

**NORTHUMBERLAND
ASSOCIATION
OF
LOCAL COUNCILS**

ANNUAL REPORT

2008-2009

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NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The Northumberland Association of Local Councils is an unincorporated association which was formed in the 1940s to support and represent the interests of parish and town councils (known generally as 'local councils') throughout Northumberland and Newcastle. There are just over 150 local councils in our area, and all but a small handful are members of the Association.

NALC is one of the forty, or so, county associations which together form the National Association of Local Councils (also shortened to NALC!). We employ no staff: instead, we arrange for our partners, Community Action Northumberland (formerly the Community Council of Northumberland), to provide administrative and professional services on our behalf. Thus, David Francis is both the Honorary Secretary of NALC and the Director of CAN. This arrangement is cost-effective and it enables NALC and CAN to present a 'seamless' advisory and information service to parish councils of a sort which is much more fragmented in other parts of the country.

NALC is a membership body, most of whose income is derived through the subscriptions paid by local councils in our area. NALC does not hold significant general reserves, nor does it own property.

Our over-riding aim is to develop and support active and effective local councils. This requires local councils to be aware of local needs and concerns, and to find a way of addressing them, whether by taking direct action themselves or by encouraging others to take the lead. Local councils have unlimited powers to raise money by precepting on the Council Tax, and this is an opportunity which can be used enthusiastically but prudently to support local initiatives and services. To support local councils, we provide advice, information, training and other encouragement.

In addition to providing this direct help, we also undertake policy and partnership work, on behalf of the local councils' 'sector'. This involves monitoring changes, policies and proposals which may impact on local councils, and working to influence the decisions which are made by local government, central government, agencies and public utility providers. It also means working with other bodies to develop opportunities which can benefit local councils and their communities.

The policy and overall direction of NALC is organised through our County Committee which is composed of councillors and clerks drawn from all parts of our area. These representatives are elected each autumn at our Annual General Meeting.

**NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION
OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

2008 – 2009

President
Mr Jim Rudd

Vice President
Cllr David Woodard

Hon Treasurer
Miss G Turner

Hon Auditor
Mr Richard Slater

COUNTY COMMITTEE

Cllr Mrs Val Seddon (Chair)	Widdrington Village
Mrs M Anderton	Broomhaugh & Riding
Cllr P Angus	Longhirst
Cllr J Brown	Widdrington Station & Stobswood
Cllr P Claridge	East Chevington
Cllr D Cowans	Hepscott
Cllr N Dunn	Glanton
Cllr C Forster	Woolsington
Cllr Mrs J Gardner	Cresswell
Cllr J Geggie	Amble
Cllr B Jackson	Longhirst
Cllr Mrs H Shaw	Ulgham
Cllr R Ramsay	Ponteland

As at March 2009:
Secretary: David Francis

Acklington
Acomb
Adderstone with Lucker
Allendale
Alnmouth
Alnwick
Alwinton
Amble
Ancroft
Bamburgh
Bardon Mill
Bavington
Beadnell
Belford with Middleton
Bellingham
Belsay
Berwick upon Tweed
Birtley
Blakelaw & North Fenham
Blanchland
Bowsden
Branxton
Brinkburn & Hesleyhurst
Broomhaugh & Riding
Broomley & Stocksfield
Brunswick
Bywell
Capheaton
Carham
Cartington
Chollerton
Coanwood
Corbridge
Cornhill
Corsenside
Craster
Cresswell
Dinnington
Doddington
Duddo
East Chevington
Edlingham
Eglington
Ellingham
Ellington & Linton
Elsdon
Embleton
Fourstone
Featherstone
Felton
Ford
Glanton
Greenhead
Haltwhistle
Harbottle
Hartburn
Hartleyburn
Hauxley
Haydon
Hazelrigg
Healey
Hebron

Heddon on the wall
Hedgeley
Hedley on the Hill
Henshaw
Hepple
Hepscott
Hexham
Hexhamshire & District
Horncliffe
Horsley
Humshaugh
Ingram
Kielder
Kirknewton
Kirkwhelpington
Knaresdale with Kirkhaugh
Kyloe
Lesbury
Longframlington
Longhirst
Longhorsley
Longhoughton
Lowick
Lynemouth
Matfen
Meldon
Melkridge
Milfield
Mitford
Morpeth
Netherton with Biddlestone
Netherwitton
Newbrough
Newton by the Sea
Newton on the Moor & Swarland
Norham
North Gosforth
North Sunderland & Seahouses
Nunykirk
Ord
Otterburn
Ovingham
Ovington
Pegswood
Plenmeller with Whitfield
Ponteland
Prudhoe
Rennington
Rochester & Byrness
Rothbury
Sandhoe
Shilbottle
Shoreswood
Shotley Low Quarter
Simonburn
Slaley
Stamfordham
Stannington
Taret & Greystead
Thirlwall
Thirston
Thropton

Tilside
Togston
Tritlington & West Chevington
Ulgham
Wall
Wallington Demesne
Warden
Wark
Warkworth
West Allen
Walton
Whittingham, Callaly & Alnham
Whittington
Widdrington Station & Stobswood
Widdrington Village
Wooler
Wolsington
Wylam

Chairman's Foreword 08/09

Did you miss something from last year's (07/08) NALC annual report? That's right, the chairman's foreword was missing from the printed edition. It did go out later as an email version so I hope you all had the opportunity to read it. The reason? I went on holiday in mid September and the NALC AGM was held in October. By the time I returned home the printing stage had already been reached. This year, I thought that I would be very organised and booked my holiday for late September. The Chairman's foreword would be written before I left and I wouldn't have to worry about it while I was away. Unfortunately, it was decided to delay the AGM until November and along with it the draft annual report! Ah well, what is that quotation – you know the one I mean – something about 'The best laid plans.....' Hopefully this will reach the NALC office in time for the printer.

This is my last year as Chairman of the NALC County Committee. The Chairman can only serve for a maximum of 3 years and my time is up. The last 3 years have brought many changes; we now have a unitary authority for Northumberland and along with that go other changes in organisation. We hope that over the coming years NALC will be able to introduce changes to its structure and organisation to reflect this. My years as Chairman have given me the opportunity to work closely with many people from other Parish Councils and as a NALC representative on other bodies. If anyone is considering volunteering for the County Committee I can recommend it – you will make new friends, form new contacts and have great fun while being part of an important organisation that represents the majority of Parish and Town Councils in Northumberland and Newcastle.

This year we have welcomed some new Parish and Town Councils to Northumberland, particularly those in South East Northumberland. I hope that the new councils will find NALC support valuable and that they will continue to be part of this important organisation. There have also been enquires from some area of Newcastle considering the setting up of parished areas.

This year, NALC has been able to send out more information to more Parish and Town Councils than ever before by using email and internet. We are setting up a data base, not only of Clerks email contact details, but also for Chairmen. We hope to extend this to all Parish and Town Councillors in future, so that information is received quickly and efficiently and is as widespread as possible. There still are a few Parish Councils where the Clerk does not have an internet connection; however this gets fewer all the time. In many parishes, all Councillors are now connected. Unfortunately, some parts of Northumberland still have poor broadband connection or none at all. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, as these areas are being deprived of a service that many now take for granted.

The Charter for Local Councils is an important agreement between Parish/Town Councils and Northumberland County Council, as the principal authority for Northumberland. NALC welcomes the clear setting out of the ways in which we will work together and support local democracy through the Parish/Town Council movement. The charter was ratified by NALC in January 2009 and by the County Council in April 2009.

NALC has supported the Quality Parish Council scheme since its inception in 2003. Several Parish and Town Councils in our area now have quality status. NALC offers support and training for Councils that wish to pursue this qualification.

I would like to thank all CAN staff for their work this year in supporting the work of NALC. Thank you, also, to all of the members of the County Committee for giving their time so generously to help continue the work of this organisation; this year has been particularly arduous with the need for additional monthly meetings. However, my biggest thank you goes to you, as Parish/Town

Councillors and Clerks, for the valuable work you do for your communities. As I said, I have enjoyed the last 3 years as Chairman and I hope to continue my connection with NALC for many years to come.

Valerie Seddon, chairman NALC

1. Support for individual councils

Although our members value our policy related and networking activities, probably the main reason why most local councils are members of our Association is for the support which we offer directly to them. Increasingly this service is provided via email, although we are happy to visit and talk to individual councils from time to time.

We have continued to provide a wide range of advice, information, training and other support to individual councils throughout our area. Examples include:

- resolving conflicts among council members
- putting in-place appropriate employment processes (for example, written terms and conditions of service, pensions, and grievance/disciplinary processes)
- helping clerks to set up financial accounting systems
- advising on appropriate public-involvement and community engagement arrangements
- partnerships with voluntary groups on local projects
- securing grant aid
- avoiding or minimising Value Added Tax
- implementing and operating new publication schemes, under the Freedom of Information Act
- using the power of co-option for filling casual vacancies, to diversify the 'mix' of council members
- various public rights of way and commons/village green issues
..... and so on.

Most of NALC's services are provided from arms-length, or through individual meetings and events. However, towards the end of the year we made preparations to provide a short-term clerking service to enable the eight new parish councils in South-East Northumberland to become established, to a point where they were able to recruit their own staffing.

2. Charter for Local Councils

Local council charters are a way of defining, in a mutually-agreed policy, the respective roles, rights and relationships between local councils and principle authorities. The idea of charters is not new: the Government has promoted charters since the time of the 1990s local government structural reviews, and Newcastle City Council introduced one in 2007. Within Northumberland, the prospect of local government reform produced increasing demands from our local council members for a new charter, to clarify not only the relationship with the new unitary authority, but also the role which local councils would play in the new 'belonging community' forums.

The survey of all local councils which we conducted in the Spring of 2007 provided some important information: not only facts about each council's organisational capacity, but also about their aspirations for how they would operate within a reorganised, unitary authority structure.

Over 80% of local councils envisaged an increased role, level of responsibility and activity as a result of LGR. They could see that they would need to organise themselves differently to cope with the increasing pressures of work, including ensuring the widespread use of ICT (information and communications technology). All councils wished to be consulted by their unitary authority on the wide range of issues which impact on their area. Roughly half also envisaged a direct role in managing and delivering services which hitherto had been run by the county or district council.

This survey, and numerous local council forums and cluster meetings around Northumberland, then set the context for designing the new Charter. The Charter would need to be:

- clear and not written in 'legal language'
- flexible to accommodate the different situations within the local councils' sector
- challenging (but not unreasonably so) in 'raising the game' of the new Authority and of local councils
- timely, in order to influence the design of the new Authority's policies and processes
- acceptable to the new Authority and the local councils' sector.

To aid discussion, we prepared and circulated a scoping paper for the Charter in the summer of 2008, and followed this by consulting all parish councils with a draft document in October to December 2008. A final version incorporated a range of amendments arising from local councils' comments. It was endorsed by NALC in January 2009, and by the County Council on 1 April 2009.

The Charter has a range of provisions, ranging from the promotion of community leadership and democracy, to arrangements for consultation and service-delivery.

It also seeks to achieve a more-consistent approach across the county, in defining the range of services which local councils themselves should normally be expected to provide and find: for example, allotments, playing fields and burial grounds. Most local councils in Northumberland were already leading on such provisions, but this was not the case universally, and so the achievement of a 'level playing-field' would inevitably require some parish councils to take a responsibility for certain services for the first time.

3. Natural communities and partnerships

Late in 2005 the NSP (Northumberland Strategic Partnership) launched a consultation about the concept of 'Natural Communities', which sought to define a series of four tiers of geographical area within Northumberland; areas within which there was a degree of common interest and functional connection. The consultation eventually extended until February 2008, when decisions were made on the boundaries of the 'characteristic communities' (the three main sub areas of Northumberland – the North, the West, and the South East) and also of the 'belonging communities' (of which 27 had been identified, in most instances based on a cluster of rural parishes, or on a single large town).

During the year, work which had begun to help local councils and community groups to agree and establish community forums within each 'belonging community' came to an abrupt halt; initially due to the pre-May 2008 'electoral purdah' restrictions, and then due to a lack of political consensus within the County Council about this whole approach. Although a momentum was eventually re-established, it is disappointing that the new community forums were not established in sufficient time to enable them to influence the latter stages of designing and establishing the new Authority.

We remain committed to the vision of community forums as a means of bringing together a wide range of local views and interests: the parish and neighbourhood perspective of local councils, alongside (for example) young people, representatives of special needs and local businesses.

4. New parish councils

Although the 'map' of parish councils has remained fairly static over many decades, there have been opportunities to create new ones, and to alter the boundaries of existing ones. Historically, parish

councils were a feature of the rural areas, and in Northumberland most of the rural areas have been 'parished' since the 1890s. However, legislation passed in 1997 and in 2007 has provided a new impetus to create parishes and parish councils in the towns and city areas.

Over the past year, we have supported new parishing initiatives in four areas:

- (i) Berwick/Tweedmouth/Spittal: Berwick Borough Council had been requesting the Government for several years that a parish council should be created for their single largest town, and it was finally created on 1 April 2008. We provided advice, information and training, both before and after the first elections in May 2008.
- (ii) Wansbeck area: in 2007 public petitions had been organised first in Newbiggin and then in Bedlington, calling on Wansbeck District Council to create parish councils for those two communities. Wansbeck District Council then carried out their own consultation, across all parts of the district, and this revealed support for all areas to be parished. During 2008 we worked closely with the District Council on further consultations to arrive at the detailed proposals: boundaries, warding, names, number of councillors etc. The conclusions were to create five parish councils: Ashington; Newbiggin; West Bedlington; North Bedlington; and East Bedlington.
- (iii) Blyth Valley area: although there had been occasional interest shown by people in Cramlington for a parish council, overall Blyth valley Borough Council had not been particularly enthusiastic about the possibility of parish councils. However, the prospect of reorganising the principal authorities into the single county-wide unitary authority spurred the Borough Council to conduct a community governance review, which NALC assisted. The conclusions were to create three parish councils: Blyth; Cramlington' and Seaton Valley.
- (iv) North Tyneside: we have provided information and advice to a group of residents and business people who are interested in creating a parish council for Whitley Bay. It is not yet clear whether this proposal will be supported by North Tyneside Borough Council.

It is now the case that all of Northumberland is parished (ie all communities are within a parish area), and all but a very small handful of sparsely populated communities are served by a parish council. Even though the organisational capacity and the outlook of different parish councils varies considerably across Northumberland, the fact that there is near-universal coverage has helped the creation of policies and opportunities for the new Authority's community engagement and delivery of local services.

We have discussed with Newcastle City Council from time to time the prospect of creating further parish councils there. (There are currently six, five of which were 'inherited' from Northumberland due to a boundary change in 1974). We will support any community who may be interested.

5. Quality Parish Council Scheme

In partnership with our National Association, the Government introduced the Quality Parish Council scheme in 2003. The quality mark is based on a mixture of tests. Some are basic legal compliance requirements, and others are good-practice in relation to engagement with the community. These tests include criteria such as: the production of informative newsletters and annual reports; encouraging the public to attend and speak at parish council meetings; compiling financial accounts which are not 'qualified' by the auditor; and so on. With two exceptions, the tests are things which a parish council can easily put into place. The two bigger challenges are:

- (i) the 'electoral mandate' test, which requires at least a prescribed minimum of the council's members to have stood for election (as opposed to being co-opted). If this did not occur at the last elections, it is difficult for a parish council to put things right, until the next election.
- (ii) The 'qualified clerk' test, which requires the clerk to attain one of two recognised national qualifications: the University of Gloucestershire's Local Policy Certificate of Higher Education; or the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CILCA)

We have continued to offer tutorial sessions and also some one-to-one support for parish clerks who are pursuing the CILCA qualification, and we are looking forward to an increase in the number of councils in our area who secure Quality status over the next few years.

6. Representing parish council interests on other bodies

One of NALC's roles is to ensure that the interests of our member councils are communicated to and understood by a range of responsible bodies. Mostly, we achieve this either by engaging those bodies in direct dialogue, or by facilitating and encouraging parish councils to speak on their own behalf. Sometimes, however, there are opportunities for parish council representatives to sit on these other bodies, and NALC either makes a direct appointment or we organise an open nomination and selection process. The following are some examples of parish council representation on other bodies.

- (i) Standards Committee: prior to April 2009, every district council standards committee had a responsibility also for the ethical standards of all and any parish councils in its area. Following LGR, there is a single standards committee for Northumberland. NALC worked with the new authority to interview and appoint three parish representatives, for appointment by the new authority. These were: David Buckle (Cornhill), Eileen Burt (Prudhoe) and Brian Selman (Heddon). A further parish representative to be drawn from South-East Northumberland, will be recruited in Autumn 2009. Within Newcastle, the six parish councils work directly with the City Council to appoint three representatives to the Newcastle Standards Committee.
- (ii) Northumberland National Park Authority: before April 2009 there were four places on the Authority for parish council representatives and they have recently been occupied by Derek Edwards, Philip Shaker, Johnny Wilson and Rachel Pearson. With the prospect of LGR and the loss of district councils' representation on the National Park authority, two further parish places were made available, and NALC organised a ballot among the councils concerned. As a result, Sue Bolam (Harbottle) and Brian Walters were appointed, alongside the previous four parish representatives.
- (iii) Northumberland Strategic Partnership: Hitherto, NALC had one place on the NSP board, to which we appointed our Chairman (currently Val Seddon). With the reorganisation of the NSP, NALC will in future have three places on the NSP Board, appointments to which will follow an open selection process. NALC now also will have a place on the NSP Executive, to be occupied by David Francis.
- (iv) National Association of Local Councils: David Francis sits on the National Council, and he is currently also elected on to their Executive Committee.

7. Finance

Overall expenditure amounted to £31,303, which included the payment of some non-recurrent grants to local councils for carrying out parish plan activities, which had been financed by a designated fund for this purpose. The underlying picture was of £18.2k expenditure, most of which was financed by members' subscriptions (£16.2k) and by the sale of Local Council's Review (£1.9k).

With a surplus of £954, the general reserve at the year-end was £8k.

NALC is grateful for the support given by the Treasurer (Gillian Turner), Auditor (Richard Slater) and the staff of Community Action Northumberland.

NORTHUMBERLAND
ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL
COUNCILS Statement of Income &
Expenditure 1 April 2008 - 31 March
2009

<u>2007-2008</u>		<u>2008-2009</u>	<u>2007-2008</u>		<u>2008-2009</u>
£	<u>Expenditure</u>	£	£	<u>Income</u>	£
6,658.36	National Association - Membership Fee	6,952.44	15,684.88	Membership Subscriptions	16,291.83
9,200.00	Community Action - Agency Fee	9,500.00	-	-	-
1,729.14	Local Council Review	1,630.69	2,028.00	Local Council Review	1,968.00
137.50	Publications & Printing	-	181.09	Publications	97.64
63.00	Meetings & Events	-	345.00	Training Events	343.00
-	General Activities	120.00	35.00	General Activities	150.08
-	-	-	678.52	Bank Interest	307.12
6,900.00	Parish Plans	13,100.00	-	Parish Plans	13,100.00
3,430.00	Belonging Community Networks	-	-	Belonging Community Networks	-
-	Transfer to Designated Funds	-	10,330.00	Transfer from Designated Funds	-
-	-	-	-	Excess of Expenditure over Income	-
1,164.49	Excess of Income over Expenditure	954.54	-	-	-
<u>29,282.49</u>		<u>32,257.67</u>	<u>29,282.49</u>		<u>32,257.67</u>

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Balance Sheet at 31 March 2009

<u>2007/2008</u>		<u>2008/2009</u>		
£		£	£	£
	<u>CURRENT ASSETS</u>			
70.22	Sundry Debtors	52.24		
20,091.21	Cash on Deposit	<u>7,963.73</u>	8,015.97	
	 <u>LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES</u>			
-	Sundry Creditors	-		
-	Receipts in Advance	<u>-</u>	<u>-</u>	
20,161.43				8,015.97
	 <u>FINANCED BY</u>			
5,896.94	General Reserve - Accumulated Surplus		7,061.43	
13,100.00	Designated Fund - Parish Plans		-	
1,164.49	- Surplus for Year		954.54	
-	- Deficit for Year		<u>-</u>	
20,161.43				8,015.97