

EDINBURGH ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

c/o The Secretary, 2b Redford Gardens, Edinburgh EH13 0AR

Community Council Meetings During the COVID-19 Emergency: Emerging Practice

Introduction

This note is based on discussion between community council representatives at the meeting of the Edinburgh Association of Community Council on 18th June. Members were invited to share the practices adopted in the light of the guidance from Edinburgh City Council that normal meetings of community councils should not be held during the period of the emergency. It was clear that CCs have adopted a range of responses: as agreed at the EACC meeting, this note demonstrates the alternative practices which have been adopted, for the information of all CCs within the city.

Undermining local democracy?

Whilst some CCs had followed the guidance and suspended business, many others felt that to do so was firmly to undermine local democracy at a time when public authorities were themselves curtailing consultation procedures and introducing emergency measures which impact significantly on communities. There was the perception too that some developers may seek to take advantage of the reduced scrutiny of their proposals.

A range of responses

Those represented at the EACC meeting had adopted a wide range of practices in order to maintain at least some kind of discussion of current concerns within their areas. All were dependent on on-line communication. Broadly, the range of practice is summarised below:

- Reliance on discussion between members by email or on Facebook.
- Reliance on meetings of CC Office Bearers.
- Reliance on special meetings on particular topics such as with developers on specific proposals.
- Reliance on on-line business meetings of CC members only, using platforms such as Zoom or Skype.
- Reliance on full on-line meetings as above but with participation from members of the public and councillors.

In addition, some CCs had undertaken initiatives within their areas, for example to support local traders or supporting volunteer groups working with vulnerable people.

Experience

Each of these approaches allowed basic business to continue, although often in a restricted form.

Those using on-line platforms reported that Zoom was much more reliable than Skype, although it restricted ward councillors from participating unless they used their own equipment from home. Most community council members were able to participate in meetings although lack of access to suitable equipment did prohibit some from doing so.

The most problematic issue for many was the arrangements for participation from members of the public. Some did not attempt this, restricting meetings to CC business meetings, and limiting

decision making until 'normal' meetings could ratify decisions made. Others had used a variety of ways to involve the public. These included:

- Advertising meetings and agendas on their websites and inviting people to comment by email.
- Inviting people to indicate they would like to attend, and then supplying them with a link to join the on-line meeting.
- Inviting people to register for the meeting through Eventbrite and then providing a link.

Such arrangements were successful in attracting an element of public participation, and in some cases in considerable numbers. Such meetings were able to discuss a range of business much as they would do normally, including receiving Police reports albeit in writing rather than in person. Meetings were quorate, members were easily able to vote, and firm decisions could be made.

Conclusions

Whilst it is for individual community councils to agree how they should conduct their business, it was apparent from the discussion at the EACC meeting that it was practical to hold on-line meetings with full participation from the majority of CC members, city councillors and from members of the public. It was therefore possible to continue the normal local democratic process, and for CCs to continue to participate in consultative processes and undertake other community business.

Indeed, there was a view that such on-line meetings were arguable better than conventional face-to-face meetings in a public place. Whilst each format can exclude some (e.g. those without internet access on the one hand or restricted mobility on the other), it was clear that community business could be carried out efficiently, and when supported by appropriate public announcements, openly.

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Chair, EACC