# Information Literacy for Democratic Engagement (IL-DEM)

## Introduction

The Information Literacy Group has recently funded a project entitled Information Literacy for Demographic Engagement (IL-DEM). The project was completed by a team from the Centre for Social Informatics at Edinburgh Napier University. This comprised Professor Hazel Hall, Peter Cruickshank and Dr Bruce Ryan.

The focus of the project was information literacy amongst those involved in hyperlocal democracy in Scotland as community councillors (the equivalent of parish councillors in England). The work of community councillors relates to ascertaining, co-ordinating and expressing the views of their communities to local authorities and taking 'such action in the interests of [their communities] as appears to be expedient and practicable' (Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1973).

## The rationale for the study

Governments and local authorities employ information professionals to support information channels designed to engage citizens. At the hyperlocal level, unpaid community councillors take on this role. They face a number of information challenges related to accessing and understanding information on their duties and rights; keeping up to date with local developments; and disseminating information to their communities. For example, prior work completed by members of the project team in 2014 revealed that only about 10% of Scotland's community councils have online presences that facilitate dialogue with their communities (Ryan & Cruickshank, 2014), even though many of their citizens are regular Internet users. This contributes to a hyperlocal democratic deficit. The project was thus set up to investigate whether information literacy could be a route to tackling this deficit, via key questions 1 and 3 below.

Public libraries are tasked with becoming 'champions of community engagement and empowerment' (SLIC, 2015, p. 25) and it has been said that librarians have become information literacy's 'proprietors' (Crawford, 2013). This raises questions about the role of public libraries in supporting their community councillors. Key question 2 below was the project's route to investigating the role of public library services in this context.

**Key questions**

The investigation addressed three key questions:

1. What are community councillors' current practices in exploiting information channels for engaging citizens in democratic processes?
2. What are public libraries' roles in supporting community councillors, particularly around their acquisition of information literacy?
3. What are the relationships between community councillors' information behaviours and literacies, resources, and knowledge and experience?

**Data collection and analysis**

In late 2016 the project team interviewed a sample of community councillors representing different types of communities (ranging from rural to urban, and from deprived to wealthy). Another set of community councillors completed an online survey, and some additional data was also obtained from public officials and librarians. Finally, desk research was undertaken into local authority policies about library support for community councils.

**Project findings**

Community councillors' current practices in exploiting information channels for engaging citizens in democratic processes

Community councillors generally understand from local authority guidance that they should communicate the opinions of citizens to public authorities (e.g. local authorities, emergency services). However, community councillors also transmit information in the other direction, and some undertake quasi-governmental roles. To explore their roles, community councillors also refer to a number of bodies, including Planning Democracy, Planning Aid Scotland; to community councils other than their own; and to information sources including the national community council web site and Facebook groups such as *Chewin' the fat*.

Community councils are statutory consultees on spatial planning in their localities (although not on community planning (SURF, 2016)). They automatically receive lists of planning applications. However, they experience difficulties in obtaining other information, and in having their voices heard by higher government tiers. This finding echoes views expressed in a report on a major community council networking event (Improvement Service, 2015). The other major planning information sources used by community councillors are citizens, the local press, and Facebook. Less frequently-used sources include TellMeScotland (a centralised

public notices portal), developers, and workers on building sites. Citizens' opinions are obtained via social media (principally Facebook); word-of-mouth and local networking; comment boxes, surveys and questionnaires.

In practice, community councillors are also tasked with disseminating information from authorities to citizens. Digital channels such as blogs, email and Facebook are used for this purpose. Non-digital channels include newsletters; word-of-mouth and local networking; and local press. Obstacles to sharing information with citizens include poor communication within some community councils, and a lack of clarity around local authority structures.

Some community councillors recognise that information skills are critically important. This is because information is a form of currency for their work. They use their information skills for the benefit of others, for example, in addressing issues around planning, air pollution, dog-mess, helping citizens who have been attacked, supporting disadvantaged areas, retaining public facilities, and building social cohesion.

A major obstacle to the work of community councils is their low membership. This finding is in line with previous research (Goodlad et al., 1999; Ryan & Cruickshank, 2012, 2014). This lack of human resources contributes to skills gaps around knowledge of social media, analytics and digital engagement skills, and means of gauging public opinion using online tools. Community councillors also report a need for up-to-date training in information gathering, processing and dissemination.

## The roles of public libraries in supporting community councillors, particularly around their acquisition of information literacy

Although public libraries provide facilities for community councils, such as hosting meetings and displaying information, none appear to address the information literacy needs of this group directly. This study identified only one local authority that has a readily-findable policy on library support for community councils. Public libraries also provide internet access, while many also offer IT training.

The interviewees in this study were clearly highly educated and self-efficacious – most had degrees while over half had postgraduate qualifications. Such people are likely to have well-developed information skills. However, people without these qualities are likely to struggle with information tasks.

### The relationships between community councillors' information behaviours and literacies, resources, and knowledge and experience

The study reveals that a number of factors have an impact on the development of the information literacy skills of community councillors. As might be predicted from the high levels of formal education in interviewees and survey respondents, our results suggest that their information skills are developed mostly during studenthood, with a significant contributions coming from employment and childhood or school education. Other aspects of working life (e.g. membership of professional bodies or trade unions) appear to have smaller effects, as do social factors such as ethnicity and gender. However, further research (to be undertaken in Spring 2017) will further explore the importance of these factors and the relationships between them.

### Conclusions

Community councillors can generally identify and scope their information needs. However, they do not rigorously plan how to fill information gaps or evaluate the information that they gather. Information is generally evaluated simplistically according to its provenance. Information management and presentation are highly variable.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal that much could be done to improve Scottish community councillors' information literacy to enhance their roles in hyperlocal democracy. Similarly, there is scope for public libraries in Scotland to do more to support the work of community councils, particularly in relation to training. Further project outputs for stakeholders such as community councillors, local authority officials who support community councils and the Improvement Service include specific recommendations to address these issues.

### Next steps

Fuller findings of this study will be disseminated in academic conference and journal papers. The project team has recently received additional internal funding to extend the research. This will focus on exploring further the relationships between community councillors' information behaviours and literacies, resources, and knowledge and experience.

### Acknowledgments

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