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Northumberland Association of Local Councils

NALC Enews 8 April 2020

Please circulate to all Councillors and Staff at Member Councils

Briefings

The following events are scheduled over the next few weeks. Please use the appropriate link for more information and booking. At the present time I am restricting numbers to 25 as they are also training for me acting as the host.

Monday 20 April 2020 - Accounts and Audit - ZOOM - 8.00pm

This will be a session mainly for clerks who are new to completion of the Annual Accountability and Governance Return but is open to the all Councillors and Clerks of Member Councils.

It's free as it will be the first briefing session we have run via ZOOM so we will be learning too.

Please book using the link below. Joining instructions will be

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/accounts-and-audit-tickets-102163154746>

Tuesday 21 April 2020 Introduction to ZOOM

The primary purpose is to enable participants to practice an electronic meeting. We are using ZOOM but others are available.

The session will also provide an opportunity for questions and discussion on issues arising from the current suspension of physical meetings.

Undoubtedly if further measures relating to our sector have been announced, they too will be discussed.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/zoom-demonstration-and-update-tickets-102239864186>

The Audit of the 2019/2020 Accounts

MHCLG have confirmed to the national NALC that final regulations are due to be made in the week commencing 6 April which will extend the statutory audit deadlines for 2019/20. It is proposed that:

- The publication date for final, audited, accounts for local councils will move from 30 September to 30 November 2020
- To give local councils more flexibility, the requirement for the public inspection period to include the first 10 working days of July has been removed. Instead, local councils must commence the public inspection period on or before the first working day of September 2020

This means that draft accounts must be approved by 31 August 2020 at the latest or maybe approved earlier where possible. **This means there has been a two-month extension.**

Authorities must publish the dates of their public inspection period this year, and the government recommends that they provide public notice on their websites (where available) when the public inspection period would usually commence, explaining why they are departing from normal practise for 2020. We will provide updates for our members once these regulations have been made. The Joint Practitioners Action Group (JPAG) will also provide an addendum to

Further Comment from Stephen Rickitt

The SAAA website <http://localaudits.co.uk/> at Guidance has the forms prepared before the National Emergency. It is possible that their style may change but there is merit in clerks preparing the final accounts for 2019/2020 and the explanation of variances as the substantive content may well be the same as in previous years.

We know that representations have been made about the practicalities such as

- Physically getting the papers to the internal auditor
- Will there be a need for "wet" signatures
- How will the public exercise the rights of inspection.

The suspicion is that the legislation will need tweaking once practitioners have considered it.

Holding Remote Meetings

Legislation has now come into force enabling Councils to hold electronic meetings. The national NALC have produced some useful information on the coronavirus part of their website <http://www.nalc.gov.uk>

We'd welcome details of any issues which have worked well, or those ways which did not work as well as hoped.

We know there are concerns about existing Councillors being disenfranchised if they do not have the necessary hardware or have poor facilities. That is inevitable at the present time but if your Council has found a way to mitigate the problem, please let us know so that the ideas can be shared.

As can be seen above, a further briefing has been arranged for 21 April to enable those new to electronic meetings to get some experience.

We suggest that Councils consider having a dry-run before embarking on a full scale formal meeting. It may also be wise to

Agendas and other documents should be circulated as usual, although hard copies through the post may present an issue depending on your local circumstances.

Village Halls and other Community Organisations

Our colleagues in CAN are keeping their website up-to-date with information affecting their sector during the National Emergency. Their website is <http://ca-north.org.uk/>

Amongst the issues on the website is information about insurance policies and requirements to occupy/use buildings. These may apply to Councils who own or occupy premises.

Elections and the Six-month rule

Regulations have just been published with the effect of postponing all elections, polls and referendums until May 2021. They need careful study. There a little bit of guidance in a letter sent by MHCLG to the Chief Executives of the City and County Councils. This is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-letter-to-councils-about-local-authority-meetings-and-postponement-of-elections>

At first sight this does not address the issues arising the six-month rule where an absence for that period causes an automatic vacancy. The rule is more detailed but that is the broad effect. If your Council has a Councillor in that category and the six-months are not yet completed, then a leave of absence can be given.

What is unclear is the position of a Councillor who would have been given a leave of absence at a meeting in February or March but that meeting was cancelled because of coronavirus. The national NALC are pressing Govt. on this point amongst others.

The County Council

On 7 April all clerks were sent a letter from the County Council explaining the current actions being taken by the Local Services Teams.

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https://mcusercontent.com/5060a2022e1081d67bbdd9b3a/files/a67c81bf-1716-4954-ba1c-ac0b6ec790f1/LS_Service_Update_for_T_PC_7_April_2020_.pdf

Security Issues

Member Councils are rightfully concerned about the security of systems such as ZOOM. There are legitimate concerns which ZOOM and other providers are addressing. The risks are mitigated to some degree if caution is exercised when clicking on any links and having up-to-date protection on your devices.

There is also a lot of misinformation being circulated. For what it is worth, at home I use <https://www.snopes.com/> or <https://fullfact.org/> Neither are infallible but do provide a way of checking some of the statements being made particularly on social media.



If you have any comments or observations, please contact

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