

## **SMALLER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES**

Meeting of the Smaller Councils Committee held by Zoom teleconference on 24 May at 10.00.

### **Present:**

National Assembly members: Cllr Lillian Burns, Cllr Mike Drew (national vice chair, member services), Cllr Graham Ford (committee chair) Cllr Bob Blezzard; directly elected members: Cllr Josephine Parish (committee vice-chair).

### **Staff present:**

Chris Borg (policy manager, for part), Jessica Lancod-Frost (policy officer), (head of policy and communications), Jonathan Owen (chief executive, for part).

### **1. Apologies**

No apologies for absence were received.

### **2. Minutes of previous meetings**

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

Cllr Bob Blezzard indicated that he had been incorrectly listed as a directly elected member.

The committee approved the minutes of the meeting on 2 March 2022.

The committee chair asked if there were any matters arising. Matters raised in response included:

The chief executive provided an update on the filling of committee vacancies. Overall there were two vacancies on the Smaller Councils Committee, one on Policy Committee and one on Finance Committee and four expressions of interest had been received. Various discussions with the candidates were now taking place.

The chief executive confirmed that the campaign to encourage more prospective councillors to stand for election was ongoing.

### **3. Letter to smaller councils**

Cllr Lillian Burns introduced her report analysing responses to the letter to smaller councils. Over 100 responses had been received from smaller councils all over England.

The exercise had raised the profile of the Smaller Councils Committee and made smaller councils aware the committee was there for them.

The committee hoped that NALC's Management Board would consider the report and ways forward, as most of the issues were relevant to local councils of all sizes.

However, these issues were felt more acutely by smaller councils, who were looking for help from NALC in a variety of shapes and forms. Therefore, the committee hoped that more officer time could be devoted to supporting smaller councils.

The chief executive asked the committee to decide what the most important points were and to take them to NALC's Management Board. NALC was already working on some of the areas mentioned, whilst a few areas were for County Associations to develop into a motion.

The committee vice chair thanked Cllr Lillian Burns for the work she had put into writing her report. The exercise had identified several issues and NALC needed to lobby government for more resources to support smaller councils.

A discussion then took place on the definition of a smaller council, in which the following points were raised:

- The current definition needs redefining - councils like Sandown Town Council with a precept of £355,000 are currently classified as a smaller council
- Work to redefine the definition should be looked at on a regional basis - Cllr Blezzard would consider asking SERCAF to look at it when the group next met
- A review of the definition would also need to go to the Constitutional Task and Finish Group
- The committee vice chairman expressed concern that if the definition of a smaller council was set to those councils with a precept of lower than £25,000,

this would create a middle level of councils that didn't feel represented by initiatives for larger councils

- Cllr Burns said that if the definition was to alter, there needed to be a proper case put forward for any alternative criteria.

The committee chair suggested that the Smaller Councils Committee should increase in size, to include one representative from each region as part of a directly elected contingent.

Cllr Bob Blezzard supported the committee chair's proposal that the committee should increase in size. Cllr Blezzard also proposed that the National Assembly contingent should be reduced to three directly elected members, with the directly elected contingent increasing to eight members (one from each region).

Cllr Josephine Parish also called for the committee to retain the power to coopt members.

**Resolved (1):** That the committee requests, as a matter of urgency, that the Constitutional Task and Finish Group addresses the definition of smaller and other local councils and provides justification for any changes made to the definition.

**Resolved (2):** That membership of the Smaller Councils Committee should be expanded to include three national Assembly members and eight directly elected members - one from each region, the committee chair to sit on Management Board and the committee to retain the power to coopt members based on strengths.

The committee then had a discussion and made resolutions based on the recommendations set out in Cllr Lillian Burns report as follows:

**Resolved (3):** The committee noted it was already NALC policy to push for local councils to be able to hold hybrid meetings, however it was agreed to ask NALC's President Baroness Scott to lobby further on this.

**Resolved (4):** When local councils are allowed to hold hybrid meetings, the committee to ask NALC to produce a guidance note on how hybrid meetings should be run.

**Resolved (5):** That County Associations should help local councils in keeping two way communication open during the change over period ahead of the change to unitary councils.

**Resolved (6):** That it should still be mandatory for local councils to hold an annual parish meeting.

**Resolved (7):** The committee to ask Finance and Scrutiny Committee to ask NALC leadership to investigate the feasibility of setting up a legal aid fund for smaller councils.

**Resolved (8):** The committee to refer the points in the report on planning and relations with principal authorities to Policy Committee.

**Resolved (9):** The committee to put in a request to Management Board for NALC to set up a task and finish group to comment on planning policies that it wants included in the Levelling Up Bill.

**Resolved (10):** That the committee strongly supports the recommendation that NALC employs a planning consultant.

**Resolved (11):** For Management Board and NALC's Legal Team to consider the requests to produce a range of template documents for smaller councils and the model documents in the appendix of Cllr Lillian Burn's report.

**Resolved (12):** The committee to request NALC signposts councils to the resources on devolution of services.

**Resolved (13):** The committee to request that NALC creates more networks on an as needed basis (this could include a temporary network on planning) and for more resources to help facilitate this.

**Resolved (14):** The committee to request that potential incentives for joining the Local Council Award Scheme are reviewed, with the possibility of financial incentives for smaller councils in future.

**Resolved (15):** The committee to have a future agenda item on the local council award scheme criteria, as requiring two thirds of councillors to be elected is impeding many local councils from applying.

**Resolved (16):** The committee to put forward a suggestion to Management Board that NALC produces a briefing document for banks.

**Resolved (17):** The committee agreed that all documents being developed for local councils should be tabled before the smaller councils committee and larger councils committee prior to publication.

**Resolved (18):** That NALC finds out which County Associations are offering remote training and publicises those sessions.

**Resolved (19):** For the committee to find out whether any schemes offering small pots of highways funding to local councils exist.

**Resolved (20):** The committee to request more officer time is devoted to supporting smaller councils.

**Resolved (21):** The committee agreed to write to regional associations to find out if the points raised by one or two smaller councils amounted to more than a passing interest.

On a number of issues, such as the suggestion that NALC should have 'champions' for specific issues, the committee did not get around to considering them at the meeting. The committee hopes to come back to them at the first opportunity.

#### **4. Date and time of next meeting**

19 July 2022 at 10:00am by Zoom.