

Age and Experience

Response of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. It is evident from the 2001 census that the Scottish Jewish community is an aging community. 30% of those who identified themselves as Jewish were of pensionable age – more than for any other faith group – and only 28% were under 30 – fewer than for any other faith group except the Church of Scotland. It is, therefore, evident that issues around aging are of great concern to the Jewish community.

The majority of the Scottish Jewish community lives in the Central Belt, but there are smaller communities in Aberdeen and Dundee as well as isolated groups and individuals throughout Scotland from the Borders to the Shetlands. Small populations may easily be overlooked. Many Jewish people in Scotland live in small and often rural communities of barely a hundred people, whilst others live outwith any geographically distinct Jewish community. Service providers in these areas need particular support in providing appropriate services, and the first step is for them to be aware that a need exists.

This is by no means straightforward. The 2001 census also provides evidence that more people regard themselves as being of any particular religion than attend a place of worship. This is particularly true of the Jewish religion since many people consider themselves ethnically Jewish despite the fact that they do not affiliate to a synagogue. In addition, many elderly Jewish people in Scotland arrived as refugees from Nazi Germany or from the pogroms of Eastern Europe and their experiences lead them to be apprehensive about identifying themselves as Jewish on official forms. We therefore believe that the actual number of Jewish people in Scotland is up to 25% greater than would appear from the census. (This percentage is supported by research done on the Canadian census.)

Lack of certainty about the identity, number and location of elderly Jewish people causes both Jewish and mainstream services some difficulty in providing appropriate services. This is an important issue because many people, who identify themselves as ethnically Jewish prefer to use social and educational services that cater for people of a similar background rather than those provided in the wider community.

In a recent mapping exercise undertaken by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities almost all respondents reported that they cannot obtain specifically Jewish goods and services locally and have to look to the larger Jewish communities in East Renfrewshire or even outwith Scotland. This is a particularly difficulty for elderly people many of whom do not have access to a car and rely on public transport.

Approximately 75% of respondents to the mapping exercise said they would like to have greater involvement with their local Jewish community but many mentioned barriers that prevent them from achieving this. The most common difficulties are distance from other Jewish people and the lack of availability of suitable public transport. Some people without access to a car are unable to attend even occasional

prayer services to recite the memorial prayer on the anniversary of a close relative's death, and they find this particularly distressing.

Somewhat disturbingly, most respondents did not think that services provided by their local council, GP or hospital take special account of any needs they might have as a Jewish person. Among the more positive responses were "I assume the hospital must have some sort of policies it can use" and "[the local hospital] has connections with reps of the faiths"

There are also, however, positive experiences, as demonstrated by the following extract, received from an elderly Jewish lady living in an isolated rural area of the Highlands.

A few months ago I asked at our local service point about local burial and within a short space of time we had a very positive response from the Highland Council. I had a phone call from a young man in response to my initial enquiry. He had obviously done his homework because he was worried that he couldn't promise to provide ten men to form a minyan (prayer quorum) for us. I explained this would not be necessary and he was much relieved. He was also very worried about the need for burial in 24 hours because a Sunday burial would be very difficult in our part of the Highlands or on a bank holiday. However we can possibly sort this out. The Council has agreed that we can 'separate' our part of the cemetery with white painted bricks in the grass. Hopefully we will also be able to sort out care of the body and a Rabbi or celebrant for the service. This may all seem a little morbid, but having waited thirty years to fulfil my dream of living here this is where we want to remain. I only write about this so that others with similar wishes or other queries know that if you ask sometimes, surprisingly, the answer is yes.

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is aware that the profile of the wider Scottish population is aging, and this trend can be seen more sharply in the Scottish Jewish community. Care organisations in the Jewish community (such as Jewish Care which works in partnership with East Renfrewshire Council) provide many facilities and services for the elderly in that area, but there is a need for mainstream services to consult with faith communities in order to support the provision of appropriate services for minority communities across Scotland.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.