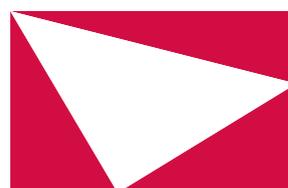


Community Councils online

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Informatics
& Digital
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Community Councils online

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- Above all, the Community Councillors around Scotland who work for their communities, for no reward other than satisfaction when positive results are achieved.

GLOSSARY

ASCC	Association of Scottish Community Councils
CC	Community Council
CCllr	Community Councillor
CCLO	Community Council Liaison Officer
LA	Local Authority
RS	Reform Scotland
SG	Scottish Government

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

22% of Scottish Community Councils have up-to-date online public presences. Only 4% of Community Councils have easily accessible online planning content. Most Community Councils websites communicate from Community Councils to citizen – only 10% use social media to host online discussion and opinion-gathering. Local Authority-hosted presences guarantee that Community Councils have presence but not that they are up to date. Such presences are also not content-rich. Community Councils' own volition makes the difference between having no presence at all, mediocre presences and informative, content-rich presences that may serve citizens well. Suggestions to improve matters include broadening the scope of local of Local Authority-hosted presences and CCs mentoring each other.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 ORIGINS OF CCs

Community Councils (CCs) were introduced by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (UK Government, 1973). CCs were to ascertain, co-ordinate and express the views of their communities and take expedient and practicable action (Scottish Government, 2005). CCs were given a statutory right to be consulted on applications for planning permission (that is, a role in spatial planning rather than community planning) by the Local Government etc (Scotland) Act 1994 (Scottish Government, 2011a).

1.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITY COUNCILS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

All Local Authorities (LAs) have produced and implemented CC schemes covering almost all parts of their areas. LA schemes, e.g. (Aberdeenshire Council, 1994) detail the numbers of community councillors (CCLlrs) for each CC, outline election arrangements, advise on running meetings and handling budgets: in general, they set out how CCs can legally and responsibly do whatever they undertake. Decisions about what to undertake are left to CCs, subject to the general purposes outlined in the 1973 and 1994 Acts. LAs aid CC activities by contributing to running expenses and providing other services such as accommodation.

In practice, contacts between LAs and their CCs are through officials known as Community Council Liaison Officers (CCLOs). Some LAs, e.g. Highland Council, divide their CCs into groups with a CCLO for each group. In brief, CCLOs represent, oversee, and obtain and implement LA services for their CCs. For example, one CCLO's responsibilities include (anonymised CCLO A, 2012)

- ensuring the efficient and effective delivery and development of services to CCs within the terms of LA schemes
- liaison with LA development teams, or similar, on matters relevant to CC representation in their LA hierarchies
- conducting business relationships with elected members and LA officials on all aspects of CC activities.
- facilitating CC events, such as discussion forum meetings.
- being responsible for the development of CCs; providing information, support and advice to enable them to represent their communities effectively; liaison with LA, its elected members and officials; development and delivery of training courses for CCLlrs.
- ensuring all legislative and procedural compliances are met; facilitating effective CC engagement with their LAs, other public bodies and private agencies.
- within the context of election procedures, as referred to in LA schemes, acting as returning officers for CC elections.

The CCLO who provided this list also stated that he attends 3 meetings per CC per year and that such meetings 'invariably' throw up issues for him. The Scottish Government has recently recommended that CCLO remits should be published and that they should have 'suitable seniority ... to ensure that both the CC work and working relationship is appropriately progressed at LA level' (Scottish Government, 2012f).

Despite all the support provided by LAs and their CCLOs, according to a report by the Jimmy Reid Foundation (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012), the average CC annual budget is £400 'matching [CCs'] near zero powers and near zero number of contested elections'.

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1.3 INACTIVE CCs, UNCONTESTED ELECTIONS AND OTHER ISSUES

CCs are not compulsory. The 1973 legislation mandated CCs only if 20 or more electors called for them (UK Government, 1973). In 2011, of the 1514 possible CCs, only 1215 were active while elections were frequently uncontested (BBC, 2011a). The BBC's results were:

Council	Total CCs	Active CCs	Uncontested elections	% active	% uncontested	Population	adults	contested elections	'turnout'
Aberdeen	31	24	no data	77.4%	no data	217,120	178,601		
Aberdeenshire	70	70	65	100.0%	92.9%	245,780	192,854	7.1%	13,775
Angus	25	21	20	84.0%	95.2%	110,570	88,256	4.8%	4,203
Argyll & Bute	56	54	no data	96.4%	no data	89,200	72,663		
Clackmannanshire	12	8	8	66.7%	100.0%	50,630	39,819	0.0%	0
Dumfries & Galloway	107	86	83	80.4%	96.5%	148,190	120,037	3.5%	4,187
Dundee	19	3	no data	15.8%	no data	144,290	117,003		
East Ayrshire	35	30	no data	85.7%	no data	120,240	95,931		
East Dunbartonshire	12	12	no data	100.0%	no data	104,580	83,068		
East Lothian	20	20	16	100.0%	80.0%	97,500	76,152	20.0%	15,230
East Renfrewshire	10	10	10	100.0%	100.0%	89,540	69,309	0.0%	0
Edinburgh	43	43	43	100.0%	100.0%	486,120	403,957	0.0%	0
Eilean Siar	30	24	22	80.0%	91.7%	26,190	21,112	8.3%	1,759
Falkirk	23	18	15	78.3%	83.3%	153,280	121,091	16.7%	20,182
Fife	104	79	71	76.0%	89.9%	365,020	291,270	10.1%	29,496
Glasgow	100	80	80	80.0%	100.0%	592,820	482,696	0.0%	0
Highland	156	138	106	88.5%	76.8%	221,630	177,267	23.2%	41,105
Inverclyde	12	10	no data	83.3%	no data	79,770	64,032		
Midlothian	16	16	no data	100.0%	no data	81,140	63,656		
Moray	20	14	13	70.0%	92.9%	87,720	69,957	7.1%	4,997
North Ayrshire	17	13	12	76.5%	92.3%	135,180	107,481	7.7%	8,268
North Lanarkshire	80	38	38	47.5%	100.0%	326,360	255,082	0.0%	0
Orkney	20	20	9	100.0%	45.0%	20,110	16,154	55.0%	8,885
Perth & Kinross	52	46	45	88.5%	97.8%	147,780	119,214	2.2%	2,592
Renfrewshire	26	22	22	84.6%	100.0%	170,250	135,810	0.0%	0
Scottish Borders	68	66	59	97.1%	89.4%	112,870	90,271	10.6%	9,574
Shetland	162	102	89	63.0%	87.3%	22,400	17,520	12.7%	2,233
South Ayrshire	29	27	23	93.1%	85.2%	111,440	90,717	14.8%	13,440
South Lanarkshire	58	32	30	55.2%	93.8%	311,880	247,381	6.3%	15,461
Stirling	43	43	38	100.0%	88.4%	89,850	71,134	11.6%	8,271
West Dunbartonshire	17	9	9	52.9%	100.0%	90,570	72,127	0.0%	0
West Lothian	41	37	37	90.2%	100.0%	172,080	132,639	0.0%	0
Total	1514	1215	963	80.3%	79.3%	5,222,100	4,184,261		203,658

(BBC, 2011a) (National Records of Scotland, 2011)

Omitting the obviously incorrect data for Shetland (and ignoring mistrust raised by this error) left 1352 potential CCs, of which 1113 (82%) were active. Omitting also those LAs for which election data was not available left 1265 potential CCs, of which 1055 (83%) were active. Of these, 874 (83%) had uncontested elections. This refined data can be used to assess later findings, such as those in this report.

The lack of contested elections is beyond the scope of this project, except to note the lack of interest in standing for such elections, and hence presumed lack of interest in CCs, prevalent across Scotland. Factoring in population data taken from (National Records of Scotland, 2011) and assuming that CC areas had equal populations within LAs, only around 200,000 people had the chance to vote at recent CC elections. This is around 4% of the adult population for which election data are available.

Further, CCllrs tend to be demographically unrepresentative (ASCC, quoted in (Scottish Government, 2005)). One solution, according to the then head of the now-defunct Association of Scottish Community Councils (ASCC), would be to give CCs 'a sense of purpose' and 'more legislative teeth' (BBC, 2011b).

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The pressure group Reform Scotland (RS) recently published a report (Thomson, Mawdsley, & Payne, *Renewing Local Government*, 2012) calling for a rejuvenation of local democracy. RS suggests that devolution should carry on 'down' to more local tiers of government, for example giving CCs more powers, along with relevant support, training and resources.

In RS's surprisingly small survey (117 respondents), respondents also suggested better publicity, payments for Councillors, more control over LAs, and CCs forming their own local caucuses. RS also claimed that CCs needn't be homogenous – instead they should be developed to 'best suit their area and circumstance'.

Most relevant to this research, one respondent said: 'The internet opens up a lot more channels to communicate with people – I'd like to think Community Councils could tap into this. The unfortunate thing just now is that they need to know someone who can help them set a website up' (There is already a free [advertising-funded] DIY CC website service at <http://www.community-council.org.uk>.)

On the other side of the political spectrum, the Jimmy Reid Foundation (Bort, McAlpine, & Morgan, 2012) claimed that the current system leads to low interest and involvement in local politics. It noted the disconnectedness between, for example, citizens in the far north of Scotland and their LAs, despite the 'superhuman efforts' made by Councillors. It also recognised the 'need' for CCs (and local democracy in general) to be heterogeneous and called for further devolution of powers to 'affected communities', noting that technological change can allow things to be done differently and more efficiently.

1.4 IMPORTANCE OF CCs

Meanwhile, CCs are still seen as the bodies to consult on important local matters (e.g. (Scottish Institute for Policing Research, 2011), (Cotton & Devine-Wright, 2010) while community engagement is 'central' to the Scottish Government (SG) Community Planning policy (Paterson, 2010). Some CCs provide transport for elderly and disabled people and regenerate civic amenities (BBC, 2011b). CCs have also made valid contributions in emergency situations (Bonney, 2010).

1.5 SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT¹ ACTION

In 2005, the Scottish Government published research into what it could do 'to help CCs fulfil their role' (Scottish Government, 2005). Suggestions relevant to the proposed research included

- CC elections using postal and/or electronic voting
- finding means to increase Councillor diversity
- better dialogue (including use of email) and more consultation between LAs and CCs (and between CCs and other public bodies)
- better funding of CCs' communication (computers, photocopies, etc)

This report also noted that only 55% of CCs were members of the ASCC. This was established in 1993 but closed down in 2012 (Shannon, 2011).

Later, a Scottish Government Short-Life Working Group (SLWG) active in 2007-08 developed 'Good Practice Guidance for Local Authorities and Community Councils'. This guidance included 'Create a website, or get a section on the Local Authority website. Collate a database of e-mail addresses for constituents. Ask for permission to send them e-mail bulletins seeking their views and reporting your actions.' (Scottish Government, 2009)

Last year, the SG published details of five CC pilot schemes that focussed 'on budget management, elections and asset management' (Scottish Government, 2011b).

1 Until earlier in 2012, the Scottish Government was legally known as the Scottish Executive. This report uses 'SG' or 'Scottish Government' throughout for consistency.

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Another SLWG was instituted in November 2011 to 'look at ways to build the resilience and capacity of Community Councils, in order to strengthen their role as voices for their communities' (Scottish Government, 2012a). The SLWG's remit did not directly include use of IT to facilitate CC-constituent communications (Scottish Government, 2012b) but noted that its CCLr members saw 'word of mouth and local newspapers' as 'useful [CC election] promotional techniques' (Scottish Government, 2012c). Later, the SLWG noted 'a lack of overarching evidence relating to ... CCs' and proposed to rectify this by seeking data from LAs' CC Liaison Officers and producing a questionnaire for CCs (Scottish Government, 2012d). This SLWG has just published its final report and recommendations (Scottish Government, 2012f). This research has been broadly complementary to the SLWG's recommendations: intersections are noted below.

Also, the Scottish Government has recently finished a public consultation on the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill (Scottish Government, 2012e). This consultation asked for public responses on, inter alia,

- What role, if any, can community councils play in helping to ensure communities are involved in the design and delivery of public services?
- What role, if any, can community councils play in delivering public services?
- What changes, if any, to existing community council legislation can be made to help enable community councils maximise their positive role in communities?

No mention was made of CCs being online but, because 80% of UK households have internet access and 67% of UK adults use computers every day (Office for National Statistics, 2012), this report assumes that an increasing proportion of citizens who wish to interact with CCs will wish to do so via the internet, either by email or the web.

1.6 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Edinburgh Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre (ITC) has carried out research into innovative eGovernance systems to strengthen public participation in democratic decision-making since 1999. In 2006, it published research into how some CCs used the web, concluding that:

- web-based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say
- there is significant appetite for such tools
- electronic documentation is readily assimilated and disseminated by CCs where members each have access to the web and are able to use it effectively' while budgetary restrictions effectively prevent CCs from disseminating such information by post.
- However, few CCs and CCLrs at the time had the technical skills necessary to create and use CC websites: hence LAs needed to 'take a proactive stance in disseminating e-democracy tools.' (ITC, 2006), (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006)

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2 AIM, SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

This project had two aims: the first was to find out how CCs present themselves online and use the internet to engage with their constituents, and what drives such behaviour. The second, not central to this report, was to follow up the ITC's research into CCs' use of websites to facilitate inter-CC/IR and CC-to-constituent communication (ITC, 2006), (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shell, 2006). However, that research did inspire the current report.

This report is based on a snapshot of CC public online activity in July to early August 2012. Starting from lists of CCs on LA websites, each CC was searched for in Google. Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Angus CCs were also searched for in Facebook. However, because so few Facebook presences were found, this search was not repeated for CCs in other LAs.

If an online presence was found, the following were noted:

- whether the presence was **up to date** or **out of date**. Presences were classified as up-to-date if they had been updated in May 2012 or later, to allow for CCs taking summer breaks and for minutes not being uploaded until they were approved at later meetings.
- how frequently the presence was updated. The classifications used were:
 - **monthly** if the presence was updated after each meeting (so that CCs who met every two or three months but updated their presences after each meeting were not counted as updating 'rarely')
 - **rarely** if the presence was updated less often than monthly, and this was not due to meeting being less frequent than monthly
 - **often** if updating occurred more frequently than the 'monthly' classification.
- how the presence was hosted. The classifications used were
 - **LA-hosted**: where the presence was hosted on a local authority website, e.g. www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1872 for Barrhead CC)
 - **CC association**: where the presence was on a website pertaining to a group of CCs, e.g. www.communitycouncilsglasgow.org.uk/dack for Arden, Carnwadric, Kennishead & Old Darnley CC. The distinction between this class and the LA-hosted class may well be artificial. For example, presences on www.communitycouncilsglasgow.org.uk were classed as being hosted by CC associations because it was not known how closely this site was linked to Glasgow City Council. However, presences hosted on www.edinburghnp.org.uk/community-councils were counted as being hosted by the LA because it was known that this site is closely linked to Edinburgh City Council. In any case, only 33 presences were seen to be hosted by CC associations.
 - **Template- and site-providers**: where the presence was hosted by organisations such as www.community-council.org.uk, e.g. www.islaycommunitycouncil.org.uk
 - **Local community website**: where the presence part of a website controlled by a community organisation such a local community trust, e.g. www.thornhillstirling.org.uk for Thornhill and Blairdrummond CC.
 - **Facebook only**: where the only presence found was a Facebook page, e.g. www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Northfield/157871354239649 for Northfield CC. It was assumed that if a CC had a Facebook presence, this would appear high in the Google search results. For the few CCs found to use both traditional websites and Facebook, this research focussed on the traditional website.
 - **Other blogs**: where the presence was hosted by blogging systems such as Blogger, Blogspot and Wordpress (e.g. carnoustiecommunitycouncil.wordpress.com for Carnoustie CC).
 - **Own**: where the presence obviously belonged to the CC, either by being on a domain belonging to the CC (e.g. www.newmacharcouncil.co.uk for Newmachar CC), or where the presence proclaimed itself to be the CC's website and was not obviously hosted by a template- and site-provider.

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- the types of content on the presence. Content was classified as:
 - **local area:** content describing or advertising local amenities, attractions, businesses and similar
 - **minutes**
 - **news:** content describing or advertising local events and newsworthy occurrences
 - **planning:** content related to CCs' planning activities. (This research only noted planning content if it was apparent without needing to read minutes.)
 - **other:** content such as agendae, CCLr contact details and similar.

Each LA's results were forwarded to the relevant CCLO. He or she was asked to check whether the results for active CCs were accurate, and to amend them if not. He or she was also asked for details of any social media or communications training provided for CCs by the LA. A small number had provided such training. However, many CCLOs stated that they were not allowed to access social media at work and so could not even begin to support CCs using such tools.

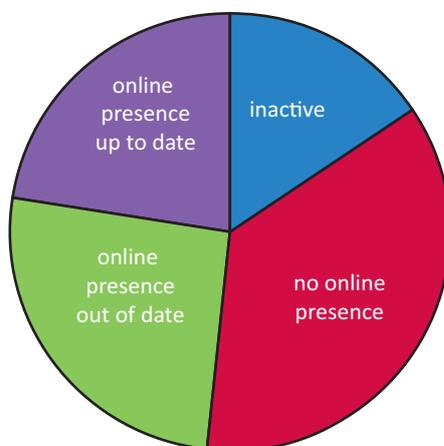
Interviews with a small number of CCs who had up-to-date presences explored why these CCs used the various hosting and content types they chose, how presences were used in relation to planning matters and LA input into online communications/social media training.

Community Councils online

3 RESULTS

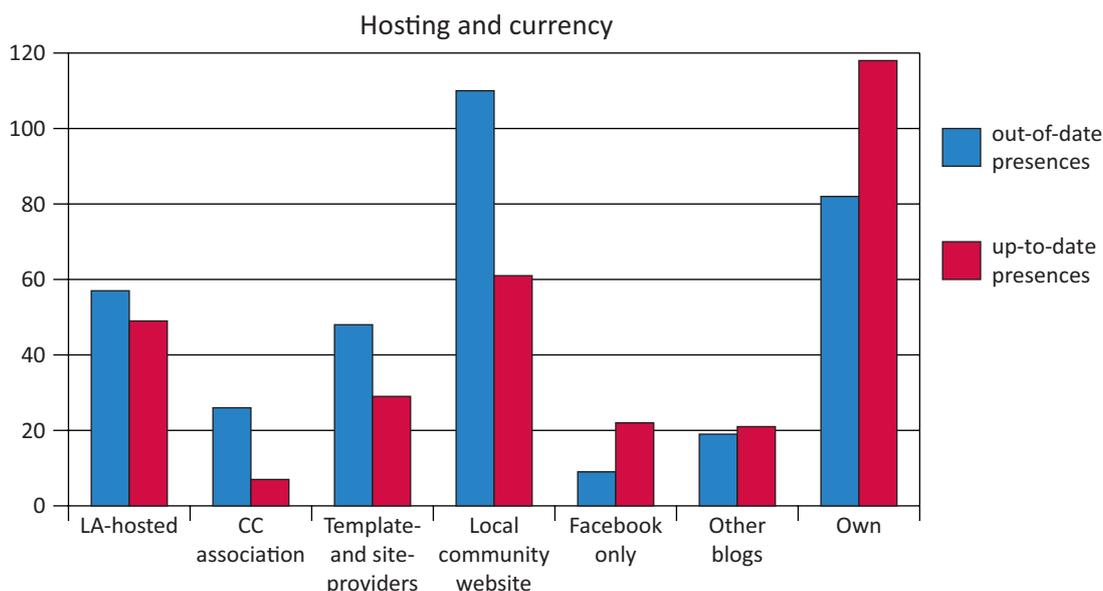
3.1 ACTIVITY

There are potentially 1369 CCs in Scotland. Of these, 213 were inactive, 498 were active but had no online presence and 658 were active and had public online presences. Of these online presences, 351 were out of date and 307 were up to date. (Numerical data is in table 1.)



3.2 HOSTING AND CURRENCY

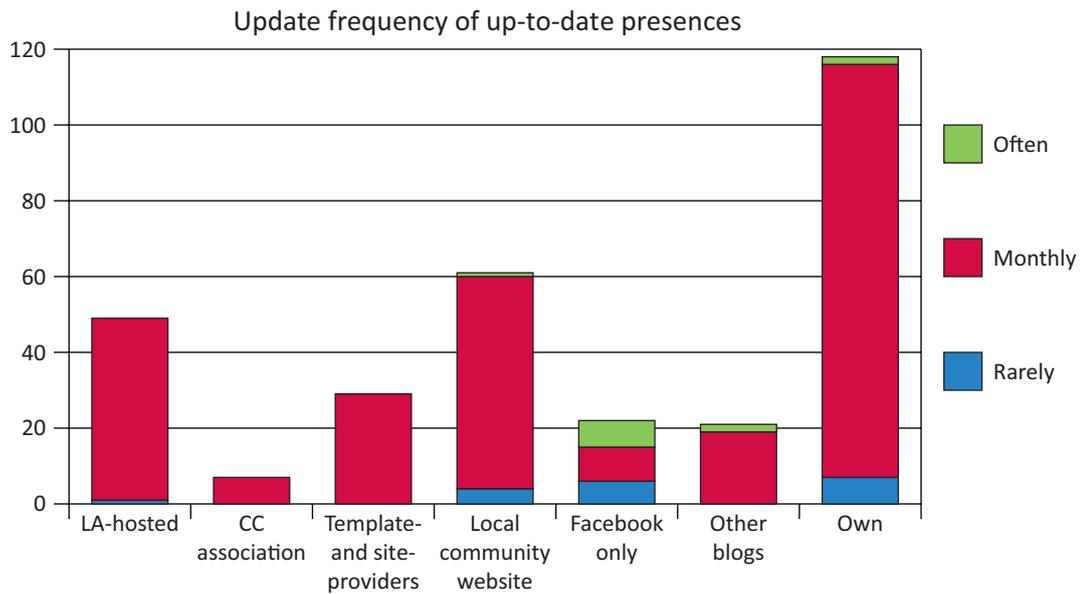
The majority of presences were CCs' own websites or parts of local community websites, with a significant fraction being hosted on local authority websites. Presences on CCs' own domains were more likely to be up-to-date, as were Facebook and other-blog presences.



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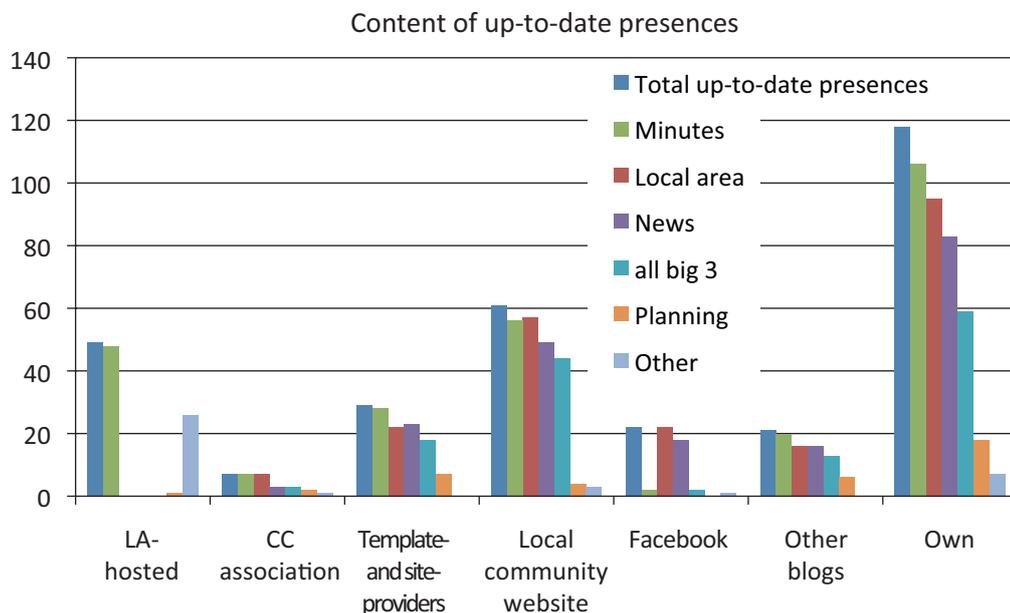
3.3 UPDATE FREQUENCY AND CURRENCY

90% of up-to-date presences were updated monthly. Considering only up-to-date presences, the small number of CCs using Facebook only (7%) updated much more frequently than other types.



3.4 CONTENT

Another area of analysis was consideration of the content CCs chose to include on their online presences. Content was categorised into five main classes: local area, minutes, news, planning, other material. To simplify the analysis, a separate count was used for the CCs which had all of local area information, minutes and news content – labelled as ‘all big 3’ in this report.

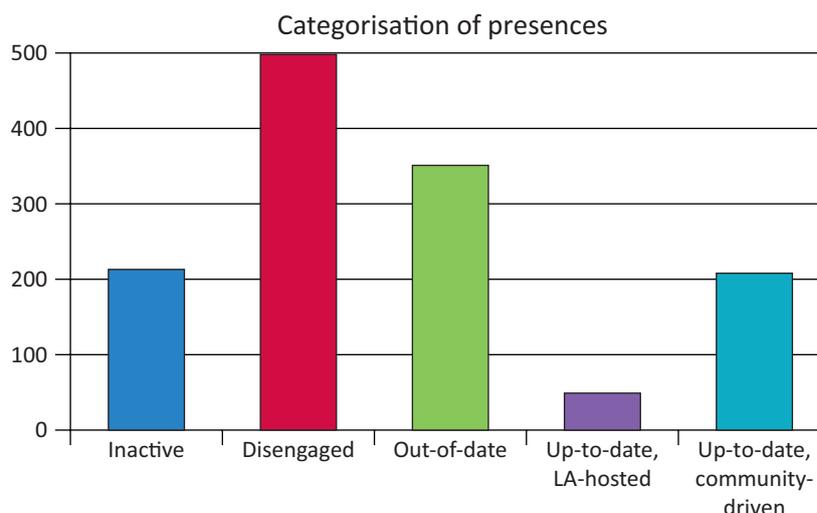


LA-hosted presences tended to have only minutes and CC contact details, while Facebook presences tended not to have minutes. These differences were exemplified by one of the interviewed CCs – it used its LA-provided web page to host minutes and its Facebook page to inform and to discuss local issues. This is explored further below (sections 3.5.2 and 4.2).

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3.5 CATEGORISATION OF PRESENCES

It was found that CCs can be naturally grouped into five categories that cover the vast majority (97%) of circumstances. The rest of this section describes and summarises these categories.



3.5.1 *Up-to-date, community-driven*

Here, the CC existed and had an up-to-date online presence under the direct control of the CC or members of the local community. 15% of all CCs fell into this category. This category did not form a majority in any LA but was most prevalent in Argyll & Bute (34% of all CC areas in this LA), Clackmannanshire (33%) and Edinburgh (33%). There were no community-driven presences in East Ayrshire, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Inverclyde, Moray and Orkney.

Community-driven presences had a wide range of content (58% with 'all big 3' content, 14% with planning content). Almost all (93%) were updated monthly. One interpretation is that CCs that have the impetus to keep their sites up to date are similarly empowered to have wider ranges of content, hence informing their constituents and others outside the CC area.

3.5.2 *Up-to-date, LA-hosted*

Similar to the previous category, the CC existed and had an up-to-date online presence that was on its LA's website. 4% of all CCs fell into this category. This category was found in East Renfrewshire (70%), Moray (70%), Falkirk (50%), Inverclyde (36%), North Lanarkshire (16%) and Orkney (10%).

LA-driven presences almost always contained only minutes and CC contact details, and were updated monthly. In short, these presences were minimal but functional. LAs providing CC webspaces had few other types of presence.

3.5.3 *Out-of-date*

Here, the CC existed and had an online presence, but it was last updated more than 2 months before the survey. 26% of all CCs fell into this category. Such CCs were most prevalent in Orkney (90%) and Falkirk (50%), and least prevalent in East Ayrshire (9%) and Dumfries and Galloway (8%). In particular, the high number of out-of-date presences in Orkney was surprising, considering Orkney CCs undertake a number of duties for OIC (Orkney Islands Council, 2012).

Of the 351 out-of-date presences, 83 (6% of all CCs) were updated in 2012: 34 presences were last updated in April 2012. An interview with a CC whose presence was out of date indicated that it is possible that these were waiting for succeeding meetings to ratify and then upload minutes; it may also be that Councillors' other commitments mean that updates take place infrequently.

One solution, used by St Andrews Community Council among others, is to publish draft minutes very soon after the meeting, then note corrections in succeeding minutes. Another solution would be to amend online documentation in the light of subsequent discussion. Either of these would allow timely feedback from citizens.

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Out-of-date presences were most likely to be hosted on local community websites. Approximately two thirds of out-of-date presences had local area content and minutes, under half had news content and under a third had all three of these types of content. Only 6% had planning content observed in the survey. One interpretation is that CCs that do not have the wherewithal to maintain up-to-date presences are similarly likely to have reduced impetus to have full ranges of content.

3.5.4 *Disengaged*

36% of all CC existed on the ground at the time of the survey but had no detected online presence. Such CCs were most prevalent in East Ayrshire (74%), Eilean Siar (73%) and Shetland (72%). Edinburgh, Inverclyde, Moray, Dundee, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk and Orkney had no disengaged CCs.

3.5.5 *Inactive*

These were the CC which were not currently active: 16% of all CCs. Inactive CCs were most prevalent in Dundee (58%), North Lanarkshire (54%), South Lanarkshire (54%) and West Dunbartonshire (54%). Angus, Clackmannanshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Midlothian, Orkney, Shetland and Stirling had no inactive CCs.

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4 SUMMARY

This section examines some of the meanings behind the data.

4.1 RARENESS AND PAUCITY OF ONLINE PRESENCES

Only 22% of CCs had up-to-date online public presences, though it is conceivable that another 6% could become up-to-date. However, only 139 presences (10% of all CCs) could be described as complete, that is up-to-date, regularly updated and containing the key 'all big 3' types of content (local area information, news and minutes).

This compares poorly with some comparable European countries. (See table 2.) According to the literature, Norwegian municipality websites were similar to CC counterparts in that they mostly presented information rather than aiding 'effective participation'.

Despite CCs having a statutory right of audience about spatial planning matters, only 12% of online presences (4% of all CCs) mentioned planning. From interview data, it was apparent that CCs did not use the SG online planning portal² – instead most relied on paper communications from the CCLO and other bodies. These were then filtered by the CCLIs who acted as planning conveners, so that the CCs only considered issues affecting their areas. There may be technical reasons behind this: the SG planning portal does not provide an RSS feed, which could be used to automatically extract relevant local applications.

The CCs' internet presences are generally not used to support the CCs' primary function of ascertaining community opinions. Instead, it seems that this function continues to operate through traditional means (e.g. newsletters and meetings), supplemented by email and 'contact-us' to support private online discussions.

Only those using Facebook, other blog/social media systems or online fora (14% of up-to-date presences) where citizens can join conversations can be described as using the online route for engagement.

The reasons for this need further research. Several CCLOs reported being not allowed to use social media at work, so that they could not even begin to support CCs' social media efforts. Additionally, it may be that CCs prefer to not use globally visible routes for what can be sensitive discussions.

4.2 TYPES OF PRESENCE

LA-hosted presences guarantee that CCs have presences but not that they are up to date. LA-hosted presences are also not content-rich. It is conceivable that LA hosting encourages CCs to attain only a minimum, minutes-only, standard and that CCs don't try other means, i.e. they take a path of least resistance.

Because out-of-date presences were most likely to be found on local community websites, arguably local community involvement alone isn't enough to guarantee effective CC online presences. Support by LAs, or other relevant bodies, and CCs' own energy is needed as well.

4.3 CONTINUITY ISSUES

Most interviewed CCs were maintained by just one CCLI. However, most had plans in case this CCLI suddenly ceased maintaining the presence. One interviewed CC had an emailing list which was kept securely (for data protection reasons) only on the CC's publicity convenor's personal computer. If this CCLI became incapacitated or died without being able to pass on this list, it would be lost.

4.4 WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

From interviews, CCs' own volition makes the difference between having no presence at all, mediocre presences and informative, content-rich presences that may serve citizens well. Election of CCLIs who have online interests and abilities appears to be a matter of luck.

2 <https://eplanning.scotland.gov.uk/WAM>

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER WORK

5.1 LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH, AREAS FOR FURTHER WORK

This research has not fully taken into account relationships between CCs and other bodies (e.g. community development trusts). For example, one interviewee mentioned support in setting up its online presence from a nearby National Park organisation. In Edinburgh, there are Neighbourhood Partnerships that aim to bring together communities (e.g. CCs and similar organisations) and professionals from Edinburgh Council (anonymised community development council officer, 2012).

It would be desirable to interview some 'disengaged' CCs to find why they choose to be so, and what might make them choose to engage with online methods.

More detailed work on citizens' requirements for CC presences is needed, while investigation into CCLOs' and CCLRs' personal motivations into use of online methods may increase understanding of how and why CCs use online tools effectively.

More work is needed on the use of Facebook and other social media as supplements to traditional websites. The assumption that Facebook presences would automatically be found by Google searches on CC names needs to be tested.

More detailed work on planning is needed – this research did not look at individual minutes. This research also did not examine the relationship between CCs and LAs over planning matters. A significant question here is how LAs ensure they listen to CCs – and ensure that CCs understand they are heard. (When one author of this report was a CCLr and submitted comments on behalf of his CC, evidence of such comments being considered seemed rare.)

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this project was intended mainly as a survey of the current state of play, it is inevitable that the some wider observations and recommendations would emerge. It should therefore be borne in mind that the suggestions in this section are tentative: they should be explored and validated with stakeholders before any action is taken.

5.2.1 *Effective methods and standards for online presences*

Most relevant to this research, the SG SLWG has recommended that CCs are encouraged and supported in using digital and social networking to reach wider community audiences (Scottish Government, 2012f). However, because CCs were set up to express community opinions, this report urges that such methods are, from the outset, two way, so that communities are not merely passive audiences but are able to have real input into the democratic process.

Two effective models for online communication, debate and opinion-gathering found by this research are:

- the online forum system at scottishdemocracy.com. However, there would have to be assurances on continued support before this particular system could be recommended.
- using an LA-hosted presence to present minutes and CCLr contact details, along with a Facebook page for online debate and opinion-gathering. Obvious disadvantages of this model are the need to maintain two systems and the commitment to a commercial system to support democratic processes.

All LAs should support CCs' online presences by gathering CC presences' URLs onto their own websites (most already do), and should encourage CCs to maintain their own content. Related to this, LAs could consider minimum and recommended standards for content: not just minutes and contact details but also information about CC areas, and some online method for hosting online debate and ascertaining local opinions. To achieve more content-richness, LAs would need to broaden the scope of the presences they host to include more CC-generated content. One LA has stated it plans 'new webpages for the Community Councils which ... will link back to their own pages' and to have 'a page for each Community Council so that local information can be added' (anonymised CCLO B, 2012).

All presences could be hosted on LA websites, so that there is a single port-of-call for CC information within an LA, or kept under CCs' on control on their own presences. The later may be preferable because it would help maintain the distinction between LAs and CCs. Also, nearly 50% of CCs already have some form of online presence.

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However, there should be no attempt to impose standard methods of being online: there are several existing methods that have enough functionality and many working presences. Preference should be given to methods that do not require technical skills to maximise the number of people who can contribute. For example, one of the interviewed CCs used a Joomla-based content-management system that was implemented by a local web programmer. The CCLr who updates the website does not need to know how the system works, just how to enter text and add documents. LAs could encourage use of social media, especially for CCs that are currently not online, because so many people regularly use it and because it requires very few technical skills.

5.2.2 *Training and presence development*

It should be remembered that online is simply one of a number of channels for discussion and opinion gathering. However, it is a very widely used channel which is available wherever and whenever internet connections are available, rather than by citizens needing to attend meetings, receive printed newsletters or similar.

There is inevitably a struggle to introduce new technologies, especially with volunteer organisations. For example, one CCLO mentioned that four of her CCs would not use email (anonymised CCLO B, 2012). Another CCLO stated that, having being asked a number of times to provide such training and having then arranged it, only one of her CCs took this opportunity (anonymised CCLO D, 2012). However, complete technophobes are in a minority (Office for National Statistics, 2012), while the UK public is increasingly adopting web 2.0 technologies (Twitchen & Adams, 2011).

LAs must recognise that training is not a one-time occurrence: there will naturally be a turnover in CCLrs, and technology will continue to develop. Hence refresher training will also be important. Training could be delivered by local libraries: these bodies already excel in community engagement and digital methods (anonymised community development council officer, 2012), (SLIC/CILIPS, 2012). Training would need to include not just the mechanics of putting information online but would also need to include sessions on acceptable use/moderation of posts, write for the web and techniques to increase online engagement. Similarly, presences will need on-going development to remain useful to – and hence used by – citizens. For example, Google analytics can be used to find which parts of presences are visited and used.

Training and support for (and by) CCLOs will also be needed: as a number currently are not able to access social media at work, they may well not know how to support their CCs' social media efforts.

If CCs are to invest effort into online presences, they will need to realise – and demonstrate – their benefits. For example, CCs could organise environmental walkabouts, where participants tweet or post issues as they are discovered. Several LAs are able to receive and pass online-delivered information to relevant teams, as if it had been received by letter, phone or email.

5.2.3 *LA support and communities of practice*

The SG SLWG has recommended a national level induction pack for CCLrs ... as a way to instil a sense of responsibility to undertake training (Scottish Government, 2012f).

Another area where LAs can help CCs go online is by providing examples of positive role models, as part of any training they offer. This research has identified a slight clustering effect: when LAs were ranked by number of active CCs, the top 51% had 55% of up-to-date presences (table 3). The causes of this effect could be investigated and the results used to improve CCs' overall online presence. It may be that CCs with effective online presences act as mentors for other CCs making their first steps towards online, or it may indicate the presence of more active or pro-online CCLOs. This could help build a pan-Scotland community of practice where CCs routinely inform and aid each other. The SG SLWG has also recommended the creation of a 'national interactive portal [for] support and guidance' (Scottish Government, 2012f). This could be a welcome nucleus to a community of practice.

There is at least one model for a pan-Scotland CC online presence, the online forum scottishdemocracy.com. This can host CC-CC private discussions, two-way CC-citizen communication and inter-CC communication. Rather than LAs investing in different ways of doing things, CCs could be encouraged to use it and LAs could collectively support it. A drawback of this forum system is that it is text-and document-based: it cannot display visual content, as used by many CCs to publicise their areas.

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While non-public online communications (emails and closed fora) were beyond the scope of this research, emailing lists are an important resource for some CCs. Their security and continuity of accessibility, along with continuity of online presence management, needs careful consideration. This is where LA support could be invaluable: access keys could be held by LAs and passed on as necessary.

5.2.4 Planning

The apparent low planning content of CC online presences begs the question about how this can be rectified. Similarly, the apparent low awareness of the SG planning portal leads to questions about how these portals (and awareness of them) can be improved. For example, if portals can be engineered to provide filterable RSS feeds, relevant items can be added to CCs' incoming data-streams and online presences.

Further, CCs may well feel less marginalised if feedback on their planning submissions can be provided. Online systems for submission and feedback may simplify such issues. This issue has also been recognised by the current SG SLWG: their third recommendation is that LAs 'provide CCs with constructive feedback on how their representations are used and, if they are not used, the reason for this' (Scottish Government, 2012f).

Many of the recommendations in this section could form the basis for research projects of their own. There are also a number of wider themes that have emerged that are discussed in the final section.

6 CLOSING THOUGHTS

This research has necessarily been limited to a snapshot of CC online presences: several recommendations for further research are given above. Perhaps the most pressing of these are widening the scope of interviews to find why so many CCs are disengaged from online communication and to fully establish the meanings behind the numerical data, and finding ways for CCs to fully engage with citizens. It may well be beneficial to monitor some CCs who choose to move from being disengaged to fully engaged with online: the lessons from this process would be made available to all other CCs. Ideally CCs in this process would be mentored by CCs who are already fully engaged, to avoid mistakes being repeated, and to help build up the desired communities of practice.

In conclusion, although there are some shining examples of community councils using the internet to fulfil their primary function of ascertaining community opinions, it has been somewhat disappointing to find the general low level of use of internet, and the low level of ambition in what is there.

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7 TABLES

TABLE 1: INACTIVE, OFFLINE AND ONLINE COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Local Authority	inactive CCs	active CCs with no online presence	active CCs with out-of-date presences	active CCs with up-to-date presences	total CCs
Aberdeen	5	7	9	9	30
Aberdeenshire	15	19	20	19	73
Angus	-	12	8	5	25
Argyll & Bute	2	15	20	19	56
Clackmannanshire	-	3	3	3	9
Dumfries & Galloway	17	72	9	9	107
Dundee	11	-	5	3	19
East Ayrshire	5	26	3	1	35
*East Dunbartonshire	-	8	4	1	13
East Lothian	1	9	2	8	20
East Renfrewshire	-	-	3	7	10
Edinburgh	4	-	18	24	46
Eilean Siar	4	22	3	1	30
Falkirk	-	-	9	9	18
Fife	23	40	21	21	105
Glasgow	19	31	37	14	101
Highland	3	75	42	37	157
Inverclyde	2	-	5	4	11
Midlothian	-	7	7	2	16
Moray	4	-	2	14	20
North Ayrshire	5	4	6	2	17
North Lanarkshire	44	6	14	17	81
Orkney	-	-	18	2	20
Perth & Kinross	5	15	18	14	52
Renfrewshire	4	12	6	4	26
Scottish Borders	2	25	18	22	67
Shetland	-	13	2	3	18
South Ayrshire	2	15	8	4	29
South Lanarkshire	25	17	9	7	58
Stirling	-	19	9	15	43
West Dunbartonshire	7	4	3	3	17
West Lothian	4	22	10	4	40
Total	213	498	351	307	1369

* East Dunbartonshire did not respond to requests to confirm the data on numbers of potential and active CCs. However, from a map on this LA's website shows 13 CC areas. A list of CC contacts also on this LA's website (last reviewed in August 2012) named 12 CCs. Hence it was assumed that these 12 were active and that the CC omitted from this list was inactive.

TABLE 2: COMPARISON WITH AUSTRIAN GEMEINDEN AND NORWEGIAN MUNICIPALITY WEBSITES

Item	Scotland (2012)	Austria (2008)	Norway (2009)
Active LG units	84% (1156)	100% (assumed)	100% (assumed)
Local government units having websites	48% (658)	93%	90% (392 of 434)
Central support	no (ASCC has folded)	yes (www.kommunalnet.at)	Unknown
Data source	Current research	(centre for eGovernment, 2009)	(Saglie & Vabo, 2009)

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TABLE 3: CLUSTERING EFFECT

Local Authority	active CCs with no online presence	active CCs with out-of-date presences	active CCs with up-to-date presences	total number of presences	active CCs	cumulative number of active CCs	cumulative % of active CCs	cumulative number of up-to-date presences	cumulative % of up-to-date presences
Highland	75	42	37	79	154	154	13%	37	12%
Glasgow	31	37	14	51	82	236	20%	51	17%
Edinburgh		18	24	42	42	278	24%	75	24%
Fife	40	21	21	42	82	360	31%	96	31%
Scottish Borders	25	18	22	40	65	425	37%	118	38%
Aberdeenshire	19	20	19	39	58	483	42%	137	45%
Argyll & Bute	15	20	19	39	54	537	46%	156	51%
Perth & Kinross	15	18	14	32	47	584	51%	170	55%
North Lanarkshire	6	14	17	31	37	621	54%	187	61%
Stirling	19	9	15	24	43	664	57%	202	66%
Orkney		18	2	20	20	684	59%	204	66%
Aberdeen	7	9	9	18	25	709	61%	213	69%
Dumfries & Galloway	72	9	9	18	90	799	69%	222	72%
Falkirk		9	9	18	18	817	71%	231	75%
Moray		2	14	16	16	833	72%	245	80%
South Lanarkshire	17	9	7	16	33	866	75%	252	82%
West Lothian	22	10	4	14	36	902	78%	256	83%
Angus	12	8	5	13	25	927	80%	261	85%
South Ayrshire	15	8	4	12	27	954	83%	265	86%
East Lothian	9	2	8	10	19	973	84%	273	89%
East Renfrewshire		3	7	10	10	983	85%	280	91%
Renfrewshire	12	6	4	10	22	1005	87%	284	93%
Inverclyde		5	4	9	9	1014	88%	288	94%
Midlothian	7	7	2	9	16	1030	89%	290	94%
Dundee		5	3	8	8	1038	90%	293	95%
North Ayrshire	4	6	2	8	12	1050	91%	295	96%
Clackmannanshire	3	3	3	6	9	1059	92%	298	97%
West Dunbartonshire	4	3	3	6	10	1069	92%	301	98%
East Dunbartonshire	8	4	1	5	13	1082	94%	302	98%
Shetland	13	2	3	5	18	1100	95%	305	99%
East Ayrshire	26	3	1	4	30	1130	98%	306	100%
Eilean Siar	22	3	1	4	26	1156	100%	307	100%
Grand Total	498	351	307	658	1156				

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