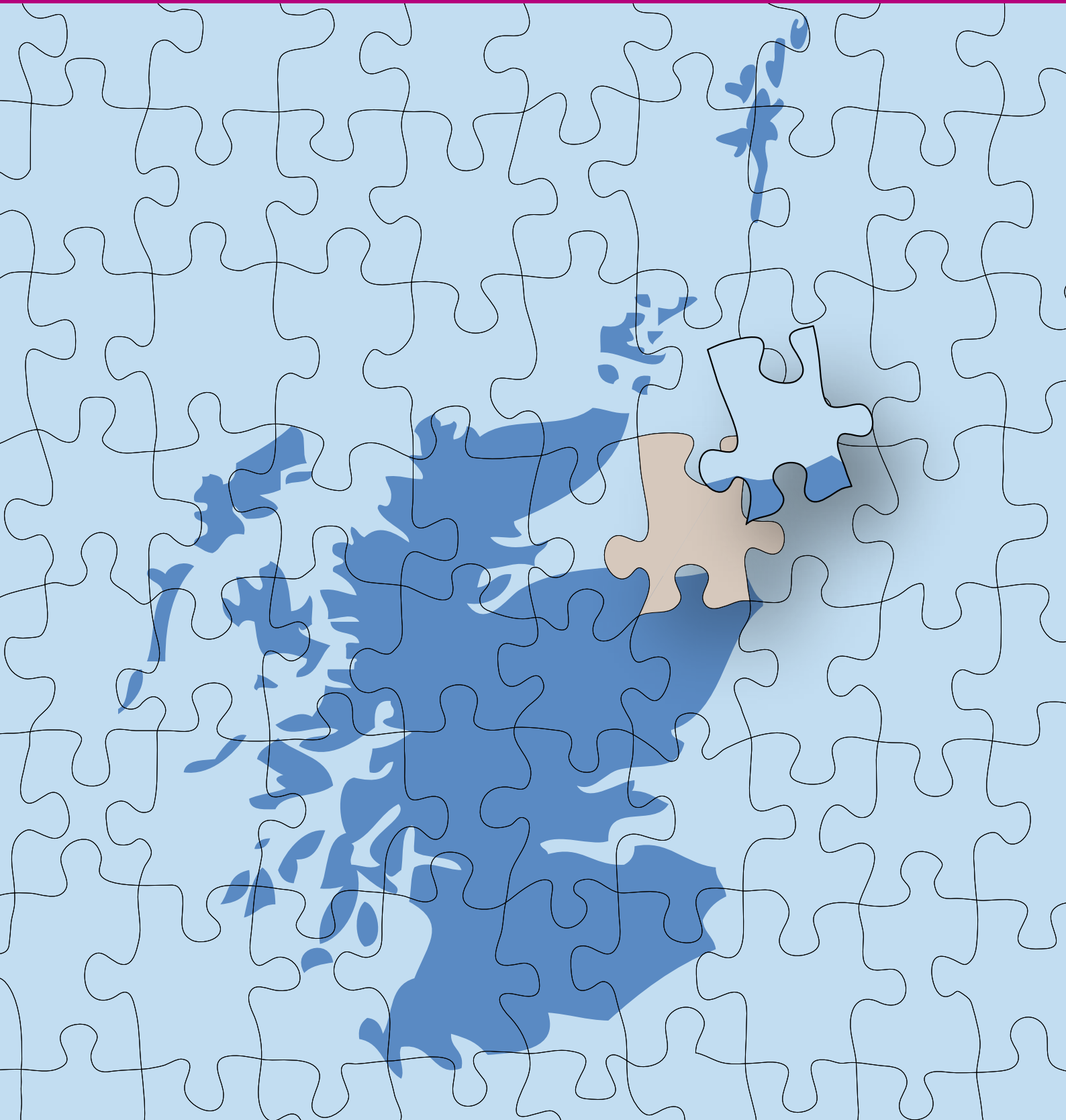


# The final piece of the jigsaw

Elected members, everyday politics and local democracy in Scotland





# **The final piece of the jigsaw**

Elected members, everyday politics and local democracy in Scotland

February 2016



**The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)** 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 council frontline service provision in areas such as waste and refuse collection, parks and environmental services, leisure, school meals, cleaning, housing and building maintenance and energy services.



### The authors

This research was led by Neil Barnett (Leeds Beckett University), Professor Richard Freeman (Edinburgh University), and Professor Steven Griggs (De Montfort University). It benefited from the support and advice offered by Louise Melville (APSE) and Paul O'Brien (APSE).

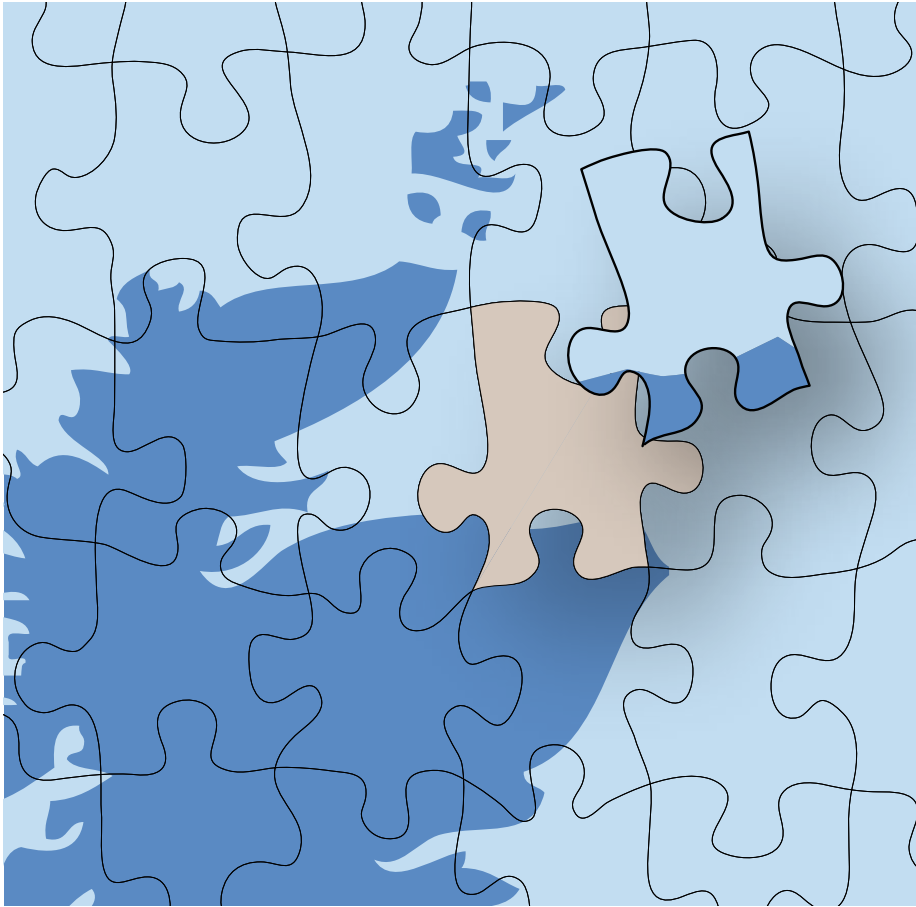


The authors would like to thank all those elected members who completed diaries, attended focus groups and agreed to be interviewed. The report would not have been possible without their collaboration and engagement. All contributions have been anonymised.

Published by APSE  
February 2016  
ISBN: 978-1-907388-32-3

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Councillors and the post-referendum context in Scotland</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. The role of councillors and its shifting political context</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3. The work of being a councillor</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4. Conclusions: reinvesting in the office of the councillor</b>	<b>18</b>



# Executive summary

This research seeks to offer a novel contribution to on-going debates over the future of elected members and local democracy in Scotland. Building on APSE's 2014 report, *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*, it examines the everyday practices of local councillors. Awareness of these everyday practices, we argue, has to inform any redesign of Scottish local politics, for it is only too easy to take these oft neglected routines, rules, and local capabilities for granted. Indeed, our findings suggest that the new common sense of local politics runs the risk of bypassing the specific contribution of local councillors to local democracy in Scotland. We argue in favour of a reinvestment in the work of elected members, building reforms on a deeper understanding and engagement with what councillors actually do when they do 'local politics'. Put alternatively, elected members and their everyday practices should be seen as the 'final piece of the jigsaw' in Scottish local democratic politics.

## Challenging the new common sense

Councillors play a pivotal role in local democratic politics. Yet, the work of elected members is not always visible to the general public, neither is it always well received or popular, particularly when councils are taking the difficult decisions to reduce services or close amenities. At the same time, their position in local decision-making has been subjected to a 'pincer movement' that has 'hollowed out' their capabilities, but not always their perceived responsibilities in the eyes of the public. Indeed, it is now arguably part of the new 'common sense' across government departments, think tanks and even some councils themselves, that the role of the elected member needs to change, that councillors require new skills and capabilities, and that alternative forms of democratic engagement are the best means to revitalise local politics.

The findings of this study call into question this new 'common sense'. This is not to retreat to a defensive position. Elected members who participated in this study recognised the constraints on their current role, and indeed the varying effectiveness and commitment of local councillors themselves. But, the new common sense ultimately runs the risk of bypassing local councillors in any discussions of the future of local democracy in Scotland. It either constructs councillors as part of the 'problem' rather than part of the 'solution', it tends to ignore them, or it takes their role for granted, with councillors becoming the symbolic vessel for a host of demands and grievances that cannot be simply attributed to the failings of local representative politics. And, as this study suggests, it fails to recognise the multiple roles undertaken as part of the everyday practice of local councillors. Put alternatively, rather than bypassing councillors, we need to reinvest in the work of elected members, building any reforms using a deeper understanding and engagement with what councillors actually do when they do 'local politics'.

## Six recommendations to trigger a new dialogue

How do we begin to reinvest in the role of councillors? In the first instance, it is only by establishing a broad and open set of debates on the future of councillors and local democratic politics that we can begin to rediscover the work of councillors and their role in everyday local politics. Councillors can no longer remain on the sidelines of such debates, responding to the many pressures and changes externally imposed upon them. Their individual and collective voices have to be expressed better and indeed heard better. Individual councillors, party organisations and councils, as well as those organisations which represent and work with local government, should give their voice to a bottom-up dialogue across councils and local forums on the future role of councillors and local authorities.

With this in mind, a new dialogue over the future of local councillors in Scotland should:

### **1. Assess whether the appropriate peer support and mentoring processes are in place in their party groups and councils**

The evidence of this report suggests that councillors should review the forms of peer support and mentoring schemes available to councillors, to focus more on the emotional labour involved in being

a councillor. Such peer support and mentoring will take on increasing importance as councillors experience the stresses and emotional difficulties of cutback management, as well as new demands of political engagement. New councillors entering office in this environment will especially need this support.

## **2. Re-open the public debate over councillor allowances**

In the current climate of public spending cuts to local government, there is no denying that the question of councillor allowances is a thorny political issue. However, many recognise that, as it stands, allowances for councillors, given the commitments associated with the office, do not provide sufficient financial support for those with other family or personal commitments, which limits the opportunities to recruit councillors from all walks of life. Allowances should be reviewed as a means of encouraging a broader recruitment across society and allowing more people to stand for election.

## **3. Review councillors' interactions with community councils**

Relations with community councils vary enormously. Going forward, there is a need to consider what impact empowering communities have upon councillors, and what role they can be expected to play alongside, and in collaboration with, community councils. No doubt, councillors will be expected to negotiate between new democratic inputs from communities, and the broader demands of party groups and the council as a whole, bringing additional pressures. Councillors have played this kind of role, informally adjusting and negotiating, helping to deal with conflicts and tensions within the local political system, for some time, but these demands are likely to increase. Such informality will always be necessary to 'oil the wheels' of the local democratic system, yet councils should recognise the increased pressures, seeking as far as possible to clarify the expectations placed upon councillors when interacting with community councils and other kinds of political fora.

## **4. Take account of the role of party groups in local decision-making**

At the local level, party or independent groups play a key role in securing collective decision-making, and communicating local issues upwards to national parties. This is nothing new. As this study confirms, the party group has always been a significant actor in the political work of local councillors. However, its role is often covered or skipped over in debates on the future role of councillors and local authorities. This omission rules out an essential dynamic of local decision-making practices. As the debate on the future of local government in Scotland moves forward, the party group has to be foregrounded once again as a central element of local politics and a primary conduit of the collective voice of councillors.

## **5. Clarify the mandate of councillors on boards or partnerships**

Councillors are increasingly led to sit on partnerships or boards alongside a host of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. Paradoxically, however, the study revealed that councillors are on such boards because they are councillors, but they are often not able to play the role of an elected member on such boards. They are constrained sometimes by legal requirements or at other times by the absence of a mandate or even the consensus-driven politics that underpins partnership working and collaboration. In the future, the different roles of councillors on external bodies and the capabilities required to undertake such roles effectively requires clarification. The question as to whether elected members are on these boards to be a councillor or because they are a councillor needs to be answered.

## **6. Review the governance arrangements of multi-member wards.**

Multi-member wards, this report demonstrates, may well muddy the essential connection between individual councillors and their constituents, undermining established practices of local accountability. They can also produce a set of practical tensions relating to the working relationships and sharing of workloads between councillors, not to mention concerns over the politics of place and how the boundaries of wards cut across 'natural' communities. These potential outcomes should be reviewed as part of any national debate over the future of local democracy in Scotland. Indeed, without a systematic assessment of the impacts of multi-member wards on the practices of local politics, any renegotiation of the Scottish polity risks being built on shaky foundations.



## Reconnecting local councillors

These six recommendations all point to the overarching need to reconnect Scottish politics, bringing local councillors firmly back into the centre of debates. Concern over the state of representative politics generally, lack of public engagement, and the vibrancy of local democracy has led to a plethora of initiatives, in Scotland and elsewhere. These initiatives should not be seen in isolation, and their accumulated incremental impacts on remodelling local democracy have to be recognised. Such impacts are complex and often contradictory, such that centralisation has arguably gone hand-in-hand with the fragmentation of local governance. Most importantly, their impact on the role of councillors needs to be re-considered. Too often this has not been recognised, leaving councillors as unseen players whilst reforms take place around them. Indeed, this study suggests that councillors have become increasingly disconnected, both horizontally and vertically, from other political areas, be it in terms of their capacity to act as a link to national arenas, to partnership boards, or to communities and community councils. Councillors are over-reliant on informal networks to facilitate interactions with the national and local, and between the authority and other local players. In other words, there is a need to reconnect Scottish politics. But, as others have recognised, this requires a broader discussion on the political system and the role of local authorities within it. And, importantly, in the short-term, it demands that we once again raise the cultural authority of the office of the local councillor.

# 1. Councillors and the post-referendum context in Scotland

It is an extremely pertinent time to be considering the role of councillors in Scotland. Post-referendum, the polity is undergoing change and there are emerging and changing constitutional and democratic settlements as the role of all tiers of governance in a newly devolved settlement are reconsidered. With respect to local government, a number of critical voices have drawn attention to the implications for local democracy of Scotland having the largest local government in Europe (demographically and geographically).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the levels of political engagement generated by the 2014 referendum have led to renewed interest in community and locality-based forms of participation. The value of maintaining these in a healthy democratic polity has been recognised by the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act, 2015.<sup>2</sup> It is important and timely, then, to consider the role of councillors in the context of this broad political and societal change. There are now normative and practical issues to think through: what do councillors do, what should they do, and how do they fit into this new polity? From one perspective, these changes can be seen to undermine the role of councillor. However, in turn, councillors can be seen as ever more vital to an effective democratic system. Whilst it is therefore important to acknowledge the extent to which the role of councillor needs to adapt to a changing environment, it is also vital to recognise the continuing importance of elected representative democracy at the local level.

With this in mind, this exploratory research, *The Final Piece in the Puzzle*, seeks to offer a novel contribution to on-going debates over the future of elected members and local democracy in Scotland. Building on APSE's 2014 report, *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*, it examines the everyday practices of local councillors. Awareness of these everyday practices, we argue, has to inform any redesign of Scottish local politics, for it is only too easy to take these oft neglected routines, rules, and local capabilities for granted. Indeed, the contribution of elected members to local communities is not always visible or well understood, and not just by the general public. Of course, elected members who participated in this study recognised the constraints on their current and future role, and the varying effectiveness and commitment of local councillors themselves. But, our findings suggest that the new common sense of local politics runs the risk of bypassing the specific contribution of local councillors to local democracy in Scotland. We thus conclude in favour of a reinvestment in the work of elected members, building reforms on a deeper understanding and engagement with what councillors actually do when they do 'local politics'. Put alternatively, elected members and their everyday practices should be seen as the 'final piece of the jigsaw' in Scottish local democratic politics.

The findings of the report are drawn from a series of practitioner diaries, focus groups and interviews with elected members from authorities across Scotland. We begin with a critical analysis of the shifting political context within which councillors work, before turning to an exploration of the everyday practices of elected members. We conclude by setting out the implications of our findings for policy, practice and on-going debates over the future of local democracy in Scotland.

---

<sup>1</sup> Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (2014) *Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities*, available at [www.localdemocracy.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Final-Report-August-2014.pdf](http://www.localdemocracy.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Final-Report-August-2014.pdf) retrieved 25 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For details of the Act, see [www.gov.scot/Topics/People/engage/CommEmpowerBill](http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/engage/CommEmpowerBill) retrieved 22 December 2015.

## 2. The role of councillors and its shifting political context

### The complex role of the councillor

To an extent, the current pressures on Councillors in Scotland highlight and reflect long term trends and debates, which serve as a starting point for post-referendum debates. The complexities of the role of councillors have long been recognised, with councillors, as elected ward representatives, often having conflicting roles and needing to both defend their 'patch' and act in the broader interests of the Council and the area as a whole. As representatives, they have to strike a balance between the differing ways in which their role can be enacted.<sup>3</sup> Classically, they may be seen as delegates, mandated to act according to the wishes of those who elected them, or as trustees, weighing ward-based demands against their judgement of the broader interest. Thus, studies of councillors' roles have identified role types, ranging, for example, from the 'parochial' – oriented towards ward casework – to the 'policy-broker', who focuses more on the work of 'the Council as a whole'.<sup>4</sup> Being a representative, by its very nature, involves a negotiation of roles and potential conflicts. Even what seems to be the most straight-forward relationship - that of councillor to the ward which elected them - has become muddled to an extent by the introduction of multi-member wards. Further, the growth and continuing importance of party politics in local government creates more complexity by adding party loyalty into the mix and creating the 'party soldier' role, in which the relationship of elected members with the electorate is mediated and potentially deflected by party discipline. A plethora of councillor roles have thus been identified over the years; what is clear is that the competing demands on councillors as ward-based representatives, elected (usually) on a party-based manifesto often overlap and are difficult to disentangle.

This lack of clarity of role has led to reforms in the past, aimed at rectifying this issue. New Labour's 'modernisation' agenda was an attempt to separate executive/cabinet (policy-making) roles from 'backbench'/scrutiny ones. However, in turn, these have created their own difficulties, including concerns over both the weakening role of non-executive members and the creation of *Two Tribes* in local government<sup>5</sup>, and over the 'managerialisation' of the executive role. In Scotland, a distinctly Scottish local government has become increasingly apparent since devolution<sup>6</sup>, and a variety of governance models have been adopted by Councils, based more around the retention of the committee system, but with a similar trend towards cabinets and executives. It could be argued that in both cases, attempts have been made to formalise roles which in fact have to be worked through in practice, perhaps differently in each local setting, as competing claims are juggled by councillors, and the 'awkward positions' which are bound up with multifaceted identities of the representative are negotiated.

### Increasing pressures: a pincer movement on councillors

There is no doubt that political and social trends have put further pressures on elected members and posed fundamental questions, not only concerning their role but also their continuing relevance, making it all the more important to identify their continued importance in not only the local, but also the national polity. Councillors have been subject to a 'pincer movement' from above and below. From 'above', firstly, successive government policies have reduced the role of the Council as direct service provider and introduced into localities a range of new actors - public, private and voluntary - meaning that councillors now operate amidst the networks, partnerships and complex arrangements which make up the local governance arena. They often have new roles as members of partnerships, boards and so on, in which their role as representative is at best indirect.

3 Sweeting, D. and Copus, C. (2012) 'Whatever Happened to Local Democracy?', *Policy & Politics* 40(1): 20-37.

4 Copus, C. (2008) 'English Councillors and Mayoral Governance: Developing a New Dynamic for Political Accountability', *Political Quarterly* 79(4): 590-604.

5 APSE (2014) *Two Tribes? Exploring the Future Role of Elected Members*, Manchester: APSE; APSE (2014) *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*, Manchester: APSE.

6 McGarvey, N. (2012) 'Expectations, Assumptions and Realities: Scottish Local Government Post-Devolution', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14(1): 153-74.

These complex environments, in which elected members share decision-making with a wide range of non-elected actors, raise issues of democratic legitimacy and require the design of new forms of accountability, which, at best, appear only to have been very tentatively worked through in practice. Councillors in these positions therefore find themselves having to negotiate new roles, 'on the hoof'.<sup>7</sup> They may or may not be acting in these settings with a mandate from their electors, their party group, or their Council. In particular, as the partnerships are often strategic in nature, elected members once again face tensions in negotiating their role as 'trustee' (with respect to both their electorate and their Council), party representative (with respect to the party group on the Council) and acting according to their judgement of the broader interest. Adding to these pressures, to operate effectively in these settings, councillors have to develop new skills in negotiation, diplomacy, and consensus-building.

Now, in addition, the pressures of austerity coming from 'above' are likely to have a profound impact on councillors. Their constituents often face increased and more complex difficulties, leading to an increase in case work. With much less financial discretion, hard choices become necessary, leaving doubts about whether even statutory services can be maintained; this not only increases the stresses involved in the role, but also will perhaps add to difficulties in recruiting, retaining and motivating councillors. Already, councillors tend to be older, white, and more male than society as a whole. Moreover, the search for cost savings reduces officer support in terms of policy development and creates increased pressure to use a range of service delivery mechanisms, be it Arms Length External Organisations, the sharing of services, or outsourcing, all of which are often deemed necessary for survival but can dilute democratic control and oversight. As Parker has put it, 'the move towards service commissioning cuts councillors out of much day-to-day decision making, while the move towards slicker customer contact centres means that citizens can increasingly resolve their problems directly with the council'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, councillors not involved in strategic decision-making may find themselves increasingly in the dark as to the details of contractual arrangements which directly impact on their wards and which may be in place for 25 years. Again, this compounds the trend towards the 'managerialisation' of the role of the elected member, with Councillors acting more as overseers of contracts and monitors of performance - with varying degrees of access to information - at the expense of a fully formed 'political' role.

From 'below', councillors have increasingly found their democratic primacy in localities challenged. Falling electoral turnouts and levels of participation have fed the notion that there is a mood of 'anti-politics' present, characterised by a declining trust and interest in formal methods of political participation. At the same time, the central role of elected representatives at the heart of local democracy has been challenged by participatory and more deliberative forms of decision-making, by direct action and issue-based activism, and generally by differing forms of political expression. Indeed, councils themselves have been at the forefront of promoting new forms of engagement aimed at 'democratic renewal' via a range of initiatives including, for example, Citizens' Juries. Councillors may become marginalised as councils communicate ever more directly with the public, and, increasingly, citizens engage directly with, or 'co-produce' their local services. It seems that councillors are now but one player in the local 'democratic soup'<sup>9</sup>, and possibly, at best, 'one amongst equals'.<sup>10</sup> Tensions are thus intensified as councillors increasingly have to negotiate their relationship with the myriad of differing claims to democratic legitimacy within their localities, with the danger being that they are 'becoming increasingly left behind in the local democratic mix'.<sup>11</sup> There has thus been pressure on elected members to change, adapt, and embrace this new reality, but often without the full implications for councillors being considered, and without the need to retain central core strengths of the 'traditional' councillor roles as elected representative.

In recognition of these pressures, and particularly the democratic challenges facing them, new roles for councillors have been proposed. The 'Community Leader' or 'Community Champion' (promoted explicitly by New Labour) redefines the role of councillors as facilitators of community engagement.

7 Copus, C. (2015) *Bringing Order to Chaos and Governing Through Governance Networks*, paper to Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Sheffield, 30 March-01 April 2015.

8 Parker, S. (2013) 'Introduction' in S. Parker and L. Scott-Smith (eds) *Future Councillors: Where Next for Local Politics*, London: NLGN, p.6.

9 Hendriks, C.M. (2009) 'The Democratic Soup: Mixed Meanings of Political Representation in Governance Networks', *Governance* 22(4): 689-715.

10 Richardson, L. (2012), 'Handing Over the Reins of Power: Making Local Democracy Work', *Political Insight* 3(3): 32-4.

11 Sweeting and Copus, 2012, 'Whatever Happened to Local Democracy?', p. 33.

This allegedly enhanced role is seen to require radical re-adjustment in self-perception and attitude from councillors, with elected members becoming 'conductors', rather than 'directors', making use more of relational and 'soft' powers and taking on a broader political role in ensuring the health of the local democracy. This is sometimes portrayed as a non-ideological, post-party political role and has been seen as an opportunity to re-invent the councillor for networked local governance.<sup>12</sup> However, others have stressed the still essentially political nature of this type of role, setting out a more radically politicised role in which Councillors, as 'public persons' play a metagovernor role in ensuring the inclusion of all affected voices in democratic debate.<sup>13</sup>

However, despite coaxing, it has proven very difficult to get elected members to fully embrace this redefined community leadership role, and research across Europe indicates that they continue to play 'traditional' roles.<sup>14</sup> Exhortations for councillors to adapt new kinds of roles, as we suggest above, have been loaded on top of existing pressures and tensions. They have often failed to recognise the ways in which new roles may conflict, or the levels of support that councillors may need to carry them out. Thus, the 'community champion' role contains tensions of its own, and conflicts with existing roles as trustee, delegate, and party representative.

Despite all of the above, it is clear that the role of the councillor is still of vital importance. The complexity of local governance underlines the need for 'democratic anchorage' in accountable, elected direction and supervision. Complex local governance can be unaccountable and fragmented, requiring collective overview most legitimately provided by elected representatives. On the one hand, participatory and activist politics needs to be connected to collective decision-making - a conduit provided by councillors who retain a role in connecting the 'micro' deliberative forums with strategic, 'macro' decision-making.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there may be many representative claims across communities, but councillors, being elected, have a 'head start'<sup>16</sup>; they have a perceived legitimacy, serve to make issues visible and represent, symbolically, the political collectivity.

## The 'pincer' in the Scottish context

In Scotland, there are particular ways in which these trends are being played out. The re-energisation of political engagement during and following the 2014 referendum here poses less a question of anti-politics than of how engagement can be maintained, and in what forms. However, councils have been faced with the 'top down' pressures surrounding local governance networks, and, increasingly, of austerity. The introduction of statutory Health and Social Care Boards, which has been called 'the most significant change in the public service landscape in Scotland in recent years'<sup>17</sup>, is one such pressure. There are also increasing demands due to demographic changes at the same time as decreasing real terms funding. 'Bottom up' pressures have been recognised, and the role of new forms of engagement to revive local democracy via greater community engagement and initiatives around direct participation, are increasingly advocated.<sup>18</sup> Many of these have now become legislative requirements for local councils following the introduction of the Community Empowerment Act 2015, including a new statutory requirement for Community Planning Partnerships and Single Outcome Agreements which leaves elected members to negotiate, or re-negotiate relationships with a range of new and existing (but emboldened) actors, including community councils. At the same time, the importance of strategic, co-ordinated and 'whole area' approaches is recognised; thus the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy addresses the complexity of local governance issues by talking of the need for 'whole area' approaches across 'spheres not tiers'.

### The Community Empowerment Act and the documents mentioned above pose important issues

<sup>12</sup> Zacharzewski, A. (2013) 'Open, Networked, Democratic: A Localist Future' in LGIU, *Connected Localism*, London: LGIU, p.21; see also Copus (2008), *English Councillors and Mayoral Governance*, and Richardson (2012), *Handing Over the Reins of Power*.

<sup>13</sup> Lepine, E. and Sullivan, H. (2010) 'Realising the Public Person', *Local Government Studies* 36(1): 91-107.

<sup>14</sup> Plüss, L. and Kübler, D. (2013) 'Coordinating Community Governance? Local Councillors in Different Governance Network Arrangements' in B. Egner, D. Sweeting and P.-J. Klok (eds.) *Local Councillors in Europe*, Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 203-19.

<sup>15</sup> Hendriks, C.M. (2006) 'Integrated Deliberation: Reconciling Civil Society's Dual Role in Deliberative Democracy', *Political Studies* 54(3): 486-508.

<sup>16</sup> Judge, D. (2013) 'Word From the Street: When Non-Electoral Representative Claims Meet Electoral Representation in the United Kingdom', *British Politics* 8: 388-409.

<sup>17</sup> Accounts Commission (2015) *An Overview of Local Government in Scotland 2015*, Edinburgh: Audit Scotland, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> See Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (2014) *Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities*; Electoral Reform Society and Public Policy Network (2013) *Democracy Max*, Edinburgh: ERS; Bort, E., McAlpine, R. and Morgan, G. (2012) *The Silent Crisis*, Biggar: Jimmy Reid Foundation.

concerning the role of Councillors, but also point to the continued importance of councillors within the kind of local democratic polity, which they envisage. However, they rarely explicitly mention Councillors and the part they are to play. It may be that this is taken for granted, or perhaps it is still to be worked through. However, it is necessary to explicitly consider these impacts. Emerging questions concern the additional pressures on councillors, what impact this may have on recruitment, retention, and the attractiveness of the 'job' of councillor to a broader and more diverse group of people. More specifically, how do councillors link into the wider local and national polity, not simply upwards to the national level, but across to partnerships, and downwards to communities? Correspondingly, what kinds of support can be given to Councillors who have to adapt to the new environment? It is these questions that we now address.

## 3. The work of being a councillor

### A heavy and diverse workload

It is widely recognised that elected members take on diverse roles and responsibilities across different political and social contexts. However, the diversity and intensity of the work of the elected member bears repeating once more. On average elected members spend 35 hours per week on council business.<sup>19</sup> They can work from early mornings through to late evenings, throughout the working week and weekends. Typically, one elected member, who held an executive leadership position, reported at the end of one day's diary entry: 'I will leave the council and have a free evening which is quite unusual.'

But, it is also the diversity of tasks, and the skills set required to exercise them, that strikingly come to the fore when the everyday practices of elected members are put under the spotlight. Diary entries listed a range of roles and responsibilities which included: negotiating over contaminated land; chairing national or local partnerships and boards; supporting and mentoring other elected members; attending council meetings; visiting site offices; getting briefed by senior officers; working with constituents and holding surgeries; attending community councils; opening and participating in local festivals; meeting with the press and undertaking radio interviews. Many of these activities took place on the same day. They also led elected members to engage in a whole range of expert policy issues and decisions, from planning, housing and climate change through to financial management, licensing regulations, spending plans, street services and so on.

### Working the patch and attending meetings: the staple diet of the councillor

However, amongst this diverse set of roles and responsibilities, there are some activities, which are part and parcel of the work of the councillor. Elected members consistently pointed to three primary activities, namely, talking and managing relationships with officers; responding to constituency and ward inquiries; and attending and chairing meetings, be it committees or party groups. Ensuring good working relations with officers was widely seen as a pivotal element of an effective councillor. One councillor thus referred to the need to 'trust [officers] and ask them daft questions.' Significantly, and in contrast to the concerns expressed by Audit Scotland<sup>20</sup>, elected members in this study voiced no fears or evidence of worsening councillor-officer relations under conditions of austerity.

Community patch or work in wards was identified as a key component of the work of councillors in the 2014 survey. Participants in this study valued their engagement with communities. Indeed, in taking on such roles, focus group respondents reinforced that councillors exercise multiple roles, providing a 'bridge' to services, acting as a 'fixer' of problems, a 'doer' who helps get things done, and, when required, working even as a 'buffer' between the council and communities.

In many ways, the local authority can be seen in the daily practices of elected members to be a series of meetings, with executive councillors seemingly running from meeting to meeting. These meetings have to be prepared: agendas have to be set, strategies and potential points of conflict identified, and formal rules and procedures learnt. The currency of much of this work is the ability to deal with and process paperwork. Indeed, one elected member reflected in a diary entry that 'this has been a particularly onerous week for paperwork which I am currently measuring in reams rather than pages.' Another commented that he always dreaded the 'thud on the floor when the papers arrive through the letterbox.' Yet, as councillors were keen to point out, the oil for much of this work was the art of conversation and listening, with much of the work of the councillors taking place backstage or in the wings through short informal 'chats' with colleagues, officers and members of the community.

---

<sup>19</sup> APSE (2014) *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Accounts Commission (2014) *An Overview of Local Government in Scotland 2014*, Edinburgh: Audit Scotland, p.22.



## Accelerating demands and public ownership

Whilst these findings confirm existing, if not publicly acknowledged, perceptions of the role of the elected member, councillors also perceived the pace of their work to have 'accelerated' in recent years.<sup>21</sup> One elected member thus declared that he said to his family that 'I am here occasionally... I have a picture on the kitchen wall! At the same time, the public facing nature of the role and responsibilities meant that the councillor was rarely off-duty. Indeed, opening fetes, attending a local church meeting or walking down the high street were all potential times to talk to constituents and members of the community. One elected member commented: 'social public events are bread and butter to a local politician [...] they give people the opportunity to meet and often present issues informally.' Another spoke of how attending such public events brought together 'a combination of socialising on-duty and picking up casework from constituents.'

But this public profile cannot be divorced from the pressures of being a 'public person'.<sup>22</sup> One elected member explained therefore that to be a councillor, candidates had to reconcile themselves with the pressures that came from 'people have a sense of ownership of you.' Another acknowledged that 'my mobile is available, as is my address; people regularly knock on my door.' Elected members never perceived themselves to be 'off duty', and most importantly, neither did many constituents within their wards. Councillors brought out numerous examples of being approached at times that other post holders would simply not experience. One councillor spoke of being approached by a constituent when part of a funeral cortege. Another spoke of getting a phone call on a festive bank holiday from a constituent who had run out of bin bags and taking the required bin bag around to his home. Importantly, councillors accepted that such ownership went with the role of an elected representative and was part and parcel of the role of an elected member who was there to work with, and for, the community. However, this recognition of ownership cannot be divorced from the acceleration of the work of being a councillor.

Much of the acceleration was explained by the increasing use of email and social media, as well as the absence of any clearly defined boundaries to the work of elected members. One elected member thus commented on the pressures born of the 'lack of ability to forecast, to rely on what's coming, [which] is attritional, wears you down...' Email communications, as in other workplaces, have also brought an 'immediacy [to the role of councillor] that was not there before.' Councillors argued that they felt under pressure to answer emails promptly, whilst smart phones and portable computers meant that councillors were seen as always contactable. Responding to email was thus seen to be an ever-present task in the daily routines of elected members. One respondent thus judged the effectiveness of the day's work by the number of emails left unopened or unanswered. Indeed, emails have come to dictate the speed of the day, with one elected member commenting that the 'first thing you do is check your emails'. Of course, this is a two-way street as councillors can access officers with more ease, and many exploit social media as a means of engaging with local communities. In some wards, social media has replaced surgeries, with one councillor remarking that surgeries were a time 'to sit there watching the birds flying past.' For others, however, generating a social media profile has just added to the list of tasks to be completed, alongside surgeries.

This acceleration of the work of councillors was married to the recognition that there are no minimum standards of what is expected from an elected member. There was widespread agreement that the role of elected member was poorly defined, with one participant commenting that the role is 'just too woolly, [with] too much being asked.' Another elected member spoke of the diversity of commitment from councillors, alluding to the different interpretations of the '5-hour and 40-hour councillor.' One also spoke of the need for parties to vet the skills and capacities of potential candidates, suggesting that, in the absence of any agreed standards, there should be an exam before standing as a candidate, even if it was only to determine IT skills. That said, elected members did disagree over whether this absence of common standards could, and should, be addressed. For some, it was interpreted as a positive element of the role as it gave individual councillors the autonomy to develop the role as they saw fit. For others, the absence of a standard was part and

---

21 Müller (2014) 'Racing for What? Anticipation and Acceleration in the Work and Careers of Academic Life Science Postdocs', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 15(3), available at [www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2245/3726](http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2245/3726) retrieved 22 December 2015.

22 Lepine and Sullivan (2010), *Realising the Public Person*.



parcel of a democratic commitment to encourage all people from different social backgrounds to stand for election. Indeed, one interviewee commented that the post of councillor was not like other roles or jobs and it was not appropriate to think of it in terms of a 'job description'.

## The politics of place

Elected members were acutely aware of how the politics of place can shape their roles and workloads. They called for further recognition of the divisions between rural and urban constituencies, bringing out the sheer distances involved in getting around rural wards and the distinct communities that can cut across the boundaries of some wards. Indeed, elected members, as might be expected, demonstrated a worked knowledge of the political geography of their wards, mapping them in to different communities, estates and 'tribes', drilling down even to local factors such as school catchment areas. Most importantly, elected members shared a critique of ward reorganisations and of the attempt to assume similar workloads for councillors, regardless of the particular social and economic contexts of wards. Here concerns were voiced over the work of the Boundary Commission, its ways of working, and the logic of standardisation of ward population size, which takes little account of potential workloads and has meant the artificial creation and division of communities and places. One councillor dismissed boundary changes as 'a numbers game', which has significant implications for the representation of communities in large rural councils. Take, for example, the district council of Argyll and Bute whose overall population is forecast to continue to decline, although in some areas it is rising. Set against this pattern of demographic change, it may well appear appropriate to reduce the number of councillors across the district. However, in practice, any reduction in the number of elected members can only mean that electoral wards will have to disappear, potentially bringing together in a single ward community in Argyll and Bute, separated by over 50 miles. Whatever the 'numbers', such reorganisations, it was recognised, undermine democratic representation and threaten established levels of community engagement.

But, at the same time, as was considered in APSE 2014 study, the politics of place has arguably transformed following the 2007 introduction of multi-member wards and single transferable vote at local elections. The switch to multi-member wards was posited in the APSE 2014 report as having the potential to amplify the community patch orientation among councillors, whilst potentially adding to the complexity of the relationships between constituents and local representatives. Elected members confirmed that they shared concerns over how the multi-member wards had the potential to fracture lines of accountability and legitimacy between local councillors and constituents. In short, councillors remarked how constituents under multi-member wards 'now shop around', taking issues to one councillor and then to another in search of a desired response. In other cases, councillors soon earned a reputation for dealing effectively with the concerns of constituents and thus attracted over time more demands and inquiries. Equally, responsibilities for delivering changes were not always clear to constituents, with some councillors allegedly 'taking credit' for work undertaken by other councillors in their ward. Of course, much of this depends on the relations between councillors in each ward and such relations are in some circumstances facilitated by party networks. But, elected members who also face the pressures of re-election, were keen to voice concerns over the long-term implications of multi-member wards for democratic accountability and legitimacy.

## Visible and invisible politics

Party groups figure largely in the life of local elected members. If much of the work of councillors is to attend and service committees, it remains the case that collective decision-making is more often than not played out on the fringes of such committees in meetings of party groups. One elected member thus commented that 'the group meeting is where key policy issues are debated and decided upon.' Indeed, the party group was widely seen as an essential forum for the running of the council. As such, the party group militates against divisions between executive and non-executive councillors as it offers a space within which elected members can influence decision-making. But, it would be rash to assume that all party groups operate as open spaces, with councillors offering both positive and negative experiences of member discipline within party groups.

In addition, the predominance of the party group has implications for the external representation of

local politics. It suggests that meetings of the Council take on a more symbolic function as 'everything is done and dusted before the meeting'. This further distances the public from the politics of decision making as formal meetings become a spectacle played out in public, such that a public meeting becomes not a space for engagement but a 'meeting held in public'. Indeed, it is almost as if politics is deliberately kept out of the public arena, posing a question as to how far local parties connect to new forms of politics. In other words, politics is kept 'invisible' for many of the constituencies, local community groups and campaigners, whilst the visible face of politics is often limited to a staged performance of formal opposition and the theatre of local government rules and procedures.

## **The emotional 'hard labour' of being a councillor**

One of the stronger messages to emerge from the pilot study was the emotional labour of being a councillor. This labour was primarily linked to the issue of reductions in public spending and taking difficult decisions over cutback management and service provision. Elected members spoke of 'hard choices' of managing austerity, of making difficult choices that were expected to get worse in the next few years, and of lowering their personal aspirations. Austerity was seen to have made casework more complex, sometimes putting Councillors at odds with decisions taken by their Councils. One elected member spoke of the need to 'harden your heart' in the public role as a councillor. In fact, there was evidence of elected members struggling with conflicts between their private and public selves. Indeed, many respondents pointed out that they 'did not come into the job to do this [make cuts]'. Such claims point to the significance of councillors undertaking what they and others can see as 'dirty work'.<sup>23</sup> One elected member admitted to 'feeling under-valued', whilst one recounted how at a surgery one constituent had told him: 'I like to see the whites of your eyes when you're telling me lies!'

## **Member development or 'learning the job'**

Elected members reported an uneven approach to member development. One councillor ironically commented that in an authority 'going for training was a sign of weakness'. There was also a perception that training programmes and their budgets have come under stress as elected members have focused attention on efficiencies and spending cuts. One councillor commented that 'training just fell by the wayside'. Equally, the training offered and mentioned by participants tended to focus on what we might call 'technical' training on the likes of planning laws and licensing regulations. There was little reference to peer mentoring and support. In many ways, this betrays a broader debate concerning the expectations and demands put upon elected members. They are expected at the same time to offer representation of community demands and to act as expert policy voices across complex portfolios.

Elected members also raised a number of questions concerning the 'thorny issue' of member allowances. The current level of allowances for elected members, it was recognised, meant that many councillors, particularly younger councillors, require another income to support their families and lifestyles. This places a number of constraints on the recruitment of elected members across the wider social spectrum, putting in place barriers to entry into the role. Equally, it leads to increasing pressures on councillors as they try to juggle competing roles of being an elected member and working in another career, which might very well suffer as a consequence.

## **Spaces of politics**

The councillor plays an important role in connecting different spaces of politics, like all elected representatives. Or rather elected members should be in a position to play such a role, what we might term a boundary spanner. Elected members can link both upwards to national government, downwards to community and across to other forums, agencies and partnership boards, which now form part and parcel of local governance of localities. Our respondents suggested that these connections are not always effective or are at least under strain. Of course, party politics can often be the oil that lubricates interactions with national politics, whether members of the Scottish Parliament or Westminster. But, these party channels can just as often act as a block on access when councillors

---

23 McMurray, R. and Ward, J. (2014) "Why Would You do That?": Defining Emotional Dirty Work', *Human Relations*, doi:10.1177/0018726714525975 retrieved 22 December 2015.

belong to a different party; and, moreover, these channels are often informal links, which are in no way institutionalised.

In fact, connections with local MSPs and MPs were not always seen as effective on the ground, even when councillors were from the same party. There were, for example, no regular meetings between councillors and MPs, with 'good relations' dependent, as pointed out above, on personal connections. Councillors spoke of confused lines of accountability between councillors and MSPs and MPs, and expressed a general concern with the weak cultural authority of local government. One elected member argued that 'if councillors are corporals, MSPs are captains, and MPs are lieutenant-colonels.' Another felt that the Scottish Government and MSPs 'floated above' local authorities, whilst yet another stated that 'sadly, the establishment does not see the role of councillors as being important.' This claim was allied both to concerns that national party machines did not always recognise the significance of the councillors and to fears over the centralisation of Scottish politics, with one councillor painting a picture in which local authorities would 'become districts – just responsible for cutting the grass.'

At the same time, councillors were themselves critical of their links to communities. They recognised the casework being undertaken by their peers. Yet, they also expressed concerns as to how the single transferable vote and multi-member wards have added a layer of complexity to community relations. Multi-member wards, elected members argued, have ushered in a new dynamic as they enable communities to 'shop around' taking their demands from councillor to councillor. It was even suggested that communities could play one councillor off against another such that an initial 'no' became a 'yes' (or vice versa). Equally, elected members voiced concerns that work in wards was not always correctly attributed, as other councillors in the ward also claimed responsibility for changes. Strict lines of accountability between the councillor and her electorate were thus arguably made more diffuse.

Relations with community councils remain highly diverse, ranging from the productive to the highly unproductive. Councillors reported good and, at times, excellent working relationships with community councils, often based on councillors' personal experiences of community work. These kinds of personal characteristics and experiences arguably stood in for any formal arrangements. Indeed, one elected member pointed to the lack of partnership working between elected members and community councils, suggesting that antagonistic relations exist, and stating that 'community councils are there to shout at councillors'. Elected members also voiced concerns over the capacity of community councils in certain areas to deliver on their new responsibilities and roles. The representativeness of community councils was questioned, with some councillors viewing community councils as pursuing sectional interests and acting as veto points in the decision-making process. Such claims require further investigations if more widespread and effective dialogue between councillors and community councils are to take place across all areas. Two pressing questions thus emerge from this study: where is the 'community' voice to be found in local political spaces? And what is the role of councillors with relation to it? Answers to these questions currently remain unclear.

Finally, there is the question of linkages across the diverse spaces of local governance. APSE's 2014 report concluded that 'councillors' representation on partnerships needs to be enhanced or, at the very least, the accountability of partnerships to councils reinforced.<sup>24</sup> The findings of this report support this conclusion. However, and more importantly, it surfaces the complexities of the role of councillors on external boards or partnerships. Paradoxically, councillors are on such boards because they are councillors, but they are often not able to play the role of an elected member on such boards. Elected members reported that they rarely attended external boards with a clear mandate from either the Council or the party. In many cases, official regulations, rules and codes of behaviour militated against such mandates. Indeed, one elected member summed up such tensions by arguing that elected members on any kind of external board have to 'forget you are a councillor'. Another stated that their role on each Board was dependent on their own judgement as to 'which hat you wear', either that of a board member bringing their life experience and expertise to matters of the board or that of a representative of the council and defender of its interests on the board.

---

<sup>24</sup> APSE (2014), *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*, p.6.

## 4. Conclusions: reinvesting in the office of the councillor

### Challenging the new common sense

Councillors play a pivotal role in local democratic politics. Yet, the work of elected members is not always visible to the general public, neither is it always well received or popular, particularly when councils are taking the difficult decisions to reduce services or close amenities. At the same time, their position within local decision-making has been subjected to a 'pincer movement' that has 'hollowed out' their capabilities, but not always their perceived responsibilities in the eyes of the public. Indeed, it is now arguably part of the new 'common sense' across government departments, think tanks and even some councils themselves, that the role of the elected member needs to change, that councillors require new skills and capabilities, and that alternative forms of democratic engagement are the best means to revitalise local politics.

The findings of this study call into question this new 'common sense'. This is not to retreat to a defensive position. Elected members who participated in this study recognised the constraints on their current role, and indeed the varying effectiveness and commitment of local councillors themselves. But, the new common sense ultimately runs the risk of bypassing local councillors in any discussions of the future of local democracy in Scotland. It either constructs councillors as part of the 'problem' rather than part of the 'solution', or it tends to ignore them or take their role for granted, with councillors becoming the symbolic vessel for a host of demands and grievances that cannot be simply attributed to the failings of local representative politics. And as this study suggests, it fails to recognise the multiple roles undertaken as part of the everyday practice of local councillors. Put alternatively, rather than bypassing councillors, we need to reinvest in the work of elected members, building any reforms on a deeper understanding and engagement with what councillors actually do when they do 'local politics'.

### Six recommendations to trigger a new dialogue

How do we begin to reinvest in the role of councillors? In the first instance, it is only with the opening up of a broad and open set of debates on the future of councillors and local democratic politics that we can begin to rediscover the work of councillors and their role in everyday local politics. Councillors can no longer remain on the sidelines of such debates, responding to the many pressures and changes externally imposed upon them. Their individual and collective voices have to be better expressed and indeed better heard. Individual councillors, party organisations and councils, as well as those organisations which represent and work with local government, should give their voice to a bottom-up dialogue across councils and local forums on the future role of local councillors and local authorities. Hopefully, this exploratory research will contribute to such debates. Indeed, we set out below six recommendations, which emerge from the voices of councillors engaged in this study, and which should be seen as framing a set of debates to be had across the world of Scottish local government.

With this in mind, a new dialogue over the future of local councillors in Scotland should:

#### 1. Assess whether the appropriate peer support and mentoring processes are in place in their party groups and councils

The development needs of councillors are widely recognised, particularly current demands for training in financial assessment and service performance evaluations. However, the evidence of this report suggests that councillors should review the forms of peer support and mentoring schemes available to councillors, to focus more on the emotional labour involved in being a councillor. Such peer support and mentoring will take on increasing importance as councillors experience the stresses and emotional difficulties of cutback management, as well as new demands of political engagement. New councillors entering office in this environment will especially need this support.

## **2. Re-open the public debate over councillor allowances**

In the current climate of public spending cuts to local government, there is no denying that the question of councillor allowances is a thorny political issue. However, many recognise that, as it stands, allowances for councillors, given the commitments associated with the office, do not provide sufficient financial support for those with other family or personal commitments, which limits the opportunities to recruit councillors from all walks of life. Allowances should be reviewed as a means of encouraging a broader recruitment across society and people to stand for election.

## **3. Review councillors' interactions with community councils**

Relations with community councils vary enormously. There is going forward a need to consider what impact empowering communities has upon councillors, and what role they can be expected to play alongside and in collaboration with community councils. No doubt, councillors will be expected to negotiate between new democratic inputs from communities and the broader demands of party groups and the council as a whole, bringing additional pressures. Councillors have played this kind of role, informally adjusting and negotiating, and helping to deal with conflicts and tensions within the local political system, for some time, but these demands are likely to increase. Such informality will always be necessary to 'oil the wheels' of the local democratic system, but councils should recognise the increased pressures and seek as far as possible to clarify the expectations placed upon councillors when interacting with community councils and newer kinds of political fora.

## **4. Take account of the role of party groups in local decision-making**

At the local level, party or independent groups play a key role in securing collective decision-making, and communicating local issues upwards to national parties. This is nothing new. As this study confirms, the party group has always been a significant actor in the political work of local councillors. However, its role is often covered or skipped over in debates over the future role of councillors and local authorities. This omission rules out an essential dynamic of local decision-making practices. As the debate on the future of local government in Scotland moves forward, the party group has to be foregrounded once again as a central element of local politics and a primary conduit of the collective voice of councillors.

## **5. Clarify the mandate of councillors on boards or partnerships**

Councillors are increasingly led to sit on partnerships or boards alongside a host of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. Paradoxically, however, the study revealed that councillors are on such boards because they are councillors, but they are often not able to play the role of an elected member on such boards. They are constrained sometimes by legal requirements or at other times by the absence of a mandate or even the consensus-driven politics that underpins partnership working and collaboration. In the future, the different roles of councillors on external bodies and the capabilities required to undertake such roles effectively requires clarification. The questions as to whether elected members are on boards to *be* a councillor or because they *are* a councillor needs to be answered.

## **6. Review the governance arrangements of multi-member wards.**

Multi-member wards, this report demonstrates, may well muddy the essential connection between individual councillors and their constituents, undermining established practices of local accountability. They can also produce a set of practical tensions relating to the working relationships and sharing of workloads between councillors, not to mention concerns over the politics of place and how the boundaries of wards cut across 'natural' communities. These potential outcomes should be reviewed as part of any national debate over the future of local democracy in Scotland. Indeed, without a systematic assessment of the impacts of multi-member wards on the practices of local politics, any renegotiation of the Scottish polity risks to be made on shaky foundations.

## Reconnecting Local Councillors

These six recommendations all point to the overarching need to reconnect Scottish politics, bringing local councillors firmly back into the centre of debates. Concern over the state of representative politics generally, lack of public engagement, and the vibrancy of local democracy has led to a plethora of initiatives, in Scotland and elsewhere. These initiatives should not be seen in isolation, and their accumulated incremental impacts on remodelling local democracy has to be recognised. Such impacts are complex and often contradictory, such that centralisation has arguably gone hand-in-hand with the fragmentation of local governance. Most importantly, their impact on the role of councillors needs to be reconsidered. Too often this has not been recognised, leaving councillors as unseen players whilst reforms take place around them. Indeed, this study suggests that councillors have become increasingly disconnected, both horizontally and vertically, from other political areas, be it in terms of their capacity to act as a link to national arenas, to partnership boards or to communities and community councils. Councillors are over-reliant on informal networks to facilitate interactions with the national and local, and between the authority and other local players. In other words, there is a need to reconnect Scottish politics. But, as others have recognised, this requires a broader discussion on the political system and the role of local authorities within it. And, importantly, in the short-term, it demands that we raise once again the cultural authority of the office of the local councillor.



# LOCAL SERVICES LOCAL SOLUTIONS

PRICE	
APSE Members	£20.00
APSE Non-members	£40.00

**Association for Public Service Excellence**  
2nd floor Washbrook House  
Talbot Road, Manchester M32 0FP

telephone: 0161 772 1810  
fax: 0161 772 1811