

SCOTISH COUNCIL OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES ANNUAL REPORT JUNE 2010

The most popular event of the year organised by SCoJeC was undoubtedly our “Kosher Ceilidh” featuring the Israeli organisation, Soul Train. We supported their tour of Scotland, which brought music, dancing and stories to almost 1,000 people, including almost 200 from outwith the central belt. They visited twelve venues, which included Maybole, Lochgilphead, Portree, Aberdeen, Dundee, St Andrews, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, receiving an unprecedented response wherever they went. The audience of 25 in Portree included Jews who had not known of each other’s existence! A number of other SCoJeC activities took place outside the Forth-Clyde valley during the year in places such as Dundee, where two weeks ago our members attended a Sunday afternoon barbeque.

Our ability to keep in touch with members of our community living outside the main conurbations is a key facet of our role as an organisation that speaks for all of Scotland’s Jews. Our website (www.scojec.org) is often the first point of contact for them. It is constantly updated and is soon to undergo a major revision. Interest in it continues to increase, with over twenty-five thousand hits a month. The most popular items are the *Guide to Jewish Facilities in Scotland*, *Four Corners*, *MEMO*, and *Scotland's Jews*.

A country-wide project for young Jewish people is about to launch, thanks to SCoJeC having been awarded a grant by Young Scot under their “Access all Areas” initiative. Young Scot is a charity that promotes citizenship education, provides information on issues affecting young people in Scotland, and works on various different projects and initiatives in partnership with local organisations. “Access all Areas” is a government-funded project aimed at empowering young people from ethnic minority, refugee, asylum seeking and faith groups to influence service provision in their local area, enhance access, and promote inclusion.

The project will involve young people in democratic processes and promoting ‘informed participation’ in local civic structures. A working group of around a dozen people aged 16 – 25 will plan and deliver a research project on an issue of interest to them as young Jews growing up in Scotland. The group will be trained in research and consultation techniques, and will be supported by both Young Scot and SCoJeC staff, to help them gather views and opinions from other young people across the community – probably electronically, given the geographical spread. The group, ideally consisting of 10 to 15 members, will draw their findings together, reaching their own conclusions and recommendations to share with key policy decision makers such as government, planners, police, and the media.

SCoJeC was commissioned by the Pears Foundation to explore the suitability for Scottish schools of the Jewish Way of Life CD-ROM that has been very well received when it was distributed to all schools in England. Learning and Teaching Scotland have now said that they are happy to promote the resource for use in Scottish schools, and will put a link from their resource bank to the software which will be hosted on the SCoJeC website.

Together with the Roman Catholic Church, we are organising a series of events in October, in Giffnock and Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen Universities, to mark the 45th anniversary of the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration that did so much to heal Jewish-Catholic relations. We drew the attention of the Secretary of State, who is organising the Papal visit in October, to the fact that the proposed dates coincide with Yom Kippur, and pointed out that it would be unfortunate if this prevented Jewish representatives from attending any interfaith events.

SCoJeC was established at the time of Devolution ten years ago to enable the Jewish Community of Scotland to speak to the Scottish Government and other Scottish public

bodies with a single, authoritative voice. Our track record since then clearly shows that SCoJeC is uniquely placed to represent the community.

During the past year we have met with the First Minister, Alex Salmond, who pledged his support for strategies to help prevent and deter antisemitism. He was pleased to hear of the prosecution of someone accused of posting vicious antisemitic messages on the Scotsman website, and undertook to write to editors to remind them of their responsibility for what appears on their sites. We also drew the First Minister's attention to the fact that the proposed transfer of central funding to local authorities would impact disproportionately on minority communities and told him about the success of our Kosher Ceilidh tour of rural areas, explaining that this would not have been possible under the proposed new arrangements. The First Minister accepted our concern, and asked his officials to explore how exceptions could be made to enable such initiatives to continue.

We also discussed with Mr Salmond the acceptability of MRI scans in place of surgical post mortems. We explained the importance of this to many faith communities, pointing out that families are unable to begin the grieving process until after the funeral. Both the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General have expressed their support and we now have an assurance that legislation is not needed for scans to be acceptable.

SCoJeC is invited annually with the Community Security Trust to meet Government and Police representatives to review antisemitism in Scotland. The head of the Community Safety Unit of the Justice Department has expressed concern about the feelings of vulnerability voiced by some Jewish people living outside any settled community and suggested that SCoJeC might undertake a qualitative investigation of the experience of Jews in Scotland, both positive and negative. We have invited a number of organisations to meet with us today to consider how best to undertake this in a manner that can command support from the community at large.

Discussions with Ministers and officials on matters of concern to the Jewish Community are a matter of routine for us. Examples this year include Holocaust education and the restitution of looted art, changes in charity regulation, and proposals to increase water charges for non-domestic premises including religious and charitable institutions. We also continue to respond several times a year to government consultations on proposals for changes in legislation. The impact of such changes on our communal organisations can be far reaching, so during the past year SCoJeC held two sessions to brief communal leaders on a range of legislative changes covering immigration controls and visas, the child protection system, charity regulations, and new fire regulations.

The bulk of the work carried out by SCoJeC takes place behind the scenes. Our Director, Ephraim Borowski, and Public Affairs Officer, Leah Granat, meet regularly with Government ministers, officials, MSPs, and others. They attend countless meetings and briefings, ensuring that the interests of the Jewish people in Scotland are always taken into account. We are also fortunate that to have been assisted particularly with our outreach work, by Fiona Brodie, and we have collaborated with the student chaplaincy board, Limmud Scotland, and Edinburgh Cheder on joint projects. I have enjoyed working with them and the members of the SCoJeC Council during the past two years and would like to thank them all for their efforts on behalf of our organisation and the Scottish Jewish Community.

Dr Walter Sneader,
Chair,
Scottish Council of Jewish Communities.