

# Examining tensions underlying resident council policy and practice

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## Background

- Resident councils provide a platform for people living in long-term care to influence their care environments.
- The right to form and participate in a resident council is protected in provincial laws and policies across Canada.
- There is a paucity of research into how resident councils operate and the policies and practices that shape participation within these spaces.

## Study Aims

Following Armstrong's (2018) approach to studying tensions in long-term care, this study aims to examine key tensions underlying resident council policy and practice that reflect competing values and priorities, and come with conflicting consequences.

## Methods

We undertook ethnographic research with two resident councils in two provinces (BC and Manitoba).

Data collection included:

1) analysis of relevant laws and policies

2) observation of council meetings

3) semi-structured interviews

12 residents  
13 family members  
13 staff members  
6 policy stakeholders

We analyzed policy documents, fieldnotes, and transcripts with a focus on areas of tension and negotiation.

## Results

We identified the following five themes which reflect sources of tension:

### Theme 1: A vague premise

Laws and policies offer a simple conceptualization of resident councils: residents gather and share input with management. This vagueness allows councils to decide how they wish to operate, but it does not specify councils' authority or responsibilities. This left residents and staff uncertain about their purpose and power:

*"I don't know if they all know why they're there and what's the purpose of the council. Nobody's ever told them. I think that needs some kind of explanation for them to be aware of... do people bring concerns to the people that are on the council?"*

- Loretta, Resident

### Theme 2: Councils as political vs person-centred spaces

Residents and staff expressed conflicting notions of the purpose of councils. For example, several staff described councils as an extension of person-centred care, a way for staff to improve care by listening to residents:

*"It has given me a different awareness of... the views of the residents... listen to them, and really see, how can we integrate their suggestions or their needs, or their views in our daily care?"*

- Chloe, Staff

By contrast, some residents drew on democratic ideals, framing councils as political spaces for residents to assert their rights:

*"I felt that we had to fight for our rights. What I thought were our rights. And I kept challenging virtually every decision that was made by [the care home]."*

- Aaron, Resident

### Theme 3: Empowerment and exclusion

Staff and residents often framed participation as dependent on residents' cognitive capacity, describing council participants as a small group of cognitively able residents. Resident councils may empower some residents while excluding others.

*"There's far too many in the council... And I know them already, the people that are there. And I know who is capable of understanding and responding. And I couldn't figure out why they brought this person there. It was almost like numbers counted. Well, that's ridiculous."*

- Abby, Resident

### Theme 4: Advocating alone

Councils' efforts are often invisible outside of the institution. When residents raised concerns about systemic issues, there was no process for sharing outside of the home. Staff and residents also did not know how other councils were run, prompting questions about alternative approaches. At one meeting, a resident asked a manager if they could connect with another council, but her request was not acted on:

*A resident asks if it's possible to just make contact on a small scale. The manager says he cannot do that, but maybe he can work with [resident council chair] to figure something out.*

*Resident: "How about just reaching out on a small scale, like to the [name of council at a different care home]?"*

*The Chair says that the council can try to reach out to them.*

- Fieldnotes Excerpt

### Theme 5: The problem of regulation

Regulations that require care homes to document and act on complaints may motivate managers to respond, but they also promote a top-down model. More flexible regulations may allow for resident-led councils but leave open the possibility that councils will not be heard.

*"In the latest standards review, they... are really looking for if decisions, and choices, and you know, empowerment-type activities are through the council. So, the latest standards, they used an example... it might be that they're going to paint the common area. So, they want... it's a resident's home, they should be able to pick the color of the common area, because it's their home."*

- Kerry, Staff

## Discussion

- Our research identified several tensions in resident council policy and practice that impact the operation and influence of resident councils such as democratic vs. person-centred aims; empowerment vs. exclusion; advocacy vs. isolation; and regulation vs. autonomy.
- Bringing these tensions to light is a necessary step towards reconciling these tensions within councils and public policy.

## References

Armstrong, P. (2018). Balancing the Tension in Long-Term Residential Care. *Ageing Int* 43, 74–90.  
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