

The future of Scotland's Councillors: Report on a conference consultation

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These comments were written in response to a questionnaire administered during the conference on "The future of Scotland's Councillors" on 4th March 2002. The conference was organised by Capital Conferences Scotland and the Scottish Forum for Modern Government.

47 questionnaires were returned. The responses came from 41 councillors, from 17 different Scottish councils, and six others. The figure may be taken as 44 councillors: one form was filled jointly by two councillors, one by three. The six others included three respondents who identified themselves as prospective candidates for council posts, two people involved in local authority organisations, and one unidentified respondent.

The questionnaire consisted of six broadly framed, open-ended, qualitative questions, intended not to elicit precise responses but to draw out a range of views. The questions were:

What is your role and interest in this field?

How has the role of councillors in Scotland changed recently?

What, in your view, are the problems and issues that councillors face?

What measures would strengthen local government in Scotland?

What should be the relationship between the Scottish Parliament and local government?

How can local democratic accountability be improved?

Most of the words used below are the words of the respondents; direct quotations are given in italics. The categories have been introduced by the researchers. The categories used below reflect the pattern of the answers rather than the structure of the questionnaire. The issues which are identified below were not prompted by the questionnaire, but were raised independently, without prior discussion, by the respondents.

The role of councillors

How the role of councillors has changed

*Becoming copies of central government
Too many powers delegated within councils to officers*

The role of councillors has taken on a more "fire fighting" emphasis. We have to justify the council financial position much more.

Poor logistical approach and lack of input from councillors

Slow decline over decades

Decentralisation of government has given more decisions to councillors - supposedly

Move to executive (i.e. scrutiny and local development) committee model. Subsidiarity within local authority.

The introduction of the Parliament has downgraded both the profile and status of local councillors

It used to be enjoyable, getting things improved for your communities and direct control on budgets with your council's own staff. Now less money, bidding for 3 year posts, PPP and PFI, House Stock transfer, council jobs done by private companies: the role of a councillor is diminishing fast. No fun in it.

Exclusion of some councillors from decisions

*Greater colleagues to be involved
As a non-administration councillor, I have little role other than as a watchdog for my constituents*

Lack of meaningful consultation

Lack of power of councillors

Lack of control

*Lack of autonomy; too much bureaucracy
Less discretion. Less autonomy. More public scrutiny.*

More responsibility with less power to change things and to raise resources

Gets worse - too many functions and powers being removed

We are now very much at the sharp end of service delivery, but no longer in control.

Far less ability to influence things

Things have changed dramatically, and not for the better. Too much bureaucracy and centralised decision making; lack of feeling useful and valued and being able really to represent my electorate.

We are accountable but we have no power

(Changes needed:)

More accountability, to be able to make a difference, to be able to decide on our own priorities

Attracting a better cross-section of society to be councillors, salary and more powers for local government would help

Allow councillors to address the stated needs of their constituents

Problem issues

Councillors have increased duties

(Problem of) Finding time for all duties, strategic and local. I am retired and don't know how those with full time occupation manage to cope.

Increasing statutory duties

Increased duties

Much more wide range, covers much wider areas; more complex issues

Yes, it has changed. There is more demand and less councillors.

More decisions, more complexity, more scrutiny, finite resources

Far busier having to deal with a huge diversification of subjects

It has changed, and not for the better - adhering to continuous legislation

Workload increased. Larger wards.

Local government reorganisation has resulted in more constituency work for ward councillors

It has become more accountable. There are more bodies - school boards, community councils and amenity groups - to whom the elected members must report.

Much more time consuming than before 1995.

Required changes:

Make it smaller

Administration

The problems and issues identified were:

Best value (2)

Ring fencing (5)

Increased ring fencing

Less ring fencing

Too much red tape and ring fencing of monies from central government whether Holyrood or Westminster

Time wasting bidding by all LAs

PFI/PPP

Hypothecation

Increased auditing (exponentially!)

Too much red tape and monitoring procedures. Too much political correctness or should I say lack of common sense.

Public expectations

Delivering services to meet the expectation of the public.

Dealing front line with voter anger/frustration with few means to respond to it

We are perceived by our electorate as having some power and we no longer have

Increased public expectations.

Unrealistic public expectations

Relationships with the electorate

Low voter turnout

Lack of faith on the part of the electorate that councillors have the power/budget/ability to do anything, hence democratic deficit, hence more centralisation, hence lower voter faith

...

Increased expectations from public

Public apathy/cynicism

Credibility: local government is not believed, seen as overpaid and underworked.

The public do not understand why council tax goes up and services are cut back.

The apathy of people who think all local governments are "at it"

Councillors are at the sharp end of dealing with constituency complaints - MSPs, MPs and MEPs seen by the electorate as too remote

(Responses required:)

Make general public aware of and define the role of a councillor

More clearly/visibly defined role of community leaders hopefully to be delivered through Community Planning agenda

Terms of service

How to combine a career and councillorship - local government doesn't enable you to survive - and when you leave you get nothing

*I lost my job when I became a councillor - therefore have to get part time work etc in order to pay my mortgage
(Problem of) finding sufficient time for responsibilities (if part time) or financial pressure (if full time)
Salary and allowance constraints: we need the pay and security to do the job full time.
Underpaid and at times ignored
No job security; not much financial reward; no clear job description
Not enough money; no pensions
No financial security, no loan for car like council officers, no pension.
Too little remuneration for work that good councillors do.*

Responses required:

*A proper pay structure and pension scheme
More time and expertise demands full time
Professional councillors and an expectation of such as well as pay
Remuneration, pensions and gratuities (2)
Pension rights
Fair wage for a fair days work*

Specific issues

*My biggest problem is roads and bridges - in a rural area not enough money spent on resurfacing on roads not pothole repair
Information technology - lack of requires training
Geography for rurals
Biggest problem in rural areas are the state of roads - more complaints re this than anything
Backlog of maintenance/capital works
Feeling of isolation in rural areas
Getting a pothole filled can be an issue*

Resources

*Ever rising council tax
Straitjacket tightened
Well off areas do not get value for money from council tax. Basic services and work not carried out at expense of "projects" in poor areas.
Finance!
Nil finance to deliver. Serious under funding of councils that have a history of being prudent.
Too few funds from central government that are not ring fenced to allow services that local people want to be achieved. Often not real money but constituents think it is.
Massive effort having to be put into cutting services
Funding shortages for services*

Lack of finance

*Money is so tight that the council is barely covering the statutory duties, never mind an expansion of service.
Lack of resources to deliver services
Lack of resources from Scottish Executive - asked to do more with no extra money
Told extra money being allowed and sometimes it is the same money taken from another service.
Local government finance
Expectations rising (Scottish Executive announcements misleading)
Lack of capital consent with which to create new and maintain infrastructure
Sustaining services against a background of financial shortfall; inequitable formulae
A financial settlement which recognises need rather than numbers
Since reorganisation in 1995, have been forced into a never ending cycle of imposing cuts in services.*

(Responses)

*More local autonomy over spending and greater financial support
Increased resources for service delivery
Return of non-domestic rates to local authority control
Fair taxation, locally controlled
Spending tax income locally
Funding to do the job that requires to be done. Licence to consult the public on a programme of work and the facility to fund the resulting programme.
Local income tax for all funding
We should be allowed to raise our own finance through local tax raising powers based on ability to pay.
Ability to borrow, as other European local authorities can
More control over allocation of finance exactly where it is needed.
Improve the link between responsibility and budget/outcomes.
Full budgetary control; abolition of central grant; full fiscal autonomy
More flexibility to borrow for capital development
An ability to raise or get money itself to do some of its own priorities
More flexibility in fiscal issues. Charges should be abolished, with that input being returned to local government.
Permission to raise some of their own finance
Grant money for local rather than national priorities
More independence - finance*

More control over finance - if council taxpayers disagreed with administration priorities this would soon become evident at the ballot box

Council tax levels should play a much larger part in the tax equation.

Tax raising powers

Give more powers and finance to carry out local projects

Give councils an incentive to stimulate their economy by allowing them to keep the "buoyancy elements" of the business rate.

Reforming local government

Changes in the powers of local government

After 1996 it became much more difficult to sustain a regional vision

*Less freedom to make decisions than in past
Lack of ability to influence how services are taken forward in my area*

Many ward issues cannot be solved because of limited financial resources and power to change legislation

Unfortunately clear extravagances in some councils undermine the credibility and respect due to others.

Need for greater autonomy

Greater freedom and flexibility to respond and deliver local priorities to local people.

More independence - powers

More control to local councils for decision making and financial control.

By allowing local democracy to take its own decisions and then stand by them

More autonomy to deliver local priorities.

Realisation that different councils have different needs

More autonomy - each area is different

Devolution to communities

Improve the relationship between funds raised and electoral accountability

Making councils responsible for their area

To be properly accountable requires that you be free to make the decisions at a local level in the first place

Increased powers and autonomy for local government

Decentralising - give more powers to council to raise money for local project

More autonomy; more independence to elected councillors to represent people

Powers with responsibility, transparency, parity of esteem.

Greater flexibility on legislative powers and less hypothecation and ring fencing on financial pronouncements from Parliaments

Councils should be allowed to make more decisions for themselves

Need for wider competence

*Remove restrictions unless you are specifically not allowed to do something then you should be able to do it if it is in the interests of your community
Greater freedom, power of general competence*

Greater powers required

Direct control of local authority housing and services

Direct control over local issues, i.e. housing, building, repair of schools, renationalise buses and trains, etc.

Health Boards and Enterprise to come under democratically elected councils

Need for defined rules and powers

Constitution for local government

Powers and responsibilities defined in a written constitution

Constitutionally defined autonomy

Local government should be placed in a constitutional framework and not under the whim of governments

More clarity in their role

Greater transparency at local level

Greater transparency and local outcome agreements

Electoral change

*(Problem of) boundary changes
democratic deficit*

(requiring)

PR

A fair voting system (e.g. STV)

More meaningful elections, including PR< although danger of losing ward link

Larger vote at election to prove worth

Altering the system of election to include a PR element

Better governance = PR

Elections not to coincide with parliament poll

No PR (2)

Proportional representation using STV to retain link with community (not ward)

A ward interest must be retained

Retaining first past the post therefore retaining clear identification

Limited electoral reform: enhanced forms of voting, different methods/locations, electronic etc.

*A proportional voting system would be a start
PR for local government could improve democratic accountability
Mandatory to vote and easier to vote.
Wider voting opportunities*

Voice

*By improving consultation both in method and in frequency
Genuine consultation and justification reason for a particular outcome
Access to electorate and for electorate are vital
Delegation of more decision taking to local level so that public feel they are stakeholders
Target young people*

Relations with central government

*Too much central direction of funding and initiatives
Lack of strategic planning
Central government diktat
Central control
The pressure of central government control has restricted the role of councillors.
More centralisation/control from government
You would not be able to tell - as a councillor - that Thatcher was not still in power.
Jumping to another government's agenda
People at the centre not listening to calls for help
Lack of ability to make local decisions
Less local decision making ability has diluted democratic process
Stifling central control
A perception of lack of trust and coordination between the various levels of government
Ideological/financial "duelling"
You should not be liable for the imposed straightjacket
The eradication of decision making and the main perpetrator is the Scottish Executive
Major problem - getting the Executive to face up to its responsibilities to acknowledge the need for review
They lack consideration of local conditions in real terms
At present one dictating to the other
Ignorance and arrogance from MSPs who are dumb enough to believe the Scottish Executive spin agenda. SE to stop making LAs jump through hoops.
Very poor, only the officers or the leader get to relate*

Problems with the Scottish Executive

*Parity of esteem which was offered has not been forthcoming. Decisions made without consultation by Scottish Executive.
(Problem of) Spin of the Scottish Executive
Dictatorship from the Scottish Executive
Centralization from Scottish Executive means reducing local accountability
Nanny state. The idea that local authorities are instruments of implementing a national government's manifesto is dictatorial horse-shit.
In my opinion we're being strangled by the Scottish Executive and it's getting worse
We are becoming tax gatherers for the Executive
Less control, more restricted by Scottish Executive*

Problems with the Scottish Parliament

*Devolution applies from Holyrood as well as to it.
Interference by Scottish Parliament
Interference from Scottish Parliament and national government
The Scottish Parliament has diminished the role of local government.
Less control because of Scottish Parliament*

The required relationship should be

*one of trust and interaction
partnership (2)
Partnership - at present this is not the case
trust
Partnerships strengthened for the common good
equal partnership
Trust and parity.
More decision making on policy and financial issues could be devolved to local constituencies
trust between the Scottish Executive and I.a.s in finance, providing best value and therefore services which are best for citizens
Listening to each other - have a two way open forum of debate
A better approach and attitude from government, councillors and bureaucrats
Much more debate between the politicians instead of the civil service
Two tiers with equality
Trust and a feeling of being able to talk on the same level about the problems that face Scotland and work together to solve them
Mutual respect for different mandates, not mediated through CoSLA.
Two equal tiers of government*

*Complementary
 Mutual respect
 An interface of equal partners
 Parliament should legislate for local
 government, then leave local government to
 get on with it
 Based on trust and mutual respect, delivering
 local and national priorities jointly.
 Transparency
 More closer working. Take more account of
 rural issues and problems.
 Respectful partnership, more like system on
 the continent
 Trust and respect from Scottish Executive
 Partnership built on mutual trust and respect
 Acceptance and recognition by Parliament
 that councils deliver. Equal partners in
 delivering for Scotland: not "master" and
 "man".
 Parity of esteem; mutual trust/respect.
 Professional and businesslike shared vision
 for local services. Ability to argue robustly
 and agree to disagree when necessary
 A working partnership with defined rules but
 with the same objectives
 Mutual trust and respect, derived from
 recognising the importance of our respective
 roles and in particular the relationship with
 the electorate.
 More trust - less interference
 A close and trusting partnership working in
 tandem.
 Partnership of equals. Local government is
 elected and accountable as Parliament.
 Equal partnership: clearly defined
 boundaries/responsibilities and better
 distribution of powers to deliver
 More trust
 Close but not dictatorial. Local outcome
 agreements could be a solution in properly
 and individually applied.
 Arm's length. They have a primary
 relationship with their respective electorate.
 Ministers should accustom themselves to
 refusing to take responsibility for what
 councils do - if they start promising to sort
 the out we're on a slippery slope. The
 Parliament should deliver their mandate
 through legislation and monitoring rather
 than detailed financial control.
 Equality in all respects.
 Trust from MSPs and Parliament. MSPs
 should stop justifying their roles.
 Better and clearer links with the Executive
 and Parliament. Better communication.*

Required changes:

Civil servant re-education

*Long term, strategic perspective jointly
 agreed
 Less central control, by un-ring-fencing
 monies. More time to respond to initiatives.
 Evidence of all government pulling together
 Reduction of central control freakery and
 concentration on outcomes and outputs, not
 inputs. Local outcome agreements, less
 bureaucracy. Model is the best of devolved
 school management. Challenge and support
 from the Centre.*

Discussion

The comments which were returned show a very high level of agreement. Despite the lack of prior discussion at the stage when the questionnaire was administered, the comments were often couched in the same terms by councillors in different political parties from different parts of the country. Most referred to the loss of power of councils, and none dissented from that view. Virtually all respondents wished a relationship of trust of partnership with central government, and a large number of comments suggested that central controls were excessive. Disturbingly, none of the respondents had a single positive thing to say about any recent change in the role of councillors or local government.

The Centre for Public Policy and Management

This report was prepared by the Centre for Public Policy and Management (CPPM) at the Robert Gordon University. The CPPM is one of Scotland's leading multi-disciplinary research centres, conducting applied policy research. The staff attached to the centre have backgrounds in policy analysis, social administration, management, planning, law, economics and social research. The work of the CPPM is based on the application of a range of academic knowledge and professional expertise to the practical problems of public sector, voluntary and independent agencies. Recent and current research work has been undertaken for the Great Northern Partnership, Scottish Enterprise Grampian, Aberdeen City Council, Dundee City Council and the European Social Fund. The work includes research, consultancy and evaluation. The CPPM's website can be consulted on <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/publicpolicy/cppm/>.

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