

# Evaluation of Coastal water council work in Ringkøbing Fjord

*Author Morten Graversgaard*

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### 1. Preface

This evaluation is the culmination of Morten Graversgaard's involvement in the establishment of the coastal water council for Ringkøbing Fjord. The findings from this evaluation are detailed in the report, with the potential for further information and results to be shared with specific stakeholders.

Please note that this report is an initial draft. Due to the necessity of submitting an evaluation prior to the agreed deadline, it has not yet been peer-reviewed at Aarhus University. Additionally, the water council members expressed resistance to being evaluated before the process was completed, which also contributes to the draft status of this report. Consequently, this report should be considered a draft until it undergoes the peer-review process at Aarhus University.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to everyone who answered the questionnaire contributed to the creation of this report.

## 2. Summary

The report presents the results of an evaluation of the coastal water council work in Ringkøbing Fjord. The evaluation is based on observational studies, interviews and two surveys. The first survey (member survey) was conducted among the members of the coastal water council for Ringkøbing Fjord and the second survey among the facilitators/municipalities (facilitator survey) of the council work in 2023. The surveys aimed to evaluate the process, collaboration, and outcome of the council's work on developing local water management plan.

The member survey consisted of 37 questions covering various aspects of the council's work, such as purpose, involvement, leadership, role distribution, communication, trust, learning, satisfaction, and challenges. The survey was sent to all members (14 members of the council), representing different stakeholders such as landowners, anglers, water utilities, nature organizations. The response rate was 100% with the inclusion of one alternate member. The report summarizes the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey, using tables and graphs to illustrate the main findings. Some of the key results are:

- The council members had a common purpose and a clear understanding of their role and task in the council.
- The council members felt they were highly involved and engaged in the council's work, and felt that their knowledge and opinions were respected and used by the council and the municipalities.
- The council members had a high level of trust and appreciation for each other, and were able to resolve conflicts and communicate openly and honestly.
- The council members learned a lot from the council's work, especially from the technical group and the experts (researchers) who provided analyses and models of the water environment and the possible solutions.
- The council members were generally satisfied with the council's work and the secretariat's support, but also pointed out some challenges and limitations, such as the very short time frame, the complexity of the task, the uncertainty of the causes of the poor ecological status of the fjord, and the resistance from some groups to the proposed solutions.

The facilitators of the coastal council were generally positive about the work of the coastal members. They emphasized the importance of local knowledge, respect, dialogue, and expert input in the process, as well as the role of external experts. The cooperative spirit among the members was also highlighted as a positive outcome.

However, they expressed concerns about the complexity and clarity of the task, and the influence of certain lobbyists. They questioned the feasibility and impact of the council's suggested solutions. The main challenges they faced were the time pressure, the agenda of some stakeholders, data quality, model uncertainty, and political resistance.

Despite these challenges, they reported that the work of the coastal members qualified the municipalities' work, leading to potentially effective and durable solutions. This underscores the importance of their work and the potential for positive outcomes despite the difficulties encountered.

The recommendations and suggestions for improving the council's work in the future, such as including more time for involvement of the council members, increasing the participation rate, enhancing the communication and feedback, clarifying the roles and expectations, and ensuring the implementation and monitoring of the council's proposals.

## 1. Introduction

In accordance with the ‘Agreement on the Green Transformation of Danish Agriculture’ (October 2021), an evaluation of the scientific foundation for the nitrogen effort is underway, referred to as a second opinion. This second opinion will also incorporate local participation through the formation of coastal water councils. These councils are expected to conduct locally-based analyses to explore alternative methods of achieving target fulfilment in specifically chosen coastal waters. The findings from the work of the coastal water council will be integrated into the comprehensive review of the scientific basis for nitrogen regulation. The coastal water council has the capacity to prepare analyses of the significant challenges faced by the coastal waters and propose an action program for the planning period of 2021-2027. These proposed action programs should align with the goals set for the coastal waters as per the regulation on environmental objectives for surface water areas and groundwater bodies.

### 2.1 Process

The process began with the Ringkøbing-Skjern municipality receiving approval for the application on March 1, 2023, and subsequently acting as the secretariat municipality for the coastal council. The coastal council for Ringkøbing Fjord was established at a meeting on September 19, 2022, during which a term of reference was also approved.

The coastal council is composed of 13 organizations and 4 municipalities within the catchment area of Ringkøbing Fjord. These organizations represent a diverse mix of agricultural entities, NGOs, wastewater companies, and fisheries organizations. A detailed list of participants is provided at the Ringkøbing-Skjern municipality.

From March 1 to December 8, there have been 8 meetings of the coastal water council, see table 1 for an overview of meetings and sub-groups. The minutes and materials from these meetings are available on the municipality’s website. In addition to the coastal water council, a coordination group was formed to oversee project leadership, liaise with external experts, and organize meetings. Furthermore, a technical group consisting of technicians from the participating municipalities and a fishing group, which includes members interested in fishing, were established. An overview of the members in these various groups can be found in Table 2.

*Table 1 Meetings and subgroups*

2023	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
<b>Coastal board</b>	10.	21.	12.	23.		Cancelled	15.	27.	24.	8.
<b>Technical group</b>				26.		11.	12.		23.	7.
<b>Coordination group</b>	23.	19. 20.	10.	13.		10. 22.	8. 13. 14.	10. 13. 25. 26.	9. 17. 27.	15. 19. 21.
<b>Fish group</b>				12.						

Table 2. Groups and members of the different groups

	<b>Organisation/Municipality</b>	<b>Name</b>
<b>Coordination group</b>	Ringkøbing-Skjern Kommune	Lene Moth
	Seges	Flemming Gertz
	Vestjysk	Helle Borum
<b>Technical group</b>	Ringkøbing-Skjern Kommune	Lene Moth, Ivan Thesbjerg, Christian Prinds
	Varde kommune	Jan Pedersen
	Herning Kommune	Dan Overgaard, Michael Grankow
	Ikast-Brande Kommune	Asger Jensen
	Seges	Flemming Gertz
	Vestjysk	Helle Borum
<b>Fishing group</b>	Skjern Å Sammenslutningen	Søren Larsen
	Ringkøbing og Stadil Fjordes Fritidsfiskerforening	Arne Mogensen
	Fjordfirskerne	Alex Hansen
	Sydvestjysk Fiskeriforening	Thomas Rahbek Sloth
	Danmarks Naturfredningsforening	Tage Madsen
	Bæredygtig Landbrug	Thomas Jensen
	Ringkøbing-Skjern Kommune	Ole Nyholm-Knudsen, Lene Moth
	Vestjysk	Helle Borum

## 2. Methods

The main methods used for this evaluation is qualitative interviews and the use of surveys to evaluate the experiences and opinions of both the members and facilitators of the coastal water council for Ringkøbing Fjord. The surveys consist of two surveys: First, the coastal water council member survey. This survey was conducted among 14 members of the coastal water council for Ringkøbing Fjord. The survey aimed to evaluate the council's work, process, and outcomes in relation to the water quality and ecological status of the fjord. The surveys consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions that cover topics such as the role and function of the coastal water councils, the organization and leadership of the work, the involvement and use of local knowledge, the expectations and satisfaction with the process and the results, and the learning and challenges for the future. The survey consisted of 37 questions, covering topics such as the council's composition, purpose, involvement, collaboration, leadership, resources, knowledge, learning, satisfaction, and challenges. The survey was distributed online via SurveyXact to all 14 members of the coastal water council, who represented different stakeholder groups such as green organizations, agriculture and utilities. All members of the council answer all of the survey. Secondly, the coastal water council facilitator survey. The survey consisted of 30 questions, covering topics such as the organization, leadership, participation, communication, learning, and outcomes of the coastal water council. We received two responses. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis. The results are presented in the following sections. In the following sections, results from the surveys is mixed with results from the individual interviews.

### 3. Results

The council was composed of representatives from various organizations and interests, such as landowners, fishermen, water utilities, hunters, environmentalists, and local authorities. Most of the members were male (93%) and over 50 years old (55.4 average age). Water councils have been set up in Denmark in the past, specifically in 2014, 2017, and again in 2019/2020. Each council had a different purpose but was organized in the same way (refer to Graversgaard, 2015; Graversgaard et al. 2019 for more details). It was inquired whether the members had been part of the previous councils. Interestingly, only 2 out of the 14 members had participated in the 2014 and 2017 councils, and 3 out of the 14 had been involved in the 2019/2020 council work.

#### Organisation of the work

The Ringkøbing coastal water council, led by its coordinators and project owners, adopted an inclusive approach. This meant that any organization expressing interest in the work was permitted to participate. A local politician facilitated the meetings, which were attended by all municipalities in the River Basin. In interviews, the facilitators conveyed that politician played a crucial role in welcoming attendees and chairing the meetings. They emphasized the significance of this political involvement to underscore the importance of the task.

#### Purpose of the work

The councils were asked about their perception of what is the main purpose. Almost all answered that it is to ensure the achievement of the water quality objectives in the fjord and its catchment area. The respondents agreed that the most important function of the water council was to ensure the achievement of the objectives in the coastal waters, with 79% choosing this option, followed by creating dialogue between stakeholders (7%), sharing knowledge (7%), and assisting and advising the municipalities (7%), (figure 1).

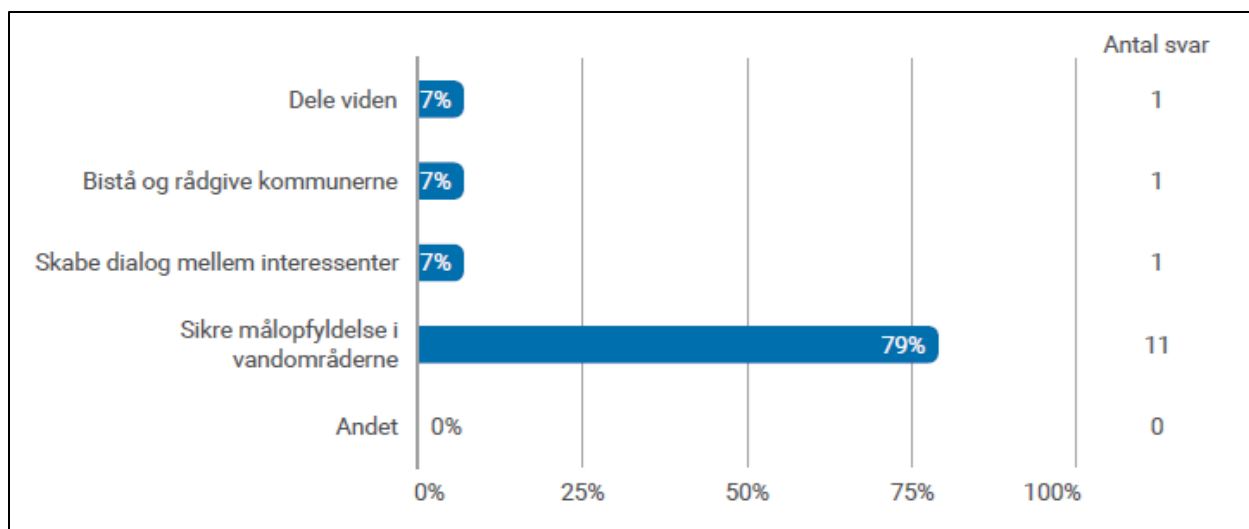


Fig. 1. Answer to the question: Hvad ser du som kystvandrådets vigtigste funktion?

The facilitators were asked the same questions and also these answered that the function of the water councils is to ensure goal achievement in the catchment, but also stated that another purpose of the water council is to present an alternative River basin management plan for Ringkøbing Fjord with the right measurement parameters and the best possible data input in the models, while one mentioned that it was to obtain local knowledge in the assessment of how to achieve goal achievement.

Most of the members were satisfied with this purpose, the respondents agreed that the purpose of the water council work had been clearly defined, with 79% saying they agreed and 21% saying they strongly agreed and felt that they had a clear understanding of their role (100%), however not all agreed that the members had a shared purpose (figure 2). The respondents had different opinions on whether the coastal water council members had a common purpose, with 64% saying yes and 36% saying no. The respondents expressed their own understanding of the purpose of the water council in their own words, such as working for the achievement of the objectives of the coastal waters in Ringkøbing Fjord catchment area, creating a strong and healthy fjord, identifying the actions and measures that are needed to ensure the achievement of the objectives, involving local stakeholders and knowledge, and finding locally based solutions that ensure good ecological status.

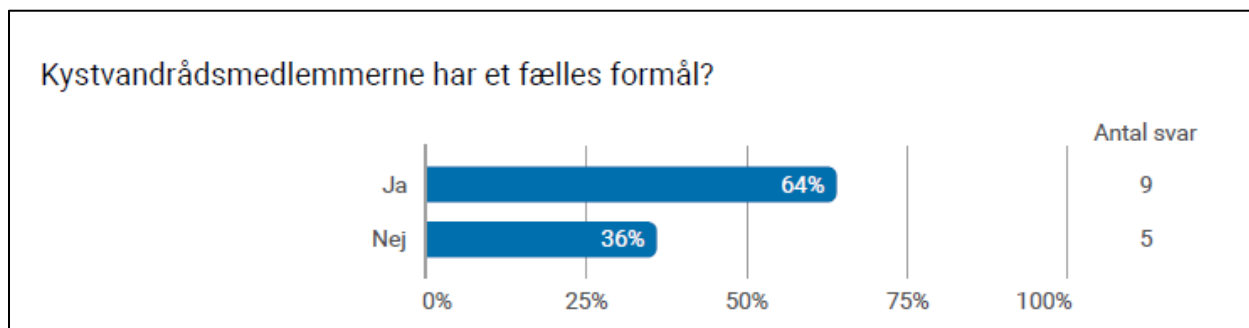


Fig. 2. Answer to the question: Kystvandrådsmedlemmerne har et fælles formål?

## Involvement

The council members felt that they were involved in the work and had a chance to share their views and expertise. They also felt that they were respected and listened to by other members and the secretariat (figure 3). However, some members felt that they were not involved enough (7% and 36%) (figure 4) or that their involvement did not have an impact on the municipal analyses (14%).

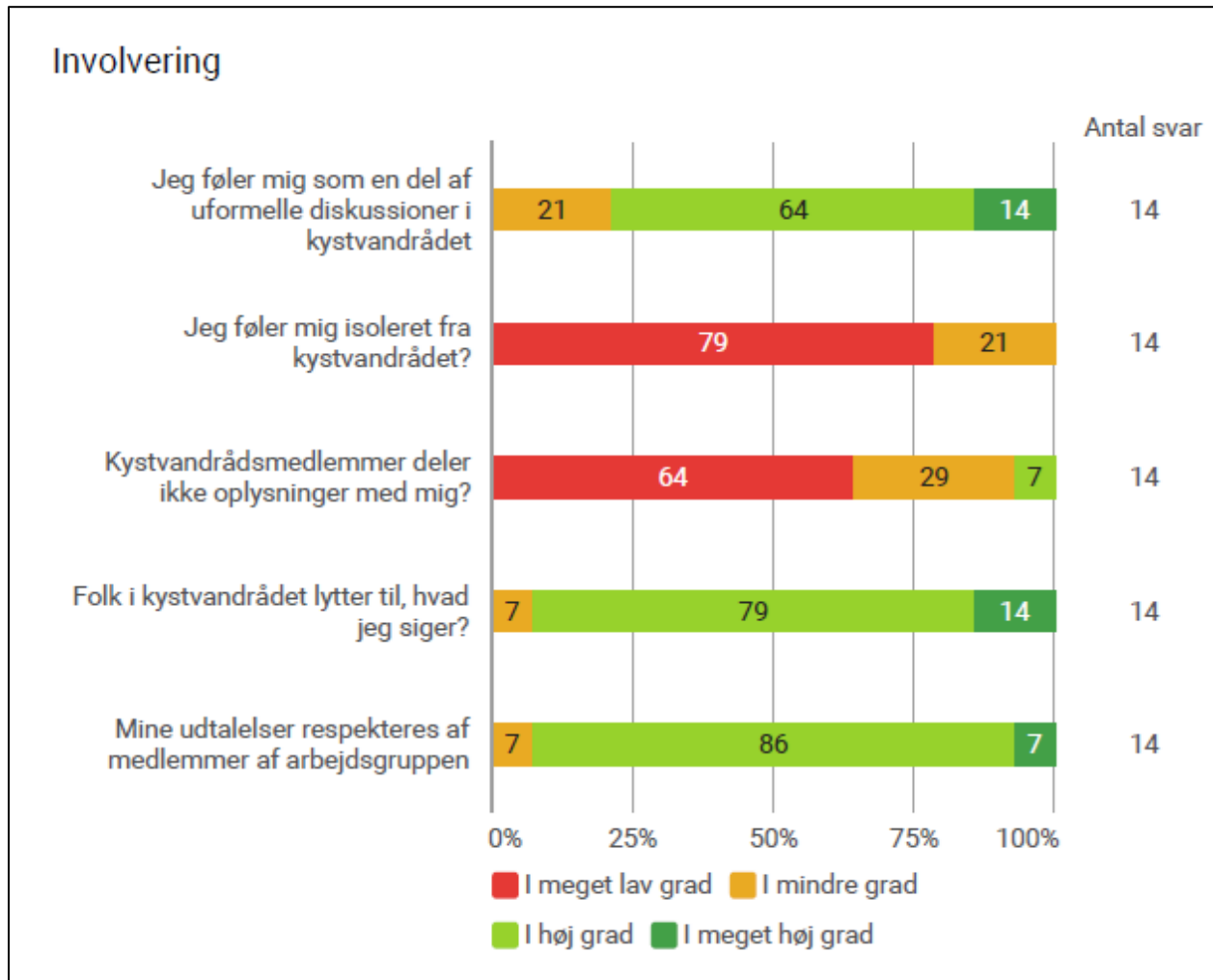


Fig. 3. Answer to the questions on involvement?



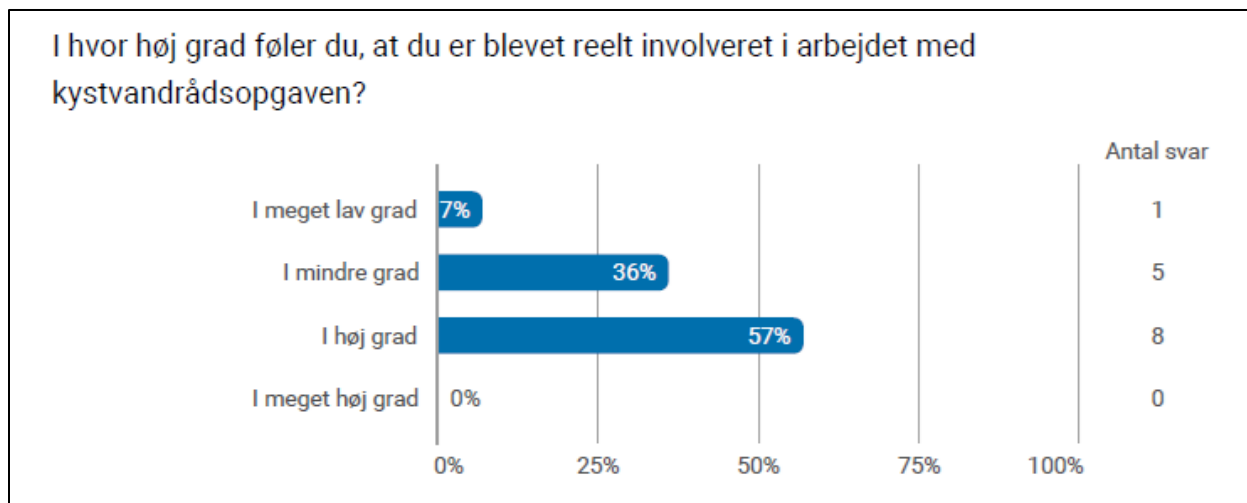


Fig. 4. Answer to the question: I hvor høj grad føler du, at du er blevet reelt involveret i arbejdet med kystvandrådsopgaven?

The facilitators mentioned how the coastal water council members were involved in the decisions, the dialogue with the foreign experts/researchers, the scenarios, the impact tools, and the reduction of epiphytes.

## Collaboration

The council members reported a high level of trust, appreciation, and communication among themselves. They also felt that they had a common goal and were engaged in the work. However, a few members also reported conflicts, isolation, or hidden agendas among some members (figure 3).

In the interviews and discussion with the members, key aspects on what influences a good process in the coastal water council, was also highlighted. Important elements are to respect and listen to each other's views, to participate with an open mind, and to leave prejudices at home, respect for each other's views, that the material was difficult and had to be repeated several times, and that the communication aspect was important to keep in mind.

## Leadership

The council members were generally satisfied with the leadership and facilitation of the secretariat, which consisted of the municipality of Ringkøbing-Skjern. They felt that the secretariat provided clear guidance, task distribution, and information for the work. However, few members also felt that the process was too predetermined or biased by the secretariat (14%).

## Resources

The council members felt that they had the necessary skills and resources to perform their work effectively. They also felt that their knowledge and the resources of the council were used sufficiently. However, some members also felt that the task was too complex or difficult to solve with the existing knowledge (33%).

## Knowledge

The council members felt that they gained new knowledge from participating in the council, especially from the technical group and the experts who presented the analyses and models of the environmental conditions and solutions for the fjord (figure 5).

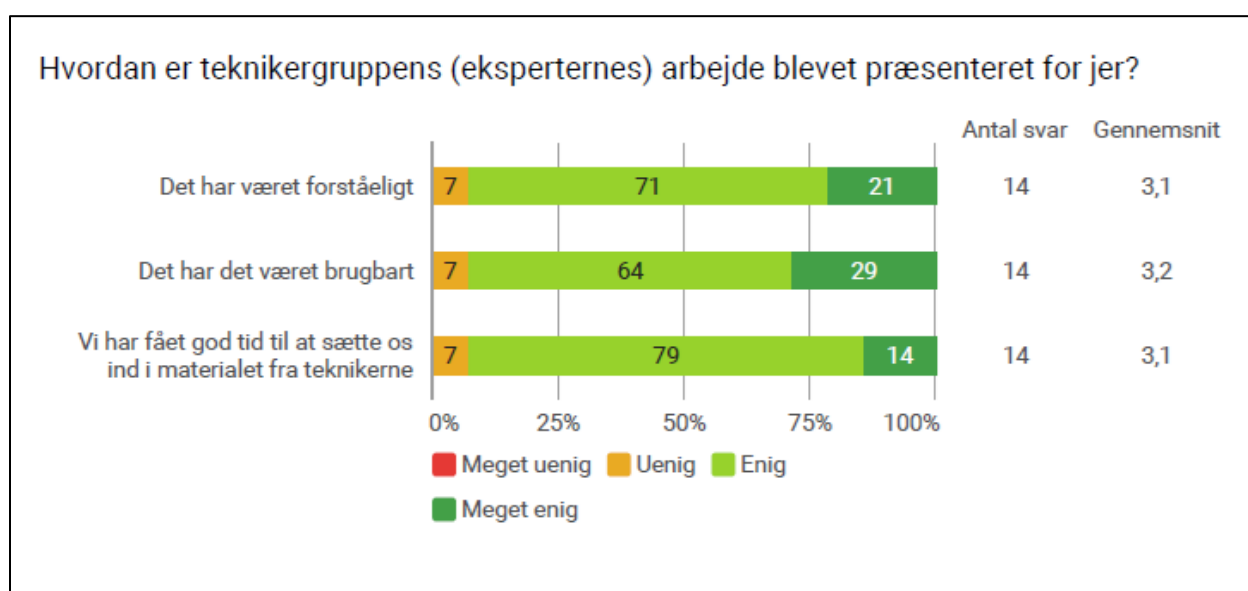


Fig. 5. Answer to the question: *Hvordan er teknikergruppens (eksperternes) arbejde blevet præsenteret for jer??*

The facilitators reflected on how the technician group (the experts) and their analyses was presented to the members. One facilitator said that the experts presented the results to the council several times, while the other said that the coordination group also communicated the recommendations from the technician group.

The water council members also felt that local knowledge was used and valued in the work. However, some members also felt that the causes of the poor ecological status of the fjord were unclear or disputed among the members (14%).

The facilitators mentioned different ways in which the council members had been involved and how their local knowledge and decisions was used. One respondent said that the decision to use wetlands instead of measures on the cultivation field was taken by the council, and that the sluice was also considered as an impact tool based on the analyses of the experts. The other respondent said that the sluice was shown

to have a significant effect on the environmental conditions in the fjord, and that wetlands were a more effective impact tool than fallowing due to the special conditions in a sandy catchment area. Other “local” knowledge was related to the plant and fish distribution, and the catchment analysis for Ringkøbing Fjord. And that the local knowledge was sought to increase the knowledge of the different parts of the fjord.

## Learning

The council members felt that they learned from the work and the collaboration with other members and stakeholders. They also felt that they contributed to the learning of others. However, some members also felt that they did not learn anything new or relevant from the work (14%).

## Satisfaction

The council members were generally satisfied with their work and the outcomes of the council. They felt that they produced effective and durable solutions for the fjord, based on local conditions and interests. However, some members also felt that they did not achieve the desired results or solutions, or that their work did not have any real influence on the outcome (25%).

## Challenges

The council members faced some challenges in their work, such as the short time frame, the large size of the catchment area, the external factors (such as climate change or invasive species), and the divergent opinions and interests among the members and the stakeholders. Some members also felt that the state’s framework for the task was too rigid or unrealistic (33%). Especially the short timeframe was mentioned by many participants as a drawback to finding effective solutions.

## Qualitative interviews and inputs to the process evaluation

The respondents interviewed indicate that they have had a positive and collaborative experience, that they have used local knowledge and experts to develop alternative local water management plans, and that they overall faced some challenges with time, resources, and communication.

The facilitators of the coastal water councils also expressed that they had experienced positive collaboration. The facilitators have had a constructive and cooperative experience, indicating the effectiveness of the council’s stakeholder engagement approach.

The facilitators have harnessed local knowledge and specialists/researchers to devise alternative water management strategies. This demonstrates the council’s commitment to using local resources and expertise for more efficient and context-specific solutions.

The main challenges encountered related to time, resources, and communication. These are common issues in many organizations and suggest areas for potential improvement within the council.

Some of the key reasons for being able to solve the task satisfactorily, according to the respondents, was both the good interaction between the coordination group, water council and experts, and that they experienced that when everyone pulled together, they moved. The common goal, and the leadership of the coordination group were also positive factors.

Challenges are related to the time was a factor, and that certain lobbyist organisations took a lot of unnecessary time and had their own agenda, and that they lacked time to do it as good as they wanted.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on the survey results, observations and interviews, the council members had a common purpose and a clear understanding of their role and task in the council. They were highly involved and engaged in the council's work, and felt that their knowledge and opinions were respected and used by the council and the municipalities. The council members had a high level of trust and appreciation for each other, and were able to resolve conflicts and communicate openly and honestly. The council members learned a lot from the council's work, especially from the technical group and the local experts who provided analyses and models of the water environment and the possible solutions. The council members were generally satisfied with the council's work and the secretariat's support, but also pointed out some challenges and limitations, such as the short time frame, the complexity of the task, the uncertainty of the causes of the poor ecological status of the fjord, and the resistance from some groups to the proposed solutions.

Overall, the results indicate that the council has been effective in involving various stakeholders and producing durable solutions for the fjord, based on local conditions and interests. However, some members also expressed concerns about the complexity and clarity of the task, the influence of some lobbyists, and the feasibility and impact of the solutions suggested by the council. These concerns should be addressed in future work to ensure the continued success of the council's work.

## References

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