

SMALLER COUNCILS COMMITTEE | DRAFT MINUTES

Meeting of the Smaller Councils Committee on 16 April 2024 at 11.00 took place in meeting room 10 at The Bloomsbury Building, 10 Bloomsbury Way, Holborn, London, WC1A 2SL.

Present

Vanessa Lowe (committee vice chair), Cllrs Stephen Ashfield (directly elected), Mick Baker (Nottinghamshire), Allan Blakemore (Durham), John Cowan (directly elected), David Francis (NALC vice chair, member services), Alan Neal (Lancashire), and Sarah Bristow (County Officer Forum representative).

Staff present: Chris Borg (policy manager), Justin Griggs (head of policy and communications) and Jonathan Owen (chief executive)

Other guests in attendance: Annie Child, chief executive officer at SAAA (for part) and Cllr Ed Gemmell, Hazelmere Parish Council (for part).

DECISION ITEMS

1. Welcome and apologies

The committee vice chair welcomed all attendees to the session.

Resolved: Apologies were noted from Cllr Marcus Allan, committee chair.

2. Minutes from previous meeting on 13 February 2024

Resolved: That the draft minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2024 be noted.

Matters arising from the minutes

The committee vice chair reported that she and Cllr Allan Blakemore had attended Martyn's Law Steering Group meetings and that responses had now been submitted by both NALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks to the government consultation on the standard tier.

3. Icebreaker exercise

As this was the first in person meeting of the new committee since it was elected in November 2023, the committee and officers split into small groups for an ice breaker exercise to get to know each other. The groups found out more about the background, local council and county association area each attendee was from, then fed back into the main committee.

4. Reuse of burial spaces

The committee vice chair presented a report asking for a route to take for NALC to frame a policy to allow local councils acting as burial authorities outside London to have the same rights as burial authorities based in London to reuse graves. There was a general discussion during which it was agreed that the problems Alcester Town Council were facing were being experienced by different sizes of local councils across the country. Lack of available land, and other environmental factors also had to be considered.

Resolved: That NALC work with Alcester Town Council and the Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils on a motion on the reuse of graves to be considered by the Policy Committee.

There was then a coffee break between 11.50 and 12.00 Noon.

DISCUSSION ITEM

5. Financial resilience

Annie Child, chief executive of the Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments (SAAA), spoke to slides about SAAA, the report on the results of auditors work 2022-23 and the recent consultation on addressing the local audit backstop in England. It was noted that the formal report will be available on the SAAA website shortly. The various audit thresholds for local (parish and town) councils were covered as were SAAA's audit lobbying points back to government.

Resolved: That Annie Child be thanked for her excellent presentation on the work of SAAA and the slides circulated to the committee.

Lunch took place between 13:00 and 13:30.

6. Micro councils network

The policy manager provided a short verbal update on progress to establish the new NALC National Network: Micro Councils. It was proposed this would be organised in line with other networks and with the same purpose as well as acting as a sounding board for issues specific to the smallest local council special interest group and would report to the Smaller Councils Committee

Resolved: That the NALC National Network: Micro Councils be defined as for local councils with either an annual budgeted precept or annual budgeted turnover of £10,000 or less, operate on the same basis as all NALC's other national networks and aim to meet in quarter 3 of 2024.

7. Climate Change

7.1 Local climate action

The committee vice chair asked all committee members to confirm how their council had recently taken environmental action:

- Shincliffe Parish Council was liaising with the Universities of Teesside and Durham.
- Barford was engaging in a litter pick.
- Whitworth had adopted the Rossendale Borough Council climate action plan.
- Alcester had set up a climate change working group and had applied for a grant to undertake a biodiversity audit.
- In Sedgefield the borough council's service level agreement factored in environmental action, widely used by parishes.
- Newton on the Moor and Swarland have engaged with developers on green issues.

Resolved: That the verbal updates be noted.

7.2. NALC climate change web page

The committee vice chair engaged in a brief discussion with the committee on specific links and materials for smaller councils which can be added to the NALC [climate change web page](#). It was noted that some of the material needed to be refreshed and the committee would

give feedback and suggestions outside of the meeting.

Resolved: That committee members send to the policy manager materials and links of direct relevance to smaller councils and feedback on current content and resources which can be added to the NALC climate change web page.

7.3. Local climate action – Hazlemere Parish Council

The committee vice chair introduced Cllr Ed Gemmell from Hazlemere Parish Council in Buckinghamshire and also the leader of the Climate Party who joined the meeting remotely and provided a full update on the actions his own local council, to fight climate change. He also spoke about the benefits of membership and work of NALC's Climate Emergency Network.

Resolved: That Cllr Gemmell be thanked for his excellent presentation on the environmental actions being taken by Hazlemere Parish Council, to the committee, and that his email address be circulated to the committee.

8. Gas and electricity standing charges

Resolved: That a discussion on the impact of rising gas and electricity standing charges on local councils that provide leisure facilities and warm spaces be deferred to the next meeting.

INFORMATION ITEMS

9. Other reports

Resolved: The committee noted the report of the NALC and committee chairs and vice chairs development session held in February 2024 and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs third Rural Proofing Report.

10. Date and time of next meeting

30 July 2024, on Zoom, starting at 10:00am. © NALC 2024