

# **Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee**

## **15th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6)**

**Tuesday 23 May 2023**

### **Evidence session on Community Councils in their 50<sup>th</sup> year**

#### **Introduction**

1. At its meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> March the Committee agreed to hold an evidence session about Community Councils ('CCs') to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, which established CCs in Scotland.
2. The role of CCs has been a recurring theme throughout the Committee's work and that of its predecessors, most recently during the inquiry into Community Planning.

#### **Background**

3. The 1973 Act created CCs in order to provide a bridge between communities and local authorities. There are around 1200 active CCs in Scotland. CCs are described by the Scottish Government as being the most local tier of statutory representation in Scotland, and some view them as having an important role in community empowerment and democratic renewal in Scotland. CC members are volunteers and should be elected to the CC, although elections are not usually contested due to a lack of candidates.
4. CCs must be consulted by local authorities on planning applications, certain licence applications, and on changes to the use of 'common good' property and assets. Some are also involved in community planning, formally or informally, and research carried out in 2019 into strengthening CCs described how they are involved in a much wider range of community activities. However CCs often struggle to attract members and local participation.
5. With the Committee's ongoing interest in the Scottish Government's Local Governance Review and the Community Empowerment Act, this session provides an opportunity to explore the role of CCs in local participation and democracy. In particular their contribution to local communities, the challenges to their being effective, and where there are opportunities to build their capacity and role.
6. The Improvement Service is funded by the Scottish Government to support CCs. In addition, the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) and What Works Scotland carried out extensive research in 2019 into how CCs could be strengthened, providing evidence to help inform the Local

Governance Review. This included surveying over 600 community councillors. Their findings included:

- Strengthening CCs should be considered by the Local Governance Review.
  - Their power and resources should be enhanced.
  - They need greater support to reach their capacity.
  - They need to be more representative of diverse groups and perspectives.
  - Councillors should be compensated for eg loss of earnings, childcare etc.
  - Scottish Government should promote and publicise CCs.
  - Reforms should allow for flexibility to meet local needs.
7. CCs are often contrasted with the Parish Council system in England which – unlike in Scotland – have budgets, paid staff and more powers at their disposal.

### **Evidence session**

8. The Committee will take evidence from two panels of witnesses. The first will focus on the broader context with witnesses from the Improvement Service, the Scottish Community Development Centre and Dr Oliver Escobar from the University of Edinburgh. Jackie Weaver, Chair of the Cheshire Association of Local Councils is also attending to allow comparison with the English system.
9. The second panel includes representatives from CCs and Community Council Liaison Officers from across Scotland. A round-table discussion with Committee members will provide evidence of how CCs operate in practice.

### **Committee Clerks**

**May 2023**