

LARGER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the Larger Councils Committee on 18 October 2022 at 11.00 taking place by Zoom.

Present (online):

Councillors Peter Astell (committee vice chair), Phil Barnett, Mike Drew (NALC vice-chair, member services), Paul Harvey (committee chair), Matthew Hulbert, Richard Parry, Isabella Roberts; and directly elected clerks, Carl Hearn and Shar Roselman.

Staff present: Chris Borg (policy manager), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications) and Jessica Lancod-frost (for part).

Also present: Elaine Anderson, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for one item

1. Apologies

Resolved: That apologies be noted from Cllr Dave Barton and elected clerks Jane Biscombe and Mark Smith.

2. Minutes of previous meeting – 26 July 2022

Resolved: That the minutes from the 26 July 2022 committee session be noted.

3. Business Improvement Districts

The committee chair introduced Elaine Anderson from the Business Improvement Districts Regeneration and Urban Policy Division at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) who explained the informal, early consultation of local government on how well BIDs were working. This followed engagement with the 300 BIDs and proposals, if any, would be subject to ministerial decisions in the New Year.

There was then short round-robin feedback from committee members whose local council areas had Business Improvement Districts (BIDs):

- The Milton Keynes BID works well, but many stakeholders have been left out of the BID process. A DLUHC review should consider

surrounding areas such as market town areas as the BID only covers central Milton Keynes.

- Newbury was incredibly supportive of its BID, helped set it up and is keen to work in unison, but raised concern when the principal council tries to dictate outcomes for BID events, it often conflicts with the town council's views including on its market.
- In Beverley plans for a BID had been shelved and the nearby East Coast BID has not gone down very well with the town council as that BID wants to deliver services delivered by local councils whose areas it straddles. Other concerns included accountability and extra cost.
- Tavistock has one of the smallest BIDs in England where the town council is a core partner, but the BID can be challenging where there is conflict over local events. The town council has a representative on the BID steering group.
- Sevenoaks has no outright BID but is trying to emulate the Canterbury BID and there are tensions with upper tier councils.

Other points raised in discussion included the benefits from events, risks of becoming party political, lessons learned from where establishing a BID had been tried and failed, and guidance to support effective relationships.

Resolved: That the committee members not present also be invited to provide feedback on BIDs for NALC to relay to DLUHC and that DLUHC be invited to attend the next meeting of the Super Councils Network.

4. Matters arising and action log

Cllr Parry raised benefits of membership for larger councils and requested this be considered at a future meeting. He also reiterated the importance of building good connections with government officials.

Shar Roselman commented on the action log and whether this could be simplified and with clearer reporting on progress against objectives. The head of policy and communications agreed to take this away and explore how this could be achieved.

The policy manager updated the committee on NALC's Make a Change campaign and forthcoming publication of materials for the local council elections in May 2023. The committee were asked to promote this campaign especially those with elections in their county areas in May 2023.

Resolved (1): That the action log be noted and proposals be developed to improve the document.

Resolved (2): That the verbal update be noted.

5. Funding Task and Finish Group

The policy manager provided a brief verbal update on the work of the Funding Task and Finish Group sitting under the auspices of the Policy Committee. This group was currently working on developing a business case for local councils to apply directly to central government funds and agencies on the same basis as principal councils.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

6. NALC analysis of council tax levels of local precepting authorities 2022-23

The policy officer gave a verbal report on NALC's analysis of council tax levels of local precepting authorities 2022-23. The document provided headline analysis of statistics including an overall profile of Band D precept changes and those local councils which had increased their precepts by £100 and £500 or more from the previous financial year. NALC had been in touch with those local councils which with precept increases to understand why.

Some of the reasons given for precept increases had been staffing cost rises, start-up costs for new local councils, service devolution and general running cost increases including insurance and energy bills. It was confirmed that for the 2022-23 financial year the total quantum of precept income was valued at just 1.8% of the overall council tax total raised by the whole of local government in England.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

7. Dependants' Carers' Allowance

The policy manager provided a short verbal update on the Sustainable Communities Act, the benefits for local councils and the three-year delay on the ministerial decision on the Weymouth Town Council submission on the Dependants' Carers' Allowance.

Securing parity to claim and issue this allowance on the same basis as principal authorities had been NALC's longstanding position. It was also part of NALC's Make A Change campaign. It was agreed that real community examples of why

this power was needed to be allowed in the local council sector, was needed, as there was not much awareness more generally in the sector of this being an issue at present.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted, and NALC continue to gather evidence from county associations and councils.

A ten minute break was held between 12.10 and 12.20.

8. Current financial issues facing larger councils

The committee discussed current financial issues facing larger councils, including those needing support and advice from NALC:

- In Tavistock energy bills are currently around £50,000, within a precept of £800,000. Energy quotes can change hourly, and the council has several public buildings. It was extremely hard to obtain new insurance quotes if a local council is a new customer. It was thought that in reality larger councils are only able to secure current affordable quotes from just one or two insurance companies.
- Newport Pagnell had less of a problem with its insurance quote lately, but was interested in the issues local councils may have been having in lowering gas bills. The council did have cost concerns over building and project costs.
- In Newbury, the town council was having to defer opening a new community café until next year as costs had rocketed.
- Yate had reached a new three-year deal with its insurance company.
- Barwell had also had issues with its insurance quote recently.
- Sevenoaks had found that utilities, energy, and insurance costs were very high.
- West Bletchley had discovered that it could halve its gas bill by having its boiler serviced.
- In Durham, many local councils were currently struggling to pay their bills.

Resolved: That the identified main cost issues facing larger councils of energy, staffing and insurance costs be reflected in engagement with government.

9. Civility and respect project update

It was agreed to defer this item as the clerk to Sevenoaks Town Council was not able to attend the meeting.

10. National networks

The committee noted that the next meeting of the Super Councils Network (SCN) was on 1 November and reiterated its purpose was to create a space for Super Councils to come together to share good practice and provide mutual support. Issues agreed for the agenda included insurance costs, DLUHC's work on BIDs, funding, and remote meetings. It was also suggested that further consideration be given to what a Super Council looks like going forward and factors which differentiate needs for example councils with large staffing numbers.

Resolved: That insurance costs, BIDs, funding and remote meetings be on the agenda for the next SCN meeting.

11. Date and time of next meeting

The committee noted the calendar of meetings had 28 February 2023 from 11:00 – 13:00 via Zoom as the next meeting. Views were expressed on this date being four months away and it was agreed this would be considered in any changes to the calendar of meetings for 2023.

Councillor Paul Harvey chair
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