

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
Public Affairs Officer's report to the AGM, 26th September 2004

Since I was appointed last November I have been involved in a wide variety of activities, some of them one-off events and others ongoing.

Coming new into post I have had to make contacts and develop relationships with a wide range of individuals and organisations. In particular these include various departments of the Scottish Executive, people at the Scottish Parliament, ethnic minority, interfaith and faith group organisations as well as representatives of the various Scottish Jewish communities.

A major area of work has been responding to consultations. The majority of these have been issued by the Scottish Executive and have dealt with subjects as wide-ranging as organ donation, civil partnership registration, paying for water services, charity law, family law reform and hate crime. The Scottish Council has also responded to the dti's White Paper consultation on the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), and to policy consultations from the BBC and the Scottish Museums' Council. In order to be able to respond appropriately I have consulted with a wide range of people in the Jewish community on each of these issues, including orthodox and reform rabbis, medical and legal specialists, synagogue representatives and anyone with a particular interest or expertise in the area concerned. In addition I have liaised with the Board of Deputies, the office of the Chief Rabbi and organisations such as Shechita UK in order to ensure that the Scottish and UK governments receive a consistent message from the Jewish community both north and south of the border.

I have organised three briefings to inform particular groups within the Jewish community about relevant new Scottish Executive initiatives, and am currently planning further sessions.

Treasurers, accountants and auditors of communal organisations heard speakers from the Scottish Executive and the McFadden Commission present proposals for charity law reform and were invited to contribute their views to inform the drafting of the Bill.

The second briefing was held in association with Women in the Jewish Community, and speakers from the Scottish Executive, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Scottish Women's Convention informed those attending about new policies intended to improve the position of women in Scotland.

The most recent briefing, aimed at health professionals, heard speakers from the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics, and the Jewish community discuss the medical, halachic and ethical implications of a number of recent Scottish Executive consultations, the outcome of which will inform one of the major Bills of the new Scottish Parliamentary session.

Briefing papers about the proposed Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) were sent out in July, and there will be a briefing on 25th October at which John Wilkes, Scottish Director of the Equal Opportunities Commission and Scottish representative on the White Paper Task Force, and Kay Hampton, Scottish Commissioner and Deputy Chair of the Commission for Race Equality will both be speaking.

The response to these briefings has been extremely positive, with people welcoming both the opportunity to learn about policies which affect the Jewish community, and also to present their own views to policy-makers in person.

A new initiative, first raised at the Scottish Council meeting in Dundee last November, was the publication of a regular newsletter to link up the smaller Jewish communities and to

inform them about matters of interest. Three issues have so far been produced, and have received a very favourable response. The next issue is planned for the end of November.

The Scottish Council is regularly contacted by MSPs and various departments of the Scottish Executive on matters affecting the Jewish community. This has enabled me to pass on relevant information to organisations such as Cosgrove Care and Jewish Care to ensure that they know of changes in policy, consultations, and conferences which may be of interest to them.

I have also been able to direct the Scottish Executive and others, (including conference organisers, journalists and people from a variety of voluntary and statutory bodies) to the appropriate people and organisations within the Jewish Community.

I monitor events in the Scottish Parliament and Executive, and in the Scottish press on a daily basis, passing on relevant information to a variety of people and organisations in the Jewish community.

I have attended regular meetings of the Scottish Equalities and Human Rights Reference Group, (the Scottish advisory group to the CEHR White Paper Task Force), and the Scottish Equalities and Human Rights Coalition, (a voluntary sector body concerned with mainstreaming equality across all areas).

I have had regular meetings with Policy and Parliamentary Officers from a variety of organisations, particularly with other faith groups. This has been a particularly valuable means of engaging support for the Jewish community. For example, as a result of this, the Catholic response to the Scottish Executive's recent Family Law consultation included a statement of support for the Jewish community's position on legislation to link civil and religious divorce.

I have responded to a number of individual issues presented by members of several Scottish Jewish communities, and have liaised between them and organisations such as Scottish Friends of Israel.

I have also responded to issues raised by the Board of Deputies and National Shechita Boards in relation to Scottish Parliament activities on subjects such as the Cross-Party Group on Palestine and the introduction of Scottish Statutory Instruments which could have a bearing on shechita.

It has been a fairly busy time – I have not been short of things to do – and all indications are that it will continue to be so.

The booklet 'Scotland's Jews' is currently being updated, and I am liaising with the various people involved. The Board of Deputies has given permission for the text of their employment booklet to be included, and there will also be photographs and information about each of the Queens Park windows, as well as an expanded section about each of the Scottish Jewish communities.

There are also a number of other ongoing activities, for example, liaising with the STUC in relation to their One Workplace project, offering information that will enable them to offer better support to Jewish employees, and with Ezra Golombok of the Israel Information Office, to ensure that MSPs have up-to-date and accurate information about the current situation in Israel.

I would like to thank members of the Management Team for their support during the last ten months.