

## **Update on Local Licensing Forums**

### **Establishing Forums**

Local Licensing Forums are now well established throughout the country, with all Forums having had their first meetings and also contributing to the draft policy statements from their prospective Licensing Boards.

Many of the Forums are in the process of arranging their annual meeting with Licensing Boards, thus giving an opportunity to Forums to meet their colleagues and discuss policy and future direction of licensing in their region.

All the forums would appear to be fairly represented reflecting a broad section of the community, with other partners and stakeholders making valuable contributions.

Forums may have to work a bit harder to achieve a good balance nationwide.

### **The balance within Forums**

Local Councils were given the power to establish Forums locally, but the government did not give detailed guidelines as to the numbers per organisation represented on Forums and as a result many Forums have developed an imbalance with over-representation of the trade within many Forums.

However, this has not had a deleterious effect on the forums, in many cases it has had a very beneficial effect, but does favour the trade in terms of voting outcomes.

Forums need more in-put from The Licensed Standards Officer and more representation of young people and Community Councils.

### **Training of Forum members**

Alcohol Focus Scotland has to date trained over 300 Forum members, with 150 still to be trained in the Western Isles, Highlands and Dumfries and Galloway.

Training has taken place in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, South Lanarkshire, Dunfermline, and in Lauder for Borders members.

We are hoping to have all training completed for Forum members by the end of April.

I will then concentrate on additional training for Conveners of Forums, Clerks to the Licensing Board and also progress with continuity training for different regions throughout Scotland.

### **Networking Channels for Forums**

I have been encouraging Forums to use all support available from stakeholders.

This includes, Health, Police, Drug/Alcohol action teams, Education, Social Work, young people and the community at large.

Forums should invite the public to meetings, link regularly with the Licensing Board and take advantage of other skills that are present within each Council throughout Scotland.

Encouraging Forums to invite external speakers to give information on specific areas and assist Forums to acquire the skills of data collection for presentation to the Board.

It is vitally important that Forums liaise with all relevant external agencies in partnership.

## **The role of Forum members and relationship with the licensing Board**

Forum members are in a unique position to facilitate change at a local level, but this requires training and the possession of, or acquisition of, specific skills related to partnership working and networking at community level.

Although Forums are meant to work hand in glove with the Board, their remit is to;

- (a) Keep under review-
    - (1) the operation of the act in the Forum's area, and
    - (2) In particular, the exercise by the relevant Licensing Board, or Boards of their functions and given such advise and making such recommendations to that or any of these Boards in relation to those matters as the Forum considers appropriate.
- (Licensing Scotland Act 2005) part11 sub sec 1-3.

Forums will not be involved with individual cases referred to the Board, nor shall they have an influence over specific licences being granted by the Board.

However, they may pay particular attention to a specific area of a community, or enquire in more detail about crime, health, under age drinking, or any statistic which may require further investigation.

Forums should have a forward plan for alcohol within their area, but before progressing, they should consult with their Licensing Board, possibly during the annual meeting, or request a special meeting to discuss their plans for the coming year.

This could be a good opportunity for Boards and Local Licensing forums to adopt, or agree to a joint plan for the five objectives within the Act.

It may also be beneficial to invite other agencies to have an input into this document, particularly those who suffer indirectly as a result of alcohol misuse. This would include domestic abuse, young people living with alcohol dependant parents, or residents suffering from the anti-social aspects of drink fuelled disturbance.

Again, it is vitally important that Local Community Councils and community groups are party to the forward plan for alcohol within their area. Included in this approach should be Regeneration Zone residents and support Managers and workers for that area.

We must try to reach the socially excluded, but as is often the case, they present the most detailed problems, with the poorest statistics across all areas of community health.

The Forums must build a good working relationship with the Board, as working together as a unit with one cause in mind will achieve greater results than working in isolation.

### **Forums and policy documents from the Board**

Most Forums should now have had the opportunity to look over the Boards 3 year policy document and to comment on it, or make suggested changes to the document where the Forum felt this was appropriate.

Many of the Forums throughout Scotland have greatly assisted Boards by being pro-active and identifying areas that Boards may have overlooked, particularly areas where the Act needs to be interpreted by legal assistance, or where there was just a simple oversight which was highlighted by the Forum. The Forums can act as a safety net in this instance and it does reflect the correct role of the Forum by keeping under review the act in their area, but in conjunction with the Board.

It is important to remember that the policy document from the Board is a live/flexible document, which will require regular review locally and will have adjustments made as the Act is changed and implemented nationally.

Local Licensing Forums are an extended arm of support to the Boards and their contribution is invaluable in monitoring the progress of licensing in their region.

### **Forums during Transition stage**

Forums are now at a crucial point in their development and they have now reached the stage where many are asking the question, "what way now for the Forums?"

Whatever direction Forums take, it must be based on Partnership working and forward planning, which requires a trawl of community need using statistics provided by the main stakeholders on the forums. This will include the inputs from Education, Social Work, Police, Health, Local Alcohol and Drug Action Teams, and Community Representatives. Forums will only survive if they are pro-active during the 3 month gap when they do not meet, but this requires organising sub-groups, or smaller work groups within the Executive of the Forum to take this forward and gather appropriate information.

If forums are to keep under review the operation of the act, they must address areas where they feel there may be overprovision, where the health of the community is at risk, where there could be harm to young people, or where the public need protected from the "fall out" from binge drinking. All of these aspects are found in the 5 elements of the Act and if Forums keep this in mind, then they will be on the right road to addressing these issues for themselves.

### **Forums as catalysts for change**

Forums must believe that they are a medium for change and not just a "talking shop".

Forums have power! If this was not so, they would not be integral to the Act!

Licensing Boards must realise that they have strong foundations within the Forums and should lean towards them to complete much of the research work. Working together in this way, may in fact influence their decisions regarding renewal and granting of licences within the community they serve.

Nicholson states that Forums "allow active participation in local decision making" and "feed in the grass roots perspective".

Paragraph 318 White Paper 2003.

### **The Role of Licensed Standards Officer**

The role of the licensed standards officer is fundamental to the development of Forums, but the role has been rather dysfunctional throughout the country.

Licence Standards Officers have in many instances had their role diluted, or subsumed within Trading Standards, or even given a greater remit involving responsibilities that divert them away from the main focus which should be alcohol.

This would appear to be against the philosophy of the act and should be a concern since the amount of premises and licences that have to be monitored is significant.

Forums will benefit a great deal from this local input and depth of knowledge, meaning that any local patterns that do emerge can be detected early by the Licensed Standards Officer responsible for that area.

It is hoped that this role will be more focused in the future, but this will require councils to direct the efforts of licensed Standards Officer into the appropriate area under the Act.

Test purchasing has been rolled out across Scotland since December and L.S.O.'S are linking with the police on this important initiative.

### **Local Licensing Forums web site:**

The web site is now up and running and we have a "blog" installed for members use.

It is envisaged that the web site will be used as a better means of communication where information can be obtained weekly by logging on to [www.local-licensing-forums.org.uk](http://www.local-licensing-forums.org.uk)

At present the website is under used, but can be an excellent means for sharing recent information and good practice across Forums.

The National Licensing Officer up-dates the web with recent developments and ideas from other Forums, but this can only work if Forum members make use of this resource.

### **The National Licensing Forum**

The National Licensing Forum was wound down after 2006, but in retrospect, it was at a time when we had the greatest need going into the Transition phase, with over 600 + volunteers requiring training and Forums needing support at the inception stage.

Licensing Forums are a major initiative, but unlike the Boards they have no history, or template to work from and it would appear that (inadvertently) national support was removed, just as the Forums are now reaching a pivotal stage in their development.

Forums seem to have been left to get on with it, but although supported by the National Licensing Officer, they require national direction during Transition.

Forums should not be left un-attached, as they are a voluntary body for each Council across Scotland and need the support of the government.

Volunteers must be recognised and supported for the excellent work they do and I am convinced Forums will prevail during this time with the appropriate support.

### **A National Association of Local Licensing forums.**

The establishing of a National body for the Forums would give an opportunity to achieve some form of continuity across the country, with various issues, or concerns being shared at these meetings. Conveners from each Forum would be expected to attend the meetings and representation from each Board would help achieve closer liaison.

The Executive of the Association could be drawn from members of the Association of Community Councils, Faith groups, Sporting Bodies, Health, Police, Alcohol/Drug groups, Trade members, Government representatives and Stakeholders who have an input relating to alcohol at a national level.

A further extension of this idea would be to encourage Forums to network regionally, especially if they have 3 or 4 Forums within their boundaries.

Through establishing a national body, Forums can then bring and take away specific strategies which may help them operate better at local level.

### **Good Practice information for Forums.**

The National Licensing Officer is in the process of producing a Good Practice leaflet to help Forums establish direction and lay down particular aims and objectives for future reference. The leaflet will highlight the partners we require to network with and give examples of how best to take the Forums forward now that the policy documents have been absorbed and other areas of concern may need consideration.

Forums should not look upon the leaflet as the only way forward, but as a guide to help them look at their existing practice, or possibly make comment on the guide which could lead to a better understanding of how we approach the transition stage.

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