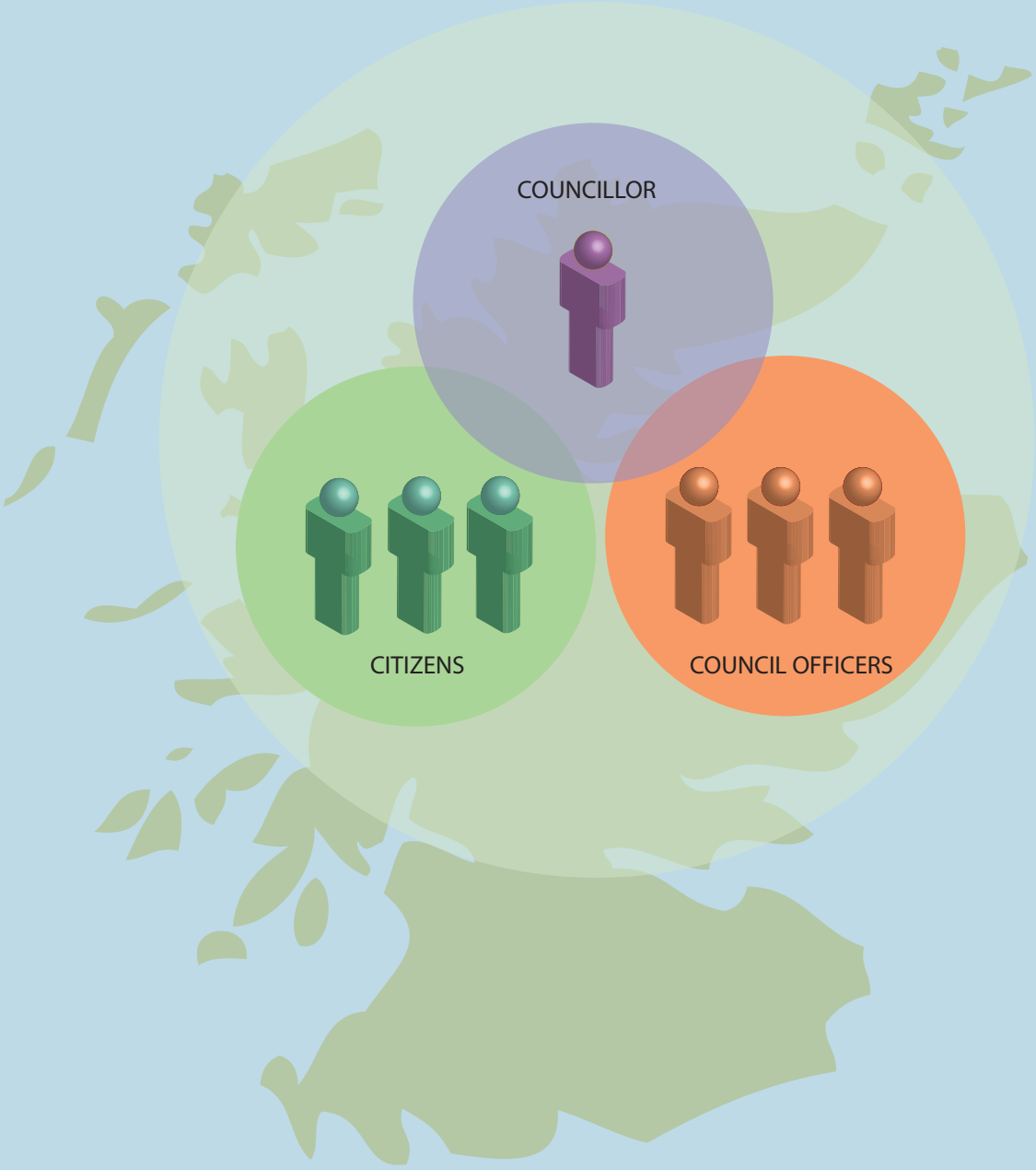
Doing local politics in Scotland

Councillors, officers and communities



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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.

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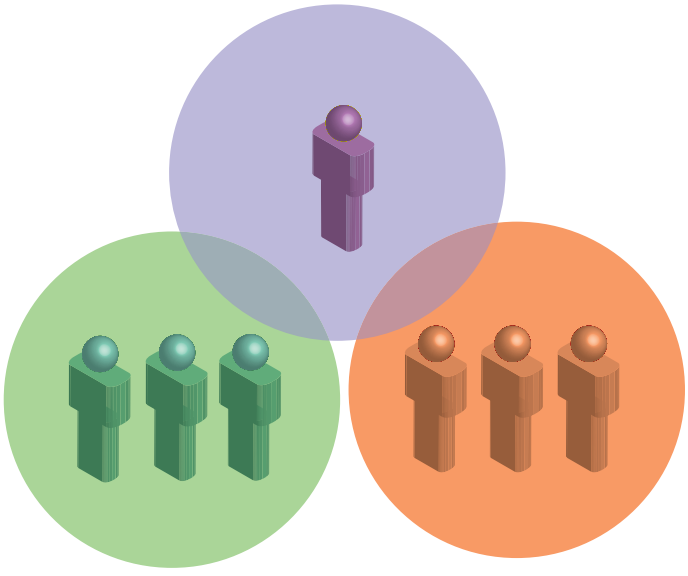


Executive Summary

This report contributes to current debates over the future of local democracy in Scotland. It draws attention to what it takes to do local politics, and to the everyday practices of local decision-making. What is it that local councillors do when they go about their work? How do officers understand their role and engage within and beyond the council? And how do communities connect with local councils and interact with councillors and officers? Having a better understanding of these questions provides us with the necessary grasp of the everyday practices of local politics with which to formulate alternative visions for the future.

The worlds of local politics

This world of local politics is better understood as a plurality of worlds. We think of three worlds of local politics: that of the citizen in his or her community, seeking to raise and resolve issues of immediate concern; that of the council officer, seeking to allocate and provide services; that of the councillor, seeking to represent one to the other and to decide on behalf of the community, in debate and discussion with others, what should be provided to whom. We are interested in what it takes to do politics in each of these worlds. Each entail different kinds of political work - organising, advocating, debating, scrutinising, meeting, speaking, writing - undertaken on different terms and conditions. Each world makes sense only in relation to one another.

We characterise the world of the council officer as highly structured but changing, and the world of the active citizen as essentially unstructured. The world of the councillor, by contrast, is radically underdetermined, for the councillor must operate on multiple axes in and between changing and unstructured worlds. These worlds of local government are each facing challenges. Creeping austerity is unsettling the 'usual' ways of working, and often in unexpected and diverse ways. In and among all this, the councillor has a pivotal role. His or her function is essentially based in interpersonal communication and trust, and often devoted to the task of mediating or translating between different worlds or elements within them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Reframe our understanding of local political work

Doing local politics is inevitably complex, messy, uncertain, and conflictual; such is the work undertaken by the councillor, officer, and engaged citizen to bring their worlds together. In making such claims, we seek to reframe understandings of what it means to do local politics; to see it as dealing with the inevitability of difference, conflicts and contestations. And, when we speak of politics, we seek to draw attention to the political work, which translates differences between the worlds of local government. This art of translation is a political process; doing local politics is in the end about brokering of this kind, and it is, as the participants in our research readily admitted, not easy.

Beware the risks of depoliticisation

We should resist knee-jerk temptations to depoliticise local policymaking in the name of pragmatism or managerialism. Political work, the practices of navigating between the worlds of councillors, officers and citizens, is inherent to forging local settlements that can convert local demands into decisions and policy programmes. But equally, widening our understanding of what constitutes local political work across authorities focuses our attention on the recognition of, and support for, the practices of translation, of addressing differences between worlds of local government. It is these practices and roles that require attention and support, as they are often unacknowledged or underplayed.

Question the limits of community leadership

Recent debates around community facilitation and leadership have often come to assume that the worlds of local politics can somehow be brought together, in a consistent and consensual way. This study sheds doubt on such assumptions. Whilst it is not a case of never the twain shall meet, the presumed totality of worlds can never be fully achieved. Each world will ultimately be unable to fully grasp the 'reality' of others. Attempts to forge anything but temporary settlements will always come up against difference, the boundaries and representations of the different worlds that are brought together to constitute local government. In other words, politics will always be present; attempts to depoliticise local government through appeals to community leadership and facilitation will necessarily flounder.

Stop 'fixing' the role of the councillor

This inescapable reality of politics is particularly important in how we think about the future role of the councillor. Our findings contest the many and varied ways in which, over an extended period, the role and function of the councillor has been cast as somehow problematic, in research, in policy, and in both public and journalistic commentary. Amidst the current challenges and calls for change in local government, it leads us to strike something of a discordant note, one which challenges the narrative that views the office of the councillor as one that requires 'fixing'. In contrast, our findings suggest that the so-called deficits attached to the work of councillors are better understood as evidence or signs of the 'messy' work of politics; they are part and parcel of politics rather than the individual failings of elected members. In light of our research, the remarkable thing about the work of the councillor is not that it is done well or badly, but that it is done at all.

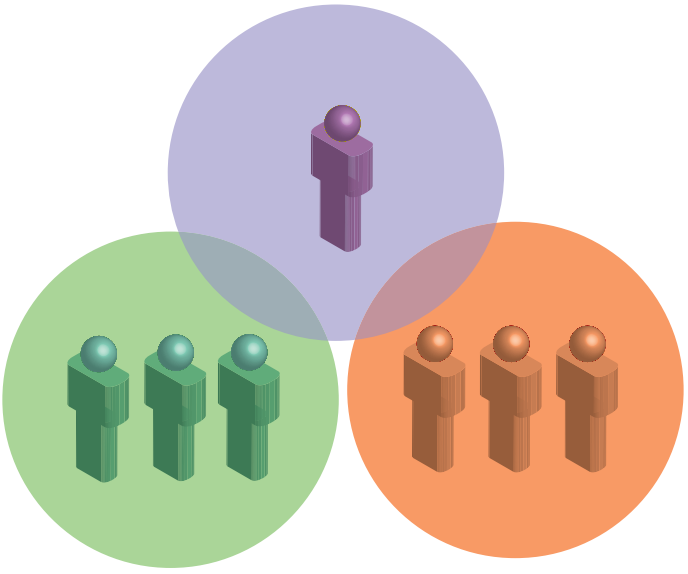
Move away from top-down interventions

Attempts to define, prescribe and otherwise regulate the work of the councillor, the officer, and the engaged citizen will tend to weaken the system of local government. Such top-down interventions risk backfiring, introducing rigidities, when maximum flexibility is required. It may be inevitable but also right that these roles, particularly that of the councillor, should be fulfilled by different kinds of people in different ways. Instead of recasting the role of local government yet again, we should be thinking of how to support councillors, officers, and citizens in fulfilling their role in a range of different ways. We must recognise how the practices of councillors differ, not least because of the economic and political contexts of different wards, and the identities and personal situations of councillors. This may make it possible to attract an increasing diversity of people to enter the world of local government. And, given their role in connecting worlds together, such a perspective will also build upon the capabilities of councillors to operate on multiple axes in and between diverse spaces, leading us to recognise the political work of the councillor as one of the crucial elements in bringing together the different worlds of local government.

Create a new dialogue about ensuring local political and policy outputs

In short, councillors, officers, and citizens need to rethink together what might be done and how relations between different parts of the system might be reconfigured. There is no single 'magic bullet' that can resolve the difficulties of local political work. We cannot expect that simply changing either the institutions or size of authorities, or for that matter the duties of councillors and officers and the responsibilities of communities, will somehow enable local government to face up to the current challenges. There is a need for a broad dialogue over the future of local government, and indeed Scottish politics itself. The pressures of austerity, and the everyday tasks of doing local politics under austerity, should not take councillors, officers, and communities away from having this much-needed debate.

APSE is well placed to take the lead in this dialogue. Working with its partners, both national and local, it should engage with Scottish government to trigger a wide-ranging national discussion over the future of local government. Recent debates have typically focused, quite rightly, on what we might call 'input' politics, drawing attention to how we mobilise communities in the taking of local decisions and how ultimately, we further democratise local communities and decentralise politics from the centre to the local and then from the local to the neighbourhood. But, in this important debate, the attention to 'output politics' or how we bring demands together and convert them into policy programmes has become 'lost', and with it the role of local councillors in forging such settlements. It is time to return to such concerns, putting the stewardship capabilities and political work of the Ensuring Council back into the forefront of any future vision of local government in Scotland.



Doing local politics: councillors, officers and communities

Local government in Scotland is traversing a period of significant change, and has been doing so for some time. Creeping austerity, growing demands for services, and shifting collaborative responsibilities sit alongside post-referendum politics and a new generation of councillors entering office. Together, these challenges and opportunities are triggering new ways of thinking about local government and its relations with the Scottish government, as well as with partners and local communities. If there is one thing that all can agree upon, it is that local councils will have to work differently to meet the complex challenges that they face over the next few years.

As might be expected, however, there is much less agreement over the direction these changes should take. Local government faces a cacophony of demands and alternative visions. Notably, there are calls for a more 'permissive' local government, prioritising the restructuring of centre-local relations across Scotland, with a new package of freedoms for local authorities. Yet, there are also demands for a radical rethinking of local democracy, with the aim of empowering communities and putting in place more deliberative decision-making processes. And amidst these claims, there are voices arguing for a cultural transformation of the way councils exercise local stewardship, advocating not least new forms of place-shaping and municipal entrepreneurship.

Of course, these different visions for the future of Scottish local government are not incompatible. But, whatever visions are adopted, they are best grounded in an understanding of the everyday activity of local politics. Too often, complex organisational reforms fall by the wayside as they go against the grain of such local practices, rather than working with them to bring about change. When speaking of practices, we are not talking of the formal conventions of council meetings or the guidance for running ward meetings. Rather, we are referring to the tacit and informal knowledge of 'how things work around here', of where to go to get things done, or of how to navigate a decision up from the ward through to the executive. This is knowledge that elected members, officers, and community representatives build up over the years through experience 'on the job', often under the apprenticeship of a senior figure in the party, the authority, or the community. It is not easily codified, but no less important for that.

It is here that this report aims to contribute to current debates over the future of local democracy in Scotland. For despite the wealth of studies on local government, the knowledge of the everyday roles, functions, routines and norms that go to make up the practices of local politics remains somewhat distant from the current debate. As Allan McConnell has argued, 'relationships between councillors, party groups and officers [and communities] should be our real focus if we wish properly to understand who holds power over local decisions.'[1]

Our approach, then, is to refocus attention on what it takes to do local politics. What is it that local councillors do when they go about their work? How do officers understand their role and engage within and beyond the council? And how do communities connect with local councils and interact with councillors and officers? Having a better understanding of these questions, we suggest, can provide us with the necessary grasp of the everyday practices of local politics with which to formulate alternative visions for the future.

1 McConnell, A. (2004) Scottish Local Government, Edinburgh University Press, p.90.

The worlds of local politics

We think of three worlds of local politics: that of the citizen in his or her community, seeking to raise and resolve issues of immediate concern; that of the council officer, seeking to allocate and provide services; that of the councillor, seeking to represent one to the other and to decide on behalf of the community, in debate and discussion with others, what should be provided to whom. We are interested in what it takes to do politics in each of these worlds. Each entail different kinds of political work - organising, advocating, debating, scrutinising, meeting, speaking, writing - undertaken on different terms and conditions.

In this way, we think of politics as a continuing process of interaction between state and society: '(We) may visualize a political system as a giant communications network into which information in the form of demands is flowing and out of which a different kind of information we call a decision emerges. If such an output is to be possible, there must be various intermediary processes the consequences of which are to permit passage of, winnow out, combine and recombine the incoming messages so as to mold them into a number and kind that can be conveniently managed by decision-makers'.[2]

What we refer to here as 'worlds' are sets of assumptions, expectations, obligations, identities, practices and technologies, which cohere as packages. We note, as we begin, that they make sense only in relation to each other. The role and function of each engaged citizen, council officer, and councillor is meaningful only to the extent that corollary roles and functions are fulfilled by their counterparts. It is for this reason that we might think of local politics as a ***system***.

Political work of whatever kind is carried out collectively; each task must be carried out such that it will articulate with others, usually completed by other actors in a different time and place.[3] It is this that gives us a sense of politics as a process, of a dynamic system never at rest. Each world is the setting for complex tasks, which in turn require that connections be made between worlds. Actors are all, always, interacting with others: this is what politics consists of.

In what follows, we set out the framework by which we understand the work and worlds of local politics, distinguishing between the roles and functions of the councillor, the council officer and the active citizen. Table 1 below provides a preliminary description of the different parameters of our respective worlds.

Three political worlds

Table 1: the terms and conditions of local political work

	Officer	Citizen	Councillor
Entry	appointed	motivated	elected
Time commitment	full-time	volunteer	part-time
Remuneration	salaried	unpaid	low-paid
Skills	specialist	ad hoc	generic
Qualification	training	varied	experience
Accountability	managerial	limited	individual/collective

We note immediately in the terms and conditions under which local political work is done, the council officer works with all the constraints and resources available to the employee. The engaged or politically active citizen, meanwhile, is almost entirely self-motivated (though we don't mean to suggest those motivations are selfish, or that the officer and the councillor aren't similarly motivated).

2 Easton, D (1965) ***A Framework for Political Analysis***, Prentice-Hall, p. 72.

3 Corbin, J M and Strauss, A L (1993) 'The articulation of work through interaction', ***Sociological Quarterly*** 34 (1) 71-83.

Her or his role and function are almost entirely self-determined, at least until she or he accepts the still relatively limited responsibilities of office holding in a local voluntary association.

The councillor's role, by contrast, is radically underdetermined; he or she has no job description or defined hours, and requires no specialist training or professional qualification. He or she bears multiple responsibilities and duties, with very little specification as to how they should be borne or carried out. He or she is subject to fragile and parallel lines of accountability, sometimes complementary but sometimes competing, through community, party and council; the tension this generates is periodically resolved by the councillor's being subject to (re-)election every four years.

Our study

These are the worlds and this is the work we set out to explore. Building on our previous research,[4] we investigated local political work in interviews with individuals engaged in and with local government. Participants in our study were identified primarily through APSE networks across Scottish councils. Additional contacts were also made through the researchers' personal networks, and via meetings and events such as party conferences. We were looking for 8-10 interviews with each group of respondents (council officers, councillors, and engaged citizens). This was a purposive sample, designed to capture a range of experiences of local politics, and we sought to include men and women from different local authorities across the country, from both rural and urban areas, from different political parties and different ethnic groups.

We made initial approaches by email, and invited those interested to take part in interviews, which were conducted either via telephone or in person, and ranged in duration between half an hour and an hour. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, including set questions, which addressed the daily work routines of our participants. We often organised our conversations around our respondent's appointments diary. We also asked them to give both positive and negative examples of their working relations with members of our other study groups. Finally, we discussed budget cuts and recent political events – such as the Scottish independence referendum – and any impact that respondents felt these had had on their work. We allowed respondents opportunity to highlight any other issues that they felt were important but which we hadn't covered. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and we took detailed notes from these recordings which were then coded to identify salient points for reporting.

The world of the council officer

We describe four aspects of the council officer's work: (i) the definition of his or her role and relevant training for it; (ii) the experience of interruptions to his or her work by inquiry or complaint; (iii) patterns and practices of communication with councillors and members of the community; (iv) the impact of austerity.

A defined role

For our purposes here, what is significant about the world and work of the council officer is not the specific requirements of any given job or role - those officers we spoke to carried a range of responsibilities across a range of services at a range of levels - but that this work is formally specified. All officers could refer to a job description, could describe line management arrangements in respect of those to whom they were responsible and others (departmental staff) they were responsible for. They could point to a career trajectory, which entailed both varying amounts of specialist training and much learning 'on the job', by experience.

One described his work as 'multi-directional', referring 'up' to elected members, 'down' to members of

4 APSE (2014) ***The Future of Elected Members in Scotland***, Manchester: APSE; APSE (2016) ***The Final Piece of the Jigsaw. Elected members, everyday politics and local democracy in Scotland***, Manchester: APSE.

the public, and horizontally to working partnerships with local businesses and contractors, in addition to the internal management of his own staff. At the same time, the officer operates in an extended field; they are concerned not only with his or her local turf or territory, but also with relating that work to other national policies and initiatives, referring to national government, to national associations and other relevant bodies addressing similar and related issues, as well as to counterparts in other local authorities.

Interruptions

Officers reported their work routines being frequently disrupted by complaints and inquiries, both from members of the public and from elected politicians, including MPs and MSPs as well as councillors. One reported that day to day enquiries made structuring her work days difficult: she often spent time in the evening responding to queries from MPs and MSPs, frequently related to freedom of information requests. Another felt his day job should be strategic management, but that his time was often taken up with smaller day-to-day enquiries. The work 'itself' is central to the officer's world, it seems, while communication with others about it is experienced as an interruption.

Communications

One respondent noted that public questioning of council activities is painful for council officers, while another thought that communicating with the public was an important way in which her role had changed. Others had thought explicitly about steering their communications with the public, whether through the local press , in meetings and on the phone , or through personal visits. This work seemed often to have an educative as much as an informative purpose: one officer acknowledged that members of the community may not agree with any given decision, but felt it important that they understand the reasons for it and that it is put across in a 'partnership way'.

Similarly, communication with councillors often meant trying to improve their understanding of the work of a department. One officer observed that officers often have little technical expertise and needed to prepare (or be prepared) for taking certain kinds of decision. Another, concerned with his council's business activity, commented on 'taking them on that journey to understand, and it's almost trying to make them [elected members] more commercially aware, rather than being just a political beast about delivering services for their council'.

Austerity and transformation

The impact of austerity, beyond the direct effect of budget cuts, was expressed in restructuring: 'Not just doing the same thing because that's how we've always done it... The council worker today is not what the council worker was 10-15-20 years ago' and in commercialisation: while one officer acknowledged that 'We have to be more commercially minded now' , another felt that their particular approach to it was 'taking the council to a new place'.

Meanwhile, our officer respondents gave us some sense that austerity had brought the three worlds of local politics closer together. One felt that it made communication and collaboration with communities more important , while another felt he needed to provide more information to councillors required to make difficult judgements about resource allocation.

The world of the engaged citizen

The work of the citizen, by contrast, is often done in no more than a minimal organisational framework; much more often, it is an effect of individual and institutional contingency. What happens is achieved through individual motivation and by force of circumstance, with the support of whatever networks of resources individuals and groups may be able to access.

Individual engagement

Individuals who engage in their communities at local level often do so in several ways and through different local bodies and associations, including church groups, business and community organisations, youth groups and community councils. Their engagement is voluntary and ***ad hoc***; it is unstructured by any job description, role specification or training , though this also means, perhaps, that it is unburdened by any expectation from the community. As one person commented, '(Y)ou have to bear in mind that you are not working in a business environment, and the people you work with are not professionals and have a varying range of skills'.

In the absence of any organisational framework or 'system', the identity and activity of individuals assumes a greater importance: 'I like the fact that people want to come and speak to me… Ah'm a real kent face. And I've had people come up to me when I'm standing in SPAR and they'll say to me "Oh, you're the very person"… I quite like the fact that people come to me to say they think I can help them'. As another noted, however, 'If I wasn't doing what I was doing there wouldn't be a community council'.

Networks and relationships

Another of our community respondents described how she had been engaged in a housing campaign effectively full-time, supporting herself from personal savings. The campaign had networked and formed alliances with a range of other individuals and organisations, including MPs and MSPs, councillors, council officers, NGOs and tenants' associations. The issue had brought the community together, although, as she reflected, mobilisation in response to an issue or event begs questions about the durability of the connections made by each such event. Someone else reported how her Community Council had broken down as a result of fractious personal relationships, and had been inactive for a couple of years. Another community councillor described his council's position as both marginal to and marginalised by local political processes.

The world of the councillor

In this section, we explore the world and the work of the local councillor or elected member. We begin by pointing to the multiple dimensions of the role, and the variety of organisational and institutional settings in which the councillor is engaged. We focus on the essential axis of representation between council and community, and describe the councillor's role in different patterns of communication between them, in developing different ways of relating one to the other. We note the impact of changing modes of communication before turning to our concluding discussion.

Multiple worlds

Like the active citizen, the councillor's expertise and understanding comes often from one or more different occupational worlds: from work in a commercial firm, in running his or her own business, or in professional employment as a teacher, for example. None of our councillor respondents had undergone any formal training for the role. Some reported receiving advice from fellow councillors, yet, for all of them, local politics had been a process of 'learning by doing'.

For many, being a councillor is only one representative role among others: a councillor may also be a trade union official or a church steward, for example. As a councillor, meanwhile, he or she may acquire complementary roles, distinct from the immediate function for which he or she was elected. Beyond casework with constituents and participation in council meetings, a councillor may be a cabinet member or committee chair, or may be further involved in bodies of which his or her council is a member, such as COSLA or APSE. One of our respondents, for example, was leader of the opposition party in the council, a member of three different council committees, a member of the licensing board, director of a housing association as well as sitting on the boards of various trusts. We might

think of these as 'worlds within worlds'; the work of the councillor is to relate one world to another.

Councillors commented on the complexities of operating across different organisational settings. We can formalise these along different axes, running between community or constituent and council; between each of these and the local party system; between the council and other representative arenas, including different wards within the council, the community council and the Scottish parliament; between the council and other public bodies, such as the health service, other local authorities or departments of Scottish Government; between the council, commercial and charitable organisations. The difficulty of working along any one axis is compounded by the complexities of its interaction with one or more of the others.

One councillor, for example, reported being frustrated at the range of roles he needed to fulfil and the different focus required for each. Another noted that local and national governments were 'in different places' on a given issue, which was made more difficult by her disagreement with a party decision. Another councillor distinguished his current role from his previous experience as a community councillor as 'working from the inside out, rather than the outside in'. Our sense is indeed that the councillor is forever at the centre of things, but also that he or she is continually exposed to the risk of falling between two stools.

Representation: two-way not one-way

The councillor is an elected representative, and fulfils a fundamental role in any functioning liberal democracy. The councillor's purpose is to engage on behalf of his or her electors in processes of collective decision-making. And we know from previous studies that casework - advocating on behalf of specific individuals and groups in their relations with the council - is central to the councillor's motivation and a core element of his or her activity.[5] One described herself as 'the link between constituent and council officer' , while for another 'The whole point of representation is to represent the person'.

However, we learned (from council officers as much as from councillors themselves) that they hold a reciprocal function of representing the council in the community. One officer, for example, described how his relationship with elected members tends to be focused around particular policy areas and how messages going out to the community are managed. Another referred to councillors engaged in the community as the 'face of the council'. We might describe this as the councillor's 'ambassadorial' role.

The councillor is likely to become involved - the representative function is needed - precisely when there is a difference between council and community or when other forms of communication have failed. Individual enquiries, one councillor commented, come from people who have 'come up against process'.

Patterns of communication

In this way, councillors serve as a principal axis of communication between councils and communities. They may be simple ***carriers of messages***; as one put it, 'You end up actually, you effectively become a customer-service conduit'. An officer reported that a councillor might 'just pass on the response' to a constituent, while a community councillor thought of her councillor as a 'go-between'. Another respondent active in third sector referred to her relationship with a specific councillor; 'She will say "why don't you have a word with…" or "so and so wanted to talk to you about…" or "somebody was asking me more about something" and so we will follow those things up and so… it's not written down in a spreadsheet… we gather intelligence about things and, let's be honest, you learn what buttons to press where and when'.

Sometimes, a councillor engages in the more active work of ***translation***. One spoke of not simply

5 APSE (2014) *The Future of Elected Members in Scotland*; APSE (2016) *The Final Piece of the Jigsaw.*

passing on a message, but of 'reinterpreting' it in order to make contact with the right recipient. Another noted the difficulty of talking about the council as a business with people who didn't want to think of it in these terms.

Several councillors referred to a need to ***educate and explain***, to 'get people to understand'. This was important when a councillor hasn't been able to help a constituent , and was more difficult when long term benefits entailed short term drawbacks. One felt that many people don't understand the processes that go into decision-making and another said that there was limited understanding of the council's obligation to implement national government policy.

Once talks take place, the councillor may acquire a ***brokering*** function. One explained that committee work involves approaching issues from both sides, community and council, or positive and negative, and finding a balance between the two. For another 'You're trying to deliver outcomes but at the same time trying to deliver a [political] agenda. I'd say a balancing act is the best way to summarise it'. Of course, 'balance' can't always be found: 'Sometimes I do disagree with them', as one councillor said, 'but I'm not afraid to tell them that'. For another, 'Sometimes you just need to take the flak'.

Different communicative functions are cross-cut, meanwhile, by changing ***modes*** of communication; councillors pointed to the decreased role of the constituency surgery and an increased reliance on email and social media. One kept a list of email addresses to which he sent a regular newsletter , though another preferred the more immediate contact of a phone call; our previous research suggests that face-to-face interaction remains important. As one councillor summed up: 'Most communication is by email, as surgeries are generally empty. 9 out of 10 times it's an email, sometimes I bump into people in the street'.

Worlds coming together

The world of local government takes in a diverse array of 'political people', from executive officers and frontline service providers, through to councillors and on to engaged citizens and residents. They meet in a host of organisational settings and spaces such as the 'party', 'full council', 'the ward', 'partnerships' and 'Scottish government'. People and processes are brought together through local political work, as officers, councillors, and communities make and implement policy, tackle complex social problems, answer the concerns of residents, and deliberate future initiatives.

This world of local politics, as we explore and explain it here, is thus better understood as a plurality of worlds. Each fascinates on its own terms, and each, we would argue, deserves more attention in empirical research. If we believe in doing politics, we should know more about what it is that we do.

What do we learn from our parallel investigations of council officers, councillors, and engaged citizens? Based on the findings reported here, we characterise the world of the council officer as highly structured but changing, and the world of the active citizen as essentially unstructured. The world of the councillor, by contrast, is radically underdetermined, for the councillor must operate on multiple axes in and between changing and unstructured worlds.

These worlds are facing challenges. This is not to suggest that traditional ways of working are fast disappearing. But creeping austerity is, at the least, unsettling the 'usual' ways of working, and often in unexpected and different ways. Many officers experienced the increasing demands to deliver budgetary savings as bringing them closer to elected members and engaged citizens. Budget cuts, it was explained, had in part led to an increasingly widespread recognition of the need for change. One senior officer thus commented that 'people are recognising now [that] we can't stand still, we can't continue to do what we were doing...' Such sentiments were echoed by one engaged citizen. She argued that the search for efficiencies was bringing the council 'closer' to third sector organisations; councils were, in her view, seeking to work more collaboratively with partners in order to make savings.

However, in other contexts, this search for efficiency was interpreted less kindly. Another engaged citizen suggested that voluntary and community organisations were increasingly 'pushed out' of local decision-making as councils responded to cuts in funding. Indeed, interviewees persistently related austerity with concerns over 'instability' or fears over the inability of local councils to address or manage local expectations. One councillor thus remarked that the turnover of officers and changes to services had put increasing pressures on the relationships that make local political work possible. Similarly, senior officers repeatedly spoke of how they had less and less time to reflect on strategic questions, as the removal of managerial structures 'beneath' had resulted in 'a lot being placed on fewer people's shoulders.'

In fact, these worlds are always being brought together in shifting configurations. Politics or political work is thus a set of processes that cannot be divorced from the skills or capabilities to forge connections, to firm up or loosen boundaries. For, in order to achieve collective outcomes, the worlds of local authorities have to connect, as each world is itself the setting for its own set of complex tasks and practices.

This is not in itself a straightforward task. Each of these worlds has its distinct settings, its own rules, norms and expectations. Officers, councillors, and engaged citizens view other worlds principally through the lens of their own world, never fully able to grasp the world of others. Communication can thus often be difficult or challenging, but it remains crucial. It involves, as one councillor pointed out, a degree of translation. It can also be entwined with the tasks of coordination, making sure, in the words of one officer, that 'you get the message out' and ensure a 'culture of no surprises'. But, notably, for the engaged citizen, communication that draws largely on their personal reputation and capacity to hold networks together becomes one of the primary resources at their disposal in the unstructured world they inhabit. Yet, at other times, in the world of the officer and its highly-structured setting, communication with others can sometimes be seen as something of an 'interruption' or as getting in the way of work.

In and among all of this, the councillor has a pivotal role. The councillor is always a stranger, in a world but never entirely of it, necessarily belonging, at least in part, to another one. He or she enters a world only by virtue of offering a connection with others. He or she always carries a threat or a promise and often both; in other words, all of the diverse relationships in which the councillor is engaged are themselves polyvalent, comprising a mixture of authority and dependence. The councillor represents the constituent to the council but also the council to the constituent. His or her task is to hold officers to account, but also to gain their assistance in dealing with casework: the councillor must both scrutinise and ask for support from the council officer. In short, his or her function is essentially based in interpersonal communication and trust, and often devoted to the task of mediating between different worlds or elements within them. This is perhaps why the keynotes of councillors' talk are those of communication, collaboration and balance, and of tension, dilemma and contradiction. It also explains why the work of the councillor should be so idiosyncratic. That the job is done in different ways by different individuals should be in no way surprising:

> *Working hours are not 9-5, but any hours and any days. But it is up to the individual councillor. It offers flexibility, but you have to be quite protective of yourself. It's not just the things that you are interested in; of course, you have to get involved in other things. But you can make the job more specific to things that you are interested in. It can be really rewarding, it can also be hard going. You can be a councillor that comes in every day, or that comes in once every 6 weeks. It's what you make of it.*

Conclusions and recommendations

Our study has offered one reading of the political work undertaken across local authorities. Its surfacing of the different worlds of councillors, officers, and engaged citizens, raises important considerations for current debates over the future of local government in Scotland. Indeed, we conclude this report in the immediate aftermath of the Scottish local elections in May 2017. These elections have left all but three of Scotland's 32 local authorities under no overall control. Of course, it is not our intention to speculate on the likely impacts of such delicate political balances on how local authorities will navigate the complex challenges facing local government over the next few years. However, it is possible nonetheless to draw from our study a range of principles and ways of working to guide how local councils, their partners, and indeed the Scottish government move forward. Below, we set out such principles.

Reframe our understanding of local political work

Doing local politics, our evidence suggests, is inevitably complex, messy, uncertain, and conflictual; such is the work undertaken by the councillor, officer, and engaged citizen to bring their worlds together. In making such claims, we seek to reframe understandings of what it means to do local politics; to see it as dealing with the inevitability of difference, conflicts and contestations. We do not limit or constrain politics to the traditional realm of political parties and the differences between them. Of course, it is not that parties do not matter; party considerations continue to structure the work of many councillors. But, when we speak of politics, we seek to draw attention to the political work, which translates differences between the worlds of local government. This art of translation is a political process; doing local politics is in the end about brokering of this kind, and it is, as the participants in our research readily admitted, not easy.

Beware the risks of depoliticisation

With these difficulties in mind, we should resist knee-jerk temptations to depoliticise local policymaking in the name of pragmatism and managerialism. As this report has shown, politics cannot be removed from local decision-making. Political work, the practices of navigating between the worlds of councillors, officers and citizens, is inherent to forging local settlements that can convert local demands into decisions and policy programmes. But equally, widening our understanding of what constitutes local political work across authorities focuses our attention on the recognition of, and support for, the practices of translation, of addressing differences between worlds of local government. It is these practices and roles that require, we argue, attention and support, as they are often unacknowledged or underplayed.

Question the limits of community leadership

Take, for example, recent debates around community facilitation and leadership. These have often come to assume that the worlds of local politics can somehow be brought together, in a consistent and consensual way. Indeed, community leadership has been posited as a panacea for delivering change across local councils. This study sheds doubt on such assumptions. Whilst it is not a case of never the twain shall meet, the presumed totality of worlds can never be fully achieved. Each world will ultimately be unable to fully grasp the 'reality' of others. Of course, a councillor can be a 'good' manager, while an officer can be politically astute, and a citizen activist can be an expert in highly technical issues. But, attempts to forge anything but temporary settlements will always come up against difference, the boundaries and representations of the different worlds that are brought together to constitute local government. In other words, politics will always be present; attempts to depoliticise local government through appeals to community leadership and facilitation will necessarily flounder.

Stop 'fixing' the role of the councillor

This inescapable reality of politics is particularly important in how we think about the future role of the councillor. Our findings contest the many and varied ways in which, over an extended period, the role and function of the councillor has been cast as somehow problematic, in research, in policy, and in both public and journalistic commentary. Amidst the current challenges and calls for change in local government, it leads us to strike something of a discordant note, one which challenges the narrative that views the office of the councillor as one that requires 'fixing'. In contrast, our findings suggest that the so-called deficits attached to the work of councillors are better understood as evidence or signs of the 'messy' work of politics; they are part and parcel of politics rather than the individual failings of elected members. In light of our research, the remarkable thing about the work of the councillor is not that it is done well or badly, but that it is done at all.

Move away from top-down interventions

Attempts to define, prescribe and otherwise regulate the work of the councillor, the officer, and the engaged citizen will tend to weaken the system of local government. Such top-down interventions risk backfiring, introducing rigidities, when maximum flexibility is required. It may be inevitable but also right that these roles, particularly that of the councillor, should be fulfilled by different kinds of people in different ways. Instead of recasting the role of local government yet again, we should be thinking of how to support councillors, officers, and citizens in fulfilling their role in a range of different ways. We must recognise how the practices of councillors differ, not least because of the economic and political contexts of different wards, and the identities and personal situations of councillors. This may make it possible to attract an increasing diversity of people to enter the world of local government. And, given their role in connecting worlds together, such a perspective will also build upon the capabilities of councillors to operate on multiple axes in and between diverse spaces, leading us to recognise the political work of the councillor as one of the crucial elements in bringing together the different worlds of local government.

Create a new dialogue about ensuring local political and policy outputs

In short, councillors, officers, and citizens need to rethink together what might be done and how relations between different parts of the system might be reconfigured. There is no single 'magic bullet' that can resolve the difficulties of local political work. We cannot expect that simply changing either the institutions or size of authorities, or for that matter the duties of councillors and officers and the responsibilities of communities, will somehow enable local government to face up to the current challenges. There is a need for a broad dialogue over the future of local government, and indeed Scottish politics itself. The pressures of austerity, and the everyday tasks of doing local politics under austerity, should not take councillors, officers, and communities away from having this much-needed debate.

Numerous reports, including APSE's previous research into the role of elected members, have identified emerging tensions in the work of councillors, while recommending a plethora of institutional and organisational reforms. There has been much talk of increasing the financial support and training for the role of councillor; making councillors more representative of the communities they represent; tackling the new pressures of social media; forging new roles for councillors in new participatory fora; reviewing the impact of the introduction of the single transferable vote on the politics of representation across wards; addressing the ambiguity of the roles of councillors in new collaborative arenas; and reconnecting what is widely perceived to be the disjointed politics between the centre and the local.

APSE is well placed to take the lead in this dialogue. Working with its partners, both national and local, it should engage with Scottish government to trigger a wide-ranging national discussion over the future of local government. Recent debates have typically focused, quite rightly, on what we might

call 'input' politics, drawing attention to how we mobilise communities in the taking of local decisions, and how ultimately, we further democratise local communities and decentralise politics from the centre to the local and then from the local to the neighbourhood. But, in this important debate, the attention to 'output politics' or how we bring demands together and convert them into policy programmes has become 'lost', and with it the role of local councillors in forging such settlements. As Henrik Bang reminds us, 'without politicians taking upon them a political authority role, a political system could neither convert conflicting demands into collectively binding decisions ('inputs'); nor could it articulate and deliver authoritative policies that can make life at least a bit better for the population (outputs)'.[6] It is time to return to such concerns, putting the stewardship capabilities and political work of the Ensuring Council back into the forefront of any future vision of local government in Scotland.

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6 Bang, H.P. (2013) ***'It's the Politicians' Fault': Depoliticisation as Dehumanization of Politicians'***, paper presented to the Political Studies Association annual conference, Cardiff, 24-26 March, p.17.

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