

SMALLER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the NALC Smaller Councils Committee held by Zoom teleconference on 9 February 2021.

Present:

National assembly members: Cllr Bob Blezzard, Cllr Lillian Burns, Cllr Graham Ford (committee chairman), Cllr Malcolm Leeding MBE; Cllr Mike Scott; directly elected members: Cllr Josephine Parish (committee vice-chairman), Mr Stephen Rickitt, Ms Lydia Smithson.

Also in attendance:

Also present were Charlotte Eisenhart (head of member services), Claire Goldfinch (project officer – policy and communications), Chris Borg (policy manager), Jessica Lancod-Frost (policy officer), and Jonathan Owen (chief executive).

1. Apologies and welcome

No apologies for absence were received.

Cllr Bob Blezzard and Cllr Mike Scott were welcomed onto the committee.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting and action log

The committee was asked to agree the minutes of the previous meeting.

Comments raised in response included:

- There isn't currently a mechanism in place to enable the committee to reach out to smaller councils across the country
- Could county associations support smaller councils declaring a climate emergency?

The committee was asked to highlight concerns that the climate change policy is highlighted and disseminated using county associations at the next meeting of National Assembly.

The committee chairman talked through the action log and asked for an update on marketing and promotion of e-learning.

The head of member services confirmed that e-learning had not been promoted widely yet as it was not currently offered everywhere. In future NALC would look at producing a template to help county associations market e-learning.

Ms Lydia Smithson provided feedback on e-learning from the Lincolnshire Association of Local Councils. The county association was happy with both the pilot and Nimble system, however the courses currently available were on generic topics such as health and safety. Ms Smithson asked if more personalised courses would be developed on topics such as councillor induction.

The head of member services confirmed that NALC would like to expand the range of available courses and make them more personalised. This would be a priority for NALC's new project manager.

Resolved (1): That the committee chairman be authorised to sign minutes of the meeting held on 9 February 2021

Resolved (2): That the committee chairman raises county association support for smaller councils declaring a climate emergency at the next meeting of National Assembly

3. Member services

The head of member services introduced an item on remote meetings. Current legislation allowing local councils to meet remotely was due to come to an end on 7 May, however NALC was urgently lobbying the government for an extension. Committee members were asked whether they shared NALC's urgency on this.

Committee members gave their views as follows:

- Cllr Lillian Burns: The Local Government Chronicle (LGC) had reported that the Local Government Association (LGA) was taking the government to the high court to ensure remote meetings could continue beyond 7 May
- The head of member services confirmed that the Association of Democratic Service Officers (ADSO) and Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) were also involved. NALC was working closely with both organisations
- Cllr Bob Blezzard: with elections confirmed to be taking place in May, the danger was that the government would say 'well if elections can be held face

to face, then meetings can be held face to face.' Cllr Blezzard hoped the challenge would succeed as it was very necessary

- Cllr Mike Scott: raised extension to remote meetings at Lobby Day meeting with 7 MP's. There was a move within the governing party to resist this, as come May the government doesn't want excuses for people to not go back to work or help out in the community. Lobbying needs to focus not only on safety aspect during coronavirus but also on other benefits such as helping more people get involved in local council meetings
- Mr Stephen Rickitt: inclusion had been raised at recent meeting with a minister. Mr Rickitt was worried about the court case as it might turn into primary legislation that only applied to the upper tier of local government. Could NALC look at drafting a short piece of legislation to lift section 78 into a bill?
- Cllr Josephine Parish: inclusion is key, want to continue with the option of remote meetings permanently. In the short term there may be problems waiting for the outcome of the legal course of LGA action. On a practical point can you hold an annual meeting of a local council by Zoom? Once 7 May has passed are local council working groups able to meet by Zoom?
- Cllr Malcolm Leeding: personal view - antipathetic to Zoom, however the county association (Oxfordshire) surveyed all local councils and they were broadly in favour of continuing with remote meetings. Cllr Leeding hoped it would be left to local councils to decide whether to go with in person or remote meetings in future

The chief executive reassured the committee that NALC was involved in a cross association group looking at remote meetings and that the government's position was softening.

NALC's chairman Cllr Sue Baxter had met with local government minister Luke Hall MP who said he would be looking at remote meetings in more detail.

At the weekly stakeholder meeting MHCLG had announced that they would be consulting on making remote meeting legislation permanent.

The head of member services was also working on a briefing note for county associations covering what to do if remote meetings legislation was not extended beyond 7 May.

The head of member services informed the committee that NALC had launched guidance on how local councils could prepare for a possible return to face to face meetings. Committee members were invited to give feedback to the head of member services by email.

Cllr Malcolm Leeding spoke to a report on village halls. If they were to be used for the forthcoming local elections they needed be reopened – who would do that? The government needed to be fully aware that they couldn't be used for elections if there was a law preventing a certain number of people going into them. Cllr Leeding had raised this with Oxfordshire MP's on Lobby Day.

Cllr Lillian Burns raised that older people were more concerned about mixing. If there wasn't a way round the ruling about meeting in person, some councils could collapse because councillors wouldn't feel safe attending meetings.

The committee chairman commented that over half of the members on his local council didn't want to meet in person. It wasn't fair on the clerk and chairman/vice-chairman to try to keep things running.

The head of member services asked committee members what consequences NALC should be aware of if elections are delayed by six months.

Cllr Mike Scott advised that it would be disastrous if elections in Northamptonshire were delayed as it could mean some councillors served a seven year term.

Resolved (1): That the update from the head of member services be noted

Resolved (2): That committee members share NALC's urgency in getting an extension to the remote meeting legislation

Resolved (3): That NALC emphasises the inclusivity benefit of remote meetings when calling for the remote meeting legislation to be extended

Resolved (4): That committee members provide any feedback they have on the guidance on preparing for a possible return to face to face meetings by email to the head of member services

4. Young people

The project officer (policy and communications) provided an overview of NALCs proposed young people work. The intention was to create a webpage with information and case studies similar to NALC's health and wellbeing and climate change webpages.

Committee members were asked if they had any case studies to share.

The committee chairman commented that in his area work with young people had been delegated to grouped parishes. Communication with them could be difficult, however he would try and find out what they were doing and let the project officer know.

Cllr Josephine Parish asked if NALC was looking for examples of local councils encouraging young people to stand for election.

Ms Lydia Smithson asked what the age range was for young councillors. The policy manager and project officer confirmed that this was 18 to 30.

Resolved (1): That the update from the project officer be noted

Resolved (2): That committee members share any young people case studies with the project officer by email

5. Star Council Awards

The policy manager provided an overview of NALC's Star Council Awards. Preparation was underway for a launch on 25 February, with a three month window for applications. The judging panel would meet online in June and a virtual ceremony would take place shortly afterwards.

Committee members were asked if there was anything NALC could do to promote the awards to smaller councils.

The committee chairman asked if the awards were being promoted at the county officer forum and if any thought had been given to having a parallel strand to the awards, as smaller and larger councils weren't necessarily comparable.

The policy manager confirmed that there was not a parallel strand for smaller councils. Judging would be based on meeting criteria which has been reintroduced this year.

Mr Stephen Rickitt noted that previously there hadn't been many entries from northern councils and asked if regional categories could be introduced.

Resolved (1): That the update from the policy manager be noted

6. Committee chairman's report

The committee chairman talked through a report he had written. Committee members agreed to meet again informally.

Cllr Mike Scott suggested that the committee might want to spend some time discussing if it could get qualitative data to help engage with smaller councils. Cllr Scott asked what support the committee could get from NALC to gather this data.

Resolved (1): That the committee chairman's report be noted

Resolved (2): That the committee self-organises another informal Zoom meeting

Date and time of next meeting

Tuesday 22 June at 11:00am by Zoom teleconference.