Using Weblogs to support Local Democracy

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Abstract. This paper addresses the important aspect of democracy at the local community level and the need for e-democracy tools. Communities require easy to use ways of accessing and sharing information and ideas, responding to consultations and participating in policy formulation. In this paper we focus on Community Councils which are the smallest local tier of the statutory framework of democracy in Scotland. The councillors live in the community they serve, know personally many of the issues and can readily judge the impact of new or changed policies and suggestions from government. Currently they represent their communities as best they can, relying on word-of-mouth and may therefore not be as inclusive as they otherwise might be.
The rapidly expanding public access to the internet and the increasing popularity of weblogs offer an opportunity for both the councillors and the communities to discuss issues together and lobby government for policy changes.

1 Introduction

There is a need to develop e-participation tools to create new opportunities for democratic participation at the community level. The notion of e-participation and responsible citizenship brings attention to bear on access to information, the nature of participation in public debate and opportunities for communities to provide input to political decision-making and policy formulation (OECD, 2004). The overarching objective of our work is to investigate renewing local democracy by enabling elected councillors and the communities they represent to have greater influence over factors affecting their lives. We address this objective by investigating how weblogs can enable the renewal of democracy at the local level.

Much previous work to engage people in government initiated consultations and public debate using technology has been based on discussion boards. For example, Macintosh and Smith (2002) describe an online participation study to consult citizens on environmental policy issues and Luhrs, et al (2003) describe a large scale participation exercise in the City of Hamburg - both using specially developed discussion boards. On the other hand, Coleman and Gøtze (2001) have described a number of technologies for online engagement, ranging from email to chat rooms. It is now well accepted that technical, social and political factors need to be considered when developing technology to support e-democracy and using ICT to enhance democracy is a challenging task (Mambrey, 2004)

This paper is based on a project "The e-Community Council" which started on 1st February 2004 and is funded by the Scottish Executive. The aim is to design technology to support Community Councils to engage with the community and participate in decision making by government and service providers. Community councils are the local tier of the statutory framework of democracy in Scotland. They are small, local groups and there are 1160 Community Councils across Scotland. They typically each have 12 elected members who represent a small population spread across both small and large geographical areas, depending on the urban or rural nature of their location. By law, they are made up of members of their own community, giving them direct access to their constituents at a more detailed daily level than most politicians or local authority councillors could ever hope to achieve. They live in the community they serve, know personally many of the issues and can readily judge the impact of new or changed policies and suggestions from government. Currently they represent their constituents as best they can, relying on word-of-mouth and may therefore not be as inclusive as they otherwise might be. They are often given little time to consider fairly major proposals before their considered input is required. This project aims to address these problems by developing and testing a suite of e-participation tools based on weblogs to support Community Councils.

The participating Community Councils are all based in Scotland. They are described in Table 1.

Table 1: The six community councils

Community Council	Population represented	Geographical area covered (sq Km)	Number of councillors
Bannockburn	7150	73.5	15
Cambusbarron	2123	33.1	15
Strathfillan	329	247	11
Stepps	4222	-	21
Thornhill & Blairdrummond	673	54.5	12
Torbrex	1723	0.5	9

The project has two phases each lasting one year and each with its own aims and deliverables. In this first phase, version 1 of the e-Community Council toolkit has been developed for a target community council that is currently familiar with, and using IT to conduct some aspects of their work. This is the Strathfillan Community Council. By focusing on this IT literate group the impact of some of the known

variables - in particular access to and familiarity with technology - is minimised. At the end of year one, and after piloting and evaluation, the initial toolkit will be generalised and tested again with the five other Community Councils with varying degrees of literacy and covering both urban and rural communities. The results of this second phase will allow an overall roll out mechanism for Community Councils and other community groups in a region to be developed.

Community councils have the statutory role set out in the 1973 act section 51 :
"*to ascertain, co-ordinate 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 it to be expedient and practicable*".
(For a description of Community Councils see
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/comm-01.htm)

More specifically, and as result of legislation tangential to that covering directly the community council, they have some powers in relation to consultation over liquor licensing and planning applications. 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 and 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.

Each Local Authority provides a model constitution for its Community Councils. A typical constitution would have the following set of objectives for the community council:

- 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.
- to express the views of the community to the Local Authority for the area, to public authorities and other organisations;
- to take such action in the interests of the community as appears to it to be desirable and practicable;
- to promote the well-being of the community and to foster a community spirit;
- 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.

Therefore the effectiveness of community councils is dependent on the Community Councillors:

- being aware of, and having the ability to obtain, the opinions of the community on a variety of consultative issues that could effect the community;
- having the ability to gather and respond to the views and ideas of the community to both sustain and develop the community.

2   User Requirements Gathering

The general aim of the e-Community Council toolkit is to support Community Councillors 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 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 – *participation and lobbying*
− Co-ordination of the Community Council workload.

In order to determine the overall user requirements for the toolkit we set ourselves 5 main questions.

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

These questions have been addressed and the user requirements defined by using questionnaires, observations, semi-structured interviews and demonstrating mock-ups and early prototypes of the system. It was important to involve the community councillors right from the start of the project in the design of the toolkit so as to encourage effective use and ownership of the resulting system.

3   Requirements Gathering Tools

The following describes the main requirements gathering tools.

3.1   Questionnaires

Questionnaire 1 was distributed to project partners who represented the 6 participating Community Councils. This sought an overview of the type of area and population size that the Community Council is representing and the typical internet connectivity and IT infrastructure of the area.

There were 16 questions grouped under 2 headings:- About the Community? About the Community Council?. These questions aimed to develop a picture of the

current overall situation in each of the participating Community Councils. This would provide material for understanding the type of community represented by the Community Council and information regarding the baseline technical requirements.

Questionnaire 2 was distributed to all elected members of the 6 participating Community Councils. This contained detailed questions concerning the tasks carried out by the Councillors and sought their perceptions on the relevant importance and also difficulty of these.

There were 27 questions grouped under 6 headings:- personal perspective on their work; communication strategies; responding to policy considerations and consultations; about public meetings; Internet access, and their wish list.

This questionnaire aimed to develop a picture of community council work, providing material for understanding the type of tasks undertaken, their level of difficulty and their relevance for inclusion in the toolkit.

3.2   Observation

The development team attended a regular monthly meeting of Strathfillan Community Council to observe and appreciate the level and type of work undertaken by each member and the need for communication between members and other communication links.

3.3   Semi-structured Interviews

Three members of Strathfillan Community Council - the Chair person, the Secretary and a member responsible for undertaking a number of consultations - were interviewed. The purpose of this was to support and extend information gained from the questionnaires as a means of understanding the nature of community councils and their activities.

The 'guiding' questions which helped shaped the interview were based around 4 headings. The aim was to gather more detailed information on how the Community Council reacted to consultations and other communications.

The guiding questions were:

General: Overview of duties, activities and workload; any sub committee structure and how it works; secretary's workload; other time commitments.

Planning consultations: How the community council receives planning proposals; How the community council is required to publicise them; How they 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, what affect these have 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. and how are these organised; What would make dealing with this work load easier; Do they get feed back from the consulting body.

Communication: Their level of contact with the Local Authority; What letter writing and lobbying activities they engage in; Whether there are regular publicity

activities; Do they need to communicate with each other regularly and how this currently done.

3.4   Prototype demonstrations

Prototype demonstration 1 was an initial demonstration of version 1 of the e-community council toolkit to project partners who represented the 6 participating Community Councils. Drawing on the responses to the questionnaires and observations an initial mock-up of the end-user 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 audience, on what was desirable and feasible from their perspective. The intention was to gather reaction from this group on the general look and feel of the toolkit and also its intended functionality.

Prototype demonstration 2 was a 'walk-through' of version 2 of the e-community council toolkit to members of Strathfillan Community Council. It used information based on the actual work of Strathfillan Community Council, including a survey questionnaire recently conducted by them. It also had some fictional consultations, characters and events. This time the toolkit was demonstrated from both the end-user and Community Councillor perspectives. During the walk-through the members were asked a series of questions to ascertain what was desirable and acceptable and what was required to be amended for them to be able to use the toolkit to support their work.

4   Activities the toolkit should support & why

Most community councillors viewed representation of the community, advocacy for the community, and being a voice for the community as their most important tasks. Many felt that keeping an interest in community affairs and being aware of them was also highly important.

However, there was also consensus that communication in general was seen to be problematic, within the community council and both with the community and the local authority. Communication between all stakeholders was the most commonly given response by community Councillors to the question "What is the most difficult activity?". There is a need to improve communication with the community.

The most prevalent responses to the "wish list" question were those concerned with improving communication and contact between the community council and the community it serves. Linked to this was the desire to improve community involvement and lessen community apathy.

 Figure 1 provides an overview of the communication links and activities for a typical community council.
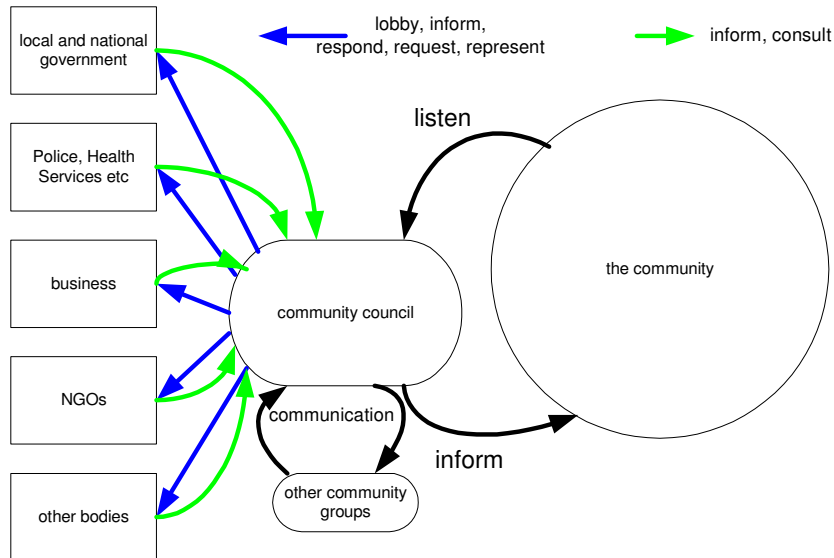
Figure 1: Overview of communication activities

4.5   Support the consultation process

The main activity, in terms of time and effort involved, is responding to consultations originating from local government. These include policy proposals and planning applications, the latter being the most extensive and regular. There is also the need to respond to consultations from the Scottish Executive and other public agencies. Even though it is generally agreed that their major role is as a consultee, there is no standard guidance as to how this is to be carried out in practice. All Community Councils agree that the workload associated with consultations and planning applications is considerable and problematic. Indeed it is seen as creating a barrier to effectively conveying the views of the community back to the local authority. The problem is partly a result of the shear volume of paper work accompanying each consultation and partly a problem of the number of consultations and timescales involved. The consensus is that they are currently struggling to cope and many consultations do not receive the level of attention they require.

   Currently the community councils seek the opinion of the community on consultations in a limited manner, often responding themselves to a consultation, or simply posting their response to a planning proposal, for example, on a community notice board, and then collecting any few comments there may be. There is a consensus that the consultative workload, as it is currently undertaken, does not permit a deeper level of consultation. Only on very sensitive community issues are deeper methods employed.

While the toolkit cannot address the issue of the volumes of paper produced by external bodies and the frequency of consultancy demands, it can support the management of consultations and support the community council to respond to them more effectively.

4.6   Support gathering of community views

Bottom-up ideas, initiatives and complaints raised by the community are communicated to the Community Council by word of mouth, telephone and letters, with e-mail being used to a small extent in some councils. This communication is almost exclusively issue based. Currently the public convey their views to the community council in a sporadic manner. Most councils agree that some means of keeping in touch with the community would be beneficial.

Depending on the issue, results to paper-based surveys are typically low. Similarly with turn out at public meetings, if the issue to be addressed is controversial and community wide, then a broad section of the community is likely to attend. By the same token, narrower issues, if they result in any public interest at all, will attract a much narrower section of the community. The average level of attendance at public meetings is variable and very much depends on what issues the community council is discussing. The general consensus is that public attendance is low and consequently this is not an effective method of gathering community views.

4.7   Support information dissemination and communication links

Providing mechanisms to raise awareness of community council's activities and "success stories" about their achievements was viewed as one way to improve communications with the community. Typically, such achievements are not regularly publicised, and in general it was felt that the community do not pay much attention to publicity material provided by the community council. Current communication methods used by community councils to raise awareness within the community and disseminate information varies, but commonly include a newsletter, a community notice board and use of the local press. The toolkit can add to these delivery mechanisms by providing an online notice board for the community and publicising meetings and newsletters through lists of news and events.

There are a large number of bodies that interact with the community council, but by far the most common is the relevant local authority. Others range from the National Park Authority to Public Transport companies. The toolkit could provide contact details for such organisations.

5   The e-Community Toolkit

The resulting e-Community Council toolkit comprises a number of integrated weblog based tools. Its overall purpose can be defined as to facilitate the work of Community

Councillors supporting their engagement with the community and representing its views. It does this through supporting the councillors to:
−   Respond to consultations
−   Support bottom-up participation
−   Access and disseminate information
−   Communicate with each other
−   Co-ordinate the workload of the Community Council
   The toolkit is being used as a centrally managed web-based service, aimed at: -
−   Community Councillors accessing from their home, library or community centre;
−   Residents in the community accessing from their home, library or community centre;
−   Representatives from government departments and public agencies accessing from their work place.;
−   Local authority councillors and local MSPs accessing from their work place.
   Because of this diverse spread of users the toolkit has to be usable on either a PC or Apple Macintosh platform. The respective minimum specifications are: -
   -   PC: Intel 486 or equivalent, 400 Mhz, 64Mb RAM
   -   Apple: G3, 300Mhz, 64Mb RAM
and a minimum screen resolution of 800 x 600 is assumed.
   All user interfaces to the toolkit are provided via industry-standard web browsers and it is possible for a user to perform all toolkit functions using MS Internet Explorer or Netscape (version 5 or above). Because of the rural communities involved in the project broadband connections to the internet cannot be assumed. Therefore under normal circumstances users should not have to wait more than 20 seconds, and on average no more than 10 seconds, for toolkit web content to load at 56kbps. Animated graphics, video and audio clips may exceptionally take more than 20 seconds but no more than 30 seconds to download at this speed. The toolkit web pages are compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 1.0 available at: http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT.
   Weblogs were chosen because of their ease of use and maintenance. Basically, a weblog can be considered as frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence. The prototypical weblog is focused around links to other sites of interest (or other weblogs) with blogger commentary for added value. Posts are primarily textual, but they may contain photos or other multimedia content. Most weblogs can also provide hypertext links to other Internet sites (see for example: Herring et al. 2004 and Nardi et al. 2004). Research by others on the community building aspect of weblogs has shown that they can create public space (Huffaker 2004) and build a relationship between the weblogger, readers and the domain (Nichani 2004). Blogging has been characterized as socially interactive and community like in nature (Herring et al. 2004) and therefore highly suitable to support the work of the community councils. The Hansard Society report (Ferguson and Howell, 2004) on weblogs discusses their uses and impact on politics, it concludes:
   "From the perspective of politics or, more specifically, political awareness and participation in the UK, blogging is fresh and exciting." (p23).
   The toolkit comprises:

−   Community Council (public) web pages (e.g. the Strathfillan Community
        Council) with associated weblogs and
−   Community Councillor (private) web pages with associated weblogs.
      Figure 2 is a screen dump of the prototype community council public web page.
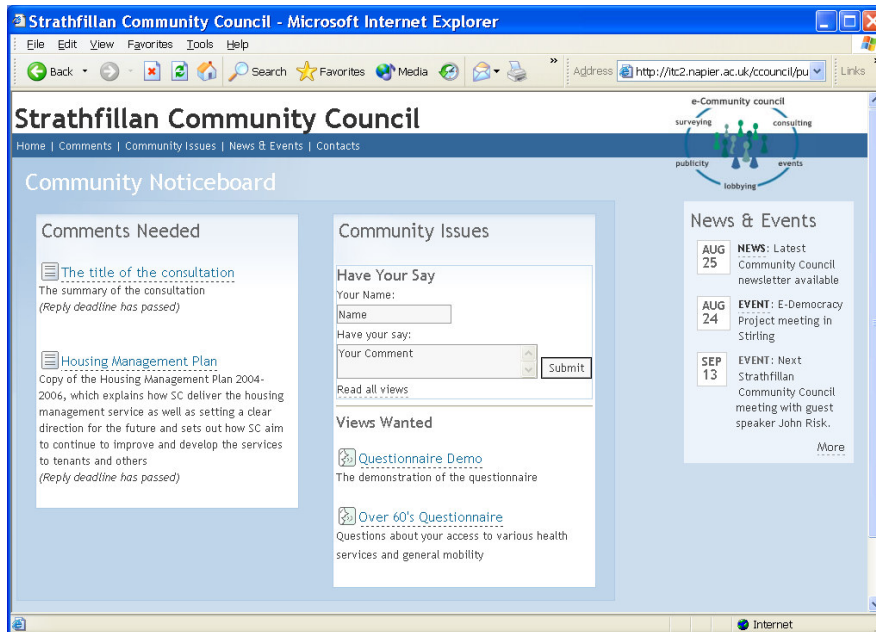

Figure 2: Community Council public home page

With regard to functionality, the toolkit has:
Top-down consultation functionality – "Comments needed"
    This will assist the community councillors in managing and responding to
consultations and planning proposals emanating from government or other consulting
bodies. In this instance, communication is initiated by the consulting body, in a top-
down manner. Currently community councils are inundated with consultative
material, from bespoke, single-issue consultations to planning applications. The tool
provides a means of managing this workload, facilitating internal discussion around
each consultation and enabling direct community involvement in responding to
consultations, something that is currently rare.
Bottom-up views gathering functionality – "Community Issues"
    This will assist the community council in gathering information directly from the
community in a bottom-up manner. In this sense it provides facilities through which
members of the community can raise their own issues for consideration by the
community council. These issues could then seed further initiatives and lobbying
activity on the part of the community council. It also includes a means of creating and
publishing on-line questionnaires and collecting their responses. These questionnaires
would be authored directly by the community councils in keeping with the bottom-up
perspective of this tool.

News and Events lists

This supports the community council promote its activities. It enables Community Councillors to maintain a detailed list of activities and also serve as a vehicle for publicising community news and events. Announcements of meeting, such as Public Meetings, along with their minutes and agendas, can be made available through this list as well as any newsletter the Community Council publishes.

Contact lists

This comprises two distinct sections. One publicly viewable area with summary contact details of the community councillors and also website addresses of relevant organisations useful for that community. The other section is restricted to the Community Council. Here the councillors maintain and share their working contacts. These would include details of individuals within government and relevant NGO as well as website addresses providing useful information for the community council.

The e-community toolkit is not meant to replace completely existing communication and participation channels and in all cases, conventional media and face-to-face events will continue to be used alongside the e-community council toolkit.

6   Conclusions

The next stage of project is to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of the e-community council toolkit within the first community council. The overall success criteria are defined from two perspectives, firstly from the perspective of the Community Councillors, and secondly from the perspective of the project partners.

From the Community Councillors' perspective the benefits sought are: -
−   Ease of co-ordination of consultations
−   Ease of access to and provision of information
−   Informed comments to top-down consultations by residents in the community
−   Better appreciation of the bottom-up opinions and ideas of residents in the community.

From the project partners' perspective the benefits sought are: -
−   Take-up by the Community Councillors
−   Take-up by a cross-section of residents in the community
−   Increased ability for Community Councils to obtain and disseminate the views of the community to local authorities and other public bodies.

The first stage of the evaluation is due to be completed by December 2004.

To conclude, international, national and local governments and agencies make decisions which fundamentally affect the lives of citizens. Organisational complexity and an increasing pace of change are making it increasingly difficult for individuals and community groups to even know about, far less engage in, decision making processes. Communities require easy to use ways of accessing and sharing information and ideas, responding to consultations and participating in policy formulation. The rapidly expanding public access to the internet and the increasing popularity of weblogs offer an opportunity to individuals and community groups to discuss issues together and lobby government for policy changes. The research work we are undertaking has the potential to provide a framework for e-participation at

local community, and in so doing contribute knowledge to a broad range of strategy and planning policies.

7   Acknowledgements

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