

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

Meeting of the Smaller Councils Committee held by Zoom teleconference at 10.00 on 21 February 2023.

### **Attendees:**

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

### **Also in attendance:**

Jessica Lancod-Frost (policy officer), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications), Jonathan Owen (for part), Chris Borg (for part), Mike Drew.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Mervyn Head and Cllr Ian Harrison, who also announced his resignation from the committee.

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

The committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022.

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

- The committee chair urged NALC not to lose sight of the request that the updated Good Councillors Guide to Employment includes the recommendation that local councils adopt the green book
- The chief executive clarified that NALC had never been able to recommend the green book
- Cllr Bob Blezzard asked when the Governance Task and Finish Group would next be meeting
- The chief executive clarified that the Task and Finish Group was designed to report to National Assembly in 2022, which it did. NALC was now preoccupied with moving out of 109 so didn't have a lot of time for it, but could revisit it in the summer

**Resolved (1):** That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022 are approved.

### **3. Councillor training**

The policy manager provided an update on the Smaller Councils Committee's request for Policy Committee to consider NALC's policy on mandatory training for councillors and any associated legislative changes required.

Policy Committee had discussed the request at their January meeting and resolved that NALC should strongly encourage training for councillors and clerks. The committee also resolved that NALC officers engage with other committees and external stakeholders to promote training in 2023.

As part of that engagement, the Smaller Councils Committee was presented with the following options:

- Leave NALC's policy on training alone
- Support making councillor training mandatory, taking into account potential issues around enforcement and cost
- Strongly recommend councillors undertake training

The policy manager advised that any appetite for change would require an officer led paper or a motion from a county association.

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

- Could inducement be linked to the Local Council Award Scheme?
- If training is made mandatory and councillors don't attend, what happens?
- In an ideal world training would be mandatory, but some councils have enough difficulty recruiting members as it is

The committee then narrowly voted against making councillor training mandatory, instead agreeing that it should be strongly recommended and included in the Annual Governance and Accountability Return and Local Council Award Scheme. The discussion then continued as follows:

- More people would be prepared to become councillors if training was mandatory, as it would raise professionalism above the stereotypical image of the sector in the media

- Basic training should be compulsory and noted on the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) checklist
- Being up to date on councillor training could be made a prerequisite of a council being in membership of a county association
- Some clerks don't know how to promote training
- Sometimes people are scared to go on a council as they think individual councillors are responsible for something instead of the council as a whole
- If training was made mandatory, a significant proportion of councillors would take it up because they were told to do it
- A distinction should be made between councils that have compulsory training and members who take it up. Sometimes councils have a recalcitrant member who won't undertake training
- The head of member services flagged up that the Local Council Award Scheme makes reference to training at every level, including encouraging councillors to attend training regularly throughout their time in office. The award scheme criteria would be reviewed this year and the review could be brought to the committee at a later meeting
- It could be strongly recommended to councils that they are much more likely to improve recruitment and caliber of councillors by including details of the training each councillor has undertaken in their annual report

**Resolved (1):** That the committee agrees councillor training should not be made mandatory, however it believes that it should be strongly recommended and included in the Annual Governance and Accountability Return and Local Council Award Scheme.

#### **4. Climate change**

The committee chair recommended that National Assembly members urge county associations to promote carbon literacy training.

The committee vice chair recommended that carbon literacy training was undertaken by at least one member of each local council.

The committee chair put out a renewed call for county associations to inform the committee as to how many of their councils have declared a climate emergency.

**Resolved (1):** That the committee recommends National Assembly members ask county associations to promote carbon literacy training and believes that it should be undertaken by at least one member of every local council.

**Resolved (2):** That NALC again asks county associations (with the exception of Cheshire and Yorkshire) to discover and report back on the number of local councils who have adopted a climate emergency declaration.

## **5. Financial resilience for smaller councils**

The committee chair introduced this item by highlighting the overlap between training and financial resilience, noting that poorly trained councillors who do not see the value in having well trained clerks do not make the best decisions for their councils. He went on to say that more councillors need to be encouraged to do more for their communities.

Committee members then made suggestions as to how to communicate financial resilience to smaller councils as follows:

- Could NALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) have a joint campaign in the Autumn to influence what local councils put into their precepts, including reminding them that as a minimum they should have enough funds available to call an election?
- Could Policy Committee consider a request for NALC to lobby for an increase in the threshold for calling a by election above the ten signatures currently required?
- There needs to be a way to develop a checkbox on the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) form to encourage smaller councils to use template documents
- The head of member services informed the committee that that she could provide details of a contact at the Joint Panel on Accountability and Guidance (JPAG) who could give information on the practitioners guide and audit process. While the 2023 forms and guide were complete, JPAG could look ahead to the future. She didn't currently have suggestions for what smaller councils should include in their budget, but could consider developing something with input from the committee
- Could smaller councils share the risk of multiple by elections by participating in a self insurance scheme?
- The head of member services clarified that NALC's aim was to provide resources that support the smallest councils and that NALC would welcome feedback on any of the documents that don't currently do that. She had tried to flag constraints about how much NALC can do, but was happy to produce resources such as the document on financial resilience flagged by the committee, if they could help or suggest someone who could help. She also

suggested that it would be good to invite NALC's financial advisor Derek Kemp to discuss audit and the AGAR form

- Would NALC consider placing a simple set of templates for smaller councils in their work programme? Smaller councils currently feel overwhelmed with the documents that come with being a councillor and had indicated they wanted them in response to the survey of smaller councils
- The head of policy and communications asked for clarity from the committee as to what templates on financial resilience were needed
- The head of member services advised the committee that she couldn't say that NALC could produce specific new templates, however she could look at the templates that had already been produced. NALC could also look to produce further documents on resilience for smaller councils, but the head of member services would welcome feedback from committee members as to what these should cover
- The very first template should cover what smaller councils should budget for
- The committee was looking for an initial tranche of simplified templates in the subjects identified in the survey of smaller councils

**Resolved (1):** It was agreed that NALC factors into its work programme the production of simplified template documents on the subjects identified in response to the 2022 survey of smaller councils.

**Resolved (2):** It was agreed that NALC will work with the SLCC on raising awareness of the need for local councils to keep reserves sufficient for emergencies, such as elections.

**Resolved (3):** It was agreed that NALC would publish financial resilience guidance in the Autumn on what smaller councils should budget for with input from smaller council committee members.

**Resolved (4):** It was agreed to invite Cllr Derek Kemp to the next committee meeting to explain how the Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance works and provide an opportunity to inform the next update of the practitioner's guide.

## **6. Local government workforce survey**

The head of member services provided an overview of the local government workforce survey as follows:

- The survey was being developed by colleagues in the workforce team at the Local Government Association (LGA) who also attend Improvement and Development Board meetings (IDB)
- It would help provide more reliable data on elements of the workforce, including age, gender and the types of roles undertaken
- It could also include questions related to pay, as well as helping to identify how many people are hired under green book conditions
- Another area of focus would be on recruitment and retention of clerks, as the feeling since the pandemic was that the turnover of clerks had been increasing again
- A key goal was to get smaller councils to respond, so the LGA had been reflecting on that in the survey design, including ensuring that there weren't too many questions and that they were straightforward to answer

Committee members were invited to offer additional thoughts on how a high uptake amongst smaller councils could be achieved, which they did as follows:

- The survey should have a long lead in time and be sent directly to smaller councils
- All questions should be available to view prior to submission, so that the whole council can input to the response
- Sexual orientation and religion should be on a separate line
- NALC writing directly to smaller councils would be a problem as county associations want everything to go through them. As an alternative, could the LGA distribute the survey, as principal councils have their own contact lists for local councils?
- Is the survey aimed at all local councils or just those in membership of NALC?
- The head of member services clarified that it was likely to be for all local councils to complete, as the way the LGA is funded means they can't discriminate against non-members

**Resolved (1):** That the committee notes the local government workforce survey, hopes it will have a long lead in time and that county associations will help bring it to the attention of member councils, with direct email communication forming part of a council's correspondence to enable more smaller councils to respond.

## **7. Celebrating national events**

The head of member services highlighted NALC's dedicated webpage on the King's Coronation. She also informed the committee that NALC had been

contacted by Bruno Peeke, pageantmaster, about celebrations to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day.

**Resolved (1):** That the update on celebrating national events be noted.

## **8. Committee chair**

The committee chair spoke to a report he had written in which he confirmed that this would be his last meeting as committee chair and as a member of the committee.

Committee members thanked the committee chair for his excellent service and commitment. They asked how he could continue giving support to the committee, such as by being co-opted back on to it and whether the rules could be changed in future so the committee chair could stay in post until the next election.

The committee vice chair clarified that co-option was a matter for each committee to determine and that in the interim the committee vice chair would act as chair. She recommended that the first item on the agenda at the next meeting was co-opting Cllr Graham Ford back on to the Smaller Councils Committee and that it was followed immediately afterwards by an item on the election of a new committee chair.

The committee vice chair thanked Cllr Ian Harrison for his time on the committee.

**Resolved (1):** That Cllr Graham Ford be thanked for his excellent service and commitment to the Smaller Councils Committee.

**Resolved (2):** That the first agenda item at the next meeting should consider co-opting Cllr Graham Ford onto the Smaller Councils Committee and should be directly followed by an item to elect a new committee chair.

**Resolved (3):** That Cllr Ian Harrison be thanked for his time on the Smaller Councils Committee.

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

23 May 2023 at 10:00 by Zoom.