

Northumberland Association of Local Councils

County Committee

14 January 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

2: Election Recharges in Northumberland for the May 2017 Parish and Town Council Elections

2.1 A joint training session with the County's Elections Manager was held on Friday 16 December 2016. During this it became apparent that the recent email regarding the re-charge of election costs indicated a greater change in our understanding than was previously thought.

2.2 The amount sought in 2013 by the County Council was the extra costs relating to the contested Parish & Town Council Elections over and above the costs they incurred for the County Council Elections held at the same time.

2.3. Whilst there will be no recharges for uncontested elections, it now seems that the County Council will be seeking Parish & Town Councils to bear a greater share of the costs for contested elections.

2.4 The apparent rationale is the change in the wording of The Charter agreed in 2014 (my emphasis)

Northumberland County Council will: • Consult T&PCs of proposed changes to service provision and on budget implications in a timely manner; • Provide information to support T&PCs in determining their precepts; • *Meet the administration and staff costs associated with ordinary elections and Neighbourhood Plan referendum;* • *Provide a detailed breakdown of election costs, to which T&PCs are expected to contribute.*

Town and Parish Councils will: • Provide precept information by the mutually agreed deadline; • *Contribute to the costs of any T&PC*

election that is held in conjunction with an ordinary election; • Be responsible for the full cost of any T&PC by-election within their parish.

2.5 Firm proposals have not yet been received but the Committee may agree that an urgent meeting should be sought with the Leader of the County Council.

2.6 One further aspect caused me concern. If a Council does not have sufficient valid nominations to form a quorum, then the second call for nominations will be treated as a by-election. Thus the full cost will be the responsibility of the Council.

2.7 The Committee are therefore recommended to

- a) Affirm its view that Parish & Town Councils should only be expected to pay the extra costs caused by contested elections being held on the same day as the County Council elections**
- b) To seek an urgent meeting with the Leader of the County Council**
- c) To agree the delegation for that meeting**

3: Policy Developments

3.1 Council Tax Referendums

The Government has announced that the provisions will not apply to Local Councils for FY 2017/2018 but that they will monitor the rate of increases. The spectre of "capping" therefore remains for future years.

3.2 National Affiliation Fees

The Paper sent out by the national NALC is enclosed. Six substantive questions are posed – *potential responses are shown*

1. Should NALC keep to the current affiliation fee system of a fixed charge per elector with the maximum fee as currently agreed? *Yes-stability is important*
2. Should the maximum fee be changed? *Yes – otherwise the larger Councils may withdraw*
3. Should there be a minimum charge in place? *No – The very small Councils may withdraw if a minimum level is set.*

4. If there is a minimum fee, at what level should it be set? *Notwithstanding the strong opposition to a minimum level in any event, the fee must be nominal.*
5. Should we adopt the Smooth Transition Method as described in this leaflet? *No – it introduces a further level of unnecessary complexity*
6. If we were to adopt the smooth transition method, at what level should the minimum and maximum fee levels be set at? *The current maximum level is appropriate and should only be increased for inflation.*
7. Any other information or views you wish the task & finish group to receive

The Committee are asked to consider and agree a response

4: Meetings attended and planned

- 16 November – The Councillor Commission – a successful and hopefully useful contribution to their deliberations
- 30 November – County Council Officers regarding the Town and Parish Council Conference – it was emphasised that the reduction in the amount of general liaison is driven by decreasing staff resources
- 7 December – Northumberland SLCC's AGM

5: Issues raised by member councils

These have included

- Standards and dispensations
- Co-options

6: Current Training and Transparency

I conducted the following Transparency Training

- Acklington – 22 November
- Greenhead - 23 November
- Allendale – 5 December

As mentioned above, a joint training session was held on 16 December for clerks on the Election process and Purdah. Notes are in the course of preparation for distribution. They include the timetable with dates.

I shall also be sending out a reminder for Councils to consider making arrangements for urgent business for the period between a Council's existing Councillors ceasing to hold office and the first meeting of the "new" Council. I shall forward copies to the Committee.

A further Transparency Training session is scheduled for Wednesday 11 January in Bamburgh and an Introduction to Local Councils is being arranged for Saturday 4 February,

Whilst I am leaving Development Control training to the three local planning authorities, I will be pressing them to arrange that training and hopefully on dates which do not clash with our training. There may also be the potential for TPC Members to attend training sessions for the principal authorities.

I attach a draft programme for the summer and autumn and would welcome any thoughts on the distribution and type of courses.

7: Website

The test pages on the Portal were well received and I anticipate that the invitation to Councils to enrol will be dispatched by the time the Committee meets. Work has started on revamping the general website. The test site remains open at present and can be accessed via:

<http://nalc.communityitacademy.org/whalton/>

8: The national NALC

Please see the report from Cllr Francis

9: Committee Vice-Chairmen

The current constitution provides for a three-year term of office and thus new Vice-Chairmen should have been appointed in November. **The Committee may wish to consider whether to seek new nominees now or whether to (technically) be in breach for the remainder of the year?**

10: The Councillor Census

My intention is to circulate this during January.

11: Brexit

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

12: Archives Consultative Committee

I have been invited to join the Archives Consultative Committee being re-established at Woodhorn. Given that member Councils are encouraged to deposit records at the County Record Office, it seemed sensible to accept following consultation with the Chairman.

13: 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.

14: Discretionary Business Rate Relief

This was raised at the November meeting and especially the potential for a principal Council to withdraw the relief.

It is possible for this relief to be withdrawn, although from a look on-line, most billing authorities indicate that they will give at least one financial year's notice.

I enclose a paper prepared by a number of organisations working with charities which sets out the problems and indicates the variety of different approaches. It is available on line at

<http://www.cfg.org.uk/Policy/~media/Files/Policy/Latest%20policy%20updates/Business%20Rates%20Review%20-%20Joint%20Response%20NCVO%20CFG%20CTG%20IoF%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

_Stephen Rickitt

NALC Chief Officer

5 January 2017