digiCC workshop outcomes report

Executive summary

A workshop on digital engagement by Community Councils (CCs) was hosted by Edinburgh Napier University on 30 January 2015 to which members from 35 CCs came. Facilitated sessions were held to establish common perceptions of problems and ways to address them.

Speakers from the Scottish Government community empowerment unit, the Improvement Service, Democratic Society Scotland shared their insights and helped facilitate.

The key outcomes of the day are:

- Digital engagement by CCs suffers from lack of support from communities, local and national government and even from other CC members.
- While CCs at the day were aware of the many channels for digital engagement, they often lack time, budget and training to use them effectively.
- Sources of help are patchy and may be slow to respond
- There is lack of succession planning leaving CCs dependent on an individual for their online presences.

Overall, the circumstances lead in some cases to cynicism, despondency and inaction.

This calls for CCs and other stakeholders to work together to create and implement a roadmap towards positive change. This would include changes within and outside CCs, and may well include the creation of a Scotland-wide Community of Practice around CC digital engagement.

One of the main objectives of the workshop was to create a forum where interested CC members could network and share experiences. The general feeling was that this objective was achieved, and an online community is being created for sharing experiences, resources and knowledge.

1. Introduction

Surveys we carried out in 2012 and 2014 of CCs' online presences showed low uptake (less than a quarter being actively online) and a high drop-out rate (25%) between 2012 and 2014. These results motivated a small-scale follow-up research project to establish the potential for creation of a learning network[1].

The event held on 30 January was intended to both share the results and to test the potential for the creation of a learning network (community of practice). It was funded by Edinburgh Napier University's Institute for Informatics and Digital innovation out of its public engagement fund, and supported by the Scottish Government's community empowerment unit, the Improvement Service and the Democratic Society in Scotland.

The focus of the day was not the wider and well-known issues with the effectiveness of CCs, but digital engagement which we defined as 'conversations and human interaction via the internet'. So posting a minute to a CC website would not be included but disseminating links about it, or online conversations about its content, would be included.

The delegates at the day were self-selecting, and were therefore more likely to be interested in digital engagement, so they represent the most active and positive users; the location of the event meant that there was an inevitable central belt bias, though there were delegates from as far afield as Dornoch (Highland).

Delegates were asked two questions about their digital engagement before the workshop began:
- What is the most significant problem in your CC digital engagement work?
- Where do you go for help?

During the workshop, there were small-group sessions on the most significant problem faced, what CCs can use the internet for, and on the online channels and solutions that could be used. A final session allowed questions about the preceding sessions – or anything else – to be asked. Points made on flipcharts[2] and in audio recordings[3] of the discussions were transcribed[4].

The following sections summarise the main outcomes of the day by theme.

2. What are the most significant problems in CC digital engagement work?

Technical issues included *gaps in physical internet infrastructure*. While fibre broadband networks are being extended[5], delivery of such infrastructure may well be behind schedule[6] with gaps in Scotland's mobile phone coverage[7]. Without internet connectivity, some CCs are reduced to text-messaging for rapid dissemination of urgent information.

Public libraries and offices used as CC meeting venues generally provide wifi internet connectivity, but some venues do not. This creates a number of practical difficulties for CCs who wish to share their activities online. Using mobile devices as wifi access points will not work without cellphone

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[1]   This project's final report is available at http://bit.ly/1ErVtZH.
[2]   Photos of flipcharts are available at http://bit.ly/1zokDbM.
[3]   Links to recordings are at http://bit.ly/1AzFWtt.
[4]   The transcription is at http://bit.ly/1Fn5Th3.
[5]   For example, see Digital Scotland's early 2015 newsletter at http://bit.ly/1EkMOs7.
[6]   For example, see analyses by Michael Fourman at http://bit.ly/1EkOpy6 and http://bit.ly/1cweSdn.
[7]   For example, see O2's coverage map at http://bit.ly/1CEd3dd.

coverage.

Other technical issues centred on *lack of know-how*, for example on selecting digital channels to reach as many citizens as possible, and lack of knowledge of how to use them. Hence *appropriate training*, especially in social media is needed.

Social and geographic issues behind lack of digital engagement may well be related to the infrastructure problems mentioned above. There was a consensus that CCs need to *go where the audiences are* (including online) and demonstrate their relevance to these audiences. Perhaps the biggest social issue is the multi-faceted *digital divide*[8], which was discussed extensively. Aspects can be addressed now if CCs, LAs, SG and other stakeholders co-operatively implement lessons from previous research.

The many **structural/organisational** issues arguably point to *a need to change how CCs work and are supported*. All CC activities have *time-costs*: CC members are unpaid volunteers, who may well not have time to *moderate incoming comments*, translate *opaque paper communications from LAs* in to clear digital forms, or keep up with the latest digital techniques, while monthly meetings are not enough for existing CC work, especially around planning, so there is a reluctance to take on more.

Attendees were aware of the *stereotypical picture of a CC member as 'old' and 'moaning'*: the attendees felt that *digital engagement was left to a few individuals* while their peers do not understand its value and may even discourage it. It is hence not surprising that *succession-planning* is an issue. The workshop showed in several ways that CCs want and need social media training but only some LAs are known to offer it. However, most CC schemes do not encourage digital engagement, and some LA schemes are not available online[9] – a poor example of digital transparency. There was agreement that LAs could do more to provide a more encouraging environment.

At the workshop, there was a strong perception *that LAs and CCLOs are not helping CCs*, despite most CCLOs' clear desire to aid CCs seen in other research. It would be valuable to research how widespread this feeling is, and how it might be reversed. However, it was recognised that CCs need to put their own houses in order to some extent – *digital engagement may be left to a few individuals* while their peers do not understand why digital engagement is important and some even undermine such work: more CC members need to be involved.

3. Where do CCs go for help with digital engagement?

Help sources mentioned by delegates included Google, 'local geeks', teenagers (there was discussion on co-opting young people onto CCs to help) and networks of friends (possibly on Twitter). Some delegates ask local council officials, although it may take a long time to obtain answers, while others are able to approach other CC members and neighbouring CCs.

It is concerning that initial responses included 'Nowhere, we're stuck!' and 'Retreat to scepticism' but it was encouraging to see so many attendees networking; it is hoped that this will lead to more knowledge sharing.

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[8]   For example a 2013 report on digital exclusion in Glasgow (http://bit.ly/1sFdwre) and a 2012 report from the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group of the Chartered Institute of taxation (http://bit.ly/1FXAjDZ)

[9]   Ryan, B. M., & Cruickshank, P. (2014). *Community Councils online*. (http://bit.ly/1DmryoT, p.28, table 13).

4.   How CCs can use the internet?

CC internet use can arguably be divided into *information storage* and *information transmission*. For example, websites and blogs can host documents such as minutes, while email and social media can be used to disseminate links to this information and to gather community opinions. There was a general lack of knowledge of existing information sources such as TellMeScotland[10], the national public information notices portal.

Some delegates suggested that *digital communication needs to be two- or multi-way* and open to all relevant citizens, that is closed Facebook groups may work against this by discouraging citizen engagement. There was a strong demand expressed for *templates for CC online presences*[11], and guidelines for developing a *road-map towards better digital engagement*.

5.   Closing remarks

A final session gave delegates a chance to air any other issues that concerned them, comment on the day's events and consider where to go next. Points included creating a road map into the future, sharing a list of CCs that currently use Twitter, issues around data protection and FOISA paralysing CCs, use of SurveyMonkey, (lack of) proper briefing for trainers, sharing skills and contacts, a template for CC websites and issues around communication via CCLOs and LAs.

The day brought out new insights and examples; it also goes towards explaining the research findings that motivated the event in the first place.

As CC digital engagement and social media researchers and practitioners, we are well aware that we do not know it all and look forward to working with and learning from CCs across Scotland, and helping to bring together stakeholders in fruitful ways.

This day strengthens the conclusion that a Scotland-wide Community of Practice around CC digital engagement is needed, so that CC digital engagers can support each other and rapidly access reliable aid. An online community ('Scottish Community Councillors Online') has now been set up on Knowledge Hub[12] to support this.

We hope to be able to arrange similar sessions around the country to continue the learning/networking process. The community would also benefit from work to develop and agree a roadmap for digital engagement for CCs.

In conclusion, the day turned out to be a great success. There was a waiting list and we have received several emails thanking us for arranging it, and one delegate told us it was 'the day CCs were reborn'. That remains to be seen but we feel it did create new relationships between community council members.

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[10]   http://www.tellmescotland.gov.uk
[11]   A model website that fits the criteria for an ideal CC online presence (See http://bit.ly/1vCGSFY, p.18) developed by B. M. Ryan is available at http://modelcc.net.
[12]   https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/scottish-community-councillors-online