

Evaluation of Coastal water council work in Ringkøbing Fjord

Advisory report from DCA – Danish Centre for Food and Agriculture

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Data sheet

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Preface

This report has been prepared in light of the initiatives and analyses undertaken by the coastal water councils in Denmark. The coastal water councils were established as part of the Danish government's Agriculture Agreement from October 4, 2021, with the aim of promoting a green transition of Danish agriculture and ensuring compliance with the EU's Water Framework Directive. This report is based on a qualitative study of the process surrounding the establishment and implementation of the coastal water council, as well as the process for the work on Ringkøbing Fjord. The results from this evaluation are detailed in this report.

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.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to everyone who responded to the questionnaire, those who agreed to participate in interviews, and because I have been able to attend selected coastal water council meetings, and thanks to all who have contributed to the preparation of this report. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance I have received from my colleagues at Aarhus University, whose expertise has been invaluable in the preparation of this report.

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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 facilitator survey was conducted and distributed to the two facilitators of the Ringkøbing coastal council, and both replied to the survey. This survey is used in the report to compare the larger member survey results.

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%. 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 Background

In accordance with the 'Agreement on the Green Transformation of Danish Agriculture' (October 2021), an evaluation of the scientific foundation of the nitrogen efforts and nationwide nitrogen regulation is underway, referred to as a second opinion. This second opinion will also incorporate perspectives for the inclusion of more local participation through the establishing of coastal water councils. These councils are expected to conduct locally-based analyses to explore alternative methods of achieving target fulfillment 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.

The second opinion and establishment of coastal water councils reflects the ongoing efforts to evaluate and improve the scientific underpinnings of environmental regulations, emphasizing the role of local councils in contributing to this process. The coastal water councils' analyses and proposed action programs are crucial for the planning period, ensuring that local challenges are addressed, and environmental objectives are met.

1.1 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
Coastal board	10.	21.	12.	23.		Cancelled	15.	27.	24.	8.
Technical group				26.		11.	12.		23.	7.
Coordination group	23.	19. 20.	10.	13.		10. 22.	8. 13. 14.	10. 13. 25. 26.	9. 17. 27.	15. 19. 21.
Fish group				12.						

Table 2. Groups and members of the different groups

	Organisation/Municipality	Name
Coordination group	Ringkøbing-Skjern Kommune	Lene Moth
	Seges	Flemming Gertz
	Vestjysk	Helle Borum
Technical group	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
Fishing group	Skjern Å Sammenslutningen	Søren Larsen
	Ringkøbing og Stadil Fjordes Fritidsfiskerforening	Arne Mogensen
	Fjordfiskerne	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 are 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. There have been conducted 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. The survey consisted of 37 questions, covering 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, the learning and challenges for the future, 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 answered all questions 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. The survey was distributed to the two facilitators, and 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 are 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, local enterprises, the harbour, environmentalists, and local authorities. (the members of the councils and more information about them can be found here: <https://www.rksk.dk/om-kommunen/raad-naevn-syn-og-kommissioner/kystvandraad-2023>). All of the respondents were male (100%) and over 50 years old (56,9 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 (see Graversgaard, 2015; Graversgaard et al. 2015; Graversgaard et al. 2019 for more details). In this study it was inquired whether the members had been part of these previous councils. Only 2 out of the 10 members had participated in the 2014 councils, 4 out of 10 in the 2017 councils, and 5 out of the 10 had been involved in the 2019/2020 council work. These results show that the respondents have different levels of experience in participating in previous water council work.

3.1 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 Ringkøbing Fjord River Basin. In interviews, the facilitators conveyed that the 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.

3.2 Purpose of the work

The councils were asked (in a single-choice question) about their perception of the councils' 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).

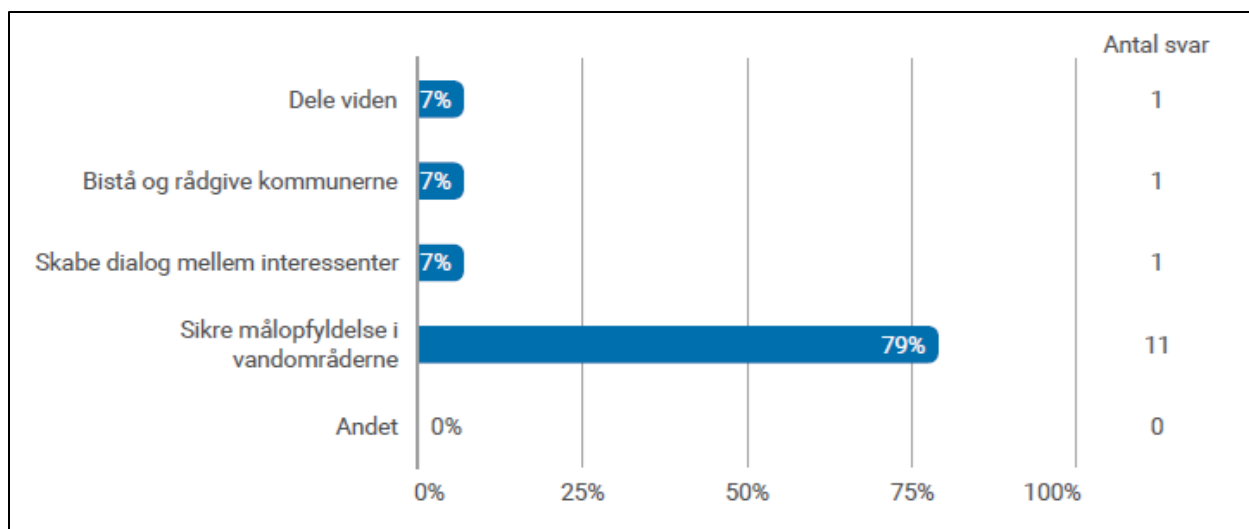


Fig. 1. Council members answer to the question: What do you see as the coastal water council's most important function? (Hvad ser du som kystvandrådets vigtigste funktion?)

The facilitators were asked the same questions and answered as well that the function of the water councils is to ensure goal achievement in the catchment area. The facilitators however, 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.

All council members were either satisfied or very satisfied with the purpose of the coastal water council (figure 2).

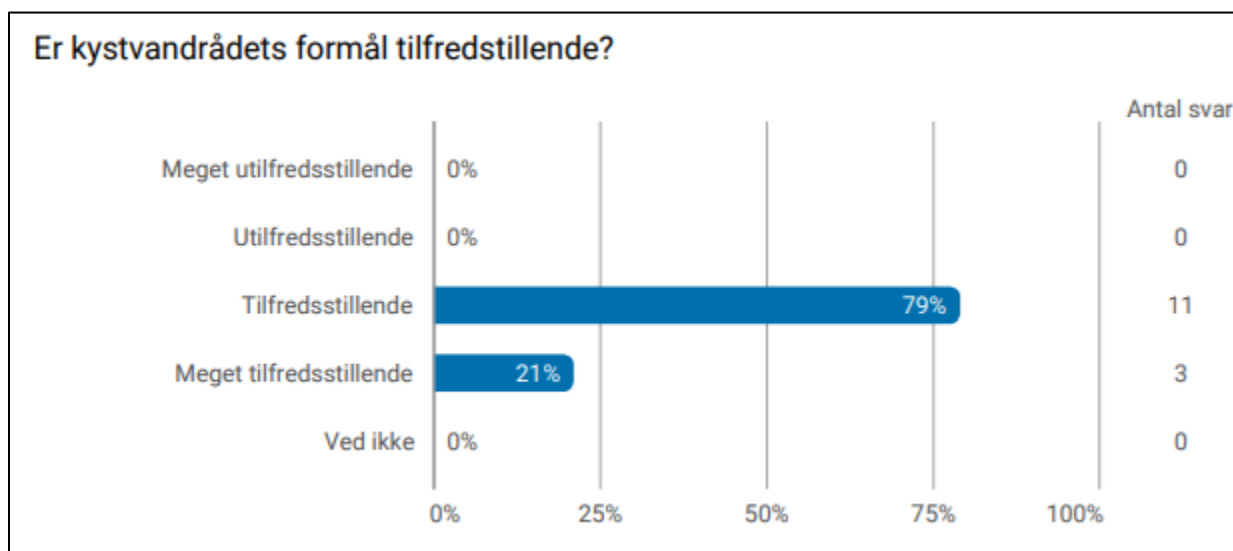


Fig. 2. Council member answer to the question: are the coastal water council's purpose satisfactory? (er kystvandrådets formål tilfredsstillende?)

The respondents agreed that the purpose of the water councils work had been clearly defined, with 79% saying they agreed and 21% saying they strongly agreed (figure 3).

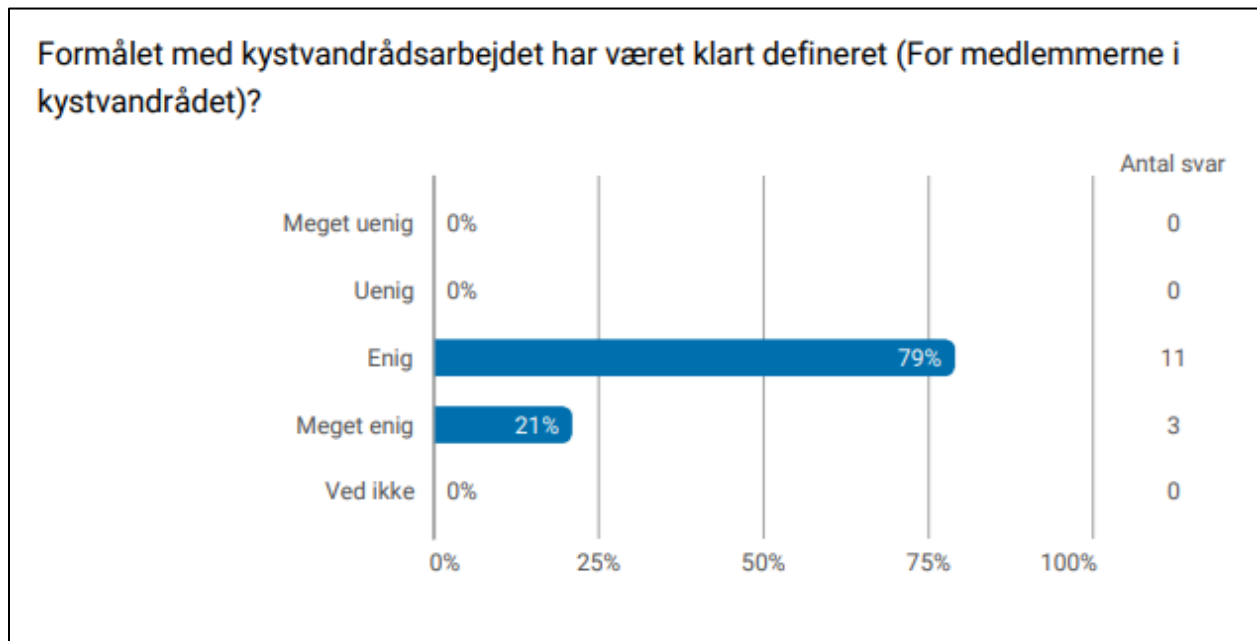


Fig. 3. Council member answer to the question: The purpose of the coastal water council work has been clearly defined (For the members of the coastal water council)? (Formålet med kystvandrådsarbejdet har været klart defineret (For medlemmerne i kystvandrådet)?)

All felt that they had a clear understanding of their role (100%), however not all agreed that the members had a shared purpose (figure 4).

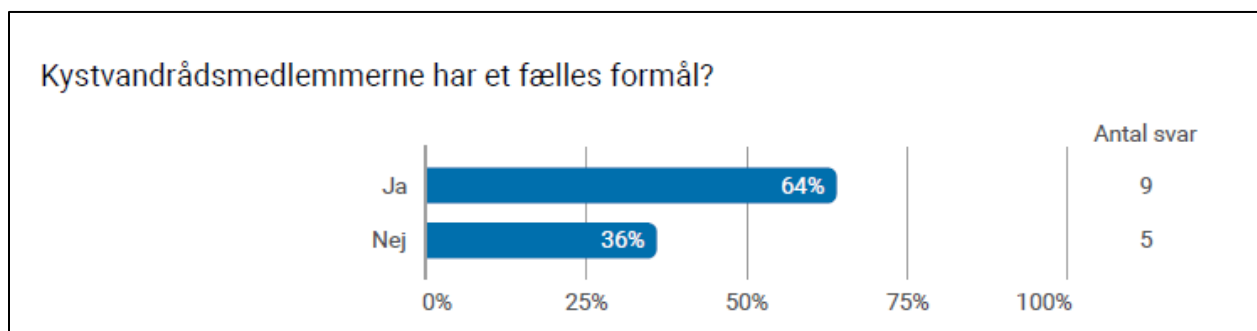


Fig. 4. Council member answers to the question: Coastal Water Council Members have a common purpose? (Kystvandrådsmedlemmerne har et fælles formål?)

The respondents had different opinions on whether the coastal water council members had a common purpose, with 64% saying yes and 36% saying no (figure 4). 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.

3.3 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 5). However, some members felt that they were not involved enough (7% and 36%) (figure 6) or that their involvement did not have an impact on the municipal analyses (14%).

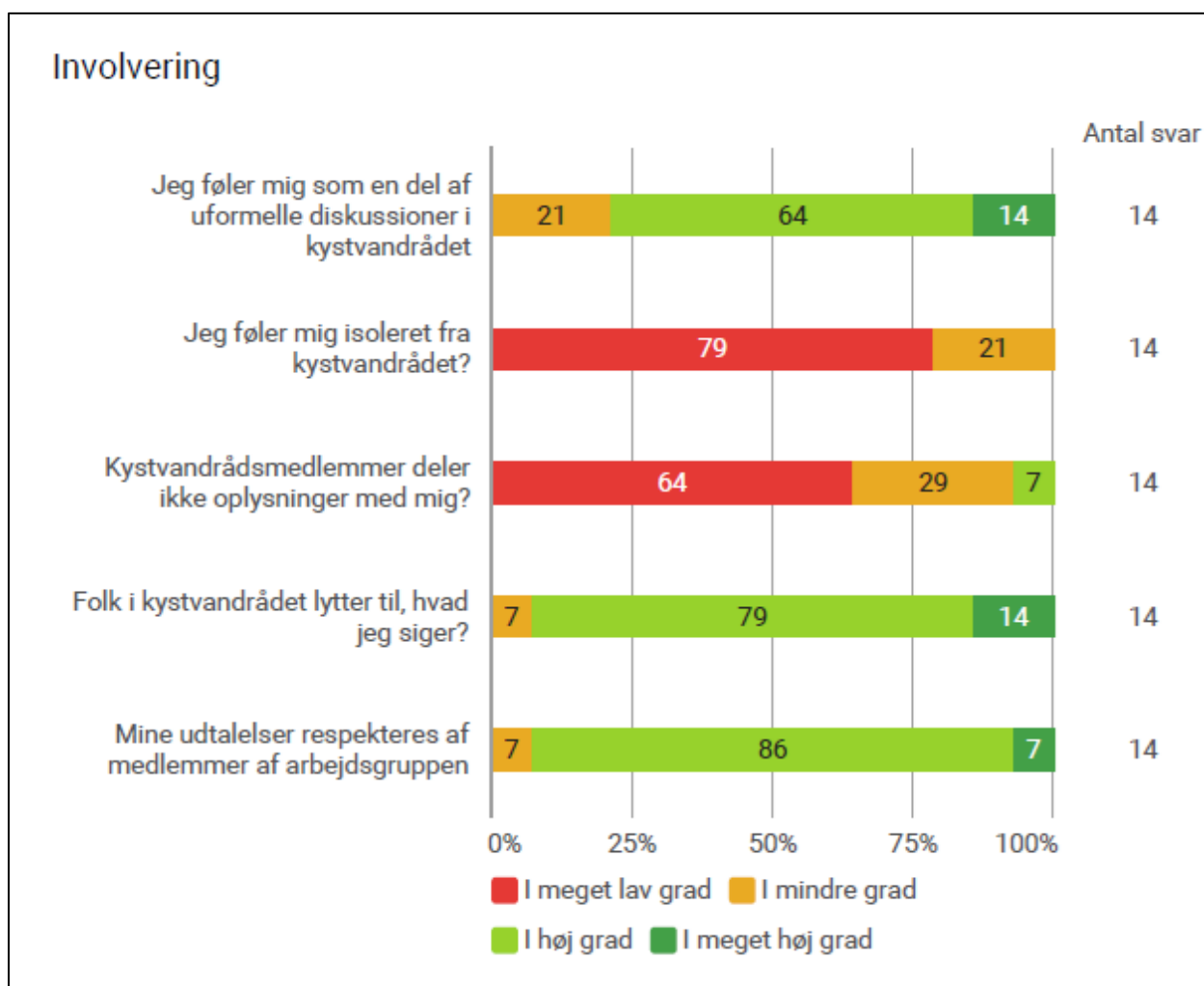


Fig. 5. Council members answer to the questions on involvement?

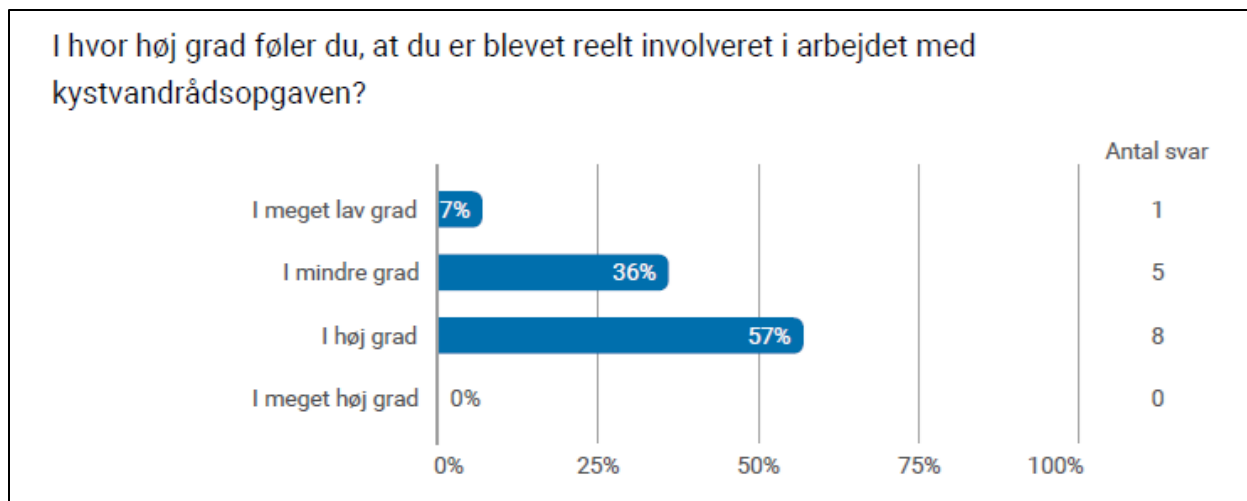


Fig. 6. Council member answer to the question: To what extent do you feel that you have been really involved in the work with the coastal water board task? (I hvor høj grad føler du, at du er blevet reelt involveret i arbejdet med kystvandrådsopgaven?)

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.

3.4 Collaboration

The majority of council members reported a high level of trust, appreciation, and communication among each other. They also felt that they had a common goal and were engaged in the work.

And generally, they felt that they have collaborated on solving the task (figure 7)

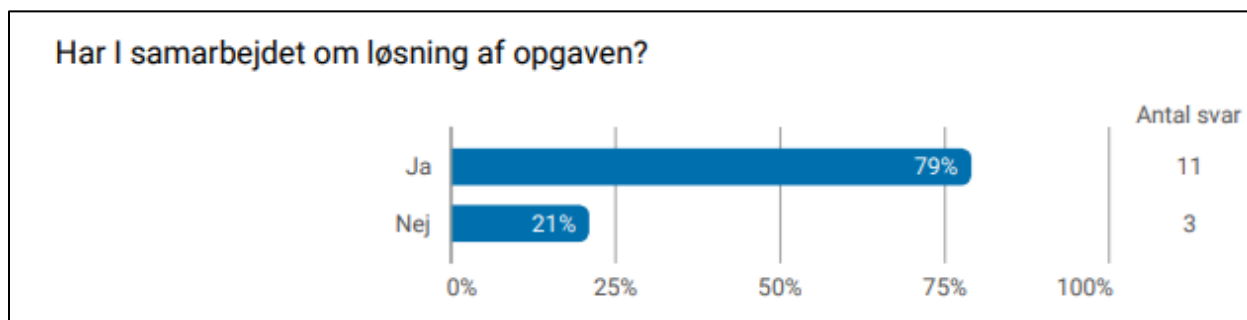


Fig. 7. Council member answer to the question: Have you collaborated on solving the task? (Har I samarbejdet om løsning af opgaven?)

However, a few members also reported conflicts, isolation, or hidden agendas among some members (figure 5).

In the interviews and discussion with the members, key aspects of what influences a good process in the coastal water council, were 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.

3.5 Leadership and Facilitation

The council members were generally satisfied with the leadership and facilitation of the secretariat, which consisted of the municipality of Ringkøbing-Skjern.

All respondents answered that the facilitation of the council from the municipality had been satisfactory, and only two persons were dissatisfied with the secretariat's work (figure 8).

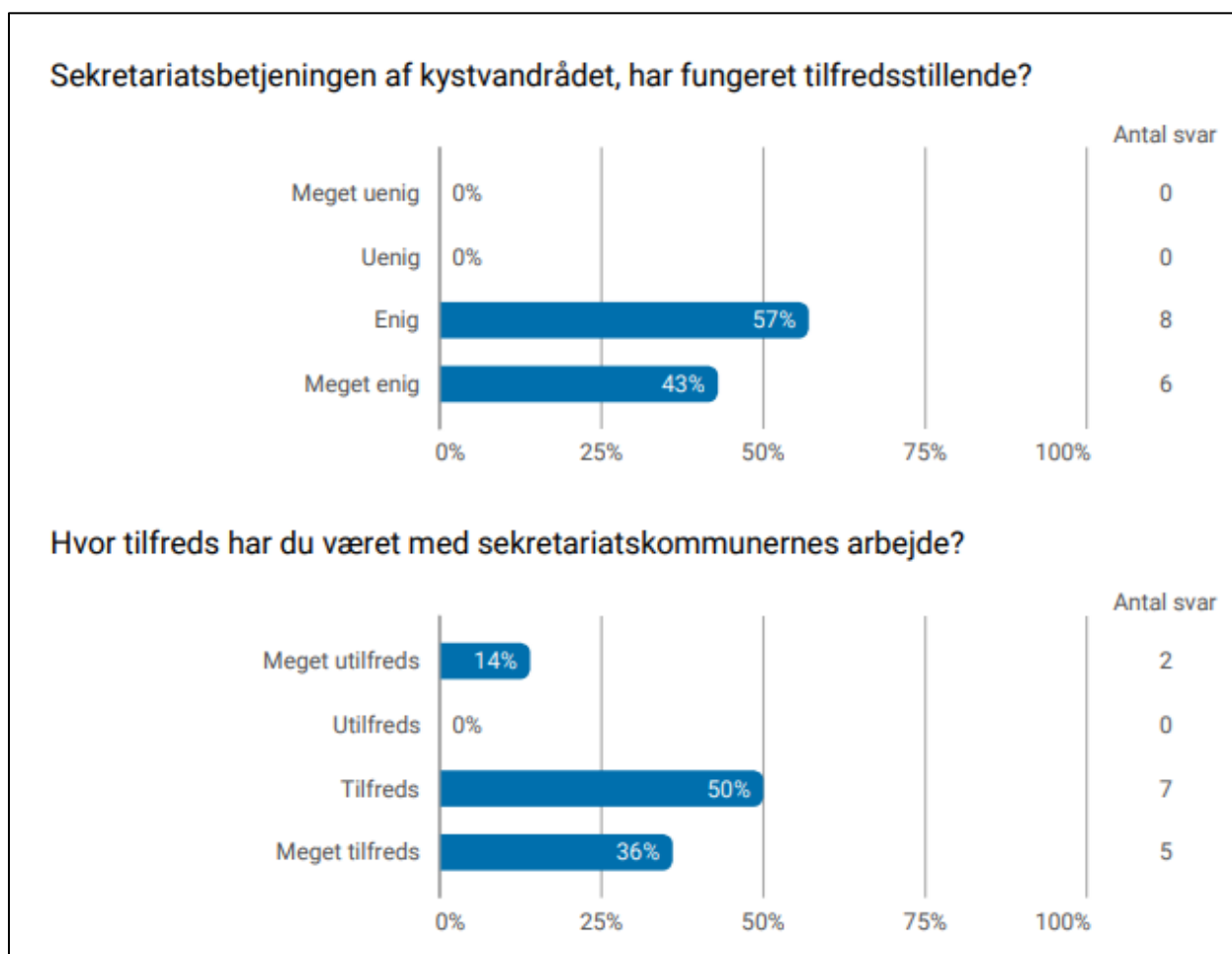


Fig. 8. Council member answer to the questions about satisfaction with the secretariat municipality.

They felt that the secretariat provided clear guidance, task distribution, and information for the work (figure 9). However, few members also felt that the process was too predetermined or biased by the secretariat.

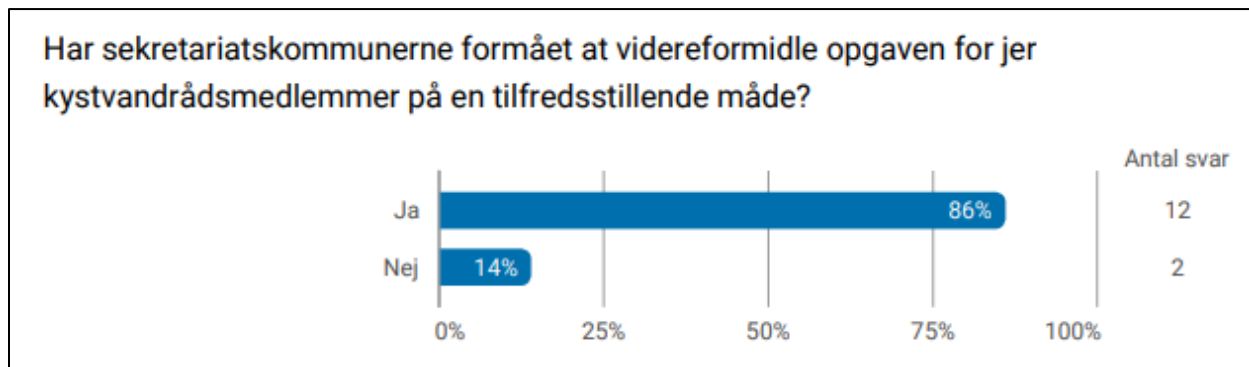


Fig. 9. Council member answer to the question: Have the municipalities' secretariat managed to convey the task to you coastal water board members in a satisfactory manner? (Har sekretariat kommunerne formået at videreformidle opgaven for jer kystvandråd medlemmer på en tilfredsstillende måde?).

3.6 Resources and knowledge

Most members felt that it was possible to solve the task satisfactorily (figure 10).

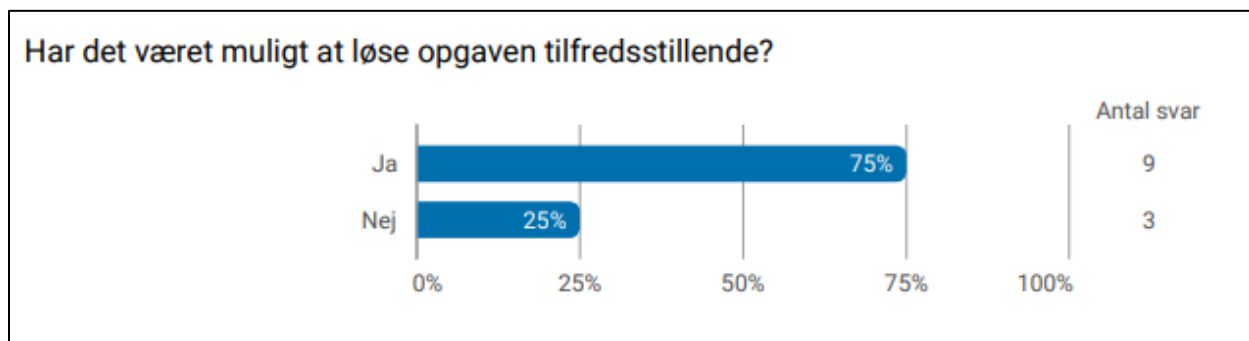


Fig. 10. Council member answer to the question: Was it possible to solve the task satisfactorily? (Har det været muligt at løse opgaven tilfredsstillende?).

The council members felt that they had the necessary skills and resources to perform their work effectively (figure 11).

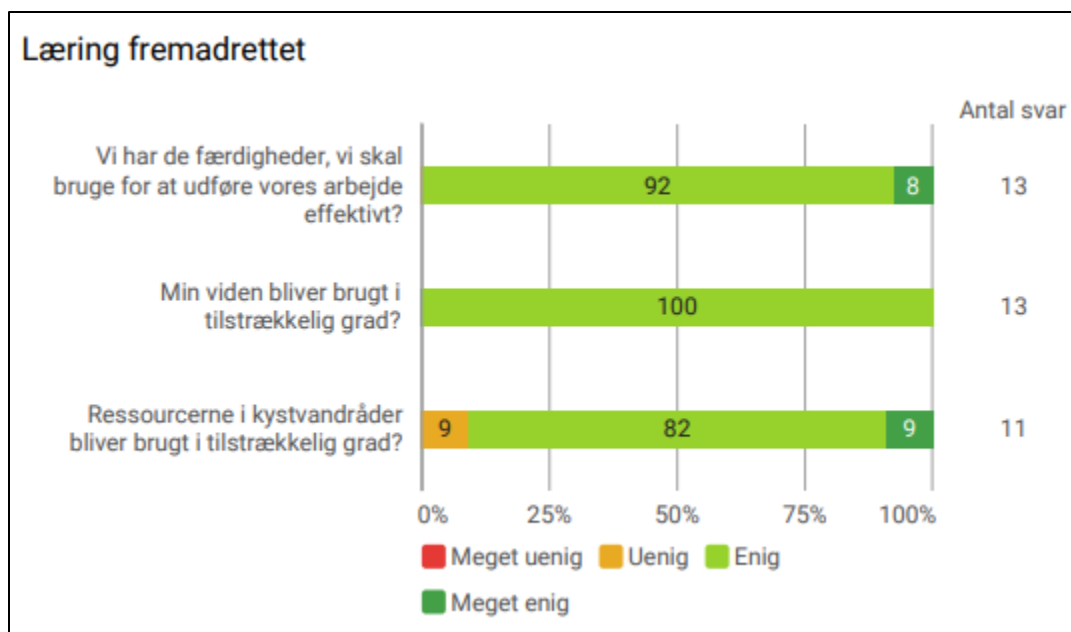


Fig. 11. Council member answer to questions on learning and skills.

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%).

And some members also felt that their involvement have an impact on the locally based analyzes the municipalities submit to the Ministry (figure 12).



Fig. 12 Council member answer to the question: Do you feel your involvement in the coastal water council work has had an impact on the locally based analyzes the municipalities submit to the Ministry? (Føler du din involvering i kystvandrådsarbejdet har haft en betydning for de lokalt funderede analyser kommunerne indsender til Ministeriet?).

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 13).

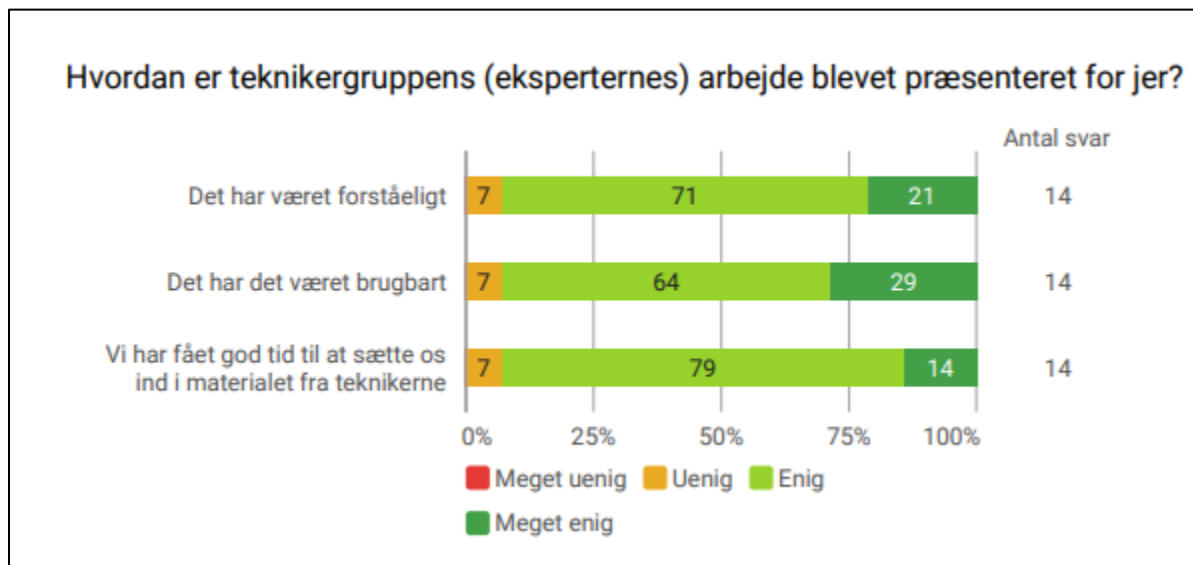


Fig. 13. Council member answer to the question: *How has the work of the technical group (experts) been presented to you? (Hvordan er teknikergruppens (eksperternes) arbejde blevet præsenteret for jer?)*

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

The water council members also felt that local knowledge was used (figure 14) and valued in the work.

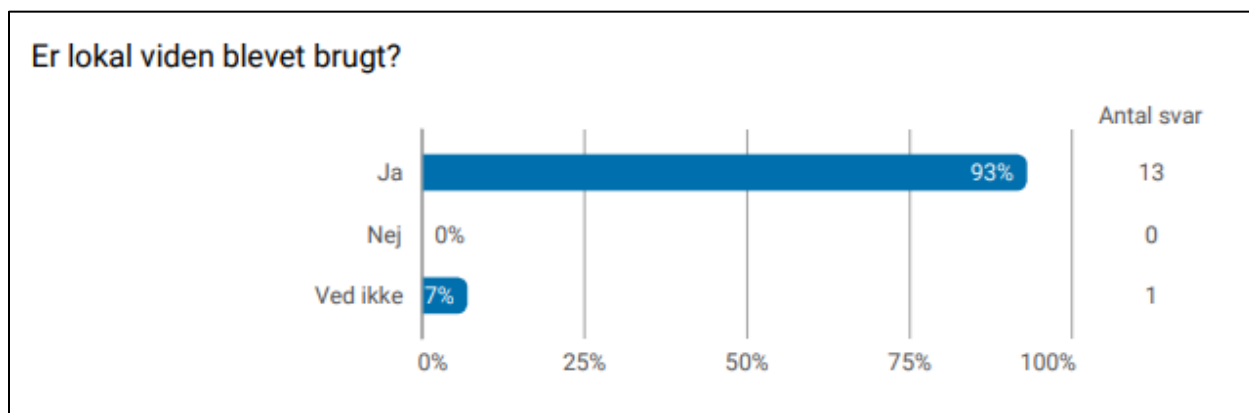


Fig. 14. Council member answer to the question: *Has local knowledge been used? (Er lokal viden blevet brugt?)*.

However, some members also felt that the causes of the poor ecological status of the fjord were unclear or disputed among the members.

The facilitators mentioned different ways in which the council members had been involved and how their local knowledge and decisions were 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. Other “local” knowledge was related to the plant and fish distribution, and the catchment analysis for Ringkøbing Fjord. Local knowledge was also sought to increase the knowledge of the different parts of the fjord.

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%).

3.7 Satisfaction

The majority of the council members were generally satisfied with their work and the outcomes of the council (figure 15).

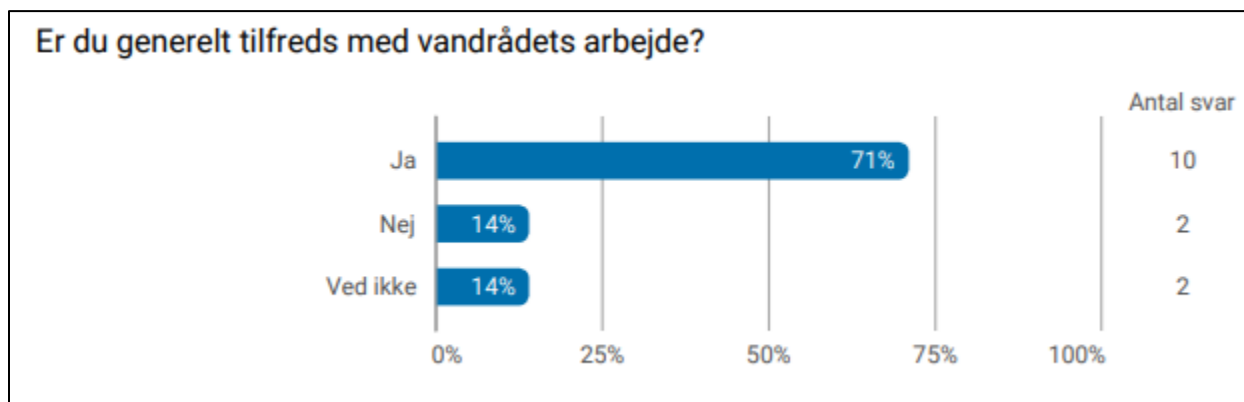


Fig. 15. Council members answers to the question: *Are you generally satisfied with the water councils work? (Er du generelt tilfreds med vandrådets arbejde?)*

Some felt that they produced effective and durable solutions for the fjord, based on local conditions and interests (figure 16).

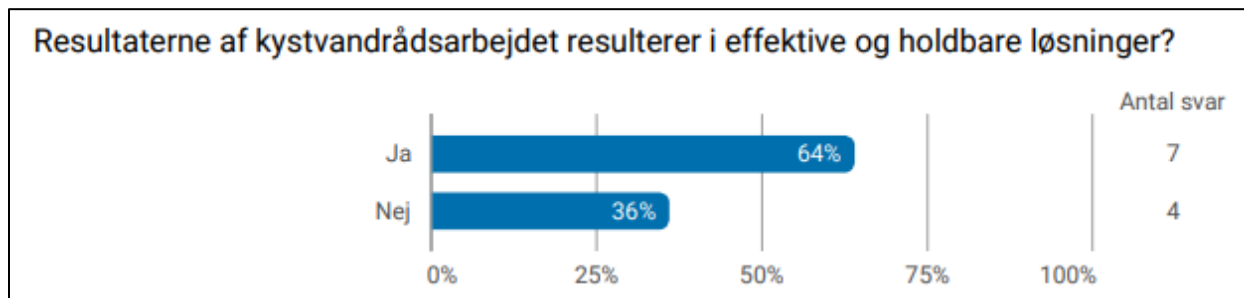


Fig. 16. Council member answer to the question: *The results of the coastal water council's work result in effective and durable solutions? (Resultaterne af kystvandrådsarbejdet resulterer i effektive og holdbare løsninger?)*

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.

3.8 Qualitative interviews and inputs to the process evaluation

The respondents indicated from the qualitative interviews that they had a positive and collaborative experience, that they have used local knowledge and expertise 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 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 are related to time, resources, and communication. These are common issues in many organizations and suggest areas for potential improvement within the council (Graversgaard, 2018).

Some of the key reasons for being able to solve the task satisfactorily, according to the respondents, were both the good interaction between the coordination group, water council and experts, and the experience, that successful cooperation led to bigger results. The common goal, and the leadership of the coordination group were also positive factors.

Challenges related to time allocated to the tasks was a factor, and for example that certain lobbyist organisations took a lot of unnecessary time and had their own agenda, and that the council members lacked time to carry out their work 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 open and honest. The council members have expressed that they learned a lot., 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. The council members faced some challenges in their work, such as the short time frame, the large size of the catchment area, 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. Especially the short timeframe was mentioned by many participants as a drawback to finding effective 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.

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