

Northumberland Association of Local Councils

County Committee

19 March 2021

NALC Chief Officer's Report

Agenda Item 4: Coronavirus

The road map for easing restrictions in England has been published. It seems clear that the dates and targets should not be regarded as set in stone.

There are some practical issues for Member Councils at least the power to hold digital meetings lapses on 6 May 2021.

The road map may be read as permitting face-to-face meetings from Mid-May but there is a conflict with the need in Northumberland to hold the annual parish council meeting on or before 24 May 2021. Pressure is being put on MHCLG to extend the provision. In addition, there is a looming application to the High Court for a declaration that existing pre-covid legislation permits digital council meetings.

This is an area where changes and/or guidance may well change.

Agenda Item 5: Elections – May 2021

The elections will proceed on 6 May 2021 for Northumberland's Local Councils, the County Council and the Police & Crime Commissioner. The formal start of the election period has been slightly brought forward to Friday 26 March 2021, when purdah will take effect. All clerks in Northumberland should have received emails with the nomination papers.

Editions of the Enews and/ or Member Council Updates will contain reminders and links to further information. I will also reissue the note on the difference between the Annual Parish Meeting and the Annual Parish Council Meeting.

At the time of writing, no indication has been received as to the potential recharges to be made by the County Council.

Councils who are entitled to participate in the selection of Parish Representatives to sit on the Northumberland National Park Authority have been emailed with details of the process being used which is, in substance, identical to that used in 2017.

Agenda Item 6 The LGA Model Code of Conduct

On Tuesday 9th March, the National Association of Local Councils voted, with some dissent, to recommend that English Local Councils adopt the model code of conduct published by the Local Government Association just before Christmas. A copy is enclosed with the papers for this meeting.

The draft code has received some criticism at all levels of local government within England, but it follows on from the recommendations made by the Committee for Standards in Public Life in January 2019.

I have made enquiries to both the City and County Councils as to whether they will be recommending adoption, no replies have yet been received.

There is a dilemma for this Association as the Association in the past has prepared its own shorter version of a model code for Member Councils. The Association will have to decide whether to devote time and resources to continuing that approach as being perhaps more suitable for local councils than the all-embracing code prepared by the Local Government Association . There is some merit in continuing with such a local code, but it does mean that commentary and guidance issued on a national level may well be inapplicable or need modification for a local code.

On balance my personal view is to recommend the adoption of the model code if it is to be adopted by both the City and County Councils for their members. This means that any commentaries, guidance etc will be directly applicable and available to Member Councils and Councillors.

Agenda Item 8: The Briefing Programme for 2021

Four events have been held

Date	Event	Numbers Booked	Numbers attended
8 February	Social Media	18	17
11 February	Safeguarding	7	7
17 February	General Introduction	11	11
11 March	Preparing for Audit	5	4

It was disappointing that attendance at the Safeguarding briefing was lower than anticipated.

It has been suggested that we repeated last year's FoI briefing and arranged one on Standards. I can incorporate those in the programme for the second part of the year.

Agenda Item 9: External Audit

The forms and guidance are still awaited at the date of writing. It is unclear whether the same extensions to the timetable given in 2020 will apply this year. As and when detail is received, Member Councils will be informed

There are national concerns about the volume of time taken by the external auditors in dealing with electors' objections to the account. There is a sense that the external auditors are reluctant to use their power to disregard objections which are frivolous or vexatious or where an investigation would be disproportionate to the amount in dispute

Agenda Item 10: The Memorandum of Understanding with CAN

The Association has a Memorandum of Understanding with Community Action Northumberland for the provision of administrative and financial support. The proposed further memorandum has already been circulated to the Committee. This would extend the Memorandum, on broadly the same terms, for a further three years. The Committee are asked to formally confirm their agreement to the memorandum. The board of Community Action Northumberland have already endorsed it.

Stephen Rickitt

NALC Chief Officer

12 March 2021