

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

PARISH LIAISON WORKING GROUP

At a meeting of the **Parish Liaison Working Group** held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Morpeth on Thursday, 5th September, 2013 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

D Ledger (Chair), TN Thorne (Vice-Chair), J Reid, Alyson Wallace

OFFICERS

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| M Bird | Team Leader (Scrutiny/Regulatory), Democratic Services |
| B Rowland | Corporate Director of Local Services |

ALSO PRESENT

N Best - Morpeth Town Council
L Brown - Ashington Town Council
R Butler - Choppington Parish Council
P Claridge - East Chevington Parish Council
P Cowey - Ponteland Town Council
S Hedley - West Bedlington Parish Council
M Hodgson - Corbridge Parish Council
I Hunter - Berwick Town Council
H Lindley - Thirston Parish Council
M Parker - Blyth Town Council
T Reid - Prudhoe Town Council
T Robson - Hexham Town Council
W Rogers - Newbiggin by the Sea Town Council
Alex Wallace - East Bedlington Parish Council / NALC
C Weir - Amble Town Council

PART I

1. Working Group Terms of Reference, Future Topics for Discussion and Work Programme Formulation

Councillor Dave Ledger welcomed everybody to the meeting and following his invite everybody present introduced themselves. Councillor Ledger updated on procedural matters for the working group. He had been appointed as the Chair and Councillor Trevor Thorne as Vice-chair. He referred to some concerns expressed in advance of the meeting about the format and arrangements for the working group, and read out the response of county council leader Grant Davey in response to a complaint received:

"Until July 2011 the Council had centred within its constitution an allowance for a Parish Liaison working group chairperson. The current administration supports the Councils constitution in the knowledge that Parish, Community and Town councils have the power to provide additional services for their constituent areas, and are consulted about issues that particularly affect their localities.

In order to ensure that consultation takes place, we chose to implement a liaison committee/working group that had sat in the structure previously, wasn't well used by the previous administration and contact offered via the Parish Key list left a democratic deficit as it only provided Parishes with Officer contact.

"The make up of the Parish representation is designed to be all inclusive yet of a size that can enter into debate. To assist with the dissemination of information from the working group to parishes we have invited the Chairperson of Northumberland ALC who will represent their membership which I believe is a good proportion of the Parish Councils in Northumberland. We have also invited representation from those Parishes we are aware are not members of NALC plus the representatives of the 18 largest Parishes a proportion of whom are employing authorities and members of NEREO.

"As with all of our working groups they will be subject to annual review."

Councillor Ledger added that the meetings would be determined by the needs identified by those present. In response to a question he confirmed that those invited to this meeting would form the make up of the working group for the meantime; the meetings had to be manageable given there were over 150 parish/town councils in Northumberland. He also added that Barry Rowland, Corporate Director of Local Services, would be the senior officer with responsibility for contact with parish/town councils. In response to a question about the role of NALC, Councillor Ledger confirmed how this meeting was the starting point of the process and there would be much to discuss on where to go next. He paid tribute to Councillors Reid and Styring for their hard work to get to the current position.

Detailed discussion followed, with reference to the discussion paper included with the agenda about the working group's terms of reference and future agenda items. The main areas of debate and key points raised included:

Parish Council Charter

- Hexham and Prudhoe both did not feel bound by the Charter; serving their residents was their priority
- the Charter was considered a good set of principles and detailed ways to liaise with NALC

- the Charter was an ongoing document that would continue to be reviewed.

Service Transfer

- reference was made to the respective responsibilities of parish/town councils and the county councils for services such as grass cutting
- it was emphasised that allotments had and always would be the responsibility of parish/town councils
- the county council's capacity and record for delivering services had reduced and some parish/town councils wished to take responsibility for such services and accompanying budgets
- parish/town councils varied greatly in their size and had different aspirations regarding services; there could not be a one size fits all approach. The budgets of many of the new local councils established in 2009 had increased substantially
- some small councils did not have the capacity for providing services. There could be potential for more clustering of parishes for services and their representation on this working group

Mr Rowland responded to discussion by referring to the capacity and energy that parish/town councils brought as institutions and the importance of building on this. He suggested that the Charter could be further developed, the intention to get additional officer capacity for working with parish/town councils, and the intention that parish/town councils could provide more services but perhaps on a basis of council by council. In response to a question about the quality of services provided he referred to the administration's prioritisation of front line services, and the importance of their modernisation, quality and productivity.

Working Relationships

- tribute was paid to the visits of the previous county council administration to parish/town councils to discuss issues such as service transfer
- future discussions between parish/town councils and the county council could perhaps consist of a meeting per year with larger town councils, and meetings in clusters with the smaller parish councils
- regular discussions should take place between parish/town councils and the county council to improve dialogue and their working relationships.

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Precepts

- some areas had a majority of Band A properties and did not have scope to increase their precept
- parish/town councils needed an early indication from the county council on the budget so they could assess the implications and plan their precepts.

Asset Transfer

In response to discussion on asset transfer, Mr Rowland added that asset transfer could progress once a policy position was confirmed; the working group could discuss this issue further.

Other Points

- it was queried whether the county council's IT department could ensure that out of office messages were always provided on the email accounts of county council staff who no longer worked for the authority
- it was requested for more training to be provided for parish/town councils, in particular on planning. There were many new local councillors following May's elections who needed training.

In conclusion, the working group considered its arrangements for future meetings, work programmes and agenda items. It was then AGREED that:

- 1) future meetings of the working group begin at 11am, with an additional meeting in late October and meeting on a quarterly basis afterwards;
- 2) future meetings begin at 11am, preferably in Committee Room 1, with the possibility of future meetings taking place elsewhere in the county;
- 3) October's meeting include the following agenda items: a) the current position on service transfer; b) a paper on working relationships/communications between parish/town councils and the county council; an early update on the budget; and 4) an update on the Charter.

The meeting ended at 11.15am.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____