

POLICY COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the Policy Committee held on 24 January 2023 at 10.00 taking place via Zoom.

Present:

Councillors David Francis (committee chair and Northumberland), Lillian Burns (committee vice chair and Cheshire), (Lancashire), Richard Page (Gloucestershire), Colin Peacock (Lancashire), Janet Wallace (Dorset), and Keith Stevens (NALC chair, for part), Charlene Slade, county officer from the Essex county association and Shelley Parker, policy and external affairs manager, SLCC.

Guests in attendance: Cllr Stephen Gilling, Spennymoor Town Council (for part) and Steve Ragg, county officer at the County Durham Association of Local Councils (for part).

Staff present: Jonathan Owen (chief executive, for part), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications), Chris Borg (policy manager), Fflur Jones (campaigns intern), and Jessica Lancod-frost policy officer (for part).

1. Apologies

The committee chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting.

Resolved: That the apologies be noted from Cllr Peter Allison.

2. Motions from county associations

2.1 County Durham Association of Local Councils (CDALC) on extraordinary parish council meetings.

Cllr Stephen Gilling, Spennymoor Town Council (for part) and Steve Ragg, county officer at the County Durham Association of Local Councils proposed a motion on making it harder (unless there was a very good reason) for extraordinary parish council meetings to be called.

The specific request was for NALC to lobby government to make the number of councillors necessary to call such meetings more proportionate to the size of the council.

During discussion, several points were raised:

- The current loophole caused stress on several local councils to officers as it was being exploited for political reasons.
- Often a minority of councillors for in-substantive reasons were calling for extraordinary parish council meetings which were not required and were inconclusive.
- The same parties requesting such a meeting often do not attend those meetings.
- There was broad sympathy and support for the local councils in Durham where this has happened.

Resolved: That the motion be adopted and that NALC would seek a change to the legislation and that it would also seek via the Local Government Association the experience of principal authorities, who are subject to a comparable provision in the relevant Act.

2.2 Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC) on energy efficiency in listed buildings

There was no representative from the Dorset county association to propose this motion. However the committee discussed and considered the motion which was asking for NALC to lobby central government for changes to the National Planning Policy Framework to reduce the conflict and contradiction between conservation's adherence to less effective standards and building regulation's requirements to improved environmental and energy efficient insulation methods.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Balance was needed between protecting heritage and making listed buildings energy efficient.
- Listed buildings still had to be made fit to inhabit for the current century whilst also being protected.
- It was necessary to avoid extremes of position here – where listed buildings could reasonably be made more energy efficient without altering their character, they should be.

Resolved: That the motion be not supported but that NALC would take into account the need for an appropriate balance between the environmental performance and the heritage conservation of protected buildings when it considers its response to the government's consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework.

3. Minutes previous meetings

3.1 To approve the draft minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2022

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2022 be noted.

3.2 To approve the notes from the informal meeting held on 9 November 2022

Resolved: That the notes from the informal meeting held on 9 November 2022 be noted.

3.3 Matters arising

The policy manager confirmed that the helpful report from the committee vice chair on the Devon rural single track road speed limits motion had been sent to the Devon county association who had confirmed their thanks and appreciation for it.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

4. Local government finance

4.1 Provisional local government finance settlement 2023-24.

The policy manager confirmed that the NALC response to the government's Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023-24 technical consultation had been submitted the previous week. NALC had welcomed the exemption of local councils for the forthcoming financial year from referendum principles on excessive council tax increases, but argued for either a permanent or multi-year exemption which would provide certainty for local councils when setting budgets and managing their finances moving forward.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

4.2 Fair and secure funding campaign – verbal update from Funding Task and Finish Group.

The policy manager provided a short verbal update on the work of the funding task and finish group. The group had last met in December and had agreed the findings of its own desktop research conducted between September and November 2022. The conclusion was as suspected that local councils could apply for only a minority of central government funding sources, were ineligible to apply for most and needed to be able in principle if they chose to apply for such funds on the same basis as principal authorities.

The policy manager was currently creating a template for the group's full business case on the above basis. The business case would be shared with the group ahead of its final meeting in March 2023. The business would then be presented to the committee to agree next steps at its own March session.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

5. Mandatory training for councillors

The policy manager provided a summary of a written report on training. There had been a request from the recent session of the Smaller Councils Committee for the committee to review its position from 2010 that training should be strongly encouraged across the local council sector, but not made mandatory.

There was then a short discussion during which it was confirmed that the reason the committee in 2010 had not adopted a position on mandatory training was because there was concern this may have been a deterrent for some candidates to stand for election. However the committee fully endorsed the concept of training, agreeing it was vital for clerks and councillors across the sector, especially new councillors. However, the committee did not want to adopt a position on mandatory training as it considered that there was no way of enforcing such a requirement in reality in the sector – but endorsed the principle that all training should be strongly encouraged.

It was agreed that it should be a requirement for those councils that have signed the civility pledge to have in place an effective programme of training. There was a need for new councillors to receive induction training on a wider range of issues relating to conduct, planning, finance and powers, as well as the specifics of their own council. The opportunity to develop the availability and delivery of training further was also agreed to, through the use of video calls and other online technology. NALC would pursue this with county associations and other stakeholders this year and, if appropriate, a motion for debate would be included in the AGM.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted, that NALC strongly encourage training for clerks and councillors (especially new councillors) across the sector, that NALC officers engage with other committees and external stakeholders to promote training across 2023 and that a suitable motion or policy on training be submitted for consideration at the NALC 2023 AGM if appropriate.

There was then a ten minute comfort break.

6. NALC campaigns

6.1 Unadopted roads – to consider adopting a policy on unadopted roads following the recent House of Commons Adjournment Debate on unadopted roads and new build infrastructure led by Andrew Selous MP

The policy manager spoke to a briefing framed by the policy officer which had been sent to Andrew Selous an MP in Bedfordshire in December 2022 ahead of an adjournment debate on unadopted roads and infrastructure in the Commons at that point.

It was agreed that officers should recommend adoption of an informal policy on land management companies and local councils at the next formal session of the committee and that this policy should be circulated electronically to the committee for comment in the meantime. Committee members would work to prepare a policy along the lines suggested, for adoption at the March meeting.

Resolved: That the committee should consider an informal policy on the provision of amenities including green spaces being the responsibility of local councils in the first instance (and not land management companies), with legal provisions to this effect inbuilt to the planning system, at its next formal session.

6.2 Report of the Commission on the UK's Future

The head of policy and communications provided a verbal update that the Labour Party had recently published Gordon Brown's Report of the Commission on the UK's Future. NALC had briefly welcomed the report via a short news story.

There was a short discussion during which recommendations 2, 14 and 15 were welcomed and it was agreed that NALC should further engage with Labour on the themes of local leadership, planning, onward devolution, the return of regionalism and stronger standards.

Resolved: That the committee welcome the report and endorse further NALC engagement with Labour on the themes of local leadership, planning, onward devolution, the return of regionalism and stronger standards contained in the report, which most affect local councils.

6.3. [Levelling Up White Paper and Bill](#) – update on the progress of Levelling Up the United Kingdom white paper and Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill

The head of policy and communications provided a short verbal update on the Lords second reading briefing of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which had taken place on 17 January. NALC had held a well-attended briefing on the bill for peers on 11 January. As a result, several peers including Baroness Pinnock, Lord Lytton and Baroness Scott (NALC President) had made several of NALC's points in the chamber at second reading. Committee stage in the Lords will be on 20 February 2023 at which Baroness Scott and others will be lodging various amendments to the bill predicated on NALC's briefing positions.

Resolved: That the report be noted, and that the pro-active stance which NALC staff and various peers had been taking to influence the debates on the bill in the Lords, be welcomed.

7. Responses to consultations

7.1 To note the response to the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee Inquiry into Levelling Up Funding

The policy manager confirmed that NALC had responded to the November 2022 House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee Inquiry into Levelling Up Funding. NALC has made various points that local councils should be able to apply for all levelling up and central government funds on the same basis as principal authorities which was currently not the case.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

7.2 Vacancy on the committee

The policy manager confirmed the committee vacancy created by the resignation of Cllr Jonathan Davies late in 2022 would be filled from a wider NALC trawl to fill other committee vacancies.

Resolved: That the verbal update be noted.

7.3 Physical committee meeting in 2023-24 financial year

The policy manager confirmed to the committee that if it wished, it could hold one physical formal session in London during the 2023-24 financial year, but that NALC would likely be leaving 109 Great Russell Street by the end of the current financial year so if this option was pursued other meeting venues such as CCLA would have to be sourced. There was a general discussion during which the point was made that there would be no hybrid committee meetings held by NALC again and the last time the committee had been offered the chance of holding a physical session at the NALC offices, no members had attended in person, in part due to a national rail strike.

Resolved: That the committee hold no physical formal meetings during 2023 but that this position be reviewed later in 2023 if the incoming committee wishes to hold a physical session during the first quarter of 2024.

8. Date and time of next meeting

The next formal meeting of the Policy Committee will be held virtually on 28 March 2023 but it will meet online informally also on 3 February 2023 to consider its response to the National Planning Policy Framework consultation.