



Community Council of the Royal Burgh of Peebles & District

07 February 2024

Jenni Craig
Director – Resilient Communities
Scottish Borders Council
Council HQ
Newtown St Boswells
Melrose
TD6 0SA

cc **Mr. David Robertson CEO**
cc Tweeddale Councilors
cc PCC Secretary, PCC Treasurer

Dear Ms. Craig

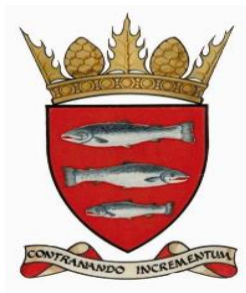
Draft Community Councils Best Practice Guidance.

Thank you for your letter of the 26 January, with the response to our concerns, particularly relating to Honoraria payments and expenditure controls. There are several points that I need to address. Your letter contains a quotation from section 11.2 of the existing provision and notes that there are no changes suggested in the current review. This is incorrect.

Existing section as copied in your letter.

The Secretary and Treasurer (but no other office-bearers) may be appointed from out with the membership of the Community Council and in that case may receive such remuneration as the Community Council may determine from the resources available to them, there being no extra funding available from the Scottish Borders Council for this purpose. Such appointees from out-with the membership shall be entitled to speak only on matters relating to their function as office-bearers and shall have no voting rights. [NOTE: This text appears to be an addition and does not appear in the published version which for the sake of doubt is added here at Appendix 1]

Our core group of officers have read this statement, not to mention the spurious text, and found it ambiguous. Indeed for at least the last 10+ years, our community council has paid a token honorarium to our Secretary and



Treasurer. This has been declared annually in our submissions to SBC and has not been challenged. The published (existing) version of the guidance is entirely consistent with this established practice, and has been allowed by SBC for many years, i.e. that CCs can pay treasurers and secretaries an honorarium.

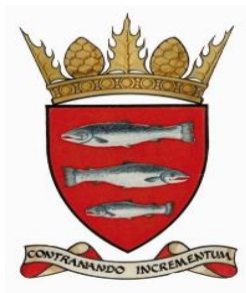
The newly suggested text in the draft is noted below, and some of the differences highlighted.

Community Councils may reimburse office bearers, other members and employees for any reasonable expenses incurred in the performance of their duties. The disbursement of honoraria payments to members of a Community Council is not authorised in the Scheme for Community Councils i.e. honoraria payments to secretaries and treasurers may only be made where the person fulfilling that role is not an elected member of the Community Council. While the dedicated efforts of all Community Council members is acknowledged and appreciated, given the fact that public funds are ever more scarce and coming under ever greater scrutiny, it cannot be appropriate for these kind of payments to be made from the SBC annual administrative grant.

This wording is not identical to that previously quoted, or indeed to the published document. Neither is it ambiguous. The wording in the existing documents states that there is no “extra” funding available for this purpose”, it does not preclude it. The revised draft document states clearly that “The disbursement of honoraria payments to members of a Community Council is not authorised” and that honoraria payments can only be made where the person concerned is not a member of the community council.

This draft is titled, “Community Councils Best Practice Guidance.”. There are two important points to make here. Previously, when using a guidance document to make a particular point with SBC over planning matters, I have been informed that it is “guidance” only and SBC can take it or leave it. Guidance uses words such as “may”, “should”, etc. The existing text contains such words. The newly suggested text contains: “may only be made”, “it cannot be appropriate”, “is not authorised”, etc. This is not written as guidance and is unambiguous.

The new text highlights that the “dedicated efforts of community council members is acknowledged and appreciated”. It then completely ignores practical realities. A small community council secretary may devote perhaps a half day a week to community council business. Peebles is the biggest community council in the Borders with 18 members. Our secretary works



tirelessly at least 5 days a week. She deserves modest monetary recognition which in no way compensates her for her efforts. She has notified me that she will resign if this honorarium is withdrawn. What then are we to do? We are unlikely to find a suitable unpaid replacement. Of course, the text allows us to recruit a secretary from outwith the membership of the community council. Where do you propose we find the £15 - £20K that would be needed? I too will resign.

Is it the intention of Scottish Borders Council to make it so difficult for a community council to operate that we just go away? This suggested new text follows on from the derisory rise in grant that has just been awarded. It is worth reiterating what I sent to our Tweeddale councillors in November last.

Email to Tweeddale Councillors – Proposed Increase in Community Council Grants – 19 November 2023

Now we all understand that times are hard for all public services across both national and local issues. However, the debate on CC funding last week was generally without a great deal of substance, although I do note your interjection Marshall and thank you for it. The facts so far as PCC is concerned are:

- We get £1365 per annum fixed in 2009.
- If we had kept pace with inflation, then this would be circa £2082 or an additional £700. [Bank of England inflation calculator]
- This 10% award will take us to £1,500 and will not change for three years.
- By which time it will be worth £1,287 or thereabouts and around £800 less in real terms than the original award and £78 less than we get now. That is laughable, it doesn't even protect our present pathetic position. Can you honestly say that this is either fair or sensible?

I do despair at some of the thinking that went into this study. It was said [in the meeting] that the team looked at what CCs spend now and on what and that this is being protected. No one seems to have considered that CCs cut their cloth according to present cash flow. We were not asked what we cannot do and what we need to do. Nor has our present position been maintained. Why has path maintenance gone up by 50%? That is no use to us, although we did do it in the past. What we need is a serviced web site and we have no way of funding it.



One councilor stated, "It is important that a message is sent that community councils are really valued". Is that so? It sure doesn't look that way. Another councilor said that councils don't get an inflationary rise and that may be true, but in 2009 it appears that the SBC budget was £269M and I think it is now closer to £350M, a rise of 27%. A real time cut, but still no comparison to what we in PCC are expected to absorb.

Last week at the meeting to consider the way ahead for the SBCCN, I said, and who can argue, that a strong SBCCN requires strong community councils. SBC, aided and abetted by its councillors is paying lip service to community councils at a time when the Scottish Government want us to do more. We are hard pressed to do what we do now.

Scotland has the worst local democratic deficit in Europe and no wonder.

Peebles Community Council received no replies to this email. I reiterate that Peebles Community Council understand the difficult financial circumstances that SBC operates under. We have said on numerous occasions that SBC do a difficult job and for the most part do it well. Our present group of local councillors are hardworking and dedicated. However, we in the community council expect to be treated fairly and with respect and not be dismissed without due consideration.

Yours Sincerely

Peter Maudsley
Chairman



APPENDIX 1

From SBC website

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETC. (SCOTLAND) ACT 1994 SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL SCHEME FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

- 13.5 All monies received by a Community Council, whether by way of grant, gift, or loan, shall be applied to maintain its administrative structure and/or to further the objects of such Council.
- 11.2 Every Community Council may appoint a Secretary and a Treasurer (the offices may be combined) who shall hold office and may be eligible for re-appointment in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution to be prepared in line with this Scheme. The Secretary and Treasurer (but no other office-bearers) may be appointed from outwith the membership of the Community Council and may receive such remuneration as the Community Council may determine from the resources available to them, there being no extra funding available from the Scottish Borders Council for this purpose. Such appointees from outwith the membership shall be entitled to speak only on matters relating to their function as office-bearers and shall have no voting rights.