

SMALLER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the Smaller Councils Committee held by Zoom teleconference at 10.00 on 11 October 2022.

Attendees:

National Assembly members – Councillors Mick Baker, Bob Blezzard, Lillian Burns, Graham Ford (committee chair) and Sue Lintern; directly elected members – Councillors Mervyn Head and Josephine Parish (committee vice-chair).

Also in attendance:

Jessica Lancod-Frost (policy officer), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications), Corinne Curtis, Worknest (for part), Linda Larter, Sevenoaks Town Council (for part)

1. Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Ian Harrison.

2. Minutes of previous meetings

The committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2022.

3. Governance Task and Finish Group

Cllr Lillian Burns provided an update on the work of the governance task and finish group which she had been attending as the representative for the North West region. She reported on a proposal for the Smaller Councils Committee to be replaced by a network for councils with precepts of less than £25,000, which she had voted against, adding that neither the committee nor the recent survey of smaller councils had called for this. She expressed her disappointment that in her view the Management Board had not fully considered the findings from the survey and subsequent report, and that she did not support the committee losing its formal status in NALC's governance and the creation of a new online network.

A discussion then took place in which the following points were raised:

- There was disappointment that the committee hadn't been consulted by the task and finish group on its proposals to National Assembly
- Having a wide variety of experiences is beneficial as smaller councils can be vastly different
- NALC should be working to attract more people to stand on committees and for more members of the Smaller Councils Committee to come from outside National Assembly, with one representative from each region
- Smaller councils seek more assistance from NALC such as with simplified documentation and templates

The head of policy and communications clarified the proposals from the Task and Finish Group to National Assembly. These recognised that the value of committees for smaller and larger councils was in ensuring those councils had a voice in NALC and their current wide membership made that unfocused. National Assembly was to be invited to consult with the committees and draw up proposals to establish special interest groups for the smallest and largest councils for adoption at the end of the current cycle 2023, and should the proposal not be adopted, committee membership to be reviewed for 2023 elections. He added that a range of views were expressed in a debate at National Assembly on developing support for smaller and larger councils and these would be considered separately by National Assembly next year.

Resolved (1): That the committee is opposed to any proposal for the committee to be abolished and no longer part of the formal NALC governance and replaced by an online network representing councils with precepts under £25,000, and sought clarification on any rationale behind this recommendation.

Resolved (2): That the committee meets informally to identify the top five priorities arising from the analysis of the smaller councils survey.

4. NALC analysis of council tax levels of local precepting authorities

The policy officer provided an overview of NALC's analysis of local precepting authorities 2022/3, published by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This included the number of local councils by precept range, the profile of Band D changes and average precept and Band D increases by county association. The information was used by NALC when lobbying for local councils to be exempt from referendum principles.

Committee members were invited to give feedback the analysis, which they did as follows:

- Is there a correlation between local councils increasing their precept and having a unitary principal authority?
- Of the local councils that have a precept of zero, how many are parish meetings?
- The current bandings are too broad
- Local councils needed to be empowered to do more for their communities

The head of policy and communications urged the committee to work on communicating financial resilience to smaller councils in a way that wouldn't scare them.

Resolved (1): That the analysis of council tax levels of local precepting authorities be noted and suggestions including the bandings used and data for areas where local government reorganisation is taking place be considered for next year's report.

Resolved (2): That the Smaller Councils Committee discusses how to communicate financial resilience to smaller councils at its next meeting.

5. Climate change

The policy officer provided an update on the committee's request for information from county associations regarding how many of their local councils had declared a climate emergency, anything else they'd done to tackle climate change locally and ways in which they'd partnered with principal authorities to tackle climate change. A call out to county associations had been issued at the fortnightly county officer call and had subsequently been followed up by email, however only the Cheshire Association of Local Councils and Yorkshire Local Councils Association had responded.

A short discussion then took place as follows:

- The committee noted the good work that local councils in Cheshire and Yorkshire were doing to tackle climate change, including making council buildings more energy efficient, switching to a no plastic policy and planting trees and wildflowers. However they expressed disappointment at the poor response rate

- Cllr Mervyn Head had undertaken climate literacy training with the Local Government Association, connected with like minded principal councils and worked on a project bringing his principal council together with several local councils
- All local councils should appoint a climate change representative

The committee chair called for climate change to be a central item of the next Smaller Councils Committee meeting.

Resolved (1): That an item on climate change is added to the agenda of the next Smaller Councils Committee meeting.

6. Member services update

6.1 Worknest update

Corinne Curtis from Worknest attended to provide an update on the review of the Good Councillors Guide to Employment and to invite feedback on what worked well, what didn't work well and what was missing from the current edition of the guide, which committee members offered as follows:

- Could the model contract be shorter and simpler?
- It would be useful to have advice on how to run a good remote meeting
- Smaller councils find it difficult to work out how to treat part time employees such as dog wardens
- Any update to the guide should include the recommendation that local councils adopt the green book
- Cllr Lillian Burns provided feedback from former committee chair Cllr David Francis on the statement around delegation of employment matters on page 29, including that it was factually incorrect, local councils have the freedom to delegate tasks to individual officers for which NALC could usefully provide a reference document and that the smallest councils had difficulties raising committees. Cllr Francis also noted that NALC's PR consultants had produced additional resources since the guide was originally produced

Corinne confirmed that the updated guide would reflect the future needs of local councils and that Worknest was currently looking at the model contract, including making sure that it wasn't too onerous for a smaller employer.

Resolved (1): That the update from Worknest be noted.

6.2 Civility and Respect Project

Linda Larter from Sevenoaks Town Council delivered a presentation on the Civility and Respect Project, including training, complaints, interventions and solutions and the Civility and Respect Pledge. Committee members were then invited to give feedback, which they did as follows:

- Some councillors who have been in the role for a while don't feel that training applies to them and don't always take it seriously
- Could there be a twin tack of getting individual councillors to sign the pledge as well as councils?
- Monitoring officers don't currently have any powers of enforcement and nothing is currently enshrined in law on how to remove councillors due to bullying unless their behaviour is against the law
- Training should be mandatory as it would raise professionalism in the sector, which in turn would encourage more people to stand as a councillor
- Making training mandatory could add to difficulties in filling council vacancies
- It would be good to have a log of the training committee members have undertaken
- Local councils need support for problems that originate outside the council

Linda informed the committee that the Civility and Respect Project was working with the Association of Democratic Service Officers and Lawyers in Local Government to get support and consistency on monitoring officers. Additionally, the project's legislative work stream was looking at mandatory training.

The head of policy and communications informed the committee that NALC had pushed alongside the Society of Local Council Clerks for stronger sanctions but was poles apart from other membership organisations and government.

Resolved (1): The committee to ask Policy Committee to consider NALC's policy on mandatory training for councillors and any associated legislative changes required.

7. Date and time of next meeting

21 February 2023, time and location to be confirmed.