

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

What we offer

We are an association of local (ie parish and town) councils, which draws membership from the historical county area of Northumberland, which also includes Newcastle and North Tyneside. 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 or arrange:

- A regular distribution of topical information, mostly by email
- Advice to clerks and councillors, on a wide range of topics: legal, managerial, financial, etc
- Training: mostly short events, but also support for the CiLCA qualification (Certificate in Local Councils Administration)
- Access to new opportunities, ranging from insurance policies, equipment schemes, ICT solutions.... and much more
- Advice to community groups on forming new councils
- Representation on bodies such as the Standards Committee, and National Park and AONB governance bodies.

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, agencies and public utility providers. It also means working with other bodies to develop opportunities which can benefit local councils and their communities.

Although we are an independent body, we also form part of the National Association of Local Councils, from whom we draw specialist support on legal and policy topics, and to whom we pay an annual financial levy.

Chairman's Foreword

NALC represents about 150 local councils in Northumberland and six in Newcastle upon Tyne. They range from the smallest councils with a precept of a few thousand pounds to some of the larger councils with a precept of over one million pounds. NALC is here to represent and support you, no matter how small or large your council is. If David Francis is unable to resolve your issues, he will contact the National Association of Local Councils for advice.

This has been a busy year for those of us on the Parish Liaison Working Group, in planning and reviewing a range of initiatives concerning our relationship with Northumberland County Council. We have met with officers of NCC to look at the Charter and to plan for what, we are pleased, is now an annual conference. We have reviewed and addressed a number of issues in the parish-county relationship, on matters as diverse as grounds maintenance, planning consultations, cemetery costs and car parking enforcement. We have welcomed the fact that NCC has now committed to providing or supporting regular training for local councillors on planning and other topics, which will be organised either by NCC or by NALC.

Already both Northumberland County Council and Newcastle City Council have had to make stringent cuts as part of the Government's austerity policy. Local councils have done a good job, where they can, in expanding their role to address some of the resultant shortfalls. This has often involved making increases in local precepts, and we have been concerned about DCLG threats of Council Tax capping. With some trepidation, we await the government's plans for 2016-2017.

On your behalf I would like to thank Gillian Turner, on behalf of NALC members, for being our treasurer for several years. Gillian is retiring from her role as Morpeth Town Clerk and our treasurer before the next AGM. I wish her a long, healthy retirement. I would also like to thank David Francis and our Vice Chairmen for covering for me during my illness last year.

Ray Butler Chairman NALC County Committee

About us

NALC is one of about forty county associations of local councils in England, which together form the National Association. 'Local council' includes parish, town, neighbourhood, community and village councils of which there are 156 in our area (Northumberland and Newcastle). All but 5 or 6 are members of our Association. NALC was formed in the 1940s and, since 1951, has received administrative and professional support from CAN (Community Action Northumberland), thus saving on 'overhead' costs, and reducing duplication in the provision of our seamless advisory work to support local communities.

NALC is governed by a County Committee composed of representatives appointed by our member-councils. The current chairman is Ray Butler and he is supported by 3 vice Chairmen, chosen from each area of Northumberland. The staff team which provides a variety of support services for NALC is led by CAN's Director, David Francis.

The past year was busy, in terms of both the advice and support provided to our member councils, and also our work in representing the interests of the local councils' sector in its dealings with a variety of departments, agencies and programmes. Supporting local councils to initiate new projects was as demanding as ever, but so too were calls for our help to address problems and disputes, and overcome a range of bureaucratic challenges.

Supporting individual councils

A major part of our work is concerned with providing information and advice on request to individual councils. In recent years, we have been providing a monthly e-newsletter, which, together with our training events and roadshows, has given most councils most of what they need, for most of the time. The requests for help therefore have tended to be either for more-complex problems, or to provide clarification and assurance about a proposed course of action, or to supply councils with the appropriate specialist briefing documents to address a particular problem.

Last year, the array of topics was as great as ever. For example:

- Clerk recruitment
- The legality of expenditure
- Filling casual vacancies
- Handing complaints from the public
- Understanding Neighbourhood Planning and the emerging local plan
- Employment matters
- Freedom of Information, and confidentiality
- Adopting or amending standing orders
- Managing grants
- Conflicts of interest
- Officer delegation
- Supporting community groups

- Acquiring and managing new property
 - Accounting, taxation and book-keeping
 - Charity trusteeship
 - Commons and village greens
 - Broadband initiatives
 - Affordable housing
 - Conducting surveys
 - Establishing committees
- and many more.

NALC Roadshows

During February and March 2015, we ran a number of 'roadshow' events at various venues around the area, to cover a number of current issues and opportunities, which attracted a sizeable turnout. The venues included Wooler, Bardon Mill, Bellingham, Longframlington, Embleton and Bedlington. The topics covered at each event included:

- Open-ness of meetings and the new recording/broadcasting rules
- Government plans for audit reform
- Prospective transparency rules
- Freedom of Information Act practicalities
- Quality Councils and the new Award Scheme
- Reform of development management procedures
- Financial changes

We are grateful to our National Association who provided some financial assistance for these events.

Employment support

Local councils are often unclear about their roles and responsibilities as employers. We receive a steady stream of requests for help, on topics such as staff recruitment, salary grading, line management, qualifications, discipline/grievance, payroll administration and temporary cover. In addition, recently there have been several more problematical cases, in different parts of the county, which generated significant stress and also adverse media coverage. These generally involved significant internal difficulties within a council, between an employee and one or more councillors.

We were aware that we have only a limited capacity to provide support, and certainly not the sort of 'hand-holding service' which we know that any employer-employee difficulty may sometimes need. Nevertheless, we formed a short-term working party of councillors and clerks, drawn from our County Committee, to explore the issues and to develop a manageable package of support, within our very limited resources. We have now begun to prepare and publish additional good-practice guidance and model documents, on (for example) staff recruitment, a model job description/person specification and pensions/gratuities. We are also

looking to offer some training on the basics of good employer practice, later in 2015.

Transparency

The DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) undertook a range of initiatives to introduce further 'transparency' into local government. In part, this was to overcome the secrecy which the Secretary of State perceived to exist in parts of local government. It was also linked to the government's programme of reforming the audit system, which in due course would remove thousands of smaller local councils from a routine annual external audit.

Since their creation in the 1890s, local councils' meetings have been open to the public, but there had never been a public right to film, record and broadcast a council's proceedings. In 2014, this became a public right. We immediately introduced new model standing orders, both to accommodate this new right, and also to pre-empt unduly intrusive behaviour towards the general public by over-enthusiastic amateur reporters.

It seems likely that, by 2017, all local councils will need to publish on a website a range of key information, including financial transactions, papers relating to council meetings, and governance provisions. To our dismay, it became apparent that this would impact first on the smallest of councils: those raising and spending less than £25k each year. Despite our making representations to the contrary, a new framework appeared to take effect in April 2015, but with serious doubts over its precise legal status.

The announcement of the pre-General Election purdah period, followed by a change of Secretary of State, appears to have removed the immediate pressure. It is estimated that 35-40% of smaller councils will need to establish websites for the first time, to comply with the new Code of Recommended Practice.

At some stage in 2016, new powers will be made across the country for the audit of those councils which raise and spend more than £25k pa. It is expected that new auditors will take the place of BDO, who are based in Southampton.

Working with the County Council

Early in the life of the reorganised unitary County Council, partnership arrangements were put in place whereby senior people from NALC met regularly with NCC's Executive (now called Cabinet) and with the chairmen of the 3 Area Committees. As well as these scheduled meetings, we were in frequent dialogue with individual portfolio holders and senior officers, to plan and deliver specific pieces of work, and to anticipate and head-off matters before they became a major problem.

During 2014 this was replaced by a new Liaison Group, consisting of a number of chairmen/mayors of larger councils who had been specifically invited by NCC, and several back-bench County Councillors. In addition, there are now frequent meetings between key senior staff from the Local Services team, with individual

larger councils, 4 or 5 of which have led to formal co-funded Partnership Agreements.

We assisted NCC's Locality Team in the development of dedicated 'parish and town council pages' within the NCC website. These now include a host of useful information about the roles and opportunities of a wide range of NCC functions, such as planning, highways, elections, community rights, grant funding, archives, payroll, printing.... and a host of others. For the first time, this website has given a very good appreciation of the many contacts, as well as the opportunities which can be of great help to local councils in Northumberland.

In September 2014, the County Council also staged a conference for local councils, held in County Hall. Although there was some disappointment over the premature cancellation of the evening event which had originally been planned, councils who were able to attend generally appreciated the opportunity to meet key NCC personnel and to catch-up on a number of developments.

In December, the County Council launched a consultation on its budget plans for 2015-16. As with many authorities in the North, the Government was imposing significant cuts. For the first time, the County Council conducted a more-structured consultation, backed by an informative new corporate plan document, which we welcomed. However, in practice it was difficult to interpret the likely local impact of NCC's proposals. Local councils were in the same position as in previous years, uncertain whether there was anything they could do to mitigate the impact of unspecified reductions or closures of local NCC services in their parishes.

NCC Partnership Agreements

At the request of several larger town councils, we provided advice on some new Partnership Agreements which had been negotiated with the County Council and signed with some urgency, in preparation for the start of the new financial year. The concept was very good: a town council and the County Council each agreeing to co-fund a locally-dedicated council workforce to undertake a variety of practical tasks such as grass-cutting, litter-picking, snow clearance, tree and shrub maintenance, flower beds, etc. The town councils increased their budgets by hundreds of thousands of pounds in April 2014, to meet their share of the annual costs.

The Agreements had a number of advantages:

- New jobs were created, including some apprenticeships
- The ten-year duration enabled more-confident workforce planning
- Local councils had much greater influence over the quality and quantity of the services
- The substantial contribution from local councils overcame any 'double taxation' concerns from elsewhere in the county, by addressing any doubts that County Council-owned parks and open spaces in the south-east were being subsidised by all other parts of Northumberland.

Our assistance was modest: the provision of advice on how to put some lawful management/governance arrangements in place, and addressing any doubts about the legal basis for some of the work which was being undertaken. In some instances, there were also 'Code of Conduct' issues to consider, where leading members of a local council were also members of the County Council.

Cemeteries

For more than a century, the operation of burial grounds has been no single organisation's responsibility. In Northumberland as elsewhere, the Church of England has been the main provider, followed by local (parish and town) councils. However, in some parts of Northumberland, district councils had provided cemeteries – not least in the south-east of the county where there were no local councils prior to 2009. The merger of the 6 district councils with the County Council in 2009 led to concerns among many local councils that their residents were 'paying twice' for cemetery provision through the Council Tax: ie both to support a local parish council cemetery and also to support County Council cemeteries elsewhere in Northumberland.

We had been pursuing a solution to this with the County Council by making preparations for local councils to take ownership of and responsibility for, the remaining NCC cemeteries. However, a change of political administration in 2014 led to a change of policy, and a new solution which was implemented in 2014, whereby NCC would retain responsibility for its cemeteries, but would financially compensate those local councils who run their own facilities.

Last year, we also initiated a stream of work with the Church and the County Council to explore the longer-term question of who would make any new powers to replace burial grounds that are reaching capacity. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no comprehensive listing or database of current provision, and so we set about compiling one, from a variety of sources, which revealed:

- With about 90 'open' churchyards, the Church is the largest provider of burial grounds
- About 20, or so, cemeteries are provided by individual (or groups of) local councils
- 11 cemeteries are provided by the County Council
- The County Council is also maintaining a small number of open churchyards.

With a few exceptions, local churches expect local government to make any new provision, when the churchyards become full. It seems unlikely that the County Council will be able and willing to create many new cemeteries. Therefore a growing burden will fall on local councils: in some instances in several years time, in other instances many decades from now.

No conclusions have yet been reached but we are working with the County Council to provide a degree of practical and technical advice, even if financial help might be more difficult.

Planning Matters

Since the early 1970s, local councils have had the statutory right to be consulted over planning applications which are likely to affect their parishes, for their views to be considered by the planning authority and to be notified of the authority's decision.

During the year, we discovered that the County Council had been under pressure for at least a year to improve the efficiency and quality of its development management: ie the processing of planning application. Without communicating or consulting with local councils, the County Council was preparing to change a range of procedures, including removing the ability of local councils to ensure that more-contentious applications could be determined by a planning committee, rather than by an officer. It emerged that 3 reports had been commissioned from consultants during 2014: two from the Planning Officers' Society enterprise arm and one from NCC's auditors, Deloitte. The reports pointed to a wide range of problems, mostly internal to the planning officer teams and the operation of the planning committees. Deloitte had generated a degree of unrest by suggesting that local councils had no statutory right to be consulted over planning matters. Regrettably, the County Council did not move quickly to correct this misconception.

Following a number of meetings and exchanges of correspondence, a more structured review of systems was carried out, which elicited a huge response from local councils and amenity organisations. We supported some improvements to the system which would increase the number of uncontroversial applications which could be determined without resort to a planning committee. We also offered to work with the County Council to stage a programme of training which would not only enable local councils to understand the planning system better, but would also help councils to streamline their own deliberations.

Localisation of Council Tax Benefits

In 2013 the Government moved the responsibility for the administration of Council Tax Benefits from the Department for Work and Pensions, to principal authorities. As part of the changes, those households that received these Benefits were removed from the official 'Council Tax base', which meant that every Council's precept now draws upon a smaller number of households. The Government attempted to compensate all authorities, including local councils, by providing grant aid which was channelled via the Billing Authority. Regrettably the Government did not make it compulsory for this grant to be passed to local councils. We have welcomed Newcastle City Council's continued passporting of this grant to the parishes, and we have been disappointed by the County Council's retention of this grant, which is estimated to total £628k pa. So far, the Government has been reluctant to apply any realistic pressure on authorities such as Northumberland. Regrettably our local councils have been 'piggies in the middle' between the County Council and central government.

Local Council Awards

During the year, our National Association conducted a review of the Quality Parish Council Scheme. Originally, this had been promoted by the Government, and later by the County Council shortly after local government re-organisation in 2009. We were keen to see a simple scheme which could attract and retain many more councils than the original scheme had managed. However, the eventual outcome is a 3-tier local scheme, with higher fees. We have promoted the new arrangements, but so far there has been a slow take-up.

Newcastle

We meet with the City Council's Head of Democratic Services and the local council clerks 2 or 3 times per year to explore issues and opportunities of common interest. Topics last year included the planning process, Localism of Council Tax Benefits, boundary reviews, Neighbourhood Planning, the Newcastle/Gateshead LDP, local elections and the Code of Conduct.

North East

During the year, we co-hosted a number of regional meetings with our colleagues in Durham and Cleveland. This included a number of specialist training events and two conferences. We also contributed to discussion with Durham County Council on the opportunities arising from our experiences of the parish-county relationship in Northumberland.

NALC's finances

As we expected, our financial position has fluctuated significantly over recent years. In 2011 the County Council had arranged to provide several years of financial support, largely to compensate for the ending of a very long-standing arrangement whereby principal authorities had been supporting NALC indirectly, via their financial support for CAN. With the ending of the County Council's direct support in March 2014, we needed to adjust our finances by reducing our expenditure and increasing our income. This required a review of the formula which is used to calculate the subscription which each member council pays. As an interim measure for 2014-15, we simply added a 5% across-the-board increase to all subscriptions, which we estimated would result in a £5300 deficit (to be met by our reserves). In reality, we reached the year-end with a slightly more favourable position of a £4982 deficit.

For 2015-16 onwards, we conducted a review and consultation during the summer of 2014, which resulted in agreement at our October 2014 AGM to introduce a formula in which the income which our own Association (ie Northumberland cf National) would need, would be based upon the Council Tax base of each parish, rather than on the number of electors. Because the Government had removed

from the Council Tax base the households who receive Council Tax benefits, this change in the formula created a pattern of 'winners and losers' whereby parishes with equal numbers of electors may pay a higher or lower subscription, depending on the pattern of CT Benefit claimants. To soften the change in the shorter-term, we placed a 'cap' of £250pa on the rise in any subscriptions which, in effect, is being funded by our reserves.

It was with some reluctance that we have introduced this new framework, which was a necessary response to 3 factors:

- A change in the Council Tax Benefits system
- A cessation of the County Council's support for NALC
- The County Council's withholding of grant aid which, the DCLG say, is intended to be passed to all local councils.

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Statement of Income & Expenditure

1 April 2014 - 31 March 2015

<u>2013-2014</u>		<u>2014-2015</u>	<u>2013-2014</u>		<u>2014-2015</u>
£	<u>Expenditure</u>	£	£	<u>Income</u>	£
11,832.35	National Association - Membership Fee	12,086.69	36,170.87	Membership Subscriptions	36,169.91
32,000.00	Community Action - Agency Fee	30,000.00	10,000.00	Northumberland County Council	-
1,133.00	Local Council Review	1,200.00	1,431.00	Local Council Review	1,480.50
873.89	Publications & Printing	34.00	842.02	Publications	38.65
240.00	Meetings & Events	349.00	1,455.00	Training Events	955.00
-	General Activities	-	10.00	General Activities	40.00
-		-	3.08	Bank Interest	3.07
-		-	-	Excess of Expenditure over Income	982.56
3,832.73	Excess of Income over Expenditure	-	-		-
<u>49,911.97</u>		<u>43,669.69</u>	<u>49,911.97</u>		<u>43,669.69</u>

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Balance Sheet at 31 March 2015

<u>2013/2014</u>		<u>2014/2015</u>		
£		£	£	£
	<u>CURRENT ASSETS</u>			
379.17	Sundry Debtors	136.15		
12,004.19	Cash on Deposit	7,311.40	7,447.55	
	<u>LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES</u>			
-	Sundry Creditors	46.75		
-	Receipts in Advance	-	46.75	
12,383.36				7,400.80
	<u>FINANCED BY</u>			
8,550.63	General Reserve - Accumulated Surplus		12,383.36	
3,832.73	- Surplus for Year		-	
-	- Deficit for Year		4,982.56	
12,383.36				7,400.80

MEMBERS 2014-15

Acklington	Embleton	Newton on the Moor &
Acomb	Falstone	Swarland
Adderstone with Lucker	Featherstone	Norham
Allendale	Felton	North Sunderland &
Alnmouth	Ford	Seahouses
Alnwick	Glanton	Nunnykirk
Alwinton	Greenhead	Otterburn
Amble	Haltwhistle	Ovingham
Ancroft	Harbottle	Ovington
Ashington	Hartburn	Pegswood
Bamburgh	Hartleyburn	Plenmeller with Whitfield
Bardon Mill	Hauxley	Ponteland
Bavington	Hazlerigg	Prudhoe
Beadnell	Healey	Rennington
Belford with Middleton	Hebron	Rochester & Byrness
Bellingham	Heddon on the Wall	Rothbury
Belsay	Hedgeley	Sandhoe
Berwick upon Tweed	Hedley on the Hill	Shilbottle
Birtley	Henshaw	Shoreswood
Blakelaw & North Fenham	Hepple	Shotley Low Quarter
Blanchland	Hepscott	Simonburn
Blyth	Hexham	Slaley
Bowden	Hexhamshire	Stamfordham
Branxton	Holy Island	Stannington
Brinkburn & Hesleyhurst	Horncliffe	Tarset & Greystead
Broomhaugh & Riding	Horsley	Thirlwall
Broomley & Stocksfield	Humshaugh	Thropton
Brunswick	Ingram	Tillside
Bywell	Kielder	Togston
Capheaton	Kirkwhelpington	Tritlington & West
Carham	Knarsdale with Kirkhaugh	Chevington
Cartington	Kyloe	Ulgham
Chollerton	Lesbury	Wall
Choppington	Longframlington	Wallington Demesne
Coanwood	Longhirst	Warden
Corbridge	Longhorsley	Wark
Cornhill	Longhoughton	Warkworth
Corsenside	Lowick	West Allen
Cramlington	Lynemouth	West Bedlington
Craster	Matfen	Whalton
Cresswell	Meldon	Whittingham, Callaly &
Dinnington	Melkridge	Alnham
Doddington	Milfield	Whittington
Duddo	Mitford	Whitton & Tosson
East Bedlington	Morpeth	Widdrington Station &
Edlingham	Netherton with Biddlestone	Stobswood
Eglingham	Netherwitton	Widdrington Village
Ellingham	Newbiggin by the Sea	Wooler
Ellington & Linton	Newbrough	Woolsington
Elsdon	Newton by the Sea	Wylam

