



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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By email only

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Dear Tom

Community Councils

At its meeting on 23rd May the Committee marked the 50th anniversary of the Local Government (Scotland) Act which established Community Councils ('CCs'). We were joined by Community Councillors from across Scotland for a round-table discussion about the effectiveness of CCs and the challenges they face. We also heard from a panel of witnesses who provided wider context about the position in Scotland, and Jackie Weaver (Chief Officer of the Cheshire Association of Local Councils) provided comparison with England's equivalent system of parish councils.

That evidence session raised some important issues which I have summarised below. The witnesses we heard from also suggested a number of actions which could be taken that would strengthen CCs' position in local empowerment and democracy, to the benefit of communities.

The Committee would be grateful for the Scottish Government's response to these. Many echo the findings of previous reviews of CCs and so are not necessarily new, but with the First Minister's new missions for government including 'community', we hope that there is opportunity for the Scottish Government to consider the role of Community Councils afresh.

Our position as a Committee is that Community Councils should be a key component of local democracy in Scotland. Improved support for and empowerment of CCs would enable them to represent their communities more effectively and better address local needs. This would in turn enable them to contribute to wider national

priorities including those agreed in the Verity House Agreement to tackle poverty, deliver net zero, and provide person-centred public services.

Given that it is now half a century since legislation established CCs, it is clear that their position needs to be looked at afresh if they are to become relevant in modern Scotland and reach their potential. We understand that the Model Scheme of Establishment and associated guidance supporting CCs is in the process of being refreshed by the Improvement Service which is welcome, however we believe that more needs to be done to empower CCs.

The Committee heard about the benefits that incorporation brings Parish Councils in England, which enables them to access wider grant funding opportunities and provides powers to borrow and to own assets. We would be interested in the Scottish Government's position on whether similar powers for Community Councils could be explored further.

Summary of the key issues heard in evidence

- CCs are largely powerless. Local authorities are not required to act on their views or recommendations, and in contrast to Parish Councils in England they are unable to raise money through levies or taxes, or to borrow money. They are sometimes criticised for being unrepresentative of local communities, though it may be their lack of influence which makes the role of Community Councillor unattractive.
- The budget constraints of local authorities mean that CCs are already increasingly 'filling the gaps' in local support and service delivery, and there is the potential to do more in the future. With the right support and resources CCs could play an important role in local regeneration, delivering services and working more closely with Community Development Trusts.
- Some CCs have an important role to play in community resilience, as demonstrated during the pandemic, and play a part in democratic innovation such as participatory budgeting (for example in the North-East's Just Transition Programme). CCs also have relationships with a wide range of local organisations and are part of a bigger network including health and social care partnerships and community planning partnerships. Community Councillors are often active in other community roles too and have strong networks.
- Although they receive support at a national level from the Improvement Service there is no organisation able to advocate or lobby on CCs' behalf. CCs have had no national representative body since 2012 when the Scottish Government cut its funding by 40%. Most CCs seem to operate only on the minimal administrative grant provided by their local authority – typically £500 per year.
- Community Councillors can be too thinly spread, and in need of training and support to help them fulfil existing duties, especially the consideration of planning applications which can be particularly complex and time consuming.

- Relationships between CCs and local authorities vary greatly; some authorities are very supportive and collaborative, others have little respect for their CCs and are seen as undermining or paying little attention to CCs' views, particularly when these are critical of the local authority.
- Examples of successful work by CCs include Cambuslang's Regeneration Strategy, West Lothian's 'blueprint' for CCs, Moray's resilience groups, West Lothian's access to town centre funds, and youth engagement in Shetland and other areas.
- In England, Parish councils depend on a network of trained and qualified clerks for support. A national association is entirely self-funded through membership, and there is a wide network of regional/district associations which act as intermediaries with local authorities

Proposed actions

- Scotland would benefit from a national body representing and advocating for CCs, together with a network of regional associations.
- Some additional resource from the Scottish Government could deliver substantial improvements, although this need not be expensive (as evidenced by the English model). The creation of an investment fund for CCs to draw down on would enable them to support local projects.
- The establishment of a clerking system to support and underpin Community Councils' work would enable them to operate with improved efficiency and professionalism.
- Holding elections for CCs on the same date as council elections could increase participation and raise awareness.
- Improved support and training for Community Councillors would aid their effectiveness and in turn improve community empowerment.
- Local Development Trusts are effective vehicles for driving local action and improvement, however they don't have the democratic mandate that CCs do. Increased collaboration would be to the benefit of both.

I would be grateful for your response to these proposals, and your views on the value that CCs could bring to supporting the delivery of the Scottish Government's key ambitions for community and local democracy. Given it is 50 years since their inception it would be a lost opportunity if the Scottish Government were to allow the status quo to continue.

Yours sincerely,

Ariane Burgess

Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee