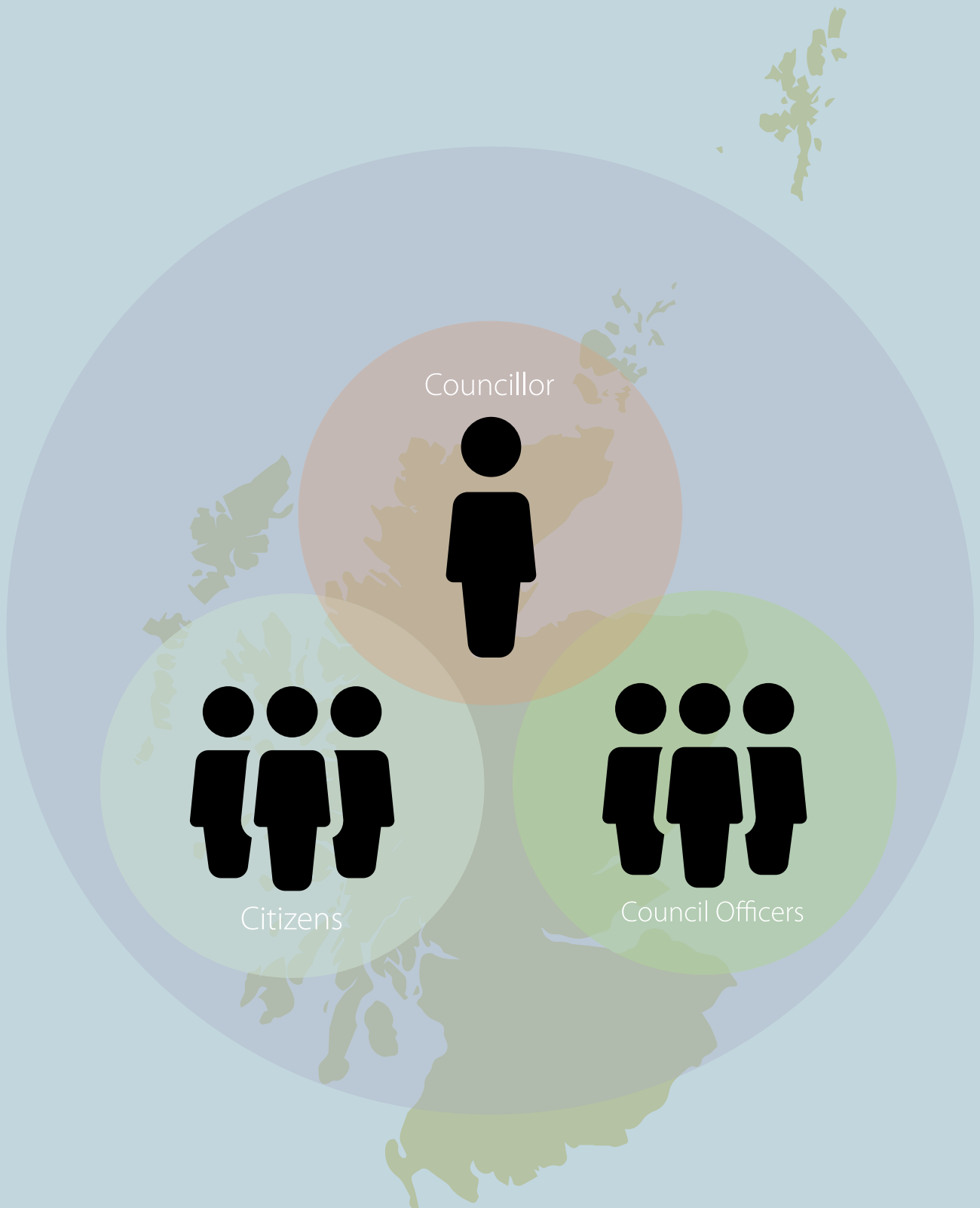


Doing local politics: supplementary report

Centre and locality in Scottish politics

A report for APSE Scotland



About APSE

APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK. Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority front line services, hosting a network for front line service providers in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, housing and building maintenance.

Contributors

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This pamphlet has been produced following on from that research by Professor Richard Freeman (University of Edinburgh) Professor Steven Griggs (de Montfort University) and Susan Lassesen (Master of Public Policy, Edinburgh University)

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In 2017, we completed an APSE study of the work and world of the councillor and interconnected worlds of the council officer and the engaged citizen.¹ Having been concerned then with horizontal relations between those who do politics at local level, we were asked to investigate the vertical relationships between local councillors and national politics in Holyrood and Westminster.

Recent national and local elections have changed the political landscape in some areas of Scotland, and new political relationships are being forged at national and local levels as well as between them. A new generation of elected representatives is negotiating new political terrain, with different sorts of mechanisms and opportunities in place to support them.

"From the Government's point of view, they'll go to regular meetings with COSLA spokespeople, but that's covering, or is supposed to be covering, all local authorities sort of thing, whereas when you are talking about party politics, you ought to be speaking to your own party and people in it" #Councillor A

To better understand the vertical relationships between local councillors and national politics we talked to both MSPs and councillors. We were concerned here with the elected rather than administrative branch of government.

This exploratory study is based on six interviews: two with MSPs, of whom one was a constituency MSP and the other a regional MSP, and four with local councillors. Four interviewees were SNP, one was Labour and one was Conservative; four were men and two were women. Half of our respondents were newly elected, while both MSPs had served as local councillors until the local elections of 2017. Our interviews were semi-structured and carried out over the telephone, except for one that was conducted in person.

¹ Anderson, D, Barnett, N, Freeman, R, Griggs, S and Leigh, D (2017) *Doing Local Politics: councillors, officers and communities*, Manchester: APSE

The political division of labour

If we think of politics as a kind of work, we should expect to find one or more divisions of labour within it; the most obvious of these simply reflects the functions and responsibilities of different levels of government. For similar reasons, councillors have much more contact with MSPs than with MPs: local government responsibilities map much more closely on to the competences of the Scottish Government and Parliament than to Whitehall and Westminster:

"I'll contact my MSP if there's an issue with other organisations such as Scottish Water, Transport Scotland, that type of thing, we try to put some pressure on to get the issue resolved" #Councillor D

This makes for a corresponding need for communication and coordination:

"They need to know what is going on here in the Scottish Parliament. They need to know the public policies that are coming out of here, the legislation that is coming out of here a lot of which affect local government. We as MSPs need to know what our councillors are thinking on these issues, but they also need to know what we're doing." #MSP S

However, while both MSPs and councillors perceive their respective roles as complimentary, they do not necessarily agree on how, when and why to involve each other, and nor do they have any standard institutional mechanism for doing so.

A puzzle

We begin with the puzzle which prompted this second phase of investigation: some councillors seem well connected with higher tiers of politics and government, while others do not.

"Yes, obviously the MSP will come along to branch meetings, constituency Labour party meetings, we will email each other, we will telephone each other. We use all sorts and forms of communication that we can, you know. And in the main, just to try and help each other." #Councillor D

"Sometimes as well as this we've got regular meetings set up between myself, the leader of the Council, and the MSP and the MP, and the Chief Executive of the Council. So, we will sit around the table together to discuss issues and ways forward, but that can sometimes involve also opposition, list MSPs, etc. that they can come along too" #Councillor W

but,

"If we're talking about, how can I put it, trying to influence policy or anything like that, then there is very little contact between Councillors and MSPs on a regular or semi-regular basis." #Councillor A

Our explanation of the discrepancy is of two kinds: one is that parties matter, and the other is that people matter. The contingencies of electoral strength mean that, in some councils, the party serves as an effective vehicle of communication between local and national systems of representation. At the same time, of course, individual elected representatives quite naturally manage their work in different ways: communicating with counterparts at different levels is more important for some than for others. Meanwhile, recent elections have put new people in new positions: this makes for a changed pattern of opportunities to work together, and a new interest among some representatives to develop new practices for doing so.

Parties matter

Of course, party allegiance matters to politicians with party affiliations:

"I think, we're an SNP led authority, we have an SNP MP and MSP so for us we have really good direct links with the Government and I think that is because that's where you can see Government policy actually being delivered locally because we're signed up to the same issues and we support the same politics so I think that is where you can see all three strands working together for the same aim" #Councillor W

"I mean, the MSPs will get in contact with you and ask 'what are your ideas for the project and that type of thing for the following year?', 'what sort of things do you think I could support?', 'what sort of things do you think I can't support?', you know... 'How can I support you to deliver what the Council wants?'. In that respect, the party thing is quite good" #Councillor D

"You deal with you own party" #Councillor S

That said, we found some evidence of cross-party collaboration, too:

"The Conservative list MSP is actually quite involved with lots of different things and will come to Council events which is quite good for cross-party working really to get an open dialogue happening" #Councillor W

"You know, he [constituency MSP] is really approachable for looking for answers to a question on something that's come up in Parliament or a new initiative that they're trying to roll out etcetera. We can get quite a lot of information from him. We do have list MSPs as well which are quite active and that's from different parties across the board. So, we see them quite a lot, they come to a lot of Council events" #Councillor W

More and more of this contact seems to happen in more formal institutional spaces such as joint boards, committees and cross-party working groups:

"These meetings are cross-party, but they work, because you'll find that you just lose your party voucher at the door. You are just there to talk about the issues. People wear their colours when they are in public, when they know they are being watched. If you're not being watched you just behave normally" #MSP S

People matter

Other differences matter, too: between levels of experience and commitment, and between different personalities and patterns of working.

"[Council officials] do tend to run the show, they can run rings around councillors, particularly inexperienced councillors. So councillors, who often don't have the time or might often have other jobs, can find it difficult to scrutinise things properly, so I think that, you need to be quite a good councillor, you need to really be on the ball, in order to drive policy. It's not easy. I had some success, but only after a few years, once you've gotten your head around the system, got to know people, got them to trust you while working. It's a difficult balance, the officers have a lot of power" #MSP S

"I was part of a community-led action planning group in my own area, which is what led me to become involved in local politics and I think that some of the experiences that I've had and talks that I've given etc. is bringing me to the attention of different MSPs which has then fed into invitations for different things" #Councillor W

The new political landscape following the elections has offered some national politicians a chance to reconnect with local councillors and party branches. One MSP for example reported having introduced regular monthly meetings with councillors following political changes after the elections. However, shifting electoral fortunes can ultimately work in both directions, opening up new opportunities to connect while closing down others.

Indeed, it's not just that people matter; it's immediate and direct face-to-face contact between them that really makes a difference. Politics is done not by individuals, but by individuals in interaction with others. They exchange information whenever they meet, either at occasional events or in the course of regular organisational processes:

"Well, I had a conversation with [politician] at an award ceremony on Saturday night... so [he] came over to speak to me about discussing [what is being delivered on a local level] and see how we can roll that out on a national level to get councils more involved in that type of work" #Councillor W

"I mean, obviously, we have APSE and COSLA as well, where we meet up and we discuss things and look at best practice and look at research and see if there're things we can improve on. So, I mean, all the above we go to, in the hope that we can find, that's if we need a solution across, but also to get support from other organisations, MSPs and MPs to say 'yeah, I can understand where you are coming from, I can do this to help you.' Because, there are maybe things that we don't know that MSPs and MPs can do" #Councillor D

Conclusion

"What I've tried to say is that as a political party we need to have a structure where we can put in place a dialogue between these levels of government, whether it's informal or formal, it really doesn't matter. We need to have a structure in place so we can talk about things" #Councillor A

We began by setting out a puzzle: why do some councillors seem well connected with higher tiers of politics and government, while others do not? Our answer lies in the types of resources that facilitate interactions across the multiple spaces and levels of government, namely political parties and personal networks. In many ways, these resources act as the 'oil' between diverse governance spaces. But they are both highly contingent; they necessarily operate informally, and they tend towards exclusivity.

What are we to draw from such conclusions? At first glance, it is tempting to argue that parties and networks, whatever their limitations, are characteristic practices of political work, which are naturally and essentially difficult to regulate.

However, it is difficult to deny that they also entail a governance problem. When used as primary methods of coordination and communication, parties and networks are always likely to reproduce differentiated modes of political access, amplify instability, and place inherent constraints on transparency and public accountability. Indeed, such practices may well take on increasing salience in the current context of the number of Scottish councils with no overall majority, increasing demands for democratic renewal, and emerging spaces of collaboration and partnership beyond the boundaries of any single local authority.

Against this background, this study adds to the calls for a renewed dialogue on the multi-tier governance of Scotland. Governance practices, like those of the economy, are not given. They are shaped by our practices and those of others. Most importantly, they are to be called into question and subjected to public debate and assessment. What do we want of our local political representatives? How should we supplement existing modes of coordination and communication between centre and locality in Scottish politics?

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