



**MINUTES OF MEMBERS' MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 21 JULY 2021 HELD AT THE
COHANNON INN, DUNGANNON**

ATTENDEES

Aldermen

Angus Carson
Jim Speers MBE
Michael Henderson MBE

Bill Keery MBE
Jim Rodgers OBE

Alan McDowell
Tommy Sandford

Councillors

Alison Bennington
Errol Thompson
Timothy Gaston
Charlie Casey

Joe Boyle
Victor Warrington
Niamh Doris
Valerie Harte

Diana Armstrong
Hazel Legge
Terry Andrews

Kate Wilson (Admin Assistant)

APOLOGIES

Aldermen

Frazer Agnew MBE
Amanda Grehan

Derek Hussey
Tommy Nicholl MBE

Keith Kerrigan

Councillors

Paul Hamill
Eddie Thompson
Tracy Kelly
Dermot Nicholl
Stephen McCann
Rodney Quigley
Michael Ruane

Vera McWilliam
Liam Mackle
Dale Pankhurst
Conor Heaney
Beth Adger MBE
Robert Burgess

Billy Webb MBE
Eric Harvey
Joan Baird OBE
Ruairi McHugh
Peter Johnston
Dermot Curran

1. Chairman's Welcome and Apologies

The NAC Chair, Ald Sandford welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. Apologies received by email and mentioned today are as listed above. The Secretary pointed out that it is important to know the numbers in advance to keep catering costs down.

2. Minutes of last Meeting

The minutes of the last Members' Meeting which took place on 19 May 2021 by Zoom were agreed by all, as proposed by Cllr Andrews, and seconded by Cllr Casey.

3. Reports from officers

Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Ald Carson, said that he was delighted to be here today, and he advised the balance held in the current account. He thanked everyone that had got in contact with their Council's finance departments to arrange for payment of their annual subscription fees. The Treasurer's report was accepted as proposed by Cllr Thompson and seconded by Cllr Warrington.

Secretary's Report

Cllr Boyle, the Secretary welcomed everyone and requested that they sign the Attendance Register, if they had not already done so. He then delivered his report as follows:

"This report is a summary of our activities since the last Members' Meeting which was held by Zoom on Wednesday 19th May 2021. When I have gone through the report, I can answer questions and/or read correspondence mentioned if further details are required by members.

NAC Newsletter

This was circulated to all members on Monday 31st May 2021, and it is also available through a link on the News Page of the NAC NI website.

Councillor Equality

Members of the NAC Executive Committee (EC) met with Minister Deirdre Hargey, MLA, and her colleagues on Tuesday 1 June 2021. It was a very positive meeting with the Minister offering to engage with the NAC on a review journey going forward and to put a pathway in place for further engagement.

We followed up on this meeting by sending letters to Minister Hargey and DfC Officials Mr Carleton and Mr Glass on 11th June 2021.

I received a reply from Mr Carleton on 24th June addressing the matters raised in both letters. I have subsequently sent a follow-up letter requesting meeting dates to Mr Carleton and copied to Minister Hargey.

Facilitation of In-Person Meetings

I wrote to Democratic Services Officers at 10 Councils asking for their position on hosting NAC meetings, providing them with the dates of our next EC and Members' Meetings.

Six Councils have not yet responded, two said they were unable to host these meetings, one can offer meeting room with tea/coffee only (CC&G), one still looking into it for EC Meetings only, (M&EA).

Subsequently a decision was taken by the NAC EC to seek outside venues for our upcoming meetings and quotations were requested from several venues with the outcome that the July EC Meeting was held at The Ivanhoe Hotel and a central location was sought for today's meeting.

Queries have been received in relation to holding Hybrid Meetings and this will be raised with the EC at our August meeting.

DfE COVID-19 Grant

An email enquiry was received from David Thompson, Assistant Editor of the BBC Nolan Show on Tuesday 22nd June at 5.08pm saying that they were running an item on this and their deadline for a response was 8am on Wednesday 23rd June.

I was unavailable to participate but I sent a detailed response answering the questions put forward by Mr Thompson.

The item was covered on the Stephen Nolan Radio Show on Thursday 24th June, with no reference to the points put forward by me. I think that Belfast Live and the News Letter also covered this story.

It was disappointing that the questions and answers were ignored and as we are an open and transparent organisation, I will read them out now:

Questions from Mr Thompson (Nolan Show) and Answers from Cllr Joe Boyle

(1) Question: Why did the NAC NI apply for and accept a coronavirus small business grant when it is a political lobbying organisation?

Answer: The NAC did NOT apply for the Small Business Grant Scheme but automatically received this funding due to our organisation being eligible for the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme and with a Net Annual Value (NAV) of less than £15,000.

Payment was made by means of using, already in receipt of, banking details where our rates are paid from by means of a monthly direct debit.

As we operate all our decision-making processes on an Executive Committee/Members Forum basis, whenever we received the £10k we had a discussion at our earliest Executive meeting and agreed that given that DFE had made 452 payments (£4.52m) in error, we would write to the DFE seeking clarity on our entitlement to payment.

We subsequently received a response from the Economic Strategy Branch within DFE stating that: The DFE have liaised with LPS and confirmed that the organisation (NAC), meets the 2 basic eligibility requirements of the scheme, that it is in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief and has a total Net Asset Value (NAV) of less than £15,000.

The DFE response continued: Checks have also confirmed that the organisation provides a service to its members and is not affiliated with any political party. Therefore, the Department is content that the NAC are entitled to the £10k grant.

(2) Question: How does this not go against the spirit of the scheme?

Answer: I'm not so sure that whenever the NAC has demonstrated taking the lead by contacting DFE, rather than DFE contacting the NAC, that the organisation (NAC) be suggested as going against the spirit of the scheme.

(3) Question: What was the money to be spent on? has it been spent?

Answer: Similar to many businesses/organisations and recipients of such funding, there was, and still is, uncertainty on the way forward, the NAC is no different. We represent 462 elected members, 88 delegates nominated from 11 Councils and a 13-member Executive Committee. We are reliant on funding and facilities from 11 Councils. We knew Councils were suffering from extreme financial losses, we were unaware how this was all working out with reference to the financial positions in Councils and who they could continue to assist and support.

The NAC is a very frugal and well managed organisation that is extremely careful of its limited finances. Our members have been operating, for a considerable period on a virtual and impersonal way of doing business and for some this has been a huge challenge. We are also currently unaware of the challenges moving forward and have recently established that no Councils are accepting our Executive or Delegate meetings and the associated numbers into their premises. We are still unaware of what the future holds or what the new norm might look like.

What we do know is that our members are keen to attend 'real' meetings and to this extent, with the hospitality sector now open for business, there is an opportunity to be catered for in social distancing premises, bearing in mind the generational gap across our members, we may also have to accommodate hybrid meetings. In moving forward, we are aware that there will be associated and extra costings to the NAC of which our grant funding will be in place to assist with these additional and new meeting costs - something that is supported by our members.

~END ~

We manage our finances well and we are now incurring expenses that we didn't have before. We are on a journey now of having costs over and above that of the normal running costs of the NAC, and the funding will not be spent without consulting with members.

This matter was discussed by the NAC EC at our July meeting and a decision was taken to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the NAC and its members and arrange for an updated assessment incorporating a Business Plan being prepared for our organisation. Points raised during that discussion included:

- The grant was paid automatically into the NAC bank account, it was not applied for.
- Clarity was sought as to whether the organisation was entitled to receive the grant and confirmation from the Dept stated that the NAC was eligible under the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme.
- There were no guidelines or timeframes from the DfC on how and when the grant funding provided should be used or accounted for.
- There were approximately 452 organisations in total that allegedly wrongly received this type of funding, some have returned it to the Dept but currently approximately 340 organisations have still not returned the funding.
- The NAC have continued to pay all its running costs throughout the pandemic.
- No NAC Members have been in contact with the Secretary in relation to the receipt of the grant.
- The organisation has been cautious with finances and has always kept the operational costs low.
- The funding would be a contributory factor to benefiting and assisting our membership by adapting to a changing society, due to COVID-19, and therefore delivering and improving the services we provide to our members.

Hybrid Meetings

Apologies to members that would have liked to tune into a Hybrid meeting today, we will have to investigate that for future meetings. I will put it forward at the next EC meeting as members have indicated that they want to participate and cannot necessarily attend in person."

That ends the Secretary's Report.

A discussion then followed on the COVID-19 funding item with various points and opinions put forward by members.

During this debate a proposal was put forward by Cllr Gaston for the funding to be sent back as he feels there are a number of organisations that didn't receive funding and are experiencing hardships through COVID. Ald McDowell said that as he felt uncomfortable about this, he would second the proposal if the proposer Cllr Gaston would accept an amendment that it is deferred until we receive the Business Plan at the next meeting. Cllr Gaston refused to accept the deferral and Ald McDowell then agreed that he would second his original proposal.

Cllr Boyle pointed out that the NAC EC had already made a decision at their last meeting to carry out an assessment on how COVID-19 has financially impacted on the NAC and its members and arrange for the preparation of a Business Plan to illustrate the projected finance required by the organisation to support expenditure over the coming years, which was supported by Ald McDowell. Based on that he proposed an amendment to continue as agreed by the EC to get a full Business Plan back before a decision is taken, this was seconded by Cllr Casey. Cllr Gaston asked for a recorded vote on this.

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Voting on Cllr Boyle's amendment "That we continue, as recently agreed, by the EC proposal, to arrange for an Independent full Business Plan to be carried out and report the findings back to the Members".

FOR: Cllr Boyle, Cllr Casey, Cllr Andrews, Cllr Harte, Ald Speers, Cllr Armstrong, Cllr Warrington, Cllr Doris, Cllr Legge, Cllr Thompson, Cllr Bennington, Ald Keery, Ald Rodgers, Ald Carson, Ald Sandford.

AGAINST: Cllr Gaston, Ald McDowell

(Ald Henderson had left the meeting prior to the vote being taken as he had another engagement)

This decision will stand.

4. AOB

Ald McDowell asked if we had a meeting date yet with the DfC in relation to Councillor Equality, Cllr Boyle advised we were following up on this and would keep the EC informed.

Cllr Andrews advised that Cllr Ian McGarvey recently celebrated his 91st birthday and is still a serving Councillor for Donegal County Council. Cllr Andrews then proposed that the NAC send a card and letter to Cllr McGarvey congratulating him on his achievements, this was seconded by Ald Carson.

Cllr Speers spoke further about a matter raised by Cllr Gaston in relation to many organisations not being awarded funding through COVID-19 grants and said that this was disappointing and perhaps the criteria applied for receiving funding should be reviewed. He proposed that the NAC write to the appropriate department requesting that they review the criteria used for determining if COVID-19 funding is granted or refused to applicants, this was seconded by Cllr Andrews. Cllr Boyle added that perhaps Members should raise this within their Councils as higher-level intervention may be helpful to those organisations not in receipt of funding.

Cllr Armstrong stated that we are living in a special time and suggested that the details of the decisions taken today should be included in the NAC Newsletters to keep all members up to date.

5. Next Meeting Date - Wednesday 15 September 2021, the format/venue is to be confirmed and we will circulate the details when arranged.

The Meeting ended.

Decisions taken and Action required	By
Arrange for an Independent Business Plan to be carried out and report the findings back to the Members.	JB
Send a letter and card to Cllr Ian McGarvey of Donegal County Council to congratulate him on reaching his 91 st birthday whilst remaining as an elected representative.	JB
Write to the Department for the Economy to request a review of the criteria in relation to the COVID-19 funding applications for businesses and organisations	JB