

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

Chair's report, 2011

ScoJeC's public work is concerned with government, organisational networks, and relationships with other communities. Within the Jewish community, SCoJeC plays a lynchpin role in bringing people into contact, negotiating with a wide range of agencies and developing services in Scotland. Beyond that, SCoJeC also provides essential services to Scotland's communities, particularly those who are small, isolated, and have limited resources.

Governance

The scope, complexity and workload of SCoJeC's activities are staggering. ScoJeC's mushroom growth has meant that it is increasingly difficult to respond to issues informally; we need to make sure the way SCoJeC does its business is clear, transparent, and properly regulated. A large part of my work as Chair has been concerned with refining its governance: aiming for established lines of authority, a regular schedule of meetings, precise agenda papers, tight paperwork, brisker, more businesslike meetings, explicit policies and protocols for action. All of this material is available on our website.

Representative work

During the past year we have continued to meet with a variety of government Ministers and opposition leaders to brief them on a wide range of matters of concern to the Jewish Community. We have also submitted responses to a wide range of consultations on matters affecting the Community, including the investigation and registration of deaths, the religion and ethnicity questions in the census, child protection, shechitah, religious education, charity law, regulations affecting religious buildings, family law, equality law, etc., indicating when necessary the range of diverse opinions in the Community.

It is perhaps important, too, to say something about the things that SCoJeC does not do. As a representative organisation, we have agreed protocols that mean we should never present our personal views as if they were the views of Scotland's Jewish communities. We consult extensively. If we have enough information to represent the full range of views, for example in the consultation formerly conducted about women's issues, we will try to cover the full range. However, we do not comment on issues which the communities are not agreed on: the clearest example is Israel, though we have been publicly criticised for not weighing in on the issue.

Relationships with other communities.

SCoJeC continues to be actively involved in developing relationships with other communities, including work in public education – SCoJeC sponsored the Jewish Way of Life exhibition, and the internet version of the software – and extensive networking with faith and minority ethnic groups. Ephraim Borowski has become the Convenor of BEMIS, the

key organisation for minority ethnic groups in Scotland. Together with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Glasgow we invited Chief Rabbi David Rosen and Father John Pawlikowski to address a joint event to mark the anniversary of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration in 1965 that did so much to heal Jewish-Catholic relations. The event was a huge success, and has done much to foster good relations between our communities in Scotland.

Antisemitism.

While most of the community in Scotland is secure and comfortable, we have been aware for some time of a worrying climate of tension and uncertainty in parts of the community. As a participant in one of our discussion meetings commented, it is disturbing that only Jewish people the need to hire security guards to be able to conduct their worship in safety. SCoJeC's work in this field is often frustrating: the antisemitic behaviour we are asked to respond is often puerile and absurd – but it has to be responded to. Our interventions have included reporting incidents, trying to get police to take antisemitic attacks seriously and explaining to public organisations why certain conduct is inappropriate. The head of the Community Safety Unit held a meeting in Newton Mearns to hear the views of the Community on his proposal for a study by SCoJeC of the experience of “Being Jewish in Scotland”, especially outside any settled community.

Services to communities.

During the last year we have collaborated in projects with the student chaplaincy, Edinburgh cheder and Limmud, and events organised by the Dundee and Aberdeen communities and the Edinburgh Liberal community. We have continued to publish our award-winning quarterly newsletter, *Four Corners*, and a report circulated to synagogues before Yom Kippur. SCoJeC has offered briefings on issues including charity law, death certification, and the Byzantine regulations for protection of vulnerable groups (PVG). We also act as umbrella for the whole community for a number of legal purposes, such as PVG checks, confirming the *bona fides* of Jewish marriage celebrants from abroad after discussion with the relevant local branch of Judaism, and sponsoring visa applications for visitors to the community.

A huge amount of SCoJeC's work takes place behind the scenes, and is undertaken in a voluntary capacity by our Director, Ephraim Borowski, and by Leah Granat, whom we have promoted to Deputy Director in recognition of her outstanding contribution and incredible commitment. They meet regularly with Government ministers, officials, MSPs, and others. They attend countless meetings and briefings, ensuring that the interests of Jewish people in Scotland are always taken into account. I would like to thank them, as well as my fellow members of the SCoJeC Executive and Council, for their efforts on behalf of our organisation and the Community.

Prof Paul Spicker
Chair