ELECTED MEMBERS SERIES

RESEARCH REPORT

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE:
Results of a survey of Scottish elected members who stood down in 2007

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improvement service

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Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences and attitudes of those serving councillors who decided to stand down in 2007. The research involved a survey of all those who decided to stand down, and a small number of interviews amongst those who indicated a willingness to be involved in further research. The research explored:

- reasons for standing down as a councillor
- key changes that have shaped local government
- what local government will look like in the future
- supports and barriers to being an effective councillor
- experiences of training and development
- advice for councillors elected for the first time in 2007

Key Findings

- The most frequently mentioned most important reason for respondents standing down was retirement or age (22%).
- Multi-member wards and the move to STV were raised as important secondary factors influencing people's decisions to stand down from office.
- Forty per cent of respondents identified the move to unitary councils in 1996 as the most significant change to local government during their time in office.
- Increased partnership working and the introduction of Community Planning were viewed as positive changes in local government by the majority of respondents - 74% and 63% respectively.
- Increased central government control over finances and the increased central direction of local decision making were viewed as negative changes to local government by the majority of respondents - 86% and 78% respectively.
- A high percentage of respondents viewed the reduction in central government funding (73%), the change to STV voting system (73%) and the introduction of multi-member wards (69%) as very significant for the future of local government.
- Financial constraints was by far the most commonly selected factor which prevented respondents from being as effective as they would have liked in their role as a councillor (60%).
- Over three-quarters of respondents indicated that as a councillor it was very important to fulfil the following roles: giving support and advice to individual constituents; representing community views; advancing the interests of your ward; and scrutinising the performance of council services.
- At least one-fifth of respondents had extensive experience of all areas of importance to local government listed in the survey, except data protection/freedom of information and Community Planning.
- If somebody asked for advice on whether to stand for election as a local councillor, over two-thirds of respondents said they would recommend standing (69%).
- Of those who would recommend standing as a local councillor, 65% indicated that the main reason for recommending the role was that "you are able to bring about positive changes in the community".
- We asked councillors what top tips they would give to the newly elected councillors in 2007. The main themes raised were communication is vital; be true to yourself; balance representing your constituents and the wider council area; be realistic and cautious; and don't give up!

1. Background

1.1 The 2004 Local Governance (Scotland) Act determined that elected members would be offered a one-off severance payment if they stood down from office in 2007. The intention of this payment was to recognise long service and to make way for a younger generation of councillors; acknowledging that there were likely to be more councillors standing down in 2007 due to the introduction of the Single Transferable Voting system and multi-member wards. This meant that Scottish local government would lose a wealth of experience in 2007. The application for severance payment offered a unique opportunity to identify those standing down from office and explore their reasons for doing so and their attitudes and opinions about Scottish local government. Therefore the Improvement Service, in partnership with COSLA, decided to conduct research into these issues with three main objectives:

- to learn lessons from councillors standing down
- to identify future challenges for local government
- to explore experiences of being a councillor

1.2 This information could then be used by COSLA and the Improvement Service to inform policy development and the support offered to councillors in the future. It was also hoped that information about the experiences of those leaving local government would be of use to new councillors and council officers.

1.3 This document reports on the main findings of the research, exploring:

- reasons for standing down
- changes that have shaped local government
- local government in the future
- being an effective councillor
- the role of a councillor
- levels of experience
- training and development
- advice to new councillors
- top tips for councillors

1.4 In addition to this research on the councillors standing down, the Improvement Service, in partnership with COSLA and the Scottish Government, is conducting a survey of all those elected in 2007. This research aims to build a comprehensive picture of Scottish councillors, specifically capturing socio-demographic information such as age, education and employment status. In addition, the report will explore wider issues such as why they stood for election, their training and development experiences, and the personal and work commitments that impact on their work as a councillor. The research will be published, and will be available on the Improvement Service website (www.improvementservice.org.uk) in December 2007.

2. Research Methods and Response Rates

2.1 To capture their opinions and experiences a survey was distributed via email to councillors identified as intending to stand down from office in May 2007 (this information was provided by COSLA). The survey was sent to 406 councillors who had registered their intention to stand down. When the survey was distributed, 19 emails were returned as undeliverable, or a response was received informing us that the councillor had decided to stand again. Of those who had been correctly identified as a councillor standing down, 126 responses were received - a response rate of 33%.

2.2 To supplement the survey, 26 interviews were conducted with those survey respondents who had indicated a willingness to be involved in future research. Interview participants were selected to ensure representation throughout Scotland and across the political parties. Topics explored in the interviews were based on emerging results from the survey of councillors.

3. Respondent Profile

3.1 At least one survey response was received from all except two councils, Clackmannanshire and North Ayrshire. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents were men, 22% women. This is consistent with the overall profile of councillors in 2003[1]; however, there is no data available on the gender split of those councillors standing down in 2007.

3.2 The party affiliation of those who decided to stand down in 2007 was broadly in line with the profile of councillors elected in 2003; though there was a slight over representation in the number of Independents (+6%), Labour (+2%) and Others (+1%) and a slight under representation of Conservatives (-2%), Liberal Democrats (-4%) and Scottish Nationalist Party (-3%).

TABLE 1: Profile of councillors standing down compared to the 2003 Scottish Local Government Election result[2]

Party	Standing down in 2007		2003 Election Results		
	Number of Councillors	%	Number of Councillors	%	% Difference
Conservative	32	8%	123	10%	-2%
Independent	101	25%	231	19%	+6%
Labour	177	44%	509	42%	+2%
Liberal Democrats	43	10%	175	14%	-4%
Scottish National Party	47	12%	181	15%	-3%
Other	6	1%	3	0%	+1%
Total	**1222**	**100%**	**406**	**100%**	

[1] Smyth, G. and Vestri, P. (2003) Scotland's Councillors 2003 (Cosla and Scottish Executive)
[2] Based on results recorded in Bochel, H.M and Denver, D.T. (2003) Scottish Council Elections 2003: Results and Statistics (Election Studies, Newport on Tay), p.x and p.xiii

3.3 The party political profile of those who responded to the survey was broadly in line with those who had chosen to stand down, as indicated in table 2 below. However, ex-Labour Party councillors were particularly under-represented amongst survey respondents (-11%). There was also a slight over-representation of Independents (+4%), Liberal Democrats (+3%) and Conservatives (+2%).

TABLE 2: Party affiliations of councillors standing down in 2007 and survey respondents

Party	Standing down in 2007		Survey respondents		
	Number of Councillors	%	Number of Councillors	%	% Difference
Conservative	32	8%	13	10%	+2%
Independent	101	25%	37	29%	+4%
Labour	177	44%	42	33%	-11%
Liberal Democrats	43	11%	17	12%	+3%
Scottish National Party	47	12%	15	1%	0%
Other	6	1%	1	1%	0%
Total	**406**	**100%**	**125**	**100%**	

3.4 **Interviewees**

To complement the survey, 26 interviews were conducted with councillors who had chosen to stand down in 2007. These interviewees were selected to ensure the views of a cross-section of councillors were captured. Sixty-five per cent of interviewees were male and 35% female. The party affiliation of interviewees is shown in table 3 below and shows an even, rather than representative, spread across the main parties and Independents to ensure that issues across all the parties were explored.

TABLE 3: Party affiliation of interviewees

	Number of interviewees	Percentage of interviewees
SNP	5	19%
Lib Dems	5	19%
Labour	6	23%
Conservative	6	23%
Independent	4	15%
Total	**26**	**100%**

3.5 At least one councillor was interviewed from 20 different Scottish councils; including 55% from authorities classed as rural authorities and 45% from authorities classed as urban (actual numbers of local authorities in each category are 44% rural, 56% urban).[3]

[3] The classification between rural and urban authorities is based on the categorisation of councils into urban/rural by the Scottish Executive Environment Group. This is based on the urban - rural classifications used in the Scottish Household Survey which use population density. For further details see Scottish Government (2003) Indicators of Sustainable Development for Scotland available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47032/0014778.pdf

4. Reasons for Standing Down

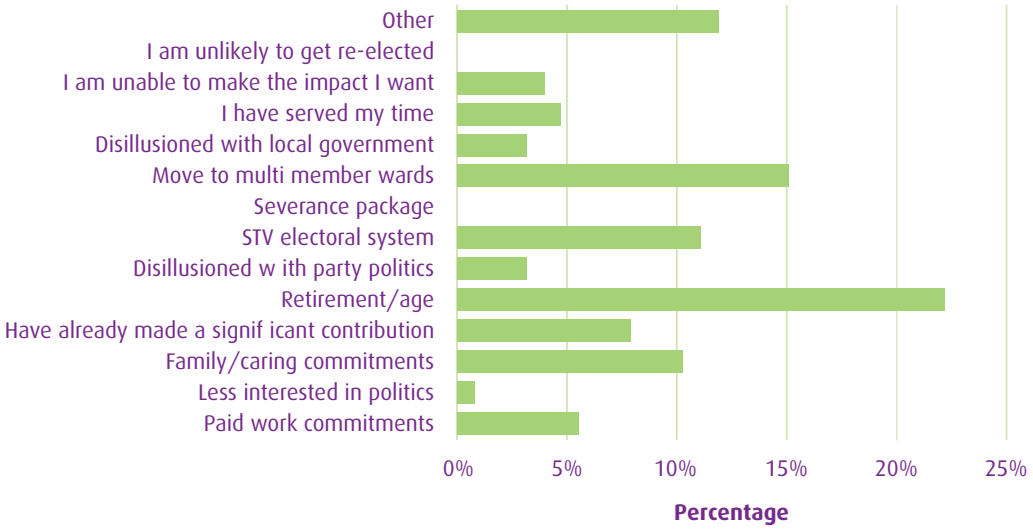
Most important reason for standing down

4.1 Survey respondents were asked to indicate their reasons for standing down, indicating the importance of these different reasons. The most important reasons for standing down (illustrated in the graph below) were:

- retirement or age (22%)
- multi-member wards (15%)
- STV electoral system (11%)
- family/caring commitments (10%)

4.2 "Other" was also frequently selected (12%). These "other" factors included ill-health and exhaustion, not reselected by their party, standing as a candidate for other tiers of government and bullying.

The most important reasons for standing down



4.3 The most important reason for standing down was also analysed by party affiliation. Retirement/age was the most commonly mentioned reason for standing down by:

- Liberal Democrat (47%)
- Conservative (23%)
- SNP (20%)[4]

[4] 20% of SNP councillors also mentioned family/caring commitments as their most important reason for standing down.

4.4 However, for Labour and Independent councillors the most common reason for standing down was multi-member wards:

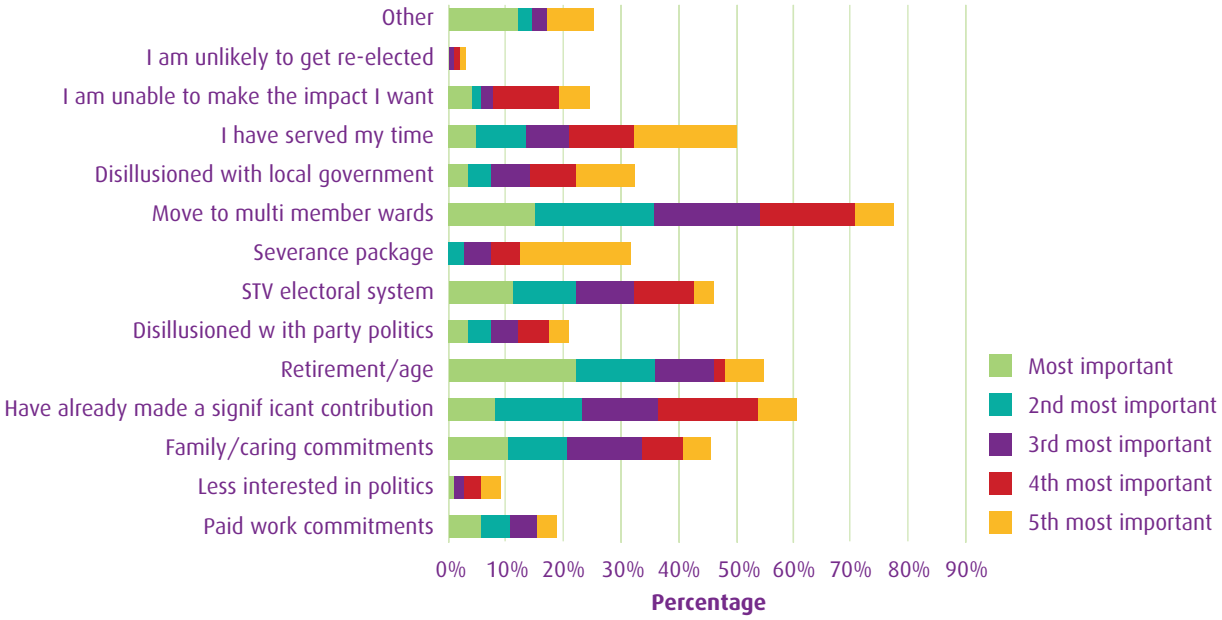
- Labour (17%)
- Independent (22%)

4.5 Respondents were asked to indicate up to five contributory factors influencing their decision to stand down. When all reasons for standing down were examined the three most common responses for all respondents were:

- move to multi-member wards (80%)
- have already made a significant contribution (61%)
- retirement/age (59%)

4.6 The graph below shows the percentage of all respondents who identified different factors as a reason for standing down and shows the importance of the reason for their decision.

All reasons for standing down



4.7 When reasons for standing down were explored in the interviews, a number of ex-councillors expressed that they "wanted their life back" and to spend more time doing other things (e.g. spending time with their grandchildren);

"Your life wasn't yours at all. I wanted my life back."
(Conservative, Dumfries and Galloway)

"People ring you night and day and presume you are ready to jump at half past seven on a Sunday because the drain's blocked."
(Labour, Dundee)

4.8 In addition several interviewees mentioned that they were motivated to stand down to enable others, particularly younger people, to stand.

"I thought eight years was sufficient – I've given it a good go at eight years and I thought it was time for younger people."
(Conservative, Scottish Borders)

4.9 Multi-member wards and the move to STV were raised as important secondary factors influencing people's decisions to stand down from office. Often this was due to a predicted increase in workload and increased political tensions which older councillors in particular did not want to face. For instance, one councillor who predicted the new electoral system would result in a coalition in their council commented that this"... would require much more hand-to-hand combat" (Labour, Glasgow).

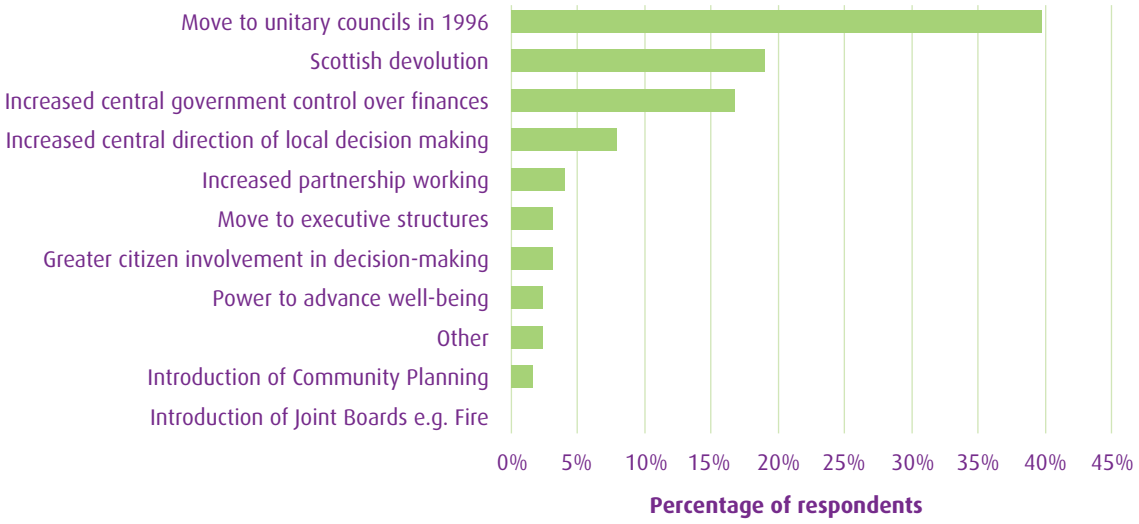
4.10 Disillusionment or difficult relationships with the party, party group, council officials and chief executives were also an important motivation for standing down for many ex-councillors.

"I found I wasn't being listened to either by the group or by the councillors. I found myself a lone voice. You've got to be a good debater, you've got to fight your corner".
(SNP, Angus)

5. Changes that have Shaped Local Government

5.1 Survey respondents were asked about various changes affecting local government during their time in office and the impact of these changes. Survey respondents were given a list of 10 changes that have affected local government and were asked to rank the top three in order of their significance in shaping local government. The changes that were ranked as the most significant are shown in the following graph.

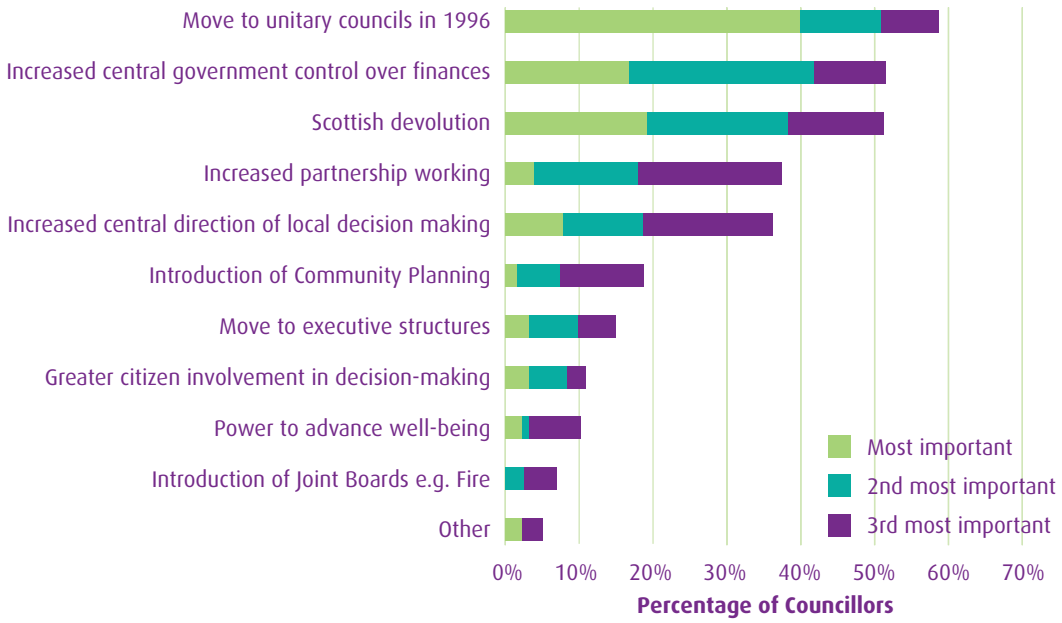
The most significant change affecting local government



5.2 Forty per cent of respondents identified the move to unitary councils in 1996 as the most significant change. This was double the number who selected the next most common response, Scottish devolution (19% of respondents). Increased central government control over finances was the third most common response (17%).

5.3 Respondents were asked to indicate the three most significant changes affecting local government. The discussion above refers only to the "most significant" change, here we also analyse the other two significant changes identified.

The 3 most signficant changes which have shaped local government



5.4 When analysing the three most significant changes, the following three changes still emerge as significant:

- move to unitary councils in 1996 (62%)
- Scottish devolution (53%)
- increased central government control over finances (53%)

5.5 The interviews highlighted the negative views about ring-fencing which had been one of the key characteristics of increased central government control over finances. The interviewees felt that ring-fencing took power away from the councillors as they were forced to spend money in specific areas regardless of where they perceived the needs lay.

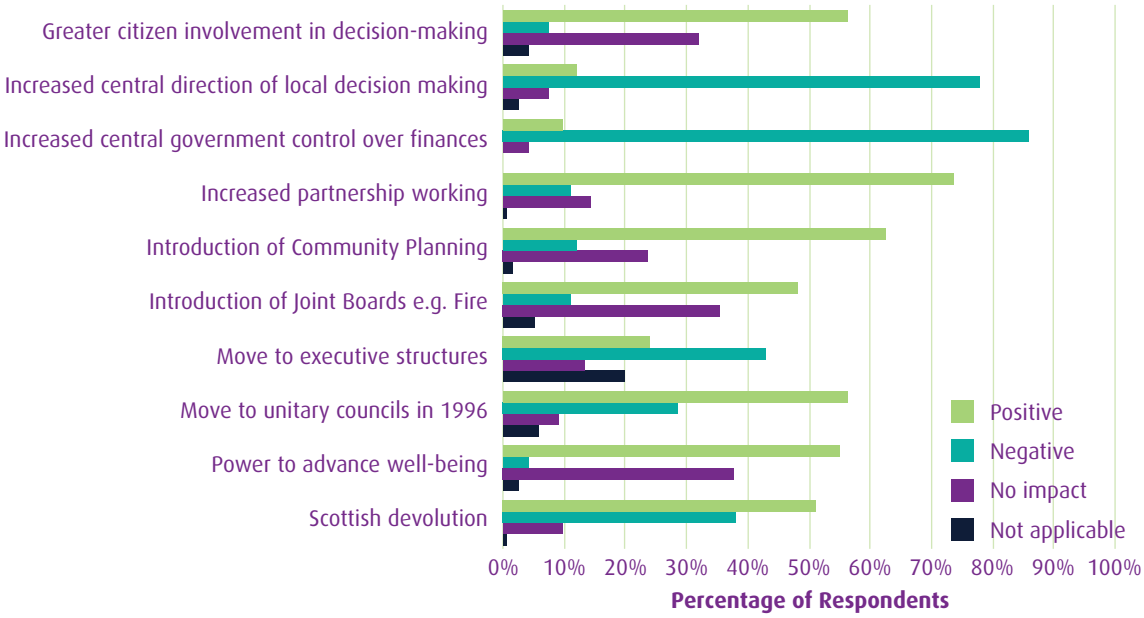
5.6 Perhaps more surprising are the changes that were least commonly selected as one of the top three changes in local government. These were:

- introduction of Community Planning (19%)
- move to executive structures (15%)
- greater citizen involvement in decision-making (11%)
- power to advance well-being (10%)
- introduction of Joint Boards (7%)

5.7 These results were reflected in the interviews, with the factors listed above not being mentioned as significant in shaping local government.

5.8 Respondents were then asked to indicate whether all these changes had, on the whole, been positive, negative or had no impact. Many of the changes which were not considered as among the three most significant were, however, seen as positive changes, as illustrated in the following graph.

Positive & negative changes in local government



5.9 The majority of respondents identified the following as positive changes in local government:

- increased partnership working (74%)
- the introduction of Community Planning (63%)

5.10 The majority of respondents identified the following changes as negative changes to local government:

- increased central government control over finances (86%)
- increased central direction of local decision making (78%)

5.11 The following areas were considered to have had no impact by over 30% of respondents:

- power to advance well-being (38%)
- introduction of Joint Boards (36%)
- greater citizen involvement in decision-making (32%)

5.12 Interestingly, those who felt these issues did have an impact were considerably more likely to say that the impact was positive rather than negative.

5.13 There were two changes where a high percentage of respondents recorded mixed views in terms of whether it was a positive or a negative change: the move to executive structures and Scottish devolution.

5.14 Forty-three per cent of respondents thought the move to executive structures was a negative change compared to 24% who thought it was positive. Thirty-eight per cent thought Scottish devolution was a negative change compared to 51% who thought it was positive.

5.15 This division in opinion on whether changes were positive or negative was reflected in the interviews. Several interviewees mentioned how executive structures allow the council to develop a clearer focus and strengthen accountability and decision-making. However, others felt that executive structures focus power in too few hands and decrease democracy by excluding councillors in the decision-making process.

5.16 Interviews also highlighted concerns about greater citizen involvement in decision-making and citizens' involvement in Community Planning. The concerns were about unelected community representatives representing the views of local residents:

"It's all very well for community representatives to be involved in decision-making, but at the end of the day, who's carrying the can? Where's the accountability? Where do responsibilities lie?"
(Labour, West Dunbartonshire)

6. Local Government in the Future

6.1 In order to explore views about the future of local government, respondents were asked to indicate how significant various factors would be in the future:

- change to STV voting system
- introduction of multi-member wards
- reduction of central government funding
- efficient government initiative
- public sector reform
- increasing customer expectations and demands
- move to executive structures
- shared services

6.2 Three factors were seen by over 65% of respondents as very significant for the future of local government:

- reduction in central government funding (73%)
- change to STV voting system (73%)
- introduction of multi-member wards (69%)

6.3 Other factors that the respondents rated as very significant were increasing customer expectations and demands (47%), shared services (42%), and the move to executive structures (35%). No more than 7% of respondents felt that any of the factors listed were not at all significant for the future of local government.

6.4 The follow-up interviews with the councillors focused on the three most significant factors which had emerged from the survey: the change to the STV voting system; introduction of multi-member wards; and the reduction in central government funding.

Multi-member wards and the STV voting system

6.5 During the interviews many expressed great concerns about the impact of multi-member wards and the STV voting system on the role of the councillor and local government more broadly. The move to STV means that coalitions are more likely to exist in councils. Some expressed concern that this would mean that making controversial or sensitive decisions would become more difficult as there would be a need to secure agreement on a specific approach.

6.6 Multi-member wards were seen by the majority of interviewees as a:

"Charter for the lazy and a death sentence for the hard-working."
(Labour, Dundee)

6.7 Many councillors feared that the workload for councillors in multi-member wards would increase due to the increase in the size of the ward, difficulties in working cooperatively with other ward councillors and duplication of effort. Some felt that constituents would be part of the reason for duplicating effort as they would take their query to all of the ward councillors in turn until they received the response they were looking for:

"I think it's going to be an absolute disaster. You'll have people going to one councillor, then going to the next one, then the next one till they get the answer they want. Whoever gives them the answer they want will be a great guy and whoever doesn't will be absolutely useless."
(Labour, South Ayrshire)

6.8 Several also felt that there would be an impact on constituents as they might not be clear who to go to, who represents them and this would remove the direct relationship they felt they had in single member wards.

"It takes away from the local areas, the representation of a local councillor representing a relatively local area."
(Conservative, Scottish Borders)

6.9 There were a few councillors who expressed some positive aspects of the introduction of multi-member wards. They believed that if there was cooperation between the ward councillors, they could coordinate their efforts to ensure actions on key issues which had previously been ignored.

Changes in local government funding

6.10 The interviews highlighted the opinions of councillors on the consequences of the changes to the financial situation in local government. Everybody agreed that there would be less money available from central government and many believed that local government was not a priority for the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament.

"As with any parliament they will want their glamour projects and their big projects and providing adequate resources for local government is expensive but doesn't show you doing a lot, it is not highly visible."
(Labour, City of Edinburgh)

6.11 There were mixed views as to the extent that efficiency measures could lessen the impact of the reduction in funding on services. Some felt that there were many efficiencies which could be made in their council, including a move towards shared services. Some councillors felt that there would be another reorganisation which would reduce the number of councils and the number of councillors, or even reduce the areas of responsibility for councils, in an attempt to reduce costs. Most expressed a view that there were difficult decisions to be made in relation to prioritising funding in the future.

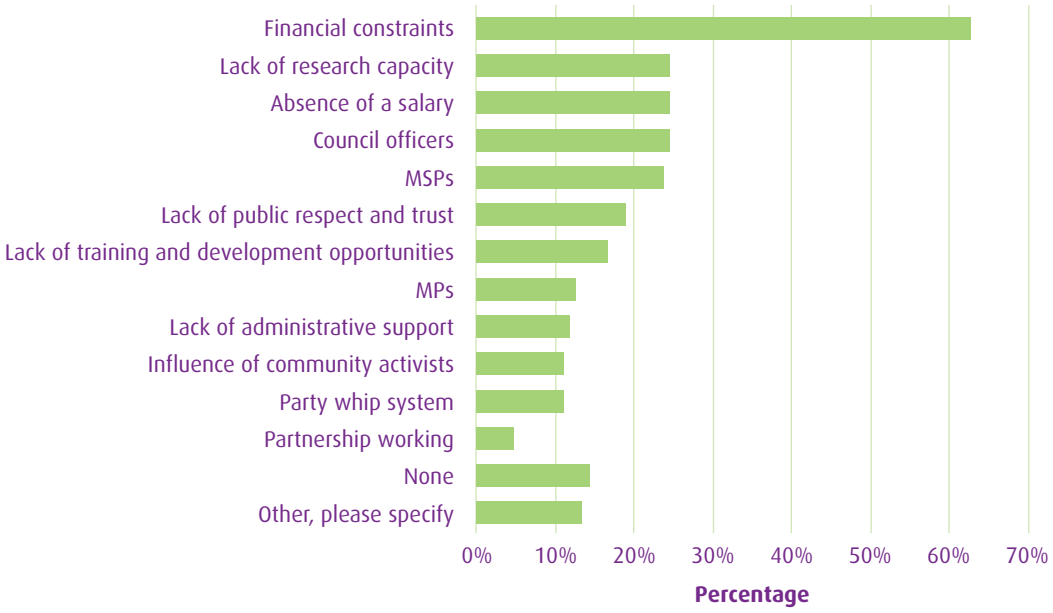
6.12 Many felt that staff cuts were inevitable and expressed concern about how this would be achieved and the impact this would have on morale. As one councillor stated, although it is difficult to make staff cuts the role of the council is to provide good services not to employ people:

"What is the objective of the council;, is it to employ people, or is it to provide services to the public in the most efficient manner?...Before we can carry on as an organisation we have to decide, are we employers or are we service providers? I think our council tax payers want us to be service providers."
(Conservative, Perth & Kinross)

7. Being an Effective Councillor

7.1 Respondents were asked about the factors which prevented them from being as effective as they would have liked. By far the most commonly selected factor, chosen by over 60% of respondents, was financial constraints. The next most commonly selected factors were only mentioned by about a quarter of respondents and were the lack of research capacity (25%), absence of a salary (25%), council officers (25%) and MSPs (24%).

Factors preventing councillors being effective



7.2 The issues around being an effective councillor and the barriers to being effective were explored more extensively in the interviews. The councillors generally felt that they could be effective at the ward level and in dealing with constituents' queries but that the difficulties they faced were at the council level.

7.3 One area that the interviewees highlighted, that did not come through in the survey, was the importance of personal skills and qualities in helping them be effective councillors. The ability to build relationships and to work closely with both their constituents and the council officers was seen as particularly useful. A few felt that their own background e.g. in building industry had been very useful in their role as a councillor. Other skills that were mentioned were the ability to read and take in lots of information, good communication skills, time management, IT skills and one interviewee mentioned the need to maintain a sense of humour. Several expressed the importance of doing enough research and reading before meetings and committees. Linked to this was the ability to ask the right questions of the right people and know who to contact in the council for specific topics.

7.4 Alongside the skills that councillors felt they needed to be effective were the supports they identified. The most commonly mentioned support was administrative support and several who had been councillors prior to the reorganisation in 1996 mentioned how this had improved significantly over the past 11 years. The support of council officers was also mentioned as important in being able to fulfil their role as councillors both in dealing with queries from constituents and in supporting decision making in the committees and at full council. One final support mentioned was that from the local MP and the party they represented.

Barriers to being an effective councillor

7.5 The interviewees were asked about the barriers that prevented them from being effective. Here, too, finance came out strongly as a factor, both in relation to the reducing budgets from central government, ring fencing of this funding and the drive to find efficiency savings. The lack of a salary was also mentioned in relation to putting people off standing and the financial impact that becoming a councillor can have for people. Several mentioned that they felt there had been a lack of quality training offered to councillors. This meant that they had to learn through doing, without adequate professional input into the complex issues they dealt with in the council.

7.6 The barrier that council officers can present also came through during the interviews. This took the form of councillors feeling that they were not given enough, or all the relevant, information. Some felt that officers were unaware of what the councillors needed to know whilst others felt that they used language which was inaccessible to others. Some mentioned that officers took too long to respond to queries or did not respond at all, although one councillor put this down to an increase in red tape rather than any barriers put in place by individual officers. A few councillors felt that officers were resistant to change and were protecting their own department although they still felt that they were able to debate these issues with the officers. Some felt that there was more deliberate resistance and that officers were working to their own agenda, pushing for a particular outcome.

7.7 The negative impact of the media on councillors was also highlighted by some interviewees. They felt that the media was not interested in local news stories, particularly since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999. The impact of this was that the media did not have a good level of understanding about how councils operate and the issues they face and therefore often reported issues inaccurately or only reflecting one point of view. The ability to build up a relationship with local journalists and to engage the media were seen as important skills that a councillor should develop.

7.8 The political system that operates in Scottish local government was also seen as a barrier to being effective by some councillors. In the past the different political affiliations meant that good ideas might be blocked or a suggestion might be seen to have a political motive when in fact it was simply common sense.

7.9 Several interviewees mentioned the impact of bullying/harassment on their life as a councillor, often feeling this was detrimental to them personally but also impinged on their effectiveness as a councillor. Several of those who mentioned bullying or harassment explained that it operated across local government and was generally accepted as part of the local government culture. Those councillors that mentioned bullying or harassment often felt that there was little protection for councillors against this culture:

"As a councillor there are no personnel policies that apply to you, there is no anti-harassment policy, there is nobody you can go to...You are completely on your own and you are completely vulnerable. You are vulnerable to bullies everywhere; bullies within the group, bullies within the party, bullies within the public, bullies within the officers, and there is nobody whose job it is to defend you."
(Labour, Dundee)

Challenges for new councillors

7.10 During the interviews the councillors were asked what they think the future challenges will be for the newly elected councillors. Overall, the challenges that were perceived mostly related to the change to the STV voting system and the introduction of multi-member wards (see section 6.5, p.12) and the new ways of working that would need to be negotiated. The need to work more collaboratively, both at the council in coalitions and in the ward, was seen as a major challenge:

"Working together is the biggest challenge they have got because they don't know how to do it, the system isn't there for them to do it, the internal management structure isn't there to allow them to find a way to do it."
(Scottish Borders, Independent)

7.11 Some expressed concerns due to the scale of the change with a large number of newly elected councillors with no experience of council matters. Some felt that there would be a division between the experienced and new councillors, as the more experienced councillors tried to push their ideas through whilst the new councillors were still finding their feet.

7.12 The interviewees also felt that the new councillors might get frustrated as they wanted to make changes but would learn that it takes time to get things done in local government:

"One frustration in local government is the time it takes to get things done. The new councillors may think four years is a long time but they'll find that those four years vanish in a puff of smoke."
(Labour, Edinburgh)

8. The Role of a Councillor

Most important roles

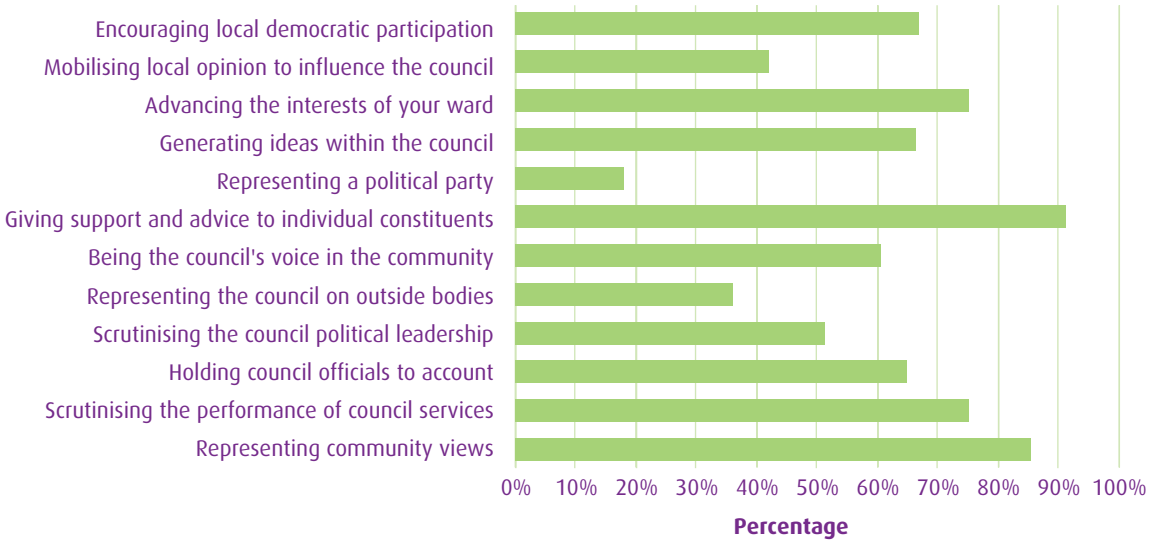
8.1 The survey stated 12 roles which councillors could fulfil and survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of each one on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being very important and 5 being not at all important). The majority of roles were judged to be very important by over 50% of respondents.

8.2 The four roles that were considered to be very important by over 70% of respondents were:

- giving support and advice to individual constituents (91%)
- representing community views (85%)
- advancing the interests of your ward (75%)
- scrutinising the performance of council services (75%)

8.3 The roles that were considered very important by less than 50% of respondents were "representing the council on outside bodies", "representing a political party" and "mobilising local opinion to influence the council". Only one role was considered "not at all important" by over 5% which was "representing a political party" and was considered not at all important by 30% of respondents.

Councillors roles considered very important



8.4 Respondents were also asked to indicate which role they consider as the most important. The top three most important roles reflect those roles considered very important by most respondents, but in a different order with "representing community views" being considered the most important role by the highest number of respondents (33%), followed by "giving support and advice to individual constituents" (17%) and "advancing the interests of your ward" (12%).

Changing roles

8.5 During the interviews the councillors were asked to reflect on how their roles have changed over time. Many felt that there had actually been little change as they saw their primary role as a local representative of the people and they felt this was still the focus of their work.

8.6 In relation to the workload of councillors, views were mixed on whether this had increased or decreased, depending on their length of time in office and previous roles. Those who had served on regional councils explained that their workload then had been substantial, with councillors having to serve a large geographical area, often without sufficient administrative support and without the advantages of the IT systems which are now in place. Others felt that workload had increased with more meetings to attend, more bureaucracy and paper work, which was often viewed as unproductive by councillors. Workload had also increased due to rising expectations and demands from the public and central government;

"The public seem to think that they can demand anything and get it done...It was a case of if they shouted they expected you to jump as high as you could."
(SNP, Comhairle nan Eilean)

9. Levels of Experience

9.1 Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of experience in a number of areas of importance to local government, on a scale of 1-5 (1 being extensive experience and 5 being no experience).

9.2 At least one-fifth of respondents had extensive experience of all areas stated, except data protection/freedom of information and Community Planning. This suggests that councillors have less specialised expertise in these areas. When you combine those who ranked themselves as either 1 or 2 on the experience scale (where 1=extensive experience) the respondents had considerable experience of:

- planning (69%)
- education (69%)
- partnership working (65%)
- licensing (60%)
- finance (57%)

9.3 Areas where a high percentage of respondents had extensive experience tended to be where there are specific committees or statutory duties.

9.4 When combining those who ranked themselves as 3 or 4 on the experience scale, the areas where the councillors had some experience were:

- data protection/freedom of information (54%)
- Community Planning (46%)
- social work (44%)

9.5 There were also some key areas where the councillors had no experience (ranked 5 on the scale):

- Joint Boards (35%)
- data protection/freedom of information (22%)
- scrutiny (17%)

9.6 This highlights that local government is losing considerable experience in key areas of importance such as planning, licensing and education. However, it also shows that even experienced councillors do not feel experienced in key areas of local government such as Community Planning, social work and data protection and freedom of information issues.

TABLE 4: Councillor Experience

	Experience (Levels 1 and 2)	Experience (Levels 3 and 4)	No experience (Level 5)
Finance	57%	37%	5%
Planning	69%	28%	2%
Licensing	60%	25%	14%
Education	69%	28%	3%
Recruitment & selection	53%	35%	12%
Scrutiny	49%	34%	17%
Partnership working	65%	29%	7%
Joint Boards e.g. Fire	40%	25%	35%
Social Work	41%	44%	15%
Community Planning	49%	46%	6%
Data Protection/Freedom of Information	24%	54%	22%

9.7 Respondents were asked about their committee experience during their time in office. Almost all respondents sat on at least one regulatory committee (96%) and at least one policy committee (97%) during the last session. Additionally, high levels of respondents sat on the Scrutiny committee (85%) and on the Cabinet/Executive committee (68%). It is interesting to note that 85% sat on a scrutiny committee but only 49% felt that they had a considerable level of experience of scrutiny (ranking 1 or 2 on scale).

10. Training and Development

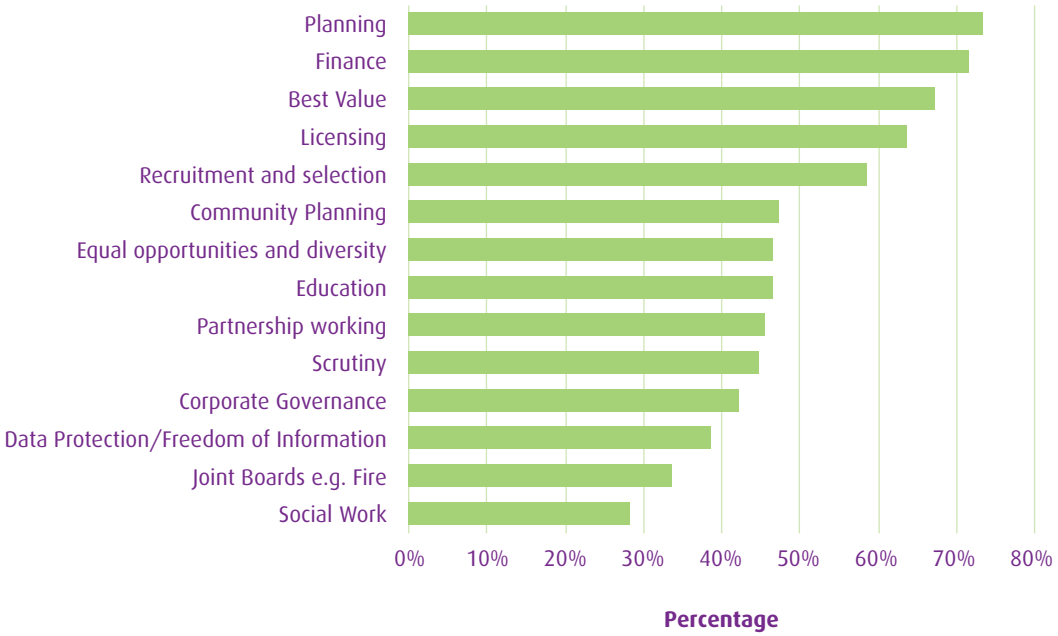
10.1 Respondents were asked if they had attended training and development sessions in 14 different areas (see graph below). Over 25% of respondents had attended training and development sessions on all areas mentioned.

10.2 Respondents were most likely to have attended training sessions on:

- Planning (73%)
- Finance (72%)
- Best Value (67%)

10.3 Of those areas mentioned, social work and Joint Boards were the issues respondents were least likely to have undertaken training or development sessions on.

Attendance of training and development sessions



10.4 During the interviews councillors mentioned a lack of training, and sometimes the poor quality of the training, as a barrier to them being effective in their roles. One councillor stated that he had only had three training sessions in the eight years that he was a councillor and another mentioned that even though some specific training was requested by several councillors, this had not been arranged. This contradicts the overall picture from the survey which suggests that most councillors had received training in many key areas, although the quality of the training was not explored.

11. Advice to New Councillors

11.1 If somebody asked for advice on whether to stand for election as a local councillor, over two-thirds of respondents (69%) said they would recommend standing, compared to 14% who said they would not recommend standing and 17% who said they did not know.

11.2 Those who said they would recommend standing as a local councillor were asked to indicate the main reason why. The majority of respondents chose "you are able to bring about positive changes in the community" (65%). The next most popular response, at 17%, was "it is an important public service" followed by "you are able to improve public services" (7%). No respondents selected "it is good for your career and/or personal development". However, in the interviews several councillors mentioned the fact that being a councillor was now seen as part of a career progression within politics; a stepping stone to standing as an MSP or MP.

11.3 Those who indicated that they would not recommend the role of a councillor to others were asked to indicate the main reason why not. Of those who gave a reason, 22% indicated a lack of support or respect by either the public, MSPs, MPs or the media. For instance, one councillor commented that,

"It is the only job I have ever had where it is assumed that I am corrupt, stupid and egotistical"
(Labour, Dundee)

11.4 Other reasons for not recommending the role of a councillor included: the introduction of multi-member wards; an inability to make a difference; the time and effort involved; party politics; the Scottish Government; a lack of trust in senior officials; centralisation; and low level of salary.

11.5 Interviewees were asked about what they thought the new councillors would gain from being a councillor. Many of the councillors' responses related to the difference councillors can make at their local level, which is very satisfying and rewarding. It also allows councillors to get to know their area, to feel a part of the community and to make new friends. It was described as a rich life experience and many would recommend it.

"You felt as happy for them if you got a result as though you were getting it yourself...when you didnae get a result you got a wee bit down yourself for them, if you thought they should have got it."
(SNP, Perth & Kinross)

11.6 Even those who had been positive about their experience as a councillor stated that you had to go in with your eyes open, that you had to learn to accept that you could not change everything and there were often many disappointments that you had to face. As one councillor concluded:

"I really enjoyed it...but I am not going to miss it."
(SNP, Perth & Kinross)

12. Top Tips for Councillors

12.1 We asked the councillors in the interviews what top tips they would give to the newly elected councillors in 2007. Here we have highlighted the common themes in the advice the retiring councillors would give.

Communication is vital

12.2 Speak to people and make sure that you go back to people to keep them up-dated on progress, even if it is not a positive outcome.

12.3 Listen to both constituents and officers and, if you are on a committee, listen to those affected by your decisions e.g. speak to the parents when dealing with education matters. As one councillor put it, you are born with two ears and one mouth and you should use them in that proportion. It is also useful to identify who the key people are on specific topics and to build up a good relationship with them, including talking to the Chief Executive and directors to gain an understanding of what they do.

"Work with the officers, not against the officers."
(Conservative, Scottish Borders)

12.4 When you are a new councillor it is important to listen and take your time to understand how things work and the history of decisions before you do anything yourself.

"Sit and listen and say nothing unless you have to."
(Independent, Falkirk)

12.5 Try to work in partnership with people in making decisions. As one councillor explained, it is not about having power, it is about having influence so use it to solve problems together.

12.6 Ask lots of questions to enable you to improve your understanding but also ensure that when you ask your question it covers all the points you want to cover.

"Ask questions then ask more questions."
(Conservative, East Renfrewshire)

Be true to yourself

12.7 It is an honour to represent people so it is important to take it seriously. If you take a stand on something, make sure it is something that you believe in and fight the battles that you think are important. Stick to your principles and vote the way you think is right and not the way your party wants you to vote.

"You have to be very, very conscious of your reputation and integrity. And people have to trust you. They have to recognise in you the kind of person that they are prepared to entrust their representation to."
(Labour, West Dunbartonshire)

12.8 Use opportunities as they come up. If you have an issue put it to the council even if you know that there will be considerable opposition to the idea; at least you know that you have tried to influence people and have used the opportunity to voice your opinion.

Represent your constituents and the council

12.9 It is important to develop a good relationship with your local constituents, know your area and learn what their priorities are.

"Never forget the people who put you in. And if there's something in your area that needs done, you've got to work hard and keep at it."
(Independent, Falkirk)

12.10 There were some mixed views on the right balance between your responsibilities to your ward and to the wider council area. Some felt that you had to ensure that you did not just shout for your own area but thought about what was important for the whole council. One councillor suggested that you should get to know the whole council area and to become an expert in one major area of interest to the council. Others thought it was important to stand up for your constituents against the bureaucracy of the council.

Be realistic

12.11 Do not make promises you cannot keep, be realistic about what can and cannot be achieved and always be truthful. Always do your best to deal with constituents' queries but do not promise anything as you cannot be sure of the outcome. Tackle problems head on so that you can demonstrate that you are always doing your best for your constituents.

Be cautious

12.12 A few councillors recommended that new councillors should be wary of both their fellow councillors and council officers. One councillor felt that once in office people can change and become egotistical which causes problems.

12.13 Others suggested that you should not take what officers tell you at face value but ask more questions and go and speak to others to further explore what you are being told.

And finally...don't give up

12.14 Perseverance is considered an important quality in a councillor, as is patience. Do not become disheartened and be prepared for hard work. But also remember that there is life outside the council.

ANNEX 1: The Survey Questions

1. Are you:

Male

Female

2. Please select the name of your council:

3. What age were you on your last birthday?

4. In the last election which type of candidate did you stand as?

Independent

Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party

Scottish Green Party

Scottish Labour Party

Scottish Liberal Democrats

Scottish National Party

Scottish Socialist Party

Other, Please specify:

5. How many years in total have you served as a councillor?

Please include all periods of office that you have served as a councillor.

6. What year were you first elected as a councillor?

7. What positions have you held in the last year in your council? Please tick all that apply:

Leader/Convenor of the council

Depute Leader/Convenor

Lord Provost/Provost

Depute Lord Provost/Provost

Opposition Leader/Official Spokesperson

Committee Chair/Convenor

Scrutiny Panel/Committee Chair

Scrutiny Panel/Committee Member

Councillor with no office bearing position

Other, Please specify:

8. How many of the following types of committee did you sit on during the last session?

	0	1	2	3	4+
Regulatory e.g. planning, licensing					
Policy e.g. housing, social services					
Scrutiny					
Cabinet/Executive					

9. Thinking about the reasons you decided to stand down, please rank up to five of the following factors in order of importance from the most important to the fifth most important factor:

Paid work commitments	
Less interested in politics	
Family/Caring commitments	
Have already made a significant contribution	
Retirement/Age	
Disillusioned with party politics	
STV electoral system	
Severance package	
Move to multi-member wards	
Disillusioned with local government	
I have served my time	
I am unable to make the impact I want	
I am unlikely to get re-elected	

Other (please specify):

10. Thinking about the many changes that have affected local government over the years, which of the following factors do you think have been the three most significant in shaping local government?

Please rank them as most significant, 2nd most significant and 3rd most significant:

	Most	2nd Most	3rd Most
Move to unitary councils in 1996			
Scottish devolution			
Increased central government control over finances			
Greater citizen involvement in decision-making			
Move to executive structures			
Power to advance well-being			
Increased partnership working			
Introduction of Community Planning			
Introduction of Joint Boards			
Increased central direction of local decision making			

11. Thinking about the same changes in local government as in the previous question, do you think these have had a positive or a negative effect on local government in Scotland?

	Positive	Negative	No impact	Not applicable
Move to unitary councils in 1996				
Scottish devolution				
Increased central government control over finances				
Greater citizen involvement in decision-making				
Move to executive structures				
Power to advance well-being				
Increased partnership working				
Introduction of Community Planning				
Introduction of Joint Boards				
Increased central direction of local decision making				

12. Thinking about what will effect local government in the future how significant do you think the following factors will be:

Please rank each factor from 1-5, where 1 = Very significant and 5 = Not at all significant:

	Very significant 1	2	3	4	Not at all significant 5
Change to STV voting system					
Introduction of multi-member wards					
Reduction in central government funding					
Efficient government initiative					
Public Service Reform					
Increasing customer expectations and demands					
Move to executive structures					
Shared services					

13. Which, if any, of the following factors prevented you from being as effective a councillor as you would have liked?

Please tick all that apply:

- Party whip system ☐
- Council officers ☐
- Lack of public respect and trust ☐
- Lack of administrative support ☐
- MSPs ☐
- MPs ☐
- Lack of research capacity ☐
- Partnership working ☐
- Influence of community activists ☐
- Financial constraints ☐
- Absence of a salary ☐
- Lack of training & development ☐
- None ☐
- Other, Please specify: ☐

14. The following is a list of different roles that an elected member may perform. How important do you think each of these roles is?

Please rank each one from 1 to 5 where 1= Very important and 5=Not at all important.

	Very important 1	2	3	4	Not at all important 5
Representing community views					
Scrutinising the performance of council services					
Holding council officials to account					
Scrutinising the council political leadership					
Representing the council on outside bodies					
Being the council's voice in the community					
Giving support and advice to individual constituents					
Representing a political party					
Generating ideas within the council					
Advancing the interests of your ward					
Mobilising local opinion to influence the council					
Advancing the interests of your ward					
Encouraging local democratic participation					

15. Thinking about the same roles of an elected member as in the previous question, which one do you feel is the most important:

16. What level of experience have you had in each of the following areas during your time as a councillor?

Please rank one on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=Extensive and 5=No experience.

	Extensive Experience 1	2	3	4	No Experience 5
Finance					
Planning					
Licensing					
Education					
Recruitment & selection					
Scrutiny					
Partnership working					
Joint Boards e.g. Fire					
Social work					
Community Planning					
Data Protection/Fo					

17. Have you attended training and development sessions in any of these areas during your time as a councillor? Please tick all that apply.

- Finance
- Planning
- Licensing
- Best Value
- Education
- Recruitment & selection
- Equal opportunities & diversity
- Scrutiny
- Corporate Governance
- Partnership working
- Joint Boards e.g. Fire
- Social work
- Community Planning
- Data Protection/FoI

18. If somebody asked your advice on whether to stand for election as a local councillor, would you recommend standing?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

19. If you were recommending the role of councillor to others, what one main reason would you give?

- You are able to bring about positive changes in the community ☐
- It is an important public service ☐
- You are able to improve public services ☐
- You are able to resolve a specific issue ☐
- It is good for your career and/or personal development ☐
- You can challenge existing public service provision ☐
- You can promote your party's objectives ☐
- Other, please specify: ☐

20. What is the one main reason that you would not recommend the role of a councillor?

ANNEX 2: Interview topic guide

1. How long have you served as a councillor? When were you first elected?

2. How has your role as a councillor changed over your time in office?
Probe on issues that may have affected their role.

3. What are the key changes that you have seen in local government during your time in office? What impact did these have on you?

4. What factors helped you to be an effective councillor? What were the barriers? Probe for specific EXAMPLES.

5. How did you come to the decision to stand down? What combination of factors led to the decision?

6. What do you think are the difficulties that face new councillors in their role?

7. What do you think will be the most significant changes in local government in Scotland in the next ten years?

Probe specifically on impact of:

- multi-member wards (and STV)
- relationship with central government
- move to executive structures

8. What do you think the financial situation for local government will be in the future? What impact will this have on the delivery of services?

9. Thinking about the councillors who have been elected for the first time – what do you think they will gain from being a councillor?

10. What would be your top two tips for a newly elected councillor?

11. There is a proposal to have a mentoring scheme which would match experienced or recently retired councillors with newly elected councillors to offer advice and support. What do you think about this idea? Is it something that you would consider getting involved in?

12. Is there anything else about local government in Scotland that you would like to tell me about that you haven't had the opportunity to mention?

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