

Institution: De Montfort University		
Unit of Assessment: 17		
Title of case study: Giving a Voice to Councillors		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2013–September 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Colin Copus	Professor in Local Politics	2 March 2009–30 June 2018
Steven Griggs	Professor in Public Policy	1 April 2009 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014–March 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>The Local Governance Research Centre (LGRC) directly informed understandings of the work of councillors under austerity, ensuring executive and legislative attention on the critical contribution of councillors to local democracy. First, it has ensured that the changing nature of the tasks, responsibilities and roles with which councillors are faced have been kept on the Government's policy agenda, while shaping and influencing the work of parliamentary select committees. Second, it has led new thinking on councillors across local government associations and individual councils. Third, working directly with councillors, it has developed systems and mechanisms which strengthen local political leadership and accountability.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>The research identified and assessed the challenges of local representative democracy and localism in the UK under austerity. It demonstrated how centralised policy narratives and restructurings of the roles, powers and functions of councillors have impacted negatively on local political leadership and democratic accountability [R1, R3]. As a body of work, it contested prevailing practices of centralisation, discerning how localism and austerity depoliticise local government by strengthening technocratic/market service delivery while neglecting local representation and political power and the capacity of councillors to govern localities [R2, R4]. Indeed, it advocated an alternative blueprint of local government which was demonstratively 'local' and 'government' in its workings [R3, R4], with Copus, Roberts and Wall [R4] articulating a 'persuasive case in favour of greater autonomy for English local government' (P. Eckersley, <i>Local Government Studies</i>, 44(2), 2018).</p> <p>At the heart of this contribution was the generation of a novel evidence-base on the everyday practices of councillors that detailed the roles, powers, tasks, functions, expectations and challenges of the office of councillor [R3, R5, R6]. This evidence-base identified the mismatch between 'on the job' experiences of councillors and broader 'deficit narratives' of successive governments that characterised councillors as an 'obstacle' to local democracy and central policy initiatives [R1, R3]. It identified the potential contradictions among councillors between party-centric ideological views and pragmatic approaches, thereby generating two dimensions of councillor action: first, the corporate or associated councillor which reflected the different relationships of councillors inside or outside the council; and second, the lay or professional councillor, which assessed the nature of the approach councillors take to their office. The research advocated further development of the scrutiny process in local government; and the recasting of centre-local relations through the development of a localised state [R3].</p> <p>Importantly, the research drew attention to the 'democratic deficit' of local political leadership due to the limited engagement of 'backbench' councillors in decision-making, which itself challenged the effectiveness of scrutiny and community leadership reforms. Griggs et al.'s <i>Two Tribes</i> 2014 national survey of 2,600 councillors across the UK [R6] identified the differential experience of backbench councillors across local authorities, with 46% of backbench councillors no longer believing that they could influence service improvement within their councils. It</p>		

concluded that centrally led reforms to local government since the early 2000s had sown different identities and divisions among councillors. It posited that 'two tribes' of councillors exist, with executive or backbench membership overriding party identification as the primary indicator of policy positions and approaches to the reform of public leadership and management.

Finally, *The Voice of the Councillor* [R5], a one-year inquiry (based on 128 submissions and 31 roundtables engaging over 300 councillors) concluded that the powers and responsibilities of councillors are increasingly out of step with the nature of their work. Its findings suggested that councillors require and should be able to demand more useable information and data from councils and external bodies. Traditional organisational structures, our evidence suggested, do not always support councillors in the work they do within the council, their communities and with the external organisations with which they now interact.

3. References to the research

- [R1] Barnett, N.J., Griggs, S. and Howarth, D. (2019) 'Whatever happened to councillors? Problematising the deficiency narrative in English local politics', *Political Studies*, 67(3): 775–794; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718807379>
- [R2] Copus, C., Sweeting, D. and Wingfield, M. (2013) 'Repoliticising and redemocratising local democracy and the public realm: why we need councillors and councils', *Policy & Politics*, 41(3): 389–408; <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557313X670136>

RESEARCH MONOGRAPHS

- [R3] Copus, C. (2016) *In Defence of Councillors*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; ISBN 9780719088322
- [R4] Copus, C., Roberts, M. and Wall, R. (2017) *Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control*, London: Palgrave Macmillan; ISBN 9781137264176

POLICY REPORTS

- [R5] Copus, C. and Wall, R. (2017) *The Voice of the Councillor*, Final Report of the De Montfort and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission, Leicester: Local Governance Research Centre and the Municipal Journal; <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/news-stories/2488-the-voice-of-the-councillor/file>
- [R6] Griggs, S., Wingfield, M., Copus, C. and Martin, S. (2014) *Two Tribes? Exploring the Future Role of Elected Members*, Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), Manchester: APSE; [www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/UK Members \(web\).pdf](http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/UK%20Members%20(web).pdf)

All articles were published in leading international peer-reviewed high-impact journals; the research monographs were published by a university press and international academic publisher and were subject to blind peer-review of both the book proposal and draft book, before publication. The two policy reports are based on original research, generated new data and were undertaken in collaboration with other universities and influential policy-oriented and leading practitioner organisations from local government.

4. Details of the impact

The research raised awareness of the challenges of political leadership and management facing local councillors under austerity. It shaped councillors' understandings of their roles, while communicating their everyday experiences to national government, political parties and local government membership bodies. Its pathway to impact was based on councillor engagement and co-production, privileging three ways of working: engaging individual councillors and councils; shaping the strategy of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE); and putting councillors at the heart of parliamentary debates.

(1) CREATING A SPACE OF LEARNING FOR INDIVIDUAL COUNCILLORS

The Councillor Commission opened a space for councillors to voice their reflections on their roles and functions in councils. Copus was the chair of the Commission. He undertook 31 workshops across England, engaging with 24 local authorities and the Local Government Association. He also collaborated with the National Association of Local Councils to undertake a national survey

of parish and town councillors. Over 300 councillors participated in the workshops and roundtables; the Commission received 128 submissions from individuals and organisations. The recommendation of the Commission [R5] for an inquiry into working relations between parish councils and principal authorities led to the Local Government Association and the National Association of Local Councils producing a guide to effective partnership working [C1]. In Hampshire, the work of Copus resulted in the successful bidding for GBP60,000 of additional funding for local councils and the putting in place of a charter between the tiers of councils in the county, as recommended by the Councillor Commission [R5, C2]. The *Two Tribes?* report [R6] was used as evidence in the 2018 submission to the Boundary Commission of Labour councillors in Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, with Labour councillors arguing against the increasing workloads resulting from any reduction in the number of councillors 'for the reasons highlighted in the authoritative APSE report'. The *Two Tribes?* report [R6] was also used by the all-party Kirklees Democracy Commission as evidence of the disengagement of non-executive councillors from Overview and Scrutiny. Similarly, the report [R6] was deployed as campaign advice by the *It's Our City* resident network in Sheffield for its People's Petition to hold a referendum on the democratic organisation of the council [C3].

(2) SHAPING THE STRATEGY AND PUBLIC POSITIONING OF APSE

APSE is a UK local government membership association, working with over 300 councils. The research [R1, R3, R6] shaped its national strategy and public positioning, with Griggs acting as its academic research adviser from 2015 through to the end of 2020. Due to this partnership, APSE undertook a new programme of research and member engagement on the role of councillors [R6]. Over a period of three years, APSE funded five policy reports from the LGRC. Internally, APSE's chief executive states that the profiling and recommendations of the research led to requests for councillor training from its member authorities. Externally, he argues that the research informed strategic interventions with the Conservative and Labour parties, 'notably our engagements with the Conservative Councillors' Association and the Labour Party's Community Wealth Building Unit. It also shaped APSE's position on Welsh local government reorganisation' [C4]. APSE Scotland have used the research and its findings on Scotland [R6] to promote the role of local councillors in the review of Scottish local governance, engaging with Kevin Stewart, Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, as well as MSPs and local councillors. Its 2017 fringe party meeting at the SNP conference was attended by more than 150 delegates. The research also triggered collaboration between APSE and the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Building on this internal and external positioning, APSE launched its 2030 Local Government Commission in partnership with the LGRC [C4].

(3) PUTTING COUNCILLORS AT THE HEART OF PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Our research [R2, R3] and the organisation and leadership of consultative stakeholder workshops with the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee resulted in the Committee designing a model to empower councillors as governors of their communities, which redesigned working relationships between central and local government. This model was codified by Copus and presented to the Commons in July 2014, as the Local Government (Independence) Bill, a private members' bill proposed by Graham Allen MP, chair of the Committee [C5].

As a result of the engagement of Copus with the Communities and Local Government Committee, its then chair, Clive Betts MP, formed an independent commission into the role of councillors [C6]. Its findings, *The Voice of the Councillor* [R5], were discussed by the Committee at its review of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government [C7]. The Department of Communities and Local Government responded that the findings would 'inform the work of the department' [C8]. Lord Kennedy, shadow local government spokesperson, referred to the report as 'an excellent piece of work that must form a key part of the repositioning of local councillors and strengthening their role.' In October 2017, Lord Kennedy directly posed a written question to Lord Bourne, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Department of Communities and Local Government, asking 'what assessment [Her Majesty's Government] have made of the report *The Voice of the Councillor*, the final report of the De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission, published in July' [C9].

The findings of LGRC research undertaken for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on District Councils (APPGDC) on the role of councillors was the subject of an adjournment debate in the Commons on 15 November 2017. Responding to the debate, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Jake Berry, commented that ‘the report has shown Government a way in which district councils can remain at the heart of our local government family for the long term’. He added that it was a ‘hugely important report’ and that ‘the Government will continue to fully engage ... and respond over the coming weeks and months to the specific issues raised.’ Mark Pawsey, chair of the APPGDC, ensured that the recommendations of the LGRC research were recorded for the public record in Hansard [C10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] Local Government Association and National Association of Local Councils (2018) One Community: A Guide to Effective Partnership Working Between Principal and Local Councils; <https://www.local.gov.uk/one-community-guide-effective-partnership-working-between-principal-and-local-councils>
- [C2] Letter to Professor Copus from Cllr Mike Evans, Hampshire Association of Local Councils, 14 February 2018.
- [C3] Combined Submission to the Boundary Commission, Basingstoke and Deane Councillors, March 2018, p 61; http://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lgbce/Reviews/South%20East/Hampshire/Basingstoke%20and%20Deane/Councillor%20Numbers/BDBC_CombinedSubmissions_20180214_Redacted.pdf; Kirklees Democracy Commission, ‘Governance, Accountability and Decision Making’; <http://www.democracycommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Governance-Accountability-and-Decision-Making.pdf>; It’s Our City, Sheffield, campaign evidence; <https://www.itsoursheffield.co.uk/campaign-advice/>.
- [C4] Testimonial from Chief Executive, APSE.
Joining the dots of local democracy, LocalGov, 31 March 2015; <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Joining-the-dots-of-local-democracy/38436>
- [C5] Graham Allen, Local Government Independence Bill, 2014–15; <https://services.parliament.uk/Bills/2014-15/localgovernmentindependence.html>
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/2014-2015/0072/150072.pdf>
- [C6] Clive Betts MP, former chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee testimony.
Copus evidence to HCLG Select Committee, 21 October 2014; <https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/councillors-frontline-copus-report-session/>
- [C7] Professor Copus, evidence to Communities and Local Government Committee, Oral Evidence, Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government HC 369; <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/housing-communities-and-local-government-committee/overview-and-scrutiny-in-local-government/oral/71497.html>;
Communities and Local Government Committee (2017) Effectiveness of Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees, HC 369, see pp 8, 12–13, 18–20, 24–26 and 30; <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/369/369.pdf>
- [C8] Local Government Stewardship Division, Department of Communities and Local Government, 11 September 2017, letter to Professor Copus.
- [C9] Lord Kennedy of Southwark, 20 October 2017, letter to Professor Copus.

Question for DCLG, UIN HL2643, tabled 27 October 2017; <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-10-27/HL2643>

[C10] Hansard, House of Commons, Vol. 631, 15 November 2017, District Councils; <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2017-11-15/debates/5B849B80-0C8D-4B03-B7A8-84835A25DCB9/DistrictCouncils>