

## Draft Notes on NALC conference 4-5 Sept 2009

### AGM

The existing president was agreed without debate – there were no other nominations. I'm not quite sure how you get to be president, or what the responsibilities are, other than chairing the AGM and being very important. Auditors and minutes were agreed, as was the annual report. There was considerable discussion about the accounts, mainly due to differences between the figures given in accounts and the planned budgets. This anomaly arose because the budgets had to be agreed before the accounts for the previous year were completed. There were also some other elements of the accounts which needed explaining because there was not enough detail.

There has been an increase in affiliations during the year with a resulting increase in income and a surplus over the year rather than a deficit. There were a number of matters raised by county associations:

- Essex: to lobby DCLG, LGA to promote participatory funding - carried
- Hampshire: to make county associations members of NALC rather than individual councils. Not carried
- National council: To rescind last year's resolution that the AGM and conference should be held at the same time. The AGM has to be held in the three months before November. August is a very bad time to have a conference from the point of view of delegates, September and October are both difficult because of other conferences which the exhibitors need to attend and we need the income from exhibitors if the conference is not to lose money. Carried
- National Council: to change the constitution to add a Greater London county association so that first tier councils created in London can join. Carried

There were two other motions from county associations which were not represented. Staffordshire had not said they would not attend so the motion fell. Worcestershire had said they couldn't attend and their motion on "double taxation" was referred to the policy committee.

We need as Walc to propose the motion to restrict HGV's as Staffordshire's or else it could fall by the wayside, because of Nalc procedural rules.

### Stuart Burgess - Chair of Commission for Rural Communities

He was a good presenter. The CRC provides independent advice to government in three ways:

- Advocacy
- Expert advice and evidence based work
- As an independent watchdog, holding government and RDAs to account.

He believes that government will always be essentially urban because only 20% of the population lives in rural areas and the power lies in urban areas.

They have produced a parish toolkit to help parishes engage with the new unitary authorities and are supportive of quality status. He believes that local councils can do a lot to promote economic well being. One of the interesting facts he gave is that rural areas have more women entrepreneurs. Also watch out for the forthcoming report on the uplands enquiry

Issues raised in questions included:

- broadband speeds in sparsely populated areas
- affordable housing
- wind turbines and the negative effect on tourism

## **Rosie Winterton – minister of state at Communities and Local Government (appointed June 2009)**

DCLG has given NALC a grant of 750k between 2008 and 2011 to do a number of specific things, including support for quality councils, support for new councils in unparished areas and... She re-iterated the importance of TPCs in the front line of democracy and that we have knowledge of local communities and the power to improve lives. Her two words were democracy and delivery. – “Do something”.

### **The great debate.**

The motion was: Parish Councils are not fit for purpose: 21st century local government. In reality, not even the people proposing the motion really agreed with it. They did argue very effectively that not all parish councils are fit for purpose, referring to the large number of councils where there is not much happening, no elections, the same people have been councillors for years and no-one really knows who they are. They did, however, agree that not all councils are like that, and that the sector as a whole is developing and has developed considerably in the last 10 years. The people opposing the motion argued that the sector was key to local democracy and much closer to communities than other levels of government and therefore potentially much more effective. It was mentioned that as an organisation we are only as strong as the weakest link, (council ). Principal Authorities do not always know which services we deliver on their behalf. QPS, is seen as Fit for Purpose by your Borough, District, County or Metropolitan Councils to take on service delivery jointly.

### **Saturday**

#### **John Findlay – CE of NALC**

He provided an overview of NALC's work over the last year and looked at what's happening now and what will happen in the future. He believes that this is a critical time for town and parish councils. All the political parties are talking about and promoting localisation and NALC is engaging with government and the other political parties too. A key issue for NALC is the need to obtain funding - increased membership will help but they also need to find other sources of funding once the DCLG funding runs out in 2011. NALC will be supporting the development of new councils and will be supporting existing councils to take on their new responsibilities as part of the DCLG grant. NALC has received a grant from DCLG to promote and support quality councils. Defra funding has been obtained to support the clerks' bursary scheme. NALC will be introducing a regional fund to help regions and would like to receive bids. Activities which will be supported include raising awareness of councils in unparished areas.

#### **Michael Chater – Chair of NALC**

Challenged delegates to do something as a result of the conference, not just let the inspiration disappear. In particular, do as much as you can before April - the new financial year will see a tougher funding regime. He believes that NALC should operate as a united "family" and there was a plea for members to listen and to challenge constructively.

#### **Richard Kemp, deputy chair of LGA.**

Richard was a good speaker who seemed to be offering closer working between LGA and NALC, and in particular joint working to "parish and town council proof" their policy documents. He is a Liverpool city councillor and said he would not recommend a parish council for his ward because it

doesn't have a single identify or "sense of place" and he believes that is important for new councils. He argued that town and parish councils have been too isolated from principal councils. As well as looking at policy documents and briefings he suggested that NALC should look at LGA programmes such as "total place" with a view to a local level "total neighbourhood" programme and that we might look at joint conferences or at least NALC people invited to LGA conferences

## **Matthew Taylor MP**

He talked about his rural review and the vision for rural communities which had been accepted by the majority of rural stakeholders. He was very well received.

He argued that keeping a living working village alive needs development. If there is no development then villages will be occupied by retired people and commuters and will die. Simply putting up barriers to development and saying nothing should change will mean that the community will die. People like living in villages because of the community and the community relationships, not just because of the built environment and the landscape. People who work in rural areas must be able to live there and people who live in rural areas must be able to work there. This means looking differently at development and allowing a mix of business and residential use, rather than keeping them entirely separate.

He also argued that market towns had suffered as a consequence of planning restraint in villages. Rather than building small numbers of affordable homes in many villages, many homes have been built in a smaller number of market towns. Because of development areas this has meant large estates on the outskirts of market towns so people need to drive to the centre of town – or out to the villages to work. The development of business parks has also increased driving and congestions as people cannot walk to work or the shops and have to drive there.

He made the point that, when he was elected as an MP and needed to move to London for at least part of the time (from Cornwall) he had expected life to be very different but central London was built before planning and there is a mix of use for development and he still has a corner shop, equivalent to the village shop and a local pub within walking distance. "Village London"

He believes that central government needs to be willing to allow local communities to decide. He has also found that if development starts from a vision of what the community would be like in the future, next 20 years, then, almost inevitably, some degree of development, particularly affordable housing, is agreed. People want to see their communities with thriving schools and shops and pubs and services and these will only be there if there are houses that young families can afford to live in and the staff of the pub and the shop can afford to live in the village too. Town and Parish councils must get more involved in a vision for Sustainability of village and town and importantly lift planning from the end of the garden, into Place Shaping. Have input into, Draft Economic Planning, ( local planning ), Housing Planning Document, by having a seat on your local LSP or at the very least having a dialogue with these and similar key shakers and movers.

Issues raised in questions included:

- The possibility of business rate relief for small shops. Matthew Taylor believes that, for many things, village shops are no more expensive than supermarkets, particularly if travel costs are taken into account. He also believes that most people will never get all their supplies from the village shop but that the government should pay for services to be provided locally and this would help to build trade and make businesses viable.
- High bus fares leading to lack of use. He believes that if the service is frequent and reliable it will be used. But there has never been a mass public transport system in rural areas, nor is there ever likely to be

- Should development areas be abolished and all development be mixed use. Answer. Not exactly but there needs to be blurring of the lines. Settlements need to be developed along the same lines as the existing settlement.
- Sustainability. Some community land trusts are providing very eco buildings but it may be hard to make commercial developers keep to such high standards.

Matthew Taylor is standing down at the next election and will become the chair of the National Housing Federation and will be involved in the "Rural Coalition" which will monitor the progress of the recommendations in his review

## **Dr Robert Chilton – Chair of Standards for England**

The focus of the standards board has moved from putting things right to getting things right. I think he is expecting the standards board to be abolished after the next election. He gave us some statistics about the number of complaints – 73% of authorities have had a least one, the average being around 8. One authority has had 209 – the majority from one complainant and there is an issue about vexatious complaints.

Issues raised in questions:

A local authority should not charge a parish council for standards services.

Peer mentoring – IdeA can help to provide partners.

Vexatious complainers – do the electors know what the person is doing in their name?

## **Steve Parkinson, Society of Local Council Clerks**

Society is a good thing – it has developed services and increased membership significantly in the last 5 years. Should be working in partnership with county associations where there are branches. Does a lot of training, development and support.

## **Planning**

The focus of this session was strategic plans rather than development planning. Presentations will be attached – couldn't make many notes because I had mislaid my bag. Overall point was the importance of community led planning – particularly with powers that councils have to do things. It made me feel guilty (again) about not having a parish plan. The Parish Plan, needs to go forward for your local authority to show to government that it is engaging with the community. In short we need dialogue not monologue. Being consulted means you are Empowered (not employed), with the right to have influence. There were also some examples of things that had been achieved through local plans by councils in Kent

## **Climate Change – Ashton Heyes**

This was a presentation from a village in Cheshire which has decided to become the first carbon neutral community in England. Presentation will be attached. The main thing that they seem to have done is

1. Get agreement from enough people to get started – at the launch meeting 400 people turned up – 75% of adult population

2. Annual surveys by University of Chester students. Each respondent is given feedback about their carbon footprint, the village average, and what they can do to reduce theirs.

Carbon footprint has been reduced by 23% - a lot of this through increased use of public transport and reduced flying. They persuaded the principal council to build a footpath to the next village where there is a station so now many more people walk to the station and use the train. Their next plan is to develop a renewable energy microgrid.

## **Engaging with your communities**

This was a couple of members of Great Aycliffe Town Council talking about what they have done.

1. They have established a youth council which has a delegated budget of £4k. They are seriously consulted and have contested elections. They meet every month and there are 18 members who are paid to come to meetings but also expected to attend unpaid workshops.
2. They have a customer panel who meet every month – open to all. They also run open days, trips for the over 60s. The last survey they did had a 45% return – they offered a prize of £50.

## **Summary**

I found the conference very interesting – much more so than I expected to be honest. I did feel though that many of the things that we discussed had much more relevance to larger councils who have responsibility for a wider range of things (toilets, lighting, playing fields) that our small parish council has and a correspondingly larger precept. I did feel guilty (again) about being co-opted rather than being voted in – a bit of a democratic deficit.

Cllr J. Macdonald and Cllr V. Owen