

Strathblane Community Council Annual General Meeting 8th June 2009

Chairman's Report

Introduction

This report covers the period from June 2008 when I took over the Chair from Willie Oswald. I took on the job on the basis of being able to rely on the support of a very capable team of fellow councillors, and although reduced in numbers, I would like to thank them for their sterling efforts over the year. Looking back on some of the suggestions I made when taking over the Chair – some have been adopted but some are still work in progress, and despite being out of a job since Christmas I've actually found myself with less time than expected! Whatever, in going through the minutes of the past year I am made aware of how much has been achieved by my colleagues on the community council – quality not quantity sums up the present team around me!

Council numbers again under pressure

If numbers on the council is a measure of my chairmanship, then I've not started very well! We began the year with almost a full contingent, eleven members and only one vacancy in the Mugdock ward. But on returning from my summer holidays I was presented immediately with 2 resignations, Alastair Smith and Finlay Fountain, both of whom had been more than underwhelmed by some questionable decisions from SC on developments in the greenbelt. It should be noted that Alastair has been extremely helpful through the year in supporting the replacement Treasurer, for which I am very grateful.

The remaining members have had to shoulder a greater share of the load. The team has been David Anderson, Bob Flashman, John Gray, Philip Graves, Fiona Murray, Willie Oswald, Marjorie Peddie, Elspeth Possnet and Margaret Vass. Marjorie intimated many months ago she would not be seeking re-election and has formally resigned in time for today's AGM.

Thank you all for your significant contributions and support and let's hope we can find some new blood. We have elections coming up and we may need to repeat some active promotion.

SCC's Purpose?

I agree with my predecessor's aim to make the community council as "open, informal, inclusive and accessible" as possible and to continue to see it as a forum for the whole community. What we also set out to do in the early part of the year was to reconsider its purpose and relevance to local people.

With this in mind and as a consequence of a few key planning decisions going the wrong way, we invited the SC CE Keith Yates and the Head of Planning Mick Stewart to a meeting at the end of July. Headed “Why should we bother if our views are often ignored”, we had a constructive meeting that has set the agenda in some ways for the rest of the year. Not long afterwards we met the (elected) Chair of the Planning Panel to discuss our grievances over planning and we learnt more about how to work with the system, and some practical advice on how to get our views across more effectively.

Keith Yates stressed we should concentrate on the “achievable” and not get bogged down in planning matters where we would have less influence – SC planners stick to firm planning guidelines which we cannot change (though interpretation is not always clear-cut!). We should also seek out what the local community wanted us to do. Clear support for village projects would assist in gaining agreement from SC and perhaps funding from them or other agencies. He recommended using CDTs to access funding unavailable to the community council, and ensuring these other community bodies talked to each other.

It is encouraging to report that much of this is happening in Strathblane. Although the SCC cannot take credit for the progress being made on by our own CDT, we have supported it from the start, and presently have a representative on the Board. We have also given our backing to the Village Survey, committing £1000 to the cost of the project. We should also congratulate them on their recent £106,000 grant from the Climate Challenge Fund and we will be hoping to work closely with them and the Carbon Neutral Group in the future.

But, as in most years, most discussion at SCC meetings tends to focus on 3 areas, and these reflect local residents’ main concerns and thus will always hog the agenda. These are Planning, Roads (and Traffic Management) and Environmental issues.

Planning

Despite Keith Yates’ advice, we have again spent much time on the planning front. Whilst this reflects the number of complex applications we have received, it is also the result of responding to major consultation documents and the forthcoming new Local Development Plan.

We have been concerned about the continued loss of garden ground within the village as new homes receive outline or full planning approval. Our main efforts have centred as usual on protecting the greenbelt with limited success, but with some lessons learnt. We realise with hindsight that in the case of Valhalla (application approved on appeal) we should have used our influence to ensure that stricter conditions were applied at the *outline* planning stage, in particular the size of any new house. This was discussed at our hearing but was not applied when the outline decision was made, and we were not present. The Planning Panel (though not the Planning Officers) opposed the detailed plans but it was too late by then, as the Reporter pointed out.

We met with the Planning Panel Chair after the decision to approve the Ardunan Lodge demolition and replacement house in the green belt, which we had opposed so vigorously. We were advised, in future, not to declare our full hand when commenting on applications and to copy our objections to all our elected members and the chair of the panel.

Edenmill Farm applications are still pending a decision with the access being the critical issue to be resolved. A dedicated access road would solve many of the grievances and we thank the local residents for their contributions and patience in this long-running saga, in which the local developer seems always one step ahead of SC.

John Gray led the work on responding to the Council's policy for development in the countryside and we secured some significant changes, most notably for a continued presumption against development in the greenbelt. This was after a presentation by SC at our December 2008 meeting on "Housing in the Countryside". This gave us our next success with the planners recommending refusal of the outline application for a house on land SE of Deil's Craig.

We have had most difficulty with some of the agricultural justifications being employed by such developments. This accounted for our suspicions on Corriknowe at the top of Campsie Dene Road where SC gave permission for a new house so as to be near farmland that stretched in all directions and could, we felt, have been serviced from anywhere else in the village.

The planning group has been readying themselves to deal with the task of leading the community input into the local development plan process which will become the village's master plan for years to come. It will be critical to ensure that all residents who wish to be involved are able to contribute. This will be a significant task for us next year and I thank Margaret Vass for her initial efforts in this area. We have been fortunate in having had 2 visits by SC Planning Officers to discuss the LDP, the most recent one last month linked in with a talk by Rural Stirling Housing Association. We are also grateful from the support we have received from the "Greenbelt" group (Eric Strachan) and Richard Callender, a planner at EDC. We would also thank those applicants who have had the courage to appear at SCC meetings to present their case – we could do with more such individuals.

The LDP will shape land-use in Stirlingshire for years to come and we will try as best we can to represent local residents' views. We recognise this will be difficult and we are hoping the Village Survey will give us a stronger mandate to protect the greenbelt, and put a cap on too much of Strathblane's green spaces and gardens turning into housing.

Roads

As in previous years some progress has been made. There has been a noticeable improvement in communication with the Roads department, (the same is true with Planning above) but much credit lies with Robert Flashman for his consistent pestering. He would love to take the credit for the major road straightening on the A81 by Duntreath and the resurfacing of the Sheath Road in Mugdock, but this

mainly reflects a slight loosening up of funding from SC. His persistence has at last led to a formal survey of the A81-Station Road junction – a shockingly dangerous place which has had its fair share of accidents this year. The plans have only just arrived.

This would represent the final stages of the A81 Traffic Management Scheme which has spread over a few years now. Speeding is still an issue in the village and some near misses at the zebra crossing have provoked us to highlight the poor lighting here yet again. Meanwhile the faulty speed detector at the Ballewan end of the village has caused endless email communication. We have had the usual numerous complaints about potholes around the area. Robert can and does report as many complaints as possible but we all have a duty to complain to SC, the more members of the public the better – a point I would re-iterate for all complaints brought to the SCC – PLEASE INFORM SC YOURSELVES – there really is strength in numbers!

Environment

This is a wide subject matter, but we must thank Elspeth Posnett and her helpers for some of the most visible improvements to the village. Firstly as Tubs Convener, supported by Fiona Murray, she has replaced all the old tubs with new ones supplied last year by the local distillery. After many attempts a “tubs day” was organised this spring to finish the task.

Secondly we had a Christmas tree, for the second year in succession. This was a real community council project and I thank you all for your efforts whilst I found some excuse to be away as usual!

Elspeth has also maintained contact with the ‘Restorative Justice Programme’ and successfully engaged them to complete odd jobs around the village, such as painting the football pavilion.

We have also made progress on new notice boards for the village with a new site agreed near the bank and chemist. Agreement with the land-owners and the planning department has taken time, but we have the grant money (£500 won from the Community Pride Fund at the start of the year) and the signs should go up this year. John Gray continues to push this one ahead – many thanks.

Willie Oswald has taken on the job of investigating a replacement to the wooden welcome signs that are slowly rotting away at both ends of the village. Fiona Murray and Willie worked hard to get another £1000 from the CPF towards the cost and the SCC has assumed the £3000 additional cost will come from the unhealthily large balance held in our account. Planning is proving a problem here – the stone structure is deemed a road hazard despite being located high up on the verge. We have also surveyed the village for suggestions for the wording.

Youth

I repeat what was said last time about the lack of any effective dialogue with the youth of our village. We are open to suggestions on this front and, as in other areas, should keep an eye on what is achieved by other community councils.

Area Community Planning

Members of the Community Council have attended the meetings of the Rural South West Area Forum. These have occasionally been a useful exercise as SC use them to introduce new initiatives, as recently happened with their plans for the LDP consultation process.

The Future

One of the bug-bears I have about the SCC is its low turn-out at the monthly meetings. How can we make it more relevant and more interesting? How can we encourage more volunteers to sit as councillors? We need a young, enthusiastic, good-looking Chairman with time on his/her hands. Such people have better things to do with their spare time?

We have tried to have visiting speakers and presentations from a wide range of backgrounds, from SC Planners to Scottish Power Engineers. This takes organisation, and I'm keen to get more local input – groups such as CNG, the MUGA fund-raisers etc. Any suggestions kindly received. I've even considered having the meetings in the pub to encourage more interest!

Last year we had a few resignations, mainly over the lack of attention SC seemed to show to our views. Reasonable expectations is vital, but so is communication. Communication does seem to have improved with SC, especially in the Planning and Roads departments. We can also thank Pam Campbell (Rural Development officer, SC) for her excellent work as a "go-between" for us and Stirling. Also let's not forget our 3 councillors (Councillors Alistair Berrill, Colin O'Brien and Graham Lambie) who have been great supporters of our meetings and our community.

I've just come back from a week-end conference on Climate Change hosted by Comrie CDT. There was no shortage of enthusiasm amongst the various community development bodies represented and plenty of funding still available. It reminds me how closely we must work with our own CDT, offer our support and become more involved if necessary. A major project such as the Energy Audit seems to work well in acting as a catalyst for further community initiatives. To that end we will be playing a major part in the village survey with one of us (myself) sitting on the steering group.

Community spirit is always going to be difficult in a commuter village outside a large city. We must thank the editors of The Blane for their efforts on this front and I urge us all to contribute and support this great local magazine. I have tried to encourage the use of our website, www.strathblanefield.org.uk and have had some success in encouraging more of the village groups to enrol. Thanks to Alan Campbell for his great work here – I believe this is a tool we must all get used to using more regularly and it has huge scope to inform outsiders and insiders what is available in our community. In time it might even help to get more feedback about how we should be doing our job from local residents....

I commend this report to you.

Philip Graves,
Chairman, Strathblane Community Council