

Community Councils – Frequently Asked Questions

What is a community council?

A community council is a voluntary organisation set up by statute by the Local Authority and run by local residents to act on behalf of its area. As the most local tier of elected representation, community councils play an important role in local democracy. They bridge the gap between local authorities and communities and help to make public bodies aware of the opinions and needs of the communities they represent.

As well as representing the needs, aspirations and views of the community to public bodies, community councils often facilitate activities which promote the well-being of their communities. They bring local people together to make things happen, protect and promote the identity of their community, advise, lobby, advocate and influence on issues of concern on behalf of local people and communities.

Here are some examples of their work from across Highland:

- Carry out projects to enhance their community for all types of citizens – elderly, single mothers, minority groups, youths etc.
- Issue community newsletters
- Conduct local surveys
- Campaign on local issues
- Organise community events (such as local galas)

Community councils are the strongest means of becoming involved with your local area. It will give you a good understanding of the workings of local government and what is going on locally and nationally.

What is involved in being a community councillor?

Being a community councillor means taking shared responsibility for the success of the community council, even if you are not an office bearer. You must commit to the role and uphold the standards and values of the community council. All members should attend meetings regularly and contribute to discussions and decisions concerning the work of the community council. Acting through the community council, you must reflect the views of the community as a whole, on any issue, irrespective of your own personal opinion.

The maximum membership of each of the 154 Highland Community Councils is determined by the population it serves and varies from 7 to 13 members.

How do I get involved?

Most community councils have their own website and social media pages. Meetings are open to the public, so if you are interested in becoming a community councillor feel free to go along and see how it all works.

Community council elections are held every 4 years. The next local elections will be held in November 2019 and are open to anyone who is eligible to stand (i.e. you must be 16 years or over and appear on the electoral roll for the relevant area). Election notices are posted in public places and in the local media prior to the nomination deadline.

Out with election or by-elections, there may also be opportunities to become a co-opted (nominated) member of your local community council. If this is of interest to you, get in touch with your local community council.

Contact details for all community councils can be found online at:

<https://www.highland.gov.uk/communitycouncils>

Nomination papers are available from the Highland Council www.highland.gov.uk/elections and from your Ward Manager.

How often do community councils meet and what happens at meetings?

Each community council must hold at least six ordinary meetings per year. However, meetings are held as often as necessary to fulfil duties, usually every 4 to 6 weeks. Agenda items can include consideration of planning applications, requests for feedback from public bodies on service delivery proposals or changes, and a range of community issues raised through correspondence.

The local Elected Members of Highland Council usually attend meetings and there are regular reports and inputs from Police Scotland and other local service providers, such as NHS Highland.

What are the various roles in a community council?

There are various roles in which you can play your part on your community council. All members of the community council are equally responsible for the community council's decisions and actions, governance and finance - ensuring that everything is done according to the Scheme of Establishment for community councils (this is explained below). All members are responsible for representing their community objectively and conscientiously.

Some specific roles within a community council are described below, followed by an outline of other potential roles that may be useful from time to time.

Chairperson - The chairperson can make a very significant difference to the success of a community council. Meetings are key to the community council making decisions on its work and priorities. The chairperson is responsible for ensuring discussions are productive and run on-time, and that clear action points are set.

Treasurer - The Treasurer is responsible for handling the community council 's finances. This includes ensuring finances are kept healthy and the community council does not get into debt. The Treasurer must oversee all financial administration and transactions of the community council and make decisions regarding these.

Secretary - The Secretary ensures the smooth running of the community council by organising meetings, setting the agenda and keeping minutes and records. Secretaries also ensure effective communication between committee members.

Minute Secretary – this is an optional appointment to assist with taking minutes, but with no voting rights

Members - All members contribute to the success of a community council, through participating in decision making and undertaking extra work for the community council from time to time. Members must be over 16 years of age.

Co-opted Members - As above for Members, but nominated to fill vacancies rather than elected.

Ex Officio Members - Elected Members of Highland Council for the community council area. They do not have voting rights but may contribute to discussion and may be tasked with furthering items relating to the local authority.

Associate Members – appointed by majority vote of a community council, to bring in individuals with particular skills or knowledge. Associate members have no voting rights and need not be resident within the Community Council area. This may include representatives from other constituted local voluntary organisations and persons under the age of 16.

Other roles - community councils may want to consider need to create a specific role in response to an area or project that needs a lot of attention. E.g. The community council may wish to create the post of Engagement Officer where there is a need to reach out to a specific group that is under-represented (e.g. young people, ethnic minorities or disabled people).

Examples of other roles that could be created to support the work of community councils are:

- Publicity Officer;
- Fundraising Officer;
- Assets Management Officer;
- Communications Officer;
- Events Officer;
- Youth involvement.

You do not have to take on a specific role to be involved in your community council. All members play an important part by thinking creatively about what they can do together to improve the lives of local citizens. If you do take on a role, then you do not need to feel restricted to only doing this – the main role of the group is to support

each other and work together to make things happen for the benefit of the Community.

What is the 'Scheme' for community councils?

The Scheme of Establishment details the rules and regulations governing community councils. The document covers everything from the purpose of community councils, elections, membership, conduct at meetings, and much more.

Who can vote on a community council?

Elected and nominated members have voting rights.

What is the quorum for general meetings?

Quorum is the required minimum number of members present and eligible to vote on a matter for that vote to be valid. For community councils, quorum is 4 voting members.

Are community council boundaries the same as ward boundaries?

In some cases, yes, but in other areas community council boundaries are based on other factors, like local community identity and natural boundaries.

How is the annual grant to community councils calculated?

Highland Council provides each community council with an administrative grant to assist with operating costs. The annual grant is paid as a lump sum to reflect those serving rural and sparsely populated communities.

What does the grant cover?

The grant is primarily intended to cover administrative expenses. Community councils may also incur minor expenditure on donations to local charitable and community activities.

I have more questions – who should I contact?

- **Information on community councils**, including maps of each area and contact details, can be found at the Council's website: <https://www.highland.gov.uk/communitycouncils>
- **Nomination papers** are available from the Highland Council www.highland.gov.uk/elections and from your Ward Manager.
- **Queries around elections** - please contact the Elections Office on 01349 886 657 or election@highland.gov.uk.
- **To check if you are a registered voter and eligible to become a community councillor**, contact the Electoral Registration Office on 01463 703341 or email ero@highland.gov.uk.