh>

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this study show that community councillors have a general awareness of their information needs. However, their strategies for addressing these are not always systematic. They also struggle to overcome barriers to accessing information sources, and evaluating their value, in the course of executing their duties. Practices related to the dissemination of information across this group of hyperlocal representatives are variable, particularly in terms of channel adoption. In short, although community councillors are practised in obtaining and publishing information, the levels of information literacy that they exhibit indicate that their democratic roles could be strengthened with (further) training and development. The role of public library services, which already support community councils in a number of ways, could be enlarged (with the right resources) to accommodate this. In doing so, they would be closer to meeting the ambition of becoming ‘champions of community engagement’ and ‘creat[ing] partnerships with community planning partners’ by supporting and training community councillors, as noted in the aspirations expressed in *Ambition and opportunity: a strategy for public libraries* (SLIC, 2015).

The recommendations of this study address three primary groups of stakeholders: (1) community councils; (2) community council liaison officers, local authorities, and the Improvement Service (3) public library services. (It is recognised that in many cases the implementation of these recommendations would require additional resources. The level of resource is not considered here.)

4.1 Recommendations for community councils

- Community councillors should take part in an audit of their information skills and practices.
- Community councillors should lobby for suitable training. The outcomes of the audit can be used as an evidence base to show where the greatest needs lie.
- Examples of good practice identified in the audit should be publicised across community councils so that that they can be shared and emulated. For example: community councillors who are skilled in using social media to disseminate information to their citizens could mentor others; community councils that have raised income to create information artefacts such as newsletters through the selling of advertising space could explain how this can be achieved; community councillors who are practised at information seeking at local public events could share the strategy for, and value of, such activity for public engagement.
- Community councils should lobby for further provision of national guidelines on good practice and standards, particularly on the creation and use of digital engagement tools

4.2 Recommendations for community council liaison officers, local authorities and the Improvement Service

- Community council liaison officers should do more to emphasise the value of highly developed information skills amongst the full membership of community councils. This should be done in the context of the statutory role of representing citizen opinions.
- The Improvement Service should take a leadership role in the audit of community councillors’ information skills and practices and coordinate efforts toward addressing training needs.
- Local authorities should support the initiatives we recommend for other stakeholders.

4.3 Recommendations for public library services

- Public library services should extend their role in supporting community councils, particularly with reference to improving community councillors’ information literacy through providing training.

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Appendix: Summary of interviewees

#	Position	Age range	Gender	Origin	Highest qualification	Years on community council	LA	Location	SIMD decile*
1	Communications officer	50-59	Female	White Scottish	Degree	2	Aberdeen	small urban	8
2	Publicity officer	50-59	Female	White Scottish	PhD	1	Aberdeen	very urban	10
3	Planning liaison officer	60-69	Male	White (not stated)	Degree	3	Aberdeen	small urban	9
4	Chair	60-69	Female	White other	PG Dip	1	Aberdeen	very urban	10
5	Minutes secretary	50-59	Female	White Scottish	Degree	1	Argyll & Bute	small urban	7
6	Treasurer	70-79	Male	White Scottish	Masters	15	Argyll & Bute	small urban	7
7	Convenor	70-79	Female	White Scottish	Masters	2	Argyll & Bute	very rural	6
8	Secretary	50-59	Female	White other	Degree	5	Edinburgh	very urban	10
9	Planning convener	50-59	Male	(not stated)	Masters	6	Edinburgh	very urban	10
10	Ordinary member	50-59	Female	White Scottish	Degree	17	Fife	very urban	10
11	Chair	40-49	Male	White British	Masters	4	Glasgow	very urban	9
12	Ordinary member	40-49	Male	White (not stated)	Degree	2	Glasgow	small urban	6
13	Internet communications	50-59	Female	White Scottish/ British	PG Dip	3	Glasgow	very urban	6
14	Chair	30-39	Male	White British	HNC	1	Perth & Kinross	small urban	5
15	Chair	40-49	Female	White Scottish	Masters	3	Perth & Kinross	rural	8
16	Secretary	50-59	Male	White (not stated)	Masters	1	Perth & Kinross	rural	7
17	Chair	60-69	Female	White Scottish	Masters	1	Perth & Kinross	rural	7
18	Chair	50-59	Female	White (not stated)	Diploma	5	Renfrewshire	rural	6
19	Ordinary member	60-69	Male	White Scottish	Professional	4	Shetland	small urban	7
Averages		56	-	-	-	4	-	-	-

***SIMD Deciles:** The Scottish Index of multiple deprivation (SIMD, <http://simd.scot/2016>) divides communities into deciles, with 1 being most deprived and 10 the least deprived