

REVIEW: LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ABERDEEN

Stewart Black

Kirsteen Davidson and John Fairley (2000), **Running The Granite City - Local Government in Aberdeen 1975-96**, Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, ISBN 1840170328, £9.99, 191pp.

This is a rare book-length account of the life of a single local authority, Aberdeen District Council. As aficionados will recognise from the book's sub-title, the story spans the period between the two most recent structural re-organisations of Scottish local government. In effect then, its principal focus is the entire lifespan of the council for one of Scotland's four cities. The book was commissioned by the Council itself.

The first objective of the book is to tell this story. It does so in an intuitive way. It commences with sketching the background to both the council's antecedents and setting this in the context of the wider evolution of local government. It then discusses the major functions and services of the council. Finally, it considers inter-organisational and international issues.

However, the book has a second, essentially educational intention - to explain how this council worked, and, by extension, how others work. The book's intended audience is wide, and includes citizens and college and senior school pupils. The intuitive approach the authors adopt - signalled by the book's reader-friendly title and the inclusion of a selection of illustrations - is also helpful in achieving this second objective.

Writing for an audiences which is both non-specialist and mixed could have posed a serious problem of writing style for the authors. However, they have adopted an unfussy and informative prose style which successfully meets this requirement. The absence of an index may disappoint those trying to find a particular reference. The chirpiness of some of the photo captions is a little at odds with the 'voice' of the text.

The Council will have been keen to tell the story of its evolution, and the authors do full justice to their commission. However perhaps the more

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interesting part of the book - at least in terms of its educational value beyond Aberdeen - is its valuable discussion of each of the council services. Citizens or modern studies students who have wondered 'what exactly councils actually do' in providing services such as Housing, Planning, Environment, Arts and Leisure will find much to satisfy their curiosity here. (Because of the structure of local government in the period in question, the authors cannot give similar attention to the 'other half' of council services - including Education, Social Work, Roads and Transport and Structure Planning - as they were the responsibility of the former regional councils, including the former Grampian Regional Council.) Similarly, the book is informative in exemplifying the very different role councillors and officers play in a council.

The book is not intended solely for those who live in, or are interested in, Aberdeen. Certainly it has few book-of-a-council rivals. And what became of Aberdeen DC? It 'became' Aberdeen City Council in April 1996 - but that's another story.

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