Howgate Community Council
Minutes of AGM held on 26 June 2019

Present
Bruce Hobbs (chairman), Jenny Westwood, Ian King, David Wilson, Ian Quigley

In attendance
PCs Melanie Glasgow and Christie Burnett.
Pauline Cunningham representing Wellington Action Group.
In a contest between the best weather for months and attendance at the AGM there was always going to be only one winner.

1. Apologies

Graeme Young and Councillor Debbie McCall.

2. Minutes of 2018 AGM and matters arising.

These minutes were table and approved, proposed by Ian King and seconded by David Wilson. There were no matters arising not covered by the Agenda.

3. Community Policing Report.

This had been circulated in advance. Although there were a number of instances of theft, drug use and antisocial behaviour in Penicuik there were no issues specifically related to Howgate during May2019.
Our attention was drawn to the appointment of DCI Jim Morrison who has a particular interest and expertise in community Policing.
There was the usual discussion about traffic monitoring.

4. Chairman's Report.

Bruce Hobbs made the following report.
Howgate Community Council Chairman's report 2018-2019

I took over chairmanship of the Community Council at last year's AGM. It has been quite a busy year involving consideration of roads and safety, closure of Howgate Church and a number of planning issues. The support I have received from members of the Community Council has been exceptional and I thank them warmly for their efforts. At the outset of the year some members agreed to take responsibility for particular aspects including being Secretary and minute taker (Ian Quigley), Treasurer (Graham Young), member of the Midlothian Roads Traffic and Paths group (Ian King) and attending meetings of the Federation of Community Councils (David Wilson). Jenny Westwood took minutes in Ian's absence. With these responsibilities I believe the committee worked very well together.

Our meeting day has changed from a Thursday to a Wednesday to avoid conflict with Federation meetings – this enables David to attend those meetings. We now meet on the fourth Wednesday of most months. Since the last AGM the Community Council met on eight occasions, each time being quorate. Minutes of our meetings are posted on the Howgate Village website, for which we thank Donald Cameron, and also on the notice board here in the Village Hall. The agenda is also posted in advance when possible. During the year we were successful in obtaining funding from Midlothian Council for our operating costs - £380 for 2019/2020 and £398 and £416 for the following two years. We made an application for a large grant for the purchase of a Safe Speed APNR system to try and control excessive speed though Howgate village but were unsuccessful.

Two particular developments during the year will have a major bearing on members of our community and in both the Community Council has tried to help.

The first is the situation created by the closure of Howgate Church and the consequent uncertainties created for the Church itself together with the Village Hall, the Glebe, the car park and the Allotments. The Community Council distributed a leaflet and questionnaire to all residents

within its responsible area. The positive outcome was that Howgate Village residents are concerned at the possible loss of their Village Hall and are prepared to work to try and reach a satisfactory outcome. To this end a Howgate Development Trust is being formed independently of the Community Council.

The second situation is the proposal of a major housing development at the site of the former Wellington School. Many residents attended a Community Council meeting and as a result formed a very vigorous Wellington Action Group. An exhibition by the developers was arranged for 15 May 2019 in the Penicuik Town Hall. Private donations to the action group have enabled them to secure the services of a planning consultant and the Community Council will provide funds to hire the Village Hall as a venue for meetings.

As I mentioned, members of the Community Council have worked very well together. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of our relationship with Midlothian Council.

A Community Council is a voluntary organisation set up by statute by the Local Authority. One of its functions is to represent the community to the local authority. Indeed, the Midlothian Council's website says that Community Councils are a voice for the community. I have now come to the conclusion that Midlothian Council pays little or no attention to Community Council views. I will present four reasons in support of my position but there are other instances too.

The first involves the Midlothian Local Plan, adopted in November 2017. Having sought views from local residents, Howgate Community Council made detailed comments on the then proposed plan, particularly concerning possible developments in the Pomathorn and Wellington areas of the Howgate region. You will see in last year's Chairman's Report by Colin Bennett how Midlothian Council failed to comply with its Participation Statement in as much as there had been no attempt at consultation with the local community prior to adopting the proposed developments. Our comments were simply passed to a Reporter labelled "unresolved conflicts" – Midlothian Council had made no attempt to resolve them. Frustration by the lack of engagement is common to all members of the Federation of Community Councils.

The second example involves working with a newly established Midlothian Council Community Liaison Officer. It started promisingly enough, with a report detailing all the concerns we had with roads. However, at most of our Council meetings there was no attendance by the liaison officer and no update to the report – the "response" column was woefully lacking. The liaison officer appeared at our last meeting in May and presented an honest report where he admitted that the Council's Roads department has been slow to respond, react and give definitive, tangible answers with deadlines. He also said that there would now no longer be a liaison officer, thereby severing another link with Midlothian Council. However there is a very positive note to add – through our hard-working Ian King, Howgate CC is now a full participant in the Midlothian Traffic Roads and Paths group, a sub group of the Midlothian Federation of Community Councils, and I understand our Howgate Community Council representative is a great source of information and technical knowledge. There is at least an aspect of hope here.

The third example of Midlothian Council not listening involves a planning application at Netherton and a Pre-application Consultation at Wellington.

Howgate Community Council looks at planning applications in our relevant area and listens to local objectors and/or supporters. We examine applications and judge them according to the policies present in the current Midlothian Local Plan. Where there is departure from the local plan, we make considered objections with reasons. In the case of Netherton with an application for 5 yurts, a glamping hub, a pond for wild swimming and a café and shop with accommodation in addition to an already approved housing unit, we suggested this did not conform to a number of policies in the Midlothian Local Plan. Despite our objections and those of a number of local residents, the case officer, Graeme King suggested the granting of planning permission. Councillor McCall, who regularly attends Howgate Community Council meetings, called in the proposal and I emailed to ask if we needed to, or had a chance to, make any further comments. In her reply, Councillor McCall stated "I can speak on the CC's behalf". Indeed Midlothian Planning Committee papers state the application has been called to Committee for consideration by Councillor McCall "to consider the concerns raised by local residents and the Howgate Community Council". I watched the Midlothian Council meeting with disbelief – not one of our points

was raised by Councillor McCall. Councillor McCall said she was in favour of the application (as she is entitled to do) as there was nothing between Penicuik and Whitmuir since the Leadburn Inn was closed (in reality it has been open since February and Councillor McCall admitted driving past it three times a week) and she said there would be no hen or stag parties so disruptive at similar yurts in the Borders as the clientele here would be very different (which is complete conjecture). The Provost asked why the scheduled site visit had not taken place and said he would find it impossible to say yea or nay without an appreciation of the visual aspects raised by objectors which was a critical part of their case. He was told no one had asked for a site visit and was surprised to learn that calling in an application did not promote one automatically. Councillor McCall stated she had been on a site visit, which was important to her, and that she was happy with what she saw. None of our points or any other objector's points were raised by any other Councillors though all had received communication on the matter. No debate took place on any issues we raised and the application was granted. Similarly for the Pre-Application Constitution on Wellington there was complete silence from Council - not one member uttered a word. We have raised this issue with Midlothian Council so many times and Councillor McCall said she had sat in on those discussions, but not a word.

Finally on this matter of not listening, Howgate, along with Penicuik Community Council, raised objections regarding conditions imposed on the Penicuik recycling facility and the effect of a levy for brown bin collections on the poorer parts of the community. In March I received an email stating that colleagues in resources will contact me to arrange a meeting to discuss my observations. Councillor McCall tried to get things moving and was told by Commercial Operations that it would be on the agenda of a cross party working group coming up in the near future. The same information was related to me in April. Since then, silence.

During my time on Council I attended various planning meetings including those for preparing the Midlothian Local Plan and the SESplan. As reported by Councillor Baxter in the Midlothian Advertiser way back in October 2015, the process of developing a Local Development Plan "appears to have been a waste of time and money". The same sentiments apply today, some four years later. In the SES plan meeting I attended absolutely all the delegates suggested it was foolish to encourage a population move from the west of Scotland to the east. No-one in authority listened and we now have what appears to be an out-of-control house building program with little or no extra infrastructure and a Council that is desperately short of money as a consequence.

I think it is unreasonable for Midlothian Council to create, by statute, Community Councils and then ignore them. I can therefore see no reason to stay on as Chairman of a Community Council, making the same type of comment to Midlothian Council year in year out and getting no response. Now I have seen the workings of the Council on their webcam I can see the complete disinterest in local matters by the Council Members. There is no point in me devoting hours of my life to achieve nothing. I therefore, with regret, resign from the Community Council. I will forward a copy of my Chairman's Report to Midlothian Council so they can see the atmosphere they are creating.

The other members of HCC were very sorry that Bruce had decided to resign, although they understood his frustration.
Ian Q on behalf of HCC thanked Bruce for his considerable efforts.

5. Treasurer's Report.
In the absence of Graeme the audited accounts were presented and approved. These are attached to the Minutes.
It was noted that we need to check up on the timing of payment of the grant from Midlothian Council.

6. Report On Howgate Church Closure.

Sara Snodgrass had reported to Ian Q that a steering group had been set up with a view to forming a Howgate Development Trust.

Ian had also asked Sheena Dawe of Howgate Church if she could tell him the current position and Sheena had said that they were waiting for valuations.

7. Report on Wellington Action Group.

Pauline Cunningham gave an update as follows:-

The WAG meets on a monthly basis.
The pre application procedure is complete and representations made to Strutt and Parker.
A formal planning application will be made in due course.
Two planning committee meetings had been attended by WAG.
At the first one confusion reigned.
Because all members of Midlothian Council are also members of the planning committee there seems to be the view that no councillor can express any opinions before the planning meeting, and one Councillor was accused of doing so, and therefore because of procedure/politics the meeting was abandoned , everyone having wasted their time.
At the second meeting none of the local councillors in whose area Wellington lies voiced any of the many points raised in detail by WAG and of course no members of the public are allowed to speak.
Given the emphasis which MDC says it places on local democracy this is to say the least, disappointing.

A further problem is that a new application has been made for another 30 houses on the land across Milkhall Road lying to the north of Wellington School.

Given the approach of the local councillors so far WAG felt that they had to approach Christine Graham MSP.

The members of HCC noted that the problems with planning procedures and approach were very significant, and that Wellington was just an example. It was agreed that Ian Q would seek a meeting at the appropriate level to try to understand how it all works and to raise general concerns.

8. Howgate Connect Newsletter.

Following on discussion between HVHA chairman and Ian Q HCC had agreed to consider bearing part of the cost of production of Howgate Connect. Bruce had ascertained that the monthly cost of production is [£32] and it was agreed that to contribute half of that would be far too great a proportion of HCC's annual income.
It was agreed to hold this over until a later meeting.

9. Election of new Council members.

Bruce having resigned from HCC there is a vacancy. Unfortunately there has been no interest shown.
It was agreed that Ian Q would become Chairman and that Jenny Westwood would become Secretary.

10. AOCB

Ian Q reported that there have been at least three relatively new planning applications (1) for a holiday park at the landfill site on Drummond moor on the A 6094 to the south of Rosslynlee hospital, a big extension to the trout farm on the same road and a proposal for two glamping pods at Bag End, Leadburn. This is addition to the yurts proposed for Netherton.

A general view was expressed that there was no point in the members spending time preparing for and attending meetings if there was no real interest or response from Midlothian Council or its members.
It was agreed that we would look into ways of improving matters and that the fact that Dr Vickers is Chief Executive of Midlothian Council gave us some hope.

11 Next AGM
24 June2020 at 7.30 pm (venue to be specified nearer the time)

12 Next HCC meeting

Wednesday 25 September 2019. But because of all that is going on there will have to be other communication on an ongoing basis. Ian Q will discuss with Jenny how best to do this in a way which is effective and doesn't waste time.

Guest speaker.

Rona Duncan, who is a policewoman currently working to develop activities in terms of the Community Empowerment Act gave a very interesting talk on Community Resilience.
In essence this involves recognising probable risks, e.g. in our area heavy snowfall, and setting up systems to deal with it.
It was felt that in a small community like ours most of what is involved is done as a matter of course but we noted that a communications network and set procedures would be useful.