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Community Councils in Aberdeenshire, Scotland: Achievements and Challenges



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Contents

Executive Summary	4
1 Introduction	7
2 Findings	8
2.1 Achievements	8
2.2 Challenges	9
2.2.1 Recruitment of members and office bearers	9
2.2.2 Building the skills base	10
2.2.3 Financial support	11
2.2.4 Decision making powers	12
2.3 Representation of, and connectedness to the wider community	12
3 What do Community Councils need to empower communities?	14
4 Conclusion	16
5 References	17
6 Appendix 1: Methods - How did we collect the data for this report?	18

Executive Summary

Community Councils (CCs) were established as non-party-political, public representative bodies as part of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. These councils 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.

This report presents the findings of an in-depth study of Community Councils in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. The research set out to explore the achievements and challenges of CCs in Aberdeenshire as seen from their point of view, and investigate how CCs are linked to other community groups and the LA. The data were gathered from 21 interviews with 11 CCs, as well as through taking part in Community Council events such as CC forums and CC training events (see Appendix 1). In total, the authors had contact with 22 CCs in Aberdeenshire, in one form or another. The study was funded by Scottish Government to investigate governance and decision making for community empowerment in rural communities, with CCs seen to potentially play an important role in community empowerment. The summary of findings below are organised in sections which correspond to the body of the report.

Achievements

Many CCs carry out a wide range of activities including organising community events, maintaining flower displays, greenspaces and equipment, commenting on planning applications, and much more. Although activity levels differ from 'quiet' to 'energetic' CCs, they generally foster community spirit and cohesion, a sense of pride, and general well-being of residents. CCs played an important role as the bridge between the communities they represent and the LA. CC provided a point of contact for residents, as well as an information channel from the LA to communities. However, there was sense among respondents that the achievements of CCs were not widely recognised both in the community and beyond, which may be partially due to difficulties in capturing the achievements and the lack of publicity.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges for CCs relating to recruitment of members, building a skill base, financial support and decision making powers.

Recruitment

Almost all CCs faced difficulties recruiting members and office bearers. In particular, the age bracket of 20-40 year olds was rarely represented. About half of the CCs interviewed had youth members and viewed this favourably. Some respondents thought that the difficulty to attract members was due to apathy; however other factors are also important for example:

- Becoming a member of the CC can be daunting and holding a role in the CC (in particular the Secretary or Chair) can require a significant weekly commitment.
- There are many demands on people's time including working long hours, commuting, family commitments and other community groups.
- Those who commute to Aberdeen City 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.

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. Many CC members felt adequately equipped or trained for their role in the CC. Sufficient skills were perceived to be present among CC members based on individuals' professional work or life experience, or previous roles held in other organisations. These views were in contrast to several respondents that felt they had not been properly inducted, were not aware of the existence of the Handbook for Community Councils and requested that there should be more training offered and more direction provided to youth members.

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.

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, and considered it even "*dangerous*" given some characters on the CC.

Representation of, and connectedness to the wider community

All CCs had links to other local community groups and networks. The intensity of links ranged from overlapping membership and joint projects to occasional sharing of information. CCs reached the wider community by publishing meeting minutes in the local newspaper, maintaining a Facebook page or a website and also speaking to people on the street, in the shop or post office, or at local events.

Some CCs elicited their views in other ways, for example through a survey. However, the extent to which CCs can invest time and effort into ascertaining the community's views and linking to community groups and residents is limited by the fact that members are volunteers and may only have a small amount of time available for serving on the CC. Ascertaining community views was particularly challenging in CC areas with dispersed settlements.

What do Community Councils need to empower communities?

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

- Skills of their members,
- Availability of approachable LA officers when CCs seek to clarify and resolve issues,
- Level of resources and community engagement,
- Support from the elected Local Councillors, and
- Support from key roles in the LA such as Area Managers and Community Learning and Development Officers.

Each CC is made of volunteers and operates in a different environment, in communities facing different pressures and challenges. Therefore, what would empower one community may be of little benefit to, or even inappropriate, for another.

Respondents commented favourably on councillors' and police attendance at CC meetings and saw them as a valuable source of information. A strong relationship with Area Managers was valued for receiving and passing on comments from CCs, supplying information, and answering questions. Similarly, CCs were pleased with the cooperation with many LA officers (e.g. roads department, planning department, education department) although there were some exceptions. When dealing with the LA, the perception of being listened to and having the power to influence decisions was linked to LAs acknowledging CC correspondence and responding to it in a timely, friendly manner.

There are a number of actions that can help CCs to fulfil their role.

- Individuals can develop their skills in a particular area, familiarise themselves with the Handbook and CC constitution, and help publicise the CC and its activities.
- The residents in the community can support their CC by providing information, volunteering as members or for small projects, work towards coordinated action between various community groups, and showing an interest in planning applications and other issues concerning the community.
- The LA can maintain good communication channels, publicise CC achievements, provide in-kind support, demonstrate commitment to CCs and ensure the Scheme of Establishment is fit for purpose.
- Scottish Government can publicise achievements of CCs, provide access to professional support in solving complex issues, make adequate provisions for CCs in the Community Empowerment Bill and offer larger pots of funding available to those CCs who want to manage some of their local services.

Conclusions

The achievements of CCs are important to and valued by local communities but are often not acknowledged at higher levels. More needs to be done to publicise the achievements of CCs, both by CCs themselves, and by other organisations including the LA and Scottish Government.

At the heart of communities' struggle for having more say in the delivery of services and implementation of projects is standardisation as a result of creating large LA areas which cannot cater for the specificities of individual communities. Therefore, the cost-savings that may be accrued through providing standardised services across communities come at the expense of communities feeling in charge and that their needs are adequately addressed.

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.

1 Introduction

There are around 1200 Community Councils (CCs) in Scotland, of which 68 are in Aberdeenshire. Community Councils were established as non-party-political, public representative bodies as part of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. These councils 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. Despite their legislative basis and a 'Scheme for Establishment' set up by each individual LA that frame the rights and responsibilities of CCs, it is important to remember that they are made up of volunteers. This determines what they are able and willing to do.

Local residents become involved for a number of reasons: because they want to beautify an area or keep it as it is; have a say and prevent inappropriate development; know what's going on and meet people; be useful and do something for the community; or just because they need something to occupy their time. Many CCs carry out a wide range of activities including organising community events, maintaining flower displays, greenspaces and equipment, commenting on planning applications, and much more.

This report notes the results of a research project that set out to explore the achievements of CCs in Aberdeenshire as seen from their point of view, and investigate how CCs are linked to other community groups and the Local Authority. The study is based on data generated from 21 interviews with 11 Community Councils across Aberdeenshire as well as through taking part in Community Council events such as CC forums and training events. In total, the authors had contact with 22 CCs throughout Aberdeenshire (see Appendix 1 for more information on our methods). Scottish Government funded this study because they were interested to know how to build resilience and capacity in Scotland's CCs in the future. 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).

Acronyms:

CC – Community Council

CCs – Community Councils

LA – Local Authority

LAs – Local Authorities

Please note that "quotation marks" indicate verbatim phrases from respondents. All quotes have been anonymised.

2 Findings

2.1 Achievements of Community Councils

CCs 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 such as running a caravan park/pleasure park, managing a village hall, organising galas and fundraising events. Table 1 lists the typical achievements that were discussed by CC respondents. Based on the achievements 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.

Table 1: Typical achievements mentioned by ‘quiet’ and ‘energetic’ Community Councils

Quiet	Energetic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying alive • Potholes fixed • Road safety improved (crossings, markings, speed signs) • Dog fouling addressed • Christmas lights organised • Gutters cleared • Flower beds maintained, grass and hedges cut • Village sign installed • Litter bins/ pick up organised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gala or other large-scale event organised • Successful funding applications • Quarterly paper for the village/area produced • Engaged with the community through survey or community action plan • Actively involved in planning consultations and impact assessments • Manage village hall, caravan park, pleasure park, boating pond or similar asset • Put on an annual raffle

Among the CCs studied, five showed characteristic activities of quiet CCs, and six showed characteristics of energetic CCs. There was no evident relationship between the type of CC and its composition (central town, several villages, dispersed settlements; see Table 4 in the Appendix). It is important to note that in some CC areas, a

gala or hall committee may be a sub-committee of the CC, in others they are independent groups. Having a quiet CC does not necessarily mean that other activities are absent in the area. Instead, they may be taken on by other community groups such as community associations, Development Trusts, community trusts or amenity groups. This suggests that it is important to view the community and its activities as a whole, rather than judge by a single organisation.

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. CCs alerted the LA to any problems regarding service delivery in the community, and passed information from the LA back to the community. 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.

It was an important achievement for both ‘quiet’ and ‘energetic’ CCs to maintain a sufficient quorum of members so that the CC could continue to function. Several respondents commented that they judged achievements based on what was valued by the community (such as 25 years of Christmas lights) but that this may be at odds with what is valued “*at the big scale*”, i.e. what may be valued by the LA at the level of the Local Authority area. Others felt that the achievements of CCs were ‘routine’ or ‘not ground breaking’.

“We have a small voice if you like. We can raise issues and keep issues alive [...] try and coordinate what people are feeling [...] plus provide things like as I say trying to beautify the area, especially at Christmas time and in the summer by street planting.”

Some achievements could be described as intangible. Almost everyone we spoke to referred to CCs fostering community spirit and cohesion, a sense of pride, and general well-being of residents. Other achievements are difficult to pinpoint because they took a long time to materialise, requiring many little steps and work behind the scenes. For example, the CC may carry out a survey of residents, collate the wishes and

needs to feed into the Local Development Plan, to ultimately ensure that there is a mechanism to access Developer Obligation Funds to improve local infrastructure. Several respondents viewed the CC as a way to access elected councillors and a first point of call for residents, in particular in cases where the individual might not know which organisation or department would be appropriate to contact in the LA.

“The community council exists really, because people care for the area they live in.”

An aspect that complicates the assessment of the achievements of CCs further is that events and activities are often jointly organised with other community groups or individual members of the community. For example, the CC may organise the flowers and bulbs from the LA, but the Residents Association or Amenity Group plants them; a gala might be organised by the Gala Committee with the CC sorting the entertainment license. Some respondents were members of different community groups and so did not clearly distinguish between what was achieved in their capacity as a CC member or another group.

CCs are organisations that: “represent the village, that people could go to and speak if they had a problem so...I think it is quite an important part of villages [...] that they have either a community association or a community council so that there is a voice if you have a problem that you can speak about.”

There was a sense among some respondents that CC achievements were not widely recognised, both within the community and beyond. There may be several reasons for this:

1. Only some CCs make the effort to identify and publicise their achievements.
2. Residents do not often see the direct effect that CC action has had (e.g. a consultation response from the CC), or the response to solve a complaint takes several months to years.
3. In many locations, the CC coexisted with other community groups such as community associations, amenity groups and Development Trusts. In this set up, the CC dealt with the

‘dry’ issues that are less visible and take longer to resolve, whereas the other groups take on projects that involve the community to a greater extent, ‘are more fun’ and appeal to a larger share of the community.

4. CCs generally do not have large sums of money to spend, through which they could directly determine how public services were delivered, e.g. litter picking by a village orderly.



2.2 Challenges

There was a great diversity amongst CCs in their activity levels and achievements. CCs face a trade-off between actively doing things (seen as making a difference) and related paperwork (for example organising gala licence and insurance requirements or effort for elections and organising a community event). CCs played an important role in their communities, but encountered a number of challenges. The challenges that occurred across most CCs are discussed below.

2.2.1 Recruitment of members and office bearers

Recruiting new members was difficult for almost all CCs. This confirms findings in other reports, for example Thomson et al. (2012) found that 80% of Scottish CCs face a struggle to attract members. Some respondents, who had been involved in CCs for several decades, commented that this has always been a challenge. In particular, the age bracket 20-40 year olds is rarely represented. The reluctance of residents to join the CC led some respondents to blame public disinterest and ‘apathy’. However, there is likely to be a mix of reasons why a particular individual is not interested or able to join the CC (Table 2).

Table 2: Potential reasons for difficulties in recruiting

People between 20-40 years are busy with careers, young families, and tend to be mobile

For those who commute to Aberdeen City for work, social life is work related and happens in the city rather than in the place of residence

People work long hours; much time is spent commuting

CC membership brings mainly collective benefits but few personal benefits

People are already involved in other community groups

The majority of housing in some villages might be provided by an estate, where people may not want to 'speak up' against their landlord for fear of getting their lease cancelled

The CC is not advertised or not perceived as being active

Misperceptions about what might be required and what can be achieved (or not)

CC representatives told us that people in commuting towns spend much of their time working and socialising in Aberdeen City and so did not associate much with the community in which they lived. These people represented a segment of the population which can be particularly difficult to engage. Some perceived that parents whose children attend local schools, or stay at home, may be more active in the CC or other community groups, because they may have a stronger link to the community, and want their children to grow up in a place with a 'village' feel.

The success of a CC depended to a large extent on its members, and on the existence of a charismatic, committed leader (often the secretary or the chairperson) who could motivate others. Almost all respondents commented that it was difficult to find office bearers. Holding a role in the CC, in particular, being a secretary or a chair, required a significant weekly commitment, which was seen to "put people off". In some cases, this led to some CCs operating without a chair, without a secretary, or one person holding a dual role (e.g. chair and secretary; secretary and treasurer). In part due to the difficulty in recruiting office bearers, the role was not passed on as often as it perhaps should

be (some have had the role for 10 years or so). If leaders leave or suffer from burnout, there is a risk that CC work is disrupted.

It was rare that contested elections were held for Community Councils. More commonly, nominated people were elected as members at the Annual General Meeting or co-opted. Some CCs were trying to change this, and actively advertised for members. For several years, a pilot has been underway to co-opt youth members that were selected through an election at local high schools. Those CCs that had youth members (6 out of 11) viewed this favourably. Having a youth member could improve the young people's skills and understanding of democratic processes, but also meant that a broader range of topics were brought to the table at CC meetings, and a wider range of people were represented. Some respondents argued that 16-18 year olds should generally be allowed to stand for Community Council elections in their own right. Youth members in some CCs had full voting rights. Several respondents were keen to allow youth members from age 14.

2.2.2 Building the skills base

It was challenging for CCs to gain and retain particular skills that allowed them, for example, to respond to controversial planning applications which may require specialist expertise. There were diverging views about the availability and necessity of training. Office bearers tended to have received training, regular members less so. Two of the respondents we interviewed expressed that if attending a course is made compulsory it puts volunteers off. A majority of CC members felt adequately equipped or trained for their role in the CC. Sufficient skills were perceived to be present among CC members, based on individuals' professional work or life experience, or previous roles held in other organisations.

These views were in contrast to several respondents that felt they had not been properly inducted, were not aware of the existence of the Handbook for Community Councils, and felt that youth members received little direction as to what their role should be. Even where the Handbook was known about, some CCs preferred to get clarification on issues through personal contact with the Area Manager's



secretary. Some of those respondents who claimed there should be more training, appeared to not be aware of training offered by Aberdeenshire Council, and the opportunities for learning and sharing experiences through quarterly meetings of the Community Council Forum organised for each of the six Local Authority areas in Aberdeenshire. CCs that attended Community Council Ward Forums, Community Council Forums, or meetings of the Development Partnerships (e.g. Buchan Development Partnership, Marr Development Partnership) were generally at the ‘energetic’ end of the spectrum (see Section 2.1).

2.2.3 Financial support

Opinions about financial support were split. Some respondents explicitly stated that the grants provided by the LA were not enough, leaving the CCs “*shockingly underfunded*”. Those CCs who relied more heavily on the funding provided by the LA, the grant in the region of £500-1000 was perceived as tokenistic. They saw it as restrictive, because it did not provide sufficient resources to realise plans; some said that the level of financing meant that CCs did not have the power to actually make any changes.

Other respondents found the level of financial support adequate, saying “*we get enough money*

for what we do”. The grant was usually used to pay for flower baskets, travel to some meetings, the rent for their meeting place or an honorarium for the secretary.

The remaining respondents did not relate their achievements to available funding. This may be due to the communities they worked in, where access to skills and community resources allowed them to make the changes they wanted to see in their areas, without being dependent on LA funding. One way of generating financial resources is for CCs to organise fundraising. Some of the CCs undertook fundraising, mainly for Christmas lights in their villages. Other communities had arrangements where fundraising was the core activity of other community groups.

“If there was a message for the government it’s...it’s try and understand that side, that volunteers are not always motivated by the standard things of salaries and so on because there aren’t any so...you’ve got a totally different set of motivations that you need to maintain the energy in rather than swamp it by saying, well now you are responsible for this, get on with it.”

These different opinions on financial support may be the result of respondents’ different understandings of what grants and funding are available to CCs, and the skills and desire they may have to pursue other funding avenues. CCs receive a yearly allowance from the LA based on the total population in their area. In addition, some receive a grant from the Tidy Village Fund. CCs may also apply for local and national funding, or even be involved in international funding bids (e.g. European Union LEADER funding).

There was also no clear indication of whether or not funding was related to empowerment. On the one hand, the lack of funding was seen as restrictive and inhibiting CCs from making the changes they wanted to make, while on the other hand people emphasised that money was not the core issue, and empowerment “*is not about the money*”. Nevertheless, several respondents supported the idea to give CC bigger budgets and let them apply for funds to manage services in the community, as it would “*enhance the community council’s role*”.

2.2.4 Decision making powers

The perception that CCs have little influence can seriously limit the motivations of CC and their achievements. Respondents made comments that the CC was seen as a “*talking shop*”, a “*paper tiger*”, having “*no teeth*” or “*no clout*”. This was particularly apparent in relation to planning applications: “*Although we are a statutory consultee when it comes to planning matters I’m not convinced that our views carry much weight when it comes to the area committee*”.

The people we spoke to had different experiences in dealing with LAs. Some Community Councils felt ignored, and therefore did not maintain links or simply bypassed LAs. Others tried to work with the LA to make changes in their communities. Some CCs expressed uncertainty about which issues they were allowed to become involved in and which ones were the domain of the Local Authority.

The perception of having decision making powers was sometimes simply a matter of communication at the right time. One respondent said “*I’d like to see us being brought into the loop with the local planning and things*”, for example, expecting the LA officer to phone or email to inform the CC that money was to be spent. Because this communication did not happen, stone walls were built when paths would have been preferred by the community.

“If more powers were given to us that would involve more effort, and more responsibility, and do I want that as a volunteer - probably not!”

Many CC members were happy with the current extent of their decision making powers. They associated having (or 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 receive sufficient support from officers at the LA 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

CC. One respondent was unsure if their CC could cope with more responsibility, and considered it even “*dangerous*” given some characters on the CC.

One recent change was criticised by several CC members. They perceived that previously, the objection or support from a CC (e.g. to a planning application) was weighted higher than an individual’s, whereas now the voice of the CC counted as a single objection like any individual submitting one. The CC members felt that this reduced their influence. However, there appeared to be a partial misunderstanding of the details in the process which currently foresees the following: As a statutory consultee, the objection of a CC will require the LA to consider that objection at a committee. This means that if a CC objects, planners cannot approve the application under delegated powers. In addition, the time for objections is longer for statutory consultees. Therefore, CCs as a body are indeed single objectors but are different to individual residents in that their status as statutory consultee has some impact.



2.3 Representation of, and connectedness to the wider community

All CCs had links to other local community groups as well as a number of networks and umbrella groups. Respondents mentioned between one and eight community groups that they were in touch with, including although not limited to, Development Trusts, community trusts, community associations, village hall committees, amenity groups, play groups, parent teacher associations, business associations, heritage trusts, golf clubs, and ‘friends of’ groups. In some cases, members of local groups regularly attended CC meetings. More often, the link was made through individuals being members

in several groups. This 'overlapping membership' was beneficial because CCs were aware of what other groups in the local area were doing, and were able to pass on any information that could benefit both the LA and other groups. This was viewed as part of the "team effort" to make the local area a nice place to live.

Other ways of reaching the wider community included publishing meeting minutes in the local newspaper, maintaining a Facebook page, a website or a growing mailing list of residents who wanted to receive CC minutes and updates. Respondents often mentioned talking to residents on the street, in the shop or post office, or at local events. In this informal and ad-hoc way, views, complaints and information were passed on to CC members. Community links and involvement from the wider community seemed to 'spring to life' when there was a commonly perceived problem or threat, such as a new housing or wind turbine development causing concern among residents, or the blockage of the access road in winter. Five of the CCs we interviewed had organised public meetings, for example regarding the Main Issues Report or a contentious planning application.

CC meetings are open to the public. In six of the CCs we interviewed, the public (i.e. people that were not members of the CC) often attended meetings. In some of these cases, it was always the same people that came along. In another four CCs, residents sometimes or rarely attended. In one case, the public never attended meetings, which can indicate that links to the wider community were weak.

"it is important that I do get involved in the work of other bodies whether it be an official role or ex-officio so that (A) I know what's going on and (B) it may be the case that the group that I'm part of may want...information which I maybe party to because I am in the community council. And therefore, I am maybe seen as a link to Aberdeenshire Council because there may be information that Aberdeenshire Council have provided us as a community council which I feel might be of benefit to the said group that I'm part of."

In some CC areas where there were many dispersed villages, working with the 'community' was particularly challenging because it was difficult to establish a clear community centre. To some respondents, the CC boundaries seemed arbitrary and did not represent the community well, with some settlements gravitating towards another CC area.

"It's rare, really rare for a member of the public to come along to our meetings but you know I will be approached, or [our chair] will be approached, or another member will be approached by somebody in the street saying, hey what are you going to do about you know"

In very few cases, CCs made an effort to collect views through a community-wide survey, for example with regard to a wind turbine proposal. Villages or towns in three of the CCs where we conducted interviews had been involved in developing a Community Action Plan, which was generally based on a community survey. Others expressed that they would benefit from such an exercise. However, the extent to which CCs can invest time and effort into ascertaining the community's views and linking to community groups and residents, was limited by the fact that members are volunteers and may only have a small amount of time available for serving on the CC.

3 What do Community Councils need to empower communities?

Every CC is different and is made up of members with different skill sets and interests. Members are volunteers, and this influences how much can be expected of them and what they can be asked to deliver. This supports Escobar's (2014) recommendation that any reforms should bear in mind the varied level of aspiration and capacity across CCs. In addition, each CC operates in a different environment, in communities facing different pressures and challenges. Therefore, what would empower one community may be of little benefit to – or even inappropriate for – another. Whether an organisation such as a CC has power to make changes and represent the interests of the wider community depends on what is put down in writing (including legislation and Scheme of Establishment) as well as how it influences decision making processes in practice. Much of the latter will depend on individuals' experiences and perceptions.

Many CCs commented on how important the Area Manager was for receiving and passing on comments from CCs, supplying information, and answering questions. Similarly, CCs were pleased with the cooperation with many LA officers (e.g. roads department, planning department, education department). When dealing with the LA, the perception of being listened to and having the power to influence decisions was linked to LAs acknowledging CC correspondence and responding to it in a timely manner. As long as the reply contained a reason why a certain request could not (yet) be carried out, CCs still felt like they have had a say and were listened to. In contrast, respondents also reported cases where correspondence was not acknowledged, a reply took several weeks or had to be chased up, and when there was a response it was given in a *"terse, unfriendly"* manner. This made CCs feel they were a nuisance, *"a pain in the neck"* and not getting anywhere, and thus that were not listened to and had no influence. Even if the relationship with the LA was *"mostly very good"* and certain individuals were *"absolutely brilliant"*, the interaction with one *"very difficult person"* could provoke the image of the LA *"sit[ting] in their ivory towers"*.

Personal contact and the perceived accessibility of knowledgeable people can make a big difference. For example, police officers regularly attended CC meetings. Where this personal contact had not happened for a period of time, CCs felt less valued. Police reports sent in for CC meetings were not viewed as an adequate replacement. Furthermore, elected councillors had an important role as a conduit between CCs and the LA. Respondents commented favourably on councillors' attendance and saw them as a valuable source of information. The people we spoke to appreciated when paid councilors followed up questions and issues with the appropriate officers in the LA. One respondent welcomed if councillors 'put their name behind' a query or request, so that the locally resident CC member did not have to – which helped avoid clashes with neighbours. In a few cases there was discontent with the behaviour of elected councillors, namely where they had made a decision in the area committee on a contentious planning application and not provided reasons for their decisions, or when they had agreed to follow up an issue but failed to do so.

"It's not the big...mega council issues, it's the little things that are important to villagers."

An important aspect of empowering communities is the coordinated effort of existing community groups. This is not always easy, in particular when there was a sense of competition between CC and other local groups because they may have similar aims, want to organise a similar event, or compete for the same resources (both in terms of members and funding). One respondent described that the other organisation would *"hoover up any grants"*. In a similar way, good working relationship with large landowners (e.g. via the estate factor) was seen as crucial, influencing the future of the communities both as a housing developer and as landlord for a share of the village residents.

There was a concern that *"bureaucracy can be an enemy of empowerment"*. Several respondents commented on how they sometimes felt inundated with paperwork and correspondence. The form filling required for receiving a public entertainment licence, health and safety for people volunteering in a community-run café, and the red tape associated with running a village hall was seriously

undermining the motivation of residents to become involved or continue to be involved in such efforts.

In summary, whether or not CCs have the ability to make a change depends on:

- Skills of their members,
- Approachable LA officers when CCs seek to clarify and resolve issues,
- Resources and an engaged community,
- Support from the elected Local Councillors, and
- Support from key roles in the LA such as Area Managers and Community Learning and Development Officers.

Based on the findings gathered from 22 Community Councils in Aberdeenshire, we derived a number of actions that different types of people could undertake (Table 3). The sum of these actions would contribute to support CCs in carrying out their role. The actions illustrate what Escobar (2014, p.4) recommended in order to develop effective and meaningful collaboration: *“On the one hand, public officials must improve their understanding and support of community engagement, and the role that CCs can play in it. On the other, CCs must improve the way they work and represent their communities, so that they can take a more substantial role in partnership with LAs, and as mediators of broader citizen participation in their communities.”*

Table 3: Suggested actions to support the role of Community Councils

Target group	Action
Individuals	Get training, develop skills in a particular area
	Read up on Handbook (Community Council Establishment Scheme) and your CC’s constitution
	As a CC: share widely what the CC is, what it does, and who the members are (e.g. Facebook, website, notice boards, print newsletter, local paper, email newsletter)
Community	Make sure you 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 meetings or public meetings
	Address conflicts and rivalry between community organisations
	Other 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
	Provide in-kind support
	Leading positions (e.g. Area Managers, Chief Executive): demonstrate that CCs are valued partners
	Officers: acknowledge incoming correspondence, and follow up with a reply giving reasons for why something could not (yet) be addressed
	Ensure a Community Council Establishment Scheme that is fit for purpose
Scottish Government	Publicise achievements of CCs
	Provide adequate provisions for CCs in the Community Empowerment Bill
	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

4 Conclusion

Our study found that CCs played an important role as the bridge between the communities they represent and the Local Authority. CCs can be a listening ear for communities and a central local body and point of contact with the Local Authority to pass on any concerns or to voice opinions, as well as an information channel from LA to the community. CCs had a wide range of achievements most of which were seen as important for community development and cohesion.

Activities and achievements of CCs varied depending on their membership, other community groups and their roles, and the needs of the communities. Typical achievements differed, reflecting the range from 'quiet' to 'energetic' CCs. Some achievements are difficult to measure, due to their medium to long-term nature and the complex web of community initiatives which CCs are part of, however, most people said that CCs do build cohesion, sense of pride and place, and improve wellbeing of residents. Overall, more needs to be done to publicise the achievements of CCs, both by CCs themselves, and by other organisations including the LA and Scottish Government. This seems even more important given that 47% of CCs have an online presence, but only 22% are up to date (Ryan and Cruickshank, 2014).

CCs faced challenges relating to the recruitment of members, maintaining the skills base of their members, and generating the funding for activities that they would like to carry out. Opinions were split with regard to the current decision making power and influence of CCs. Our findings emphasise the different capabilities and aspirations of CCs; for some devolving more power to CC is desirable to make the CC the centre of the local area, whereas for others, more power would be off putting, because it would come with increased responsibilities. Although our findings confirm the struggle for members, we disagree with the assumption that giving Community Councils more responsibilities would necessarily mean that more people would participate (Thomson et al. 2012).

At the heart of communities' struggle for having more say in the delivery of services and implementation of projects is the standardisation

as a result of creating large LA areas which cannot cater for the specificities of individual communities. The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy established by COSLA arrived at the following conclusion:

"Big government and big local government have struggled to address and improve the pattern of outcomes and inequalities in Scotland because these occur at a very granular, local community level. Big systems also struggle to engage with the diversity of Scotland's communities because they are conventionally geared towards uniformity and standardisation"
(COSLA, 2014).

Therefore, the cost-savings that may be accrued through providing standardised services across communities come at the expense of communities feeling in charge and that their needs are adequately addressed. Some services may be delivered too often or at the wrong times, others may be needed but lacking.

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. This follows Escobar's (2014, p.6) recommendation that "there might be a case for devolved budgets to those Community Councils who are prepared to manage them."

5 References

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6 Appendix 1: Methods - How did we collect the data for this report?

This report is based on data generated from semi-structured, 21 qualitative interviews in 11 CC 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. The selection of Community Councils was guided by the aim to cover a broad spectrum of settings from peri-urban to remote rural, from all six local authority areas, and from areas with different socio-economic performance (Thomson et al., 2013). Our sample included four CCs which consisted of a central town (sometimes with a small hinterland), four CCs which contained 3-5 villages, and three CCs which covered rural areas with dispersed, loose settlements (Table 4).

Initial contact was made via the secretary or chair, depending on who was listed on Aberdeenshire Council website (www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/communitycouncils/index.asp), who then made recommendations who we should speak to.

We asked that people had at least two years of experience of working with the CC. Interviews took place in homes, cafés and at CC meetings. Five of the interviews were carried out over the phone.

Table 4: Overview of composition and type of CCs in the study

Code	Composition	Type
T1	Central town (but dormant)	Quiet
T2	Central town	Energetic
T3	Central town	Energetic
T4	Central town (with hinterland)	Energetic
V1	3 villages	Energetic
V2	4 villages	Quiet
V3	4 villages	Quiet
V4	5 villages	Energetic
S1	3 settlements	Quiet
S2	3 settlements	Quiet
S3	3 settlements	Energetic

(Note: 'Settlements' refers to areas where houses are clustered but not coherent enough to justify it being called a village. Settlements in this sense do not have a discernible centre and are even lacking a main street.)

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, findings of this report are based on information from the following 22 Community Councils:

Banchory	Meldrum and Bourtie
Bennachie	Methlick
Birse and Ballogie	Mintlaw and District
Echt and Skene	North Kincardine
Feughdee West	Rosehearty
Foveran	Stonehaven and District
Fyvie, Rothienorman, Monquitter	Tap O'Noth Tarves
Huntly	Turriff and District
Inverurie	Udny
Kemnay	Whitehills and District
Kintore and District	



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