

Centre for Social Informatics
Institute of Informatics and Digital Innovation
Edinburgh Napier University
Merchiston Campus
10 Colinton Road
Edinburgh EH10 5DT

Clerk to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee
Committee Office
Room T3.40
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh EH99 1SP
28 March 2014

Dear Members of the LGRC

Many thanks for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the flexibility and autonomy of local government in Scotland. We are responding as individual researchers who work at the Centre for Social Informatics, part of the Institute of Informatics and Digital Innovation at Edinburgh Napier University.

Our response is based on the observation that Scotland already has the largest units of local accountability in Europe and it would seem logical for any strengthening of local democratic decision-making and service-delivery to include devolution to smaller units within Local Authorities.

We believe that appropriate use of internet communication tools provides a chance to help achieve this in a cost effective manner: this is our area of expertise and where we focus our response. Our recent research has centred on the use of the internet as a means of communication by Community Councils (CCs). The attached submission around the flow of information and local opinions into CCs, an essential process if local democracy is to remain (or become) flexible.

Our main points (expanded in the following pages) are that:

- We assume there is a need for an effective community-based level of democracy with strong links to other tiers of representation.
- The internet provides a mechanism for cost-effective engagement with communities, for instance allowing realistic engagement with the planning process.
- The Community Empowerment Bill implies a greater need for engagement at community level.
- There are a number of practical steps that can overcome the weaknesses we identify.

These are explored further below. We will be very happy to discuss the matters raised here further with you if you feel that is appropriate.

Yours sincerely

Peter Cruickshank

Research Fellow

Short biographical information is presented at the end of this submission

Dr Bruce Ryan

Researcher

1 The current situation

1.1 Links to community organisations

We believe that a community-based (or “hyperlocal”) level of democracy will continue to be needed below the Local Authority (LA) level, no matter how Scotland’s democracy changes. The current CC system has the advantage of already existing and having an amount of goodwill and support,

CCs often have links with community organisations, which gives some evidence that existing CC areas form a worthwhile definition of ‘local’ for many purposes. For example, the online presence of Strathblane CC (in Stirling LA) is part of the StrathBlaneField local community website¹. For some issues, two or more CCs would be involved but personal experience suggests that CCs can work together.

Hence we prefer that the CC system is retained, but evolved so that it can support a lively, modern representative and participatory democracy.

1.2 Use of internet technology

We have found that use of the internet to support the collection of local opinions and for these to flow to decision-makers is generally poor.

Our research, which will be updated this year, (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012) has found that of 1369 possible community councils, only 307 (22%) have up-to-date websites: even these mostly give out information but do not gather citizen input: that is, CCs often do not use the internet as a route for informing their communities, let alone gathering community input.

Worse, many active CCs (498 = 36%) do not use the internet at all to communicate publically with citizens – a further 351 (26%) have out-of-date websites, which is little better. That is, we found that 78% of all possible and 74% of existing community councils do not use the internet to support their roles of communication and opinion-gathering. A significant proportion (213 = 16%) of CCs simply do not exist. Hence there is no mechanism for local input in these areas.

Finally, we estimate that only about 4% of Scotland’s population have been able to vote for their Community Councillors.

In summary, the Community Council system which was specifically set up to supply local opinions to Local Authorities (LAs), emergency and health services and similar to aid their decision-making processes, does not have the necessary IT-mediated channels to effectively carry out this function.

1.3 Links to other layers of democracy

We recognise that councillors, MPs and MSPs are automatically members of CCs in their wards and constituencies, potentially providing some linkage between CCs and higher tiers of democratic representation. However, we are concerned that information is not flowing between CCs and their citizens, and hence local opinions may not be properly reaching

¹ <http://www.strathblanefield.org.uk/communitycouncil/cchome.html>

these links to bodies where decisions are actually made. Appropriate use of the internet through blogs or social media could add an element of transparency to this information flow.

It is worth noting that only 10 of the 32 community planning partnerships (CPPs), which join up LAs, emergency and health services, include CC representatives at board level (Improvement Service, 2014). So even if local opinions do reach CCs, they are not guaranteed to reach CPPs.

1.4 The opportunity of the Community Empowerment Bill

We welcome the Community Empowerment Bill's intention to create community-based control of community assets.

Without good channels for communicating with citizens, CCs will not only be unable to learn what citizens want but they will also be unable to take advantage of expertise and other resources local citizens may have. Hence we believe that CCs' decision-making processes on the matters that would be devolved to them would be impaired by lack of appropriate tools to support communication and citizen engagement.

1.5 Current weaknesses

In our research mentioned earlier, we have found several further barriers to local accountability which could be overcome through appropriate use of internet technologies such as blog/news sites and social media such as Facebook:

- Even those CCs that have up-to-date websites often do not publish agendas, so local citizens would not have notice of what is to be discussed.
- Minutes are often published only after they have been ratified at subsequent meetings, typically a month after the original meeting. Hence local citizens are not informed of important matters by CCs until after deadlines have passed. (Typically, planning applications have 3-week consultation periods.)
- Only 59 CC websites (9% of online presences) have specific planning sections. Hence planning matters are either not mentioned or are buried in minutes, which may be hard to find.

Hence meaningful engagement by citizens with the planning process (one of their key consultative duties) is not currently facilitated by most CCs.

Many Community Councillors would like to do more but feel hamstrung by the voluntary nature of their roles, and the lack of a basis for adequately funding CCs. For example, while they may be able to poll their citizens via online and offline methods, they may well lack the resources and expertise to process large amounts of responses.

An example of how this might be challenged arises from the Edinburgh planning concordat: this scheme will help fund CCs' consulting with their citizens about contentious planning issues, in cases where developers are unwilling to aid such local consultation.

2 Potential actions and solutions

2.1 Taking advantage of existing technology

We are aware that basic internet infrastructure is poor in remote and rural areas: The work of Michael Fourman may be of interest here (Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2011). As well as this technical infrastructure we also believe that Community Councillors will need support to develop the communication skills needed in a modern, participatory democracy. Hence we suggest that:

- LAs and the Scottish Government need to continue to invest in online infrastructure.
- LAs and the Scottish Government need to encourage and support CCs' use of online communication.
- Recent positive developments with the use of open data by government services should be supported. One example is the creation of the Public Information Notices portal (<http://www.tellmesotland.gov.uk>) which now provides the technical capability to allow listing of all live local planning applications on a community council's website.

However, we are not in favour of 'digitalocracy'; closing the digital divide implies easy access for citizens to assistive technology and continued support for public library internet facilities. It is also important to recognise that CCs will still need to contact some citizens via traditional offline means – though we know of CCs who prior to developing online presences effectively did not communicate at all.

2.2 Improving autonomy and moving to service delivery

Touching on your fourth question on the level of legal flexibility and autonomy from central government that local government enjoys, we are aware that some island LAs (particularly Orkney) have devolved some service provision to their CCs. We believe that this could be extended to other LAs, but recognise that this will be an evolutionary process in which mistakes will be made and lessons learned. We therefore urge tolerance towards such mistakes, and support for communication of lessons learned between CCs and LAs across Scotland: the internet provides a cost-effective mechanism for achieving this.

Our evidence implies a shift of funding to help support revived CCs. However, we believe that the cost of exclusion of community-level democracy would be far higher.

We can summarise our submission by saying that for community-level participatory democracy schemes to succeed, they need to overcome four potential obstacles:

- technical limits
- absence of issues for discussion
- weak sense of community
- *lack of real influence*

(Griessler, 2012)

Although our response only focuses on the first of these, clear and cost effective mechanisms for engaging citizens are a necessary condition for a vibrant democracy and hence effective government at community level.

References

- Cruickshank, P., Ryan, B., & Smith, C. (in press). *Disconnected democracy? A survey of Scottish Community Councils' online presences*. Scottish Affairs.
- Griessler, C. (2012). E-participation declined? *Conference for E-Democracy and Open Government* (pp. 313-316). Krems, Austria: Edition Donau-Universität, Krems.
- Improvement Service. (2014). *Community Planning Partnerships*. Available from <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/community-planning-partnerships>.
- Royal Society of Edinburgh (2011). Broadband Infrastructure in Scotland: a response to the Scottish Parliament's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. Available from http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/2011/ad11_15.pdf
- Ryan, B. M. (2013, December). *Disconnected democracy? A study of Scottish Community Councils' online communications*. Unpublished MSc dissertation.
- Ryan, B. M., & Cruickshank, P. (2012, October). *Scottish Community Councils - a survey*. Available from <http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/c/publications/publicationid/13373555>.

Biographical information

Bruce Ryan's research interest is in the use of the internet by Scottish Community Councils. He was treasurer of St Andrews CC (Fife) and is currently minutes secretary for and joint webmaster for two CCs in Leith, Edinburgh.

Peter Cruickshank is a lecturer in Information Systems, researches e-participation and has a background in business, accountancy, IS Audit and information governance. More information can be found via his research page at <http://www.iidi.napier.ac.uk/p.cruickshank>.

The Centre for Social Informatics is carries out interdisciplinary research into the design and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that takes account of institutional and cultural contexts. We have considerable previous experience in the particular area of e-participation – that is, the application of research to the democratic process.