

Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association



Annual Report and Accounts 2020-2021

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Chairman's Annual Report

It has certainly been another very demanding year for all parish and town councils and, indeed, challenging for all of us individually, but it has been so encouraging to witness the way in which local councils have responded to the pandemic. The extent to which volunteers, very often under the guidance and oversight of their parish councils, have stepped forward to make available much needed support to those in their communities perhaps less fortunate than themselves has been inspiring.

The Association itself has played a part in continuing to work closely with the County Council on the development of initiatives to help combat social isolation and loneliness. An informal meeting of the County Council cabinet in February, which our CEO was invited to address, endorsed the importance of this work and agreed a number of actions, including the development of a related 'Loneliness campaign' which was launched in March.

More recently, SPCA and Staffordshire County Council jointly hosted an evening webinar to present a strategic update from both organisations, and discussed opportunities for parish councils and the County Council to work together centred on the *#DoingOurBit* campaign, to focus on ways and means of keeping local residents healthy and supported through the coming winter.

The Government's failure to make any accommodation for the continuation of remote meetings beyond 6th May, notwithstanding the then still widespread problems associated with the pandemic, induced widespread concern and criticism was rightly the subject of strongly worded representation from NALC. I can reflect that all Staffordshire MPs responded positively to a letter I wrote to them on behalf of SPCA in early February calling for an extension to the then current 'Flexibility Regulations' and that Aaron Bell MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, who acts as convener of the Staffordshire group, promptly wrote on their behalf to the Minister of State outlining the local council sector's case. The Minister concerned eventually responded some three months later, offering nothing of any positive note to allay the very real problems caused by the government's inflexibility and the obvious misalignment of the requirements for parish councils to meet 'face-to-face' from 7th May onwards in clear contravention of the government's own then current guidance that such meetings could not in practice be held due to ongoing restrictions on persons meeting indoors.

Throughout, the Government has contended that extending the Flexibility Regulations made under section 78 of the Coronavirus Act, which were implemented on 4th April 2020, would have required primary legislation, further suggesting that the progress made on the vaccination programme in the Spring made an extension unnecessary. That must remain a moot point and clearly the failure to allow continuing flexibility in meeting arrangements caused many problems.

The Government has at least acknowledged that some councils, though by no means all, have expressed an interest in meeting remotely on a permanent basis, and to that end it launched a call for evidence to gather the views of councils and inform a longer-term decision about whether to make express provision for councils to meet remotely beyond the scope of the pandemic. It's hoped that this option will eventually be made available and NALC will continue to press the case for change.

Notwithstanding the difficulties caused by the pandemic, I believe the Association has gone from strength to strength over the last year and that new and creative ways of working have ensured that the service level has not only been maintained but in the area of training significantly expanded. Andrew and Lisa provide more details about this opposite.

Patricia Ansell

Chairman and Vice President of SPCA



Chief Executive's Report

During the course of 2021 NALC has pursued vigorously its campaign to deal effectively with bullying and disruptive behaviour at meetings, emphasising that it is committed to promoting and supporting good governance and the highest standards of conduct and behaviour in local councils, by councillors, clerks and council staff. NALC is also continuing to call for the strengthening of the standards regime by introducing meaningful sanctions, a single Code of Conduct and mandatory training.

Early in the year, NALC recommended the adoption by parish and town councils of the new model Code of Conduct as drafted and published by the Local Government Association. A number of SPCA member councils have followed that advice, albeit there is some uncertainty because not all principal councils across Staffordshire appear to be convinced that the new Code as drafted by LGA is suitable and some have resolved not to recommend changing their existing Codes of Conduct at this stage but rather would await the Government's response to the recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life which might impact on related provisions in the future.

One major concern is the extent of the application of the new Code to members when they are not acting in their official capacity as a councillor, given that the new model code seeks to apply high standards of behaviour "at all times". Whilst this is an appropriate and laudable aim, the difficulty remains that the primary legislation takes a much narrower view on that particular issue. Thus, if the new model code is adopted in its current format, there could be issues associated with complaints received about the conduct of members when they are not acting in an official role; for example, a complaint that a member had been disrespectful or abusive when using their own private social media account. Under the new model code that would probably be deemed to be a breach, but if a breach was so found it would be susceptible to legal challenge on the basis that the Code went further than the primary legislation permitted.

The further broadening of the scope of the Association's training programme under the stewardship of Lisa Horritt has continued apace throughout the year, with additional new courses on Social Media for Councillors, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Creating Accessible Documents having been introduced to complement more familiar subjects. Lisa has also fostered the sharing of courses with neighbouring County Associations and this has resulted in an increase in our ability to run sessions dealing with less popular topics such as Cemetery Management which would not be viable if run solely for Staffordshire councils. Lisa explains more below!

Although the pandemic clearly created some financial pressures, especially for those councils whose budgets rely heavily in the generation of income from facilities and activities, it is encouraging to reflect that such difficulties do not appear to have impacted on the willingness of member councils to ensure that clerks and elected representatives alike take full advantage of the new training opportunities. The uptake on the CiLCA courses now being promoted locally has similarly been very positive and will help bring greater level of professionalism and expertise to the sector. Lisa herself takes up the story...

"Training courses recommenced in July 2020, following a period of adjustment required due to the pandemic resulting in our courses moving to Zoom. Despite the shorter training period within the year, we trained over 600 people at over 65 sessions during the year. Online training has allowed us to train more easily around our vast County and has allowed us access to a highly skilled group of trainers who are situated all over the UK. I would like to thank everyone who embraced the move to Zoom allowing us to continue to provide much needed training. Face-to-face courses will resume but Zoom will continue to be an important part of our training tools".

Andrew McRae

Lisa Horritt

Receipts and payments Year to 31st March 2021

2019/20	Receipts	2020/21
1,493.96	Interest / Dividends	1,335.05
8,750.00	Grants received	8,750.00
766.53	Sales	101.32
54,862.00	Subscriptions	54,599.00
5,144.00	Training	17,264.23
	Miscellaneous	1,142.64
71,016.99	Total	83,192.24
	 Payments	
1,520.48	Meetings expenditure	585.14
82.50	Admin & Postage	0.00
289.97	Insurance	289.97
710.76	Printing costs	139.60
642.27	Purchases	172.29
38,190.03	Salaries and overheads	48,288.90
2,563.92	Pensions	3,146.00
27,938.82	Subs payments	27,942.48
799.68	Training costs	11,668.00
621.74	Travel expenses	0.00
73,360.17	Total	92,232.38
(2,343.18)	Surplus / (Deficit)	(9040.14)

Balance Sheet as at 31st March 2021

Opening balance 1/4/2020	94,369.09
Receipts	83,192.24
Payments	92,232.38
Closing balance	85,328.95

Represented by:

CCLA Property Fund	30,000.00
CCLA Cash Fund	25,495.39
Cash at bank	36,473.56
Less unpresented cheques	-260.00
Plus unbanked receipts	0.00
Less early subs receipts	-9,380.00
Plus pre-paid salaries	3,000.00
TOTAL	85,328.95

Auditor's Certificate

Audited and found correct according to the books and records supplied to me

Alan Toplis

Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association

affiliated to the National Association of Local Councils

Office address: Eastgate House, 79 Eastgate Street, Stafford, ST16 2NG
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Website: www.spcaonline.org.uk

Chief Executive: Andrew McRae
Assistant County Officer / Training Officer: Lisa Horritt
Administration Officer: Richard Ellison

Objects of the Association

The aims and objects of the Association are to take all such steps as may be necessary or desirable in the interest of the members consistent with the objects of the National Association of Local Councils, which are:-

- (i) to protect and promote the interests, rights, functions and privileges of members
- (ii) to offer advice to members in the performance of their duties
- (iii) to promote and develop the social, economic and environmental life of parishes and villages;
- (iv) to promote training to support an increasingly professional local government sector

Benefits to Member Councils

- Legal/financial/general/on advice council administration and activities
- Publication of information packs, circulars, legal topic notes, briefing notes, "The Good Councillor's Guide", model documents
- Regular newsletter

Information and Training includes

- Technical Library, databases
- Tailored seminars for clerks and councillors including special topics e.g. chairmanship skills, end of year accounts, VAT, planning, CiLCA; courses are currently delivered 'on-line'

Lobbying and Wider Representation

- Executive Committee selected from amongst Parish Councils and partner organisations
- SPCA representatives sit on Police Committees, Locality Action Partnerships, Parish Forums etc.
- A representative on the NALC Executive to advise NALC which, in turn, lobbies central Government on behalf of the local council sector
- In-depth professional legal/policy advice on the many changes taking place in local government is a sector specific service provided by the National Association of Local Councils for member Councils

Promoting Good Local Governance by:

- Raising the profile of parishes
- Campaigning for new parishes
- Informing the public about parish councils
- Disseminating good practice
- Encouraging greater democratic awareness



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National Association
of Local Councils

 **Staffordshire**
County Council

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