Aberdeen City Council

Community Council Protocol

PREFACE

I am pleased to present and support this protocol which has been developed to enhance the working relationship between the Council and the Community Councils who represent local communities across Aberdeen.

As a Council we have said that we will seek to develop a sense of community in Aberdeen based on principles of openness, fairness, reciprocity and responsibility and that we will encourage and support citizens to participate in the development, design and decision making of services to promote civic pride, active citizenship and resilience. Community Councils can help to achieve this by identifying local issues and providing a channel of communication between the Council, Elected Members, Officers and the local communities that they represent. The Council in turn must acknowledge the work of the Community Councils and the representations that they make on behalf of their local residents.

This protocol outlines the expectations and standards for the way in which Community Councils and the Council can work together to improve communication and participation across the City. We as a Council will face many challenges and pressures so it is important to maintain an open and constructive dialogue with Community Councils to help us achieve all that faces the City now and in the future.

I am confident that this protocol will encourage and promote the necessary effective working relationship between Council officials, Elected Members, Community Councils and the local communities they represent whilst making the City a better place for all of its citizens.

Councillor Barney Crockett

Leader of the Council
Aberdeen City Council

Contents Page

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1

This protocol describes how the interaction should happen between Community Councils and the City Council and has been developed through dialogue between the City Council and Community Councils and represents their joint commitment to an effective working relationship. It sets out the mutual expectations agreed between the City Council and Community Councils.

1.2

When the Protocol fails to be adhered to by any partner the Community Council Liaison Officer will be notified in order to discuss the issue with the relevant party and if at that stage the issue has still not been rectified then a letter of complaint should be submitted to the Chief Executive and/or the Chairperson of the Community Council Forum which should be done via the Community Council Liaison Officer in order to ensure that the matter is being investigated.

1.3

The Protocol should be a working document that can be reviewed at any time to ensure that it is working effectively and also so that any new legislation or other improvements can be included.

2. ROLES

2.1 Community Council Forum

The City Council welcomes the role of the Community Council Forum as it provides support and assistance to individual Community Councils on matters of interest or concern. As an independent and non-political body they are a collective voice for Community Councils across the City and welcome information and speakers on issues that affect local communities.

2.2 Community Councils

Community Councils as a statutory consultee are involved in local environmental, planning and licensing issues and provide the Council with public opinion on such matters affecting their communities. Community Councils are fully committed to adhere to the legislation and guidelines in relation to community engagement, equality and planning.

It is acknowledged that liaison procedures should reflect local variations and should be tailored to the characteristics of the particular Community Council and the local areas involved. It is also considered that Community Councils have a special role in these matters, to represent a broader yet still local view that can be considered alongside the comments of those with a more individual interest.

An important aspect of the Community Council's role is to advocate and campaign in support of their community's concerns. In some cases Community Councils will be in disagreement with the Council and the public debate over contentious issues is an important part of the democratic process. This Protocol and the National Standards for Community Engagement support this by ensuring Community Councils have the required information and opportunities to effectively carry out their role. In return Community Councils are expected to conduct campaigns in a fair and proportionate manner to acknowledge the Council's (or other authorities) ultimate need to take decisions balancing competing views and their statutory responsibilities.

2.3   Chief Executive

The City Council's Chief Executive is the chief officer and is the formal link between the elected members of the Council and its officers and is ultimately responsible for the delivery of all Council Services.

If a Community Council is not satisfied with, or wishes to commend the actions or decisions of a particular City Council Service or an Officer then this is most appropriately done through the Chief Executive.

2.4   Elected Members

Elected members of the City Council represent serve and provide leadership for all the communities in Aberdeen. City Councillors have to make many challenging decisions in the Council's day to day business. They must balance their priorities by taking into account their statutory responsibilities, the needs and aspirations of citizens and the resources available to them.

2.5   Officers

The principal point of contact between Community Councils and the Council is directly with Council Officers. The most effective way of getting information, providing community feedback, exploring issues and advocating on behalf of the community is to have direct dialogue with the appropriate officer. It is not practical to provide a list of responsible officers for the thousands of issues that will concern a Community Council nor is it appropriate to be inflexible in how Community Councils contact officers. This protocol tries to address these issues by describing contact at three different levels (as set out under Sections 5 and 6.

3. RATIONALE

A number of principles and local government initiatives provide the basis of the Community Council Protocol. These are outlined below:-

- The Protocol has been developed in line with the National Standards for Community Engagement.

- The City Council has worked to enhance local democracy and to promote community involvement in local and city wide issues. An important aspect of this work is the support of community organisations that can represent the various communities in the city and engage in a dialogue with public authorities.

- By developing their relationship with local authorities and their familiarity with the issues involved, Community Councils can increase the effectiveness of their input and sustain their ability to keep local residents informed.

- Community Councils have an important role to play as the most local community based tier of elected representation provided for in statute.

- Through restructuring, and through policy and planning initiatives including Community Planning, Best Value and Social Inclusion the City Council is bringing local government closer to the people. This includes an increased commitment to consult citizens and involve communities particularly at neighbourhood level.

- Community Councils and the City Council have respectively expressed a willingness to tackle the challenges of enabling Community Councils to effectively represent a full cross section of their communities and for the Council of developing fair and accessible means of consultation and participation.

4. SCHEME FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

4.1
Detailed arrangements are set out in the Council's Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils. This covers elections, funding, liaison, training etc. The Scheme is set out in accordance with the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, Chapter 65, Part IV.

4.2
The Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils should be part of an ongoing review to ensure new legislation or specific local issues are dealt with in a timely manner. At the very least it should be reviewed prior to the elections for Community Councils.

5.   COMMUNICATION

5.1
In order to operate effectively there needs to be an open and easy way to communicate with each party.

5.2   Elected Members

Each Community Council's boundary will include one or more City Council wards. The City Councillors who represent these wards provide a direct link between their constituents and the City Councils services and decision making structures. Contact between Community Councils and City Councillors can create a mutually informed channel of communication between the Council and communities within the city. Ward Councillors are non-voting members of the Community Council.

To make the most of this point of contact it is recognised good practice for Community Councillors to let their Ward Councillors know when meetings are being held and to copy them into relevant correspondence. The Ward Councillor may do likewise. It is the responsibility of each Community Council and City Councillor to develop whatever working relationship they consider is appropriate. Ward Councillors, when available and appropriate to do so, should try to attend meetings of the Community Council's in their areas.

5.3   Community Council Liaison Officer (CCLO)

The first point of contact for new Community Councils is with the Community Council Liaison Officer who supports the election arrangements and initial community council meetings. The officer plays an ongoing role in helping Community Councils to conform to their constitution and the Council's Scheme for Community Councils and in relation to other developments that may involve Community Councils in general (e.g. training, special meetings).

Contact with the Community Council Liaison Officer is appropriate for all matters concerning the organisation of Community Councils. However it is recognised that for most Community Councils, Councillors and Officers, the Liaison Officer becomes a familiar and easy reached contact within the Council and it is for this reason that the Liaison Officer regularly advises Community Councils on who within the Council to contact about specific queries. The Liaison Officer should also be contacted to help with resolving issues between Services of the Council and Community Councils.

The Community Council Liaison Officer is Karen Riddoch and can be contacted on 01224 522723 or email communitycouncils@aberdeencity.gov.uk

5.4 City Council Officers

The City Council aims to be open and transparent in the way it works and makes decisions. This includes providing information through the web-site, leaflets, press releases and direct mailing. This approach together with the assistance of the Community Councils Liaison Officer should enable Community Councils to identify whom they require to contact about a specific issue. Initial contacts will usually be directed through the office of the appropriate Head of Service but it is accepted that Community Councillors and Officers with specific responsibilities will become known to each other and find it more effective to communicate directly. This is appropriate and helpful so long as an officer is not expected to act beyond their level of responsibility. Contact between Community Councils and City Council officers can be described at three different levels (informal, formal and statutory). The degree of formality and complexity should determine what method of communication is used (i.e. telephone, email/fax, letter or meeting).

Informal: A Community Councillor, like any member of the public, is entitled to ask for information about services, plans etc that are held by Aberdeen City Council. Officers are expected to be available and helpful, whilst enquirers should respect the time and responsibilities of officers. Similarly officers may find it useful when processing issues that have a local impact to informally seek information or feedback from community councillors.

Formal: When Community Councils and the Council wish to have enquiries, submissions and responses to these put on record it is preferable to resort to more formal means of contact such as letters and minuted meetings. In such cases it is important that there is a mutual awareness that participants are acting on behalf of the Community Council and City Council. For this reason it is preferable that contact is between Community Council office bearers (i.e. Chairperson, Secretary, or other designated member) and City Council senior managers (i.e. Director, Head of Service or other designated officer). Where contact involves City Council committees the standing orders of the City Council will further prescribe the means of contact.

Statutory: Community Councils are statutory consultees in applications for planning permission and for premises (liquor) licences relating to the application for provisional, new and major variations. They may also engage in other matters where the City Council has statutory duties (e.g. Social Work, Education, Environment, etc). In such cases both the City Council and the Community Councils are obliged to respect the responsibilities and procedures laid down by Government.

5.5 Community Councils

Officers of the Council and elected members will need to contact Community Councils on a variety of issues therefore a list of contacts will be made available to them. Alternatively the Community Council Liaison Officer can act as a contact point for issuing information to Community Councils.

6.   CORRESPONDENCE

6.1
The City Council will strive to adhere to basic standards in dealing with general correspondence, complaints and enquiries from Community Councils. Within five working days a response or an acknowledgement should be issued. Within 15 working days a full response or an update on progress will be issued.

A written request for information available under the Freedom of Information legislation will be responded to within the statutory limit of 20 working days. A request for environmental information, which is dealt with under the Environmental Information Regulations, will normally be answered within 20 working days, up to 40 working days if complex.

6.2
Correspondence from the City Council to Community Councils should be addressed to the Chairperson or Secretary (or other designated member). When a response on behalf of the Community Council is requested any deadline must allow for their cycle of meetings (usually monthly). For complex and far reaching matters it may be appropriate to allow two meetings.

6.3
Specifically correspondence should be received by Chairpersons or Secretaries (or another designated community council member) by the end of the month prior to consultation.

The Community Council will have the opportunity to discuss the correspondence at their regular monthly council meeting and, if necessary, invite a representative(s) from the Council to attend. Thereafter, the Community Council will have two weeks from the end of the consultation month to provide any written response. Many Community Councils do not sit in July and December. During these months the discussion period for consultation will be extended to two months – (July/September) (December/January).

Feedback to any response on the correspondence will be provided as soon as possible and no later than 20 working days from receipt of the response, unless specifically agreed with the Community Council.

7.   PARTICIPATION

7.1
The Council actively seeks the direct participation of citizens and community organisations to improve the quality of the services it provides and to increase the sense of ownership people feel for their Council. Community Councils, as

representative area based community organisations, make a key contribution to community participation and active citizenship.

7.2
To support good practice in community participation the Council has adopted the National Standards for Community Engagement**.**

7.3
The process will follow the same timetable as highlighted under correspondence. Notification of at least one month of a request to attend a participation event or notification before the end of a month to enable one month for the community council to hold their regular council meeting to discuss the relevant issue (extended to 2 months for July/August and December/January).

This will allow invited guests from the Council to attend as necessary and two weeks for the Community Council to send any written response. Feedback to any response on the consultation exercise should be as soon as possible and no later than 15 working days from receipt of the response, unless specifically agreed with the Community Council.

8.   PLANNING

The engagement between Aberdeen City Council and Community Councils on planning is subject to a separate planning protocol.

9.   INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

9.1
The City Council is developing an increasing range of means of contact between itself and the citizens of Aberdeen. Some of these will be of use to Community Councils

9.2   Telephone Help Lines
A number of help lines are now in place to assist in the reporting of faults and other incidents. These include: faulty street lights, broken pavements, fly-tipping, overflowing waste bins, Crimestoppers, etc.

9.3   Aberdeen City Council Web Site
The web site aims to provide a number of means of providing information, making enquiries and reporting faults. http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/
Information about the Freedom of Information policy and publication scheme can be found there. The website is also a useful tool for accessing the Committee papers for the Council's Committees.

There is also a section on the City Councils website specifically for Community Council Information. This includes details of each of the Community Councils and the area that they serve as well as links to various ACC pages commonly used by Community Councils.