



NORTHUMBERLAND ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Minutes of the meeting of the County Committee at 10:00am on Saturday 7th March at County Hall, Morpeth.

Present: Cllrs: Claire Connoly, David Hughes, David Woodard, Jill Henderson, Helen Shaw, Jan Casey.

Online: Cllrs: Alex Wallace, Liz Dunn, Sylvia Hillan, Isabel Hunter

Also Present: Mr Graeme Popay – Chief Officer [Actions marked as CO]

1: Welcome.

Cllr David Hughes, Chair, welcomed members

2: Apologies for Absence.

Cllrs David Francis, David Ferguson, Gwen Woodman.

3: Minutes of the County Committee meeting held on 22nd January 2026

All agreed to accept the minute as a true record.

4: Matters arising

Training: it was recognised that training was key to good governance. Neil Massons briefing at the January meeting was extremely good, his offer of rolling this out to all Councils was very encouraging. To date nothing had been received from Neil.

ACTION CO to contact Neil Masson for an update..

5: County Conference

Very well received with good numbers in attendance – 20 stands including Highways, Neighbourhood Planning, Public Health, , Northumberland National Park and Coast National Landscape, Places Leisure, Public Health and Environmental enforcement.

Sessions in the chamber included a presentation from Healthy Communities and the Community Governance review. Rob Murfins presentation on Changes to the Planning system was particularly well received – Rob ended his presentation with an offer present this again for NALC online.

This report prompted a discussion about housing needs in the County, in particular the proposed impact described by Rob Murfin.

Cllr Isabel Hunter who chaired the conference reiterated the Northumberland County Councils Leader Glen Sandersons offer to attend any Town & Parish Council meetings in the future.

ACTION CO to contact Rob for a briefing date. **UPDATE** Rob has offered to run online session relating to the Northumberland Local Plan via NALC for T&PCs



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6: Finance

The Financial report was tabled showing the current position.

All agreed to accept the report.

County Treasurer – David Woodard was proposed by the CO as Hon Treasurer to Northumberland ALC.

Seconded by the Chairman David Hughes.

All Agreed.

The Chairman thanked David for his offer to stand.

David Woodard said the member councils subscription levy was well overdue a review. He would with Margarets assistance look into this and have a proposal ready for the AGM in September.

7: National Issues

Cllr David Francis was not present but had prepared a report:

Annual reporting: we are fast approaching the end of the financial year. All local councils will need to ensure that they have put in place the relevant measures to enable a positive response to the new 'Assertion 10' in the AGAR (Annual Governance and Accountancy Return). Among other things, this requires each council to have a 'main contact' email address on a domain which they manage (ie not for example a Gmail or BTInternet one). To satisfy the requirement for an IT policy, a model is available on the National ALC website for those councils that supply their staff and members with all of the IT equipment. For those councils where staff and members supply their own, I have prepared a model by adapting a model from the Proper Practices Guide.

Electronic AGAR: work has started on the production of an electronic version of the AGAR, a pilot trial of which is planned for later this year. This should greatly ease the reporting system for the c8500 local councils in England, as well as enabling some statistical analysis of councils' finances and property.

Review of the Proper Practices Guide: a consultation of our councils which was conducted during November/December has revealed widespread support for councils to adopt more-informative formats for showing their annual accounts. There is also support for improvements to make the internal audit system more robust. The challenge now is to develop a regime which can bring internal auditors to an appropriate level of knowledge and skill, which is proportionate to the size of each council's budget.

Standards: I am a member of a small Task and Finish Group which is convened by the Ministry to develop the detail of a new and improved regime to promote and uphold standards of behaviour among Councillors. We have been looking at the role and composition of Standards Committees, complaints and appeals processes, guidance and support, reporting,



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and sanctions. We are now hoping that the Government makes Parliamentary time available to produce the required legislation.

Heritage: many county associations, including our own, were created 80 years ago, in 1946, as a precursor to forming the National Association in the following year. I am working with a National ALC staff colleague to make available some material about the heritage of local councils and our associations, and to encourage good archiving practice.

8: Issues raised by County Committee members

Boundary changes

discussion over the most recent changes and potential changes that may come from the Community Governance review. 8 Parish Council are dormant at present with no Precept being levied in those parishes, with the financial responsibility being covered by their neighbouring parishes.

review - None

9. Chief Officers Report

The CO gave an anonymised verbal report covering:

Legal and Governance Enquiries: A significant number of legal and procedural enquiries have been received during the period, covering a wide range of governance matters affecting parish councils. Topics included vexatious or persistent members of the public, planning disputes, councillor conduct and internal disagreements, employment matters, requests for policy templates, pay grade advice, reserve policies, statutory procedures, and general compliance issues. This reflects the continued demand for accessible professional support and practical guidance across the sector.

Correspondence, Advisory Support and Casework: A substantial volume of correspondence has been managed, with advice provided to clerks, councillors and councils on day-to-day operational matters. Enquiries ranged from governance best practice and procedural interpretation through to complex disputes requiring careful handling and risk management. Support has also included signposting to relevant guidance, templates, training opportunities and external agencies where appropriate.

Meetings, Projects and Strategic Support: Numerous meetings have been attended with councils, stakeholders and partner organisations, alongside preparation for upcoming meetings and ongoing projects. The most significant current project remains the rollout and development of the new HugoFox websites for parish councils. This work is supporting councils to modernise their digital presence, improve accessibility compliance, enhance transparency, and provide residents with clearer access to council information, agendas, minutes and services. Continued support is being provided to councils migrating content, improving governance documentation online, and embedding best practice in website management.



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Impact of .gov.uk Email Addresses: Supporting parish councils with the transition to and adoption of .gov.uk email addresses. The use of official government domain email accounts strengthens public confidence, improves cyber security, reinforces professional standards, and helps ensure council business is conducted through secure and auditable channels rather than personal email accounts. This is increasingly important in the context of data protection, freedom of information requests, records management, and demonstrating proper separation between personal and council communications.

Assertion 10 Implications (Governance and Transparency): The move to compliant websites and official .gov.uk email systems has direct relevance to governance expectations, including the requirements often associated with Assertion 10 regarding transparency, proper communication systems, and the lawful exercise of public duties. Councils that continue to rely on outdated websites, inaccessible records, or personal email arrangements may expose themselves to greater governance risk, weaker audit assurance, reputational damage, and challenges in evidencing sound internal control.

Training and Development: Training support has continued throughout the period, including sessions facilitated via Parkinson's. In addition, the County Officer has delivered two face-to-face training sessions with parish councils, both of which were well received. There remains strong appetite for further in-person sessions, and additional opportunities are welcomed.

10: Website update

Covered in the CO's report above.

11: 2026 Potential speakers

Online Briefings: the CO has contacted the following as potential speakers:

- Cllr Glen Sanderson – declined – Community Partnerships is preferred forum
- Mazars – AGAR and Audit – 20th April 7pm
- Cllr Gordon Castle – Community Partnerships, – 28th April 7pm
- Mayor of Combined Authority, Kim McGuinness – a member of the team will attend – no date at present
- Paul Jones, NCC Director of Environment and Transport – winter date
- County Cllr - Mark Mather – Highways – Autumn date

12: Next meeting of the Committee

County Committee 10am Saturday 16th May – Hybrid at County Hall

14: Any Other Urgent Business - None

Meeting Closed at 11:45