

POLICY COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the Policy Committee held on 20 June 2023 at 10.00 via Zoom.

Present:

Councillors Peter Allison (committee vice chair and West Yorkshire), David Francis (committee chair and Northumberland), Janet Wallace (Dorset); and Shelley Parker, policy and external affairs manager, Society of Local Council Clerks.

Also in attendance: Cllr Jeff Tutt (Kent Association of Local Councils), for part, and Cllr Bob Blezzard (Isle of Wight of Association of Local Councils), for part.

Staff present: Justin Griggs, head of policy and communications, Chris Borg, policy manager and Fflur Jones, campaigns intern.

1. Welcome and apologies

The committee chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting, and apologies from Cllr Keith Stevens, NALC chair, Cllr Richard Page (Gloucestershire) and Charlene Slade, county officer, Essex Association of Local Councils, were noted.

2. Motions from county associations

2.1 Kent Association of Local Councils on water neutrality

Cllr Jeff Tutt from Dunkirk Parish Council and the Kent Association of Local Councils outlined a motion asking NALC to lobby the government to incorporate in the National Planning Policy Framework the existing requirement on developers to supply a water neutrality statement with planning applications for new development. There was then a discussion, and the below general points were made:

- A huge amount of sewage is currently being pumped into the sea, water is being wasted in huge amounts across the country and it was reported that in the south of England there will likely be only one day's reserve of drinking water.
- This agenda needed to be looked at also from the cost perspective and huge pressure needed to be placed on water companies to be much more accountable. There was a view that the more coverage this issue receives, the better.

- Whilst there was probably a need for more balanced development it was agreed there was not the infrastructure particularly in the southeast at present to attend to several thousand new homes being built and that this could become a national problem.
- It was agreed that though this was not a national problem at present it did merit further engagement, research, and monitoring. While embracing the understandable concern, the Committee agreed to explore the issue further to better understand the specific interest to local councils, and to engage with organisations including the Home Builders' Federation, Local Government Association and Royal Town Planning Institute.

Resolved: That the motion not be supported at this stage, but that NALC undertake further research including engaging with other relevant organisations plus the NALC National Network: Climate Emergency.

2.2 Isle of Wight Association of Local Councils (IWALC) on thresholds for triggering by-elections and parish polls

Cllr Bob Blezzard from IWALC spoke to a motion requesting NALC to lobby the government to increase the threshold of the number of electors who can trigger a by-election or a parish poll.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- There was general agreement that the thresholds did need to be increased for a by-election and for a parish poll to be called. However, there was cognisance of the need to promote the principle of democracy, withstanding the obvious problems the current thresholds presented.
- It was deemed too easy to call parish polls under the current system and NALC already has a longstanding policy objective to reform parish polls and has engaged with the government on this issue including through the 2015, which would be added to the policy register.
- Whilst NALC has promoted the effective use of co-option there was general agreement that NALC should primarily be promoting increased candidacy and contested elections for local councils as a priority.
- The Committee agreed to de-couple the two issues, reconfirming their existing policy position on reform to parish polls and agreed to the principle of increasing the by-election threshold and to undertake further work to determine an appropriate and proportionate level.

Resolved: That NALC continue to lobby for reform to parish polls and current positions be added to the policy register; that further work be undertaken to determine an appropriate and proportionate level for thresholds required to trigger a local council by-election which can then be advocated to the

government; and that NALC also press for the facility of co-option to be used where a vacancy cannot be filled by by-election.

3. Neighbourhood Planning Committees

3.1 Neighbourhood Planning Committees – to adopt a policy on giving non-councillor seats with voting rights on Neighbourhood Planning Committees

The committee chair introduced a paper drafted by himself and the policy manager proposing that non-local councillors be given voting rights on neighbourhood planning committees at certain points during the framing of a neighbourhood plan.

The Parish and Community Councils (Committees) regulations 1990 (1990/2476) required amendment to give neighbourhood planning committees the same status as those set up to manage harbour, festival, or tourism functions. Whilst it was agreed that local councils should be in complete control at the start and end of the neighbourhood planning process and that the current system was complex, more latitude was required.

The Committee agreed to lobby the government to define the production of a neighbourhood plan as a parish council function in legislation, and to engage with Locality.

Resolved: That NALC lobby the government to define the production of a Neighbourhood Plan as a ‘parish council function’ under the Parish and Community Councils (Committees) regulations 1990 (1990/2476) to allow non-parish council members to have voting rights on a neighbourhood planning committee on the same basis as committees dealing with land management, harbour, tourism, or festival functions; and that NALC engage with Locality on this issue.

4. Minutes of previous meetings

Resolved: That the draft minutes from the 28 March 2023 committee session be noted.

Resolved: That the notes from the 22 May 2023 informal committee session be noted.

Resolved: The Committee noted there were three vacancies on the Committee following the recent local elections and that members of National Assembly had been asked to express an interest in filling current vacancies on committees and these would be considered at the next meeting in July.

5. Mandatory training for councillors

5.1 To receive a recommendation report on the review of NALC's policy on mandatory training for councillors

The committee chair summarised the previous discussions by the committee and its view that mandatory training for councillors could not be enforced. The policy manager reported on the engagement process with several NALC committees and networks as part of the review:

- There had not been unanimous agreement across committees and networks that training should or even could be enforced on all local councillors – networks had broadly backed this and committees had broadly opposed it.
- It had been recognized that training is a broad area and that this affected clerks and councillors alike.
- It was suggested that some topics were more urgent for training, especially for councillors, but the sector could suffer reputational damage if it pushed for what the committee considered was an unworkable policy.

Resolved: That NALC continue to strongly encourage new councillor training especially in the areas of corporate governance, behaviour at meetings and sharing good practice.

(A short comfort break took place between 13:06 and 13:15)

6. NALC campaigns

6.1 Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill – verbal update on the progress of the Levelling Up the United Kingdom white paper and Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill

The head of policy and communications provided verbal update on progress of Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. NALC's president Baroness Scott of Needham Market had tabled and spoken to several amendments covering NALC's priority policy issues during the fifteen days of Committee Stage in the House of Lords on the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. Dates for Report Stage are yet to be published and issues likely to be pursued further and supported by NALC include planning reform, remote meetings, dependents' carer's allowance, and church funding. NALC would also continue to engage with Mumsnet who supported reforms to remote meetings and dependents' carers' allowance as part of their Women and Mums in Politics campaign. Shelley Parker had been engaging with One Voice Wales on the costs of dependents' carers' allowance in Wales.

Resolved: That the update be noted.

7. Responses to consultations

Resolved: The Committee noted that consultation responses had been submitted to the government on permitted development rights, the proposed Infrastructure Levy, and environmental outcomes reports; and NALC would also be providing written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee on pre-legislative scrutiny of Martyn's Law.

8. Star Council Awards 2023

8.1 Star Council Awards 2023

The Committee was encouraged to support and promote NALC's [Star Council Awards 2023](#) and provide feedback on actions taken by their own county association to promote the initiative to councils in their areas.

All committee members were also asked to make at least one nomination (especially for the Young Councillor of the Year category) by the nomination deadline of 28 July 2023. National Assembly members were also asked to encourage to work with their county officers to apply for the County Association of the Year category.

Resolved: That the verbal updates be noted.

9. Date and time of next meeting

The next meeting of the Policy Committee will be held virtually on 17 October 2023.

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