The 2015 parish and town council elections: feedback and recommendations

1. Introduction

2. The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) represents the 10,000 parish and town councils in England and their 80,000 councillors that make these grassroots councils the cornerstone of local democracy and governance, contributing in excess of £2 billion of community investment to supporting and improving local communities.

3. This report draws together experiences of parish elections in 2015 based on feedback from councils, county associations of local councils and from councillors on NALC’s own committees.

4. As a result of our analysis we have identified a number of areas for consideration and action by a range of stakeholders including the government, Electoral Commission (EC) and the Local Government Association (LGA), along with challenges our sector itself needs to address to help strengthen local democracy such as encouraging more people to stand for election and ensuring councils see the benefit of the electoral process.

5. We are keen to discuss these findings with the above stakeholders and other organisations with an interest in working with us to strengthen local democracy and help take our ideas and recommendations forward.

6. Overview and key themes

7. In 2015 the vast majority of parish and town councils held elections. A number of general issues emerged as a result including:

   - fewer people putting themselves forward to stand for election in some areas;
   - an increase in party politics and candidates from political parties;
   - big local issues brought people out to stand and vote;
   - in some areas contested elections only took place in around 20% of councils;
   - evidence suggests a continued trend of people co-opted to councils after the election as a cost effective alternative to contested elections.

8. However the main conclusion we have drawn is that there is a lack of accurate and robust evidence base of what the situation and picture is, and that NALC should press for funding to conduct national research to develop an evidence base for public policy and to properly assess the democratic health of our most local level of government.
9. Such an evidence base and accompanying analysis is now absolutely vital as parish and town councils become increasingly important in local communities and public services: leading on neighbourhood planning to influence the future development of neighbourhoods; delivering services no longer provided by principal councils; and assuming new roles and responsibilities through devolution.

10. One significant and consistent area of concern in respect of the 2015 elections related to costs, variations in practice between areas and a loss of expertise within principal councils. The LGA and EC should be urged to consider appropriate action on these issues.

11. In terms of encouraging more people and people who are more representative of their communities to get involved and stand for election, councils and county associations have taken forward a number of initiatives and NALC has continued to promote and support these, along with sharing good practice. However, there is a bigger need to raise the profile of the sector, encourage national media and other organisations to be more positive about the important role of parish councils and to help encourage people to stand for election. A local democracy programme backed up by a national democracy fund is needed to support this and we would urge government to consider this step.

12. Nevertheless there is also a need for the parish council sector itself to change its culture so that elections are seen as an investment in democracy rather than purely an expense; that standing for election and contested elections are illustrative of a healthy local democracy which should be encouraged and embraced.

13. **Analysis of parish election voting patterns**

14. Anecdotal feedback received as part of our research revealed different experiences across the country, which was to be expected. Some councillors said that nomination levels seemed to be down for parish elections in their areas, while others especially where there were big local issues, felt they were up. We also heard from councillors that they felt there was more party politics in these elections, with more people standing for election from political parties. The number of contested elections taking place in some county areas was as low as 20% of all councils.

15. There is no real national picture currently or historically about parish election voting patterns and this is needed to inform the steps that should be taken to improve participation and help strengthen local democracy. Given the parish council sector is growing in its size and scope – and becoming more influential – it is only right a good evidence base exists on which to develop public policy.
16. In order to take this forward we are recommending:

- academic research be commissioned to gather and drill down into parish election data;
- to compliment this we suggest additional research by public polling/market research companies into why people did or did not stand for election, the perceptions of parishes etc;
- and finally we also suggest a conducting a councillor census, similar to the exercise conducted by the LGA every two years, to get a clearer picture of who councillors are and to inform what needs to be done over the next few years to ensure a healthy and representative sector going forward.

17. We would urge the government and other bodies such as the EC and LGA to work with NALC to provide the necessary funding to take forward these proposals.

18. **Issues for consideration and discussion with Electoral Commission and/ or Government.**

19. **Cost of elections**

20. The cost of elections is the number one concern flagged up by councillors.

21. There needs to be greater transparency and clarity about the costs of elections charged by principal councils. High costs put off councils from encouraging people to stand for election. Councillors also told us there seems to be little consistent rationale for the costs being charged and no clarity or guidance about election costs across the tiers of local government. In our view any charge should be reasonable and proportionate and supports the objective of ensuring councils do not try to discourage elections taking place.

22. Practice varies enormously with some principal councils charging for elections, others charging some the marginal costs of organising a parish election at the same time as another election, and some imposing no charge at all. We suggest there should be a consistent approach to charging for elections and guidance developed to ensure any costs are fair and proportionate.

23. Feedback from one councillor who has worked with councillors across a county area revealed differing approaches by the three district council in this county area, with one fully subsidising elections, another partially subsidising elections, and the third questioning the legality of the approach of the other two councils!

24. Charges are also applied or varied at differing times in the year which makes financial planning for parish councils increasingly difficult.
25. We also pose the question of whether there could be a lighter touch arrangement for by-elections, which in some cases costs between £4,000 and £6,000 for an average sized parish council. The majority of parish councils have an income of less than £25,000 per year so this is a significant proportion of their budget, particularly if by-elections occur frequently in that council.

26. In addition we suggest there could be a role for parish councils in supporting the running of the elections to make them more cost effective, coupled with the piloting of electronic voting, a proposal we have already suggested to the government regarding reforms to parish polls.

27. **Management, administration and promotion of elections**

28. There are a number of differences in legislation between how elections are managed at local and principal council level and whether the rules should in fact be the same. We would welcome clarification from the EC about where election rules differ between local and principal councils and why this is the case.

29. Examples raised through our research include parish council candidates not able to use election agents and differences of approach to accessing to the electoral register.

30. Such differences may simply have been caused by accident due to parish councils being forgotten and overlooked when legislation is amended. However such an oversight causes confusion and can hold our councils back from modernising. Variation of rules is also likely to cause confusion for councillors who sit on other councils such as the district or county council, who are faced with having to understand the many complexities around elections.

31. Anecdotal evidence also suggests a loss of electoral expertise in principal councils, presumably as a result of austerity and downsizing, which has made it more difficult for parishes to access information. Our county associations have reported they have often had to pick this up and provide information and advice.

32. Other issues flagged up include the location and number polling stations (sometimes being fewer than at other elections and in different venues), along with evidence of people being sent to wrong polling station or venue, and insufficient advertising of the election (which can be a contributing factor to the first two issues).

33. One councillor commented “the attention of government should be drawn to the key role of village halls as polling stations and the importance of ensuring their role can be carried out, through Government interest/policy. This would also apply to community buildings. I feel there might be increased pressure from the education sector not to permit schools to be made available. My other point concerns accessibility of polling stations such as my own parish where it would be more convenient for residents to use a building in an adjoining principal authority area. Different coloured ballot papers would be possible. At present, residents of two parts of the parish have to drive to the village hall. It is not within walking distance and there is no public transport”.

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34. NALC would like to see the early introduction of the electronic submission of nomination papers, a measure which is also supported by the EC.

35. Some people told us they were confused by the documentation and guidance on the EC website, for example:

- Guidance on ‘Spending and donations’ during the elections period says it is for ‘local elections’, but refers to the role of agents which is not allowed by parish and town council candidates;

- Other guides do have a clear statement that they are not for parish and town councils, such as ‘who is eligible to stand for election’ (however, with some minor updating could be made relevant and useful for candidates at parish and town council level);

- The page on ‘Candidates and agents at parish and community council elections in England and Wales’ includes documentation that often has the caveat of not being applicable to parish and town councils.

36. We therefore recommend the EC review and update their various elections guidance and we would be willing to assist with this.

37. Other anomalies/issues relating to the management and administration of elections highlighted by councillors include:

- under and over representation in some wards;

- the varied number of councillors per elector;

- lack of consistency for parish elections with nominations by ward;

- in some areas candidates were not given access the electoral register until after the nominations deadline;

- election agents cannot be used in parish elections;

- many local elections were uncontested because district councils were not assisting in the provision of information to prospective candidates;

- a concern there might be perceptions that there were too many barriers to standing for election, such as lots of bureaucracy;

- the capacity of local councils especially smaller parishes – one councillor’s clerk had not notified councillors of the election as she did not have the time to do so, being employed for only 5 hours per week;

- and as one councillor concluded “There is a need to aim for an even standard of support by principal authorities and a system of fair charges and these points should be considered by the government, EC and LGA.”
38. **General issues to be addressed by wider society, the sector and national bodies**

39. Our research has shown significant support for a concerted campaign to raise the profile of parish councils, their role and influence and the importance of elections. This was an issue not only for NALC and county associations to address but also government and others too.

40. Government should statutorily enforce parish councils and parish meetings as being bodies that must be recognised as the first tier of local government, and their views obtained and taken into account by local organisations and public service providers.

41. If parishes are to become an increasingly important part of local governance then there needs to be a better understanding of their role and work, their importance to community resilience and as a building block of democracy. A number of ideas and suggestions are set out below:

- A need for more positive examples of what councillors do in publications;
- Promotion through television and social media;
- A national local democracy week to shine a spotlight on and promote parish councils;
- Reach out to underrepresented groups, greater access and support for disabled people, encourage other national bodies to promote parish councils and standing for election;
- Recruit support from other sectors such as encouraging the voluntary and community sector to get involved and businesses as part of their corporate social responsibility;
- NALC should actively encourage other organisations to promote participation in parishes.

42. As well as these wider social issues there are also cultural issues for the sector that need to be addressed too. Through our discussions with active, current councillors, their comments below illustrate a number of barriers and issues:

- Why hold an election if you could lose your seat?;
- There are more elections held if there is a political element to the council which is generally an urban rather than rural phenomenon;
- If the parish council is effective there is often a perception there is less of a need for an election;
- Councillors should be encouraged to stand down after an appropriate time and length of service;
- A return of the Standards Committee might help control quality;
• Change culture – elections should be seem as a strength and ‘good’ – properly funded, precepts raised; the precept should cover election costs, councils should be run in a business-like manner;

• If councillors were standing down they should find someone else;

• Was the viability of smaller councils an issue, should the number of councils be reduced through amalgamations?

• Job descriptions for councillors to give prospective candidates a clear idea of what was entailed and what was expected.

43. One councillor posed the challenge quite neatly: “We probably all know of cases where a parish council will have done something to raise its profile and thereby created a climate in which people want to stand for election either because they see the council as an effective body worth joining or they stand to remove existing councillors who they judge to be ineffective. I suspect that many councils are not sufficiently visible in their communities to warrant either such attentions. All Councils should be using the social media to get their stories across. They should also be using the traditional media to tell their stories. Many local newspapers are crying out for copy and if parish councils can develop good relationships with them they can be a valuable aid to getting the people to take notice of what they are doing. This too goes for local radio and television. Perhaps training could be arranged for parishes to improve media relations.”

44. Issues for NALC and county associations

45. The below table highlights a number of issues to be addressed and taken forward by NALC and county associations:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>NALC’s Election Hub had 27 documents shared by county associations.</td>
<td>Establish dedicated area on NALC website and open to all members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NALC should continue to maintain this hub and increase access.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NALC needs to provide clearer and timely advice on elections eg around the pre-election period or ‘purdah’</td>
<td>Refer to legal team for action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County associations should share experiences and lessons through the Election Hub and in other ways.</td>
<td>National Council members to raise within county associations.</td>
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46. **What worked well in generating interest in standing for election?**

47. A number of examples of the types of successful activity and initiatives to encourage people to stand for election include:

- Leaflet through door, however this can be costly;
- Promotion through newsletters and articles in local paper and media;
- Open sessions for potential candidates organised by the parish council;
- County associations secured funding to hold promotional events;
- Blandford Forum’s short video (now on a Facebook page) trying to promote both registering to vote and standing for election, which has received over 1,000 views: [http://youtu.be/L2kppyz0Bxs](http://youtu.be/L2kppyz0Bxs)
- Events such as public meetings had not always been cost effective: one county association carried out a series of public events with tea and biscuits in villages to drum up interest in the elections, which attracted interest but in their view didn’t have a material effect on the number of candidates standing.

48. **NALC current policy positions on elections**

49. In addition to the recommendations set out in this report, NALC has a number of further policy proposals which are also relevant and are put forward for consideration:

- Introduction of a local democracy programme aimed at encouraging more people to become councillors, making it easier for people to stand and serve, gathering elections data and promoting contested elections, undertaking a census survey of councillors and establishing a national democracy fund;
- Changes to current statutory post-election processes for parish councils as present legislation leads to considerable delay in forming a new council; if a quorum is not reached on the statutory ordinary election date or where the election is countermanded due to death of a candidate;
- The statutory time limit for the calling or demanding of a parish election following the occurrence of a casual vacancy to be amended to give the parish council a further maximum six week period to find candidates willing to stand for a contested election to fill the vacancy;
• Change the law to allow the chairman of a parish meeting (in areas where there is no parish council) to obtain a free copy of the full Electoral Register for their area;

• Review of the parish and town council by-election process, which would address both the cost and timescales;

• Change the law to allow returning officers in the case of parish elections to rule that a candidate's nomination paper is not valid where the returning officer is satisfied from the face of the paper that the candidate does not meet any of the qualification criteria stated on the nomination paper;

• Change the law to extend councillor allowances to co-opted councillors.

50. **Conclusion**

51. Through our analysis of the experience of parish and town council elections in 2015 we have identified a number of areas for consideration and action by a range of stakeholders including the government, EC and LGA, along with challenges our sector itself needs to address in order to help strengthen local democracy.

52. We are keen to discuss the findings in this report with the above stakeholders and with other organisations that may have interest in working with us to support and promote parish and town councils and help take our ideas and recommendations forward.