

Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance

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Convener,

Community Councils

Thank you for your letter dated 8 September 2023 following your meeting on 23 May 2023 where the Committee marked the 50th anniversary of Community Councils. I would also like to thank you for providing me with a summary of the key issues heard in evidence and the committee's proposed actions. I have provided a response to the proposals at Annex A and I would like to take this opportunity to update the committee on developments over the last few years.

Community Councils across Scotland have made an important contribution, representing their communities' views on the things that matter locally. Whilst the role of Community Councils has remained much the same since 1973, I believe that over the last decade, there have been a number of community empowerment developments which have had a positive impact on their work.

In particular, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. For example, the majority of Part 3 Participation Requests have been made by Community Councils to local authorities, helping to start a dialogue and contributing to decision-making processes to improve outcomes. Community Councils are also listed in Part 8 of the Act where local authorities must consult with the local community, including Community Councils if making any changes to Common Good property.

Although not directly mentioned in other parts of the Act, Community Councils are uniquely placed at the centre of their communities and can play an influential role in Community Planning, Asset Transfer and Community Right to Buy. These legislative and policy developments have built on Community Councils' statutory right to be consulted on licensing and more recently, the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 strengthened their engagement with the planning system. The current review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 will inform how community empowerment can be strengthened.

The 50th Anniversary is an important milestone, and I was delighted to visit Cambuslang recently with Councillor Maureen Chalmers, COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson, to celebrate the updated Community Council model documents first launched in 2009. These are available on the Community Council website: [Guidance Documents](#). The changes reflect updates to legislation and national policy and takes into account developments in digital engagement and communications. This will enable both Community Councils and local authorities to work together to ensure that they have the capacity and capability to engage effectively in an open, transparent and inclusive manner.

As you know, local authorities have statutory oversight of Community Councils and the Verity House Agreement includes a commitment to complete the Local Governance Review by the end of this parliamentary term, of which the [Democracy Matters engagement process](#) forms a crucial part.

At a more strategic level, as I mentioned to committee on 5th September 2023, I hope that community councillors get involved in the second phase of Democracy Matters national engagement. The engagement process which the Scottish Government launched with COSLA on 28th August 2023, is asking communities to consider what increased decision-making at a more local level should look like where they live. Hearing from people from diverse backgrounds will help us to ensure that any new arrangements are effective, inclusive and can benefit everyone. This will also provide an opportunity to explore the Parish Council model in England.

Community Councils are a key component of local democracy in Scotland and I agree with the Committee that improved support is required. That's why we have delivered a series of webinars with the Improvement Service to promote the Democracy Matters process and the associated [grant fund](#) which is offering up to £300 to community groups including Community Councils to support their local conversations. The sessions were very well attended and produced positive discussions which I hope translate into engagement responses.

The Scottish Government remains committed to empowering communities and this is an excellent opportunity to consider and explore the number of important issues you have raised in your letter. The views of Community Councils will be critical given their role in local democracy. It is important that we build on existing good practice in ways which can best support our ambition to significantly strengthen local decision-making.

I hope you find the information helpful.

Tom Arthur
Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance

Scottish Government Response to Proposed Actions

Scotland would benefit from a national body representing and advocating for CCs, together with a network of regional associations.

Community Councils have been operating for over a decade without a national representative body or regional associations and the Scottish Government is not aware of any significant evidence to suggest the need for one. The Scottish Government funding provided to the Improvement Service since 2013/14 is successfully providing targeted support for Community Councils. The Improvement Service has developed relationships of trust and credibility with Scotland's Community Councils and Local Authorities Community Council Liaison Officers and is in a unique position to support them. The organisation works both on a national and local level and is linked to several networks closely related to Community Councils.

Some additional resource from the Scottish Government could deliver substantial improvements, although this need not be expensive (as evidenced by the English model). The creation of an investment fund for CCs to draw down on would enable them to support local projects.

Due to the diverse nature of Community Council activity, local authorities are best placed to decide how to fund them. However, they can and do, find income and support from other fundraising resources such as the Scottish Government's range of funding programmes to support community-led regeneration and community empowerment. Another useful source for funding information is the Communities Channel Scotland [website](#) which is funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by the Scottish Community Development Centre.

The establishment of a clerking system to support and underpin Community Councils' work would enable them to operate with improved efficiency and professionalism.

The Scottish Government works closely with COSLA and the Improvement Service to build the capacity of Community Council Liaison Officers who support Scotland's Community Council. They host bi-annual meetings to share best practice to improve efficiency. This has helped establish a strong network both online through social media and by running face-to-face events, providing learning resources and improving digital capacity.

Holding elections for CCs on the same date as council elections could increase participation and raise awareness.

Community Council elections are the responsibility of local authorities and holding both elections on the same date has some merit and could raise profile and awareness. It could also help increase turnout, although in the short-term there is the risk that this could highlight issues of low turnout. Resourcing two types of elections on the same day would also have its challenges.

Improved support and training for Community Councillors would aid their effectiveness and in turn improve community empowerment.

Scottish Government funding for the Improvement Service provides support and training for community councillors. The Community Councils website features regular news updates on sources of funding, consultations and other resources which might be of interest to Community Councils, along with case studies of successful Community Council projects. Training resources are also available through the Scottish Community Councils partnership with the Open University, which gives community councillors access to free courses on digital skills, business skills, finance and fundraising.

There is also a social media guide, #FollowMe, which was published in 2022. Community Councils can also access information on a range of cost of living resources from national advice organisations as well as finding out what help is available from local councils. Scottish Government funding is also provided to the Improvement Service for the Rural and Islands Community Councils Project to build capacity and reach of rural and island Community Councils in Scotland.

Local Development Trusts are effective vehicles for driving local action and improvement, however they don't have the democratic mandate that CCs do. Increased collaboration would be to the benefit of both.

The Scottish Government agrees that working alongside other community organisations such as Development Trusts would strengthen community empowerment and would help Community Councils inform strategic decisions from a grassroots level. The Democracy Matters national engagement is an opportunity to propose models of community democracy that will enhance collaboration and ensure that communities benefit from all of the skills and capacity available to them.