

SMALLER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the NALC Smaller Councils Committee held by Zoom teleconference on 22 June 2021.

Present:

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

Also in attendance:

Also present were Anders Hanson (projects manager) Chris Borg (policy manager), Jessica Lancod-Frost (policy officer), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications), Mike Drew (NALC vice-chair) for part and Jonathan Owen (chief executive).

1. Apologies and welcome

Apologies were received from Cllr Mike Scott.

The committee was informed that Cllr Lydia Smithson had resigned.

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:

- That the text on the bottom of page two be amended to say ‘the committee was asked to raise the need for the campaign to be highlighted’

Other matters arising were raised as follows:

- The head of policy and communications confirmed that NALC had published the date for the inaugural young councillors network meeting. The committee welcomed this initiative

The policy officer provided an update on the 2021 Star Council Awards as follows:

- NALC had received a record number of entries (205) which were now with the judging panel

- Finalists would be announced in July and an online awards ceremony would take place in September or October
- Mr Stephen Rickitt asked if information on the geographical spread and size of nominees could be provided
- The chief executive emphasised that no Star Council entrants were small minded – all were looking to do more

The committee chairman talked through the action log.

Resolved (1): That the text on the bottom of page two of the minutes from the 9 February 2021 meeting be amended to say that ‘the committee was asked to raise the need for the campaign to be highlighted.’

Resolved (2): That the committee welcomes the creation of NALC’s Young Councillors network

Resolved (3): That the update on the Star Council Awards be noted

Resolved (4): That the policy officer provides information on the geographical spread and size of councils that entered NALC’s Star Council Awards

3. Member services

The projects manager introduced himself and highlighted staffing changes in the member services team.

The projects manager confirmed that the three main projects he would be working on were:

- E-learning
- The Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS)
- Redevelopment of the NALC website

An update was provided on E-learning as follows:

- NALC is in the process of concluding the pilot which ran last year and will produce a report with future recommendations
- The pilot appears to have gone well however, and so NALC expects to make this a permanent offer and expand it further with more counties taking part, more courses and improved publicity

- Since it started, 418 learners across 10 counties have enrolled on a course. Half of these learners are in three areas, demonstrating that some areas really embraced it quite well
- NALC is also working with Breakthrough Communications to develop more courses, including on basic data protection for councillors, social media and communications strategy

An updated was also provided on the Local Council Award scheme (LCAS) as follows:

- Twenty one applications were received in the first round (January deadline), of which ten are likely to have come from small councils. Of those ten, five are going for the Quality Gold award
- In the second round thirteen councils submitted applications. One is a small council going for the Quality Gold award
- The projects manager will be looking at streamlining the process and producing more useful KPI's
- NALC is currently in the process of concluding round one
- Applications submitted in round two are currently out for triage

Comments raised in response included:

- When packaging e-learning, could NALC think of a way to draw in councillors who don't feel they need training?
- The projects manager confirmed he would look at how e-learning is promoted
- Are things likely to be confused by having a plethora of avenues for training?
- Mr Stephen Rickitt: as a part time county officer, happy for people to get training from different places. However other county officers who rely on income from training would disagree. The move to online training could be an issue for those county associations
- The projects manager confirmed that it was a decision for counties whether they took part in e-learning or not. Some already have their own offer, but the likelihood is that there will be a mix of in-person and online with people using the method they prefer or using online as a 'taster' for a topic

The chief executive provided an overview of the civility project NALC is currently working on with the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and One Voice Wales (OVW):

- The project covers three areas: how office holders are treated by members of the public, relationships between councillors and relationships between councillors and clerks
- A project team has been put together consisting of three local councillors, three county officers and three clerks
- The civility group had proposed a number of measures:
 - Making sure all local councils have appropriate policies in place to ensure good governance
 - Addressing poor relationships between councils and clerks. Lobbying for a stronger standards regime backed by sanctions, training for councillors and clerks
 - Drawing on the Local Government Association's (LGA) work to help councillors deal with difficult residents on social media – the LGA has toolkits online
 - Establishing a national panel to intervene where councils are consistently performing below the standard expected of the first tier of local government. A pilot will take place soon

NALC's civility work was at an early stage, no timescale had been set for getting it finished but the sooner it was finished the better.

An agreement had been made that resources would be found, with suggestions for ways they could be spent including administrator support, a good councillors guide and video resources.

Committee members commented as follows:

- Cllr Josephine Parish: many small councils don't fully understand the relevance of the Local Council Award Scheme. Is this a communication issue or due to longstanding councillors feeling they know everything? It is difficult to get councillors to attend training unless they are new. Would including LCAS as a tick box on the governance page of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) be a good way of getting round that?
- Cllr Malcolm Leeding: my council hasn't applied for LCAS accreditation, it only has six members and has other things to deal with. The only councillor to have attended all training courses, other councillors are not keen as they all have full time jobs and/or young families. E-learning not among hot personal agenda items
- Cllr Lillian Burns: delighted with NALC's civility work. Such a disparity between county associations e.g. Stephen Rickitt part time, whilst Cheshire has

a full time county officer and two part time members of staff who deliver a full programme of training that has gone online very successfully. The county officer would be worried if NALC started offering courses in competition with the Cheshire Association of Local Councils

The projects manager made a number of comments in response, as follows:

- In the longer term it is likely that a lot of learning and training will be a mixture of different styles, including face to face and online. One advantage of e-learning is that you can do it in small bite size pieces, which could be an advantage for those with limited free time
- The E-learning NALC is offering is being delivered with county associations. County associations are not being forced to sign up
- A suggestion had been made that NALC should look at feedback from those who've been through LCAS to see whether there was any relevant training that could be recommended

Cllr Malcolm Leeding emphasised that training income is absolutely vital for the survival of some county associations.

Resolved (1): That the updates from the projects manager on E-Learning and the Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS) be noted

Resolved (2): That the update on NALC's civility work be noted

Resolved (3): That civility becomes a standing item on the Smaller Councils Committee agenda moving forwards, with a focus on the barriers smaller councils face

Resolved (4): That the committee welcomes NALC's work on standards, encourages smaller councils to sign up for the Local Council Award Scheme and provide a budget for councillors to attend training

4. Return to in person meetings

Committee members were invited to give feedback on how the return to in person meetings was going, which they did as follows:

- Cllr Graham Ford: attended a meeting of Truro City Council and a local council meeting, in both cases some councillors couldn't hear what was being said

- Cllr Bob Blezzard: both local councils returned to in person meetings, which went well. People who were coming were asked to consider taking a lateral flow test on the day. There was a limit on the number of people who could be in the room, but this was no different from before as rooms always had a capacity limit. It was worrying that some councils have been getting round the in person meeting rule, as this could do damage to the reputation of the local council sector
- Cllr Malcolm Leeding: the local council returns to in person meetings at the village hall tomorrow night. Meetings in small village halls could be a problem if a council gets a big planning application and members of the public want to attend
- Mr Stephen Rickitt: the local council has gone for the least worst option, another virtual meeting, as unvaccinated councillors didn't want to attend an in person meeting
- Cllr Lillian Burns: amongst three members of the council still isolating, so sent apologies for the last meeting. Also sent apologies for the next meeting. Concerned that if this isn't sorted out in the next six months councillors could be automatically barred. Dialed in to the online stream to observe the meeting but couldn't hear or see what was going on
- Could members who are isolating be given a medical certificate or apply for leave of absence?
- Cllr Josephine Parish: welcome the clarification on leave of absence, could it be added to NALC's information for local councils? The council held an in person meeting, it wasn't possible to hear what people were saying with masks on so people took them off, didn't feel safe then as not vaccinated. The county officer in Dorset says working groups must meet face to face, which means members of the public are now unable to attend the climate change working group. Would urge NALC to continue pushing for remote meetings to become an option again. Dorset Council cabinet meetings are still taking place virtually and environment group members are confused as to why they can dial into those and not the working group

- The chief executive clarified that the rule was different for principal authorities as they can delegate decision making, which doesn't apply at the local council level

Resolved (1): That the discussion on the return to in person meetings be noted

Resolved (2): That clarification on leave of absence for councillors is added to NALC's guidance for local councils

5. Committee chairman's report

The Committee chairman spoke to a report he had written following informal meetings of the committee covering the role and function of the committee, its value and influence, interface with smaller councils, need for new initiatives and data gathering. A number of points were made during discussion, including:

- the committee is not big enough to represent the geographic spread and ambition of smaller councils
- the committee is smaller than the Larger Councils Committee
- increasing the size of the committee shouldn't be a problem whilst meetings take place virtually, but would result in additional costs when in person meetings return
- terms of reference state the committee should have a role in decision making and this be achieved through a place for the chairman on the Management Board
- a budget and authority be identified for the delivery of three virtual forums for smaller councils
- the committee were reminded of their previous decision to expand the committee into a network to engage with more councils and be more inclusive and that this would support the virtual forums objective
- the report did not reflect a conversation between the chairman and chief executive who confirmed proposals would need to be put to the Management Board
- as most rural councils are smaller councils responsibility for rural issues be returned to the committee from Policy Committee
- current length of meetings of sixty minutes is not enough for the committee to conduct its business
- a qualitative survey for smaller councils should be developed but more work was needed to scope this out in more detail

Resolved (1): The Committee recommends to the Management Board that its membership be increased by two directly elected councillors, the Committee chairman should have an automatic seat on the Management Board and responsibility for rural issues be returned to the Committee from the Policy Committee.

Resolved (2): The length of meetings be extended from an hour to ninety minutes and the qualitative survey of smaller councils and proposal for a budget and three virtual forums for smaller councils be considered further at the next meeting.

6. Local council elections review

Members of the committee were invited to give feedback on their experiences of the 2021 local council elections, which they did as follows:

- Cllr Bob Blezzard: In the Isle of Wight the larger councils were more likely to have contested elections, whilst smaller ones were more likely to have vacant seats. Ryde Town Council had a big shake up, only six out of sixteen councillors retained seats. There was a similar picture at Sandown Town Council which has now come back into membership of IWALC and NALC. The IWALC chairman lost her seat and got co-opted onto a smaller council

Resolved (1): That the feedback on the 2021 local council elections be noted

7. Any other business

Cllr Josephine Parish asked if members of the public who were not happy with a local council could approach the council first, rather than approaching electoral services and calling an election. The present system was resulting in local councils having to pay £2,000 to hold an election, which is a significant proportion of a smaller council's precept.

The national vice-chairman informed the committee that there was clear guidance on the NALC website around when members of the public can call an election.

Date and time of next meeting

Tuesday 28 September at 11:00am by Zoom teleconference.