

**NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

**Minutes of the digital meeting of the County Committee held on Friday 25 February 2022 starting at 10.00 am.**

Present:

Councillors David Bewley, Paul Claridge, Graham Curry, David Francis, Christine Greenwell, Sylvia Hillan, Tony Hood, David Hughes, John Potts, Violet Rook, Alan Taylor, Simon Taylor, Paul Vaughan, Colin Wakeling, Debs Wilson and Mike Wood (Vice-Chairman in the chair)

Also Present

Mr David Woodard – President

Ms Gillian Turner - Treasurer

Mr Stephen Rickitt – Chief Officer [Actions marked as SER]

Northumberland County Council

Councillors Isabel Hunter & Glen Sanderson

The national NALC

Miss Jane Moore - Senior solicitor and head of member services

1: Welcome

The Chairman welcomed all present.

2: Committee Membership and Appointments

There were no candidates for co-option.

3: Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from

Councillors Peter Coates, Liz Dunn, Graham Eastwood, Rachel Locke and Alex Wallace

Mrs Monica Anderton

Mr Tony Kirsop & Mr Iain Hedley – Northumberland County Council

Andy Dean – CAN

4: County Council Issues

The Vice-Chairman welcomed Councillor Sanderson and invited him to address the meeting. Councillor Sanderson's comments included the following

- the adoption of the County Council's budget earlier that week based on two principles of supporting businesses and supporting residents by tackling inequality
- no frontline services were to be cut nor were parking charges to be introduced in existing town centres. He was particularly pleased that the County Council had allocated £48 million over the next four years to deliver more affordable housing
- He referred to the forthcoming review of the County Council's electoral divisions to take effect at the elections in 2025
- He mentioned the discussions on extending the combined authority to include Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland. Durham County Council may opt out of the existing of the proposed arrangements seeking their own deal with government. Councillor Sanderson indicated that no decisions had yet being made as ministers were to advise what extra financial assistance would be available. Councillor Sanderson expected that any decision would not be made until late 2022 or early 2023

Members of the committee welcomed the extra investment in public toilets pointing out that these would assist in the retention and recruitment all of commercial vehicle drivers but also drawing attention to the need for proper eating places for those drivers.

Members also were keen to know if there would be extra funds for public transport for services for areas not currently served by buses.

#### 5: Minutes of the Meeting held on 12 December 2021

These were agreed as a true record and will be signed by the Vice-Chairman.

#### 6: Matters arising, (if not otherwise on the agenda) included

- Dormant Councils - At the date of agenda preparation, responses are awaited from the County Council but with the possible exception of Snitter, there were no known reasons for this to be considered as pressing
- Digital Meetings & Lobby Day – the national NALC have arranged for a Lobby Day on 23 March. Last year the chief officer has offered to speak to the six MPs or their staff via Zoom and will take the opportunity to lobby for a power to hold digital meetings. It was suggested at a Member of the House of Lords be approached by the Chief Officer.

#### 7: Coronavirus

Members of the Committee were not aware of any new issues regarding the pandemic although concern was expressed about scams seeking up funds from vulnerable people reportedly for coronavirus tests.

Miss Moore advised there was no updated advice from government following their recent announcement of the easing of restrictions. She believed that it was acceptable to request that masks be worn, and people keep to the social distancing guidelines.

#### 8: Storm Arwen

Members were asked to encourage individuals within their communities to send in their personal experience of the storms to the County Council's Review.

Councillor Sanderson participated in the discussion and the one of the key issues is the lack of funding for village halls to obtain generators so they can be used as emergency centres. Councillor Sanderson agreed to remind County Councillors that the County Council's Members Small Schemes Allowance could be used for this purpose.

Members again made the point that mobile phone reception is very susceptible to interruption in the electricity supply. It was suggested that there should be emergency masts for mobile signals should there be a such a storm again. Some had heard suggestions of obtaining satellite phones, but these are expensive to obtain and to use.

#### 9: The Northumberland Local Council Charter

The survey on communications had been circulated to Members of the Committee together with comments from the Chief Officer, copies of which are attached to the signed minutes.

The Committee endorsed the suggestions that the Charter encourage Parish, Town and Community Councils to have a specific item on their agendas to allow the County Councillor to present a report and to encourage County Councillors to attend some of the Parish Town and Community Council meetings within their division. The Committee accepted that there would be clashes of meetings and it would be difficult for County Councillors to attend all Parish, Town and Community Council meetings.

The other ideas in the Chief Officer's note were accepted.

#### 10: Councillors' Allowance and Expenses

The Honorary Treasurer had noted that several Councils are now reimbursing Councillors for incidental expenses. It was understood that those Councils have taken the view that it is administratively less expensive for their Councils to pay a reasonable lump sum to cover such items as paper and printer inks rather than to have the bureaucracy of reimbursing individual receipts.

It was noted that the County Council's Independent Remuneration Panel is about to meet to consider County Councillor's allowances and expenses, but it was pointed out that should the Parish, Town and Community Council sector wish to put proposals to the Panel then there would have to be evidenced research to back up any proposals.

#### 11: The Levelling Up White Paper

The Committee received the extracted Executive Summary, a copy of which is attached to the signed minutes.

Speaking from the perspective as the Chair of the national Policy Committee, Councillor Frances said the national association would be considering this in detail. He was pleased to see the potential reintroduction of a regional tier although much will depend on the detail yet to be announced by Govt.

#### 12: Finance

The report was agreed, and a copy is attached to the signed minutes

### 13: A return to Physical Meetings of the Committee

In July 2021 the Committee discussed a possible return and minuted

#### 5: Style of Meetings

5.1 The Committee considered the information provided in the agenda and after discussion agreed

- a) To continue with digital meetings until Members feel confident enough to resume some face-to-face meetings
- b) The informal digital Friday morning meetings should continue as they had proved their usefulness in having focussed and in-depth discussions, being led by an external speaker

5.2 Various views were expressed about the desirability, or otherwise, of recording formal and informal meetings of the Committee, including whether discussion would be more inhibited or external speakers more reluctant to attend. It was agreed that the Chief Officer should investigate the potential for making such recordings available to Committee Members only on a time-limited basis.

There was a general discussion, and the consensus was that digital meetings should be retained at the present time particularly for the informal single topic meetings on Friday mornings.

The Committee agreed to hold a face-to-face meeting in June/July to as a trial.

### 14: Election Costs for the May 2021 Elections in Northumberland

The Committee noted that on 2 February a discussion was held with the County Council

- The standard charge of £450 levied on the four inquorate Councils is to be reconsidered
- The ballot paper printers had advised to place the Parish/Town/Community Councils' papers in a separate envelope. As far as the elections team were aware only one election authority had tried to combine them.
- Looking forward to 2025, the elections team will be issuing indicative costs for contested elections in the near future, which will enable Member Councils to start building a fund for potential use.

The Committee agreed more information was needed by Local Councils in order that sensible budgeting decisions can be made

### 15: National Issues

Miss Moore updated the committee on various issues at the national level including

- The new website is currently being tested
- The national Local Council Awards are being relaunched
- The National Association is working with the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) on the civility and respect project, and they are identifying gaps in training for our sector
- They are looking to adapt the national model code of conduct to make it more appropriate for Local Councils
- The legal topic notes on policing and charities are being updated
- There will be a new legal topic note on electric vehicle charging

- New guidance on the annual governance and accountability return (the AGAR) will be issued before the end of March

In his capacity as the national chair of the Policy Committee, Councillor Francis highlighted a number of emerging issues for that Committee to consider, including

- The problems caused by gulls, particularly in coastal communities
- The lack of a coordination between development control teams under the planning acts and building regulation teams across parts of England
- The increasing problems with increasing numbers of Airbnb's properties having the effect of reducing the amount of private letting properties available for long-term letting.

#### 16: Issues raised by Committee Members

These included

- Councillor Wakeling drew attention to the review of the national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty
- Councillor Rook drew attention to the police and crime commissioner's question and answer session on anti-social behaviour
- It was noted that the County Council's draft local plan was to be considered at a special meeting of the County Council on 30th March when it was expected to be adopted.

#### 17: The Briefing Programme September 2021 – February 2022

The Chief Officer updated the committee on the outcomes of the briefing sessions as shown below

| Ref | Date          | Title   | Presenter  | Bookings | Attendance                 |
|-----|---------------|---|------------|----------|----------------------------|
| 1   | Thurs 23 Sept | General Introduction to Local Councils                  | NALC / SER | 5        | 5                          |
| 2   | Tues 5 Oct    | Finance and Budgeting for Local Councils                | NALC / SER | 10       | 10                         |
| 3   | Thurs 14 Oct  | Planning – Permitted Development and Prior Notification | NCC        | 10       | 10                         |
| 4   | Tues 26 Oct   | Planning – Highway and Rights of Way Issues             | NCC        | 4        | Postponed                  |
| 5   | Mon 8 Nov     | Common Land and Village Greens                          | NALC / SER | 5        | 4                          |
| 6   | Mon 22 Nov    | Planning -Section 106s and Developer Contributions      | NCC        | 15       | 9                          |
| 7   | Thurs 25 Nov  | Chairing a Local Council                                | NALC / SER | 5        | 4                          |
| 8   | Tues 14 Dec   | Planning – Conservation Areas                           | NCC        | 17       | Postponed being rearranged |
| 9   | Thurs 20 Jan  | Planning - Neighbourhood Plans – Lessons Learnt         | NCC        | 25       | 22                         |
| 10  | Mon 24 Jan    | Planning - Enforcement                                  | NCC        | 20       | 18                         |

|    |              |                                       |                     |    |    |
|----|--------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|----|----|
| 11 | Tues 8 Feb   | Planning – Highways and Rights of Way | NCC                 | 16 | 13 |
| 12 | Thurs 10 Feb | Standards                             | Bethan Evans / NALC | 23 | 20 |

**18: Any Other Urgent Business**

Issues raised are noted above.

**19: Future Meetings of the Committee**

it was agreed that the next meeting would be on Friday 22nd April in a digital format but with a face-to-face meeting in June or July at a suitable venue within the Association's area.

The Chief Officer is endeavouring to arrange further informal meetings of the Committee on a range of topics.

Confirmed as a true record

and signed by the Chairman..... Date.....