



MINUTES OF THE MEMBERS' MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2020 BY ZOOM

ATTENDEES

Aldermen

Tommy Sandford (Chair)
Robert Gibson
Jim Speers MBE
Maurice Devenney

Angus Carson (Treasurer)
Bill Keery
Sharon McKillop
Keith Kerrigan

Frazer Agnew MBE
Alan McDowell
Allan Bresland
Robin Cherry

Councillors

Joe Boyle (Secretary)
Billy Webb MBE
Joan Baird OBE
Victor Warrington
John McDermott
Christine McFlynn
Charlie Casey

Alison Bennington
Eddie Thompson
Dermot Nicholl
Hazel Legge
Rodney Quigley
Terry Andrews
Dermot Curran

Vera McWilliam
Eric Hanvey
Errol Thompson
Beth Adger MBE
Niamh Doris
Robert Burgess

Kate Wilson (Admin Assistant)

APOLOGIES

Aldermen

Michael Henderson MBE

Jim Rodgers MBE

Tommy Nicholl MBE

Councillors

Liam Mackle
Peter Johnston

Tracy Kelly
Valerie Harte

Diana Armstrong

The NAC Chair, Ald Sandford welcomed everyone and the meeting commenced.

1. Apologies

Those received by phone/email in advance and mentioned today are as detailed above.

2. Minutes of last meeting

It was clarified by the Secretary that these are for the Members' Meeting that took place by Zoom on Wednesday 19 August 2020 as the AGM Minutes will be circulated for approval prior to the next AGM.

The minutes were agreed by all as proposed by Cllr Terry Andrews and seconded by Ald Jim Speers.

Reports from officers (*Discussion notes and points raised following the reports are in italics*)

3. Treasurer's Report

Alderman Carson, the Treasurer, provided a finance report stating the current account bank balance.

This was accepted by all as proposed by Cllr Errol Thompson and seconded by Cllr Burgess.

4. Secretary's Report

Meetings

Since our last Members' Meeting held by Zoom in August, the NAC Executive Committee held their September, October and November meetings face to face, and we are grateful to Derry City & Strabane, Mid Ulster and Fermanagh & Omagh councils for providing their council chambers to us.

We also had a very successful AGM at the Glenavon House Hotel in Cookstown on Friday 2nd October and further details of this were included in our last Newsletter which was circulated to all members on 21st October and there is a gallery of photos from the event on our website.

Mr Anthony Tohill, former CE of Mid Ulster

We sent a letter to Mr Tohill, CE of Mid Ulster DC in August thanking him for his support of the NAC and wishing him well in his new position. He wrote back saying "Please convey my thanks to Cllr Boyle and the NAC on the kind words expressed in their letter to me, they are much appreciated".

Department of Health

We wrote to the Department of Health during September in relation to COVID-19 local restrictions and the possibility of councils having to make decisions on future lockdowns. We followed up on this with a further letter on 3 November, we have not yet received any responses.

Consultation on the Staff Code of Conduct

A meeting took place at the NAC office on 28th September in relation to the Consultation on the Staff Code of Conduct for Local Government Employees. The NAC Chair and I met with Ms Lorna Parsons, Director Recruitment & Diversity for The Local Government Staff Commission for NI to discuss the proposed Code and provide feedback on behalf of our members. To address an issue that was brought to my attention by one of our members, it was put forward that council staff should be reminded that they must treat elected members with respect.

DfC Partnership Panel

I received a reply to my request for the NAC Executive Committee have representation on the reconvened Partnership Panel from Mr Anthony Carleton, DfC Director. He advised that this will to be brought to the Panel for discussion, and that the expansion of the Panel's membership would require primary legislation, which is a lengthy process. He said he would revert to me when the Panel has had a chance to discuss.

Support for the NAC on this matter was expressed and it was noted that SOLAS are included on the Panel as Observers. There was agreement that members who are on the panel, either through their council or NILGA, should raise this matter on behalf of the NAC.

A proposal was put forward by Cllr Webb that the NAC request to go on the Panel as an Observer, in the interim whilst our request for inclusion as a Contributor is being considered. This was seconded by Cllr Andrews and agreed by all.

Ombudsman's Office

We invited the new NI Public Services Ombudsman – Ms Margaret Kelly to our AGM but she was unable to attend, however we are currently arranging a meeting with her to introduce the NAC and to receive an update from Ms Kelly and Mrs Michaela McAleer on the new adjudication procedures which are being introduced in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not all cases are put forward for adjudication, but those that are have been pending since the onset of the pandemic, these will now be carried out by video call.

Code of Conduct review

The review process which the NAC had input to, has been going on for several years as it was delayed by the lack of an Assembly. However, we have and will continue to follow-up with the DfC to get this progressed. We have also requested dispensations under the Code to enable NAC delegates to remain in council meetings and contribute to debate when the NAC is discussed.

The Acting Secretary for the DfC, Mr Mark O'Donnell replied to letters we sent to him during July, August, and September on the review. He informed us that the Minister was to consider and approve the consultation responses in relation to the Code of Conduct review. Following this, and subject to the Minister's agreement a revised Councillors' Code will then be laid in the Assembly for approval – it was anticipated this would happen in September/October.

In relation to our request for dispensations, Mr O'Donnell advised that a paper outlining the relevant legislation and issues we raised would be presented to the Minister for consideration and he would write to me again when this has taken place.

Councillor Equality

- A meeting request was sent to Minister Carál Ní Chuilín with a copy of the original request which was sent to Minister Hargey in February 2020. (Minister Hargey is currently off due to illness with Minister Ní Chuilín standing in). A reply was received from the Minister's Private Secretary advising that due to continuing diary pressures the Minister is unable to meet at this time but has suggested that Departmental officials meet with us in her place to discuss our issues. We are currently liaising with Mr Anthony Carleton, DfC Director to arrange a meeting date.

We are liaising with the AILG and LAMA on this as they have already gone through a similar process in the Southern Ireland.

- I also wrote to the Chair of the Communities Committee, Ms Paula Bradley requesting a meeting for the NAC to provide a presentation on Councillor Equality. Ms Bradley replied saying she had forwarded our email and presentation request to the committee clerk. A reply has not yet been received.

(The NAC are currently working on a presentation to take to these meetings.)

The discussion on this matter was comprehensive with many members expressing their support to the NAC Executive Committee for making representation on their behalf and thanking them for the work they are doing on this. There were many comments made, some in relation to: the evolution of the councillor role over the years that has resulted in increased demands and responsibilities; the pressures on councillors through being the first line of contact for many constituents; the differences across councils in terms of resources offered; inequality in the recompense across our local government tiers including the lack of a severance pay scheme for councillors.

All points put forward have been noted for consideration by the Executive Committee and for inclusion in the NAC presentation which is currently being prepared for the DfC and Communities Committee.

Local Government Training Group (LGTG) review process

Ald Michael Henderson was co-opted on to the NAC Executive Committee in October and this stemmed from Ald Henderson's involvement at the LGTG meetings, whilst in his role of NAC Chair, and his experience and knowledge in relation to this. Ald Henderson and I have been participating in the consultation process on behalf of the NAC and this has involved one-to-one interviews, coursework and a 3-hour workshop.

NAC Constitution re-structuring

A sub-committee are working on reviewing and re-structuring the current constitution. This committee comprises of Cllr Webb APNI, Cllr Adger DUP, Cllr Andrews SDLP, Cllr Burgess UUP and Cllr Casey SF.

Cllr Webb advised that he has an email out to the sub-committee looking for dates for a meeting, Members of the sub-committee acknowledged this and said they would get back to him.

Admin Assistant Employment Contract renewal

Following agreement by the EC I am working to arrange an extension to Kate Wilson's Employment Contract which expired earlier this year. With things that have been going on this year we have fallen a bit behind on this, but I am currently working with LCCC, who originally set this up and ANDBC who are giving me a hand as well and hopefully with the expertise from both councils we will be able to get this pulled together to sign Kate up for a further two-year contract. An Assessment Meeting with Kate took place on Monday 16th November involving the Chair, Ald Sandford, Snr Vice Chair, Cllr Terry Andrews, and myself. Cllr Andrews was included as he will become Chair during the renewed contract term. The Treasurer, Ald Carson was aware that the meeting was taking place and he will get a report and feedback from me.

That ends my report and members will be kept updated on the NAC activities through our Newsletter but if anyone has any issues, they can contact me directly or Kate at the NAC office on Monday, Tuesday and up to lunchtime on Wednesdays.

Several members expressed their appreciation and thanked the Secretary for his comprehensive report with Cllr Errol Thompson proposing acceptance and Cllr Burgess seconding this.

5. AOB

A request was put forward for the group chat/private messaging function to be added to Zoom so that members can use this during meetings.

The Admin Assistant, Kate advised that the IT Specialist that we consulted for setting up the on-line conferencing did not recommend using this as it can be disruptive. She will bring this up with the Chair and Secretary prior to the next meeting.

Cllr Baird apologised for being late to the meeting, but a neighbour's cow had got into her garden.

6. Next Meeting Date

This will be in the new year and the date/format/venue will be circulated during December.

DECISIONS TAKEN

- The Constitution Review Sub-Committee are to agree a meeting date with Cllr Webb.
- A request is to be made to the DfC for the NAC to have representation on the Partnership Panel as an Observer, in the interim while our request for inclusion on the Panel is being considered.
- Points made in relation to Councillor Equality are to be considered by the Executive Committee for inclusion in the NAC presentation for DfC and Communities Committee.
- Kate is to check with the Chair and Secretary if the group chat/private messaging function to be added to Zoom so that members can use this during meetings.