



MINUTES OF THE ZOOM MEMBERS' MEETING ON WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021

ATTENDEES

Aldermen

Frazer Agnew MBE
Alan McDowell
Derek Hussey

Angus Carson
Tommy Sandford
Keith Kerrigan

Bill Keery MBE
Allan Bresland
Michael Henderson MBE

Councillors

Alison Bennington
Joe Boyle
Errol Thompson
Nicholas Trimble
Niamh Doris
Charlie Casey

Vera McWilliam
Eddie Thompson
Victor Warrington
Beth Adger MBE
Terry Andrews
Valerie Harte

Billy Webb MBE
John Coyle
Hazel Legge
Timothy Gaston
Robert Burgess

Kate Wilson (Admin Assistant)

APOLOGIES

Aldermen

Jim Rodgers MBE

Maurice Devenney

Tommy Nicholl MBE

Councillors

Darryn Causby
Dan Kelly
Christine McFlynn

Dale Pankhurst
Diana Armstrong
Dermot Curran

Dermot Nicholl
Peter Johnston

1. Chairman's Welcome and Apologies

The NAC Chair, Ald Sandford welcomed everyone, he asked attendees to use the 'Hands Up' feature on Zoom to indicate if they wanted to speak.

Apologies received by phone/email in advance and mentioned today are as listed above. Some members then advised the Chair that they might have to leave the meeting early.

2. Minutes of last Meeting

The minutes of the last Members' Meeting which took place on 20 January 2021 were agreed by all, as proposed by Cllr Errol Thompson, and seconded by Ald Henderson. There were no matters arising from the minutes.

3. Reports from officers

Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Ald Carson, welcomed everyone, he said it was nice to see a good turnout and he provided the current account bank balance. He advised that Belfast were the first Council to pay their annual Membership fee and asked if there were any questions.

This was accepted by all, as proposed by Cllr Adger, and seconded by Cllr Andrews.

There were no questions put to the Treasurer.

Secretary's Report

Cllr Boyle, the Secretary delivered the following report:

Meetings/Updates

Since our last Members' Meeting held by Zoom in January, the NAC Executive Committee held their February and March meetings, also by Zoom. Members of the EC have also participated in Zoom meetings with iESE in relation to the review of the Local Government Training Group; and in relation to our campaign for Councillor Equality we met with Members of the Association of Irish Local Government and Officials from the Department for Communities – I will provide further details of these meetings within my report.

Partnership Panel

Mr Carleton of the DfC confirmed that an NAC representative can attend future Partnership Panel meetings as an Observer as agreed at the last Panel meeting on 20 January, an invitation has been received for the next meeting taking place on 21 April 2021.

Ombudsman's Office Meeting

I received an email from Ms McAleer of the NIPSO office, this was clarifying the points raised by the NAC EC following our meeting with Ms Kelly in December. (Doc 2)

We wrote to Ms McAleer on 2 February, with reference to a circulation they issued saying that correspondence to Councillors, who have been reported under the Code of Conduct, is now sent by encrypted email, and there are concerns that councillors may not be receiving these emails and/or may be having difficulty with accessing them. The NAC EC agreed that the preferred method for this correspondence is by post and I will report further on this when a reply is received to our letter.

Working from Home/HMRC Allowances

This was raised at our last Members' Meeting and following that Cllr Casey (NAC National Vice Chair) and Ald Sandford (NAC Regional Chair) attended an NAC UK Zoom meeting. During the meeting Cllr Casey raised the matters of hardships being experienced by Councillors in relation to having to work from home, as discussed and the HMRC allowance in relation to this. The NAC General Secretary, Cllr Brian Nelson agreed to address these matters with Councils and the HMRC and a letter was sent on 2 February advising him of our support of his approach to Councils and HMRC on this matter.

Code of Conduct review

We prepared and sent a response in conjunction with NILGA on 10 February, this was in relation to the DfC's Synopsis of Responses and Departmental Response Document on the Code of Conduct Review.

NAC Constitution re-structuring

The EC has decided to defer discussing the Constitution Review until a face-to-face meeting can be arranged to deal specifically with this matter, with a view to having it in place for the 2023 Local Government Election's.

....Continued

Secretary's Report Continued

Mid Ulster Council proposal on extended leave for Councillors

Letters were sent to Mid Ulster Council and the DfC Minister Hargey on 5 February, stating that the NAC supported the proposal made by Mid Ulster in relation to Councillors who require extended periods of leave due to maternity, paternity, or sickness. This was included in our Councillor Equality the DfC Officials and will be included in the Presentation for the NI Assembly Communities Committee.

Association of Irish Local Government (AILG)

In response to our request, the AILG invited the NAC EC to a Zoom meeting on Monday 8 February to provide further details and discuss their allowance review process. The AILG then forwarded the relevant documents to us.

The AILG President, Cllr Mary Hoade also sent an invitation to their on-line event which took place on International Women's Day Monday 8th March, this was circulated to all NAC Members.

Local Government Training Group (LGTG)

Ald Henderson, myself and Kate attended a meeting on 16 February in relation to the Local Government Training Group review. The appointed consultants iESE provided a Presentation with proposals put forward for future training. An outcome report was then provided which was discussed by the EC and a response was submitted in conjunction with NILGA.

I have stepped down from the review group and the NAC Senior Vice Chair will be taking my place in representing the NAC alongside Ald Henderson.

Councillor Equality

We received confirmation from the UUP and Alliance Party that they support our approach on this making it the five main parties that are supportive. We provided a presentation to Officials from the DfC on 23 February, this and our Council's Survey has been sent to them and they will respond to the points raised; following our agreement on this, they will present it to Minister Hargey.

The NI Assembly Communities Committee asked us to provide a written presentation in the interim of waiting for an oral consultation and this has been sent to Dr Janice Thompson, Clerk to the NI Assembly Communities Committee to be put forward to the Committee for consideration.

Invitations for all Councillors to attend our virtual Members' Meeting

This was raised at our last EC meeting and following discussion around the difficulties that relate to Zoom Meetings versus In-Person Meetings, there was agreement by all that access to our Zoom Meetings should be granted to any Members that make a request by email to attend. A message about this has been put on our Website and was circulated by email to all Members.

That ends the Secretary's Report.

The following points were raised from this report:

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- Cllr Casey thanked Cllr Boyle for communicating with the NAC UK General Secretary, Cllr Brian Nelson, on having their Website updated to reflect the current Membership Fees and structures. Cllr Boyle then explained how the fee structures were different across the regions and he thanked Cllr Casey for raising issues we have discussed at the NAC UK meetings.
 - Cllr Errol Thompson asked about the HMRC Working from Home allowance and Cllr Boyle explained that this had been raised and discussed at the last Members' Meeting and brought to the UK General Secretary's attention by Cllr Casey. Cllr Nelson said he would lead the approach to HMRC on requesting an increase. It was agreed that any updates on this will be circulated to all our members.
 - Ald Henderson asked Cllr Boyle to explain the issues that were raised at our meeting with the DfC Officials on the 23 February. Cllr Boyle explained that the NAC Executive Committee members had delivered a slide show presentation with various members providing commentary on the slides. The DfC Officials asked for the presentation and the NAC Survey on what each Council provides to their Councillors, saying they would reply to the points raised, these documents have been sent, and we are waiting for the response.
Our presentation covered many concerns that have been raised by our members, including the inequality across Councils in relation to items provided to their Councillors, such as paper, envelopes, ink cartridges etc (tools for the job); the changes in the Councillor role involving additional time input and responsibilities; the absence of a severance scheme for departing Councillors and a request for an independent review to be carried out with the findings to be acted upon.
 - Councillors' allowances being frozen by not accepting the allocated increase was raised and discussed. This is the second year this has happened within one Council, through a proposal being put forward within a Council meeting, for the increase to be refused by **all** their Councillors as 'a Rate-Payers saving' exercise. It was noted that another Council also did this three years ago but from those attending today's meeting there did not appear to be any other Council that is currently doing this.
We are seeking clarification from the DfC as to whether this can be done as it is very concerning that a few have the right to decide for all, rather than individually refusing the increase. This should not be a matter for debate and decision within Councils, as it appears to be a publicity-seeking activity and other individuals and/or parties may be concerned about the consequences of bad publicity if they were to oppose it.
It was noted that many Councillors are carrying out the role on a full-time basis with no other job and therefore the Councillor Allowance being their only source of income is very important.
 - Cllr Bennington advised that she had attended the AILG on-line event which took place on International Women's Day. She said it was a Webinar which she found to be very interesting and informative.
4. AOB - None
 5. Next Meeting Date - Wednesday 19 May 2021, the format/venue is to be confirmed and we will circulate the details when arranged.

The Meeting Ended.