



An e-Democracy Model for Communities

Final Report of the e-Community Council Project

Version 3e

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Preface

The e-Community Council project was the brainchild of John Riley, a leading community activist in Strathfillan, Perthshire. One of the principal challenges facing his and other local communities in Scotland and across the UK was the ever increasing pressure from local and national bodies to “consult” with local people – usually by sending a single copy of a thick, dense and very technical document, accompanied by a tight time scale for commenting.

John, a committed Community Councillor, saw the opportunity to use the power of the internet to improve the opportunities for the development of participative democracy. His vision was threefold; to offer community councillors the means to communicate easily with each other, to enable them to keep their community informed and, most importantly, to provide the community with an opportunity to respond to community council issues and also raise issues of their own. He also saw the future opportunity for cross-community collaboration.

John sought support at a time when rising levels of internet access increased the opportunity to make this vision a reality. with the support of Sylvia Jackson MSP, the ‘Renewing Local Democracy Working Group’ was formed with the Association of Scottish Community Councils, the Association of Community Councils for the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park Area, Stirling Assembly, Stirling Council and Napier University. With the financial support of the Scottish Executive, a two year development plan was agreed.

The next step was to develop proposals for a community council website to support the activities of community councils and their councillors. The first prototype was trialled by Strathfillan, and then by the other community councils. At this, the close of its development phase, the project has produced a meaningful, robust community asset which provides community councils with a secure and easily accessible means of encouraging local democratic participation.

Finally, on behalf of the Working Group, I would like to thank the Scottish Executive for their support through the 21st Century Government Unit Flexible Fund. The successful completion of this stage of the project has demonstrated the potential for the use of an e-democracy tool. Given the commitment of the Scottish Executive to Community Planning and the need for public involvement, the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group sees a strong case for building on the capabilities developed in the project. As local authorities have a statutory responsibility for leading Community Planning, they are best placed to encourage the use of e-Democracy tools. Indeed, several local authorities have begun to explore the internet as a means of improving communication with their local communities. The Renewing Local Democracy Working Group sees the most viable way forward as encouraging individual local authorities to adopt the project as a central plank in their Community Planning and local democracy processes.

Murray Dickie, Chair of Renewing Local Democracy Group

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Executive Summary and Main Recommendations

This is the final report of the *e-Community Council* project which, from February 2004 to January 2006, piloted and evaluated e-democracy tools designed to support the work of Community Councils in Scotland. The project involved collaboration between researchers at Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre and members of the six Community Councils involved in the project; Bannockburn, Cambusbarron, Strathfillan, Stepps, Thornhill & Blairdrummond, and Torbrex.

National governments in the UK are currently considering how best to reinvigorate local democracy, in the face of widespread disengagement from the political process. This is a timely report, because it describes concrete action, initiated by community councils and funded by the Scottish Executive, to provide straightforward internet-based tools that community councils may use to reinvigorate local democracy.

Our 5 main conclusions and recommendations below are followed by some background and a summary of the results described in the report:-

1. The project demonstrates that web based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say in local democracy than has previously been the case through community councils' public meetings and communications. It is therefore recommended that local and national government supports community councils to develop web tools to inform and interact with the public. There is a significant public appetite for the opportunities to influence local decision-making that such tools support. They are regarded as a convenient opportunity to have views considered, provided those views are responded to.
2. The project demonstrates that individual community councils face challenges organising to make best use of online tools. A growing number provide information online, but few have the resources to manage online interaction with the public ('e-participation'). It is recommended that online tools be managed by people experienced in the use of the internet. Recognising that some community councils will have no experienced members there will be requirements for support to community councils for example through training and cooption of support staff. The funding implications should be considered by Local authorities under their duties to establish Community Planning and for Best Value in communication and engagement with residents.
3. It is recommended that Local Authorities take a proactive stance in disseminating e-democracy tools. This should include administrative support for community councils to respond to public input, and financing to enable hosting of the software and to implement our recommended changes to it. Support for 'e-participation' should be considered alongside support for more traditional forms of communication. It should also ensure local authorities have adequate protection in place for the statutory and legal liabilities arising from community councils publishing public opinion online.
4. The project demonstrates that electronic documentation is readily assimilated and disseminated by community councils where members each have access

to the web and are able to use it effectively. Dissemination of electronic material takes a matter of minutes whereas dissemination of written material received by post is virtually impossible due to the lack of community council budgets for photocopying or dissemination to the public. It is recommended that Local Authorities and other public bodies should follow the Scottish Executive's lead in making consultation documents available electronically, and offering an email notification service.

5. The project explored various approaches to building the confidence and capability of community councillors to use the internet as a communication medium. This project demonstrates that community councils which receive structured support perform more effectively than those which do not. It is therefore recommended that the Scottish Executive consider nationally coordinated support for community councillors' training in basic internet skills and in e-participation, i.e. in the effective use of online tools to communicate with their communities and ascertain their opinion.

Background and context to the project

The pattern of community councils' work is in a state of flux, shaped by sporadic bursts of activity by public bodies to consult them on local and national policy and services, the work they are called on to do in Community Planning, and public expectations that their views should be considered more effectively.

There have been many developments, prior to and in parallel with this project, indicating that Internet-based tools can help meet community councils' communication needs. Local and national government has recently fostered development of 'e-democracy' tools. There has also been much recent innovation in online tools to support citizen journalism and social networking, eagerly taken up by individual enthusiasts and civic organisations. The resulting 'virtual' communities parallel those catered for by community websites, which are increasing in number and in the scope of the information they provide on specific geographic areas, often including information on community councils¹.

Drawing on their experience and knowledge of these various developments, International Teledemocracy Centre worked during 2004-2005 as part of the Renewing Local Democracy Working Group. The Group has in-depth knowledge and experience of community councils' work; representing the Association of Scottish Community Councils, Stirling Assembly, Stirling Council, and six Community Councils from the Stirling and North Lanarkshire areas of Scotland. These serve a combined population of 16,051, of which roughly 7,000 will have internet access².

¹ The Caithness Community Website (<http://www.caithness.org>) is one of many examples.

² Population from census figures collated by Stirling and North Lanarkshire Councils.

Below we summarise the opportunities and challenges described in more detail in the three main chapters and the separate Annexes to the report. Following a brief outline of the e-Community Council capabilities, and a short account of their development and the uses made of them, we summarise:-

- Public take-up, awareness and expectations of the e-Community Council.
- Community councillor take-up of the e-Community Council tools, and its impact on the participating Community Councils' activities.

Lastly this summary considers the *sustainability* of the e-Community Council tools developed. In other words, how should community councils and others take the initiative and responsibility for developing the tools further, and make sure they are used effectively for democratic ends?

The e-Community Council Tools

The e-Community Council tools take the form of a website for each participating community council. Each has two 'sides' or sets of pages; one restricted to members of the Community Council and the other for public access and use. These two sides of the e-Community Council are to support community councillors to communicate with each other and the public, and for the public to have a say on what they do. The e-Community Council are features summarised in Table A below.

The tools were designed to take the first steps in meeting the needs of Scottish community councils. Firstly a prototype was developed to address the challenges faced by a dispersed rural community council; Strathfillan. This was initially geared to helping community councillors respond to consultations from public bodies.

<i>Community councillor / admin tools</i>	<i>Public response and dialogue</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Publish item on a topic of current interest. - Make 'private' comments to other councillors, e.g. on draft Minutes. - Publish a document for comment e.g. Minutes, consultations. - Draft a response to a published consultation. - Check/ approve item or comment added by the public - Use topics to categorise items - Set up a questionnaire - Edit the events & meetings diary, and contact information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Read news items about the issues and projects the Community Council is working on. - Download attached documents - Comment on any item shown. - Respond to consultations from the local Council and other bodies - Write an item for the home page, and submit it for approval. - Answer questionnaires and polls - Find dates of forthcoming meetings and events - Find contact details for local organisations

Table A. e-Community Council tools

Between October 2004 and March 2005 the pilot was set up with five further community councils. These were drawn from urban and rural areas and from a wide economic background so that issues of the digital divide could also be considered. Following feedback from them on the need for the site to attract public responses on a wider variety of local issues and projects, it was extensively revised for the September-November 2005 pilot period.

Public take-up, awareness and expectations

Demonstrations and field tests of the e-Community Council sites were carried out with each of the Community Councils, and with members of the public in Bannockburn and Cambusbarron. The demonstrations allowed Strathfillan participants to share their experience, and both these and the field tests provided the developers with valuable feedback to complement that from the Steering Group.

Evidence of public take-up was available from *contributions to the sites* and from *website traffic*. Further to that, user experiences and the wider public's expectations and awareness of the development were gathered from the *field tests* and a *survey of Stirling Council's 1300 citizen panel members*. Taking these sources in turn we summarise their highlights below.

Take-up of the site grew substantially over the pilot period. During the three month pilot the six e-Community Council sites gathered 96 contributions from the public, mainly 60 items of local news and opinion or comments in response to them. The participating community councillors reported more contact by online methods than traditional ones. By head of population, public contributions to the e-Community Council sites also exceed contributions to some local authority e-democracy sites at a similar stage of development³.

Website traffic statistics showed the number of visitors to the e-Community Council sites rising 17% from 1109 in September to 1296 in November. In the same period the number of pages viewed rose 12% from 5789 to 6493, more than the corresponding community council pages on Stirling Council's website.

Stirling citizens' panel members are typically individuals interested in issues affecting their areas and communities, and are representative of Stirling area residents in demographic terms. Their responses broadly confirmed results from the smaller group of field testers⁴ and showed: -

³ For example a pilot e-democracy site for the Bristol area (population 380,000) received 495 contributions in its first 10 weeks, and a similar site for the Wolverhampton Partnership (pop. 239,100) received 91 contributions in 8 weeks (see Whyte, A., Renton, A. and Macintosh, A. (2005); *eDemocracy from the Top Down: An Evaluation of eDemocracy Activities Initiated by Councils and Government* available at <http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk>

⁴ There were 7 field testers in Bannockburn and 6 in Cambusbarron, recruited from visitors to the public library and community centre respectively.

- Most (69%) were interested in using an e-Community Council website to give their views, with interest highest among those aged 35-44 (84%) and women (75%). Despite low-level publicity, *awareness* of the e-community council among residents of the participating areas was 41%.
- A large majority (92%) expect views submitted to their community council to be considered by the appropriate decision-maker.
- Most (84%) would expect an e-Community Council website to keep people informed more effectively, and 80% to help a wider range of local people have a say on local issues.
- Most (62%) would expect to visit an e-Community Council site for their own area at least monthly.
- If adding a comment to an e-Community Council site, 70% would expect a community councillor to respond within a week.
- In their comments the respondents identified *responsiveness*, *relevant content*, *website usability* and *accessibility* as the main factors needed to encourage public uptake of an e-Community Council.
- Many commented they welcomed the added convenience of e-Community Council sites relative to attending public meetings. Many added the proviso that face-to-face contact is still needed in some circumstances, preferred by some people especially the elderly, and that many people have no, or at least no easy, internet access.

Community councillor take-up and impact

Community councillors actively used the tools both to communicate with the public and with other members of their community council. Most had at least one community councillor contributing to their e-Community Council site at least weekly, and several others actively using it. The six community councils made 180 contributions to their sites, i.e. on average each community council contributed to its site once every three days in the 3 month pilot period. This included 73 items of public news and opinion and 57 comments on these, 10 questionnaires, 5 consultations on behalf of other public bodies, and 35 event notices.

The two most active e-Community Councils (Bannockburn and Cambusbarron) account for more than half of that activity. Contributing regularly and responding to public input was a challenge in all cases; and for a minority it was too much of a burden. We summarise the successes and impediments to them below.

At the end of the evaluation period 22 community councillors in 6 community councils took part in interviews or responded to questionnaires. Community councillors reported these positive impacts on community council business:-

- In Bannockburn, Cambusbarron and Stepps new community councillors were recruited as a result of their interest in the sites; Bannockburn reporting that without this they would not currently have an active community council.

- Minutes are made available quicker, in draft and final form. Making these and other documents available for download has resolved significant problems distributing them as email attachments.
- In Bannockburn, Cambusbarron and Strathfillan, meetings are seen as more productive, since most members arrive better informed about the matters to be discussed if they have not already discussed them online.
- In Bannockburn planning applications are responded to more effectively as the community council receives public comments within the deadline for objections. Public comments are also printed off and used in meetings with local authority Councillors.
- In Cambusbarron, community councillors have been able to consider views expressed online that would otherwise not be heard, on a matter of local concern.
- In Torbrex and Bannockburn, the site provided an information resource for these Community Councils to link with campaigning groups across Scotland.

There were various factors acting as *barriers* to more effective e-Community Council use. As is often found in such projects the main barrier was the time needed to change working practices, especially given community councillors' wide range of internet access and skills. This resulted in little use of the e-Community Council sites for their original aim, to coordinate responses to consultations by other public bodies.

Lack of time for site administration was another factor. Community councils are organised around monthly or 6-weekly meetings, rather than providing a 24x7 public response service. Between meetings office-bearers handle most ongoing matters including public contact. Website maintenance is additional (voluntary) work to their other communication tasks. In Steps and Torbrex the burden of other work was a major barrier to take-up. In Thornhill & Blairdrummond, lack of internet access among community councillors compounded the problem, since it led to duplication of effort.

In some cases, community councillors objected to the idea that they should be expected to give undue attention to a form of communication they considered inferior to face-to-face contact and public debate, and divisive in terms of unequal access. The common grounds for such objections were concerns over lack of Internet access for the public and other community councillors, and expectations of public apathy.

The extensive revisions to the site in July-September 2005 were needed to give greater emphasis to public comment on local issues. However the changes were implemented quickly, with a knock-on effect on the community councillors' familiarity with and uptake of the site. Further changes are needed to improve usability and ease the site administration, and these are identified in the report.

Despite such difficulties, a large majority of our participants said they found helpful all or most functions they had used, and rated the e-community council positively on ease of learning, ease of use, and impact on their Community Council's productivity.

The future of e-Community Councils

More than two-thirds of Stirling citizens' panel members say they would be interested in using an e-Community Council website to give their views on "local issues the Community Council can influence". There is near-unanimous support among our participating community councillors for e-Community Council facilities to be developed further; possibly organised and provided as a collaborative enterprise between *groups* of community councils. Citizens' panel members were more interested in discussing local issues on websites organised by community councils (69%) than community planning groups (56%). Nevertheless sustainability demands the active contribution of others involved in community planning, and resourcing from local authorities.

This coordinated approach can offer benefits to all involved in community governance. The perception among our community council participants is that area 'clusters' need alternatives to public meetings to maintain continuity. Public meetings are expensive to organise and often inconvenient for those they are intended to attract. Operating at the area level, e-Community Council tools can sustain communication between community councils and other communities of interest or circumstance in the relevant areas.

During this project a growing number of other community councils have established websites, though still a small minority of the approx 1200 in Scotland. Most of these sites provide information, but offer the public little or no facilities to interact with community councillors or other members of the public.

It is these 'e-participation' facilities that e-Community Council tools provide and which would benefit most from coordinated and consistent development and support across the local authority area, on an area or 'cluster' basis. It would not be realistic or desirable to propose the e-Community Council tools as a standard that all individual community councils must adopt, although those that already have them wish them to be continued. There was also keen interest in the tools from other community councils, in the Stirling and other local authority areas.

The initiative and responsibility for e-Community Council websites should remain with community councils. However local authorities and others involved in community planning are better placed to offer technical and administrative support. That should be integrated with support for other methods of ascertaining and representing community views. For example, community councils need help to establish who (in demographic terms) is expressing views using e-Community Council facilities, to be better informed about sections of the community they may reach more effectively, e.g. through meetings or surveys targeted through other community groups.

Finally, support is also needed in the areas of broadband public internet access, training in basic internet skills, and in managing public involvement online, i.e. 'e-participation'. The Scottish Executive should consider offering coordinated national support for such training particularly for rural community councils, which frequently do not have the library or community centre-based internet access facilities that are now taken for granted in urban areas.

Chapter 1 Introduction and Background

Aims and Scope of the Project

This is the final report of the *e-Community Council* project which, from February 2004 to January 2006, piloted and evaluated e-democracy tools designed to support the work of Community Councils in Scotland. The project involved collaboration between researchers at Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre and members of the six Community Councils involved in the project.

The report is aimed at Scottish Community Councils and other community groups considering using e-democracy software, and policy makers considering e-democracy developments to support community governance.

The participating Community Councils are located in two areas of central Scotland. Five of them lie in the area surrounding Stirling in Bannockburn, Cambusbarron, Strathfillan, Thornhill and Blairdrummond, and Torbrex. The seventh is Stepps Community Council, located in North Lanarkshire. The e-Community Council initiative is funded by the Scottish Executive, and has the support of Stirling Council, Stirling Assembly, Dr Sylvia Jackson MSP⁵ and the Association of Scottish Community Councils. This chapter includes a brief description of these organisations, with further details in Annex A of the areas represented.

In the report we focus on 3 things. *First* in the rest of this chapter we set out the background to the project. We outline current developments in local governance and in e-democracy that have informed the project. Changing though it may be, the current governing framework for Community Councils in Scotland is part of the project's context and is outlined at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 is the core of the report. It describes the aspects of Community Councils' work that the *e-Community Council* tools were developed to support, and the evidence gathered on their effectiveness. The tools are principally intended to help community councillors in:-

- Involving local people in communicating local news and opinion
- Coordinating the Community Council's response to proposals, e.g. consultation documents issued by other public bodies.

The chapter begins with a summary of the success criteria, the evaluation methods and the evidence used. That evidence draws on the *expectations* of members of the public and community councillors, the *uses* made of the e-Community Council

⁵ MSP: Member of the Scottish Parliament

websites, and the *reflections* of community councillors on the impact and future expectations of the e-Community Council tools.

In the third chapter we consider the way forward. The chapter begins by reviewing key aspects of the work needed to make an e-Community Council work. Our aim in doing so is to help Community Councils consider the changes to their working practices needed to communicate effectively using e-Community Council or similar tools. We then consider how the e-Community Council tools may best be sustained following this project. Before drawing overall conclusions we highlight the next steps needed to develop the software in light of the evaluation, and the access and training issues to be addressed.

The e-Community Council project produced two earlier 'deliverables' which this report draws on:-

- *(D1 July 2005) e-Community Council User Requirements Specification* described the functions to be implemented in the e-Community Council tools.
- *(D2 July 2005) Towards a Model of e-Democracy for Communities* was an early draft of the current report.

The current report incorporates two further 'deliverables' that were originally intended to be separate reports but have been combined in this one, as they substantially overlap with it.

- *Evaluation of e-Community Council Pilot* to report the pilot results, giving evidence against the success criteria and indicators defined earlier and documented in D2. These are included in chapter 2 of this report, with further evaluation details given in the Annexes.
- *Best Practice Recommendations* to give straightforward guidance on the coordination and technical aspects that a Community Council or similar body should consider when setting up and running e-Community Council tools. These are discussed in Chapter 3, with sources of further guidance in Annex B.

The Project Partners

The project has brought together a diverse range of organisations, which we briefly describe here. Annex A provides a more detailed demographic profile of the 6 community council areas represented in the project.

The project was the initiative of Strathfillan Community Council, who worked with others in the Stirling Assembly, the Association of Community Councils for the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park area, the Association of Scottish Community Councils, Dr Sylvia Jackson MSP and Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre to obtain backing from the Scottish Executive.

Association of Scottish Community Councils

The ASCC was formed initially as a forum for community councils to discuss the reorganisation of Scottish local government in 1993. Its membership comprises 1100 of about 1300 community councils in Scotland, with a remit to provide its members with a range of services, small projects, a newsletter and website. Services include liaison with local authorities and other voluntary and statutory bodies. Projects include the annual Calor Gas Community of the Year Awards, open to all community councils and other community groups, the Peter Riach Memorial Award (Young Community Councillor, under 40 years of age), a Community Council Handbook, annual survey and reports.

Further details including the Newsletter are available at <http://www.ascc.org.uk>

Association of Community Councils for the Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park Area

The ACC was established to co-ordinate the views of all the relevant Community Councils in relation to the National Park proposals for the area surrounding Loch Lomond and the Trossachs hills. The ACC objectives are: -

- to ascertain, co-ordinate and reflect the views of the communities which it represents;
- to liaise with other community groups within the area;
- to express fairly the diversity of opinions and outlooks of the communities to the public authorities and other organizations;
- to take such actions in the interests of the community as appears to it to be desirable and practicable;
- to be non-party in politics and non-sectarian in religion.

Further details can be found at <http://www.lochlomond-trossachs.org>

Community Councils

The six community councils participating in the pilot represent areas in central Scotland, mainly served by Stirling Council. They are Bannockburn (population 7354), Cambusbarron (pop. 3224), Strathfillan (pop. 396), Thornhill and Blairdrummond (pop. 1109), and Torbrex (pop. 1575). The exception is Stepps (pop. 4393), which lies in the area served by North Lanarkshire Council.

At time of writing Bannockburn, Cambusbarron and Thornhill and Blairdrummond community councils each have 12 members, Torbrex has 9, while Stepps and Strathfillan have 7 each – compared with the Scottish average of 10 members (ASCC 2004 survey).

With the exception of Bannockburn the community council areas have smaller populations than the Scottish average (4,600 according to the ASCC's 2004 survey). They represent small rural and suburban locales, whose demographic characteristics are detailed in Annex A, drawing on the 2001 National Census results to compare 5 of the Community Council areas with the corresponding Local Authorities.

The statistics show communities that are relatively affluent and middle-aged, again with the exception of Bannockburn. We should note that the statistics do not convey the economic polarisation that is present in some communities, nor the range of social problems that Community Councils address.

Internet access is likely to be high relative to the population as a whole, given that the participating Community Councils serve populations that are relatively affluent and highly educated. In Scotland generally, the Scottish Household Survey reports that: -

“.. the percentage of adults who make use of the internet for personal use has risen steadily from 29 per cent in the first quarter of 2001 to 47 per cent in the second quarter of 2004. Men make greater personal use of the internet than women with the figures for men generally being around eight percentage points higher than those for women.”⁶

International Teledemocracy Centre (Napier University)

ITC is a research centre established in 1999. Its remit is to research and apply information and communication technologies that aim to support democratic decision-making processes. This involves working with governments, parliaments and NGOs across Europe and worldwide, to combine development of relevant software engineering applications with political and sociological analysis. The Centre's research agenda focuses on three main questions:

- How can technology support the public to participate in democratic decision-making?
- How can technology make information more accessible and understandable?
- What is the societal effect of technology on the democratic process?

Further details of the ITC's research themes, projects and publications are available on its website at <http://itc.napier.ac.uk> .

⁶ Scottish Household Survey: Social Justice Information available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/16002/11658> (consulted July 2005)

Stirling Assembly

The Stirling Assembly is a civic forum serving the area of Stirling Council promoting local democracy, active communities and citizenship. It is an independent body, supported by Stirling Council and its Community Planning Partners. The Assembly purpose is *'To encourage, enable and empower people living in Stirling Council area to influence issues affecting their lives'*.

The activities are managed by an Executive Committee elected at an annual general meeting. The Committee, in consultation with members and Community Planning Partners, identifies about six to eight topics of "pan-Stirling" interest each year. Each topic becomes the subject of an Assembly event. Each event is designed to suit the topic, advertised and is open to the public. The events are informed by witnesses from appropriate bodies who 'set the scene' by presenting facts and perceptions of the selected topic from various viewpoints. People then debate and discuss in large and small groups and reach conclusions so that an informed community voice is expressed through the Stirling Assembly. The outcomes are fed back to members and are also sent to appropriate bodies and groups in order to influence their decision making.

Stirling Council

Stirling Council has been committed from its inception in 1997 to the development of an effective local democracy strategy. It has supported the development of 41 Community Councils as the grass roots layer of representation. There is a Community Council in every part of Stirling Council area. The Council has a lengthy experience of working with groups of community councils. It has recently supported the establishment of a number of Local Community Planning Groups, Community Trusts and Regeneration Groups. From these experiences it has developed a partnership with local communities to form a number of Area Community Planning Groups. These groups are designed to offer local community councils, groups and individuals an opportunity to engage in Community Planning at an area-based level. The Council has supported the Stirling Assembly as an opportunity for, independent, "pan-Stirling" participation in local democracy. The Council has a range of other opportunities for engagement, including a Citizens' Panel called "Stirling Sounding Board" and Community Planning thematic groups.

Community Governance and e-Democracy

Community governance; the process through which people are represented in public decision-making from the most local level upwards; is rapidly changing and acquiring greater social and political significance. Both in Scotland and the UK more generally,

these changes represent new attempts to address declining public interest in politics and participation in democratic institutions.

Recent developments in local government legislation give more prominence to the 'neighbourhood' and 'community leadership' in local governance⁷, although the nature of legislative changes remains to be seen and the question of whether civic responsibilities are becoming more or less centralised is deeply controversial. Meanwhile, Community Councils are taking their own initiatives to develop new ways of working as this report documents. This section briefly takes stock of current developments.

Scottish community councils' role

Scottish society is known for its 'community-mindedness' in comparison with the rest of the UK⁸. However policy-makers' concerns over lack of community cohesion are mirrored in a lack of public engagement in formal democratic processes. The decreasing turnout at elections is only one of many indications that traditional democratic processes are failing to engage people.

In Scotland, in the May 2003 elections⁹ to the Scottish Parliament the average turnout was 49.4% as compared to 59% in 1999. Less than half the electorate voted for their elected representative. In the constituency of Glasgow Shettleston only 35.41% voted. The situation in local government is even worse. For example the City of Edinburgh Council May 2003 election results¹⁰ showed an average drop in turnout of 9.71%.

In seeking to reverse this trend, recent local government legislation has placed fresh emphasis on 'community leadership'. In Scotland the *Local Government in Scotland Act 2003* has provided local authorities with a statutory basis for "Community Planning", to work for "Best Value" services in partnership with Community Councils and other local bodies¹¹. We briefly review the legislation later in this chapter.

Further need for innovation comes from the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill, which is now enacted and will lead to a proportional system of voting from 2007. As a result, in place of the current process for electing one Councillor per ward,

⁷ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) "Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter"

⁸ "For the good neighbour policy, look northwards" Guardian, 10.6.05

⁹ www.scottish.parliament.uk/research/briefings-03/sb03-25.pdf

¹⁰ Available at: <http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk> (consulted July 2005)

¹¹ 'Local Government in Scotland Act 2003; Community Planning, Duty to Secure Best Value and Power to Advance Well-being Guidance' Scottish Civic Forum Briefing available at: http://www.civicforum.org.uk/briefing/briefing_pdf/old/local_government_scotland_act.pdf (consulted July 2005)

Councillors will be elected to multi-member wards with 3 or 4 members depending on the ward's size.

As Stirling Council's Community Governance Strategy recognises¹², this will call for innovative ways for Councillors to listen to and involve communities, including the members of Community Councils within their ward boundaries. This need to innovate is also underpinned by the 2003 Act, which gives Local Authorities a general "power to advance well being".

National Governance and Community Councils

The Scottish Executive, who have funded this project have recently begun a consultation process on the Scottish community councils system. The review intends to "harness good practice and identify obstacles and areas of weakness which prevent community councils from being fully effective"¹³ The authors believe the e-Community Council project results contribute to that process. However we should point out that this report does not represent a response to the Executive's discussion document.

Allowing for these ongoing changes in community councils' formal roles, the community councils can still be said to focus on the six broad activities identified in the 1999 report¹⁴ by Goodlad et al: -

- i. Organise special events such as outings for older people or gala days which have benefits in terms of social cohesion, social integration and community development;
- ii. Provide services such as advice or minor construction or environmental projects which have immediate benefits for individuals and communities and also add to the visibility and perceptions of effectiveness of the community councils;
- iii. Liaise with other community and voluntary organisations to present a common voice, to promote co-operation between them or to negotiate a consensus on priorities for the area;
- iv. Identify and take action on issues of concern, directly or by applying pressure to public bodies or others seen as relevant;
- v. Provide a sounding board for local authorities and other public bodies in the conduct of public policy as proposals are developed and implemented, including

¹² 'A Community Governance Strategy for the Stirling Area 2004-2008' Stirling Council available at: www.stirling.gov.uk/index/community/involvement

¹³ Scottish Executive "What Can We Do To Help Community Councils Fulfil their Role?: a Discussion Paper" October 2005.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.51

the conduct of specific decision-making processes such as planning control as well as more strategic planning processes such as community or structure planning;

- vi. Provide a sounding board for local authorities and other public bodies in relation to specific services at the request of the service provider, including those required to achieve best value or public consultation in service provision.

Our collaboration with the Community Councils involved in this project finds much in common with this range of activities. They are of course interconnected, the most salient point being that increasing demands are placed on Community Councillors by the latter two, i.e. efforts on behalf of local authorities and other public bodies.

In terms of the time and effort involved, one of the main activities for our participating Community Councils is *responding to consultations* originating from local government and other external public bodies. These include policy proposals and planning applications, the latter being the most extensive and regular.

Current practice limits the extent to which Community Councils can effectively present such consultations to the local community and collect their comments and objections, in order to provide a response to the consulting body. Officers (normally the Secretary) are notified, by post normally, and have to decide which will be discussed at the Community Council's regular public meeting.

Time limits mean that a small minority of public consultations issued, particularly if one includes planning applications, are publicly discussed. Thus one of the main drivers for this project was the belief that e-democracy tools, available to anyone with internet access at any time, could broaden the range of people engaging in a public dialogue that their Community Council could effectively represent.

E-democracy and Weblogs

'E-democracy' tools have been developed and evaluated by the International Teledemocracy Centre and others since the late 1990s. There is growing evidence that local and national governments have found benefits in engaging 'a wider public' using e-democracy, and that increasing numbers of the public also find benefit in the convenience of getting involved online, and value the prospect of more transparent and responsive decision-making.

Much innovative work has been undertaken in Scotland using online discussion forums and petitions to complement the paper-based and in-person mechanisms available for the public to raise their concerns with representatives¹⁵.

¹⁵ See for example: Adams, N. J., Macintosh, A., and Johnston, J. (2005); 'e-Petitioning: Enabling Ground-up Participation'; *Challenges of Expanding Internet: E-Commerce, E-Business and E-Government*; Mutohisa Funabashi and Adam Grzech (eds); 5th IFIP Conference on e-Commerce, E-Business and E-Government (I3E'2005); October 26-28 2005, Poznan, Poland, pp265-271.

There is an internationally recognised need for innovation in democratic processes. For example the OECD recently issued guidance to governments, arguing that democratic political participation must involve the means to be informed, the mechanisms to take part in the decision-making and the ability to contribute and influence the policy agenda. The report defines the following terms :-

- *Information*: a one-way relation in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both 'passive' access to information upon demand by citizens and 'active' measures by government to disseminate information to citizens.
- *Consultation*: a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. It is based on the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information.
- *Active participation*: a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue – although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government.

Commentators on e-democracy acknowledge that Internet-based technologies change at a faster pace than the democratic processes instituted by governments. New tools for networked communication have emerged to suit the purposes of less formal everyday interaction.

Weblog's and 'citizen journalism'

The weblog or (for short) 'blog' is one such development, first emerging in the late 1990's as a type of online diary or journal focused around links to other sites of interest (including other blogs) on the Web, and offering brief comments on those links for added value. .

The features commonly associated with blogs^{16,17} include: -

- By enabling faster and easier content modification that does not require knowledge of HTML, blogs can be used by almost anyone, and be responsive to people's daily needs.

¹⁶ Herring, S., Ann Scheidt Lois, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright. (2004) Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs. *Hawaii International Conference on Systems Science HICSS-37*.

¹⁷ Nardi, Bonnie, Diane Schiano, and Michelle Gumbrecht. (2004) Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary? *Proceedings of Computer Supported Cooperative Work 2004*. Available at: <http://home.comcast.net/~diane.schiano/CSCW04.Blog.pdf>.

- Posts are primarily textual, but they may contain photos or other multimedia content. Most blogs provide hypertext links to other Internet sites, and many allow for readers to respond with comments
- Blogs typically fall into three types: (1) commentaries on events described on other sites, such as current affairs; (2) personal journals relating thoughts on a particular topic; (3) notebooks distinguished by longer, focused essays.
- Blogging is seen as a social activity, forming communities of interest around particular topics and perspectives.

These characteristics appear to lend themselves to the task of designing e-democracy systems with public appeal. For example a recent Hansard Society report¹⁸ (Ferguson and Howell, 2004) on weblogs discussing their uses and impact on politics, concludes: "From the perspective of politics or, more specifically, political awareness and participation in the UK, blogging is fresh and exciting." (p23).

Whether or not the informal style and content typical of blogs can be translated for the purposes of local e-democracy is an open question that this project has begun to address. Certainly individuals require easy to use and appealing ways to access and share information and ideas on what is happening (or needs to happen) in their communities. The e-Community Council project has also explored whether that may extend to responding to consultations and taking part in community councils' deliberations.

Community Councils' Legislative Framework

Scottish Community Councils have limited powers, notwithstanding the importance that national policy makers give to renewing community governance. The Scottish Parliament (and prior to devolution the UK Parliament in Westminster) defines these powers in terms of a general role for Community Councils in the democratic process. Unlike parish and town councils in England, community councils are not a part of the formal government structure - they are explicitly not a third tier of government.

In the next section we summarise the relevant legislation, key parts of which were enacted before the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The legislation also provides a role for local authorities in enabling and constraining what Community Councils can do. They do this through limited funding and according to published "Schemes", which vary between local authorities (Councils). This also means that the specific roles and functions of Community Councils vary across Scotland. In a subsequent section we outline the Schemes operated by the two Councils directly relevant to the project; Stirling and North Lanarkshire.

¹⁸ Ferguson, R. and Howell, M. (2004) *Political Blogs – Craze or Convention* Hansard Society, London.

The section touches on the wider democratic processes in Scotland, which we have no room to describe further here. These include the consultation procedures used by the Parliament and the Scottish Executive, and the community organisations through which Local Councils carry out their respective statutory duties to involve the public in policy-making and service delivery.

Our aim here is restricted to providing sufficient general background to understand Scottish Community Councils' general parameters. In the chapter 2, we will describe how they vary on aspects monitored by the Association of Scottish Community Councils through surveys of its membership. We also characterise their work by generalising from that undertaken by the project participants.

The legislation

A framework for Community Councils was established by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The Wheatley report, from which the act is derived, suggested that the Community Council would strengthen the link between local authorities and their constituent local communities. This was of particular import at the time, in the light of a reduction in the number of local authorities in Scotland. Currently there are 39 Local authorities and around 1300 Community councils in Scotland.

The statutory basis for Community Councils comes from sections 51-55 of the Act and section 22 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994. (See Appendix 1 for full text). Section 51 (2) of the 1973 Act defines their role as: -

“...to ascertain, coordinate and express to the local authorities for its area, and to public authorities, the views of the community which it represents, in relation to matters for which these authorities are responsible, and to take such action in the interests of that community as appears to be expedient and practicable.”

The 1973 Act also requires local authorities to set out a Scheme for the provision of community councils. The Scheme must do the following: -

Include a map showing the area boundaries for each community council;
Make provisions for qualification of electors, elections or other voting arrangements, composition, meetings, financing and accounts;
Set out arrangements for the development of procedures for the exchange of information between local authorities and community councils on items of mutual interest.

Once a Scheme has been approved, the Act accords the right to any 20 electors within any of the Community Council area boundaries covered by the local authority, to set in motion whatever procedures for forming a Community Council that the local authority has defined (such as elections).

Thus the legislation is primarily concerned with setting out the responsibilities of local government in facilitating the creation of community councils. Less emphasis is put upon the actual functionality of the community council. So it is difficult to draw, directly from the legislation, a strict definition of their role, duties and rights.

Community councils do not have statutory powers: they are intended to act as a voice for their local community, representing the views of the community to local authorities and other public bodies operating in their area and otherwise to act to further the interests of their communities. They are essentially voluntary bodies established within a statutory framework.

Community councils are bound only by their particular constitutions, so in principle their role can be broad ranging. They can acquire property and staff. They do not have the power to levy rates, but are able to undertake voluntary fund raising activities on their own behalf and to receive grants from local authorities as well as being eligible to apply for any national Government grants which are appropriate to their activities.

Of the obligations given to *local authorities* in relation to community councils, it is perhaps Section 52 (d) that is most relevant to the e-Community Council project aims. This section of the 1973 Act places an obligation on them to publish: -

“...the procedures to be adopted by which the community councils on the one hand and the local and public authorities with responsibilities in the areas of the community councils on the other will keep each other informed on matters of mutual interest”.

This provides a statutory justification for local authorities to involve Community Councils in considering how online methods can support the required exchange of information. However in current practice the nature, regularity and depth of this communication will vary considerably.

One well-established means of information exchange concerns *liquor licensing and planning applications*. As result of legislation tangential to that covering directly the community council, local authorities are obliged to consult them in relation to liquor licensing and the planning system. The 1976 Licensing (Scotland) Act gave community councils the right to object to the granting, renewal or transfer of liquor licenses.

In 1996, community councils were given a specific role as consultees in relation to applications for planning permission. Local planning authorities must consult community councils on planning applications affecting their areas. They are required to send community councils a weekly list of all planning applications. It is also a statutory obligation of local authorities to ensure that community councils have ready access to planning information affecting their community.

In terms of finance, community councils have the right to obtain financial support from various sources, including fund raising events and local authority or national government grants. The local authorities may provide financial and material support to the community councils as they see fit, but there is no obligation on them to do so.

The 1994 act amends the procedure for the setting up of the schemes and the modification of existing schemes in the light of changes to local authority area boundaries and powers that were made at the same time.

Community Council Schemes

This section considers the scope of the Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils that local authorities are obliged to publish according to the legislation.

Forming a community council

Schemes drawn up by local authorities must define an initial method for creating the council, thereafter there is much variance. In some cases the local authority remains responsible for arranging elections, in other cases the community council itself is responsible and in some cases both bodies are involved.

In many cases there are fewer nominees than posts to fill, and so elections are infrequent as the councillors are un-opposed. Co-option is a common method of filling unfulfilled positions and in some cases representatives from other community groups are specifically sought to become community councillors. Some local authorities have expressed concern about levels of co-option as they fear that this can produce cliques, which undermines the representative nature of community councils.

In 1997 Stirling Council revised its Scheme and introduced measures to strengthen the electoral mandate of Community Councils. The main points are: -

- Elections are to be held every three years for the entire community council
- No more than two elections per year to fill casual vacancies or shortfalls.
- These elections are to be held by secret postal ballot, using the single transferable vote method except in certain circumstances.

North Lanarkshire, within which Stepps Community Council resides, similarly provides a definition of its election process. The main points here are:

There shall be an Ordinary Election of all elected Community Council members at least every four years.

Every candidate for election to a Community Council must be proposed and seconded by persons with the same residential qualifications.

Ordinary Elections to a Community Council shall take place at such times and places and in such a manner as North Lanarkshire Council determines.

Only those persons whose names are included in the Voters' Roll for the area and are entitled to vote at local government elections shall be entitled to vote at a Community Council election for that area.

With regard to other elections to fill casual vacancies occurring during the period between ordinary elections, it will be the responsibility of each Community Council to ensure that they are conducted in terms of guidance prepared by the Director of Administration of North Lanarkshire Council.

In both Stirling Council and North Lanarkshire Council's schemes representatives must be members of the local community, i.e. present on the electoral role for the area defined in the community council scheme.

Constitutional objectives

Local authorities typically provide a model constitution for the community councils within their area. This helps to define their role and objectives. The constitution provided by Stirling Council for its community councils states the following as the objectives of the community council.

- (a) to ascertain, co-ordinate and reflect the views of the community which it represents, to liaise with other community groups within the area, and to fairly express the diversity of opinions and outlooks of the people.
- (b) to express the views of the community to the Local Authority for the area, to public authorities and other organisations;
- (c) to take such action in the interests of the community as appears to it to be desirable and practicable;
- (d) to promote the well-being of the community and to foster a community spirit;
- (e) to be a means whereby the people of the area shall be able to voice their opinions on any matter affecting their lives, their welfare, their environment, its development and amenity.

The model constitution provided by North Lanarkshire Council gives very similar guidance.

Funding and Structure

Community Councils do not receive direct government funding and do not have the right to levy a tax or similar obligatory method to raise funds. They can, however apply for grants from national or local government and use voluntary fund raising events.

Local authorities are required to declare, in their community council schemes, what provision they intend to make for providing financial assistance to the community councils. In reality most community councils do receive the major part of their financial or material assistance from their respective local authority.

In some Local authorities the constitution defines elements of the internal community council structure. The number of councillors is determined by a system of banding based on the geographic area of a community, its population and its rural/urban nature. There is a minimum of 7 members.

Some constitutions also provide for the creation of sub committees consisting of members of the community council. There is also the requirement for three core office bearers per council. These are the Chair, the Treasurer and the Secretary. There can also be ex-officio members including the local elected councillor.

The regular (often monthly but frequency does vary) meeting is the main forum of discussion and planning carried out by the community council. Within this forum the community councillors can report on their work and or findings to the rest of the

council. This is also a forum for external representatives to present to the council. It is within the regular meeting that all new consultations are presented by one of the councillors, usually the secretary. They then decide who, if any, will compile a response to each consultation. This effectively limits how much of the monthly meeting can be devoted to other matters.

Community councils are in one sense a voluntary body that represents the views and to an extent needs of local communities. And yet by virtue of their being created through statute and the schemes created by the local authorities, they do hold a degree of statutory recognition. This ambiguity is in a way what defines community councils within the democratic structure of Scotland.

In terms of national presence, there would seem to be a community council scheme provided by local authorities for all communities in Scotland. However, not all of these schemes currently have been taken up in the form of a functioning community council. According to the 1999 report by Goodlad et. al. *The Role and Effectiveness of Community Councils with Regard to Community Consultation*¹⁹ there were 1390 schemes provided and 1152 resulting community councils in operation, that is 83% of schemes had a functioning community council. Since then the number of community councils has declined slightly, and the ASCC currently count 1110 members of approximately 1200 in Scotland.

Community Councils' Role in Community Planning

The Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) places a duty on each Local Authority in Scotland:

“...to initiate and, having done so, to maintain and facilitate a process (in this Act, called ‘community planning’) by which the public services provided in the area of the local authority are provided and the planning of that provision takes place...”

In effect this Act is placing a duty on the local authority to facilitate the process for ‘joining up’ all public services in an area to suit the needs of local people and businesses. This applies to both planning what services are appropriate and to delivering those services that are appropriate for people in an area.

The Act also places duties on other public sector bodies (including the central administration – the Scottish Executive) to support local authorities in fulfilling this duty so the resolution of local issues is firmly devolved to local level. The relationship includes engagement with (appropriate) non devolved central functions with a UK remit and local presence. The Statutory Guidance²⁰ to the Act states at Sections 5

¹⁹ Goodlad, R., Flint, J., Kearns, A., Keogghan, M., Paddison, R. and Raco, M. (1999) *The Role and Effectiveness of Community Councils with Regard to Community Consultation* The Scottish Office Central Research Unit, Edinburgh

²⁰ The Local Government in Scotland Act Community Planning: Statutory Guidance (Scottish Executive 2004) describes what the duty of Community Planning entails. Amongst the many requirements the Guidance states at

and 6 that it is for the local authority in its facilitation role to ensure that they identify bodies operating in the local area and at Section 2.1 the guidance states “the Community Planning process should be open to all bodies and individuals who wish to participate”.

Community Councils are specifically addressed in the Statutory Guidance. The Statutory Guidance Section 5.1 states ... “local authorities in their initiation and facilitation of the Community Planning process should consult and cooperate with a wide range of interests including...Community Councils fulfilling their role as representatives of their local area”, and this same section also states that “The voluntary sector plays a key role in involving communities and excluded groups, particularly at the local level. Local authorities and other Community Planning partners should ensure their skills are fully utilised” and that “Community bodies involved in the Community Planning process should operate in an open, democratic and accountable manner, and be clear about what interests they can or cannot represent”.

More details on Community Planning and Best Value in Scotland can be found at <http://www.communityplanning.org.uk>; the legal requirements elsewhere in the UK differ slightly and are not addressed here.

Section 2.1 that ‘the local authority will be responsible for facilitating *the process*’... and ... ‘outcomes should reflect both the performance in the process of partnership working and outcomes for the partnership to performance in *service improvements*’.

Chapter 2. Supporting Community Councils in Practice

Introduction to this Chapter

This chapter is the core of the model of 'e-democracy for communities'. Where the introduction outlined what community councils do in principle this chapter deals with practice, and how the 2-year collaboration between ITC and 6 community councils culminated in the 3 month pilot results. The model then consists of:-

- the tools developed and piloted (described in this chapter)
- the appreciation of which aspects of the pilot worked and why, i.e. to what extent it made a difference to the part community councils play in local democracy (described in this chapter)
- recommendations on action to ensure other Community Councils can benefit from the work, based on the public and community councillors' interest and expectations (described in chapter 3)

Following this introduction, the current chapter gives an overview of how the prototype e-Community Council tools were developed over the lifetime of the project. The section following that describes how the final version of the prototype was piloted and evaluated towards the end of 2005.

Then in the third and fourth sections we detail the community councils' activities to engage (respectively) with other residents and with local government and public bodies. Each section looks at the kinds of activity undertaken, and the e-community council tools that were designed with a view to supporting that activity. The two sections also review the evaluation results, to consider the extent to which the e-Community Councils were used and visited by the public and taken up by community councillors. We give an account of their respective reasons for doing so (or not) and the attendant benefits in terms of an impact on community councils' business.

Stages in the e-Community Council's development

The general aims of the e-Community Council toolkit were outlined at the beginning of the project as to support Community Councils to engage with individuals and groups by facilitating:

- Access through a range of ICT-based devices to allow promotion of any engagement initiative at the earliest possible stage – *awareness*
- Fast, easy access to (plain English) information to support issues – *information provision*
- Informed responses from individuals and groups - *consultation*
- Deliberative dialogue with and amongst groups through interactive facilities - *dialogue*

- Feedback to individuals and groups of progress and outcomes – *information provision*
- Participative (non legally binding) voting and lobbying – *surveying*

Establishing the more detailed user requirements meant asking 5 main questions.

1. What engagement activities could the toolkit realistically support?
2. How are those activities currently carried out, by whom, and using what methods?
3. Why did these activities need to be enhanced using the toolkit?
4. What are the current technical capabilities of the Community Councils who would be using the toolkit?
5. What IT skills and infrastructure issues may affect deployment and require training or awareness-raising?

These questions were addressed and the requirements defined through working with the Steering Group members and visiting their community councils- initially Strathfillan who were the focus of the first year of the project.

Observations, questionnaires, and interviews were used by ITC researchers to build their understanding of what community council's work entails and what the community councils expected. At the same time, ITC's demonstrations of the evolving e-Community Council tools built up the community councillors understanding of what was possible and practical.

The guiding questions were:-

General: Overview of duties, activities and workload; the sub committee structure and how it works; Secretaries workload; other time commitments.

Planning consultations: How does the community council receive planning proposals? How is the community council required to publicise them? How do you collect local views? What supporting information is available? What effect can or has the community council had on the planning process? If there are objections, do these have an affect on the planning proposal?

Other consultations: What sort of material is included? How are these publicised? In what manner do the public respond? Level of incoming consultations, requests etc. How are these organised? What would make dealing with this work load easier? Do you get feed back from the consulting body?

Communication: What is the level of contact with the local authority? What letter writing and lobbying activities does the community council engage in? Are there regular publicity activities? Do you need to communicate with each other quite regularly? How is this currently done?

The prototype approach

The term 'prototype' can be used to refer to various ways of developing software, but generally means that software functions and appearance are gradually improved to reflect the users' experiences, until the software satisfactorily meets some pre-defined aims. The 'prototype' may refer to a paper-based illustration of the software interface, a computer-based demonstration version with limited functions, or a fully functioning version that the developers intend to improve before finally releasing to the intended users.

An evolutionary approach was taken in this project, and so the prototype took all of the above forms. In phase 1 (February 2004 to January 2005) there were successive demonstrations of a working online system to the project Steering Group and to Strathfillan Community Council. The prototype was then piloted with Strathfillan Community Councillors in order to get their feedback. After that, feedback from other Community Councils was obtained through a series of demonstrations, and from the piloting of the phase 2 tools with each Community Council.

Prototype 1

An initial mock-up of the system containing an events diary and a fictional planning consultation was used, with fictional characters, to illustrate how the toolkit could support communication activities. Comments were sought from the Steering Group, on what was desirable and feasible from their perspective. The demonstration used a mock-up of the screens that the end user of the toolkit would be able to view and interact with.

Prototype 2

This enhanced version 1, based on the ITC's understanding of the work of Strathfillan Community Council. The screens presented in figures 2.2 and 2.2 below show both the Community Councillor and public screens.

During this time the prototype web tools were also being used by community councillors in the 5 other community councils, via a password protected site. Sites were set up for use by Bannockburn, Cambusbarron, Steps & District, Thornhill & Blairdrummond and Torbrex. Then from April 2005 these sites were also made publicly available; a so-called 'soft launch' before the real pilot scheduled for September- November 2005.

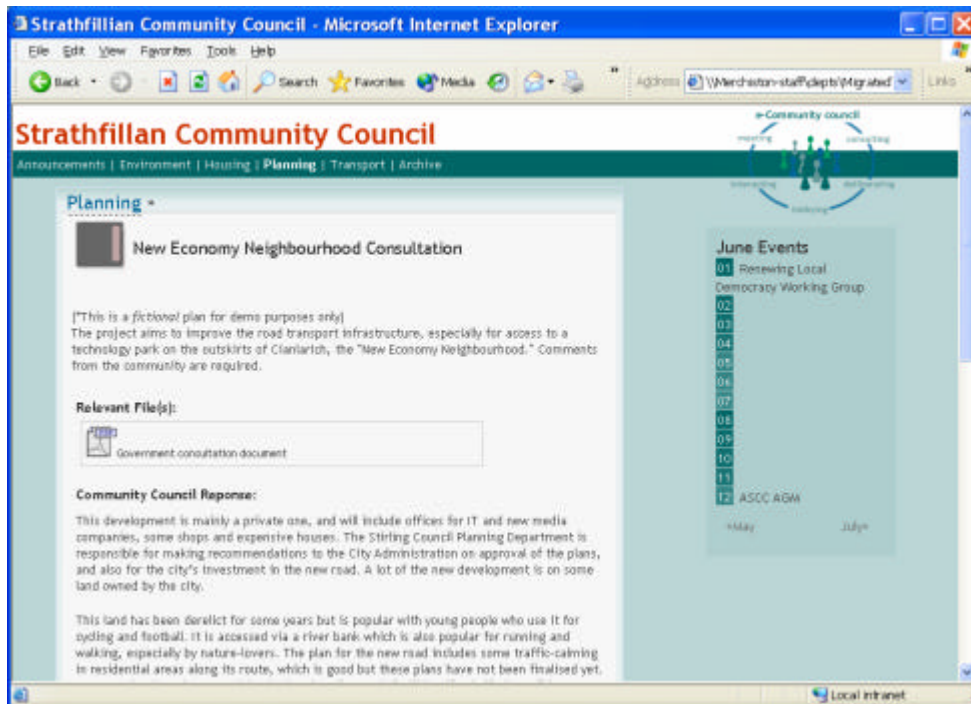


Figure 2.1 Community Councillor sample screen from version 2

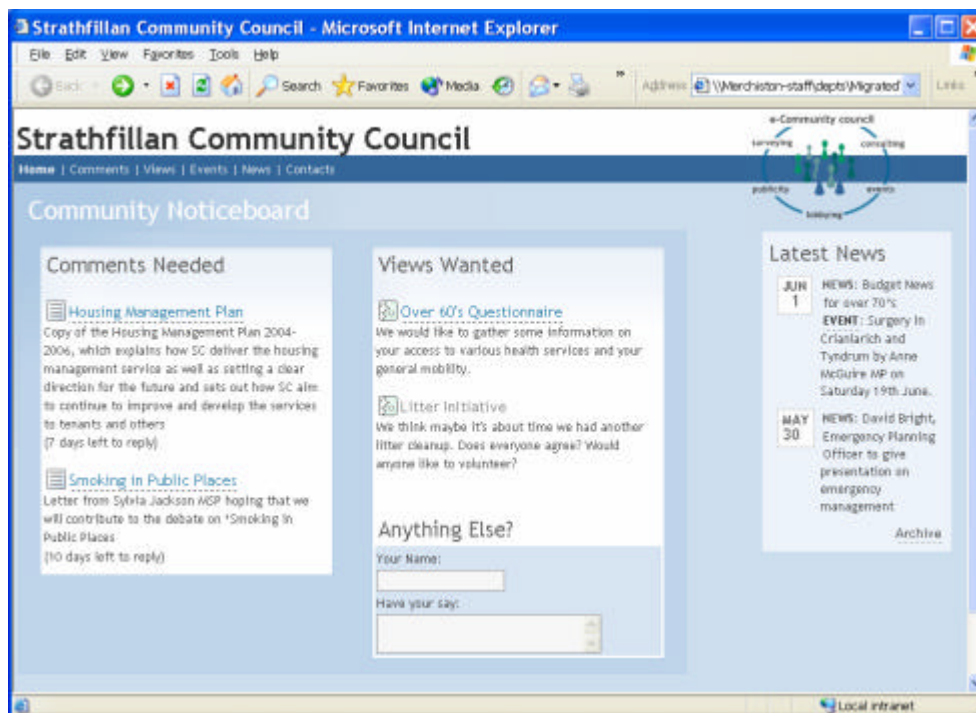


Figure 2.2: Sample screen for public access, version 2

The demonstrations and subsequent feedback indicated that the support offered for collaboration between Community Councillors was enthusiastically welcomed. However significant issues emerged about the scope of information and facilities offered on the public pages. In particular:-

A need to list current projects and issues. Councillors wanted the public to get an overview of the current work of their Community Council in terms of current issues

(community concerns recognised by the Community Council) or projects (Community Council activity to address such concerns, with a more-or-less well defined beginning and end). The prototype, with its focus on feeding back responses to external bodies' proposals, did not provide a ready opportunity to highlight projects or current issues emanating from the 'ground up'.

Choice and navigation. The 'Have Your Say' forum provided a means for any user (Community Councillors or not) to comment on any topic. However a visitor to the site with an interest in any particular topic (e.g. the site of a new school) could conceivably find relevant information and opportunities to comment under any of the "tab" headings (Comments, Views, Events, News or Contacts). Faced with this choice, it seemed likely that people might look under the 'wrong' tab, find nothing and leave the site.

Prototype 3

Reconciling these two issues would mean firstly creating a means to publish information about Current Projects and/or Issues, and to add comments in response. Adding yet more separate pages/ tab headings for these would however add to the 'choice' problem above.

The added complexity would need to be addressed either by providing a means to enable Community Councillors to put the appropriate links in place between related entries, or re-thinking the structure of the site to simplify it. Since it was important that the tools be easy to learn and to use, the latter route was taken.

Changes made to the public resulted in a site structure typical of 'weblogs' (described in the first chapter); the public home page listing in reverse chronological order items of news and opinion relevant to the Community Councils' activities. Sample screens are shown below in Figure 2.3 and 2.4.

In the 3rd version of the prototype the layout of the *public* pages differed markedly from the *community councillor* pages, which were not re-designed to the same extent. Instead the newer functions; to approve items submitted by the public, to manage the 'topics' used to categorise them, and to edit the 'about this community council' and Contacts pages, were added as extra pages shown as tabs on the right hand side of the menu. This was intended to maintain continuity for those community councillors who had begun to get familiar with the site administration tasks.

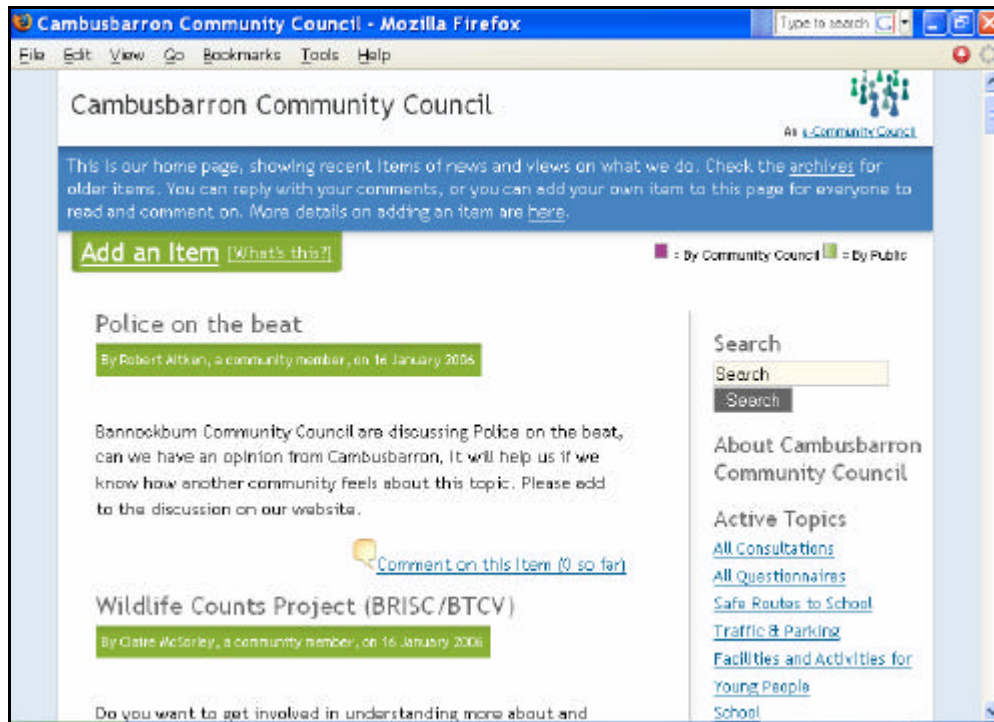


Figure 2.3 Sample screen for public access, version 3

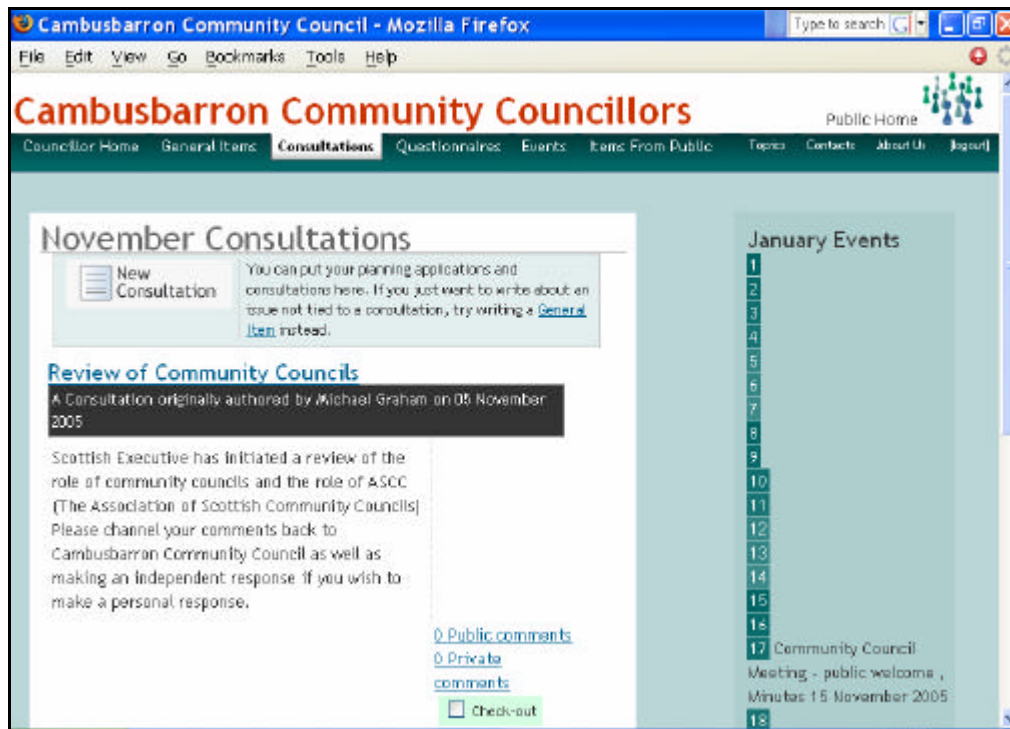


Figure 2.4 Sample screen for community councillors, version 3

Evaluating the e-Community Council pilot

Success criteria and sources of evidence

It was not the aim of the project to evaluate how effectively the participating Community Councils perform their role. However we need to consider factors relevant to that for the simple reason that the e-Community Council toolkit is meant to help them perform their role. The most recent relevant research is the 1999 report by Goodlad et al, referred to previously²¹, which is concerned with the effectiveness of Community Councils in broad terms of :-

- Representativeness of Community Councillors according to demographic characteristics of the areas they represent;
- Community Council awareness of local views and their ability to transmit them to local authorities and other public bodies;
- The willingness of local authorities and other public bodies to listen to Community Councils.

The second of these criteria is the one *directly* concerning us. The Goodlad report and the more recent ASCC 2004 survey of Scottish Community Councils indicate that community councillors are representative in gender terms, but less so in terms of age profile (their average age being in the mid 50's). It is to be hoped that a consequence of using e-Community Council tools may be greater participation by people who would not otherwise get involved, with the indirect effect of a more representative membership. We did not however consider it realistic to expect significant changes in membership within the 3 month pilot period.

The main focus of our attention then is on e-Community Councils' effectiveness for communication, firstly with the public and secondly with government and public bodies. Our approach²² uses multiple methods and has previously been applied in various e-democracy projects with local government²³.

In July 2005 ITC researchers and a working group of Community Councillors met to agree evaluation *criteria* and, for each of these, various types of *indicators* consistent

²¹ Goodlad, R., Flint, J., Kearns, A., Keogghan, M., Paddison, R. and Raco, M. (1999) *The Role and Effectiveness of Community Councils with Regard to Community Consultation* The Scottish Office Central Research Unit, Edinburgh

²² Whyte, A. and Macintosh, A. (2003) 'Analysis and Evaluation of e-Consultations'. *e-Service Journal* 2, 2003

²³ Most recently: Whyte, A., Renton, A. and Macintosh, A. (2005) '*eDemocracy from the Top Down: An Evaluation of eDemocracy Activities Initiated by Councils and Government*' Bristol City Council

with the evidence available during the September – November 2005 pilot period. These are shown below with the main *sources* of evaluation data.

1. *Field tests*- Observations of members of the public and Community Councillors, invited to try out their e-Community Council. Field tests with the public were carried out in Bannockburn and Cambusbarron, and with community councillors in Tyndrum (Strathfillan) and Thornhill. Any difficulties experienced by the participants were highlighted in notes and recordings of these sessions.
2. *Questionnaires and Interviews* with community councillors and members of the public in each area. The 13 members of the public who took part in field tests also completed a questionnaire. At the end of the pilot period 22 community councillors responded to a questionnaire, and telephone interviews were carried out with 10 of those who had been most closely involved in the pilot.
3. *Questionnaire survey of Stirling Council's Citizen Panel*. This group of 1300 local residents, selected to be demographically representative, was surveyed in December 2005 on their interest in, awareness and expectations of 'e-Community Council' websites. There were 627 responses (48%).
4. *Web server logs and database*. Server log analysis provides evidence of the relative use made of the various e-Community Councils in terms of web page requests ('hits') and visitors. This measures relatively passive use of the sites. Evidence of active use was also available in the form of the *comments and responses* posted by Councillors and members of the public, and stored in the system's database.
5. *Desk research*: documentary evidence, for example the Minutes of the participating community councils.

For the detailed results from each of the first 4 of these sources please refer to the Annexes to the report.

Various *types* of evidence have been drawn from each of the above sources as follows:-

	<i>sources</i>
a. <i>Expectations</i> : what impact do community councillors and the public expect e-Community Councils to have?	1,2,3,5
b. <i>Actions</i> : what have councillors and the public done with the e-Community Council tools?	1,4
c. <i>Reflections</i> : does the e-Community Council meet the intended aims? Does it or will it have other consequences?	1,2,3,5

Table 2.1 types of evaluation evidence

The *criteria* that were defined were:-

1. Public awareness and take-up of the e-Community Council
2. The impact of public take-up on Community Council activities
3. Community Councillor take-up of the e-Community Council tools.
4. The impact of Community Councillor take-up on the Community Councils' activities
5. Sustainability of the e-Community Council

Taking each of these in turn, indicators were agreed as listed below.

Public awareness and take-up

a. Expectations

Indicator 1: A majority of residents stating an interest in being involved in decisions affecting their area are aware of their e-Community Council website.

b. Actions: By the end of the pilot period the e-Community Council usage is growing in terms of:-

Indicator 2: levels of access - the monthly number of 'unique visitors' to each e-CC is comparable to relevant pages on the local authority site.

Indicator 3: active contributions- more comments/ responses are received via the e-CC than by other written method.

c. Reflections: In each participating Community Council, a majority of the evaluation participants rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of:

Indicator 4: ease of use

Indicator 5: understanding how the Community Council represents local views

Indicator 6: helping a wider range of local people to express their views to the Community Council.

Public take-up has a positive impact on Community Council activities

a. Expectations

Indicator 7: By the end of the pilot period a majority of community councillors who have used the e-Community Council expect it to enable them to better represent the views of the community.

- b. *Actions:* By the end of the pilot period an increase in public involvement should be demonstrated by an upward trend in: -

Indicator 8: the number of consultations responses that members of the public have contributed to.

Indicator 9: the number of items received on other matters of local concern.

- c. *Reflections:* In each participating Community Council, a majority of members rate the e- Community Council positively in terms of: -

Indicator 10: The range of people who have expressed a view using it

Indicator 11: The usefulness of the public responses made using it.

Community Councillor take-up of the e-Community Council tools.

- a. *Expectations*

Indicator 12: Minutes of all participating Community Councils show each has made a commitment to use the e-Community Council tools for the pilot period.

- b. *Actions*

Indicator 13: By the end of the pilot period, each e-Community Council site is being used at least monthly by at least 3 members for 'private' communication.

- c. *Reflections*

Indicator 14: In each Community Council, by the end of the pilot period a majority of members who have used their e-Community Council are satisfied that it helps them with their Community Council work.

Councillor take-up has a positive impact on Community Council activities

- a. *Expectations*

Indicator 15: In each participating Community Council, a majority of members who have used their e- Community Council say they would use it regularly to complement their normal methods of communication.

- b. *Actions*

Indicator 16: Community Councillors get better and faster access to documents and are better informed when attending meetings as a result of using the e-Community Council

- c. *Reflections*

Indicator 17: In each participating Community Council, a majority of members rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of ease of learning and ease of use.

Sustainability of the e-Community Council

- a. *Expectations*

Indicator 18: interest is expressed in use of e-Community Council tools by other Community Councils and community bodies.

b. Actions

Indicator 19: The e- Community Council capabilities have been demonstrated to other Community Councils and community bodies.

c. Reflections

Indicator 20: Other Community Councils and community bodies are actively seeking to deploy the e-Community Council tools.

Results on the first 17 indicators are described in the rest of this chapter, followed in Chapter 3 by conclusions on sustainability.

Public Involvement in Community Councils

Here we give an overview of the community councils' current practice in engaging the public, and the e-Community Council features designed to help them do so. Then we give the evaluation results for the first of the criteria above, i.e. public awareness and take-up.

Overview of Current Practice

In principle and in practice much of what Community Councils do can be described as 'engaging with the community'. The examples in table 2.1 below show a variety of activities to inform local people of events, to take up issues raised by them and pursue projects that address those issues, and to gauge local opinion on them. These activities are simplified in Figure 2.1 below.

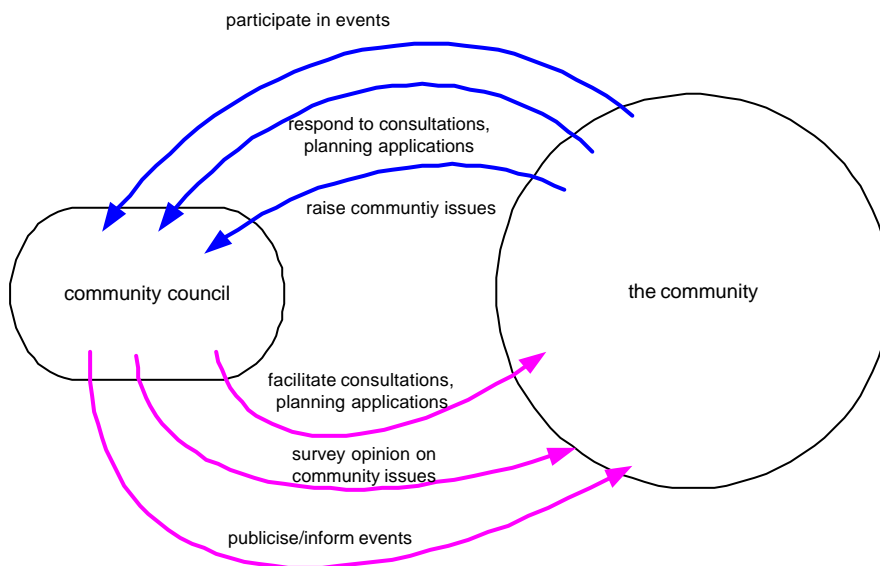


Figure 2.1 An outline of activities to engage with the community

As community councillors are local residents themselves they are party to the “word on the street” and will also have their own views on community issues. Community councils use a variety of methods to communicate with local people. Most of the participating Community Councils have a regular newsletter or bulletin, a community notice board and the local press as their main channels for informing the community.

Community Councillors tend to use word of mouth, telephone and letters as the media for ‘ascertaining’ the community’s views, with less frequent use of surveys. The Community Councils’ also hold regular meetings and ad-hoc public events. Interest and participation in public meetings tends to be higher where issues are contentious and are thought likely to have a broad impact on the community. Some responses to our questionnaire stated attendance as low as 1 or 2 people.

However where public meetings are called in response to really contentious issues the attendance has been very substantial, for example in excess of 60 for Strathfillan Community Council (population circa 360 people). The general consensus however is that public attendance is low and consequently this is not an effective method of gathering community views.

As an example of paper-based surveying, Strathfillan Community Council conducted a survey in 2004 to see whether people would want the Crianlarich station yard developed as a community centre/parent-child centre. The survey was hand delivered to those most likely to use the proposed facility including people aged 60+, people without cars and people with young children. The response was lowest from parents and highest from the over 60s. Overall, 60% of the targeted population responded, which is relatively high but required considerable effort on behalf of the Community Council. The Community Council also arranged an open day to present the findings and work so far, but this had a very poor turnout.

The Association of Scottish Community Councils report from their most recent survey of members that:-

- “One in three Community Councils publish a newsletter
- A quarter have a website
- Almost all had carried out a survey or held a public meeting in the previous two years.
- Two thirds of Community Council meetings are not covered by the press.
- The average level of public attendance at meetings is 5 persons.
- Just over one in three Community Councils e-mail their minutes to others in the community.”²⁴

Online methods are clearly being taken up by Community Councils in an effort to use limited resources more efficiently and improve communications with the public. This

²⁴ Association of Scottish Community Councils, 2005

appears to be restricted to information provision, as the survey gives no examples of online *interaction* with the community.

Table 2.2 below shows examples of current issues and projects to address them (excluding the e-Community Council project), as described by 4 of the Community Councils in May 2005.

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Projects</i>
<i>Bannockburn</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth disorder - ongoing meetings with Police and local community • Liaison with youth groups to set up regular youth club in community centre • Nuisance neighbours - requests from residents wrt undesirable elements being housed in area • New road layout on Glasgow road - speed calming • 20mph zones near local schools • Planning - several issues wrt new housing etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community newspaper launch (Sept 2004) • Village green club - tidy up of paths / rights of way • Public Private Partnership for new St Modans school - objection to proposed site on historic battlefield - council now looking at alternatives • Project with community trust to set up new play area for children of Bannockburn - phase 1 complete • Reopening of the right of way in Bannockburn at Telford Bridge - successful
<i>Cambusbarron</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning - Applications awaited for large Housing Developments • Antisocial behaviour - problems with illegal motorised bikers off road • Health Services - making sure we do not see a deterioration in Health Services as a result of proposals to make changes at Stirling Royal • School and Community - The school is near capacity yet there are plans for more houses. Zoning for nursery and primary provision requires to be resolved. • Services in the community - better access to health services and better public transport • Community Identity - impact of housing proposals and issues around creation of focal points in the village. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Futures : Setting priorities for the future. Developing a plan for 2006. • Quarry Paths Phase 2: volunteer work over the summer to clear paths; and funding applications for drainage and signage improvements. • New benches: painting and or replacement of benches in the village on Mill Hill and Touch Road. • Traffic and Parking: safe routes to schools in progress & plan for 20mph zone • Better Health: Local first aid courses organised at the new year

Table 2.2 Typical Community Council issues and projects

Table 2.2 Typical Community Council issues and projects (continued)

Issues	Projects
<i>Thornhill & Blairdrummond</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed Civic Amenity site at Craigforth • Public toilets • Conservation status for Thornhill • Street cleaning • Lay-by on A873 	<i>None current</i>
<i>Stepps and District</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residential Over-development. Actual house building far exceeds planned development • Pressure for building on 'green belt'. This goes beyond 1. So far development has been restricted to 'brown field' sites but speculative eyes are on the surrounding tenanted farm land • Siting of new PPP Primary School/Library/community Centre. Strong local objections to the loss of open space. • Pressure from Local Council for Community Council to join its local forum. NLC won't recognise the established Association of North Corridor Community Councils. • Downsizing of community police service. • Condition and misuse of infrastructure. This covers lack of action on the issues of speeding, road and paths defects, illegal and irresponsible parking etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Engagement.: support for a new monthly magazine which is delivered to local households. • Town Twinning. Quite a lot of effort put into this to help maintain the identity of the village. • Planning Watch. This takes up a lot of time to keep on top of the issues above. • Association of North Corridor Community Councils. This is a voluntary umbrella group of 4 Community Councils facing similar issues. • Village Heritage Recording. The CC supports two enthusiasts in the collection and archiving of old photographs and interviews with older members of the community, e.g. exhibition celebrating 90 Years of Scouting in Stepps.

Using the e-Community Council for Public Contact

Before considering how the e-Community Council shaped contact with the public during the pilot period we need to outline the main e-Community Council functions for that purpose, some of which were illustrated in screenshots earlier in this chapter (Figures 2.3 and 2.4).

Most of the Community Councillors involved in this project agreed that additional means of keeping in touch with the community would be beneficial. Response rates to paper-based surveys are typically low, as is turn out at public meetings. Community Councils may not have dedicated office space (although some do), so members rely on their personal resources for written or telephone communication.

A known constraint on the community's participation in Community Council work is the time commitment needed to attend public meetings. Also many members of the public may be unable or unwilling to make the effort to find out how to contact their Community Councillors.

The e-Community Council tools therefore need to provide a simple means for Community Councillors to identify current topics of interest and ask questions in relation to them, and for the public to raise matters of interest or concern. This in keeping with the characteristics of weblog tools, as described in the Introduction to this report. The e-Community Council toolkit should add to these by enabling both: -

- *Open and pre-structured questions and responses*; i.e. tools to support public polling and to collate responses for community councillors' lobbying purposes.
- *Public and private communication*; tools for open dialogue between public and community councillors, and private dialogue between community councillors themselves.

Many online surveying packages of various degree of sophistication are available, and it would not be appropriate to duplicate tools that are commercially available to Community Councils at lower cost. However to be used effectively, such packages typically require specialist knowledge of survey methods. A more general need of the e-Community Council toolkit is for Community Councillors to easily integrate pre-structured questions into their online communication with constituents, to limit the effort needed to respond, and to analyse those responses.

Members of the public will expect any questionnaire-type responses they give to be treated in confidence, in so far as they are identifiable as individuals from them. On the other hand, they should also be given the option to take part in public discussion, through posting comments on items written by Community Councillors or writing such items themselves.

To summarise then, functions to support public involvement in the community council enable any visitor to the e-Community Council site to:-

- Read items of news and opinion about the Community Council's work, including consultations initiated by other organisations.
- Comment on any item and read other people's comments.
- Submit items of news and opinion, for editorial approval by a member of the Community Council.
- Respond to online questionnaires.
- Access a diary of news and events, and a contacts list.

How the Public Responded: Awareness, Take-up and Use

There were 6 indicators of success relevant to public awareness, take-up – including issues of access and ease-of-use, and expectations of the impact. The results are described below for each in turn, showing that 4 of the indicators were met, one was not met and several could not be assessed.

Awareness

Indicator 1: A majority of residents stating an interest in being involved in decisions affecting their area are aware of their e-Community Council website.

Results: 🗣️ Citizens' panel survey showed 41% of those living in a participating community council area had heard about the e-community council project.

This was felt to be an ambitious target, and although it was not met the 41% figure was felt to be encouraging. There was no centrally coordinated publicity campaign for the project. Rather the community councils used relatively low-key means of publicity which we review below. There was nevertheless a clear need for evidence that communities are aware of their e-community council.

Given the currently very low level of awareness and participation we felt it unrealistic to expect a majority of all local households to be aware, even if every resident was regularly using the Internet. It was more realistic to expect most of those residents interested in local decision-making to be aware of the e-Community Council. This description fits members of the Stirling Council 'sounding board', a citizens' panel composed of 1300 members of the public and selected to be demographically representative of the Stirling Council area residents. Our survey respondents came from areas unrepresented in the project and awareness generally was 23%, climbing to 41% among those from one of the participating areas.

The e-community council project was publicised by our participating community councils using the methods familiar to them, including: -

Postcards and flyers: promotional postcards were distributed in each community council area, on notice boards and as inserts in newsletters.

Newsletters: Bannockburn and Thornhill have overlapping membership with the editorial groups of local newsletters. The e-community council development was highlighted in articles and in community council contact information.

Links on related websites: including Stirling Council's community council pages, and other community sites e.g. 'Stepps Online'.

Schools: Cambusbarron and Strathfillan have overlapping membership with local school boards, which in Strathfillan's case led to contributions to their site from school pupils.

Take-up: site visits and public interest

Indicator 2: By the end of the pilot period the e- Community Council usage is growing ... monthly 'visitors' are comparable to relevant pages on the local authority site.

Results: 👉 Visitors grew 17% from 1109 in September to 1296 in November. In the same period the number of pages viewed rose 12% from 5789 to 6493 per month, more than the corresponding community council pages on Stirling Council's website.

Most (69%) of Citizens' panel members responding to our survey were interested in using an e-Community Council website to give their views, with interest highest among those aged 35-44 (84%) and women (75%).

Take-up was measured in terms of web traffic (indicator 2 above) and the number of contributions made by the public (indicator 3 below).

Web traffic excluding visits to the sites by research staff grew over the 3 months, although it dipped slightly in October. Comparing the figures with other sites is difficult, due to lack of standardisation in methods and terminology, as well as differences in website characteristics and their target audiences.

The Stirling Council website 'community' pages, particularly the subset of them that provide community council information, were thought to be reasonably comparable. Statistics provided by Stirling Council show 3972 page views in November to pages within the directory www.stirling.gov.uk/community, which includes information on community planning, facilities and various other headings including community councils. These figures are far fewer than the 6493 pages viewed on the e-Community Council sites for the same period. Comparable figures for visitors were not available.

The citizens' panel survey showed strong interest in 'having a say' on local issues; Most (69%) of Citizens' panel members responding to our survey were interested in using an e-Community Council website to give their views, with interest highest among those aged 35-44 (84%) and women (75%). Chapter 3 gives further details of these results.

Contributions from the public

Indicator 3: By the end of the pilot period the e- Community Council usage is growing ... more comments/responses are received via the e-Community Council than by other written methods.

Results: 👉 The 6 e-Community Council sites received 96 contributions between them in the pilot period. E-Community Council contributions easily exceeded other forms of communication in Bannockburn and Cambusbarron. Comparison is difficult in other sites.

There was strong growth in the numbers of contributions to the sites from members of the public. They easily exceeded other forms of communication in Bannockburn and Cambusbarron. However we judged this indicator to be only partially met, because survey results from community councillors were difficult to compare between community councils. In some cases the respondents were office-bearers

and other not. In Strathfillan and Torbrex the respondents were community council chairs, whose email correspondence from local people outweighed e-Community Council contributions.

Community councillors taking part in our survey estimated they had on average 6 emails and 1 letter, which if representative would translate to (7 x 59=) 413 across the 6 community councils, but this figure includes Torbrex's unusually high figures for email. Torbrex figures were skewed by a massive public response to the community council's campaign against a school building development, which led to them being unable to find time to use their site.

Community councillors vary widely in their personal contacts with the public between public meetings. Those who are office bearers, especially the Secretary and Chair, typically are contacted far more than others. Indeed most of our participants said they had received no written communication at all during the pilot period.

Face-to-face contact is by far the most common form of contact between our participating community councillors and the public. The tables below show, firstly in Table 2.6, the levels of contact by other methods and then in Table 2.7 the contributions to the e-Community Council sites.

	min	max	average
Conversation face-to-face	2	30	9
Door to door survey	-	-	-
Telephone call	0	30	3
Letter	0	6	1
Email	0	100	6

Table 2.6 Community councillors' estimated public contact Sept-Nov 2005, by method

		Public Items		Comments on Items		Consultations		Questionnaires		Events	<i>Totals</i>
		From CC	From Public	From CC	From Public	Added	Responses	Added	Responses	Added	
Bannockburn	7	18	4	24	23	1	-	1	7	9	95
Cambusbarron	-	20	5	7	6	1	1	3	22	15	79
Stepps and District	-	6	2	4	7	-	-	1	5	1	26
Strathfillan	5	15	3	1	-	2	-	2	-	5	33
Thornhill & Blairdrummond	2	9	3	3	4	1	-	2	1	2	27
Torbrex	3	5	2	1	1	-	-	1	-	3	16
<i>Totals</i>	17	73	19	40	41	5	1	10	35	37	284

Table 2.7 Contributions to e-Community Council sites Sept-Nov 2005

These figures say little about the kinds of issues responded to, but we return to that below when discussing the impact on community councils (indicator 9).

Access, accessibility and ease of use

Indicator 4: In each participating Community Council, a majority of the evaluation participants rate the e- Community Council positively in terms of ease of use.

Results: 👍 Field test participants rated the sites positively, although the tests could only be held in Bannockburn and Cambusbarrow due to a lack of suitable venues with internet access elsewhere. Citizens' panel survey respondents identified lack of access as an important barrier to take up.

Self evidently the take-up and impact of e-democracy tools by the public depends on them first getting access to those tools and having the skills to use them. The project had no influence over public access to the internet, nor was it meant to provide public training. However these were important issues for our participants (public and community councillors), so we discuss them here alongside 'ease of use'.

Ease of use or '*usability*' takes into account whether a website (or other software) is easy to learn and remember, efficient to use, has few errors, and is subjectively pleasing. These contribute to the range of other factors that make the site useful and fit for its purpose²⁵. Our evaluation aimed to address these other factors using other indicators, but we include *accessibility* under the ease of use heading.

In its widest sense 'accessibility' includes whether text content can be understood by the range of people who are meant to read it. However the term has become more commonly associated with the accessibility guidelines of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)²⁶.

The main sources for assessing ease of use and accessibility were the collaboration with the Steering Group, and field tests with the public. Issues about access, i.e. availability of the internet, were also raised by survey respondents from Stirling Council's citizens' panel.

The Steering Group worked with ITC researchers throughout the project to identify errors and assess the prototype's accessibility and ease of use. This included ensuring the site met the WAI level 3 checkpoints, exceeding government guidelines, and testing it with 'screen reader' software.

²⁵ See for example Nielsen, J. (1993) *Usability Engineering*. Boston, US: Academic Press

²⁶ These provide a list of 'checkpoints' of measures website designers need to take to increase the possibility that the visually impaired or others using 'assistive technology' (such as screen reader software) whether the text can be read by people with disabilities. The checkpoints have 3 levels, and current guidelines for government websites specify that they must meet at least level one.

Change requests and errors were logged throughout the project. The final version of the prototype sought to address most of these. Nevertheless its quick implementation left a number of errors in the version piloted from September. Improvements and error-fixes were then made throughout the pilot period. Many of the accessibility issues which arose, with text visibility for example, were specific to particular combinations of browser software version, operating system version and screen size settings; These were mostly resolved early in the pilot period.

The field tests involved 13 members of the public²⁷, who gave us their questionnaire ratings on ease of use in terms of:-

- Ease of reading the text
- Ease of understanding the language used
- Whether the home page provided the expected information
- Ease of navigating the site ('finding my way around')
- Ease of finding information about community council activities
- Ease of finding contact details for local organisations
- Ease of using the site to give views
- Confidence in privacy

A large majority of those taking part in both sessions rated the site positively on all the above, with the exception of 'finding contact details for local organisations' (Bannockburn testers asked to find a local councillor were confused by the menu option 'Councillor login', intended for community councillors).

The questionnaire results make for some interesting comparisons between the Bannockburn and Cambusbarron participants. Age and socio-economic differences between them made little or no difference to their questionnaire responses, whether on ease of use, accessibility, or expectations that the e-community council would serve its purpose. Cambusbarron participants were more likely to have contacted their community council and have prior involvement with other local democracy groups. They also tended to have higher educational qualifications.

²⁷ Large numbers of users are not essential for usability testing since, as Nielsen (1993) notes, most usability problems will be identified by the first 5-6 test users. Our field tests included more as they were intended more to test how well the site met its purpose in real-life conditions than to test usability in controlled 'laboratory' conditions, i.e. they did not exhaustively test how the site performed for all possible combinations of tasks and functions.

The observations and comments made during the sessions are more helpful for identifying specific usability issues. Each of the testers was asked to try out at least 3 'worked examples' of tasks that could be carried out with the e-Community council site. Their actions and comments were noted to record any difficulties and the extent of these, i.e. whether the tester was able to resolve the difficulty without guidance.

These observations showed that:-

- People who were 'absolute beginners' had difficulties that were not specific to the site design, i.e. with using the mouse and scroll bars, and with slow typing speed and accuracy. It was often not apparent to them that they needed to click inside a text box in order to enter text into it.
- Some users experienced difficulty finding their way back to the home page, and finding their way from the home page to older items in the 'Archive'. The 'archive' term was not well understood- one individual expecting it to include the kind of information held by local authorities in their archives.
- Items in the list of 'active topics' were not identified clearly, i.e. text size was too small relative to other text on the page, and items were not separated clearly.

Chapter 3 includes recommendations for changes to the page layout and some functions of the site, in light of the above.

Better understanding of community councils' role

Indicator 5: In each participating Community Council, a majority of the evaluation participants rate the e- Community Council positively in terms of understanding how the community council represents local views.

Results: 👍 Bannockburn and Cambusbarron field test participants were almost all positive, but there was insufficient data from other sites.

Some information was available on this indicator from the field tests described under 'ease of use' above. Testers were asked to comment on how useful they found the site. Their responses mostly indicated they felt better informed on their community council's work, e.g.

"I would not expect to contact them unless there was an issue in which I was concerned. But I would be more likely to now."

"Stirling council also have this sort of stuff. This is quite a good thing. This is how things are going; the elderly are cottoning-on to this."

"Yes. It seems quite good for just Bannockburn. So, you would need a Stirling site for Stirling news?"

"I have never thought of contacting the community council, not even sure of what they do."

The last two comments above were among some implying that testers lacked understanding of community council boundaries, and of their role in relation to local authorities. The point here is that members of the public who use an e-Community Council site will not necessarily improve their understanding of what the community council does, or even learn any basic facts about their community council that are included on the site. Indeed most of our e-community council sites had very sparse background details about the community council.

More information on how the site visitors felt about their understanding of community councils was anticipated from 'site evaluation questionnaires' made available on the e-Community Council sites. These included a question on whether, having used the site, visitors felt they had a better understanding of community councils. However the questionnaires were not highlighted effectively enough on the sites, and were abandoned early in the pilot due to a poor response. Nor was it practical to include an appropriate question in the survey of Stirling citizens' panel members, as there was no practical way of ensuring that they had actually visited the site before responding.

Providing a wider public platform

Indicator 6: In each participating Community Council, a majority of the evaluation participants rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of helping a wider range of local people to express their views to the Community Council.

Results: 👍 Citizens' panel members' survey responses indicated a strong public expectation that e-Community Councils would encourage wider participation. Bannockburn and Cambusbarron field test participants agreed.

The survey of Stirling Council citizens' panel members asked whether they would expect an e-Community Council website to (a) keep people informed more effectively and (b) help a wider range of local people have a say on local issues. Members of the public taking part in field tests were also asked about these points.

The citizens' panel survey results showed that 84% expected e-Community Council sites to 'keep people informed more effectively' and 80% expected them to 'help a wider range of local people have a say on local issues'. In both cases 29% strongly agreed to these statements. Panel members also gave over 400 comments on factors that would encourage or discourage people to use an e-Community Council site, which we summarise in chapter 3.

The Bannockburn and Cambusbarron field testers' questionnaires asked the same questions and got similar responses: all but one of the 13 agreeing or strongly agreeing that their e-Community Council site would help the community council to keep people informed more effectively; and all but 2 agreeing or strongly agreeing that it would help a wider range of local people to have a say on local issues.

Community councillors gave us concrete examples of how their e-Community Council site had helped to obtain views that they did not believe they would have received otherwise. We return to these in our discussion of how public take-up impacted on community councils. First we review how the e-Community Council

capabilities were meant to support community councillors to engage with local government and other bodies, and the evidence on *their* take-up.

Community Councillor Involvement with Public Bodies

This section gives an overview of the community councils' communications with public bodies, and the e-Community Council features designed to help them coordinate a response to consultation activity. Then we give the evaluation results for the criteria 2 to 4 described earlier, i.e. the take-up of the tools by community councillor, and the impact on community council's work of their own and the public's use of these tools.

Overview of Current Practice

Community councils spend much of their time engaging with their local council and national governments. This is most frequently through attendance at meetings, and through formal written responses to consultations, comments and objections to planning applications.

Community Council meetings are regularly attended by a local authority officer or councillor. The ASCC survey of Community Councils reports that "elected local authority councillors attend the meetings in the great majority of cases (90%)...61% of community councils are satisfied or very satisfied with their working relationship with their local authority councillors".

Along side this there are ad hoc communications regarding local issues, through letter or telephone conversations, and increasingly through e-mail. Local authorities typically have departments that handle correspondence with Community Councils, monitored by a council committee or sub-committee with responsibility for community consultation. Community councils also communicate directly with other elected representatives, i.e. Members of the Scottish Parliament and Members of Parliament, sometimes as frequently as once a week.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this report, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003 has given added impetus to existing local authority efforts to engage the public in policy-making and service improvement. These efforts stem in large part from earlier legislation, particularly the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994, which called on local authorities to decentralise decision-making, and led to the establishment of area or neighbourhood committees or forums.

Local authority community engagement is well exemplified by Stirling Councils' promotion of 'Local Democracy and Community Leadership', which has been one of its four strategic aims since 1996. Stirling Council's community engagement strategy

acknowledges an important role for Community Councils in 'community planning'²⁸. The ASCC describes community planning as: -

“...a process where a local authority and other organisations come together to plan, provide for and promote the wellbeing of their communities. It should promote the involvement of communities in the decisions on local services which affect people’s lives including health, education, transport, the economy, safety and the environment.”²⁹

These changes in the statutory environment have been accompanied by an increasing range of local authority-led bodies that, in effect, compete with Community Councils to represent community opinion to the local authority. In the case of the Stirling area Community Councils, the Council’s strategy document includes:-

- *Stirling Community Planning Partnership*: an umbrella group which we return to in the next section.
- *Area Community Planning Forums*: whose remit includes “provision of an opportunity for two-way communication between local organisations/people and our Council/other public bodies on issues of local concern”³⁰.
- *Stirling Assembly*: as mentioned earlier this is “an open forum which allows the people of the Stirling area to debate the major issues that affect their daily lives”³¹ the Assembly meets several times annually, and brings together various statutory and voluntary organisations including Community Council delegates.

The growing number of bodies that call on Community Councils to articulate local community views increases the pressure on community councillors to respond and, when they do respond, to manage their time effectively so they can coordinate their responses based on whatever input they have been able to glean from the community.

Stirling Council also actively promotes the use of online methods (other than through support for the e-Community Council Project), committing for example to provide web access to any consultation database developed by the Council. Most though not all local authority consultation documents are available in electronic form, as are those from the Scottish Executive. This is by no means the rule however; many

²⁸ Stirling Council (2004) ‘Community Governance Strategy for the Stirling Area 2004-2008’

²⁹ Association of Scottish Community Councils (2005) ‘Guidance for Community Council Involvement in Community Planning’

³⁰ Stirling Council (op.cit.) p.23

³¹ See <http://www.stirling.gov.uk/index/community/involvement/assembly.htm> (consulted July 2005)

consultation documents are circulated to community council Secretaries as printed documents.

Returning to local authorities,' relations with community councils, Goodlad et al's review of council policy statements on community consultation found three categories of local authority: -

- i. A small number... that give community councils a distinctive role in their decentralisation schemes or community consultation policy;
- ii. A large number... who acknowledge a positive role for community councils but stress this is the same as the role given to other community or voluntary groups;
- iii. A very small number... that appear to want to bypass community councils in favour of other forms of consultation or involvement,

The latter 'other forms of consultation or involvement' include research-based approaches to gathering the views of individual citizens, such as citizens' panel surveys and focus groups. Thus Community Councils also face pressure to demonstrate the legitimacy and representativeness of the views they express, and therefore on the time and resources available to them for that purpose.

As we have mentioned, the participating Community Council members and especially the Secretaries feel under increasing pressure to coordinate responses to consultations initiated by local government and other public bodies. This is clearly not unusual as it also reported in Goodlad et al's 1999 report, which comments that "evidence suggests that none could respond within the time and resources available to them to the volume of expectations implied by the correspondence most receive"³².

Given the consultative work load imposed on the community council, consultations are often responded to by members without direct consultation of the wider community. It is felt that there are too many consultations to allow direct communication with the public on each that is relevant, using current methods.

The range of bodies that Community Councils are expected to respond to extends to all other national and local bodies involved in Community Planning. Although we have already mentioned Community Planning, we have not elaborated the range of organisations this entails. Figure 2.2 illustrates this and a simple example is shown in Figure 2.3.

³² Ibid. p. 41.

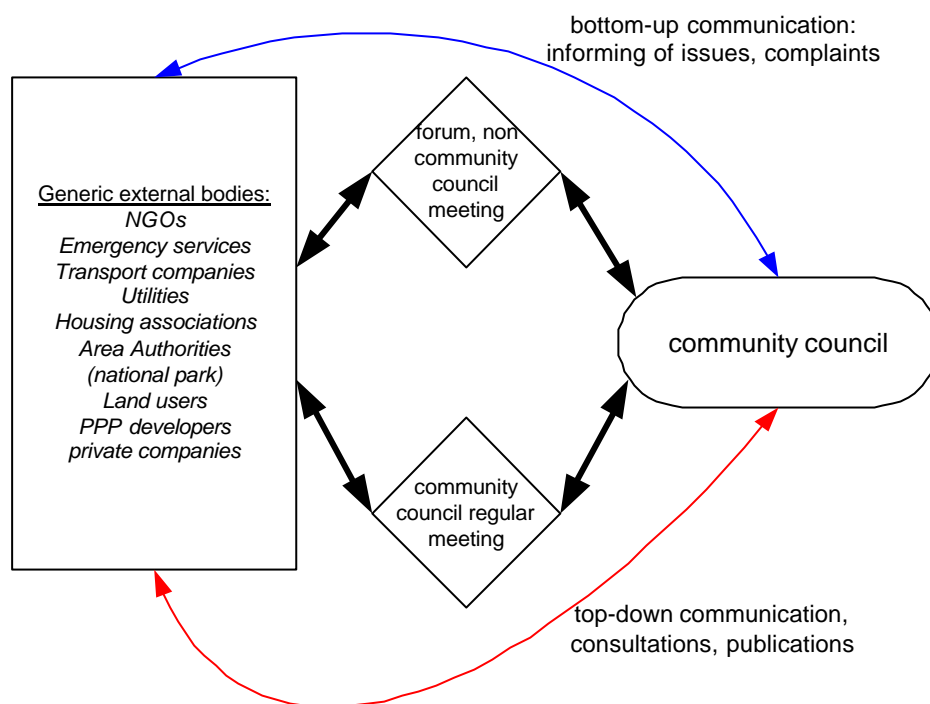


Figure 2.2 Engaging with non-government bodies

A non-exhaustive list of such organisations relevant to the participating Community Councils include: -

- *Other Community Councils:* Local community councils meet formally and informally through clusters, through the Association of Community Councils for the Stirling and Loch Lomond area, and through the Association of Scottish Community Councils
- *Health authorities:* Community Health Partnerships, Local Health Board, National Health Service
- *Housing Associations*
- *Education authorities:* e.g. Scottish Agricultural College
- *Environmental Agencies:* National Park Authority, Forestry Commission, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Scottish National Heritage
- *Transport companies*
- *Utilities :* Scottish Water, Scottish Water Consumer Panel, Power companies, Stirling Waste Forum
- *Uniformed services:* Police and Fire Authorities.

The Stirling Community Planning Partnership includes more than 50 local organisations. Many of these have it in their remit to consult the public and include Community Councils among their means of doing so.

Public bodies will also engage with the Community Councils on a more ad-hoc basis from time to time, usually on a specific issue. For example most receive a regular report from their local community police officer, either presented in person or given to the council in some format that allows a councillor, such as the secretary to present it. Representatives from other voluntary community bodies may also attend community council meetings.

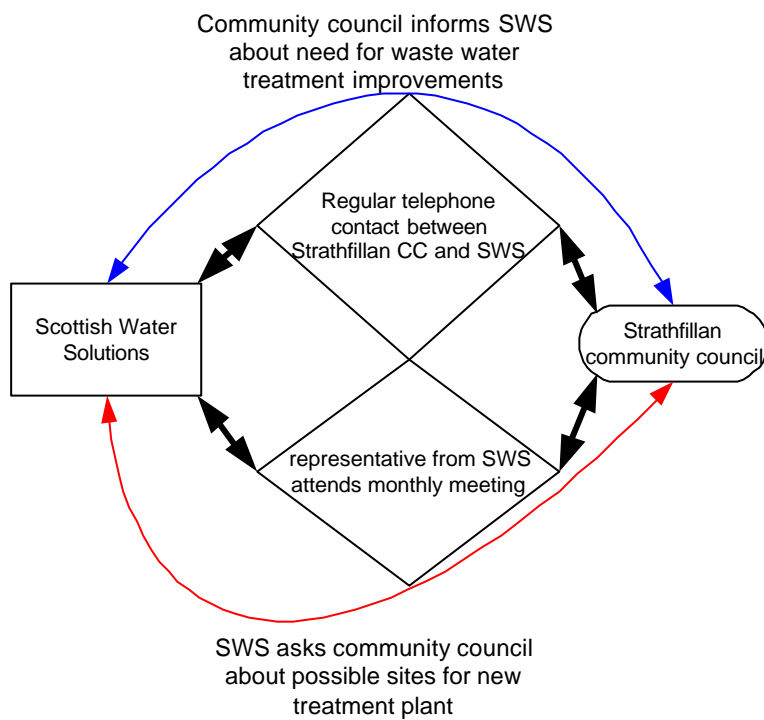


Figure 2.3 Example: Strathfillan Community Council and Scottish Water Solutions

The main implication to be drawn from the extent of Community Council engagement with other public bodies is the potential for using online methods to pool resources, in the long term increasing the coordination of consultation among local clusters of Community Councils. In the shorter term the most pressing need is for improved access to information on meetings, since these are the main current method for that coordination to happen.

Tools to Coordinate Consultation Responses

Participating Community Councils agreed that the workload associated with consultations and planning applications is considerable and problematic. It is seen as creating a barrier to effectively conveying the views of the community back to the local authority. The problem was seen as partly a result of the volume of paper work involved in 'filtering' incoming consultations for those that are deemed to be of most local relevance, and responding to them; and partly a problem of the number of consultations and timescales involved.

While the e-Community Council tools could not address the issue of the volumes of paper produced by external bodies and the frequency of consultation demands, it could support the management of consultations and support the community council to respond to them more effectively.

It was agreed therefore that the tools should support Community Councillors to coordinate their response to external consultation documents, by providing these functions:-

- Publish details of new consultations received, optionally appending any relevant electronic documents and their own summary text.
- Commit to draft a response to a newly published consultation, and indicate that to other Community Council members.
- Exchange 'private' comments with other Community Councillors, on what the Community Council response should be.

Communication with other public bodies is partly direct communication with individuals (e.g. by phone or email), and partly indirect (e.g. newsletters). Typically, publicity is limited by the effort to produce and distribute print-based newsletters.

Lobbying and effective contact with the local authority, national government and other organisations is a vital function of the community council. The e-Community Council sites were intended to complement the role of a newsletter and noticeboard by providing:-

- Community Councillors with a simple means to *maintain a public diary of meetings and other events, and contact details for the large number of bodies that interact with the community council.*
- Providing members of the public with a simple means to *keep informed of meetings and events, and useful contacts in other public bodies.*

Community Councillors' Expectations, Take-up and Reflections

Having reviewed community councillor's roles in 'ascertaining' public opinion and communicating it to the relevant decision-making bodies we can now assess the e-Community Council's contribution to that work, under the three criteria introduced at the beginning of the chapter, i.e.

- Has public take-up had a positive impact on Community Council activities?
- What was community councillor's take-up of the e-Community Council tools?
- Has their take-up had a positive impact on Community Council activities?

These questions/criteria are answered below using 11 of the 20 indicators also introduced at the beginning of the chapter.

Impact of Public Take-up

Community councillors' expectations of public take-up

Indicator 7: By the end of the pilot period a majority of community councillors who have used the e-Community Council expect it to enable them to better represent the views of the community.

Results: 👍 Questionnaire responses showed a majority expect websites to support their role in public communication.

To document the community councillors expectations, at the end of the pilot period our questionnaire/ interview survey of 59 community councillors asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with five statements about how websites *may* support their role in representing the community. Overall, a large majority of community councillors agreed with each of the statements, although the 22 responses were unevenly distributed among the community councils.

The various statements about community councillors' roles are shown below. The first two shown are those *most disagreed* with.-

- a) People want to see Community Councillors involving and responding to the public they represent, using the Internet and other means.

Strongly agree	6	Agree	10	No opinion	1	Disagree	2	Strongly Disagree	2	Don't know	1
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- b) Having an e-Community Council website implies that we should give attention to the views of those who respond to it.

Strongly agree	6	Agree	13	No opinion	-	Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	1	Don't know	2
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The remaining 3 statements had only one or two 'disagree' responses each,-

- c) A website should help us act in a 'filtering' role to alert local people to decisions that are relevant to the local community.
- d) A website should help facilitate debate with individuals, interest groups and public bodies that informs us of the concerns of each.
- e) A website should help show how we have considered local views and conveyed them to the appropriate public bodies.

A clear majority used the e-Community Council expecting that it would make a difference to their communication with the public. Nevertheless some of those involved did not expect it do so, or did not think it appropriate for that purpose. Our survey respondents were mainly from those most involved as users of the e-Community Council sites. We were aware though from comments in survey responses and from Steering Group members that in several cases there were many more on the community councils who were opposed to any involvement, for various reasons.

The advantages that community councillors expected have already been made clear; they were the rationale for the project. The 'dissenters' on the other hand objected to the idea that they should give undue attention to a form of communication they considered inferior to face-to-face contact and public debate, and divisive in terms of unequal access. The common grounds for such objections were concerns over lack of Internet access for the public and other community councillors, and expectations of public apathy.

Such concerns were expressed to us as about 'overemphasis' of a medium seen as only likely to be used by a minority. Lack of public access, compounded by a perceived lack of interest in local affairs were the main reasons. Some saw the internet as a poor substitute for face-to-face public meetings. One community councillor expressed views that we believe to be fairly common: -

"...at the moment the people who respond to the website are not the ordinary members of this village so if undue weight were given to their views, that would filter out a big majority ...the 'debate' on the web is not a discussion in a public forum where people can make their case to other members of the community who can put forward counter motions, votes can be taken and it can all be minuted".

This was a minority view, as the responses above show. We cannot dismiss concerns about inequalities of access (which as chapter 3 will show are widely shared among the public). The respective qualities of online discussion and in-person debates in community council meetings are a moot point for this report; as there were none in the community council meetings we observed we have not compared them. This would be an important part of any future research however.

Public responses to consultations

Indicator 8: By the end of the pilot period an increase in public involvement should be demonstrated by an upward trend in the number of consultation responses that members of the public have contributed to.

Results: 🗉 Only a single response from the public was received during the pilot period.

The e-Community Council sites were used to seek responses from the public to 5 consultations during the September-November pilot period, receiving only a single response in that time. Considering what we have said in this chapter about community councils' reported 'consultation overload', the low number of consultations may seem surprising and the number of public responses embarrassingly low. This is especially so given that the e-Community Council capabilities were initially focused on supporting community councillors' efforts to respond to consultations.

By the beginning of 2005 the Steering Group representatives of each community council had been persuaded of the case for using an e-Community Council site to respond to more consultations. However the low use of the community councillors' facilities for collaboration on consultation responses became apparent before the pilot period, and was one of the reasons for the re-focusing of the site design on 'bottom-up' participation.

Consultation management facilities, on the Community Councillor-only pages, allow a community councillor to set up a consultation, i.e. upload a consultation document, provide a summary of it, and set a period for public comment. The pages also allow logged-in community councillors to exchange private comments and, if they wish, to set a 'check out' box indicating to others they have volunteered to draft a response.

In one community council, Bannockburn, the 'private comment' facility was used increasingly to exchange comments on planning applications. However none of the community councillors used the 'check out' facility. Community councillors told us the term was confusing; suggesting to some that it simply referred to browsing further details about a consultation.

We also explored reasons for the low volume of consultations actually uploaded to the sites. Some felt that the level of consultations had dropped since the start of the project (February 2004), but the most common explanation was that take-up by community councillors had not reached a point where it was feasible for community councils to change their working practices, to the extent necessary for online collaboration to be worthwhile.

The usual practice among the community councils was referred to by one as "wait for things to come to us and then respond", and the e-Community Council as a so-far unrealised opportunity to "make us act more proactively".

Normally office bearers decide before their monthly (or 6-weekly) meeting, which of the consultation documents they have received from other bodies will be discussed at the meeting. Practical limits on discussion time mean this is two at most, and others are simply noted. The practical limits on office bearers' time between meetings

(especially those with a range of other voluntary responsibilities, as is very common) meant few were able to devote the time to uploading consultations.


Improvements to the site administration facilities were seen as necessary in those cases where consultation documents were accompanied by questionnaires. The site allows the community councillor to create a 'questionnaire item' and then set up the questionnaire within that item. Similarly he/she can create a 'consultation item' and define the duration; the period when it is open for comments. But this means the would-be administrator needs to link the two items, using the hyperlink facility, and work out what to say in both of them. This task was regarded as too cumbersome. Nor were there clear benefits in defining the 'open for comments' period using the field provided, and in many cases community councillors chose to state this in the summary text.

The barrier of a high effort for office-bearers, in exchange for intangible long term benefit, is all the higher when consulting bodies distribute consultation documents on paper, and more so when accompanied by paper questionnaires that community councils need to recreate online.

Recommended improvements to the consultation administration facilities are included in chapter 3 and the best practice recommendations.

Getting public input on local concerns

Indicator 9: By the end of the pilot period an increase in public involvement should be demonstrated by an upward trend in the number of items received on other matters of local concern.

Results:  There were a growing number of items submitted by the public to those e-Community Council sites that were seen to be regularly updated by community councillors.

Earlier in this chapter we gave details of the public contributions to each e-Community Council site (Table 2.7). The table is not broken down to show changes over the 3 month period, and if we did there would not be a consistently upward trend. What is clear from the responses is that they were clustered around:-


- contentious planning applications and other issues of local controversy
- community councillors' responses to earlier comments made by colleagues and members of the public.

The Bannockburn community councillors were, of the 6 sites, the most successful at encouraging an exchange of views online. Initially these were mostly between members of the community council (and in addition to those made privately on the 'community councillor pages'). Often where responses were given these were short simple acknowledgements, thanking people for their comments. These appear to have been enough to encourage other people to add their own comments.

Other sites were less successful and received only a small number of public responses, although as we have said earlier (indicator 3) these are a promising start when compared with local authority e-democracy initiatives and considering the population sizes involved.

Getting a wider range of public views

Indicator 10: In each participating Community Council, a majority of members rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of the range of people who have expressed a view using it.

Results:  A majority were satisfied the sites enable a wider range of people to raise issues and give their views. Members of two community councillors were satisfied this had happened. However in others the rating was based on expectation rather than experience and in a minority of cases there was scepticism that wider involvement would happen.

The end-of-pilot questionnaires/ interviews with community councillors asked them to rate their satisfaction that the e-Community Council website “enables a wider range of people to raise issues & give their views”. The responses were:-

Very satisfied	5	Quite satisfied	9	Neutral	6	Quite unsatisfied	-	Very unsatisfied	2	Never used/ don't know	-
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Most felt that the sites were *enabling* wider involvement. There was a wider range of views on whether they *already had* or not. In interviews, the chair of Stepps and District Community Council felt it had provoked more dialogue than there was previously. Bannockburn and Cambusbarron community councillors were confident that people who would never have got in touch any other way had responded online. In Bannockburn’s case this was mainly in terms of the numbers of responses to planning applications.

Cambusbarron’s confidence was based as much on the nature of the issue as the numbers taking part. The community council launched a survey on their site in September 2005, after complaints about motor bikes being ridden around a local quarry. The survey responses and comments unexpectedly included some from ‘bikers’ and others calling for tolerance of them. This led to a more “wide ranging” discussion at the community council’s meetings and a welcoming (by those we spoke to) of this “extra channel”.

We should point out that the community councils’ knowledge of who communicates with them online is limited. To simplify the act of contributing, the site does not require member of the public to ‘sign up’ or disclose anything about themselves. Users are asked for a name if adding a comment, and also for contact details if adding an item to the home page. However the system does not insist that users give this identifying data, and if they do there are no automatic checks on its accuracy.

This tolerance for anonymity was seen by some community councillors as of some value in encouraging people to come forward, though for others it frustrated their ability to give a meaningful response. This was especially so when comments related to planning matters; community councillors would word their response differently depending on what area someone was resident of, since many were not well informed about community council boundaries, and those of the knowledge of the area that person could be assumed to have. In light of this we have recommended that the ‘add comment’ facilities on the site ask for some basic identifying details, stopping short of data that would be certain to identify an individual.

Getting a useful public response

Indicator 11: In each participating Community Council, a majority of members rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of the of the public responses made using it.

Results: 👍 Most community councillors involved agreed the responses were useful. Three community councils attracted new members as a result of the pilot. In interviews community councillors indicated the value of the public responses was as evidence of their improved capability to get a response, and to network with other campaigning groups.

We have already considered the public's response in terms of numbers and whether they were (or appeared to be) from people who would otherwise have been in touch with community councillors. But were the responses useful? This was a further question in the end-of-pilot questionnaire and interviews.

Asked to rate their satisfaction that views gathered from the public were useful or informative for the community council, our 22 community councillors responded: -

Very satisfied	8	Quite satisfied	6	Neutral	6	Quite unsatisfied	-	Very unsatisfied	2	Never used/ don't know	-
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The majority response reflected the experiences of most of the participating community councils; Stepps, Torbrex and Strathfillan community councillors each reported valuing the public visibility of their e-Community Council sites despite the low numbers of responses in the pilot period.

Three of the six community councils reported an outcome we had previously discounted as unrealistic to expect in the short term; members of the public approached them with an interest in becoming community councillors as a result of visiting or using the e-Community Council sites.

This was most keenly appreciated in Bannockburn who gained two new members; their Steering Group representative told us they would no longer have an active community council otherwise. Similarly, Cambusbarron and Stepps & District both reported one new member.

In Torbrex and Bannockburn, the site provided an information resource for these Community Councils to link with campaigning groups across Scotland. For Torbrex this focused on their response to a Public Private Partnership (PPP) school building development, which local residents strongly oppose. The site was used to promote the community councils' online petition to the Scottish Parliament, and give links to media coverage, which led to contact with similar groups across Scotland. Similarly in Bannockburn the community council's concerns about electricity pylons, proposed to run across a wide area of neighbouring countryside, led to them seeking public responses from most of the other e-Community Council sites.

The public responses to the Bannockburn and Cambusbarron sites were also seen as useful for their *timeliness*. Community councils have only a limited period in which they may respond to local authority planning applications (in terms of the local authority duty to consult them). That period can and often does fall between community council meetings, limiting the opportunity for community councillors to agree a response between them, which is informed by views other than their own. The boost to public comments on planning applications was seen as a vital

development by Bannockburn, and they are now routinely printed off for use in meetings with the local authority councillor for the area.

Views from community council meetings

Indicator 12: Minutes of all participating Community Councils show each has made a commitment to use the e-Community Council tools during the pilot period.

Results: 👍 Minutes show the participating community councils discussed the site to encourage wider take up by their members.

The participating community councillor had minuted public meetings during the pilot phase, which are available from their e-Community Council sites. These show that each discussed the project and greater take-up by members was encouraged. Various discussions refer to the use of their site to (for example) seek responses to consultations and address local issues.

We assessed this indicator as having been met, although one site - Torbrex- could not commit to the pilot. Its chair was personally committed to the pilot, but extenuating circumstances meant the community council was pre-occupied with traditional methods of public communication. Local hostility to the development of a school on a Public Private Partnership basis led to turnout of 40 to 50 people at community council meetings (5 being the national average).

Community councillors' exchanges between meetings

Indicator 13: By the end of the pilot period, each e-Community Council site is being used at least monthly by at least 3 members for 'private' communication.

Results: 👏 In most cases there were at least one or two active members and some passive use by others, but no sites were routinely used by members to communicate privately.

Community councillors did use the sites for 'internal' community council purposes, but they made little use of the facilities for private exchanges – i.e. to add items, or make comments on items, that were only accessible by other community councillors. The figures for 'private' communication between community councillors were shown earlier in this chapter, in Table 2.7. They show the number of private exchanges, did not exceed single figures in any of the sites. Strathfillan and Bannockburn made most use of private comments, mainly regarding planning applications and forthcoming meetings.

There were others reasons for community councillors to use the sites. Of the 22 respondents to our questionnaire & interview survey 16 said they had browsed their sites to "catch up with news and opinion", and half had checked or updated diary dates. The most common reasons for doing these were to download minutes of recent meetings and agendas for forthcoming ones.

Less than half (8) of our respondents had written an item for their site however. This reflects the fact that in 3 of the community councils (Bannockburn, Cambusbarron

and Strathfillan) there were at least 2 active contributors to the site, but in the other 3 (Stepps & District, Thornhill & Blairdrummond, Torbrex) there was only one active contributor to the site; the community council's representative on the steering group.

Community councillors also found the e-Community council sites useful for other purposes, as we describe next.

Usefulness of e-Community Council tools

Indicator 14: In each Community Council, by the end of the pilot period a majority of members who have used their e-Community Council are satisfied that it helps them with their Community Council work.

Results: 👍 All community councillors responding to our survey said the tools (or features) they had used were helpful; only a minority were considered unhelpful without further improvement. Gaps in current usage were identified.

Table 2.8 below shows the e-Community Council functions found helpful by the 22 community councillors responding to our questionnaire/ interviews. Some respondents included features they had not personally used among those they thought 'helpful' on the grounds that they understood them and wanted to use them but had not yet done so. The table also shows features the respondents thought needed improvement before they could be considered helpful.

e-Community Council functions	Helpful	Improve first
(a) Publish a consultation/ planning application	9	1
(b) 'Check out' a consultation	11	-
(c) Publish item on a topic of current interest	12	-
(d) Upload a document e.g. minutes	13	-
(e) Check item or comment added by the public	12	-
(f) Use topics to categorise items	5	2
(g) Set up a questionnaire	8	1
(h) Make 'private' comments, e.g. on draft minutes.	10	-
(i) Edit the events & meetings diary	10	-
(j) Edit contact information	5	1

Table 2.8 e-Community Council functions found helpful by community councillors

This table shows that the most helpful aspects of the e-Community Council were the main functions associated with accessing the minutes of meetings, and with public communication (publishing items and checking those contributed by the public).

A few individuals found four features to need further improvement before they could be considered helpful. This suggests problems with usability (ease of use), and we return to that under indicator 17 below.

Expectations of future use

Indicator 15: In each participating Community Council, a majority of members who have used their e-Community Council say they would use it regularly to complement their normal methods of communication.

Results: 👍 There was strong support for continued use of the sites from community councillors involved in the pilot.

Community councillors were asked whether or not they thought e-community councils “should be taken forward on a wider scale”. Of the 22 respondents 17 agreed, 1 said no and there were 4 ‘don’t knows’.

The questionnaire and interviews also explored different scenarios for continuing the project, which we look at further at the end of chapter 3.

Impact on productivity

Indicator 16: Community Councillors get better and faster access to documents and are better informed when attending meetings as a result of using the e-Community Council.

Results: 👉 This was true for 3 of the community councils. Meetings were reported to be up to 50% shorter. Others faced barriers to use and therefore to an impact on productivity. Secretaries’ workload increased, mostly where some colleagues lacked access to the internet or were not using their e-community council site.

Evidence for an impact on productivity came from the end-of-pilot questionnaire and interview survey of community councillors, and from the Steering Group’s feedback throughout the project.

Q. How satisfied are you that using the ‘Community Councillor’ pages **saves time** at meetings?

Very satisfied	5	Quite satisfied	3	Neutral	9	Quite unsatisfied	2	Very unsatisfied	-	Never used/ don’t know	3
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Online distribution of minutes was an important benefit to most of the community councils. The most dramatic impact was felt in Strathfillan, who reported that meetings were 50% shorter as a result of their decision, early in the project, to make the e-Community Council the sole method for distributing minutes.

Bannockburn and Cambusbarron community councillors also judged their meetings to be more productive, since they arrived at meetings having seen the agenda, and pre-informed about items on it, having in some cases already discussed them online.

Making the minutes available for download was considered an advantage over e-mail distribution, since this was increasingly found to be subject to problems reading attached documents, especially when sent across different service providers' firewalls.

The changes brought out by online publishing of the minutes should not be underestimated. Community councils have in most cases only recently begun to use electronic documents at all. Cambusbarron's Chair Mike Graham recalls "minutes used to get lost and take months to publish... up to two years ago they were handwritten in a book which got photocopied, then at the next meeting the Chair would sign them off".

Online availability of minutes is therefore a shift from almost no public availability to wide public availability. However the effort involved is typically the responsibility of one person, which may lead to a 'publication bottleneck'. The responsibility for distributing minutes normally lies with the Secretary, and using the e-Community Council for this purpose was a duplication of effort, particularly for Thornhill & Blairdrummond, where there were too few community councillors with access to the site early enough in the pilot to enable take-up. This meant distributing minutes by mail to some and online to others.

Since unequal access to technology is a widespread problem affecting e-government initiatives, government bodies often have to maintain multiple 'channels' of communication with citizens (post, telephone, meetings). This has led some to adapt tools from commerce for 'customer relationship management' (CRM), which becomes 'citizen relationship management'.

Such tools allow continuity to be maintained in communications between service users and administrators; a factor which also makes them of interest for e-democracy purposes. As community councils develop their capacity for public communication and the numbers contacting them increases there will be a growing need for e-Community Council tools to have CRM capabilities.

Usability and Efficiency

Indicator 17: In each participating community council, a majority of members rate the e-Community Council positively in terms of ease of learning and ease of use.

Results: 👍 A majority said they were satisfied on each of these points, although responses were lacking from some community councils and the consensus was that the administration facilities should be easier to learn and need improvement.

The usability of the pages provided for community councillors private or 'internal' use was assessed through ongoing feedback from Steering Group members, from field tests and visits to community councils, and from the end-of-pilot questionnaire and interview survey of community councillors.

Taking the last of these first, the survey asked members to rate the e-Community Council on *ease of use* and *ease of learning*. The responses are shown below from 22 community councillors: -

It is **easy to learn** to use the 'Community Councillor' pages

Very satisfied	7	Quite satisfied	10	Neutral	4	Quite unsatisfied	1	Very unsatisfied	-	Never used/ don't know	-
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The 'Community Councillor' pages are **easy to use** after a few hours practice

Very satisfied	9	Quite satisfied	8	Neutral	4	Quite unsatisfied	-	Very unsatisfied	-	Never used/ don't know	-
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In these responses and in our discussions with them, most community councillors said they found the pages easy to use; though they were less satisfied they were easy to learn. This view accords with our other two sources; discussions with the Steering Group and observations from field tests and visits. A typical comment was that the pages are 'not for beginners but easy enough when you get the hang of it'.

Needs for improvement were identified from these discussions and observations, and are included in chapter 3.

Chapter Conclusions

The evaluation results show a range of expectations and experiences. In several cases- Bannockburn and Cambusbarron, enthusiastic take-up by at least two community councillors engendered an impressive response from the public, with a demonstrable impact on community council business. In Strathfillan and Torbrex the public response has been low key, yet the e-Community Council site has become an accepted and useful tool for community councillors to access information between meetings.

Some expectations were only partially met. Strathfillan's John Riley, the initiator of the project, the overall aim underpinning it remains to be fulfilled; an online network of community councils capable of national lobbying and development of participatory democracy. In other cases, notably Thornhill & Blairdrummond, lack of internet access among community councillors and the public compounded concerns that the e-Community council was neither usable enough nor desirable as a platform for unrepresentative views.

The results leave some questions unanswered. What about the wider public's interest and expectations of e-Community Councils? And what are the prospects of further development given the alternatives available to community councils, and given local authorities' own policy and e-democracy developments? The next chapter takes up these issues.

Chapter 3 Sustaining Community e-Democracy

Introduction to the chapter

This chapter has three main purposes. *Firstly* it gauges the level of interest in the e-community council concept expressed by the public and by participating community councils. *Secondly* it offers practical guidance on the measures and skills needed to 'moderate' or facilitate online discussion, including legal issues likely to affect community councils. *Thirdly* it makes recommendations on steps needed to make the tools developed in the project available on a wider scale, and to support the development of community e-democracy.

The evaluation evidence included in chapter 2 shows community e-democracy sites can attract significant take-up within a relatively short period, even with relatively low key publicity. The e-Community Council tools piloted in this project offer integrated capabilities that have been developed with and for community councils. However the tools are not unique and community councils are free to choose whatever they deem appropriate for their needs.

The eCommunity Council project was not meant to review the range of alternative platforms that are available to community councils but rather to focus on specifying and understanding their requirements by developing tools for the partners. However, this report would be incomplete without outlining some of the alternatives.

The alternative platforms available at time of writing include:-

The Local Channel offers free websites to all non-profit-making organisations including community councils, parish councils (in England) as well as "parish magazines, sports teams, historical societies, gardening clubs, village halls and more" (see <http://www.thelocalchannel.co.uk>)

Your Community Council was created by the West Lothian Association of Community Councils "to promote the work of member organisations throughout West Lothian" - in turn making them more accountable and accessible to local people" (see <http://www.yourcommunitycouncil.org.uk>)

Community Council Portal provides updateable websites for Community Councils in the UK. Various subscription options provide "easily editable ... News pages, Document Libraries, Calendars, Guestbook" (see <http://www.community-council.org.uk/>)

However these alternatives are mostly oriented to providing news and general information, and have limited support for members of the public to communicate with

their community council or other members of the public. A review³³ of all Scottish community council sites listed on Community Council Portal in January 2006, found that only 9 of 70 offered any forum for online discussion.

Support for the e-Community Council concept

The evaluation gauged the level of interest in e-community councils among the public and the participating community councils, and the results are given below. We also consider the interest shown from other community councils in actually deploying the e-community council tools.

Levels of Public Interest

The citizens’ panel survey showed strong interest in ‘having a say’ on local issues as shown in Table 2.4 below.

I would be interested in using an e-Community Council website to give my views on... (please tick as many as apply to you) -	Response % (n=583)
i. Consultations that Community Councils are asked by other bodies to comment on (e.g. Scottish Executive, Stirling Council, Parks Authority, transport/ utility companies).	52%
ii. Local Issues the Community Council can influence, e.g. Community planning and regeneration, local licensing and planning applications, Council services in my area.	69%
iii. Issues affecting all areas covered by the Local Authority, e.g. Council-run services.	59%
iv. National and international issues affecting everyone.	34%
v. Nothing online- but I am interested in giving my views by other methods (post, telephone, public meetings, door-to-door surveys).	22%
vi. Nothing- I am not interested at all.	10%

Table 3.1 Levels of interest in online participation

Using data provided by Stirling Council ³⁴ we looked at characteristics of the 69% of people who showed an interest in using an e-Community Council site, i.e. for at least

³³ The review was carried out by a student between 9-11 January 2006. Tthe home page of each site was viewed to identify the following categories and functions: News, opinion; Events diary; Minutes of meetings; Other downloadable documents (e.g. planning); General ‘community’ information; Email contact; Guestbook comments; Forum, issue-based discussion; Questionnaire/ poll; Login for member only communication.

³⁴ The data were linked by Stirling Council via an identifying number; no personally-identifying data was disclosed to us.

one of the first 5 options. The results in Table 3.2 below give some insight into who the e-Community Council concept appeals to.

By far the most significant relationship between demographic factors and whether the respondents were interested in 'having a say' online was *home access to the Internet*. However even 38% of those without home access said they were interested. There were also striking differences between *genders*, with women 12% more likely to be interested than men, and *age groups*. Table 3.2 suggests that e-Community Councils have most appeal for those in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups, but this declines sharply in older age groups. However given that youth is often associated with political disengagement, such strong interest (77%) among those aged 16-24 is perhaps more surprising than the lower interest (45%) among those aged 65+.

The difference in interest between our rural and urban respondents is probably not significant. This is interesting given recent research indicating that people in rural areas of Scotland are more likely to be involved in community and voluntary organisations³⁵. On that premise, our results suggest a wider gap between 'interest' and 'involvement' among urban residents.

Age	16-24	77%
	25-34	82%
	35-44	84%
	45-54	68%
	55-64	68%
	65-74	45%
	75+	46%
Gender	Female	75%
	Male	63%
Home access	Yes	82%
	No	38%
Urban/rural	Urban	68%
	Rural	70%

Table 3.2 Levels of interest by socio-demographic characteristics

³⁵ See Hope, S. and King, S (2005)., *Public Attitudes to Participation Research Findings 16/2005*, Scottish Executive, available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/08/11143228/32298>

Factor	Illustrative examples of comments	No. comments mentioning as encouraging (+) and as discouraging (-) factor (ranked in brackets)	
		+	-
Responsiveness	"Getting a response to comments and feeling one's opinions are considered."	112 (1 st)	44 (2 nd)
Publicity	"We have to be informed of its existence in the first place"	47 (7 th)	41 (3 rd)
Timeliness	"Kept well up-to-date"	31 (8 th)	24 (6 th)
Access/ literacy	"Availability of necessary equipment... skills"	58 (4 th)	233 (1 st)
Accessibility	"Clear presentation"	8 (11 th)	3 (14 th)
Influence	"Evidence that my input...changes the outcome."	50 (6 th)	19 (9 th =)
Convenience	"To be able to comment at home rather than go to meetings where people do not have the time"	83 (3 rd)	n/a
Relevant content	"Items posted of direct relevance to the community"	89 (2 nd)	19 (9 th =)
Ease of use	"Good design... user friendly"	53 (5 th)	39 (4 th)
Understandable content	"Info in plain English- easy to understand"	12 (9 th)	14 (11 th)
Political leadership / lack of it	"Inspirational community councillors"	9 (10 th)	11 (13 th)
Political interest/ disenchantment	"Perception that community councils are run by small self-interested groupings"... "apathy"	4 (12 th)	37 (5 th)
Privacy / concerns regarding it	"Lack of privacy about opinions- everyone can see"	2 (13 th)	13 (12 th)
"Lack of time" to use	"Lack of spare time"	n/a	22 (7 th)
Dislike of e-cc concept or websites	"Not a true picture of public opinion", "poor out of date info being posted", "not enough info on local groups, classes, facilities".	n/a	21 (8 th)

Table 3.3 Factors encouraging and discouraging online participation

The ability of community councils to *show how views have been considered* appears to be a key factor in the citizens' panel members' interest in 'having a say' online. When given 5 statements about their expectations, and asked how strongly they agreed with them, the greatest support was for the statement "If I gave my views to

my Community Council I would expect them to be considered by the appropriate decision-maker". 40% of our respondents strongly agreed and a further 52% agreed with this.

The nature of peoples' expectations of e-community council sites can be discerned from their comments. When asked to suggest factors that would encourage online participation the foremost was *responsiveness*, i.e. community councils are expected to acknowledge and reply to public input.

The comments received about these 'encouraging' factors, and others perceived to be barriers to online participation, were analysed and then grouped according to the 15 categories that emerged from the analysis. A list of these, with examples, is given in Table 3.3 (above). This shows that community councils are also expected to have a *discernible influence* on decision-making, although that expectation is seen as less important than simply responding. Encouraging factors mentioned more often were that sites should have content of direct *relevance to the community*, and that they were seen to be *convenient* relative to other forms of contact.

Access to the internet and skills to use it were seen as necessary encouraging factors, along with *ease of use*. Lack of access or skills was by far the most frequently mentioned barrier. Others factors expected to work against participation were lack of responsiveness, lack of effective publicity, and difficult-to-use sites.

Interestingly among the least mentioned factors were *accessibility* and *privacy*. However we cannot say from the results whether this was because respondents were confident these barriers would be effectively addressed or because they did not matter to our respondents.

It is important to note that the questionnaire gave background information on the e-Community Council project and the website capabilities. However most respondents (92%) said they had not visited an e-Community Council site 'before today'. So although some comments specifically referred to the pilot e-Community Council websites, most referred to the respondents expectations of them.

Interest from other Community Councils

Public interest is an obvious prerequisite for sustaining e-community councils. Without it there would be little point in community councils making the effort to use them. However indications of interest from community councils themselves are a more telling indicator that e-community councils have a future. That is therefore what the evaluation criteria focused on. Three indicators of 'sustainability' were agreed, with results as follows.

Indicator 18: Interest is expressed in the use of e-Community Council tools by other Community Councils and community bodies.

Results: 👍 Interest was shown from 5 community councils and one community trust in the Stirling area, plus others in the Glasgow and Renfrewshire areas.

Indicator 19: The e- Community Council capabilities have been demonstrated to other Community Councils and community bodies.

Results: 👍 The exiting sites were demonstrated at Stirling Council's Community Governance conference, the ASCC Annual Conference. Demonstrations were also given on a more ad-hoc basis to individual from other community councils.

Indicator 20: Other Community Councils and community bodies are actively seeking to deploy the e-Community Council tools.

Results: 👍 5 community councils and one community trust have enquired about setting up an e-community council site as soon as this is feasible.

Work to promote the e-community councils and sound out interest among other community councils was led by the participating community councils. The approach was cautious; the Steering Group did not consider it realistic to set precise targets for the number of community councils to be 'signed up' to pilot an e-community council site of their own. There were two reasons for the caution; firstly there was unwillingness to prejudge the evaluation results following the site launch in September '05, particularly in terms of getting a public response and managing any response received. Secondly, it was not thought appropriate to raise expectations about the continuation of the project without first establishing avenues for further funding and practical support.

The response to the two conference demonstrations was enthusiastic, and was followed by various other contacts from community councils, including one with an existing website which they felt lacked public engagement features.

Challenges of proactive e-engagement

Working proactively to engage the public in online discussion is a challenge for community councils. As we have already remarked in chapter 2, some of the participating community councils were better able than others to keep their sites updated and respond to comments. In this section we review some of the factors that, on reflection, the participating community councillors saw as helpful and unhelpful to maintaining their site.

Internet Access and Skills Development

Internet access and the skills to make effective use of it were considered the most important prerequisites for take-up of e-community councils. That was true of the public, as evidenced by the citizens' panel responses in Table 3.3 above. It was also true of participating community councillors. Their questionnaire responses gave the main factors affecting community use of their sites as access and skills; and apathy and low awareness. The groups of comments below illustrate these points:-

- *Access and skills*: "Lack of access to pc at home; no public access in our CC area; lack of computer literacy; confidence to use the site; Reluctance to use the internet, fear of the unknown/ Older generation don't use the internet"
- "In our area a sizable majority do not bother with the web, or only use it for emails to distant family members...other people who are using it at work don't necessarily want to spend their evenings gazing at the screen, they tell me. I think in time this will change but I believe that is the situation as of now"
- *Apathy and low awareness*: "apathy; disinterest in community issues; ignorance of our existence; poor involvement and marketing of the issues."

The project was not intended to address *public* internet access issues but these appear to have affected take-up. We should note though that the majority of the panel respondents who gave access and skills as main factors affecting take up, said so despite the fact they personally did have access. Most of the community councils have internet access available in public libraries in their areas (with the exception of Thornhill & Blairdrummond). Strathfillan has a mobile 'virtual learning centre' providing internet access in local villages on different days of the week.

Any effect on take-up appears not be one of access *per se*, but the community councillors' ability to publicise their sites using public *places*, and preferably those with public internet access. For example, Bannockburn posted flyers in a community centre close to a public library with access points, and through a newsagent member of the community council; Cambusbarron similarly used internet access in their community centre; and Strathfillan used their virtual learning centre for demonstrations to the community council. These steps appear to have helped raise awareness, although we cannot give strong evidence of their impact on take-up relative to others, such as simply keeping the sites updated.

The project provided funding to address lack of access among community councillors themselves. Community councillors were provided with computers on condition they were used to contribute to the project. In all, 11 computers with appropriate software and modems (where required) were provided across the six community councils. Training was organised through Cambusbarron community council, using Stirling-based training provider Learning IT.

This training provision was focused on basic internet and computing skills, and followed the e-community council demonstrations to community councils between February and July 2005. Unfortunately this time gap was too long; the equipment orders were marred by long supplier delays and missing parts, delaying the training. This in turn meant that community councillors who were internet novices were unable

to use the site until near the end of the pilot period. Despite the delays the training was seen as an essential confidence-builder and enabler by those attending.

Organising to maintain an e-community council

Community councils that managed to regularly add items to their site and respond to comments established a promising level of public interaction, as chapter 2 showed. Various challenges faced those that could not, particularly Thornhill & Blairdrummond, Stepps and Torbrex. These variously faced problems of lack of access, lack of consensus on needs for web-based communication, and untypical burdens on office-bearers involved in the project caused by lack of active community councillors (Stepps) or heavy workload from controversial local developments (Torbrex).

This begs the question; what ways of organising *generally* helped those community councils with lower barriers, that could have helped those with the specific problems above? One noticeable factor was that community councils that devolved issues more or less formally (or routinely) to sub-groups appeared to maintain their site more effectively than those without³⁶.

A community council wanting to set up an e-Community Council would be well advised to consider *setting up a sub-group* to manage the task, in association with the Secretary and anyone else involved in producing a newsletter or other 'traditional' communications. Other practical steps include:-

1. Define the names, contact and login details for all members
2. Define what the 'conditions of use' should cover (see the section Moderating and facilitating discussion below)
3. Identify several people willing to check the site regularly for new comments and respond, and for what periods; a rota system may be feasible and there should be an 'escalation procedure' for comments that are difficult to respond to, or which may breach the conditions of use.
4. Prepare a general introduction to inform readers/users 'about the community council', possibly including photographs of members.
5. Define a set of topics or categories to represent the projects or issues that the community council will be addressing in the short term.
6. Identify diary dates for the community council's meetings.

³⁶ While those involved generally agreed with this observation. However further research would be needed to establish how far a 'sub-group' structure contributes to success. Other explanations are possible, for example sub-groups may be more common in community councils that serve relatively large populations, which may be the more important factor.

7. Publicise the site widely to other community groups, single issue groups, and consulting bodies. Publicity should preferably be distributed by email and include the web address (url) of the site.
8. Invite community councillors to write personal items on their own concerns and opinions.
9. Invite political representatives to contribute, and journalists to use it as a potential source of news material
10. Offer incentives to members of the public to contribute- e.g. a book token for best item submitted in next calendar month.
11. Use questionnaire/polling functions to draw attention to the site, e.g. an online 'pub quiz' on knowledge of local issues & history with a prize awarded in a local pub/hotel?

Supporting consultation needs

The e-Community Council consultation and questionnaire facilities give community councils a means to widen the range of views gathered. They are capacity building tools, but they do not turn community councils into research organisations. Well designed questionnaires can explore the range of local views. Guidelines are available on the internet for advice on writing suitable questions (see Annex B for sources)

e-Community Council questionnaires can be replied to by any visitor to the site. This is desirable from the point of view of widening access, but also means they attract a 'self-selected sample'. This implies that the community council (or other consulting body) would need to use professional surveying tools if they need to restrict access to a defined sample of residents.

In the interests of taking steps to address local 'digital divides', it is advisable to include *demographic questions* in any questionnaire where there is an overriding need to capture a broad range of local views. This can help build a profile of who, in broad terms, is taking part online and who is not.

In the short term, community councils may well assume that older age groups can be reached more effectively using traditional approaches. However that is unlikely to remain so for very long. Community councils can in any case benefit by knowing whether those contributing views online are typical in terms of age, gender, or other factors. Local authorities publish statistical breakdowns of the local population from census and other data. Provided the same age group categories (for example) are used, comparisons can be made with these statistics to establish how typical e-Community Council respondents may be.

Improving consulting bodies' practice

The participating community councillors faced unnecessary barriers from the public bodies consulting them- i.e. from the inability to refer to online versions of consultation documents distributed on paper. Consulting bodies can contribute to community e-democracy by introducing and publicising mechanisms to:-

- Publish an online database of consultations, identifying the duration and topics or and preferably a summary or abstract that community councillors can distribute and adapt as they wish.
- Provide electronic versions of documents, including weekly planning lists
- Provide a notification service, so secretaries or other administrators can indicate topics they are interested in, be notified by email, and download their selected documents from the central local authority website for uploading to the community council site.

Moving forward: prospects for e-Community Councils

The e-Community Council project has tested a prototype set of worldwide web-based tools, the intention being to test a concept; e-democracy for community councils, against the evidence that this report has set out. At the outset it was envisaged that a 'rollout' phase would follow, and in this section we describe various approaches discussed among participating community councillors, and the further developments needed for them to be realistically possibilities.

Options for Organising e-Community Councils

The questionnaire survey of participating community councillors in December 2005 was used to prompt discussion of the way forward for e-community council sites, in light of the participants' experience and expectations.

The questionnaire drew attention to the effort required to maintain a responsive e-Community Council site, and the potential legal risks of defamation, obscenity or discrimination arising from 'leaving an interactive website unattended'. It asked whether respondents thought 'e-community councils should be taken forward on a wider scale'.

Of the 22 respondents 17 replied yes to this question, with a single 'no' and 4 'don't knows'. They were then asked to choose the most realistic 'management arrangement' from four scenarios described as follows:-

1. *"Individual e-Community Councils* take the initiative and are responsible for their own interactive site. They just need better facilities for checking new additions by the public, time to set up working arrangements for that, and a suitable organisation to look after the system.

2. *Community Councils share responsibility* for the interactive aspects of a shared website. When the public respond, an administrator appointed by the local association can handle routine matters and forward others to the appropriate Community Council.
3. *Local Community Planning groups or Assemblies* take the initiative and responsibility – since they are ‘participatory’ organisations and have some administrative support.
4. The *Local Council* takes the initiative and responsibility, adding Community Council interactive facilities to the information they already provide. A Council administrator can handle routine matters and forward others to the appropriate Community Council. “

Respondents were invited to comment, and the question was discussed in more depth with 10 community councillors in telephone interviews. The scenarios were preferred as follows, together with comments made:-

Scenario 1: 6 responses; “To maintain local control”; “General topics may not reflect local problems”; “Council should not control the debate or edit views expressed”.”

Scenario 2: 8 responses: “To benefit from administrative support.”

Scenario 3: 5 responses “More participatory and have administrative support.”

Scenario 4: 7 responses “Lack of public interest/ community councillor interest”/ “Community councils do not have time to support”; “community council websites allow small groups to dominate discussion”.

Four respondents chose more than one scenario, giving their reasons as:-

“All four scenarios, to spread the effort:

Scenario 2 with participation of community planning groups (option 3) and support of the Council (option 4);

“Aim for Scenario 2, evolving from Scenario 1”;

“Scenario 3 with support from the Council (Scenario 4)”;

From these responses we can say that the participating community councillors are by a large majority in favour of wider rollout of e-community council tools. Despite the lack of a clear majority for one of the scenarios presented there was a clear consensus that:-

- Community councillors feel they can play a unique role in local e-democracy compared with other groups mentioned, firstly because they are subject to an electoral process, unlike citizen assemblies and other

community planning groups, and secondly because the public see them as 'closer to the community' than the local authority. A minority thought e-community councils to be unsustainable by individual community councils.

- Individual community councils would often find the upkeep of their site daunting, without administrative support and it was the possibility of this support that made other options worth considering.
- The development of e-community council capabilities should be supported alongside traditional methods rather than as a substitute for them.

Taking that consensus into account, and considering the more detailed comments of our interviewees, we elaborate below on the scenarios and their relative strengths and weaknesses. Underlying each is the assumption that the e-Community Council software would continue to be run on an internet server, with the necessary services to support: -

1. *Online moderation/ facilitation*; to screen contributions to check they are publishable (i.e. comply with Conditions of Use), respond as appropriate, and to 'escalate' any contentious contributions to the appropriate person for their decision.
2. *Skills development and user support*; to help community councillors resolve problems understanding how to use the tools, develop their individual skills and the capabilities of their community council; and to log and report any software errors or requests for changes to functionality.
3. *Technical maintenance*; to consider requests for change, implement these and fix software errors, and perform routine monitoring of the server software and database backup.

These distinct roles were performed in the project by individual community councils (1) and by Napier University's International Teledemocracy Centre (2 and 3). The key question then is who would perform similar roles on a wider scale, given that 2 and 3 need not be carried out by the same organisation, or necessarily by ITC.

Note that each scenario also assumes that individual community councillors would continue to contribute news and opinion, and update general information about their community council. In other words it is the organisation responsible for the above 'back office' roles that would differ.

The above 4 scenarios provide illustrative examples of how the eCommunity Council project could move forward. They should not be considered as mutually exclusive. There are advantages and disadvantages with each of them in terms of the level of Community Council's control and influence, which in turn reflects levels of costs, maintenance and overall resources. They can be summarised and compared as follows:

1. *“Individual e-Community Councils*

- The Community Council takes the initiative and is responsible for their own site
- the interactive part of the website is organised around topics chosen by the Community Council
- online moderation and facilitation is managed by the Community Council
- technical maintenance could be undertaken by one or more provider, possibly including local authorities

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
Community councils keep control Easy for public to identify site with their community council	Effort needed to maintain Lacks coordination of community council voice or local authority response Technical development may be uncoordinated Availability of alternative platforms reduces potential for identifying common issues and carrying out regional/national discussions or polls in response to them.

2. *Community Councils share responsibility* for the interactive aspects of a shared website.

- Community Councils group together to share the control and responsibility for this shared site
- the interactive part of the website is organised around shared topics and shared dialogue
- online moderation and facilitation is managed by one or more community councillors/ volunteer appointed by a local association of community councils
- technical maintenance could be undertaken by one or more provider, possibly including local authorities

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
Community councils keep control May help associations to coordinate and build public recognition	Difficult to coordinate and support voluntary efforts without core funding Local associations not always active.

Easy for public to identify site with their community council	Maybe difficult to achieve consensus on technical development needs
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3. *Local community planning groups or assemblies* take the initiative and responsibility – since they are ‘participatory’ organisations and have some administrative support.
- Community Councils Planning Partnerships are formed, comprising one or more Community Council, local authority, community planning partners and other relevant local groups, to share the control and responsibility for this shared site
 - the interactive part of the website is organised around shared community planning topics and dialogue
 - online moderation and facilitation is managed by one or more volunteer, appointed by the area community planning group; local authority could advise on area content and site moderation
 - technical maintenance could be undertaken by one or more provider, possibly including local authorities

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<p>Community councils appropriate bodies to ‘front’ public engagement and build bottom-up participation.</p> <p>Other community groups may contribute, helping ensure up-to-date local content.</p> <p>Builds public recognition of Area CP groups by offering site contact directory as local portal for public involvement in community groups.</p> <p>Local authority well placed to advise on area community planning content.</p>	<p>Community councils lose some control, risking lack of take-up by them</p> <p>Needs partnership to agree how support mechanisms would work</p> <p>Area boundaries may be less recognisable by public- risking lower take-up</p> <p>Maybe difficult to achieve consensus on technical development needs</p>

4. The *Local Council* takes the initiative and responsibility, adding Community Council interactive facilities to the information they already provide.
- The Local Authority provides the site and takes the control and responsibility for the site. The site could host one or more community councils

- the interactive part of the website is organised around topics and dialogue agreed between the local authority and the community councils
- the local authority provides a managed service for handling online moderation and facilitation
- technical maintenance is handled by Local authority and/or contracted provider

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<p>Builds on local authorities' existing provision of community information, websites, and e-democracy experience.</p> <p>Maybe easier to convey how community councils relate to local authority service provision, if part of their website.</p>	<p>Loss of control likely to affect community councils' commitment and contributions</p> <p>Public prefer community councils as route for online discussion of local issues- maybe seen as top-down risking low public take-up.</p> <p>Maybe difficult to convey independent voice of community councils in relation to local authorities, if part of their website.</p>

Reconsidering the Options

There is strong public interest in community councils using websites for dialogue with local residents on issues they (community councils) can influence. The public would prefer to have online dialogue on local issues on a site operated by community councils, rather than by the local authority or other community groups, and community councillors feel the same. Community councils are subject to local elections and have a unique place in local democracy amongst other voluntary bodies.

The public expect such websites to be responsive, i.e. to get a reply from a community councillor within no more than a week. However community council working practices are oriented to a monthly (or six weekly) public meeting cycle. They are generally not resourced or organised to respond continuously to public input.

With adequate support for responding to public input, however, community councils could be seen as the main point of public contact for websites that would include information on other community planning groups, and which those groups could also contribute to. Effective use of website signposting and email notification would allow queries to be routed to the appropriate groups with minimal support from local authority staff.

Advantages of pooling resources

There are advantages in pooling resources not only between community councils, but between them and other groups in their area. In chapter 2 we gave examples of individual community councils using their partners' sites to highlight issues of possible mutual relevance. Our participating community councillors saw this kind of collaboration, extended nationally, as a longer term goal of the project. Many are conscious that community councils can be seen as parochial, and see web-based communication as a means to overcome that parochialism.

There was a common view among many of our participants that, left unsupported, it would take them far longer than the lifespan of this project to fully get to grips with e-democracy technologies. They attributed this to the slow pace of change that they feel to be realistic, and unfamiliarity with the internet or lack of access to it among many people, the elderly especially (including for reasons of disinterest or antipathy towards the Internet).

The community councils in this project that managed to regularly update their sites and respond to comments were noticeably those that had at least 2 members committed to doing that. It seems likely therefore that community councils with only a single member able to contribute would have a greater change of successfully doing so if able to collaborate with a neighbouring community council on the parts of a site needing regular attention.

Community councils already 'pool resources' with other groups in their area, most especially their members. Community councillors are often (in the authors' experience) 'well connected' locally. Our citizens' panel survey results indicated that the public expect community council websites to be equally well connected with general information on the community.

Community council information is often included in locally-relevant 'community website' providing general information on, for example, local clubs and groups, historical information and business directories. Yet these connections are time-consuming for community councillors to set up and maintain alone, and there is seems to be little incentive for community websites to develop e-democracy facilities on behalf of community councils.

Capacity building for 'bottom up' community planning

Community councillors recognise the drive by local authorities towards communication based on 'clustering' of community councils. This is seen as driven by various inter-related changes in the local governance environment:-

- Local authorities increasing need to engage community groups in Community Planning and consultation on service delivery;
- Efficiency measures add to local authority constraints on their officers time to liaise with individual community councils;

Community councillors we interviewed generally thought it desirable for community councils to collaborate on an area basis, and supported community planning in principle. However their perception was that area-based groups of community councils have in the past been seen as 'top-down' and unresponsive to identified local concerns.

Our participating community councillors found that using their e-community council could save time (up to 50%) at meetings and lead to more informed discussion at them. Those who had been involved in community planning felt that similar time savings were achievable for area meetings, which could be shorter or fewer in number if web-based communication tools were used between meetings. Community councillors feel they are called on to attend a growing number and variety of meetings, and better continuity between area community planning groups could be achieved through use of such tools.

Partnerships of community councils, other community groups and local authorities
Some saw risks in linking e-community councils to area-based community planning groups; in that their boundaries may artificially limit community councils' lobbying capabilities.. There should also be a platform for 'organic' clustering based on whatever set of common interests community councils want to articulate, since these will not remain static or geographically limited.

The general implication is that community councillors want to retain editorial responsibility for e-community council sites, with the support of local authorities. That support would be needed to ensure community councils have adequate protection against liabilities from publishing public opinion online. It would also be needed for checking comments, to ensure that they are not of the kind likely to cause such liabilities, i.e. from defamation or infringement of discrimination, obscenity or copyright legislation

Finally, local authorities may themselves benefit by having an alternative to their own websites for publishing information relevant to specific community planning areas. A partnership organised on area lines may be of as much benefit to community planning partners within the local authority, as to those who want to use online mechanisms to lobby more effectively.

It may be that staff time invested in supporting e-democracy facilities could be recouped from time spent organising meetings and attending them out of office hours. In principle the cost savings could be estimated on the basis of 'time saved times salary', plus minor savings on postage and stationery if papers etc were only distributed online.

Business planning of a 'rollout' phase involving local authorities is however outwith the scope of this report. Further discussion is needed of precisely how the required collaboration and support would operate in practice.

An Upgrade Path for e-Community Council Tools

The software upgrades that would be needed to support further rollout depend in a large part on how community councils are organised and supported to maintain it. This section outlines the minimal changes that would be needed to support 'area community planning' (as in the discussion of scenario C above), as well as those needed to offer a more robust system to individual community councils.

Area Pages

Changes to the home page layout and structure would be needed to support e-Community Council sites to operate collectively among community councils and other groups, across wider areas (i.e. wider than a single community council area). An e-Community Council facility operating on that basis would need to provide at least:-

- Information relevant to the area as well as to individual community councils
- Improved information on the boundaries and remit of individual community councils and other groups within the area.
- A means for users to identify the relevant community council for their area , e.g. by postcode, and for community councillors to be notified of comments they need to respond to on behalf of their community council.
- A means to automatically identify shared topics among the community councils in an area cluster and between those clusters.
- A means to restrict login permission to information specific to an individual community council, and/or area-wide information.

Public pages

From our discussions with the Steering Group, and observations and comments from field testers, we can identify 4 main improvements that would be desirable before making the e-Community Council tools available to a wider range of individual community councils.

1. The home page should be reorganised and presented more clearly. To aid recognition of the main functions, current sidebar items should be moved across the top of the page, leaving topics to be listed more clearly down the side. Some main functions should be renamed for clarity.
2. Images should be displayable as 'thumbnails' within items, to convey information succinctly and increase the appeal of the site to the public.
3. Better navigation is need to the 'archive pages' which should also be renamed for clarity.
4. An improved search mechanism is needed. The current version is a free utility that does not re-index site contents frequently enough.

Community Councillor pages

There were 5 main needs for improvement to the *community councillor* pages, identified from discussions and observations of community councillors' use of them:-

1. The menu structure should be reorganised and presented more clearly. It is not currently intuitive enough, i.e. when first encountering it, it is difficult for community councillors to relate the menu options to the tasks they have to perform, and there are too many options in the menu bar to easily recall. This could be improved by presenting 4 main groups of menu options:-
 - *read 'private' posts*: items or comments restricted to community councillors
 - *post new items*: i.e. general items, diary items, consultations or questionnaires
 - *check public dialogue*: i.e. recently added items and comments from the public
 - *edit site information*: i.e. content that needs updated less frequently; the list of topics, the contacts directory, the conditions of use, and information about the community council.
2. The *Items from Public* option currently does not show recently received comments. It should do so and indicate any yet to be 'moderated', i.e. checked against the stated Conditions of Use. It should also allow the user to read the originally submitted version of any item that has since been edited. Then the option should be renamed as above, to clearly indicate the task it is meant to support, i.e.. 'check public dialogue'.
3. It should be possible to set up a *questionnaire within a consultation item*, to avoid duplication of effort and to clarify the time period for responding to questionnaires. Consultations should also consistently identify which public body is responsible for the final decision, i.e. there should be a separate field for this.
4. Usability of certain functions should be improved: it should be easier to set up new topics, add more than 2 contacts, and add recurring events to the diary.
5. The '*edit site information*' options should include the ability to:-
 - edit the list of authorised community councillors and their login details
 - upload and preview a graphic image file to be used as the home page banner heading.
 - define which site directories should and should not be indexed for searching.
 - View a page of site access statistics.

These latter functions (i.e. 5 above) were not provided for in the community councillor's toolkit because they were seen as technical administration tasks that, for a research prototype, were more appropriately managed by ITC researchers during the pilot phase but would be included in a toolkit for any subsequent 'rollout' phase.

General Conclusions

The project demonstrates that web based tools enable and encourage more people to have their say in local democracy than has previously been the case through community councils' public meetings and communications. It is therefore recommended that local and national government supports community councils to develop web tools to inform and interact with the public. There is a significant public appetite for the opportunities to influence local decision-making that such tools support. They are regarded as a convenient opportunity to have views considered, provided those views are responded to.

The project demonstrates that individual community councils face challenges organising to make best use of online tools. A growing number provide information online, but few have the resources to manage online interaction with the public ('e-participation'). It is recommended that online tools be managed by people experienced in the use of the internet. Recognising that some community councils will have no experienced members there will be requirements for support to community councils for example through training and cooption of support staff. The funding implications should be considered by Local authorities under their duties to establish Community Planning and for Best Value in communication and engagement with residents.

It is recommended that Local Authorities take a proactive stance in disseminating e-democracy tools. This should include administrative support for community councils to respond to public input, and financing to enable hosting of the software and to implement our recommended changes to it. Support for 'e-participation' should be considered alongside support for more traditional forms of communication. It should also ensure local authorities have adequate protection in place for the statutory and legal liabilities arising from community councils publishing public opinion online.

The project demonstrates that electronic documentation is readily assimilated and disseminated by community councils where members each have access to the web and are able to use it effectively. Dissemination of electronic material takes a matter of minutes whereas dissemination of written material received by post is virtually impossible due to the lack of community council budgets for photocopying or dissemination to the public. It is recommended that Local Authorities and other public bodies should follow the Scottish Executive's lead in making consultation documents available electronically, and offering an email notification service.

The project explored various approaches to building the confidence and capability of community councillors to use the internet as a communication medium. This project demonstrates that community councils which receive structured support perform more effectively than those which do not. It is therefore recommended that the Scottish Executive consider nationally coordinated support for community councillors' training in basic internet skills and in e-participation, i.e. in the effective use of online tools to communicate with their communities and ascertain their opinion.