

Community Councils in Scotland: Information Literacy for Democratic Engagement

Report on initial findings – issued October 2017

Executive Summary

This reports on the initial findings from a survey of information practices of community councillors carried out in early 2017. It should be read in conjunction with the [report](#) issued earlier based on a series of interviews with community councillors.

Intended audience: community councillors and those interested in their success, including the Improvement Service, community council liaison officers (CLOs) and public library staff.

Data collection: This report is based on an initial analysis of an online survey (with 866 complete responses) by the Centre for Social Informatics at Edinburgh Napier University, funded by the University's School of Computing. The respondents generally identified themselves as Scottish, white and aged 45 or older, with a roughly equal mix of genders; over 50% have college or degree-level education.

The indicative findings at this stage are as follows:

- Workplace experience is the main source of information skills for community councillors – meaning that citizens without a background in professional/information-based work are likely to be at a disadvantage.
- Although community councillors may have information seeking skills, there is a need for training in information sharing and management to maximise the sustainability and impact of their work.
- Local authorities, not citizens, are the main source of information on local issues. Almost no community councillors obtain information about local issues from public libraries.
- There is high demand for training in use of social media and surveys, planning, and general community council duties. Existing training should be assessed to see whether it matches the priorities identified by community councillors.

Many respondents note that their community councils are under-strength. The average active community council has 10 members, and 2 vacancies. Some report up to half their positions vacant. This is likely to constrain the amount of work community councils can take on.

This report includes hyperlinks to additional information, and will be followed by a full analysis in early 2018.

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1 Findings and recommendations

In this report, information skills are those skills needed to know when and why information is needed, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner (using [the definition](#) created by [CILIP](#), the leading professional body in this area). One widely-used model of information literacy is the [SCONUL 7-pillar model](#):

Figure 1: The SCONUL 7-pillar model of information literacy



The survey participants reinforce the ‘stale and pale’ stereotype of community councillors, although the gender balance (43% female, 56% male) is more even than that for MSPs ([36% female, 64% male](#)), Scottish MPs (34% female, 66% male) and Scottish local authority councillors ([29% female, 71% male](#)). The survey also paints a picture of a relatively highly qualified population, compared to the [general Scottish population](#). However, we suspect that some of this difference will be due to a preponderance of more educated, self-efficacious survey respondents. It should be noted that these figures are based on raw survey responses, and no attempt has been made to adjust them to reflect the wider population.

1.1 Workplace experience is the main source of information skills for community councillors

Community councillors mostly develop information skills relevant to their community council work in their workplaces. Workplaces that contribute to such learning include traditional ones (ranging from being in the army to teaching) and community settings (e.g. being a charity trustee, a parent council member, or secretary of residents’ association).

Other ‘sites’ for learning information skills include being friends and neighbours, and membership of social and recreational organisations. Family roles and tertiary education make some contribution, while childhood is the least significant contributor to community councillors’ information skills. That is, in general community councillors learn to handle information after they have left school. These results concur with those about respondents’ ages (section 1 above) because information literacy skills are not yet playing a full role in school education and lifelong learning.

The implication is that community councillors from excluded or marginal groups would find it difficult to be effective in their roles as they would not have access to the necessary information literacies.

1.2 Although community councillors may have information seeking skills, there is a need for training in sharing and management

In terms of the SCONUL model above, a large majority of the community councillors responding to the survey undertake identifying, scoping and planning activities, a majority undertakes gathering and evaluating activities, and smaller majorities undertake managing and presenting activities.

In general, community councillors collaborate to identify and scope information needs. They also collaborate when planning how to gather information, when actually gathering information, and when evaluating, editing and presenting information. However, the demands for training (section 1.4) suggests that many community councillors would benefit from information-skills training.

Currently, although community councillors may have more or less effective skills in finding information, there is a weakness in their ability to manage and share it – meaning the impact and

sustainability of their work is restricted. Training in these areas should be prioritised.

1.3 Local Authorities (not citizens) are the main source of information on local issues

The most useful information sources are local authority officials and councillors, followed by community council colleagues. Local residents, members of other community councils and other community bodies make limited contributions. This suggests that the major influence on community councillors' information activities is not the citizens they are supposed to represent, but the local authorities which create, regulate and fund community councils.

Public libraries make almost no contribution to community councils' information activities. This contradicts aspirations for libraries to be '[champions of community engagement and empowerment](#)'.

Word-of-mouth is the most useful route for gathering citizens' opinions, followed by email, Facebook and surveys. Facebook use is highly variable: 21% of respondents found it to be very useful but 27% found it to be of no use at all. Other internet channels are hardly used at all.

This means that weaknesses in community councillors' information skills are a likely limiting their ability to represent their communities.

1.4 Training requirements

The following training needs were given the most priority by the participants:

Training need	% of respondents who wish for such training
Planning	68%
Using social media for communicating with residents	55%
Presenting information to local residents	48%
Using surveys (online and offline)	47%
Community council schemes of establishments (i.e. what community councils can and should do)	47%
Using social media for understanding residents' opinions	43%
Community planning partnerships	41%
Licensing	21%

It is not surprising that a majority want training around planning, because this is one of community councils' *raison d'être*. Because local authorities often provide such training, it would be worthwhile exploring what it does not provide. Community councils are also statutory consultees on licensing, so it is surprising that the call for such training is smaller than that for planning training.

The next largest calls are for training around social media and presenting information. There is a connection between these items, because communication involves both giving out and receiving information, and because channels such as Facebook facilitate such two-way communications. Also, community councils may be tasked with sharing information from local authorities to their communities, so it is not surprising that there are calls for training in the skills needed to do this.

Just under half of the respondents wish for training in surveys, while over two fifths of respondents would like training in 'use of social media for understanding residents' opinions'. These findings reflect community councils' statutory duty to 'ascertain, co-ordinate and express' community opinions.

Just under half of the respondents would like training in what community councils can and cannot do. This may be in part due to [some Schemes for community councils not being available online](#). It may

be of concern that so many respondents appear to want training about the basics of their roles.

Just over two-fifths of respondents would like training about community planning partnerships (CPPs). CPPs are partnerships between local authorities and other organisations in their areas, created to [‘tackle some of the big social, economic and environmental issues’](#), and ‘to design and deliver better services [that make a real difference to local people’s lives’](#). Community councils should be actively participating in development of [Local Outcome Improvement Plans](#), which are integral to each CPP.

1.5 Participants and their community councils

Most community councillors who responded to the survey are 45 years old or older, with a roughly even gender mix (43% female, 56% male). Most (76%) identify as Scottish, with another 20% being from elsewhere in the UK. 95% are white. Almost half (48%) are retired, while almost two fifths (38%) are employed. Very few are students (1%), home-makers (3%) or in other employment statuses (10%). Over half (51%) have college or university education, while almost a third (29%) have post-graduate or professional qualifications. In line with their ages, highest levels of education were most often achieved long ago. (54% achieved over 30 years ago).

Community councils being under-strength is a [perennial issue](#), as is the concern that vacancies may limit community councils’ effectiveness. The survey responses indicate the current scale of the problem:

- The ‘average’ community council has 10 members and 2 vacancies. Assuming there are around 1100 active community councils in Scotland, over 2000 places remain unfilled (with a similar number being needed to cover the ‘missing’ community councils). Around a third of community councils have three or more vacancies, while a few have large numbers of vacancies.
- Around 18% of community councillors have two or more roles. We believe that undertaking just one role can be very taxing, not least because community council work is a spare-time activity.
- Around 5% of community councillors do not know how many colleagues they currently have, while around 19% do not know how many colleagues they could have. This raises concerns about ignorance of the basic structure of community councils.

2 Conclusions and next steps

Community councillors work together to gather, process and share information. This is highly reminiscent of the way that information is handled in the workplace¹. This suggests that the community councillor role is akin to a job, albeit unpaid. While a primary duty of community councils is to provide information to their 'parent' local authorities, it is of concern that community councils appear to be most engaged with local authorities, and not with the citizens they represent.

The skills that community councillors employ to handle information are generally developed after formal education. However, it is apparent that many community councillors would benefit from further training.

- ⇒ Given that there is a large call for training around basic community council duties, we suggest that induction training is provided and/or strengthened, and is then regularly repeated to ensure that skills remain fresh. It seems likely that answering the call for social media training made by over half of the respondents would increase engagement and information-sharing between community councils and their citizens.
- ⇒ We also suggest that the biennial community council liaison officer (CCLO) meetings and the [national website for community councils](#) become the nuclei of a working group to share training and best practice across LA boundaries.
- ⇒ More specifically, we suggest three approaches to increasing the information skills of community councils.
 - Firstly, local authorities, local community council associations and other bodies supporting community councils could arrange training in the basics.
 - Secondly, community councils could themselves mentor each other about what works for them, and how they understand their roles.
 - Thirdly, community councils could induct new members, to increase organisational cohesiveness and to make best use of new members' skills and ambitions.

The longstanding problem of community councils being understrength shows no sign of being solved.

- ⇒ It may be that it is time to reconfigure community councils' duties and resources, so they are fully able to undertake their duties.

We will be carrying out a full analysis of the survey, and plan to issue a final report with detailed findings and recommendations early in 2018.

¹ Forster M (2017), *Information Literacy in the Workplace*. London: Facet Publishing (especially p.14, p.25)

Appendix: Background and methodology

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 level, unpaid community councillors are obliged to take on this role. The main information challenges that they face are:

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 communities through appropriate channels. (For example, many citizens use social media, whereas many community councils do not use such channels at all).

The data was collected by the LIL-DEM project, part of a [programme investigating how the concept of information literacy](#) can be used to investigate community councils’ functions. Further details are on the [project team’s website](#).

An online survey was used to collect data from current community councillors. It was advertised by direct emails to CCLOs, at a meeting of CCLOs, and by posts on the KnowledgeHub groups for [CCLOs](#) and [community councillors](#). In total, 1320 people followed the link to the survey; 1044 of these answered any part of the questions and 866 people answered all questions. Because there are around 1100 active community councils, with on average 10 members, the response rate was around 8%.

The data gathered will be subject to a full analysis in the follow-up MIL-DEM project which will report in early 2018.