

HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH LANARKSHIRE?

IMPROVING THE WORKING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
COMMUNITY COUNCILS AND SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

Cambuslang Community Council and Halfway Community Council, April 2019



CAMBUSLANG
Community Council



Acknowledgements

This report has been drafted by members of Cambuslang Community Council (CCC) and Halfway Community Council (HCC). It draws on an online survey sent to all Community Councils in South Lanarkshire.

CCC and HCC would like to thank all Community Councils who contributed to the survey, made comments on a draft version of this report or otherwise provided feedback on the subject of the report.

The report is intended to encourage constructive debate on how to improve the effective operation of Community Councils in South Lanarkshire, and how to strengthen the working relationship between Community Councils and South Lanarkshire. CCC and HCC would welcome any feedback on the analysis in the report and the conclusions and recommendations.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The relationship between Community Councils and South Lanarkshire Council (SLC) is increasingly important because of legislative changes and new rights on local community empowerment and participation in decision-making. This report reviews the current 'health' of Community Councils in South Lanarkshire and their experience of working with SLC.
2. There are fundamental problems with the representation of communities in South Lanarkshire. Only 34 areas out of a possible 57 currently have a Community Council, and many CCs have difficulties in attracting sufficient members.
3. The effectiveness of CCs is constrained by insufficient financial resources and members, and shortfalls in expertise or time to implement projects and deal with local concerns.
4. SLC does not appear to have a strategy for Community Councils (CCs). They are not included in the main planning documents, and they are not accorded any special role in the design and delivery of local plans and services.
5. SLC provides much less financial support through Administration Grant to CCs in South Lanarkshire than many other local authorities in Scotland.
6. The experience of CCs in working with SLC is mixed. Many report positive experiences, and there are numerous examples of good practice. There are also many examples of bad experiences and poor practice. There appear to be significant differences across SLC departments in their engagement with CCs, with respect to openness, communication, and support.
7. We recommend that SLC:
 - SLC develops a policy on its future engagement with CCs, and a strategy for mobilising local involvement in CCs;
 - promotes a culture of CC engagement, introduces a Code of Practice for all SLC departments on working with CCs, requires CC engagement to be included in all Committee papers, encourages SLC Councillors to attend CC meetings regularly, and enables CCs to participate in Community Planning;
 - sets up a working group with representatives of CCs to identify practical ways of improving the participation of CCs in planning matters;
 - invests in capacity-building for CCs, including training, online resources, an annual CC forum and a single point of contact for liaison with SLC departments; and
 - consults with CCs to co-determine a new system of financial support that reflects their current and future financial needs .

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Improving the working relationship between Community Councils and South Lanarkshire Council

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is an assessment of the working relationship between South Lanarkshire Council and Community Councils in South Lanarkshire. It draws on a survey conducted of all CCs in South Lanarkshire area, reviewing the experience of collaboration and identifying options for improvement.

The relationship between CCs and SLC is particularly important and relevant because of the legislative changes and new rights on local community empowerment and participation in decision-making, including the Christie Report and its recommendations for public services reform, and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act. The Scottish Government is promoting policies for decentralisation and more localised decision-making, including its commitment to devolve one percent of local authority budgets for public decision-making. In its 2016 election manifesto, the Scottish Government envisaged a stronger role for community councils, allowing community councils that can demonstrate a strong democratic mandate, to deliver some services.”¹ The Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) and What Works Scotland are working, with support from the Scottish Government, to explore how ‘community councils can be even more relevant in Scotland’s evolving policy’.²

The statutory role of Community Councils in representing their communities gives them a special position and responsibility in the process of community empowerment, as the Scottish Government has recognised. However, there are many pre-conditions that need to be put in place if community empowerment is to be successful. Foremost among these pre-conditions in South Lanarkshire is an effective working relationship between Community Councils and SLC. It is SLC that currently has the primary responsibility for designing and delivering services that affect communities, and SLC is the ‘gatekeeper’ to resources and support. It is critical, therefore, that the process of community empowerment is developed collaboratively.

The following report begins by reviewing the ‘health’ of Community Councils in South Lanarkshire, and then discusses the strategy and financial support of South Lanarkshire Council with regard to CCs. The report then discusses the results of the survey on the working relationship between SLC and Community Councils and areas for potential improvement. The final section draws together conclusions and recommendations.

It is important to stress that this report does not seek to represent the views of all CCs in South Lanarkshire. The survey has a significant number of responses from all parts of the local authority area, but the conclusions and recommendations - while based on the qualitative and quantitative data results - are those of the authors of the report alone. They are presented here to stimulate

¹ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wws-and-scdc-collaborating-on-review-of-community-councils-in-scotland/>

² <http://www.communitycouncils.scot/community-council-research---regional-workshops.html>

constructive discussion about the role of CCs in South Lanarkshire, their working relationship with SLC, and how that can be improved in line with the new legislative rights on community empowerment and participation.

2. COMMUNITY COUNCILS IN SOUTH LANARKSHIRE

Community councils were introduced through the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The Act defined the purpose of a community council as: "to ascertain, co-ordinate and express to the Local Authorities for its area and to public authorities the views of the community which it represents, in relation to matters for which those authorities are responsible."

In the past, the Scottish Government estimated that there were some 1,200 Community Councils in Scotland covering populations from 35 to 34,000 people. South Lanarkshire is divided into 57 community council areas. 34 of the areas (c.60%) have a community council. Their role is set out in government legislation, summarised by SLC in the box below.

What Community Councils do

Community councils are voluntary organisations set up by statute and run by local residents to act on behalf of their area.

Some community councils are more active than others - but their main activities include:

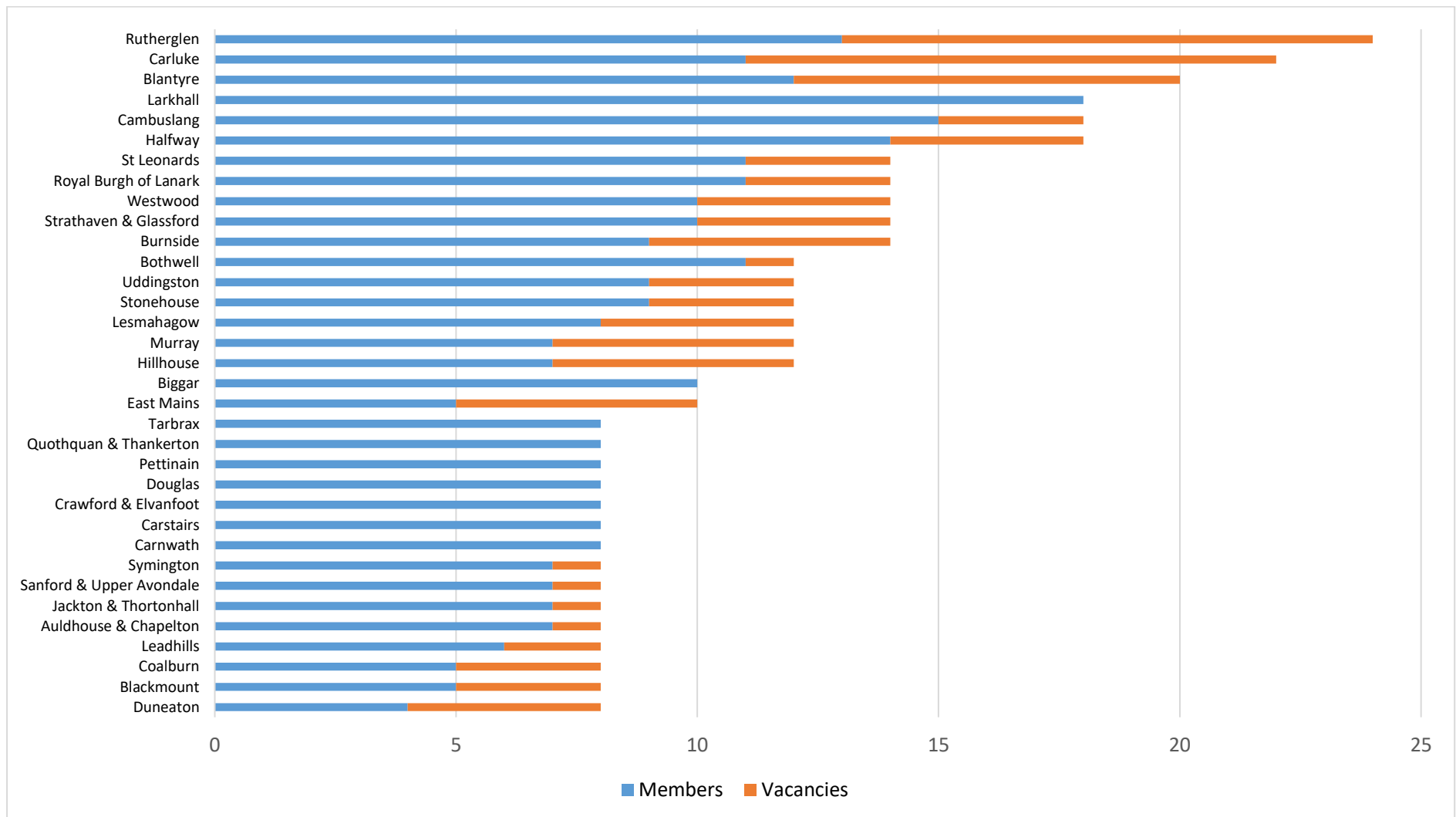
- identifying and taking action on local issues such as planning and licensing applications
- organising community events
- liaising with the public authorities and other agencies about local services

The 34 Community Councils in South Lanarkshire vary greatly in size, ranging from several small councils with a nominal membership of eight Community Councillors each, to the largest, Rutherglen, with a nominal allocation of 24 members (see Figure 1).³ According to SLC data after the CC elections in Autumn 2018, most Community Councils did not have a full complement of members.

- On average, Community Councils have 78% of the members to which they are entitled.
- Only nine Community Councils – Biggar, Carnwath, Carstairs, Crawford & Elvanfoot, Douglas, Larkhall, Pettinain, Quothquan & Thankerton, Tarbrax – were able to fill all the available places on their Council at the time of the elections.
- All other Councils are operating at below capacity, and a few – Carluke, Duneaton, East Mains – were only able to fill half of the available places at the time of the elections.

³ Prior to 2013, membership was based on the ratio of the electorate in Community Council area; the minimum membership was nine and the maximum was 46.

Figure 1: Membership and vacancies on Community Councils in South Lanarkshire – Autumn 2018



Source: South Lanarkshire Council notification of contested and uncontested elections, 2018. Note: membership numbers are for autumn 2018 at the time of the CC elections, and some memberships may have changed since the elections, for example through co-optation of members to fill vacancies.

- The vast majority of Community Councils had uncontested elections in Autumn 2018. Only Carstairs, Douglas, Larkhall and Tarbrax had contested elections. Larkhall was unique in the high level of interest: 26 candidates contested 18 places.

Given the problems in attracting candidates for many Community Councils, and that 23 areas have no Community Council at all, there are clearly fundamental issues concerning the representation of communities in the local authority area.

3. SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL STRATEGY REGARDING COMMUNITY COUNCILS

It is difficult to identify the strategic objectives of South Lanarkshire Council towards Community Councils. The main SLC strategic plan – Connect 2017-2022 - has many priorities for the community-oriented delivery of services in areas like learning, social care and safety, and commitments to community engagement, but it makes no mention whatsoever of CCs. The same is true of the SLC Community Plan 2017-2027, and the proposed Local Development Plan 2 (volumes 1 and 2) and its Draft Action Plan.

SLC has several processes for consulting with community groups – and indeed supports a separate ‘Community Links’ organisation to involve communities in regeneration – but it does not involve Community Councils specifically in these processes. The annual SLC Public Performance Report has a section on strengthening partnership working, community leadership and engagement, but again there is no reference to any work done by SLC to involve or support Community Councils.

At present, the SLC approach to CCs appears to be limited to: setting out the ‘Scheme’ for the operation of Community Councils; overseeing elections every four years; and providing an annual Administration Grant and ensuring it is properly spent, including the auditing of accounts. The Administration Services department provides helpful advice for CCs in response to requests and circulates relevant information. A forum involving training has been organised intermittently.

SLC has made commitments to Community Empowerment, in order to meet the requirements of Scottish Government community empowerment legislation, including the development of community-level Locality Plans. However, these – as yet – do not appear to involve Community Councils in anything other than a consultative role along with other local groups.

In summary, Community Councils are not included in the main planning documents and are not accorded any special role in the design and delivery of local services and plans.

4. SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY COUNCILS

South Lanarkshire Council currently provides an annual Administration Grant of £500 to all Community Councils in South Lanarkshire regardless of their size. Prior to 2013, SLC operated a system involving a core flat-rate allocation to each council plus an additional amount (£22) for each CC member. For larger CCs in particular, the shift in grant funding in 2013s represented a significant reduction in annual income.

The move to a standard grant was accompanied by SLC taking responsibility for (and funding) the obligatory annual auditing of accounts and public liability insurance. Previously, audit costs and (voluntary) insurance costs were paid by CCs from their Administration Grants. In addition, SLC agreed to provide free room hire in SLC community centres for CC meetings; in practice, this is organised by

South Lanarkshire Leisure & Culture and it has recently been confirmed that the ‘free room hire’ is capped at 12 meetings per year.

In 2018, a member of Portobello Community Council, Lee Kindness, undertook a survey of financial support for CCs across Scotland, using Freedom of Information requests, and produced a table comparing the support provided by each local authority (see Table 1). South Lanarkshire Council came fourth from bottom in terms of funding per head among local authorities in Scotland.

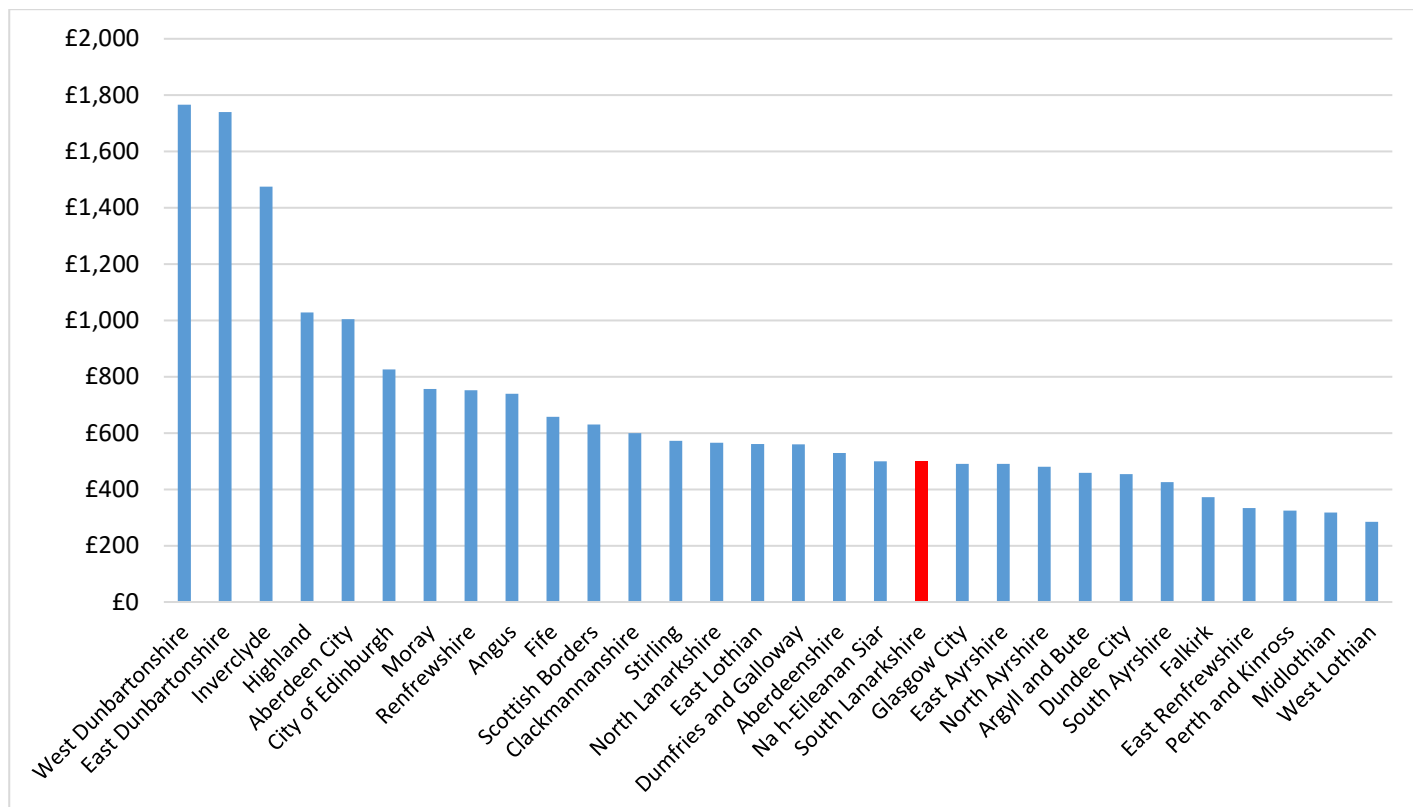
Table 1: Local authority spending on Community Councils, 2018

Local authority	Funding per head
Shetland Islands	£6.81
Orkney Islands	£3.92
Highland	£0.80
Na h-Elieanan Sar	£0.50
Scottish Borders	£0.43
Argyle & Bute	£0.36
Dumfries & Galloway	£0.33
West Dunbartonshire	£0.27
East Dunbartonshire	£0.24
Stirling	£0.23
Aberdeenshire	£0.20
Fife	£0.19
Angus	£0.18
Moray	£0.17
East Ayrshire	£0.14
East Lothian	£0.13
Inverclyde	£0.13
Aberdeen City	£0.11
South Ayrshire	£0.11
Clackmannanshire	£0.11
Midlothian	£0.09
Renfrewshire	£0.09
West Lothian	£0.09
Perth and Kinross	£0.08
City of Edinburgh	£0.07
Glasgow City	£0.06
North Ayrshire	£0.06
North Lanarkshire	£0.06
South Lanarkshire	£0.05
Falkirk	£0.05
East Renfrewshire	£0.04
Dundee City	£0.01

Source: Lee Kindness, Portobello Community Council, <https://theferret.scot/data-local-democracy-eroded/>, 19 September 2018.

Comparing SLC with other local authorities, the Administration Grant for CCs in South Lanarkshire is significantly below the average (see Figure 2), which is itself low. In other words, South Lanarkshire provides much less financial support through Administration Grant to CCs than many other local authorities. The SLC grant is only a third of that provided by the West of Scotland local authorities which lead the rankings – East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire and Inverclyde.

Figure 2: Median Community Council Administration Grant by local authority area



Source: FOI-based data collated by Lee Kindness, Portobello Community Council, 2018.

Note: Shetland Islands (£8,365) and Orkney Islands (£4,257) are excluded.

5. WORKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITY COUNCILS AND SLC

In mid-March 2019, a survey was launched via SurveyMonkey to examine the experiences of Community Councils in working with South Lanarkshire Council and to identify ideas for improvement. The survey ran for a month, with reminder emails being sent from early April onwards. The survey consisted of eight main questions,⁴ most of them pre-coded for easy analysis and with scope for additional comment in most cases:

1. What has been your experience or working with South Lanarkshire Council?
2. How do you rate your experience of working with SLC in the following areas (planning; economic development; roads & transportation; environmental services; education; housing; social work; management, finance & administration; leisure)?

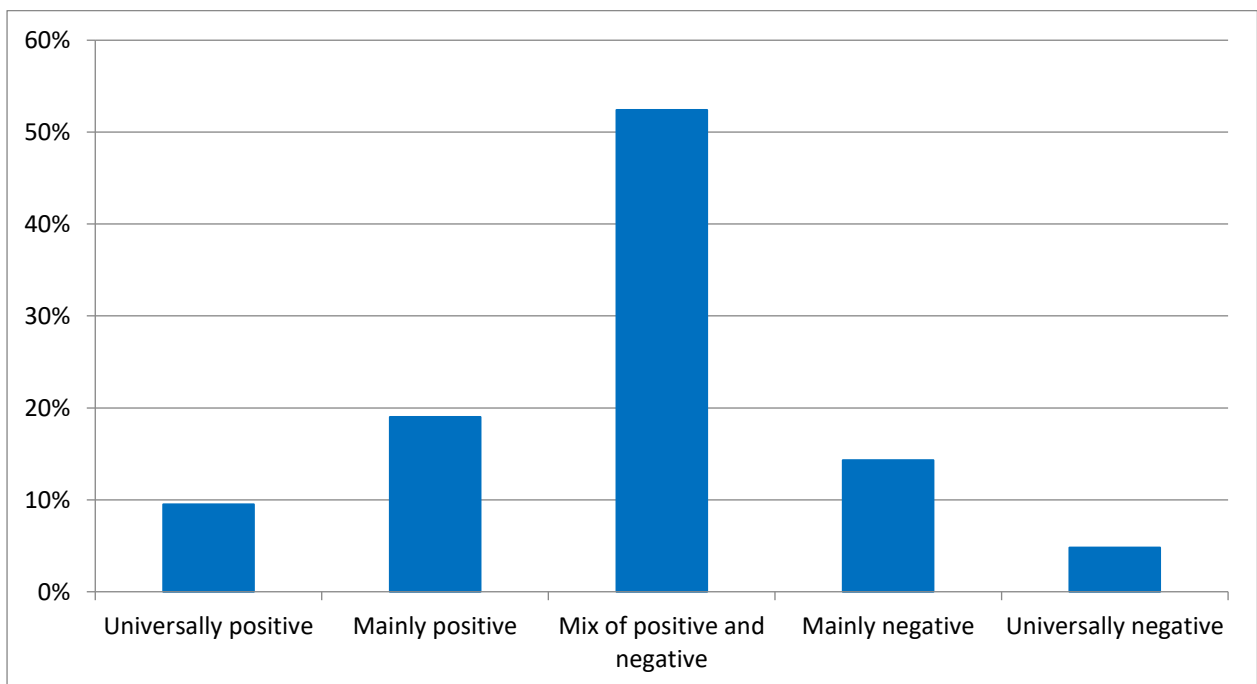
⁴ Two additional questions asked for the approval of respondents for their responses to be used in this report, and for contact details.

3. Could you provide one or more specific examples of **good practice** from your experience of working with SLC?
4. Could you provide one or more specific examples of **poor practice** from your experience of working with SLC?
5. What are the main constraints that you experience in working as an effective Community Council?
6. What could SLC do to improve the **effective working** of your Community Council?
7. What could SLC do to improve its **working relationship** with your Community Council?
8. Do you consider that any of the following measures would be helpful in improving the working relationship of your Community Council with SLC?

The survey achieved useable responses from 18 Community Councils, comprising just over half of the 34 currently constituted Community Councils in South Lanarkshire.

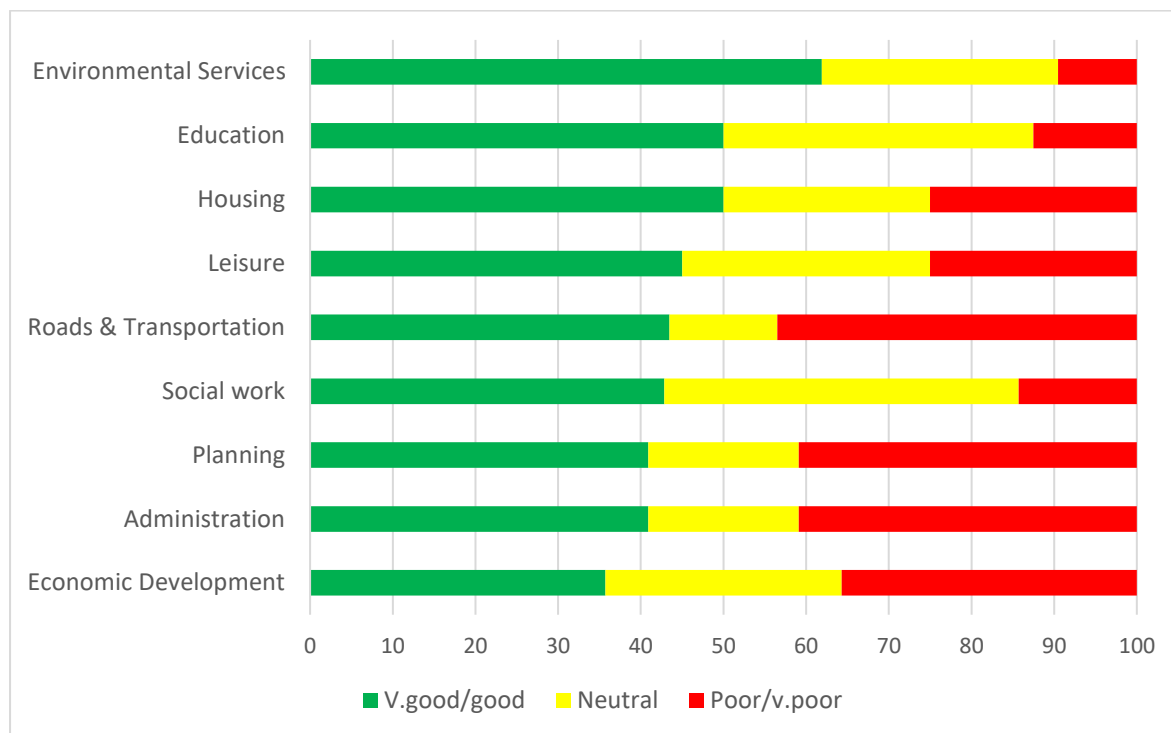
The experiences of Community Councils of working with South Lanarkshire Council cover the entire spectrum of responses from 'universally positive' to 'universally negative' (see Figure 3). However, the normal distribution shape of the bar chart shows that in most cases, the experiences are a mix of positive and negative to varying degrees (with slightly more positive than negative).

Figure 3: What has been your experience of working with South Lanarkshire Council?



To gain more detailed insights into the working relationship, Community Councils were asked to rate their experience of working with different departments or areas of SLC responsibility on a scale from very good through to very poor. Again, there is significant variation across CCs, summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: How do you rate your experience of working with SLC in the following areas:



Note: Administration includes management & finance; Leisure is South Lanarkshire Leisure & Culture. Excludes don't know / not applicable.

The results have to be treated with care: not all CCs have experience with all areas of SLC responsibility, and there is no information on how significant (in scope or depth) the experiences of CCs have been. Nevertheless, the responses indicate that:

- **Environmental Services** are most positively rated, with a large proportion of 'good' and 'very good' ratings;
- the ratings for CC experiences of working with **Education, Housing and Social Work** are also rated predominantly as 'good' or 'neutral';
- **Roads & Transportation, Planning and Administration** have the highest levels of dissatisfaction with a high proportion of 'poor' and some 'very poor' experiences; and
- **Economic Development** comes bottom of the rankings, with a relatively low proportion of positive experiences among CCs, and a significant proportion of poor/very poor ratings.

Community Councils were asked to provide specific examples of good practice and poor practice in working with SLC. The three areas of **good practice** most commonly cited by CCs were:

- the regular attendance of local SLC Councillors at CC meetings and their active role in providing information on policy discussions/decisions as well as following up quickly on concerns or requests;

- the helpfulness of individual officials in supporting projects/initiatives or (again) responding to problems (one reported that “staff are helpful and follow through to find answers to any questions”); and
- the administrative support provided to assist CCs with operational or procedural issues (one CC recorded their appreciation of an SLC official coming to a CC meeting at short notice to help sort out a problem, and another noted that “on the whole we have a good relationship with the SLC liaison team”).

Areas of **poor practice** reported by CCs were mainly experiences with the inverse of the good practice examples i.e.:

- lack of consultation on issues affecting local communities, especially planning issues;
- lack of transparency, again with planning issues cited as an example – partial disclosure of relevant documents, missing emails and notes of meetings etc;
- problems with communication - one CC reported the experience of “no acknowledgment of letters, in some cases losing petitions, objection letters and other documentation”; another CC wrote of “difficulty in speaking to anyone, poor written communication skills, bordering on rudeness”;
- SLC staff working in silos and not seeking to provide a coordinated response to CCs – one CC noted “the difficulty of getting officials to take ownership of requests for support, passing them on and deeming them dealt with”;
- lack of advice, training and operational support for the effective management and running of CCs (e.g. understanding procedures); and
- party-political differences between SLC Councillors being aired in CC meetings (“bringing politics into non-political meetings”).

It was recognised that some aspects of poor practice may be due to resourcing issues. As one CC respondent noted: “some departments are under resourced so struggle to provide the quality of service they would like to deliver. I sympathise with this.”

6. IMPROVING EFFECTIVE WORKING BY COMMUNITY COUNCILS

In the second part of the survey, the focus moved to ways of improving the effectiveness of Community Councils.

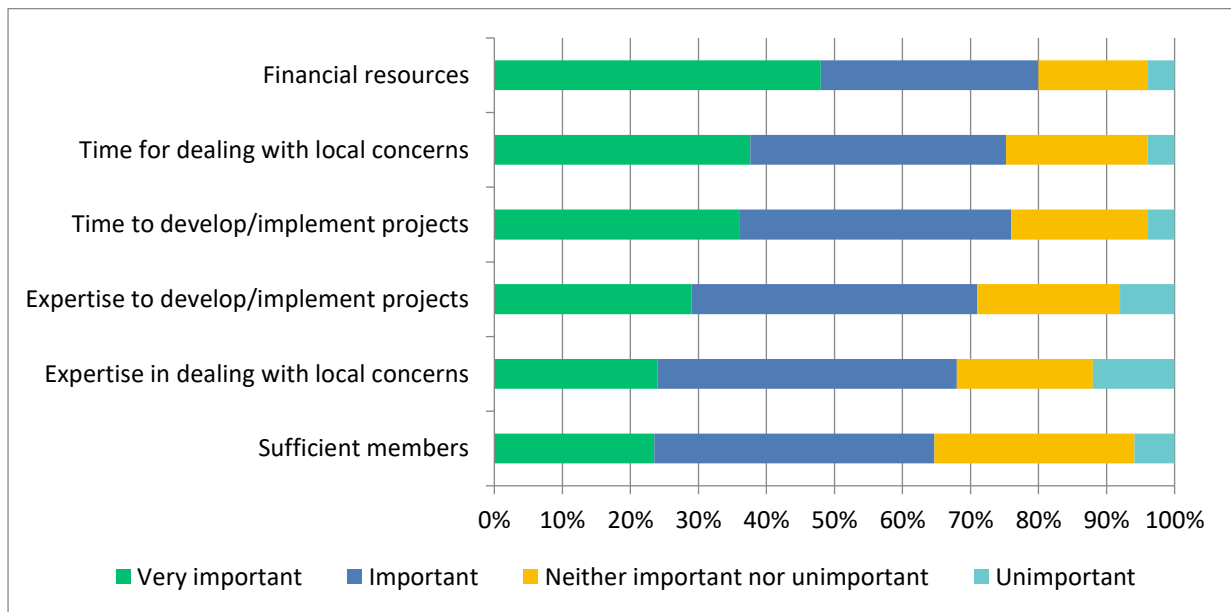
A first question asked Community Councils to rate the importance of different factors that might impede effective working – financial resources, lack of expertise or time for developing or implementing projects, and a shortage of members (see Figure 5).

- The most important constraint on CC is **insufficient financial resources**, rated as important/very important by more than 80% percent of CCs. Several CCs reinforced this point

in comments. One commented that: “the annual budget of £500 per year is woefully inadequate”

- A lack of **time to deal with local concerns (including planning) and to develop and implement projects** is also a constraint for over 70% of CCs. Better liaison between SLC and CCs was seen by a number of Community Councils as necessary to ensure that CCs could get quick access to the right department or person. The need for training was also highlighted.
- Limitations on CC **expertise in developing projects and dealing with local concerns** is also an impediment. Some CCs noted that being able to deal effectively with concerns would be facilitated by more regular attendance of SLC Councillors at CC meetings.
- The **availability of members** is the lowest-rated constraint but is still important/very important for almost two-thirds of CCs.

Figure 5: What are the main constraints that you experience in working as an effective Community Council?

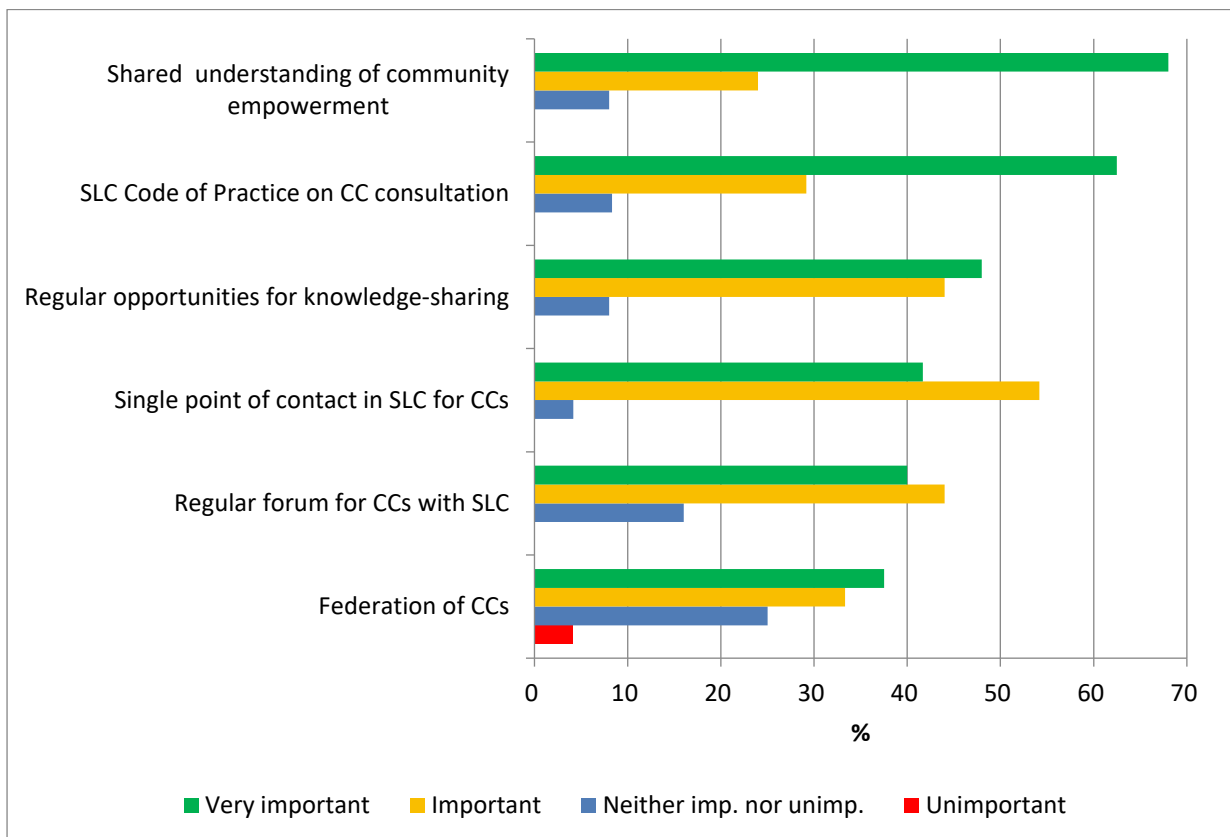


CCs were also asked whether any actions would be helpful in improving their working relationship with South Lanarkshire Council (see Figure 6), based on: a shared understanding with SLC of community empowerment; a SLC Code of Practice on consulting CCs; a single point of contact in SLCs

for CCs; regular opportunities for knowledge-sharing; a regular forum for CCs with SLC; or a federation of CCs.

- The most important action is cultural – an **understanding shared between SLC and CCs** about the value, purpose and realisation of community empowerment – regarded as important/very important by 90 percent of CCs.
- The same high level of importance is accorded to the proposal for SLC to introduce a **Code of Practice** requiring all SLC departments to consult with CCs on matters which affect their communities.
- Also rated highly as ‘very important’ by 40% of CCs and ‘important’ by a further 45% of CCs is having a **single point of contact** within SLC and the organisation of **opportunities for knowledge-sharing** among CCs.
- The lowest-rated of the measures listed are the proposals for a **regular forum for CCs** to meet with SLC and to create a **federation of CCs** in South Lanarkshire (as is the case elsewhere e.g. Edinburgh) but is still regarded as ‘very important’ by almost 35-40% of CCs and ‘important’ by a further 30-40%.

Figure 6: Do you consider that any of the following measures would be helpful in improving the working relationship of your Community Council with SLC?



7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of the process of community empowerment and participation in Scotland, this report indicates a need for SLC to undertake a fundamental review of its engagement with Community Councils, taking account of the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. Although it is Scottish Government policy to promote greater community engagement, SLC does not have any obvious policy objectives or commitments in its main strategic documents regarding its engagement with Community Councils.

We recommend that SLC:

- a. consults with CCs to **develop a policy on its future engagement with CCs** in line with the best practice of community empowerment in Scotland;
 - b. **develops a strategy and specific measures for mobilising local involvement in CCs**, particularly: (i) to tackle parts of South Lanarkshire where no CCs exist at present; (ii) to assist CCs with limited active membership in broadening their member base; and (iii) to consider how SLC can take on best practice from elsewhere in Scotland in mobilising citizen engagement in CCs; and
 - c. ensures that CCs are able to **participate in the Community Planning process** and have the right to participate in Community Planning Partnership meetings.
2. The survey results provide evidence of both good and bad practice in the relationship between CCs and SLC. In almost all cases, CCs have at least some positive experience of working with SLC although the quality of the working relationship clearly varies across different SLC departments and areas of responsibility. We do not underestimate the pressures on SLC resources in the current financial environment and the constraints that this places on quality of service. Nevertheless, the survey results indicate that there is a need to ensure a more consistent culture and practice of positive engagement with CCs.

To this end, we recommend that SLC:

- a. **introduces a Code of Practice for all SLC departments** that requires them to work with (not just consult) CCs in the development of policies and delivery of services that affect the communities that CCs represent;
- b. **requires all Committee papers to include a standard heading** specifying what engagement with CCs has taken place regarding the topic of the Committee paper;
- c. **promotes a culture of transparency and openness throughout SLC**, for example by actively encouraging participation requests and advising CCs on how to submit them successfully; and

- d. **encourages SLC Councillors to attend CC meetings** regularly to support information flows and dialogue between SLC and CCs.
- 3. Planning is a core area where CCs have a responsibility for representing community interests. Indeed, a Planning Advice Note has previously been published on the involvement of CCs in the planning process. It is, though, an area where some CCs have reported particular difficulties in getting access to relevant documents, consulting their communities, and submitting comments, especially in complex cases.

We recommend that the SLC Planning Department set up a working group with representatives of CCs from different types of community in South Lanarkshire to identify practical ways of improving information flows and access, liaison, support in responding to major or significant planning applications, and other options to improve CC effectiveness in this area (e.g. giving CCs the opportunity to address the Planning Committee).

- 4. The survey indicates that CCs experience significant constraints with respect to both expertise and time in dealing with local concerns and developing or implementing projects.

We recommend that SLC invests in the provision of capacity-building resources and development specifically for CCs, including the following measures:

- a. a regular **programme of training** for both office-bearers and CC members, potentially held in different parts of South Lanarkshire to facilitate access by all CCs;
 - b. an **annual forum** where SLC policy towards CCs can be discussed and co-determined, as well as exchange of experience;
 - c. a central **online resource** that provides guidance to new members, guidelines on dealing with local concerns, and guides to developing projects/initiatives based on the experience of other CCs in South Lanarkshire;
 - d. a **single point of contact** – perhaps via the new Community Empowerment Team – for CCs to get access to CC information and support; and
 - e. consideration of a **federation of CCs** in South Lanarkshire that can ensure the democratisation of decision-making by SLC on CC issues and accountability on both sides.
- 5. Finally, the major constraint for CCs in South Lanarkshire is a shortage of financial resources. The current annual Administration Grant for each CC is equivalent to the cost of a single day of consultancy, and (however it is calculated) is one of the lowest levels of support in Scotland.

We recommend that SLC consults with CCs to co-determine a new system of financial support that reflects their current financial needs and – in particular – the future demands on CC in managing community empowerment.