Community Councils in Aberdeenshire: Achievements and Challenges

Katrin Prager and Kirsty Holstead

There are around 1200 Community Councils (CCs) in Scotland, of which 68 are active in Aberdeenshire. Community Councils were established as nonparty- political, public representative bodies as part of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 and are meant to act as the bridge between Local Authorities (LAs) and communities, helping to make LAs and other public bodies aware of the opinions and needs of the communities they represent.

In the context of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, CCs are seen as a mechanism to empower communities. However, the extent to which they are able to fulfill this role depends on their membership, their capacity to deal with challenges, and their own priorities for what they want to achieve.

This note presents the findings of an in-depth study of Community Councils in Aberdeenshire, Scotland and explores their achievements and challenges as seen from their point of view, as well as how CCs are linked to other community groups and the Local Authority.

Photos: Carlos Galan-Diaz

Key Points

There is a great diversity amongst CCs in their activity levels and achievements, and their connectedness to the wider community. Each CC operates in a different environment, in communities facing different pressures and challenges. What would empower one community may be of little benefit to – or even inappropriate for – another.

CCs should be given a choice of whether they want to take on more responsibility. Where they accept more responsibility, this must be coupled with genuine sharing of decision making power and an appropriate budget.

Whether or not CCs have the ability to make a change depends on:

- Skills of their members,
- Level of resources and community engagement,
- Support from the elected Local Councillors, and
- Support from key roles in the LA such as Area Managers, heads of departments and Community Development Officers.

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What are the implications for policy?

In light of the diversity of situations and achievements of Community Councils, as well as the difference in opinions regarding the extent to which the current policy framework empowered communities through the mechanisms available to Community Councils, there does not appear to be a need to change current national legislation (Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973). However, it is useful to regularly review the CC establishment schemes at LA level, and include the CCs, elected councillors and LA senior managers in this process.

In order to support CCs, Scottish Government could:

- Publicise achievements of CCs at local as well as national level
- Clarify the role of CCs in the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act
- Provide an opportunity for CCs to access professional support in solving complex issues.
- Consider making larger pots of funding available to those CCs who want to manage some of their local services
- Strengthen and promote the active involvement of young people (14-18 year olds)

Why study Community Councils?

Public policy in Scotland is increasingly focused on community level decision-making and "bottom up" local development. Policies such as the Community Empowerment Act are part of this ethos and aim to foster and support community empowerment.

Community Councils are one way that people can be involved in decision-making in their area. Although Community Councils have been in place since 1973, relatively little is known about how successful they are in practice. It is therefore important to understand their achievements, challenges (and how they can be overcome), how they relate to the communities they represent and the Local Authority.

Photo: Katrin Prager

Methodology

The data for this study were generated from 21 semi-structured interviews in 11 CCs across Aberdeenshire, with interviews with two people from each CC with the exception of one CC, where only one member was willing to be interviewed. Interviews took place in homes, cafés and at CC meetings. Five of the interviews were carried out over the phone. The selection of Community Councils was guided by the aim to cover a broad spectrum of settings from small town, rural to remote rural, from all six local authority areas. Community Councils in large urban areas were excluded as the focus was on rural areas.

We also participated in CC meetings as observers and took part in Community Council events such as CC forums and CC training events. As such, the findings of this research note are based on information from 22 Community Councils in total.

This study provides an in-depth, rich description of CCs in one LA area, thereby complementing other more quantitative, Scotland-wide studies such as a survey of CCs (Scottish Government, 2012), CCs' views gathered through a forum (Escobar, 2014) and a survey of CCs' experiences and opinions (Thomson et al., 2012). Further insights are generated from case study research for What Works Scotland.

Achievements of CCs

Community Councils ranged from those whose main activities were their regular meetings and interaction with the LA, to those that had taken on a variety of larger projects (Table 1).

Based on the typical achievements discussed by respondents, we can distinguish a range from 'quiet' CCs to 'energetic' CCs. These are the two ends of a spectrum that is meant to illustrate typical activities, while the reality is not as clear-cut (e.g. an energetic CC may also undertake activities listed for a quiet CC and vice versa) and the suite of activities of any one group will change over time.

Some achievements took a long time to materialise, requiring many little steps and work behind the scenes, others were less tangible but equally important. Almost everyone we spoke to referred to CCs fostering community spirit and cohesion, a sense of pride, and general well-being of residents.

The majority of CCs achieved a functional relationship with the Local Authority, either by communicating directly with departments, or by utilising the elected councillors as a link. The extent to which information was dispersed in the community depended on the links between CC members and other groups, the existence of a CC Facebook page, website or community newsletter.

The assessment of CCs' achievements is complex because activities are often jointly organised with other community groups or residents. Respondents who 'wore different hats' did not clearly distinguish between what was achieved in their capacity as a CC member or another group.

Challenges of CCs

The key challenges that CCs face relate to i) recruitment of members and office bearers, ii) building a skill base among members, iii) financial support and iv) decision making powers. A generic challenge is the perception that achievements of CCs are not widely recognised neither within the community nor across communities at a local or national level, which may be due to difficulties in capturing achievements and the lack of publicity.

i) Recruitment

Almost all CCs faced difficulties recruiting members and office bearers. In particular 20-40 year olds are rarely represented. Some respondents thought that the difficulty to attract members was due to apathy; however other factors are also important:

- Becoming a member of the CC can be daunting and holding a role in the CC can require a significant weekly commitment.
- There are many demands on people's time including work, commuting, family and other community groups.
- Those who commute to urban areas sometimes feel less embedded in their communities and less likely to be involved as they spend most time away.
- Some CCs are not advertised or not perceived as being active.

ii) Building a skill base

It was challenging for CCs to gain and retain particular skills that allowed them to pursue activities requiring specialist expertise such as responding to controversial planning applications. There were diverging views about the availability and necessity of training.

Table 1: Typical achievements mentioned by 'quiet' and 'energetic' Community Councils	
QUIET	**ENERGETIC**
• Staying alive • Road safety improved (crossings, markings, speed signs) • Dog fouling addressed • Christmas lights organised • Gutters cleared and potholes fixes • Flower beds grass and hedges maintained • Village sign installed • Litter bins/ pick up organised	• Gala or other large-scale event organised • Successful funding applications • Quarterly paper for the village/ area produced • Engaged with the community through survey/community action plan • Actively involved in planning consultations and impact assessments • Manage village hall, caravan park or similar asset • Annual raffle to fund community organisations' activities

iii) Financial Support

For the CCs who relied more heavily on the funding provided by the LA, the grant in the region of £500-1000 was perceived as tokenistic and as not providing sufficient resources to realise plans. These CCs linked the inadequate funding to CCs' lack of power to actually make any changes.

In contrast, other CCs did not link their achievements to LA grants. These CCs tended to invest efforts in fund raising and apply for other sources of funding. Some respondents emphasised that money was not the core issue faced by CCs, and that empowerment was not just about money.

iv) Decision making powers

The perception of a lack of influence can seriously limit the motivation of CCs and ultimately their achievements. Many CC members were happy with the current extent of their decision making powers. They associated being allowed to make more decisions with increased responsibility or being seen as part of government, which some would not be comfortable with.

Some found other ways to influence decisions, or they received sufficient support from LA officers that allowed them to implement ideas and projects. Others were happy to just undertake activities in the local area, but found that accessing the resources to do so was difficult. Giving more powers to CC was associated with the risk to attract 'power-hungry' people onto the CC. One respondent was unsure if their CC could cope with more responsibility.

What do CCs need to empower communities?

In light of project findings, a range of actions are suggested at different levels:

Individuals in Community Councils

- Get training, develop skills in a particular area
- Read up on the Handbook for CCs and your CC's constitution.
- Share widely what the CC does and who the members are (Facebook, website, notice boards, print newsletter, local paper, email newsletter)

Non Community Council community members

- Support and/ or join the CC
- Respond to community surveys
- Volunteer for a small project or task
- Show an interest in planning and what is going on in the area, e.g. by attending CC/ public meetings
- Address conflicts and rivalry between community organisations
- Communicate your issues and projects

Local Authority

- Maintain (good) two-way communication and show that CCs are listened to
- Publicise achievements of CCs
- Ensure a Community Council Establishment Scheme that is fit for purpose
- Provide in-kind support
- Leading positions (e.g. Area Managers): demonstrate that CCs are valued partners
- Officers: acknowledge correspondence. and follow up with a reply giving reasons for decisions
- Elected Councillors: engage with and support CCs

Further information

Prager K and Holstead K (2015) Community Councils in Scotland: Achievements and challenges. Report for Rural Communities Team, Food, Drink and Rural Communities Division, The Scottish Government (http://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/governance-empowerment-Aberdeenshire) Escobar, O. (2014). Strengthening local democracy in Scotland: the Community Councils' perspective. Report from a participative forum with Community Councillors facilitated by the Academy of Government to inform COSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, University of Edinburgh. http://www.localdemocracy.info/wpcoent/uploads/2014/03/Report-Community-Councils-Forum-for-COSLA-Commission-2014.pdf, Scottish Government (2012). Survey of Local Authority Community Councils. Edinburgh, Scottish Government.
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Contact: Katrin Prager | Katrin.Prager@hutton.ac.uk | Tel: 01224 395386

Social, Economic & Geographical Sciences
The James Hutton Institute
Craigiebuckler
Aberdeen AB15 8QH