

**NORTHUMBERLAND
ASSOCIATION
OF
LOCAL COUNCILS**

ANNUAL REPORT

2007-2008

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NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

2007 – 2008

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Mr Jim Rudd

Vice President

Cllr David Woodard

Hon Treasurer

Peter Basnett

Hon Auditor

Richard Slater

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Cllr J Geggie
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Miss G Turner
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Longhirst
Ford
Widdrington Station
East Chevington
Hepscott
Glanton
Woolsington
Cresswell
Amble
Longhirst
Ford
Ulgham
Morpeth
Ponteland

As at March 2008:

Secretary: David Francis

Chairman's Foreword 2007/08

This year (2007-08) has been an extremely busy one for Parish Councils. The work on the implementation of the new Unitary Authority for Northumberland has caused us to stop and consider how things have worked in the past and how we would like to see them change and develop in the future. There have been many consultation documents to read and meetings to attend. All of this has happened whilst also carrying on normal Parish Council meetings and business. It has been hard work, but this is our opportunity to 'get it right'; of course there are bound to be some adjustments that will need to be made, but our hard work now should stand Parish Councils in good stead for the future.

Speaking of Parish Councils, it was with great pleasure that I heard that so many new Parish and Town Councils are to be set up in South East Northumberland and also that the new Berwick Town Council is now established. This is a great step forward for the Parish Council movement, making us all stronger, as the whole of Northumberland will be parished by April 2009.

Are you well connected? Many Parish Councils now have access to the internet – although for some of us broadband is still more a wish than a reality! It does mean that this year NALC has been able to reach more Parish Councils easily, quickly and cheaply with more information than we were able to send out previously. I am sure we have all benefited by this and that even more Parish Councils have been able to access the services that NALC provides. There are still one or two Parish Councils that do not have this facility, so I would like to encourage all Parishes to 'get connected' as soon as possible.

NALC has provided training opportunities for new Clerks, Councillors and Chairmen this year, and there has been 1 session on websites – something I think will be in great demand in the future. Hopefully, next year NALC may provide more ITC training, from the most basic to more advanced. Ideally, I would like to see some co-ordination of computer purchase and maintenance for Parish Councils throughout the NALC area. Providing training will continue to be an important part of NALC's role in the future, and will probably become even more in demand as more Parish Councils take on a wider role within their community.

NALC has continued, this year, to support Parish Councils and communities to develop Parish Plans for their areas. This has been a very popular activity, and has proved interesting and informative. One side effect of this has been to encourage community groups to work much closer with Parish Councils. This closer co-operative style of working will become even more important in the future with the setting up of local community fora.

NALC could not operate effectively without its close connection to CAN. I would like to thank David Francis, our secretary, and all staff for their work on our behalf this year. I would also like to thank those members who turn out to County Committee meetings throughout the year regardless of weather, and most especially all Parish Councillors and Clerks in the NALC area for the valuable work you do on behalf of your communities.

Valerie Seddon
Chairman NALC

1. Raising our game

Last year we were pleased to report on the significant improvement which we made to deliver an enhanced range of opportunities to parish councils, with DEFRA Social and Community Programme financial help. Initial improvements included:

- Additional advice and funding for parish-led community plans
- New training events
- The support for parish council networking, and working in clusters
- A programme to boost parish council take-up of qualifications and quality standards

This work has continued to develop. In March/April 2007 we conducted a self-completion questionnaire survey of all parish councils, to probe their plans for the future, their involvement in community-led planning, their use of ICT, their aspirations for working with a reorganised unitary local authority structure and their attitudes towards co-operating with their neighbouring parish councils. The findings of this survey have helped us not only to plan our activities, but also to negotiate new opportunities for parish councils with the principal authorities.

During the year we ran training events, as follows:

New Councillors x 6
New Clerks x 2
New Chairmen x 2
Accounts and Audit x 1
Websites x 1

We also initiated (and have continued to support) two groups of parish clerks and other students who are pursuing the qualification (Certificate in Local Council Administration) CILCA.

For some years, we have been concerned about the problems of communication, networking and co-operation among parish councils and with the principal authorities due to variations in the availability and use of computers and other ICT facilities. Encouraged by the findings of our survey (above), we took the step of compiling an email address list of the 90-odd percent of parish councils who are now ICT-connected, and we have started to use this for more urgent mass communication, alongside our continued use of hard copies and the postal service. In close co-operation with CAN (Community Action Northumberland) we also

arranged to supply second-hand personal computers to a number of councils.

2. Local Government Reorganisation

At the start of the year, it was still very uncertain whether the Government would proceed with their plans to reorganise the 2 tiers of principal authorities (counties and districts) into a unitary structure and, if so, whether they would create one or two unitary councils to cover Northumberland. As we reported last year, the single unitary proposal was more 'parish-council-friendly', but we also recognised that many of our members supported the creation of two unitary authorities, which they felt were 'closer to the people'.

In July the Government announced the intention to move to a unitary authority on 1 April 2009, which has led to a great deal of planning and 'visioning', to ensure that the new authority not only successfully emerges from its 7 predecessors, but also is better in a variety of ways. We have been working closely with this process: David Francis is a member of the Joint Implementation Team, and is taking a lead on helping the new authority to put in place an appropriate framework of policies, procedures and relationships for parish and town councils. A new Charter is being drafted, which will commit the authority to greater consultation, partnership working, service-devolution and support for parish councils; and which will encourage parish councils to 'raise their game' in engaging with and representing their wider community.

The LGR process has also encouraged the residents and district councils of un-parished South-East Northumberland to think about parish councils. As a result, we have been working closely with Wansbeck District Council and we will be working closely with Blyth Valley Borough Council, to create parish councils throughout the area on 1 April 2009. Therefore, potentially, in 2009 all parts of Northumberland will be parished.

Attention is also being given in the LGR process to a wide range of incidental issues of direct relevance to parish councils, for example:

- The handling of council tax precepts for all parish councils
- The Code of Conduct and single Standards Committee
- Consulting over planning applications.

3. Clustering and Community Forums

During the year we helped the NSP (Northumberland Strategic Partnership) to finalise the 'map' of areas on which new governance and consultative arrangements would be based, relating both to the county-wide Sustainable Community Strategy/Local Area Agreement and (as has since become clear) to the new Northumberland unitary authority.

The planning of this 'Natural Communities' initiative had started in late 2005, and parish councils had been consulted and involved since early 2006. New area committees and area partnerships would be created, based on the North, the West and the South-East of Northumberland. In

addition, some 26 or 27 Belonging Community areas were agreed, following significant input from many parish councils. We subsequently contributed to the thinking about the role, resourcing, composition and operation of the community forums which would be developed for each of these areas. There was considerable interest and support from parish councils and, in anticipation of the format of these forums, in various parts of the county parish councils began to meet in clusters both to explore common issues and to develop mutual support.

NALC has been working closely with the NSP, CAN and principal authorities to ensure that these forums can be an effective voice for the wide variety of needs and interests in each locality.

4. Tyneside

During the year, Newcastle City Council developed a keener and more supportive interest in parish councils, than we had ever seen before, since the City first 'inherited' 5 parish councils in 1974, as a result of a boundary change in the Castle Ward area. Local controversy within Blakelaw and North Fenham parish had resulted in an almost-complete change of councillors at the May 2007 election, and also a change in staffing. The City Council initiated a scrutiny review into the circumstances, which quickly developed into a more forward-looking review into 'how can we work more effectively with the current, and any new, parish councils?' As a result, a new Charter has been prepared and adopted, between the 2 tiers, and this will be supported by greater communication and partnership working.

In North Tyneside Borough, there are currently no parish councils. However, there is now growing interest in the Whitley Bay area, and we have supported the Chamber of Trade and interested residents to sound-out local opinion about the possibility of a new parish council there.

5. New opportunities for parish councils

In partnership with CAN (Community Action Northumberland) we continued to offer grants to support parish councils and their communities in the compilation of strategies and plans at a parish level. Various called community appraisals, parish plans and community-led plans, these initiatives have been extremely important in helping communities to influence decisions affecting their future, as well as in identifying opportunities for new action and in improving relationships between the different groups and interests within the community. Where these initiatives have worked best, parish councils have shown enthusiasm and support, while encouraging participation by a wide range of people in the management of the process; and the subsequent implementation of the proposals.

We also worked closely with One North East and other regional partners to try to ensure that the new European development programmes would be open to parish councils. Arguably the most promising of these programmes is LEADER, which is concerned with the promotion of local co-operation and of 'bottom-up' approaches to rural development. Much of rural Northumberland is within one of 3 LEADER areas (Uplands, Coast and Lowlands, or North Pennine Dales). A number of parish council people are involved in the Local Action Groups, and there will be opportunities to secure EU and DEFRA funding for parish council projects.

LEADER is a component of the wider RDPE (Rural Development Programme – England), which covers much of the North-East. However, it now appears that the non-LEADER elements of RDPE will be so restricted that parish councils will not be able to contribute in any tangible way to the RDPE's objective of Sustainable Communities. In contrast, the new regional ERDF programme is very focussed geographically, mostly on areas of great social and economic disadvantage, but we continue to monitor developments for new possible opportunities for local communities, including parish councils.

6. Compliance issues

In previous years we had responded to consultations over reviews to the Councillors' Code of Conduct, a new version of which was eventually introduced in April 2007, in a hurry, shortly before the May elections. We welcomed the retention of the distinction between personal and prejudicial interests, the removal of the obligation to report even very minor transgressions, and the new clarity over the provisions re harassment, bringing the council into disrepute etc. However, we were disappointed with new provisions which now make it more difficult for councillors to report back to their council on issues concerning partnerships and other groups on which they represent their council. Nevertheless, we publicised the new arrangements, and we continued to advise councils and the public regarding the Code.

We also responded to a Government consultation on the 'charging regime' relating to the supply of paperwork to the public on request, under the Freedom of Information Act. We were concerned that the general obligation on parish councils to meet most of the cost, without reimbursement, was potentially punitive. However, we have also advised many parish councils on ways of lawfully being able to recover their costs, in most circumstances.

In addition, we continued to promote good practice in relation to the Accounts and Audit regime. This mostly involved the provision of training and other guidance to parish clerks and other Responsible Financial Officers, but we also acted on behalf of the External Auditor in working on some cases where there were some particular compliance difficulties.

7. Parish elections

The parish elections took place in May 2007, and we provided a range of support, including:

- Briefing and publicity material to encourage new candidates to come forward
- Advice re the filling of any further vacancies which were not filled by the election process
- Training for new members and chairmen
- Guidance for the handful of parish councils which found themselves temporarily inquorate, for several months, due to a severe shortfall of candidates

Overall, the proportion of elections which proceeded to a poll was similar to previous elections: about 20%

In the months following the elections, we ran training events as reported earlier.

8. Finance

The underlying picture for 2007-08 was of income and expenditure at a level of about £18k. This was, however, inflated due to the handling of over £10k of designated funds relating to parish plans and to belonging community forums, and to a larger-than-normal income from bank interest, due largely to the scale of the designated funds being held on bank deposit. Our general reserve at the year-end, including the surplus arising from the income and expenditure account, was £7061, which equates to 4-5 months of normal financial activity.

Our main source of income continues to be from members' subscriptions, which are calculated on a formula basis which is reviewed each year at the AGM. As with previous years, most of the normal expenditure is in the form of contributions to CAN and to the National Association of Local Councils.

We greatly appreciate the administrative support which we receive from CAN's staff, along with the services of our auditor, Richard Slater.