THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Summary Briefing: Community Planning Officials Survey

Citation for published version:
Escobar, O, Weakley, S, Kandlik Eltanani, M & Gibb, K 2018, Summary Briefing: Community Planning Officials Survey. What Works Scotland, Edinburgh.

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

OPEN ACCESS

Community Planning Officials Survey

Understanding the everyday work of local participatory governance in Scotland

Oliver Escobar, Ken Gibb, Mor Kandlik Eltanani and Sarah Weakley

Community planning officials constitute one of the most significant groups of local public servants in Scotland today. They work across a broad range of key policy areas and are at the forefront of advancing the agenda laid out by the *Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services* and legislation such as the *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act*.

This is the Executive Summary of the What Works Scotland report which presents the findings of the first survey of community planning officials (managers and officers) conducted in Scotland.

Key points from the report

- Improving community planning partnerships (CPPs) has tended to mean rearranging structures and procedures. Getting that 'hardware' right is crucial, but community planning (CP) policy, governance and public service innovation hinge on 'the software': relationships, mind-sets and ways of working.
- A challenging aspect of the role of community planning officers (CPOs) is their leadership at the frontline of culture change in local governance. CPOs are not only stewards of partnership work and community engagement but also culture change agents operating at the cutting edge of public service reform.
- This kind of 'culture change work' can put CPOs under intense pressure and at risk of burning out. The survey, however, does not support the notion of widespread burnout in this cohort of CPOs. Nevertheless, they are under considerable pressure working through the challenges of key policy areas in Scotland (e.g. empowerment, prevention, inequalities). Monitoring their wellbeing should be a part of future research.
- CP entails multi-faceted roles where people learn by doing, through reflective practice and ongoing development as part of a community of practice. This highlights the importance of being part of a team with diverse experience and expertise, which is a challenge in typically small CP teams. It also emphasises the key role of peer-learning opportunities between CPPs and the broader network of CPOs.
- Since their creation, the aspiration and expectation for CPPs is that they can provide an effective platform for joint working and decision-making, co-production and governance. The survey evidence concludes that this has been fundamentally challenging for CPPS, with partnership work across sectoral, organisational and departmental boundaries being

inconsistent across the country despite the ongoing focus on culture change in the reconfiguration of local governance and public services.

- Community engagement has been a recurrent challenge but the survey indicates that it remains underdeveloped. It also supports previous critiques of the disjuncture between local CP and strategic decision-making in CPPs. However, although community engagement may not yet be central to CPPs' work, the survey found a burgeoning field of activity, with most respondents involved in organising participatory processes.
- Most respondents (72%) indicated that the Community Empowerment Act has the potential to improve CP and, although not all were clear about the implications for their work, only 23% felt unprepared to implement it.

Improving the evidence base on the work of community planning

The response rate was good (62%) but we note the limitations of this survey, particularly regarding robust statistical analysis on such a small sample (n = 107). The survey was conducted in 2016, so it doesn't capture recent developments in the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act. However, it does provide the baseline for a second wave in 2018, which will allow us to significantly deepen the analysis. We remain confident, however, that the report offers a plausible narrative about the state of CP work and CPPs, and we have, whenever possible, cross-checked with other studies such as by Audit Scotland to place our findings in the context of the existing evidence base. Despite extensive consultation over the research design, we also recognise that this is a first pass at this type of survey on a group of new policy workers who are not that well-defined, understood or recognised.

Understanding and supporting the community planning workforce

The survey reflects a highly educated workforce with a wide range of professional backgrounds. CPOs represent a relatively new type of policy worker in Scottish local governance with multiple pathways into the job. In this sense, they remain an evolving community of practice without a clearly anchored institutional house and professional identity. Throughout the analysis we distinguish between the strategic and local role of CPOs but in reality the CPO role entails multiple aspects, ranked here according to the importance that respondents attributed to a list we provided:

1. Working across various organisational boundaries
2. Involving communities in policy and decision-making
3. Planning and managing the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA[1])
4. Encouraging culture change
5. Managing dialogue and deliberation between different groups
6. Working across departmental boundaries in my organisation
7. Performance management and governance
8. Using evidence to support policies and projects

---

[1] The second wave of the survey will introduce the Local Outcome Improvement Plans instead of the now obsolete SOAs.

CPOs indicated that more time and energy should go into involving communities in policy and decision-making, encouraging culture change, managing dialogue and deliberation between groups, and using evidence to support policies and projects. CPOs work to balance competing interests and forge relationships between the multiplicity of actors in local governance. We found a strong presence of 'internal activists' in this group of CPOs –i.e. people who are trying to effect change in local governance by developing more collaborative, participative and/or deliberative ways of working.
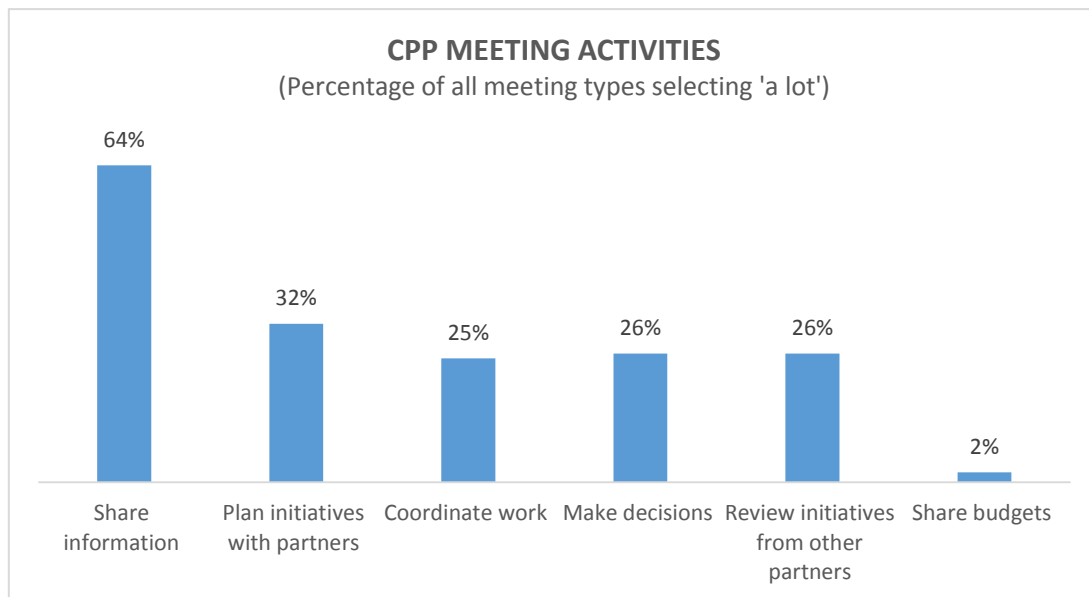
Developing and/or mobilising evidence plays a prominent role in CP work. CPOs report relying often on evidence obtained through partnership with others, public consultation, government departments and agencies, and to a lesser extent from internal research in their organisation, professional bodies and academic institutions. Respondents indicated a strong focus on using evidence to assess outcomes, particularly regarding inequalities, and to a lesser extent on using evidence to assess value for money and achieve SOA outcomes. However, only 33% of respondents indicated that their CPP makes full use of partners' data sources and expertise in data analysis, indicating underutilised capacity within CPPs.

Half of respondents reported that their CP team had evaluation expertise. As CP activity gains further prominence with the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act, the involvement of CPOs in evaluation activity may increase, alongside the need for building capacity or drawing on expertise from other departments. Lack of capacity and/or resource to undertake or commission research are reported as the main challenges regarding the use of evidence. Other challenges include lack of buy-in by elected members and officers, which echoes research on the importance of leadership in improving evidence use. When it comes to using statistical data, the two main challenges are lack of capacity and/or resource to undertake analysis and dearth of data at adequate spatial scales.

Improving how community planning partnerships work

CPP meetings at all levels are reported by survey respondents as spaces where partners share information and, to some extent, coordinate and plan together. Sometimes, CPPs are also seen as spaces for collaborative decision-making, particularly in local forums and area partnerships, and to review each other's initiatives. It is clear, however, that they are not reported as spaces where partnership working entails a great deal of sharing budgets.

Types of activities that occur 'a lot' in CPP meetings

CPP MEETING ACTIVITIES
(Percentage of all meeting types selecting 'a lot')

Activity	Percentage
Share information	64%
Plan initiatives with partners	32%
Coordinate work	25%
Make decisions	26%
Review initiatives from other partners	26%
Share budgets	2%

CPP boards feature strong public and third sector presence and weaker community representation, with only half of the respondents reporting the presence of the latter at their CP board. Finding meaningful ways of representing communities at strategic CP level can be challenging, often due to lack of recognisable and/or legitimate intermediaries. Community councillors can play this role, but the presence and legitimacy of community councils across the country is patchy and contested.

The survey found a high level of elected member representation in CPP boards, sometimes including opposition politicians, which presumably reflects the reality of coalition/minority administrations. These findings somewhat temper potential critiques of a democratic deficit and disconnection between collaborative governance in CPPs and the representative institutions of local government. However, more research is needed in this area.

The findings above refer to *external inclusion* (i.e. getting a place at the board) but we also explored the level of *internal inclusion* (i.e. having meaningful opportunities to influence deliberation at the board). Just under half of respondents agree that there is equal opportunity for different partners to influence board decisions in their CPP. Nevertheless, the notion of 'equal opportunity to influence' must be placed in the context of the range of actors represented at the board where disparities may stem from different statutory responsibilities and expertise depending on the agenda being discussed.

If CP boards are to be meaningful spaces for joint working, decision-making and governance the board should routinely involve robust challenge and scrutiny between partners. Our survey suggests that the level of scrutiny is limited, with only 38% of respondents agreeing that it is a place where policies and decisions are properly scrutinised, and only 12% indicating that there are disagreements at their board.

A lack of explicit challenge in CP boards doesn't necessarily mean that productive relationships are prevalent in CPPs. Only 27% of respondents disagreed with the notion that unproductive relationships between CP partners may currently prevent stronger impact by CPPs. Working through

these differences requires spaces for meaningful dialogue within CPPs. Otherwise this can contribute lack of buy-in regarding shared goals, as reflected in the finding that only 17% agreed that all partners took the SOA as the key framework to guide their work. The second wave of this survey will check whether the new Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs) will fare better in this regard. The survey also shows that many CPOs perceive a lack of clear vision at senior level, with only 30% of respondents agreeing that leadership arrangements across the CPP enhance CP processes.

While sceptical about whether all CP partners see the value of partnership work, respondents were clear that there is value to it. Indeed, CPOs mentioned a wide range of examples of the added value of CPPs in achieving positive outcomes across various policy areas.

Improving community engagement in community planning partnerships

A crucial aspect of community engagement in CPPs is the level of connection between local forums (e.g. neighbourhood/area partnerships, community meetings) and strategic forums (e.g. theme groups, board). Only 45% of respondents agreed that priorities from local partnerships and public forums feed clearly into the work of the board.

Community engagement is a burgeoning field of activity, with most CPOs involved in organising participatory processes. The most common types were task groups (79%) and targeted workshops (78%), followed by public meetings (65%), participatory budgeting (55%), and other community forums (44%). Participation by established community representatives or intermediaries is more common in CPPs than direct citizen participation, and traditional engagement processes are more prevalent than democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting or mini-publics[2]. However, this field of practice is being reshaped through recent policies (e.g. Community Choices Fund) and the second wave of the survey will help to gauge the extent of change.

Only 42% of CPOs reported that they work with elected members to organise community engagement, which reflects some disconnect between participatory processes and representative institutions. This can contribute to increase public cynicism and decrease trust between citizens and representatives, and communities and institutions. Almost half of respondents agreed that community engagement has influence on policies and services, which suggests that local and experiential knowledge may not always be given meaningful consideration as part of the evidence base for deliberation and decision-making.

The National Standards for Community Engagement were known by virtually all CPOs, and widely used by a majority to guide processes or to inform local policies and frameworks. When asked about key challenges in community engagement, respondents discussed public fatigue regarding inconsequential consultations, as well as shortcomings in the quality of processes, and aspirations for more meaningful and inclusive forms of participation. Some also doubted the feasibility of involving communities due to lack of resources and capacity in CP teams. Over a third reported that

---

[2] For examples of, and resources on, mini-publics please see http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/mini-publics/

these processes are organised drawing on in-house expertise at the council, with just under a third being delivered by the third sector. Therefore, a majority of community engagement processes are reported to be delivered by CP partners. Given that current policies and legislation place community engagement at the heart of CPP business, it is important that this is supported by properly resourced teams of participation practitioners and community organisers within the CPP.

Most respondents (72%) indicated that the Community Empowerment Act has the potential to improve CP although not all were clear about the implications for their work –which may be explained by the timing of this survey, in the early stages of the implementation of the Act. One of the most important areas of concern is the risk of further empowering the already powerful. As a CPO put it, there is a concern about having adequate resources to be able "*to support communities in deprived areas to take full advantage of the rights given to them in the Act*."

Improving local governance, advancing public service reform

Most respondents were acquainted with the National Performance Framework, which was seen as useful. A minority of CPOs were involved in health and social care integration. Views were mixed on whether integration is well coordinated with CPP work. The majority agreed that funding cuts are having negative effects on the relationship between local public services and communities. More CPOs agreed with the statement that 'funding cuts are stopping partners from sharing budgets' (45%) than disagreed (18%). This finding, however, must be balanced against earlier analysis by Audit Scotland which shows little evidence of joint-working and budget-sharing in CPPs *prior* to the financial crisis.

CPPs are not yet seen as established institutions for local governance on key policy areas. Half of the survey respondents agreed that decisions are usually being made elsewhere and not in CPP meetings: only 25% disagreed. CPPs are often seen by CP partners as 'secondary arenas' for policy and decision-making, with core business being carried out elsewhere (e.g. through bilateral engagement). CPPs thus function more as spaces for sharing information and planning and coordinating initiatives, than as key sites for co-production and shared decision-making.

Deliberation is a form of communication that can support robust decision-making and governance. Deliberative quality matters because assessing CPPs according to *deliberative standards* can help to ensure that priorities and services are being developed on the basis of: critical engagement with the best available evidence; inclusion of diverse perspectives that can shed light on the issue at hand; respectful dialogue that enables working through differences and disagreements including productive exchanges of reasons, emotions and values; and conclusions, recommendations; and decisions that reflect informed and considered judgement.

If CPPs did not exist, some other form of partnership arrangement would still be required in order to cope with the contemporary challenges of governance, policy-making and service delivery. Shifts towards collaborative and participative forms of governance are an international phenomenon related to the transformation of public administrations in democratic systems around the world. CPOs are not only at the frontline of public service reform in Scotland, but are part of this new generation of policy workers facing the challenge of helping to reinvent local governance.

Summary of recommendations

Developing resources and evidence to support the work of CPPs

Recommendation 1. It would be valuable to develop and maintain a national census of all CPOs (managers and officers, both local and strategic levels), particularly if their views are to be gathered periodically to support public service reform at the frontline.

Recommendation 2. Future research must assess the impact of the Community Empowerment Act on transforming CPPs into spaces for participatory governance – i.e. governance through partnership across sectors and organisations, underpinned by meaningful and consequential participation by citizens and communities of place, practice and interest.

Staff development and support

Recommendation 3. There should be further support for capacity-building and skills development in CP teams, in particular analytical training, to make effective use of evidence from a range of sources. Other skills in high demand amongst CPOs relate to leaderhip and facilitation. There is therefore scope for a national programme to support professional development and peer learning.

Recommendation 4. The Community Planning Network may consider the scope for developing a stronger sense of shared professional identity across the country, with more training opportunities as well as networking spaces for CPOs to gather and share experiences, challenges and strategies.

Improving deliberative quality in CPPs

Recommendation 5. CPPs should consider developing a framework to improve the sharing and using of evidence between CP partners in order to make the most of existing capacity across organisations and sectors.

Recommendation 6. CPP boards should investigate how board members see their role and capacity to participate, challenge and influence decisions and, if appropriate, revise working arrangements to enable productive scrutiny and shared decision-making.

Recommendation 7. CP partners should clarify the scope for shared decision-making at their CPP in order to increase transparency about what issues and priorities are within, or beyond, their shared remit. The implementation of Local Outcome Improvement Plans and Locality Plans is an opportunity to clarify how, and to what extent, power is being shared and services are being co-produced.

Recommendation 8. CPPs should examine the extent to which they constitute effective 'deliberative systems' where different meetings and forums, from the local to the strategic, are coherently linked and feature high quality deliberation throughout.

Participation and engagement

Recommendation 9. The role of community councils in CPPs, and more broadly in local democracy, should be a central consideration in the forthcoming Local Governance Review.

Recommendation 10. The monitoring of the new LOIPs and Locality Plans should pay particular attention to the level and quality of community engagement in deciding CPP priorities and developing policies and services.

Recommendation 11. Community participation in CPPs should be more coherently and transparently linked to decision-making, regardless of the type of process and level of power-sharing at stake (e.g. consultation, co-production, delegation).

Recommendation 12. Improving the level and quality of public participation in CP requires building capacity to carry out this work, and thus CPPs should review whether engagement teams are adequately resourced and supported to fulfil the expectations of their communities and the Community Empowerment Act.

Impact on communities and inequalities

Recommendation 13. Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Community Empowerment Act should pay close attention to the extent to which it contributes to reduce, increase or reproduce existing inequalities at local level and across Scotland.

Recommendation 14. The added value of CPPs needs to be better understood and communicated within CPPs, across local government and communities, and at national level – for example, by reporting more systematically the collaborative advantages gained through partnership work, as well as specific outcomes for a range of communities of place, practice and interest.

About the authors

Dr Oliver Escobar is a Co-Director for What Works Scotland and a Lecturer in Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh (School of Social and Political Science).

Prof. Ken Gibb is a former Co-Director for What Works Scotland and the Principal Investigator and Director of CaCHE, the UK-wide Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence.

Dr. Mor Kandlik Eltanani is a former research associate at the University of Edinburgh and current Senior Analyst at the Information Services Division, NHS National Services Scotland.

Sarah Weakley is a What Works Scotland research associate at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, and co-leads wave 2 of the Community Planning Officials survey.

What Works Scotland is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration which aims to improve the way local areas use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

The full report - *Community Planning Officials Survey: Understanding the everyday work of local participatory governance in Scotland* - including appendices with the datasets is available on the What Works Scotland website at whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/community-planning-officials-survey-everyday-work-of-local-participatory-governance