

*INFORMATION  
BOOKLET  
ON  
COMMUNITY COUNCILS*

# CONTENTS

- **Community Councils**
- **Meetings**
- **The Chairperson**
- **The Secretary**
- **Agenda and Correspondence**
- **Minutes**
- **The Treasurer**
- **Beatitudes for Meetings**
- **Appendix - Legislative Obligations and Useful Links**

This booklet was prepared by Fife Council (based on advice from the Association of Scottish Community Councils).

**N.B.** *For all Community Councils operating in Fife, Fife Council's Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils in Fife ("the Scheme") shall take precedence over the advice in this booklet on any procedural issues.*

# COMMUNITY COUNCILS

## What is a Community Council?

- **Community Councils are voluntary groups**

Community Councils are one of the principle mechanisms of public participation in Scottish Local Government. They exist to give local people a voice in the decisions taken by local authorities and other public bodies. There are over 1,000 active Community Councils in Scotland covering about 80% of the population. In Fife there are over 80 Community Councils with a membership of around 800 elected members, plus a number of co-opted and nominated members from local organisations.

- **Community Councils are statutory bodies**

Community Councils were established by the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973

- the same Act which created the then two tier system of District and Regional Councils in mainland Scotland. Community Councils were given a general power to represent local people and take action on their behalf, and they have retained that role under what are now unitary local authorities across Scotland.

- **Community Councils should be accountable to local people**

Community Councils should aim to represent all people in the area without prejudice: they are non-sectarian and normally (by custom and practice) non-party political. They must call for nominations publicly and if necessary hold contested elections. All Community Council meetings are open to the public.

## Who joins Community Councils?

Any persons aged over 16 years and resident in the Community Council area can be nominated to join the local Community Council. Local authority Councillors are ex-officio members of the Community Councils in their wards, and the involvement of local M.P.'s and M.S.P's is welcomed too. Community Councils can make provision for a limited number of local organisations to nominate a member.

## What Powers do Community Councils have?

Community Councils are regularly consulted by the local authorities and public bodies on a wide range of issues which affect their area, such as planning, environment and health.

## **Who Funds Community Councils?**

Community Councils receive an annual administrative grant from the Council. Community Councils in Fife receive a grant of £400.00 plus 12p per resident, and in certain circumstances Community Councils can apply for funding for specific projects too. Some also receive funding through national programmes and can apply for assistance to numerous other external sources.

## **What Activities do Community Councils undertake?**

- **Pressure Groups**

Community Councils' most important role is to represent local people and present their views to the public authorities.

- **Campaigns**

Community Councils can be effective campaigning groups when working with other local organisations such as tenants or residents associations, or with other Community Councils.

# MEETINGS

## (including Sub-Committees and Working Groups)

### **An Effective Meeting**

The focal point of an effective meeting should be the Chair. The Chairperson should know the way members behave and control the meeting in that knowledge. Regular meetings of Community Councils tend to be similar to those of other statutory and voluntary bodies, committees, etc. Any such group is more likely to undertake its remit effectively if reminded of its objectives and if the members are aware of their reason for being there.

Members need to be able to have face-to-face satisfactory communication within the group and its meetings. They are more likely to be committed to the group and its aims if they have this.

Outwith formal, regular meetings of a Community Council, members will normally wish to reach a working arrangement most suited to their circumstances which best ensures appropriate communications are maintained. This may involve an Executive Committee format being established for office-bearers, subject to suitable mechanisms being in place for reporting back.

### **Use of Sub-Committees or Working Groups**

Some of the business of a group such as a Community Council can be done through receiving and acting upon reports from Sub-Committees or Working Groups. Some organisations do this as a matter of course, but smaller Community Councils in particular can benefit from this way of operating.

Often the main body does not have time to undertake all the business, particularly the detailed discussions. Nor does it have the expertise. A Sub-Committee or Working Group can comprise those members most *involved* in a subject and may also include other members and representatives from outside bodies.

Tasks which have to be performed by other groupings, and indeed any such delegated business, should *involve* provision for reporting back to the main body. In the case of Community Councils in Fife, the terms of paragraph 9.6 of the Scheme shall apply.

### **To avoid confusion it is important to be clear:**

- What authority was given or what powers are delegated to the Sub-Committee or Working Group.
- What is presented as information and what as recommendations for a decision.

Where power has been delegated, the main body cannot make a different decision and really there is no reason to discuss content of such a report.

Responsibility for distinguishing between information and recommendations lies with the person presenting the report. If conventional minutes are used recommendations should be suitably highlighted. Useful too would be a list of motions arising from the full report.

## THE CHAIRPERSON

### Chairing the Community Council

The role of Chairperson of a Community Council (or other organisation) is *very* difficult and the qualities for an effective Chairperson are not easily defined.

### The General Responsibilities of Chairperson

- To Chair the majority of meetings of the organisation – in the case of a Community Council, whenever possible all regular meetings.
- To be the spokesperson for the organisation between meetings - the official '*voice*' of the organisation.
- Liaise closely with the Secretary about dates / arrangements / agenda for meetings.
- To take the lead on public relations for the organisation.

### At the Meetings of the Community Council

- It helps if the Chairperson arrives early for the meeting as members may wish to speak to him or her, prior to the meeting.
- Start the meeting on time and keep to 'time limits', nevertheless allowing reasonable time for each item on the agenda.
- Facilitate discussion during the meeting encouraging all members to participate.
- Bring items on agenda to a conclusion by a brief review of points (this may *involve* specific proposals/decisions from the floor).
- If a vote has to be taken then clarify *voting* procedure and enact this procedure (in the *event* of a tie the Chairperson may have a casting vote).
- At the close of the meeting fix arrangements for the next meeting and liaise with Secretary on actions resulting from the meeting (eg. press releases or letters).

A good Chairperson does not simply depend upon following the *above* responsibilities to the letter. It is doing that and more.

A good Chairperson has always to be aware of the difficult and demanding task he or she has taken on.

A good Chairperson must be well prepared before the meeting and be forewarned of possible controversial or delicate items on the agenda.

A good Chairperson must always appreciate that in this position there may well be less opportunity to voice his/her own opinions at meetings.

A good Chairperson must know all members of the organisation well and be able to recognise the 'strong' and 'weak' members. It is his or her particular responsibility to put at ease new members at their first meetings and to encourage participation by all.

A good Chairperson will know the goals for each meeting and will not allow time to be wasted. He or she must develop a sensitivity as to when discussion is no longer 'fruitful' and bring such discussion to a meaningful conclusion.

The Chairperson usually sets the tone and style of an organisation. He or she is normally the most quoted and conspicuous person to the public - often personifying the organisation.

The Chairperson's contribution to the effective working of a Community Council can never be underestimated.

## **THE SECRETARY**

### **The Effective Secretary**

The position of Secretary is the most interesting and rewarding office to hold on a Community Council (or other organisation). However the job of Secretary can be difficult and demanding and frequently goes unrecognised.

### **Correspondence and Records**

All correspondence both in and out must be noted on the agenda for the forthcoming regular meeting. Take the correspondence to the meeting for discussion, reading out any important letters, e-mails etc. No filing of current correspondence should be done until after the Community Council has received and approved both inward and outward mail. Conclude all letters with your full name and designation (Secretary), and sign in your usual way.

It is the duty of the Secretary to ensure that all Community Council records are retained for an appropriate period and stored. In Fife, a separate publication exists setting out Guidelines for Community Councils' Record-Keeping to assist with this task.

### **Membership List**

This should be kept up to date and include full details of all members. Convening meetings and preparing agendas (in consultation with the Chairperson) is the responsibility of the Secretary.

## **Preparing the Agenda**

The Secretary will need to check through the minutes of the previous meeting to ensure all instructions from that meeting have been carried out.

The Secretary should consult with the Chairperson and Treasurer as to any business which they would wish to have included on the agenda.

The Secretary may have suggestions or comments from other Community Council members.

It is good practice to post a notice enclosing an agenda with it to reach members about a week or so before the meeting.

## **The Meetings**

Ensure appropriate arrangements are made to keep a record of those present, possibly by circulating a list for signature, as well as intimating any apologies for absence. Check that a quorum is present (in accordance with the Scheme, and/or any individual constitution) before any business is done.

The Secretary will normally take the minute - where a Minute Secretary is used, the Secretary must ensure he or she is well briefed.

## **After the Meeting**

The Secretary will normally write any letters, e-mails etc, obtain any information or take any action on matters decided by the Community Council.

## **Other Responsibilities**

There may be a requirement to prepare a Secretary's annual report, as part of arrangements made by him/her for the Annual General Meeting. Publicity may also fall within the Secretary's remit.

# **AGENDA AND CORRESPONDENCE**

## **Agenda**

An agenda is a list of things to be done, a programme of business for the meeting.

When the agenda is being made up, the Secretary or Chairperson should try to contact others to find out what items ought to come up. Are there any letters, e-mails etc? Have any members of the public raised questions? Has the Treasurer a worry? Would any ex-officio members like to make a statement? Which of these are urgent to discuss with everyone? Are there more potential items of business than there will be time for? In that case, which are priority, and which could be dealt with some other way or some other time?

## **Timetabling**

Whoever is compiling the agenda could make a rough plan of the time available and how much is likely to be needed for each topic. This must not of course be so rigid that everyone feels that there is no time to discuss anything. Remember people will be fresh at the beginning and will wilt as time progresses. Remember also that meetings could be recalled at a later date to complete unfinished business and that particularly important topics may require a whole meeting devoted to that topic.

## **Correspondence**

Community Councils have to cope with a considerable volume of correspondence, much of it unsolicited, often asking for the Community Council to discuss and comment on the issues raised. Some Community Councils find that dealing with correspondence takes up most of the time at meetings, and this is clearly undesirable – it means that the Community Council may have its priorities set by outside bodies instead of involving itself in the community and taking positive initiatives of its own.

Some Community Councils have adopted a system which they have found reduces time spent on correspondence:

- Before each meeting, the Secretary compiles a brief summary of all incoming and outgoing correspondence since the previous meeting.
- The summary is available for members to read shortly before the meeting.

It is then up to the individual members to request that a particular item of correspondence should be read out in full or discussed.

# **MINUTES**

## **Why Take Minutes (and How to Take Them)?**

The minute of a meeting may have one or more purposes. There are different reasons for taking minutes, and it is a good idea to work out what yours are for.

- To keep a record of decisions taken.
- To keep in touch with people not able to be present at the meeting.
- To make a list of actions to be carried out.

## **The minute as a record of decisions taken**

It is a good idea to be as brief and to the point as possible. It is absolutely essential to put down accurately any decision taken, but not all the discussion which led up to it.

## **The minute as a method of keeping in touch**

If the minute is being sent out to keep people in touch, they will normally need to be fuller. Brief notes suitable for those present at the meeting will not necessarily make sense to those not able to be present.

- Members simply absent - they will have an idea of the background and just need a bit more detail.
- Others sent the minute for information purposes – they will require the scene set and more than just the bare bones. Include some discussion or reasons. Better still, what about a newsletter?

## **The minute as a reminder of action to be taken**

When listing actions to be carried out it is a help to put the initials of the person to carry out the task in the margin. Usually the minute is sent out just before the next meeting. In this case it is a good idea for someone to keep a separate action list during the meeting so that it is available as a reminder. If time allows, it is a good plan to reread this list to the meeting so that everyone is clear what is expected of them.

## **Who takes the Minute?**

The minute may be taken by the Secretary or a Minute Secretary may be chosen or employed. Alternative the task may be circulated amongst the group so everyone gets practice at this useful skill. In this case the minute may need to be checked by an experienced member. This can in turn be good feedback on how much of what is going on is being understood.

## **The Minute at the subsequent meeting**

One of the first topics on the agenda for the following meeting will be the minute of the previous meeting. An opportunity is given for any questions or corrections. The minute is then signed as correct. A file of the signed minutes is held by a member of the committee (probably the Secretary or Minute Secretary if there is one).

## **Business Arising**

It can help to go through the minute systematically reporting on each item and seeing what developments have occurred. This may be worth doing even if there is 'no news'. The item is then carried forward into the present minute and not forgotten. A check can be made on action that was to have been carried out and the name ticked when it has been done.

If all the members of a Community Council do not know what is being done in their name, problems can arise within the organisation. All business should be brought before the full Community Council and any disagreements settled then. Often a person will go ahead and take action in a Community Council's name for a number of good reasons -to avoid delay and express an interest in the subject.

To try and avoid these problems it is worth considering:

1. Defining powers and duties of Office Bearers. In particular, any mail which they receive should go before the Community Council. If there is some time until the next meeting, then an acknowledgement could be sent, stating that a full reply will follow after the next meeting.
2. Regulating the powers of Sub-Committees or Working Groups. The Council should be kept informed of what such sub-groups are doing and should approve of it.

## **THE TREASURER**

### **Responsibilities of the Treasurer**

The role of the Treasurer is different to that of other Office Bearers or members. Because the Treasurer is dealing with the finances of an organisation, he or she holds considerable responsibility yet has no absolute power over the way in which financial resources are used.

The Treasurer will have an understanding of the financial affairs of the organisation. The Treasurer should be able to explain in easily understood terms the organisation's financial position both immediately and projected to the foreseeable future, so that policy decisions can be made by the whole Community Council in full knowledge of the financial implications of pursuing those policies.

It can be seen that the Treasurer is more than simply a book-keeper. He or she is someone who:

- Must foster the financial resources of the organisation
- Should advise on the use of those resources to maximum advantage
- Must be aware of the policies being pursued
- Must maintain the books of account, prepare estimates and budgets
- Submit regular financial reports to the Community Council

The Treasurer has specific responsibilities for the administration of money. He or she must create secure systems for income and expenditure control, monitor cash flow, prepare annual accounts for audit.

In Fife, a separate publication exists setting out Financial Guidelines for Community Councils.

## BEATITUDES FOR MEETINGS

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall not dominate the meeting.

Blessed are the brief, for they shall be listened to.

Blessed are the meek, for they allow others to speak.

Blessed are the kind, for they do not pounce on mistakes.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they prevent fights.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they do not ride their hobby-horse!

## APPENDIX

### LEGISLATIVE OBLIGATIONS AND USEFUL LINKS

#### Legislative Obligations

The general purpose for Community Councils remains as set out in paragraph 1.1 of the Scheme, in accordance with the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (as alluded to the start of this booklet). There is however other more general legislation to which all Community Councils are bound, including duties to promote equality regardless of race or disability. Community Councils now also operate alongside local authorities as part of the Local Community Planning framework.

#### Useful Links

Community Councils can either access relevant Internet weblinks direct or through the use of local authority facilities. This tends to be the most suitable means of accessing initial information on legislation obligations and/or associated resources to be aware of or to utilise in undertaking their responsibilities. Based on previous experience, the following may be regarded as particularly useful links:-

[www.fifedirect.org.uk](http://www.fifedirect.org.uk)

- online access to Fife's public services, news, views and events.

<http://www.gov.scot>

- official website of the Scottish Government.

[www.communitycouncils.scot](http://www.communitycouncils.scot)

- Improvement Service Website – IS is the national improvement organization for local government in Scotland.

[www.sdda.org.uk](http://www.sdda.org.uk)

- Scottish Community Development Centre supports best practice in community development and is recognized by the Scottish Government as the national lead body for community development.

[www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk)

- a government agency working with others toward Community Planning, Community Engagement and Community Regeneration.

[www.cre.gov.uk/scotland](http://www.cre.gov.uk/scotland)

- website of the Commission for Racial Equality in Scotland.

[www.capability-scotland.org.uk](http://www.capability-scotland.org.uk)

website of Scotland's leading disability organisation

[www.digitalfife.com](http://www.digitalfife.com)

- a Community grid for learning for Fife Community Groups.

[www.scvo.org.uk](http://www.scvo.org.uk)

- website of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

[www.cvsfife.org.uk](http://www.cvsfife.org.uk)

- website of Fife's Council for Voluntary Service

*It is intended that the above list of links will be monitored, reviewed and updated as appropriate on a regular basis.*