

Northumberland Association of Local Councils

County Committee

11 March 2017

NALC Chief Officer's Report

1: Introduction

I have marked in bold, items where I would appreciate direction or a decision from the Committee

Some items may have to follow as I have been on leave and then at a VAT course so I am still catching up.

Glossary

CPRE = Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England

RTPI = Royal Town Planning Institute

SLCC = Society of Local Council Clerks

2: The May 2017 Elections in Northumberland for the Parish, Community and Town Councils

2.1 Advice has been sent to all Member Councils and questions are being dealt with as they arise. The nomination forms are available via

<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Councillors/Involve.aspx#becomingacouncillor>

2.2 I have been working with the County Council's Elections Team with the result that those parishes without a sitting Council will be the subject of the statutory notice of election. If insufficient candidates come forward, then the County Council may commence *Community Governance Reviews* to see if those councils should be legally dissolved and steps taken to arrange for Annual Parish Meetings. That is however a possibility in the future.

2.3 The formal pre-election period ("Purdah") starts on Monday 20 March 2017. I understand that the County Council count will be overnight on

Thursday 4 May. The count for contested Parish, Town and Community Councils will start at 0900 on Saturday 6 May. Both sets of counts will be in Hexham. I am an Election Commission accredited observer and intend to be present for the Saturday Count.

3: Policy Developments

3.1 Access under the Audit Legislation

A Private Member's Bill has started in the House of Commons with a view to giving the media the same rights as electors for access to documents during the six-week inspection period.

The national NALC welcomes the Bill but is monitoring its passage and will be making representations.

3.2 Housing White Paper

The Paper is available via

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/housing-white-paper>

It's 106 pages and is accompanied by various other papers.

The RTPI and CPRE have generally welcomed the White Paper. Contrary to some media speculation, there does not appear to be any weakening of Green Belt protection.

3.3 Parliamentary Boundaries

The Commission are seeking comments by 27 March 2017 on the submissions received in the first round. Full details are at

<https://www.bce2018.org.uk/node/6486>

4: Meetings attended and planned

- Three with Member Councils on specific issues of concern
- The City Council Planning Dept.
- County Council Officers with SLCC representatives
- Archives Consultative Committee (see below)
- The County Council's Town & Parish Liaison Working Group – this was on 2 March and I can give a verbal report. The agenda included
 - i. Medium Term Financial Plan
 - ii. Local Services
 - iii. Devolution (from Central Govt.)
 - iv. Northumberland Core Strategy

5: Issues raised by member councils

These have included

- Elections
- Standards and dispensations
- Employment
- Village Greens

6: Current Training and Transparency

I conducted the following training

- 11 January – Bamburgh – Transparency
- 4 February – Pegswood – Introduction to Local Councils

Advance warning of the April-September 2017 Training Sessions has been given and booking should be open by the time of this meeting.

I continue to press the County Council for co-ordinated training.

I have agreement in principle from the City Planners to provide planning training for Local Councils within the City. I suspect that some of the Northumberland Local Councils who border the City may find it of interest.

7: Website

At the date of preparation of this report, 29 Local Councils have signed up for the Portal. Our initial target was for 20 so this is extremely pleasing. Using the links on the County Council's list of Local Councils, it seems to reveal 38 with no website and 4 with just links to Northumberland Life. A random check of those with websites listed shows a number which have not been updated for some time. I therefore anticipate that a major part of my work in 2017/2018 will be to engage with Councils to ensure they comply with the transparency requirements.

8: The national NALC

Please see the report from Cllr Francis

9: The Councillor Census

My intention to circulate this during January came unstuck. It's planned for March and I aim to have it underway by the time of this meeting

10: Code of Conduct

A report on a prospective draft Model Code will follow.

The County Council are floating the concept of just one model Register of Interests form for both County and Local Councillors. There does seem to be some merit in the suggestion but unfortunately Councillors who serve on two Councils will still have to submit two forms.

Comments are requested please

11: Brexit

I have nothing to report which specifically relates to local councils but I am continuing to monitor various websites.

12: Archives Consultative Committee

I attended the Archives Consultative Committee at Woodhorn. The Archives are moving back under the control of the County Council but remaining at Woodhorn.

I envisage working with the staff on issues relating to electronic archiving for our member Councils,

13: VAT

This has been raised on a number of occasions. Following consultation with the Chairman and Hon. Treasurer, I attended an SLCC course on 28 February. I shall be issuing guidance to Member Councils with particular regard to

- When a Council should register for VAT as the usual turnover threshold does not apply
- When a Council should charge VAT for services to the community
- The need to only reclaim VAT for appropriate expenditure
- The ways in which Local Councils can assist community organisations
- HMRC's enforcement practice

Whilst most of the smaller Councils are unlikely to be affected, there may be issues for those Councils with income other than the precept. Fortunately, allotments and cemeteries are broadly treated as being outside the scope of VAT. I aim to have a draft note ready by the Committee but this may not be possible as there are more complexities than I had anticipated.

14: Business Plan

14.1 I am minded to prepare a short draft business plan setting out the aims and objectives for the Association. It would enable the allocation of scarce resources and give targets to measure and demonstrate our worth to Member Councils.

14.2 I would welcome a few volunteers who would be prepared to look and comment on initial drafts please

15: Admin Issues

I am still working on devising electronic storage for key advice and casework given to individual local councils and an electronic way of time recording. It is proving more complex than I had envisaged. My attempts to find some free software have been unsuccessful so far.

I may end up with manually compiled and collated sheets giving a broad indication.

Stephen Rickitt

NALC Chief Officer

3 March 2017