

SOMERSET ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

ANNUAL REPORT 2016-17



CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION 2017

This report covers the period 1st April 2016 to 31 March 2017. The Association has now settled down in our office in Somerton and the move is continuing to be cost effective to the Association.

The Association's website has been redesigned and hopefully is more user friendly. The Association encourages all of our member councils to allow councillors to have access to the website as it is a very effective channel of information for our sector. Of course a website, by its nature can only provide general information but use of the website releases time for our County Executive Officer to deal with more complicated issues.

During the year we have continued to develop our training services. In addition to our essential training for councillors, our chairmanship training and training for clerks, sessions have been held on agendas and minutes, audit, budget setting, pensions briefings, planning and transparency. Some of this training has involved outside providers and we have participated in training events run by other organisations such as CIL and neighbourhood planning organised by the CCS. Some of our member councils have taken up the offer of "Whole Council" events which can be very useful in focusing on issues which are particular to an individual council. We continue to welcome your comments on improving our "Training Offer".

The result of the European referendum has resulted in a change of political leadership nationally with the government being more focused on the consequences of the vote. With one exception the government's legislative involvement in our sector has reduced. The government did, however, produce a consultative document proposing to "Cap" the precepts of certain councils in our sector (with a threat of extension to other councils in the future. The Association, led by NALC nationally, was totally opposed to this suggestion. We held an all area meeting, wrote to our local MPs and many councils and individual councillors responded to the consultation document. The proposal was subsequently not pursued by the government. With the lack of other legislative changes the need for area meetings has reduced. The West area has been involved in discussions over the establishment of a new council to replace Taunton Deane and West Somerset District Councils. The Association is considering ways of changing the focus and invigorating area meetings.

Many of our member councils have received grants to purchase IT equipment and other services to improve transparency.

During the year our County Information Officer Sam Winter decided to move to pastures new. Our loss is a gain for one of our member councils. Sam's services are sorely missed by the Association and we have taken some time to consider how we replace her. Our County Executive Officer Justin has increased his hours and the management committee which, in addition to myself, consists of Councillors Jean Allgrove, Jenny Lawrence and Loretta Whetlor would like to place on record our thanks for the work of both Justin and Sam during the year. We will continue to work

to provide and improve the service to our member councils. The team would still wish to improve the geographical spread of membership of the management committee. The team has worked on changing the association from an unincorporated association to a company limited by guarantee. The finances of the association continue to be sound and in accordance with requests made from member councils is in the process of changing bank accounts to improve the level of return on our reserves.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank both the Management Committee and the County Committee for their support during the year. It is with sadness, however that I have to report the passing of one of our members, Chris Britton, a highly respected member of Wells City Council and County Committee member; he will be greatly missed.

Dave Mitton

Chairman

August 2017

SOMERSET ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Edgar Hall, Somerton Business Park, Somerton, Somerset, TA11 6SB

OFFICERS AND COUNTY COMMITTEE

CHAIRMAN



D Mitton

PRESIDENT



Mrs J Allgrove

VICE CHAIRMAN



Mrs J Lawrence

COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICER

J Robinson

COUNTY INFORMATION OFFICER

Mrs S Winter (until January)

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Mrs J Allgrove

Mrs J Lawrence

D Mitton

Mrs L Whetlor

AREA REPRESENTATIVES & COUNTY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

NORTH AREA

A Carr (Ch)

Mrs J Lawrence

Mrs C Wright

EAST AREA

D Aldridge (Ch)

Mrs R Losey

C Britton

SOUTH AREA

P Seib (Ch)

T Philpott

Mrs A Reeder

G Townrow

WEST AREA

Mrs L Whetlor (Ch)

Mrs J Allgrove

D Mitton

The Committee Members and Officers are those in office as at 31 March 2016.

(Ch) indicates the Chairmen of the Area Committees as at 31 March 2016.

ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR TO 31ST March 2017

General Introduction

This report covers the fifteenth full year of the independent operation of the association and its 75th year as a body. We have been sharing an office with the Somerset Playing Fields Association for just over four years and the arrangement is continuing to work well.

At the end of February 2015, both organisations moved from our former base at Victoria House in Taunton, to The Edgar Hall in Somerton. When deciding to move, the association was keen to find a location that offered ample parking, meeting room space and high-quality training facilities; The Edgar Hall offers all of these and we are grateful to the officers and members of Somerton Town Council for being the most gracious of hosts. At the end of our second full year in Somerton, it is good to note that many councils have already taken advantage of our new location and made appointments to drop by for a private consultation. Member councils are always welcome to visit, although prior notice would be much appreciated.

Last year, we reported on a hectic election year and this period has not been any quieter. However, it has been gratifying to see a rather more pleasant range of cases crossing our desks; with many councils taking on new services and seeking advice on ways to improve their communities and accountability. If last year felt a little depressing at times, this year has been invigorating and inspirational on a number of levels.

Financially, it has been another successful year for the association, owing in no small part to the great enthusiasm for our training courses. It has been most heartening to see so many councils still ensuring that their new members have the opportunity to undertake basic training. Many county associations continue to receive substantial grants from principal authorities within their areas but in Somerset we are in no way reliant on such support, a fact that we are very grateful for bearing in mind the cuts in central governments settlements that are certain to continue until 2020. Membership numbers have also continued to be strong and, for the first time in the association's history, we have 265 member councils and parish meetings.

The association, in common with many organisations, continues to face a decrease in numbers generally attending events outside of the parochial area. However, at the 2016 AGM we successfully managed to fill several vacancies on our area committees; these members go on to serve on the association's County Committee. The only area committee meeting during the year was the All Area Meeting in December 2016. The main reason for this has been the fact that it has been an unusually quiet period in terms of changes to policy and legislation. The government has clearly had its mind on other things, in the seemingly endless fallout from the EU referendum and the sector has been spared the usual round of consultations and new burdens. We have also been keen to take advantage of this

relative calm and focus on training and strengthening relationships with principal authorities, rather than holding meetings for their own sake.

The basic reason for joining the Association remains the support provided through advice and guidance for the clerk and chairman, or other designated councillor, and hence to elected members of councils, together with a representative role locally, regionally and nationally. By joining a county association, member councils also become members of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). NALC truly proved its worth this year when the government's consultation on the Local Government Finance Settlement raised the spectre of capping for larger councils. Over 1400 councils (the largest ever) responded to DCLG with a strong message: now is not the time for a u-turn on localism. Whilst the government listened and decided to take no action, the issue has not gone away and will undoubtedly resurface in the Autumn in some new guise.



The Edgar Hall, Somerton. Reproduced by kind permission of Somerton Town Council

SUPPORT SERVICES

As in previous years most queries and requests for support and guidance were received by email and there are occasional telephone calls to the office. It is helpful if the office can clearly identify the sender or caller by both name and member council, together with a contact number. In addition to the office number, there is also now a mobile number for our CEO, who is happy to take calls when available, including during the evening, should something unexpected crop up at a meeting.

With the establishment of our website members can often access useful information without contacting the office. Members are reminded, however that the website can only provide for general advice and that is very useful to contact the office if there are specific local circumstances to be taken into account. The website had a major revamp in January and we are very grateful to Sam Winter for all her hard work and input into this project. We also used this opportunity to lose the rather cumbersome login system which had become a cause of complaint for both officers and members alike.

In general, the office now receives around 1500 enquiries a year from members and partner organisations, excluding training enquiries. Whilst we are able to handle the vast majority in-house, members do also have access (through SALC) to specialist legal and financial advice provide by The National Association of Local Councils (NALC). In total, 8 queries were forwarded to NALC during the period covered by this report. The NALC service is free of charge and is part of your membership and is a vital safety net, especially for very small councils who would struggle to afford the fees for a private legal opinion.

We have also continued to focus on the outreach work we can offer to members and can arrange to meet with member councils at a location to suit. Our office in Somerton offers several private meeting rooms and a number of councils have already visited for a private consultation. We are able to offer support and advise on a very wide range of issues from basic procedural advice, through to handling complaints, conflict management, employment issues, salary benchmarking, finance/audit, business planning and community engagement.

With advance notice, we can also offer support at council meetings if requested by a member council. Occasionally we are asked to observe meetings and then produce a report for the council highlighting any issues or areas for improvement. Several members have also requested us to review projects undertaken by the council and to act as a “critical friend” when things haven’t quite gone to plan. In short, if a council is not happy with its governance arrangements, meetings, structures or individual projects/services, we can usually find a way to assist.

As always, we are open to ideas and suggestions from our members for both events and new services.

TRAINING

Some County Associations have substantial grant income and tend to have larger staffing complements. Our association, however, is almost entirely reliant on affiliation fees and income from training, with our training fees some of the lowest in the country. Election years are usually the busiest for training and the Summer months the most popular time to attend.



Training formed a major part of the service to members. In total 356 people attended our Spring, Summer and Autumn sessions and joint events:

| Course | Number of Participants |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Councillor Essentials Lecture | 80 |
| Chairmanship Training | 38 |
| Clerks Training | 61 |
| Agendas and Minutes Seminar | 11 |
| Audit Seminar | 25 |
| Transparency Seminar (LGRC) | 7 |
| Planning and Strategy Seminars | 64 |
| Neighbourhood Planning Seminars (CCS) | 55 |
| Pensions Briefing | 15 |

This year saw us continue to offer new training opportunities by partnering with outside agencies, thus allowing members to benefit from the knowledge of nationally recognised

experts. Some of our courses are workshop based (an approach we are continuing to develop), together with more traditional lectures and seminars. Our long term aim is to have a comprehensive range of courses that will appeal to a broad range of members and acknowledge the fact that different people learn (or prefer to learn) in different ways.

The majority of the courses were held in Somerton owing to the venue being fairly central within the county and close to main roads. A certain amount of facility time is also included in our rental package. Training for CiLCA (Certificate in Local Council Administration) is currently organised by the Society of Local Council Clerks, by mutual agreement of both organisations; Bruce Poole the Somerset SLCC Branch Chairman is the county's approved NALC/SLCC CiLCA training and, as always, we remain grateful for his support.

In addition to our standard courses, the association now offers bespoke training to individual councils, at very reasonable rates. Please contact the office for further details.

POLICY ISSUES

NALC has lobbied extensively and with great success in recent years around the issues of the Localisation of Council Tax Support Scheme and capping. All the local authorities in Somerset passed on a reduced proportional share of the LCTSS grant this year, with the continued exception of West Somerset District Council. We now know that the grant will be phased out this year (it was, after all introduced as a transitional grant), as the government revenue support grant paid to all principal authorities is phased out over the course of the next 18 months. With regard to capping, NALC continued to hold numerous meetings with ministers and were instrumental in ensuring that capping was not extended to cover our sector during 2017/18. Whilst the outcome was positive in December, it is clear that ministers will continue to monitor precept increases and may well take action in future years.

There has been limited interest in the new Local Councils Award Scheme, which replaced the former Quality Councils scheme. There are now three tiers of accreditation, allowing most councils to at least achieve the entry level. Somerton Town Council were the first in the county to be successfully accredited and have now achieved the Quality award. Puriton and East Huntspill parish councils are also now accredited and Crewkerne Town Council has achieved the Quality award; congratulations to you all! We have continued to work with neighbouring counties when it comes to appraising completed submissions and have a well-established regional accreditation panel to consider applications.

A number of clerks were also successful in completing the Certificate in Local Council Administration this year. CiLCA now has a slightly more academic focus and will count as an NVQ Level 3 qualification. It is now estimated that nearly a third of councils nationally either have a CiLCA qualified clerk or one studying towards the award. One major benefit is that having a qualified clerk remains one of the key criteria should a council wish to adopt the General Power of Competence.

The Transparency Fund for Smaller Councils has continued to provide grants to smaller councils (turnover less than £25k) to enable compliance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities, which became law in April 2015. The fund, which is administered by NALC and DCLG, will run until February 2018, although it is probably best not to rely on this date as the funding (£4 million nationally) could be exhausted before then. Over 70 councils in Somerset have benefitted to date, receiving over £60,000 in grant funding. The scheme enables smaller council to apply for funding to purchase equipment (computer or scanner), develop a website and undertake training; alongside support with additional staff costs and website hosting fees. Please contact Justin for the latest application form and guidance and please keep the applications flowing in. Councils are also able to apply to the fund more than once for some ongoing costs.

The new sector led body tasked with procuring external audit services for all parish councils and drainage boards has also had a busy year and has successfully tendered all audit contracts. Nationally, only 6 councils opted out of this new arrangement and these councils will now be responsible for procuring their own audit services in future, in line with very stringent, time consuming and costly legislative requirements. The new body is being managed by representatives from NALC, SLCC and The ADA (Association of Drainage Authorities) and has undoubtedly realised savings on behalf of those councils who chose to join the scheme; yet another excellent example of the benefits that can be achieved when we work together as a sector.

REPORT FROM NALC REPRESENTATIVE (MRS LORETTA WHETLOR)

This year started with another NALC Lobby Day with MPs in Westminster. On this occasion I met with David Warburton, MP for Somerton and Frome. I had some questions for him which had been raised locally on a number of occasions, with the dualling of the A303 being most timely as proposed routes had been released for consultation. David was extremely helpful during the capping consultation and was very giving of his time when we met. He clearly has a keen interest in parish councils and in the association's work.

In October 2016 I attended the NALC AGM in Birmingham, which was a calmer affair than the previous years had been, with no controversial motions proposed to the membership. The December National Council meeting (now renamed as the National Assembly) saw a significant change as longstanding chairman, Ken Browse, had come to the end of his term of office. NALC's new chairman is Councillor Sue Baxter from Worcestershire and she will benefit from having Ken Browse as her vice chairman.

I have continued to attend regional meetings on a regular basis, together with Justin Robinson and Dave Mitton. These regular sessions allow the senior members and officers from 7 county associations to share ideas, as well as giving a strong, united voice at NALC. The region also organised a highly successful Spring conference in Taunton, with over 120 delegates attending and the head of DCLG's Parish Council Section in attendance.

REPORT FROM SPFA REPRESENTATIVE (MRS JENNY LAWRENCE)

The Somerset Playing Fields Association has been running for about 50 years, they advise and support not only playing fields in Somerset but parish councils, sports clubs and centres and open play spaces. SALC has had a representative on their county committee for many years.

This last year saw another very successful AGM together with awards ceremony in September. SPFA continues to share an office with SALC and both parties find this arrangement highly beneficial as it allows us to share ideas and advise each other on matters of joint interest.

OTHER REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITY

The chairmen, national representatives and chief officers from the seven county associations in the South West met quarterly to discuss common issues and policy matters. This co-operative working between associations in the South West has ensured that there are representatives from the South West on all of NALC's main committees. County officers continue to hold a two day meeting every August to discuss policy issues and develop joint work programmes. With officer resources always stretched, this joint working and support network is of great benefit to us all.

In addition, the County Executive Officer has attended a number of outside bodies and meetings, often as a guest speaker. The association has continued to build strong links with members and officers of all the principal authorities and started a programme of visits to Standards Committees this March. It is hoped that this work will generate some new initiatives to help deal with some of the standards issues and complaints handled by monitoring officers. The CEO also participated in several surgeries organised by Mendip District Council; these outreach sessions generated both enquiries and new casework. We have also continued to work with the Community Council for Somerset, with the CEO speaking at several neighbourhood planning seminars and also assisting with an organisational review of a large town council. The association strongly believes that the phrase "strength in numbers" not only applies to local councils but to all the bodies working in our sector across Somerset and beyond; as long as we continue to work together, there is much we can achieve.

SALC Membership 2016/17

Total Number of Parish Councils in Membership 263

Total Number of Parish Meetings in Membership 2

| <i>Mendip</i> | <i>Sedgemoor</i> | <i>Taunton Deane</i> | <i>West Somerset</i> | <i>South Somerset</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Parish | Parish | Parish | Parish | Parish |
| Ashwick PC | Ashcott PC | Bishops Lydeard PC | Bicknoller PC | Abbas & |
| Baltonsborough PC | Axbridge TC | Bradford on Tone PC | Brompton Ralph PC | Templecombe PC |
| Batcombe PC | Badgworth PC | Burrowbridge PC | Brompton Regis PC | Aller PC |
| Beckington PC | Bawdrip PC | Cheddon Fitzpaine PC | Brushford PC | Ansford PC |
| Berkley PC | Berrow PC | Chipstable PC | Carhampton PC | Ash PC |
| Binegar PC | Brean PC | Churchstanton PC | Clatworthy PC | Ashill PC |
| Buckland Dinham PC | Brent Knoll PC | Combe Florey PC | Crowcombe PC | Babcary PC |
| Butleigh PC | Broomfield PC | Comeytrowe PC | Cutcombe PC | Barrington PC |
| Chilcompton PC | Burnham on Sea & | Corfe PC | Dulverton PC | Barton St David PC |
| Coleford PC | Highbridge TC | Cotford St. Luke PC | Dunster PC | Barwick PC |
| Cranmore PC | Burnham Without PC | Creech St Michael PC | Exford PC | Beercrocombe PC |
| Croscombe PC | Burtle PC | Fitzhead PC | Exmoor PC | Brewham PC |
| Ditchat PC | Cannington PC | Halse PC | Exton PC | Broadway PC |
| Douling PC | Catcott PC | Hatch Beauchamp PC | Holford PC | Bruton TC |
| East Pennard PC | Chapel Allerton PC | Kingston St Mary PC | Huish Champflower PC | Brympton PC |
| Evercreech PC | Cheddar PC | Langford Budville PC | Kilve PC | Buckland St Mary PC |
| Frome TC | Chedzoy PC | Lydeard St Lawrence & | Luccombe PC | Cary Moor (Grouped) PC |
| Glastonbury TC | Chilton Polden PC | Tolland PC | Luxborough PC | Castle Cary TC |
| Godney PC | Chilton Trinity PC | Milverton PC | Minehead TC | Chaffcombe PC |
| Hemington PC | Compton Bishop PC | Neroche PC | Monksilver PC | Chard TC |
| Holcombe PC | Cossington PC | North Curry PC | Nettlecombe PC | Charlton Horethorne PC |
| Kilmersdon PC | Durleigh PC | Norton Fitzwarren PC | Old Cleeve PC | Charlton Mackrell PC |
| Leigh on Mendip PC | East Brent PC | Nynehead PC | Porlock PC | Charlton Musgrove PC |
| Litton PC | East Huntspill PC | Oake PC | Sampford Brett PC | Chilthorne Domer PC |
| Lullington PM | Edington PC | Otterford PC | Selworthy & | Chiselborough PC |
| Lydford PC | Enmore PC | Pitminster PC | Minehead Without PC | Combe St. Nicholas PC |
| Meare PC | Fiddington PC | Ruishton & | Stogumber PC | Compton Dundon PC |
| Mells PC | Goathurst PC | Thornfalcon PC | Stogursey PC | Corton Denham PC |
| North Wootton PC | Lympsham PC | Sampford Arundel PC | Timberscombe PC | Crewkerne TC |
| Norton St Philip PC | Lyng PC | Stawley PC | Upton PC | Curry Mallet PC |
| Nunney PC | Mark PC | Stoke St Gregory PC | Watchet TC | Curry Rivel PC |
| Pilton PC | Middlezoy PC | Trull PC | West Quantoxhead PC | Donyatt PC |
| Priddy PC | Nether Stowey PC | Wellington TC | Williton PC | Dowlish Wake PC |
| Rode PC | North Petherton TC | Wellington Without PC | Winsford PC | Drayton PC |
| Rodney Stoke PC | Otterhampton PC | West Bagborough PC | Withycombe PC | East Chinnock PC |
| Selwood PC | Over Stowey PC | West Buckland PC | Withypool & | East Coker PC |
| Shepton Mallet TC | Pawlett PC | West Hatch PC | Hawkridge PC | Fivehead PC |
| St. Cuthbert Without PC | Puriton PC | West Monkton PC | Wootton Courtenay PC | Hambridge & |
| Stoke St. Michael PC | Shapwick PC | Wiveliscombe TC | | Westport PC |
| Ston Easton PC | Shipham PC | | | Hardington |
| Stratton on the Fosse PC | Spaxton PC | | | Mandeville PC |
| Street PC | Stawell PC | | | Haselbury Plucknett PC |
| Trudoxhill PC | Thurloxton PC | | | Henstridge PC |
| Walton PC | Weare PC | | | High Ham PC |
| Wanstrow PC | Wedmore PC | | | Hinton St. George PC |
| | Wembdon PC | | | |
| | West Huntspill PC | | | |
| | Westonzoyland PC | | | |
| | Woolavington PC | | | |

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|--|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Wells CC West Pennard PC Westbury sub Mendip PC Whatley PC Witham Friary PC Wookey PC</p> | | | | <p>Horsington PC Horton PC Huish Episcopi PC Ilminster TC Ilton PC Keinton Mandeville PC Kingsbury Episcopi PC Kingsdon PC Knowle St Giles PM Langport TC Long Load PC Long Sutton PC Lopen PC Marston Magna PC Martock PC Merriott PC Milborne Port PC Misterton PC Montacute PC Mudford PC North Cadbury (Grouped) PC North Vale (Grouped) PC Norton sub Hamdon PC Odcombe PC Pen Selwood PC Pitcombe PC Pitney PC Queen Camel PC Rimpton PC Seavingtons (Grouped) PC Shepton Montague PC Somerton TC South Cadbury PC South Petherton PC Sparkford PC Stocklinch PC Stoke sub Hamdon PC Stoke Trister PC Tatworth & Forton PC Tintinhull PC Wayford PC West & Middle Chinnock PC West Camel PC West Coker PC West Crewkerne PC Wincanton TC Winsham PC Yeovil TC</p> |
|--|--|--|--|--|