

Community planning after the Community Empowerment Act: The second survey of the Community Planning Officials in Scotland



Executive summary and recommendations

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Executive summary

Community planning officials (CPOs) constitute a key group of local public servants in Scotland. They work across a broad range of policy areas, from the environment to regeneration, equalities, housing, planning, transport, community development, and health and social care, to name a few. They are at the forefront of advancing the agenda laid out by the 2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services and the 2014 COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, as well as legislation such as the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act.

In sum, CPOs carry out the everyday work of enabling local governance in Scotland at the interface of three crucial policy agendas: public service reform, social justice and community empowerment.

This report presents the comparative findings of the first two surveys (2016 and 2018) of CPOs conducted in Scotland. The timing of these two surveys is significant because it covers the first two years of implementation of the Community Empowerment Act (CEA), and the 2018 survey is one of the first pieces of research to capture some of the early impacts of this legislation on community planning practice. Here, we summarise some of our key findings related to the CEA, community engagement, partnership work and evidence mobilisation, with particular attention to how the two surveys together create a fuller picture of CPOs as frontline policy workers. Based on these results we then provide recommendations for government, community planning partnerships (CPPs), and support and evaluation agencies.

The Community Empowerment Act and community engagement in CPPs

The research found that the most prominent types of community engagement carried out in CPPs rarely entail devolving substantial power and resources to communities. Supporting community empowerment is one of the primary aims of the CEA, and community engagement activities are viewed by 2018 CPOs as a vital aspect of their work; an improvement from the 2016 survey. However, despite their valuing of community engagement and their belief it is something they should put a lot of energy into, there is less evidence that they are organising activities that are co-produced or community-led. Relatedly, CPOs and community members often feel that community participation does not have a marked impact in policy and decision making.

This is linked to a key issue brought up in both surveys – that of inclusion and diversity. From the perspective of CPOs, they worry that community engagement processes tend to repeatedly involve certain groups and individuals rather than a cross-section of the relevant community and can in turn simply replicate the power inequalities at play in communities. For those community members who do engage consistently, this can lead to ‘consultation fatigue’. Lack of diversity can diminish the usefulness of community engagement evidence for policymakers, and as a result, more community members may become sceptical about the value of participating due to a lack of impact. This creates a vicious circle where lack of diversity and inclusion can undermine the legitimacy of participatory processes, which then hinders their impact. A lack of impact, in turn, makes such processes less appealing to citizens, hence undermining the prospects to improve inclusion and diversity.

Despite these issues, the 2018 survey showed some positive impacts of the CEA in community engagement, particularly in the increase in participatory budgeting activities and the CPOs’ positive assessment of local outcome improvement plans (LOIP) as a framework to focus community efforts for change. The survey also reflects a more positive opinion about how some elected members are using community engagement to inform their decisions, and suggests that there is an emerging cohort of more engaged local councillors working with CPOs. This may provide a foundation to improve the democratic credentials of CPPs in terms of bringing together community participation and elected representation.

Partnership and deliberative quality in CPPs

The 2016 and 2018 surveys aimed to investigate key dynamics in CPPs, and in particular how they function as a vehicle to deliver on the public service reform agenda set forth by the Christie Commission. Both surveys found that although partnership working does occur, particularly in the sharing of evidence (see the next section), CPP board meetings are not the main venue where partnership working nor decision-making occurs. The consistent results in both surveys strengthen the argument that CPPs are often seen as ‘secondary arenas’ for policy and decision making, with core strategic business carried out elsewhere (e.g. through bilateral engagement). Therefore, CPPs function more as spaces for sharing information and planning and coordinating initiatives than as sites for sharing resources, budgets and decision-making.

We also found that deliberative quality remains relatively low at CPP board meetings, where there is limited challenge or disagreement and little opportunity to scrutinise and improve initiatives in partnership. The surveys also reported that CPP partners’ influence is less than ideal, with many CPOs feeling that the board is still ‘council heavy’ and therefore other partners may not be sharing ownership of CPP priorities as intended. This indicates that there is some way to go to meet the objective embodied in the CEA that all partners, not just the council, take more proactive roles in driving the work of CPPs.

The role of evidence in community planning work

CPPs provide a valuable space for partners to share and use evidence, and this has direct impact on the everyday work of CPOs. Indeed, evidence from partners and evidence generated from public consultation are the two most used sources of evidence reported by CPOs in both surveys.

The increase in the use of public consultation evidence is significant in light of the CEA's focus on community input. However, there are various types of evidence gained from consultation and it is important to consider procedural issues when assessing the 'usefulness' and legitimacy of public consultation evidence. Its value greatly depends on the type and quality of processes put in place and whether they meet good standards of inclusion, participation and deliberation.

Other sources of evidence commonly used are from national and local government, while sources from the third sector, academic institutions, and professional bodies are much less frequently used by CPOs. In terms of what evidence is particularly useful and valued, CPOs highlighted evidence from local areas, practical evidence of 'what works', and evidence that helps to evaluate outcomes. The survey also found that CPOs are using evidence to better understand inequalities in their area, particularly when this evidence is appropriate to their spatial scale, but CPOs in both surveys indicated a need for more localised data to improve their work. Finally, the 2018 survey found a new area of interest in evidence use among CPOs; that of 'perception-based data'. This report explores tensions between this type of 'community voice' data alongside higher-level outcomes data in community planning work.

Local achievements and challenges

The 2018 survey illustrates some of the ways that CPPs are making an impact locally, and CPOs report a number of projects that would not happen without the work of the CPP. These include initiatives across a range of policy areas such as community justice, employment, participatory budgeting, and poverty and inequalities. We also found in the 2018 survey that there is far more buy-in to the LOIP compared to the Single Outcome Agreement in the 2016 survey. CPOs report that LOIPs create a shared focus to tackle priorities through collaboration. Respondents from the 2018 survey also have a more positive opinion of senior leadership than in 2016. This improvement is encouraging and may be the result of the CEA driving CPPs' work to create the first round of LOIPs, which provided an avenue where senior leadership could exercise a new vision for community planning in their area of influence. Nonetheless, CPOs identified tensions in reconciling local and national priorities, which was brought up by respondents as an issue challenging the relationships between CPP partners with different lines of accountability –some local and some national. This may impinge on CPPs' autonomy to be responsive institutions of local governance able to act on the basis of local priorities.

Understanding CPOs and their work

The survey shows that the work of CPOs is highly influenced by the Christie Commission, the National Standards for Community Engagement and the Community Empowerment Act. The National Performance Framework is currently far less influential in their work. The results of both surveys provide a better understanding of this community of policy workers in Scotland; a group who serve as boundary-spanners and strive to challenge some of the rigidities of traditional local governance work. We found that CPOs would like to be able to put more energy into encouraging culture change, using evidence to support policies and practices, and involving communities in policy and decision making.

Despite the challenges outlined in this executive summary and throughout the report, job satisfaction among this group of policy workers is high. This may be due to a relatively strong sense of commitment to making a difference, where CPOs see themselves as internal activists driving culture change in the system and on the ground. To do this work, engagement skills are seen as particularly important by CPOs. The two surveys identified particular skills gaps that could be improved by capacity building and training in engagement (e.g. mediation, facilitation), research, and resource management. Together, both surveys offer a nuanced picture of this dynamic cadre of professionals who act as boundary spanners, deliberative practitioners, public engagers and knowledge brokers. To move this work forward and to fulfil the potential of CPPs as effective platforms for participatory and collaborative governance, we recommend improvements to be led by government, CPPs and support and evaluation agencies.

Recommendations

For government:

1. There needs to be improved public communication, from national and local government, to promote what CPPs do and how people can get involved.
2. The Scottish Government must clarify to what extent CPPs are autonomous spaces where communities and CP partners can focus on local priorities, even though they may vary from national priorities. The current Local Governance Review provides space to address this issue.
3. The Scottish Government should provide funding for the national Community Planning Network to create more opportunities for peer learning and professional development amongst CPOs across the country.

For CPPs:

1. Community participation and representation should be improved at all levels of CPPs, from local partnerships and forums to strategic groups and boards.
2. CPPs must improve transparency about how community engagement influences services, policies and decisions.
3. CP partners should pull together a shared community engagement fund to support lowering current barriers to participation¹. Alongside traditional engagement, CPPs should develop capacity to organise more inclusive processes that involve citizens seldom heard and reflect a cross-section of the relevant community².

¹ See Lightbody et al. (2017) 'Hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'? Promoting equality in community engagement: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/hard-to-reach-or-easy-to-ignore-promoting-equality-in-community-engagement-evidence-review/>

² There is a growing field of democratic innovations (e.g. digital crowdsourcing, mini-publics, participatory budgeting) from which to take inspiration. See for example <https://participedia.xyz>

4. CPPs should regularly monitor and address training and skills gaps in the CPOs workforce as well as CP partners tasked with facilitating CP processes. Areas that require particular attention are: research skills; engagement skills, including facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution; and resource management skills.
5. CPPs should develop a framework to improve the sharing and using of evidence between CP partners in order to make the most of existing capacity across organisations and sectors.
6. CPPs should provide spaces for community interpretation of local needs and aspirations on the basis of a range of sources of evidence. Community engagement processes must become more deliberative by building into any participatory process opportunities to engage with various sources of evidence about the geographic or policy area in question.

For support and evaluation agencies:

1. The evaluation of LOIPs and Locality Plans must assess to what extent community priorities are shaping the strategic priorities of a CPP. Evaluations must pay particular attention to inequalities in power and influence amongst and within communities.
2. Evaluations should examine the extent to which CPPs constitute effective 'deliberative systems' where different meetings and forums, from the local to the strategic, are coherently linked and feature high quality deliberation and effective action throughout.
3. Awareness of when and how to use Participation Requests must be improved. In particular, there is a role for organisations and networks that work with disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups to promote and support the use of Participation Requests.
4. The added value of CPPs needs to be better understood and communicated within CPPs, across local government and communities, and at national level – for example, by reporting more systematically the collaborative advantages gained through partnership work, as well as specific outcomes for communities of place, practice and interest.

Read and download the full report at <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/community-planning-after-the-community-empowerment-act-second-survey-of-community-planning-officials/>