

Royal Burgh of Wigtown & District Community Council

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CONVENOR'S REPORT - AGM 2014

My second year as Convenor of the Royal Burgh of Wigtown & District Community Council is over. This past year has been extraordinary, for several reasons. The Community Council has done a lot - both statutory and discretionary activities, with a number of important achievements. We have contributed to vital consultations and we have had an important impact as a result. Several Community Councillors have moved on after substantial periods of active service to the community. We spent two months in abeyance - unable, officially, to do anything - while we had a by-election. A fabulous number of new people joined the Community Council, as Community Councillors and as co-opted Associates to help us with our substantial workload. And, lately, we have reorganised ourselves to spread the work more fairly, and make our business meetings work more efficiently. This process continues.

Before I go on, I would like to thank colleagues who have left the Community Council for a range of reasons: Howard Steele, Andy Farrington, Andrew Wilson, John Dickson, John Jennings, Ami Todd and Shannan Lochrie. And I would like to welcome, once again, new members and associates: Matt Kitson, Carl Davis, Lynn Drysdale, Agnes Cluckie, Rob Harford, Brian Vogan, Robin Richmond and Jak Kane. It would hardly be fair not to take this opportunity to acknowledge longer established Community Councillors also: Willie McCartney, Betty McGowan, Jock McDowall, David McAdam; and our Minute Secretary and Treasurer, Community Council Associates, June Robinson and David Moran.

Over the last year, we have responded to important consultations. On D&GC's scheme of establishment for community councils, dozens of alterations resulted from our contributions. On the Proposed Local Development Plan for D&G, our suggestions are being considered by Scottish Government Reporters. On Whauphill Hall, we teamed up with Whauphill Community Association to delay the Hall's closure and facilitate Whauphill CA taking over community management of Whauphill Hall, where we had our first meeting outside Wigtown for as long as most people can remember, in March this year.

D&GC has excelled itself in failing to consult on vital issues, impacting across the region's communities, this year. The Budget for example was about 150 pages long and was handed out at meetings to be considered and responded to at the meeting or within two days of it! This type of high-handed government is antidemocratic and this Community Council deplores such an approach. The Budget issue contributed to two of our successes this year though: we brought about the re-establishment of the broader Machars Federation of Community Councils (bringing Whithorn, Garlieston, Isle of Whithorn, Cree Valley, Kirkcowan, Kirkmabreck, and Port William Community Councils, together with ourselves) to unite community voices about major issues like the Budget, and D&GC's offensive attempts to reduce community benefit from wind turbine developments for the local communities most directly affected. The Machars communities have come together too, for special meetings about electricity and faster broadband internet access, for which Wigtown Community Council, and our D&GC elected Councillors are owed much credit.

The mock-consultation on the local authority Budget also provoked outrage regarding the John McNeillie Library, a vital resource not just for books, but also for computer access, hall booking, reference materials, tourist information, and so on, in Scotland's National Booktown. The Local Authority appears incapable of grasping the fact that smaller, more remote communities are unfairly disadvantaged by dividing resources purely on a population basis; Council officers see no contradiction in sustaining longer hours in four libraries in greater Dumfries than across Newton and the Machars as a whole, despite us being almost 30 miles from Stranraer and over 50 miles from Dumfries town. Our alliance with the Wigtown Festival Company, Wigtown Primary School Parent Council, the Association of Wigtown Booksellers, various young people's groups, and the broader community, produced a dossier which provoked significant change in D&GC's position - so that the Library will now reduce its opening hours from over 40 per week, to 28 per week, rather than 17 per week as originally proposed. This is an important, albeit limited, victory. Beware, though. Threats against local services of all sorts will increase over the next few years as D&GC's budget comes under ever more pressure for cuts.

Police Scotland and NHS Dumfries & Galloway have also provided excellent examples of bad practice in consulting communities but we have been less successful in getting through to them, perhaps in part related to their lack of direct democratic accountability and the limited role our elected D&GC Councillors - Alistair Geddes, Graham Nicol and Jim McColm - are able to have, speaking up for us to these organisations.

Planning has been an issue as usual, with wind turbines proposed for Auchleand as the biggest project of the year, and we have made our views on that proposal clear to the Planning Department. At the same time, we are trying to engage with the developers of this and other proposed wind farms, so that we are well-placed to benefit should their proposals be approved. This juggling of roles is a challenge for community councils across Wigtownshire and elsewhere.

The information and noticeboard project which I referred to in last year's report was 80% realised in 2013, with a Community Noticeboard, updated town maps / information boards, a new town leaflet and directory, and new directional signs all in place. The final element, permanent information displayed about the Wigtown Martyrs, near the bench that overlooks the Martyrs' Stake, is not yet funded, but we are still pursuing it, and we are optimistic that this too will be completed in the coming year.

During the year, we had special meetings for training and induction for new Community Councillors, and about community resilience and preparedness. The latter helps both D&GC and ourselves plan for how we react in critical situations. Thankfully March 2014 was much milder, and much much less snow-bound, than March 2013 though.

Of course, much else happened in 2013-14 - much too much to detail everything in this report.

One last example. Christmas was almost cancelled in Wigtown in 2013, when the Community Council was suspended for lack of numbers. But remaining Community Councillors (despite not having a Community Council), a range of volunteers from the community, and the churches, Wigtown Market and Wigtown Festival Company worked together to ensure that the community recognised Christmas, even though it differed from celebrations in recent years. This reflects a resilience in Wigtown and District which is to be applauded. And which reinforces our motto: Let Wigtown Flourish!



Nicholas Walker, Convenor, 12.5.2014