



MINUTES OF THE ZOOM MEMBERS' MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY 2021

ATTENDEES

Aldermen

Frazer Agnew MBE
Stephen Moutray
Allan Bresland

Angus Carson
Jim Speers MBE
Keith Kerrigan

Bill Keery MBE
Sharon McKillop
Michael Henderson MBE

Councillors

Alison Bennington
Billy Webb MBE
Thomas Larkham
Dermot Nicholl
Victor Warrington
John McDermott
Robert Burgess

Paul Hamill
Joe Boyle
Tracy Kelly
Diana Armstrong
Beth Adger MBE
Christine McFlynn
Charlie Casey

Vera McWilliam
Eddie Thompson
Stephen Magennis
John Coyle
Timothy Gaston
Terry Andrews
Dermot Curran

Kate Wilson (Admin Assistant)

APOLOGIES

Aldermen

Alan McDowell
Maurice Devenney

Jim Rodgers MBE

Tommy Sandford

Councillors

Dale Pankhurst
Valerie Harte

Joan Baird OBE

Errol Thompson

The NAC Snr Vice Chair, Cllr Andrews is chairing today's meeting as the Chair Ald Sandford is unable to attend.

Cllr Andrews welcomed everyone, and he started the meeting.

1. Apologies

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

2. Minutes of last meeting & Matters arising

There was discussion on the use of the chat/messaging function and the protocol that the NAC use for speaking during Zoom meetings. Various members described how this works at their council meetings, and it was agreed that the 'Raise Hand' function on Zoom should be used by members to indicate that they would like to speak, and they will then be introduced by the chair in the order that the hands are raised.

Cllr Webb proposed that the chat/messaging function be put in place for future meetings, this was seconded by Cllr Casey and it was agreed by all that this would be useful.

The minutes of the last Members' Meeting on 18 November 2020 were then agreed by all as proposed by Cllr Casey and seconded by Cllr Warrington.

The proposer and seconder of the minutes from the Members' Meeting held on 19 August 2020 were clarified and agreed as being Cllr Andrews and Ald Speers.

Reports from officers

3. Treasurer's Report

Ald Carson, the Treasurer welcomed everyone, he then provided the current account bank balance and asked if there were any questions.

This was accepted by all, with no questions put forward.

4. Secretary's Report

Cllr Boyle, the Secretary delivered the following report:

Meetings/Updates

Since our last Members' Meeting held by Zoom in November, the NAC Executive Committee held their December and January meetings, also by Zoom.

In December we circulated our Newsletter to all members, and this included updates on our activities and the Members' Meeting dates for 2021. This information is also available on the NAC website and I encourage the NAC Members' Delegates to spread the word about our website to their council colleagues as it has some useful information about the organisation.

Condolence

Our Chair, Ald Sandford was contacted over the holidays by the President of the NAC UK, Cllr Marie Garrity with the sad news that her young brother had died having caught COVID-19. Ald Sandford sent a condolence message on behalf of the NAC, NI Region to Cllr Garrity and she has thanked him for this. I was not aware of this at the time and was grateful that the Chair acted promptly in sending the condolence message on behalf of the NAC.

Partnership Panel

Following a decision taken at our last Members' Meeting we wrote to Mr Carleton of the DfC to request that an NAC representative can attend future Partnership Panel meetings as an Observer. He replied on 23 Dec saying:

"I apologise for the delay in responding, however, with the ongoing COVID-19 issues and the recent change of Minister, this matter is still under consideration. I will revert to you once the matter has been given full consideration."

This decision was taken as initially we had requested to participate on the panel but when this was not granted.

Ombudsman's Office Meeting

This took place early December with the NAC represented by the Chair, Ald Sandford, Snr Vice Chair, Cllr Andrews, and me. The Ombudsman, Ms Kelly was joined by Mrs McAleer and Ms Hegarty and the meeting was very positive with a lot of ground covered.

I have followed up with a letter to Ms Kelly on a few points raised by the NAC EC and I will report further on this when a reply is received. In the meantime, Ms Kelly's office has sent through the Revised Protocol for Remote Adjudication Meetings which was discussed at our meeting. They have had to put this procedure in place due to COVID-19.

Code of Conduct review

On this matter a letter received from Mr Carleton of the DfC stated that:

“The Minister has agreed the Synopsis of Responses and Departmental Response to the consultation on the revised Councillors’ Code (copy attached). This has been forwarded to the Assembly Committee for Communities and a copy issued to all those who replied to the consultation, including the NAC. It has also been sent to all Council Chief Executives, with a request that they bring the matter to the attention of their councils.”

The EC are currently preparing our response to this correspondence in conjunction with NILGA. For those of you that are on today but who are not aware, we have an extremely good working relationship with NILGA, whilst they represent the councils and we represent the councillors there are matters that both organisations are involved with and by working together, I think that we are stronger.

Councillor Equality

We are working on our presentation for the DfC and the NI Assembly Committee for Communities, and I have written again to both organisations asking for dates for a meeting. The presentation is not signed off yet but is a work in progress for discussion at the next Executive Committee meeting.

Small Business Grant

Three suggestions were put forward at an Executive Committee meeting in relation to dealing with the COVID-19 grant payment received by the NAC. It was agreed, by vote, that we would hold on to the payment and write to the Department of the Economy to seek clarity as to whether we were entitled to receive this rather than return the funding without question or return the funding and seek clarity on entitlement. The Department subsequently clarified that the NAC is entitled to receive and keep this grant as they meet all the funding eligibility criteria.

NAC Constitution re-structuring

The NAC NI Constitution currently in place has served us well but requires updating as it was set in place several years ago. A Review Sub-Committee led by Cllr Webb have met and prepared a document with some suggested changes to the Constitution, this will be on the agenda at our next EC meeting for consideration.

Admin Assistant Employment Contract renewal

We had to work through a process with bringing Kate’s employment contract up to date which involved a back payment and with the help of the finance departments within Lisburn & Castlereagh and Ards & North Down councils we have got that pulled together. Kate’s contract has been renewed and will run until 31 March 2022 and I am suggesting that we keep an eye on that on a year-by-year basis so that it is kept up to date in line with local government increases to avoid a two-year backlog.

That ends the Secretary’s report.

The Chair thanked Cllr Boyle for a comprehensive report and asked if any members have any comments to make.

Cllr Casey thanked Cllr Webb for the good work he and his team have carried out in relation to the amendments or changes to the Constitution and he asked Cllr Webb to say a few words on this.

Cllr Webb said a lot of work has gone into this and that a first cut draft has been submitted for discussion at the next NAC Executive Committee meeting. He said it is quite a detailed document and if adopted there are ramifications for the day to day running of the organisation with the procedure being that following agreement by the Executive Committee there would have to be an Extraordinary Annual General Meeting and the effective date for implementing the revised Constitution would also have to be agreed, but it is still a work in progress.

Cllr Gaston asked the Secretary to go over the details in relation to the Small Business Grant item which was included in his report.

Cllr Boyle went over the background to this and explained that the grant was awarded based on the NAC being a ratepayer with entitlement to rate-relief in relation to their rented office premises within Sketrick House in Newtownards and as the NAC is not a political organisation. Cllr Gaston expressed his reservations saying that he is baffled that the NAC, made up of elected members, is eligible to get this grant when many other businesses that had applied did not get it. He stated that he does not understand that a body such as this would hold on to the funding and asked for his comments to be noted.

Cllr Boyle emphasised that the NAC had acted responsibly by seeking clarity through corresponding with the Department of the Economy and had they not been eligible to receive the grant there would be no question or issue about paying it back.

Cllr Gaston said that at no point did he want to look unfavourably on the NAC, and he commended the officers for being pro-active in contacting the Department. He went on to say that he did not take issue with the NAC's stance on it but rather with the Department on their criteria for eligibility to the grant.

Cllr Casey stated that as a member of the NAC Executive Committee and to help put Cllr Gaston's mind at rest, we all had concerns and reservations about this, but the agreed action was to seek clarification on eligibility, and the Department that made the payment confirmed that they are confident the NAC met the criteria. He went on to say that with several members in attendance today from across all councils, a proposal can be put forward for the grant to be returned.

Cllr Gaston said he would like to propose this, to gauge the mood of the meeting and see what everyone else thinks.

A question was put forward by Cllr Kelly on what the grant will be used for. There were responses to this from Cllr Boyle and Cllr Warrington, who said that, as a group, the NAC had gone about this in the right way and acted wholly responsible. What the grant will be used for has not been decided and there is a level of uncertainty for the organisation with reference to future costs and funding in relation to the on-going pandemic.

The Chair asked for a seconder to the proposal on the table, but no-one came forward and therefore no action was taken on this.

5. AOB

Cllr Dermot Nicholl raised the matter of the hardships being experienced by many councillors, particularly since the onset of COVID-19 and he expressed his concerns over the additional costs involved with having to work from home; reduced income due to not travelling; and the lack of a sickness pay scheme for councillors. Other points raised included the high level of responsibility required for decision taking and the time required to carry out the duties of a councillor, making it a full-time job for many.

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Several members contributed to this debate, most agreeing with and supporting Cllr Nicholl's sentiments. It was also pointed out that councillors put themselves forward for election, therefore are in the role through choice, and not only for the recompense but to serve and represent their constituents. There were comments made in relation to how the councillor role has changed and evolved over the years and particularly during the pandemic and how many not involved in local government undervalue the time and effort required to fulfil the councillor role and have a misconception that the allowances are similar to that of MP's and MLA's.

From this discussion it was noted that there is an allowance available from HMRC for councillors working from home, however this has not changed for many years and therefore the NAC will investigate making an approach through the Executive Committee on requesting a review of this based on current day costs.

The NAC's actions on Councillor Equality were also discussed and it was confirmed that the five main political parties are supportive of the approach we are taking on this and it was stated that all local government elected members should back the NAC in its work to resolve this matter for the benefit of all. All aspects of the councillor role will be covered within the presentation currently being prepared by the Executive Committee and some of the points covered today will be added to this. It is envisaged that the NAC's request for a review to be carried out by an external body will involve them carrying out a formal business case to include comparisons to councillors within other regions.

Cllr Burgess advised that the NAC's request for an observer to attend future Partnership Panel meetings had been accepted at today's meeting.

6. Next Meeting Date

The Chair said that this will take place on Wednesday 24 March 2021, the format/venue is to be confirmed and we will circulate the details when arranged.

Cllr Casey said he will be participating in an NAC UK meeting later this week if anyone would like any points brought forward to that he will be happy to do so.

The Chair ended the meeting and thanked everyone for their input.

DECISIONS TAKEN

Decisions taken and Action required	By
The chat/messaging function is to be switched on so that members can use this during future Zoom meetings.	Kate
Discuss the HMRC allowance for working from home and agree an approach to having this reviewed.	EC
Add items discussed today in relation to Councillor Equality to the presentation for Department for Communities and the NI Assembly Committee for Communities, if not already covered.	EC