

## **Thick skin and boundless energy: life as a Scottish councillor**

**With an influx of new, young councillors expected in May 2007, we asked current elected members to share their thoughts on the highs and lows of the job and to offer advice to the next generation of community warriors.**

Ask any Councillor why they first stood for election and they usually say something like Fife Cllr Andrew Rodger: “When I first came into the council I wanted to change things in my area. I’ve seen double-glazing put into some of our older houses, central heating and new parks being developed. I’ve seen community halls being used in a more positive way because we’ve made sure that they’ve been painted properly, and had new roofs installed. These are the sort of things that a community wants to see.”

Whether you desire to make a difference in your local area, or you are itching to get involved at policy level, almost every Councillor we interviewed intimated that success – or at least survival – in the role depends on 1) accepting that solutions do not usually happen overnight; and 2) remembering you are always accountable.

Cllr Rodger puts it like this: “When you come to the ballot box, you want to be able to say to people, ‘well, these are the things you wanted to happen in my four-year spell and a good percentage of these things have actually happened’. That lets the public know that you’re on their side. I call it visible government - where people can actually see a change in their area.”

To a young, green Councillor, it may sound daunting, but it probably helps to realise that Councillors are rarely alone in their endeavours. Indeed, much more can be achieved if they quickly learn to appreciate and harness the power of community involvement.

“Getting community involvement is vital because the Council cannot do it all on its own. Councillors must get the public involved,” explains Cllr Rodger. “Tenants’ Associations, Community Councils, and Regeneration Groups within my area have all been involved in the decision making process, and that switches people on. If they are not involved, no matter what you provide, someone will say ‘that’s not what I wanted to happen’. Consultation is crucial but it doesn’t mean making a decision and consulting after the fact! That’s sometimes where we get it wrong as a Council, but I try, in my own area, to make sure that the views of

the public are put across in a positive way.”

### **Taking the rough with the smooth**

Sometimes, of course, a Councillor's hard work is not rewarded. For example, in a case where two communities represented by the same Councillor disagree over a development issue, a Councillor can find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to support one over the other. Speaking from experience, Orkney Cllr Stephen Hagan says:

“Sometimes you just have to take a hollow victory for the good of the wider community.”

A thick skin also helps when it comes to coping with the media. East Renfrewshire Cllr Jim Fletcher says, “If you are elected, you're in the public's eye to a degree which makes you, at least in part, public property. So you can expect anything you do or say to be reported on, commented on. Things can be taken out of context and be unfairly criticized in the local media. You have to develop a thick skin to deal with all of that.”

He adds that it's important to develop coping mechanisms to deal with the inevitable frustrations of the job. “Young people tend not to cope well with the interminable party meetings, or the unpleasantness that can come sometimes from dealing with community groups. You can come under pressure and receive unfair criticism and spend an awful lot of time dealing with fairly unrepresentative people. So that's a negative for youngsters. They're not used to it.”

And then there are the demands on your time. Cllr Fletcher continues: “Expect to have your leisure time disturbed at all hours because constituents, political supporters, political opponents - you name it - people will contact you at all times of the day. Dumfries & Galloway Cllr John Forteath agrees: “It's a heavy commitment to do the job properly. It is a seven-day-a-week job. If your constituents have a problem, they're not fussy whether it's Saturday or Sunday, or even the middle of the night, to be quite honest – and that is the way it should be!”

### **A great experience**

You may be wondering what a young person can bring to the job, and what the job can do for a young person? Though there have been few young people standing to date, Cllr Hagan

believes it is a great experience in which to learn and develop. “The whole time I’ve been in the Council, only once have we ever had a Councillor in their late 20s, early 30s. He was very good at representing the views of younger people. He promoted a skateboard park for the young people and was successful at that. Over the four years he was on the Council, I also saw that he really developed his speaking and debating skills. When he left he went into a job which was supported by the Council and was very well placed to take on that role. So the experience of being a younger person on the Council can stand you in good stead for future employment because it is seen as good experience. He’s actually thinking of standing again, which is really encouraging. He’s been encouraged by the fact that he would have a stable salary.”

### **Your Council needs You!**

North Ayrshire Cllr Peter McNamara believes that today there is a pressing need for more young people to stand. “A community is not a full community until it is involved in the engagement of young people,” he says emphatically. Edinburgh City Cllr Rev Ewan Aitken agrees: “It is amazing the difference having more young people on the Council would make. I negotiate with ministers and other decision makers, but actually the thing that really makes my day is working with youth workers and young people. These people are happy because they are doing something. There is something about the human condition - you can find meaningfulness in serving others, because if they’re happy, you find happiness yourself.”