1.4
Ways of Working and Establishing Priorities

Broadly speaking, there are two ways of working in any Community Council. It can choose to play a 'reactive role' or it can choose to play a 'proactive role'. These are discussed below:

The Reactive Role

Some Community Councils believe that their primary responsibility is to react efficiently to the problems and complaints that are brought to them by members of their community, and to correspondence coming in from outside bodies like the Local Authority.

The view taken by these Community Councils may be summarised as follows:

"If it is brought before the Community Council, something will be done about it."

In such a Community Council, the agenda would be made up almost entirely of issues such as street lighting that needed repairing, grass that needed cutting, and documents sent by the Local Authority. Clearly these are issues of importance to the community, and therefore matters which need to be resolved. Working in this way, however, is reactive in the sense that individuals and organisations outside the Community Council set the agenda itself.

The Proactive Role

In contrast, other Community Councils see it as their job, in addition to responding to issues such as those mentioned above, to facilitate particular courses of action or projects in the community. These might include seeking funding for new play-parks or managing local amenities and facilities. In such the approach will not be to wait for problems and issues to be brought before it. Rather, it would set out to identify the various issues that it thinks might affect the community, both in the short and longer term.

Having identified those issues as best it can, it would then proceed to set out some priorities for the community and the Community Council. This involves thinking what action(s) will bring most benefit for the community, and considering the role the Community Council might play in making things happen. It also means taking a decision as to the overall direction in which the Community Council should move.

For example, some Community Councils have identified the threat to their physical environment as the key issue for their community and have responded by developing a strategy which sets out a series of steps which they intend to take at local level to counter that threat. Other Community Councils have identified the improvement of community facilities as the key issue and have developed a strategy around that.

Developing a Proactive Strategy

Examining what is going on inside and outside the community; The first step is to take a careful look at the ways in which your community might be developed.

- Examine the needs that are apparent in the community and try to identify any particular hopes and ambitions that might be translated into reality;
- Then have a look at what is going on in the outside world. What are the major opportunities or threats?;
- You might consider the likely impact of matters such as the availability of European or Lottery funding in this category;
- How could your Community Council take full advantage of the opportunities available, or take action to minimise the impact of any "threats"?

Reviewing the Options

The next stage is to set out all of the possibilities, all of the things that the Community Council might get involved in to benefit the community. These are your strategic options and they need to be carefully considered before deciding which particular option(s) to pursue. Try to be clear about how much time, energy and money would have to be put in to the various options, and establish whether or not those could be justified in terms of the outcome that you would want to achieve.

Making Strategic Decisions

Once you are satisfied that you have examined all of the options open to the Community Council it is possible to start taking decisions about which option(s) offer most benefit, or make most sense given the circumstances. Effectively this means choosing a direction for the Community Council to pursue. Direction is important for any organisation since it allows the people involved to share a vision of where they are going.

Once you have chosen the overall direction try to consult widely within your community. Find out whether people in general are behind you, and try to identify any particular concerns that they might have. By consulting early there is a greater likelihood that the community as a whole will be supportive of any action that the Community Council takes subsequently. It also helps to minimise the danger that the Community Council moves in a direction that alienates the community as a whole.

Setting the Objectives

Once you are clear about what the overall goal is, it is possible to set very specific objectives. For example, if your chosen goal is "to improve the cleanliness of the area" your objectives might be as follows:

- To make local people aware of the issues;
- To involve local schoolchildren in projects;
- To carry out specific clean-up projects.

Developing the Strategy

When the objectives are clearly set out you can then consider the things that need to be done in order to achieve them. This requires you to think about which actions are likely to be the most effective in the particular circumstances of your Community Council.

Establishing Priorities

Another problem that some Community Councils have acknowledged is that they find it very difficult to deal with matters that are not practical issues such as "grass cutting" or "potholes in the road". While these issues are an important part of the work of a Community Council it should never be forgotten that there are other matters, which may be less tangible in the short term, but which may nevertheless have a major impact on the community for some time to come. These may include, for example:

- Changing economic conditions;
- Demographic changes in the community;
- Long-term development proposals.

It is important that placing too much emphasis on "nuts and bolts" issues does not overlook matters like this of strategic importance to your community. The way to overcome this problem is to think in terms of priorities and to encourage other Members of the Community Council to think likewise.

Try to be clear about which issues are most important for your community and to allocate most time to them. This may mean choosing between the short-term things like "potholes in roads" and the longer-term matters such as the reorganisation of local government. Remember always that important issues are important and should not be set aside simply because there is another issue that appears on the surface to be more urgent.

One way to get through complex issues that are important and long term is to break them down into chunks and deal with them one by one over a series of meetings. Another approach would be to split up the task and allocate responsibility for bits of the task to different individuals or groups in the Community Council.

Some Community Councils have adopted "watching briefs" whereby individual Members with specific skills, knowledge or experience, are given the role of "watching out" for issues in that particular area of interest. This would also help in dealing with the wide range of consultation documents that Community Councils are asked to respond to. A planning convener" or sub-committee is often appointed to ensure that timely responses to applications are made.

The Community Council may also be asked to participate in meetings of other bodies such as the Joint Community Councils of Moray (section1.16) or groups which are a part of the Community Planning process. You may wish to appoint representatives to these bodies to ensure that your voice is heard. A reserve is also useful to ensure continuity of attendance.

Using Time Effectively

For many people, participating in the work of Community Councils involves the sacrifice of valuable leisure time. On the one hand they want to be active in the affairs of their community; on the other hand they want to ensure that there is the minimum intrusion into their free time.

In order to achieve this it is necessary to take a fairly disciplined approach to the use of time. This is particularly important when it comes to meetings. Perhaps the single most damaging thing for any Community Council is *unproductive meetings* where the discussion is not focused on issues of importance to the community and where those doing the talking are more interested in their personal agenda than the agenda of the Community Council.

For those less used to public speaking or debating, it is sometimes useful to write down in brief on a piece of paper or card the particular points which you intend to raise. This helps to concentrate thoughts and expedite discussion.