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**NORTHUMBERLAND
ASSOCIATION
OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

**ANNUAL REPORT
2009-2010**

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 enable s 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 be 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 appointed each autumn at our Annual General Meeting.

**NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION
OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

2009 – 2010

President
Mr Jim Rudd

Vice President
Cllr David Woodard

Hon Treasurer
Miss G Turner

Hon Auditor
Mr Richard Slater

COUNTY COMMITTEE

Cllr B Jackson (Chair)
Mrs M Anderton
Cllr A Bowlas
Cllr R Butler
Cllr P Cowey
Cllr N Dunn
Cllr C Forster
Cllr T Hood
Cllr R Macfarlane
Cllr B Pickering
Cllr T Robson
Cllr Mrs H Shaw
Cllr A Wallace
Cllr R Watson

Longhirst
Broomhaugh & Riding
Berwick upon Tweed
North Bedlington
Ponteland
Glanton
Woolsington
Felton
Sandhoe
Cramlington
Hexham
Ulgham
East Bedlington
Seaton Valley

As at March 2010
Secretary: David Francis

Chairman's Foreword

This past year has been exceptionally busy for the NALC County Committee.

The continued development of the new Unitary Authority has meant a plethora of changes which have affected many aspects of Parish/Town Council working and thinking.

Northumberland County Council had been set the task of making considerable savings and with the election of the new Coalition Government more changes and savings have been placed upon them. This process is still continuing and NALC is continually feeding Parish Council views into the system to try and ensure that any decisions made take account of the needs of the people represented by Parish and Town Councils.

Those savings and changes have meant that NALC's involvement within the overall framework of local government has been put 'under the spotlight'. The County Committee (CC) has met far more frequently than in the past in an attempt to keep up with the pace of the changes which are still continuing.

It has been a pleasure to welcome to the CC representatives from Parish and Town Councils from the South East of the County. They have brought a welcome change of emphasis to many discussions along with a considerable depth of experience in local politics.

One of the major tasks the CC has undertaken this year has been, in conjunction with NCC, a complete review of the Charter which of course came into being before the SE Parish Councils were formed. This review is still ongoing and again NALC is attempting to make this a flow from the 'bottom up' to ensure the Charter is a true representation of what is needed at 'grass roots' level.

The CC has also recommended a change to the formation of the CC to try and ensure that all of the Parish/Town Councils are better represented. I would commend this change to you.

David Francis has again put in a hard year, working long hours to ensure the new Parish Councils in the SE got off the ground as smoothly as possible. My thanks to him and his staff.

Currently working within CAN on behalf of NALC is Norman Dunn who I would particularly like to thank for his efforts while on the CC and his ideas and commitment since joining the 'staff'. He is setting up a separate NALC web site which is a continuation of the efforts the CC has made to ensure better and more effective communication with their members.

I hope that in the future NALC goes from strength to strength in ensuring its members are well represented at all levels and in all aspects of their work and service to their communities.

Bob Jackson
Chairman

1. Introduction

This was a year of major changes, with the creation of a new unitary principal authority for Northumberland, the establishment of eight new parish and town councils, a range of new but eleventh-hour Government initiatives, and a review of NALC's own organisation and activities. The following pages give an overview of what happened.

2. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) – overview

The new Northumberland County Council came into existence on 1 April 2009, through the merger of the six predecessor district and borough councils with the 'old' county Council. Despite the disappointment of a large number of people who had hoped for (and supported) a reorganisation into two unitary authorities, LGR presented an opportunity to create improved and more-efficient services and practices, drawing upon the best experiences of the predecessor authorities. Given the 'distance' of the authority from individual communities, it was clear that a close working-relationship with all local councils would be imperative.

To some extent, these opportunities were overtaken by a succession of difficulties:

- A tightening economic recession, and the imposition by H M Government of public expenditure cuts, on a large and growing scale
- The difficulty for the politically 'hung council' to manage and plan the new organisation with any degree of confidence and certainty
- The significant loss of valued and experienced staff, which depressed staff morale and significantly affected the capacity of the organisation to produce the 'transformational' improvements which had been expected
- The lack of a clear and co-ordinated outlook towards local communities, and the perpetuation of silo-working in many parts of the new structure.

There were some very good examples of new initiatives, which we report on below, but overall local councils found that rather too much of the year was spent in a climate of uncertainty, over the new authority's policies, priorities, practices and attitudes. There is still some way to go to ensure a decent working relationship with our sector.

3. Electoral Review

Despite the elections for the new unitary authority proceeding eleven months before LGR, the Boundary Committee of the Electoral Commission announced its intention to review the number of seats and also the division (ward) boundaries of the new authority. We supported NCC's own case for an increase in the number of seats from 67 to 79 but to no avail. On the proposed new 'map' of divisions, we successfully challenged the creation of an unreasonably elongated division which would have covered such disconnected parishes as Elsdon and Hepscoth, but we did not sway the review from the creation of the only two-member division in Northumberland, covering Alnwick Town.

4. Code of Conduct and Standards

The loss of the six former district councils required the formation of a single new Standards Committee, to administer the Code of Conduct and Ethical Framework for both the County Council and all local councils in the county. We assisted the Committee to recruit the requisite parish representatives, in two phases: in the weeks leading to LGR, and again in autumn 2009. The parish representatives are: Eileen Burt (Prudhoe), David Buckle (Cornhill) Pauline Baird (Craster) and Peter Lovatt (Blyth).

Meanwhile, we contributed to a Government review of the Code of Conduct. In contrast to the 1990 and 2001 versions, we felt that the current (2007) version unduly constrained councillors from effectively representing their council on outside bodies and partnerships, and a councillor's ability to report-back to a council meeting about the affairs of the outside body is now severely restricted. So far, the Government has not made any alteration to the 2007 code.

5. Northumberland's Strategic Partnership

Together, LGR and regional development agency One North East's withdrawal of support for sub-regional partnerships, required a reappraisal of the NSP's role, structure and operations. In brief, the scope for partnership work remained as strong as before, but NSP's role as a commissioner and manager of regeneration programmes ceased altogether, and of course it no longer needed to be the mediator between the seven predecessor principal authorities. We supported the proposals for the new structure: of a strategic Board (composed of councillors, trustees and other non-executive people), an Executive (primarily, the chief officers of partner organisations), a subject-focussed sub-structure of thematic partnerships, and a geographical sub-structure of area partnerships.

Staffing shortages at County Hall in the lead-up to LGR meant that different bodies led in the development of different NSP structures, and we were particularly concerned at the disparate approach to the creation of the three area partnerships – for the North, the West and the South East. The uncertainty and inadequacy of the engagement process in some areas has continued to cause frustration for some local councils.

Nevertheless, we were happy to support local councils' participation in the new NSP structures, and to arrange a series of appointments and elections to key positions, as follows:

NSP Board: Ray Butler (South East); Tony Hood (North); Rob MacFarlane (West). N.B. Jeff Reid represents local councils and NCC on the NSP Leadership Group.

NSP Executive: David Francis

Area Partnerships: Ray Butler and Brian Richmond (South East); Tony Hood (North); Rob MacFarlane, John Clark, Robin Ramsay, Pat Reid, Pete Saunders, Adrian Hinchcliffe, Terry Robson and Eileen Burt (West).

Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership: Gillian Turner

6. Community Forums

As part of the NSP's Natural Communities initiative, the original concept of a community forum was to be a means of collaboration and communication between a variety of defined interests at the relatively local level of a single town or cluster of villages. Thus, community forums would typically include all of the local councils, youth groups, disability groups, environmental interests, service-providers such as GPs and schools, and so on. They would be a means of making things happen and addressing the sorts of issues which could not satisfactorily be tackled at a more-local level.

Party political disagreements within County Hall, together with growing ambiguities about the role and composition of these forums, meant that the deadline of December 2008 for the complete coverage of Northumberland by community forums was not met, and considerable delays in many localities led to increased misgivings, tensions and disillusionment. We supported the original concept, and we still see the value in bringing together a cluster of local councils, with a range of other service-providers and specialist interest groups. However, where they have become general residents' groups, and where they appear to duplicate a local council agenda, we have had misgivings about their value and their sustainability. For the 27 (or thereabouts) defined

'localities' (formerly, 'belonging communities'), by the end of the year a number of community forums had yet to be formed.

7. Charter

The Northumberland Charter for Local Councils is a document, mutually developed and agreed by the County Council and NALC, which sets out the respective roles of the two tiers of council in the county, and the range of relationships between them. Its provisions were based very largely on the findings of a questionnaire survey which we undertook in 2007, with subsequent input from local councils and principal authorities via a consultation process during Summer-Autumn 2008. The Charter is developmental: it aims to improve local councils' activities and it sets standards; it is not just a description of the 'lowest common denominator'. The Charter was largely drafted by David Francis, and its compilation was overseen by a County Councillor steering group chaired by Cllr Arthur Pegg. It was adopted by the new County Council at their first meeting, on 1 April 2009.

Implementation of the Charter over the course of the year was less than consistent, and this was initially held-back while the new Council bedded-down. Consultation arrangements varied across the authority. After initial hiccups, the Development Management and Local Development Framework consultations worked well, as did a range of ad-hoc consultations eg on the Flood Plan, Car Parking policy, playing field strategy, byelaws, etc. Less satisfactory was the almost complete lack of consultation on far-reaching budget proposals, which involved up to £30million worth of cuts or increases in charges (which eventually reduced to £16 million).

The Charter also sought to create a consistent approach to service-responsibilities, such that local councils would normally be expected to provide the usual range of very-local services: allotments, play areas, bus shelters, local celebrations, seasonal lighting, etc. For some local councils, this involved a transfer of responsibility and ownership from the new authority: a process which began regrettably late during the year, but which was well-supported by key NCC staff in the latter part of the year.

The Charter, and the developing relationship with the new authority depended heavily on effective working relationships with a wide range of staff, and with the increasing use of ICT. To our frustration some senior staff and councillors opposed the provision to local councils of information re key contacts within the Council, until late October.

Also, the withdrawal of the County Councils offer of support to help local councils with ICT has frustrated our objective of achieving 100 per cent access to ICT for communication within the local government sector.

8. Changing our organisation

Although NALC is a small and simply-structured organisation, it is important that we take stock of ourselves from time to time, and make adjustments accordingly. During the year, we began a programme of adjustments and improvements which included:

- Improving and widening our communication with member councils, using ICT and a bigger distribution list including council members
- Ensuring a better geographical 'spread' of representation on our County Committee
- Reviewing the frequency and location of our committee meetings
- Developing new support services for councils, to meet future needs especially concerning systems and ICT
- Organising local meetings for clusters of local councils
- Convening a specific forum for larger councils
- Developing and operating a 'quality system' for us and other county associations of local councils.

In the latter half of the year, we conducted a questionnaire survey of all local councils in our area. This was initially assisted by volunteer Mike Slaughter, and was completed by Robin Francis. The findings, based on a 79% response rate provided useful insight into the 'state of the sector', as well as giving councils' views on a variety of issues and opportunities.

9. Advice and training

Probably the main reason why most councils are members of the Association is for the expert advice, information and training which we provide.

It provides councils with the peace-of-mind that they are acting in an appropriate and lawful way, and it readily addresses some of the key risks in each council's risk management process.

During the year, we ran 12 training events, for new councils and new clerks, on accounts/audit, cemetery management, allotments and town and country planning. We also ran seven tutorial sessions to support clerks who are pursuing the CiLCA qualification (Certificate in Local council Administration).

We provided numerous pieces of advice to individual councils, on topics ranging from the Code of Conduct and community engagement, to VAT reclamation, grant aid policies, conflict resolution, village greens management and public rights of way. We considerably increased the frequency of our circulation of briefings by email, and we were able to open-up access to the Members' Area of the National ALC's website.

NALC thereby provided a wide range of support on legal, organisational and procedural topics. Alongside this, our colleagues in CAN provided advice and other support to local councils on a range of community-orientated topics: for example, on buildings management, festivals, renewable energy, flood mitigation and youth work.

10. Supporting new local councils

Although the pattern of local councils across our area has remained fairly static for many decades, new councils have been created from time to time: for example, Morpeth, Blakelaw/North Fenham and Berwick. However, April 2009 saw a step-change, through the creation of eight new local councils in the South-East of the county, which nearly doubled the 'parished population' of Northumberland, and meant that no part of the county was left unparished.

As an extension to the professional and administrative services which CAN provides to NALC, we provided an initial support and development service for the early days of these new councils. David Francis acted as the clerk of each new council, and Sue Finch (Town Clerk of Berwick) was appointed for a period of eight months to undertake much of the organisation and support. The period from April to early June was largely preparatory: liaising with the new unitary authority and with members of the public and community groups; undertaking basic risk-assessment and putting insurance in place; making temporary arrangements for the administration of the new councils' allotments; ensuring that NCC policies and strategies took account of the new councils; and so on. Following the elections in June, we helped the new councils to put basic systems and budgets in place, to develop their relationships with their communities and with other bodies, and to recruit their own dedicated staffing.

Elsewhere in our area, during the year there has continued to be a trickle of interest in creating new local councils: for example, in the Chapel Park area of North-West Newcastle. To help promote and support further parishing, we worked with our opposite numbers in the Durham and the Cleveland Associations, on a proposal to appoint a development officer, who would focus primarily on the unparished areas of Tyne and Wear and Teesside.

11. Finance

The audited accounts for 2009-10 show that we made a modest surplus of £210, on a total expenditure of nearly £25k. Comparisons with our financial activity in the previous year need first to filter-out the 'one-off' item of income and expenditure of £13k where we were able to make Government money available to support a number of community-led parish plans. This aside, there was an underlying increase from £19k to £25k in our 'core-activity': a reflection of the increase in membership later in the year, arising from the creation of new local councils in South-East Northumberland.

As before, the majority of our income was from members' subscriptions and the majority of expenditure was our contribution to the National Association and to CAN (Community Action Northumberland) for their professional support.

We are very grateful to CAN's Finance Team and to our honorary Auditor, Richard Slater.

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Statement of Income & Expenditure

1 April 2009 - 31 March 2010

<u>2008-2009</u>		<u>2009-2010</u>	<u>2008-2009</u>		<u>2009-2010</u>
£	<u>Expenditure</u>	£	£	<u>Income</u>	£
6,952.44	National Association - Membership Fee	7,716.17	16,291.83	Membership Subscriptions	22,017.17
9,500.00	Community Action - Agency Fee	15,000.00	-	-	-
1,630.69	Local Council Review	1,411.20	1,968.00	Local Council Review	1,834.50
-	Publications & Printing	59.05	97.64	Publications	80.90
-	Meetings & Events	286.00	343.00	Training Events	510.00
120.00	General Activities	-	150.08	General Activities	236.48
-		-	307.12	Bank Interest	4.11
13,100.00	Parish Plans	-	13,100.00	Parish Plans	-
-		-	-	Excess of Expenditure over Income	-
954.54	Excess of Income over Expenditure	210.74	-	-	-
<u>32,257.67</u>		<u>24,683.16</u>	<u>32,257.67</u>		<u>24,683.16</u>

NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Balance Sheet at 31 March 2010

<u>2008/2009</u>		<u>2009/2010</u>		
£		£	£	£
	<u>CURRENT ASSETS</u>			
52.24	Sundry Debtors	1,917.09		
7,963.73	Cash on Deposit	<u>6,595.62</u>	8,512.71	
	<u>LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES</u>			
-	Sundry Creditors	286.00		
-	Receipts in Advance	<u>-</u>	<u>286.00</u>	
8,015.97				8,226.71
	<u>FINANCED BY</u>			
7,061.43	General Reserve - Accumulated Surplus		8,015.97	
954.54	- Surplus for Year		210.74	
-	- Deficit for Year		<u>-</u>	
8,015.97				8,226.71

SIGNED



Dr D R Francis (Secretary)

SIGNED



Ms G Turner (Treasurer)

SIGNED



Mr R Slater (Hon Auditor)

Acklington
Acomb
Adderstone with Lucker
Allendale
Alnmouth
Alnwick
Alwinton
Amble
Ancroft
Ashington
Bamburgh
Bardon Mill
Bavington
Beadnell
Belford with Middleton
Bellingham
Belsay
Berwick upon Tweed
Birtley
Blakelaw & North Fenham
Blanchland
Blyth
Bowsden
Branxton
Brinkburn & Hesleyhurst
Broomhaugh & Riding
Broomley & Stocksfield
Brunswick
Bywell
Capheaton
Carham
Cartington
Chollerton
Coanwood
Corbridge
Cornhill
Corsenside
Cramlington
Craster
Cresswell
Dinnington
Doddington
Duddo
East Bedlington
East Chevington
Edlingham
Eglingham
Ellingham
Ellington & Linton
Elsdon
Embleton
Falstone
Featherstone
Felton
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
Newbiggin by the Sea
Newbrough
Newton by the Sea
Newton on the Moor &
Swarland
Norham
North Bedlington
North Gosforth
North Sunderland &
Seahouses
Nunnykirk
Ord
Otterburn
Ovingham
Ovington

Pegswood
Plenmeller with Whitfield
Ponteland
Prudhoe
Rennington
Rochester & Byrness
Rothbury
Sandhoe
Seaton Valley
Shilbottle
Shoreswood
Shotley Low Quarter
Simonburn
Slaley
Stamfordham
Stannington
Tasset & Greystead
Thirlwall
Thirston
Thropton
Tillside
Togston
Tritlington & West
Chevington
Ulgham
Wall
Wallington Demesne
Warden
Wark
Warkworth
West Allen
West Bedlington
Whalton
Whittingham, Callaly &
Alnham
Whittington
Widdrington Station &
Stobswood
Widdrington Village
Wooler
Woolsington
Wylam