# **Good Practice Guidance for Community Councils and Local Authorities (Part 2 – Consulting, Involving, and Representing your Community)**

## **Consulting with your local area**

You have a responsibility to communicate with all the residents living in your community. You should do this regularly and effectively to be able to claim that you represent their views and needs, and not the personal opinions of community councillors. There are two parts to this duty – seeking their views and keeping them informed of your work as their elected representatives.

This is a positive duty. Fulfilling it will immensely improve the service you give to the community. Here are some examples:

* Ensure your local authority is giving you the support you need to fulfil your duty through regular engagement with your Community Council Liaison Officer (CCLO)
* Include main contact details in all correspondence issued from your Community Council. Always invite contact and encourage feedback.
* Whenever possible, restate the ways constituents can contact you. Make this as easy as possible for them – offering multiple contact routes can help e.g. email, telephone or suggestion/enquiries box in a key community location.
* Create a website or ensure your details are included on the Local Authority website. List contact details for all Community Councilors, including pictures where possible. Show the date, time and venue of meetings, and the agenda. Include the minutes of all previous meetings.
* Look into using social media channels to publicise the work of the Community Council and to share information about upcoming meetings. You can use the #FollowMe social media guide: <https://www.communitycouncils.scot/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/40428/CC-Social-Media-Guide-2022.pdf> for Community Councils to help you decide which channel is best for you.
* Collate a database of e-mail addresses for constituents. Ask for permission to send them e-mail bulletins seeking their views and reporting your actions.
* Display Community Council contact details in all public buildings. Include information on what you do and how you can help.
* Secure space in any local newsletters, including local authority publications. You might want to do this collectively among all the Community Councils in your area.
* Invite and encourage the local press to attend meetings. Issue press releases on matters of local interest and communicate with the local media through your social media channels. Consider appointing an someone to handle social media channels and media relations.
* Whenever you have a change of office bearers, let the local press know and contact any local organisations you have worked with. This communication should indicate the new bearers and reinforce the status, work and approachability of your Community Council. Do the same after every Community Council election.
* Hold surgeries for the community in public venues. For example these could be community premises, local supermarkets or libraries. Advertise these in the local press and online well in advance and again closer to the time. Experiment with times, days and venues, and with the format of the surgery. Always have at least two Community Councilors present.
* Create and deploy surveys at least once per year. Ask questions about the community’s perceptions of you, of their community and their quality of life. Ask what you can do to improve the community. Find out what their priorities are. Be sure to include questions on the issues that will be important to your constituents in the future even if the details are not fully known. These surveys can be issued via email, social media and your website, as well as via printed papers in libraries or community centres in your area. Consider shorter, faster surveys on individual issues of significant local importance as they arise. The responses will be very important in helping you demonstrate how you speak for the community.
* Hold public meetings (in the true sense – all meetings of Community Councils are by law open to the public) whenever there is an issue of sufficient local importance. Monitor the attendance in terms of whether it representatively reflects the community – age, sex, area of residence, overall numbers and so on.
* Place suggestion boxes in prominent, busy local venues, as well as inviting online suggestions via email, social media and the website. Always respond to comments left when the person gives contact details. Regularly report comments at full Community Council meetings.
* If possible, deliver flyers or leaflets door to door. This is also an excellent way for Community Councilors to get to know their constituents, and vice versa. If there is a local community radio station, consider using it to promote the awareness and work of the Community Council.
* Word of mouth and informal personal contact is a common practice and has its place. However, it is the least objective method of discovering the community’s views and should not be relied upon wholly when the Community Council make important decisions.
* Use Plain English and explain any professional terminology or "jargon" used in all Community Council publications and correspondence to ensure that information is easy to understand.

The Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) has developed a number of resources to help with community engagement, including the National Standards for Community Engagement, which outline good-practice principles designed to improve and guide the process of community engagement.

**Remember*:***

* Always make it easy for the public to contact you
* Always seek comments and opinions from the community
* Always evaluate your effectiveness or otherwise regularly by results
* Never let the personal opinions of individual Community Councilors replace the views of your community.
* Always adhere to the principles of the Community Councilors Code of Conduct.

## **Campaigning on issues**

How does a Community Council decide which issues it will consider and how to pursue them?

You will be presented with a large variety of issues and problems. Some will affect a single member of the community, some the entire community and beyond. Your Community Council must try its best to make a balanced decision on what issues it will tackle and how:

* Start by applying the “community benefit” test. Your actions should be directed towards securing the most positive results for the greatest number of local people, so long as the minority is not adversely affected When faced with a number of issues, give first and most attention to those that affect the most people and on which you can realistically have a positive effect.
* Begin by gathering information. Decisions made without information, by prejudging the issue or by making assumptions are bad for your community and your reputation. Find out the key points and then find out what local people feel about it.
* Base your Community Council’s position on the views of or benefit to the majority of citizens. The Community Council can play a role in making sure local people have access to balanced information and discussions to inform their views
* Be honest and realistic about whether you can do something about the issue. What influence can you have on the issue and those involved and what action can you take to bring about change? Can you secure professional advice on technical aspects that would help you make your case? Research the person/organisation you want to influence? How can you engage with them to reach the desired outcome for the Community?
* Decide what results you want. Be specific. Know why you want each of these results and exactly how they will meet the conditions above about benefit to the community.
* Figure out how to reach these objectives and monitor your activity. Assess how you can tell when you have achieved your objectives.
* An issue does not need to have only two opposing sides. Could your Community Council be an independent mediator bringing opposing factions together?
* Avoid allowing the Community Council to become the vehicle for any campaign that is not the evident will of the majority of Community. When that is established, maintain that position, and do not let your Community Council become the venue for constant debate about the issue’s merits. Nor should any single issue overwhelm your meetings.
* When you have determined the official position of your Community Council on an issue, you should not alter it unless there is a material change in evidence or circumstances.
* A Community Councilor who becomes publicly associated with a particular position in a way that may be seen to prejudice the Community Council on an issue must declare their interest to the Community Council and not take part in any activity associated with it.
* You may choose to appoint a special committee to co-ordinate your action on a particular issue with appropriate delegated authority. Make sure the committee has a clear remit and set clear instructions on what it may do or not do without prior approval of the whole Community Council.

## **Representing your community**

Communities want to see how their views are being reflected in the decisions made on their behalf by Community Councils. This can be achieved in a number of ways:

* Minutes of Community Council meetings – minutes should accurately reflect the business at a meeting and the decision that was reached. This decision should be made on the basis of known community opinion (evidenced where possible) to clearly show to both the local community and other outside bodies, such as the Local Authority, that the community have been listened to and their view(s) accurately reflected.
* Community Council meetings – this is the clearest way for Community Councils to share the known views of the community and to demonstrate to those in attendance that they are being listened to. The Annual General Meeting (AGM) is a great opportunity to promote the work that the Community Council has done over the preceding year.
* Public (subject specific) meetings – where these reflect areas of local concern it demonstrates to the community that they are being listened to and consulted, that their concerns are being acknowledged and that action is being taken where appropriate on their behalf
* Attendance at public sector agency meetings – such attendances should be reflected in the minutes to identify where Community Councilors have attended on behalf of their community. Issues/opinions expressed by the Community Councilor should be reported back to the community through the minutes.
* Newsletters/public notices - good means to engage and share information but also to gather local views and identify how local views have shaped the views/work of the Community Council.
* Website and social media – these are increasingly important channels to ensure that you are reaching a wide cross-section of your community. As well as sharing information, they can also be a useful resource for gathering opinions from local people.
* Membership – encourage membership from across the geographical Community Council area reflecting the make-up of the community it represents. The Community Council should strive to be diverse and inclusive in its membership and leadership to ensure that all members of the community are represented.
* Communication channels – A Community Council should communicate regularly with community members to keep them informed about their activities, upcoming events, and issues affecting the community, as well as establishing communication channels with key public and third sector organisations in the area. Examples of communication media include notice boards, local shops, suggestion boxes and online via email, newsletters, social media, online forums and virtual notice boards.
* Consultation – it is important for Community Councils to represent local views through various mechanisms including consultation where possible.
* All information produced should be available as widely as possible and easily accessible. It is also important that the Community Council seeks out the most effective ways to engage with the residents. Members of the public can inform the Community Council of points which they would like to be discussed and make their views known.

When establishing views, Community Councilors should canvass local opinion but be careful not to be perceived as orchestrating campaigns unless endorsed by the Community. Community Councils are aware that it is often only a vocal minority who make representations. The Community Council should seek to represent the views of the whole Community.

## **Improving and encouraging youth membership**

Ever since they were established, many Community Councils have struggled to attract and sustain the involvement of young people. The Model Scheme of Establishment now allows for young people aged over 16 to become full Community Councilors, with full voting rights, which has gone some way towards addressing the difficulties in attracting young people to the role. Community Councils may also allow young people under the age of 16 to become associate members, but this should be done by working with local schools to ensure child protection issues are adhered to.

Article 12 in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that young people who are capable of forming their views, should have the right to express these views freely: <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/rights/uncrc/articles/article-12/>

The Scottish Parliament passed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill in 2020, with the aim of enshrining UNCRC principles into Scots law. However, the UK Supreme Court ruled that certain aspects of the UNCRC Bill were outwith the powers of the Scottish Parliament, which means that the Scottish Government has to find a way to bring the UNCRC Bill within their powers so it can become law in Scotland.

There are number of organisations in Scotland which can provide help and guidance to Community Councils who want to increase youth involvement, as well as contacting local schools and the local authority.

Youth Scotland: <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/>

Youthlink Scotland: <https://www.youthlink.scot/>

Scottish Youth Parliament: <https://syp.org.uk/get-involved/join-us/>

Young Scot: <https://young.scot/>

Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland: <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/>

Children’s Parliament: <https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/>

Scottish Alliance for Children’s Rights: <https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/>

Community Councils can stimulate young people's interest by promoting their elections amongst Youth Groups, Youth Forums, Pupil Councils and Student Associations all of which are likely to have young people who may be interested in getting involved in the local democratic process. Local Authorities are responsible for promoting active citizenship as part of the school curriculum and this should be linked to the Community Council election process.

Community Councils may also want to consider appointing young people as associate members without voting rights, for the specific purpose of representing young people's views.

Community Councils also need to consider how they will ascertain and represent the views of young people. If this cannot be achieved in the direct ways described above, then the Community Councils can work in partnership with the local authority and other agencies that have direct contact with young people to gather their opinions.