

**SOMERSET ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

**ANNUAL REPORT 2017-18**



## **CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to our Annual report which covers the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 to 31 March 2018. The Association has been operating successfully from Edgar Hall in Somerton since 2015 and we renewed our tenancy for three years in March 2018.

We hope that members like and use the website which was redesigned last year and that all of our member councils allow all councillors access to it. The website, of course can only provide general information but using it releases time for our County Executive Officer to deal with more complicated issues.

Following the departure of Sam Winter last year the Management Committee took some time consider the role of her replacement and we appointed Simon Pritchard as the Assistant County Executive Officer half way through the year.

During the interim our training was more limited but nearly 300 participants benefited from the courses which we ran and we continued to offer new training opportunities during the year. The work involved in preparing local councils for the effects of the GDPR shows that training requirements on that front alone will increase in the year 2018/9. 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".

During the year the Government have been heavily involved in "Brexit" and there has been little legislation directly affecting local councils. The cuts in the grants to the principal authorities has, of course, greatly affected many of our member councils. It was pleasing to note the statement made by the then Secretary of State for the DCLG that the Government would not be revisiting the issue of "Capping" the precepts of certain councils in our sector for three years.

The lack of other legislative changes has reduced the need for area meetings. The West area has been involved in discussions over the establishment of warding arrangements with the Boundary Commission for the new Somerset West and Taunton Authority and with the 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. The end of this process coincided with the end of our year.

The Association took some time to consider support for our County Executive Officer Justin Robinson. We increased Justin's hours of work and appointed Simon Pritchard as his Assistant in October 2017.

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 Simon 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.

Work has continued, with legal advice, on changing the association from an unincorporated association to a company limited by guarantee. The finances of the association continue to be sound. In accordance with requests made from member councils the Association has investigated methods of improving the level of return on our reserves and decisions will be taken on the best option during the coming year.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank both the Management Committee and the County Committee for their support during the year.

Dave Mitton

Chairman

September 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

### ASSISTANT COUNTY EXECUTIVE OFFICER

S Pritchard

### MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Mrs J Allgrove

Mrs J Lawrence

D Mitton

Mrs L Whetlor

### AREA REPRESENTATIVES & COUNTY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

#### NORTH AREA

Mrs J Lawrence

#### EAST AREA

D Aldridge

Mrs R Losey

#### SOUTH AREA

P Seib (Ch)

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 2017.

(Ch) indicates the Chairmen of the Area Committees as at 31 March 2017.

# **ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR TO 31<sup>ST</sup> March 2018**

## **General Introduction**

This report covers the sixteenth full year of the independent operation of the association and its 76<sup>th</sup> year as a body. We have been sharing an office with the Somerset Playing Fields Association for over eight 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 remain grateful to the officers and members of Somerton Town Council for being the most gracious of hosts. At the end of our first three years 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. The association was delighted to renew our tenancy at the Edgar Hall for a further three years in March 2018.

This year has been another busy one for our advisory service, with a broad range of enquiries to test our knowledge and troubleshooting skills. It is fair to say that no two days are ever the same! As the association was down to a single staff member for the first nine months of 2017, most of our efforts were focussed on providing timely and high-quality advice, with training and basic information services having to take a secondary role. However, once our new Assistant CEO, Simon Pritchard, was appointed we were able to return to our more traditional focus on advice, information and training. Unusually, and despite a couple of events being lost to bad weather, March proved to be our busiest training month of the year.

Financially, it has been another solid year for the association, to the extent that we now have reserves that are the envy of many other county associations. 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 entirely self-sufficient, a fact that we are very grateful for bearing in mind the cuts in central government settlements that are certain to continue until 2020. Membership numbers have also continued to be stable at around 260.

The association, in common with many organisations, continues to face a decrease in numbers generally attending events outside of the parochial area. As such, there has been little demand to hold area meetings. The main reason for this has been the fact that it has remained a relatively 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, aside from the somewhat fraught preparation for GDPR. We have also been keen to take advantage of this relative calm and focus on developing our training offer and further 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 further proved its worth this year when the government's consultation on the Local Government Finance Settlement and the introduction of capping was finally resolved with a three-year commitment to allow parish councils to remain exempt from referendum principles. A further victory was secured by NALC in March 2018 when the government did a last-minute u-turn and decided to exempt our sector from having to appoint a data protection officer for GDPR. The sector-wide sigh of relief was palpable!



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 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 has had some further work over the past twelve months, with improved security features added in advance of GDPR

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, 5 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 (although this year bucked that trend).



Despite limitation on staff time, training nevertheless remained a core part of the service to members. In total 291 people attended our Spring, Summer and Autumn sessions and briefing events:

Course	Number of Participants
Councillor Essentials Lecture	143
Chairmanship Training	15
Clerks Training	35
Clerks Briefing	29
Budget Setting Seminar	4
Information Governance Seminar	10
SIDs Briefing	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>291</b>

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. Although the council tax support scheme is now winding down in all areas, the issue of the extension of referendum principles ("capping") has remained a contentious subject for the past three years. NALC continued to hold numerous meetings with ministers and were instrumental in ensuring that capping was not extended to cover our sector during 2018/19 with an unexpected assurance that the issue would not be revisited for three years if parish councils continued to demonstrate "restraint" when setting their budgets. 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, although with a relatively low average national rise in parish precepts in 2018/19 we are confident that action is unlikely for 2019/20.

NALC was also highly active in preparing the sector for GDPR throughout 2017/18, issuing six legal briefings and a well-received toolkit in March 2018. The toolkit is an incredibly helpful resource, packed with practical policy and notice templates and it is hoped that this will serve as a future model for NALC model guidance. As alluded to earlier, extensive lobbying once again paid off and our sector was eventually exempted from one of the most complicated, time-consuming and potentially expensive parts of the GDPR legislation – having to appoint a data protection officer.

There has still been only limited interest in the new Local Councils Award Scheme, which replaced the former Quality Councils scheme in 2016. There are now three tiers of accreditation, allowing most councils to at least achieve the entry level. 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 is awarded 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 continued to provide grants to smaller councils (turnover less than £25k) throughout 2017/18 to enable compliance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities, which became law in April 2015. The fund, which was administered by NALC and DCLG, closed in February 2018; the final months were so busy that DCLG had to release additional funding. Over 100 councils in Somerset have benefitted, receiving over £80,000 in grant funding. The scheme enabled 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.

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. The external auditor for Somerset will be PKF Littlejohn, who quickly made arrangements for online training seminars and materials. It will be interesting to hear feedback from clerks on the new online submission process. Nationally, only four 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)**

NALC Lobby Days are becoming an annual event in the association's calendar and are of great use to us as parish and town councils in that we can see our MPs in their own setting. We are also able to pass on to them concerns and requests from their local electorate. We do attempt to try and see ALL Somerset MPs but that is not always easy.

On this occasion I met with Marcus Fysh, MP for Yeovil (Dave Mitton also met with Rebecca Pow). The main topic of our conversation was the new Somerset West and Taunton Council and business rate relief on public toilets. The latter having been held back due to Brexit and other pressing government matters such as the General Election in June 2017. Marcus Fysh was very interested in what I had to discuss and it is hoped that he will be able to help us in the future.

In October 2017 I attended, along with our Chairman David Mitton and CEO Justin Robinson the Annual Meeting of NALC, which was held in Milton Keynes. One of the key speakers was Sajid Javid the Secretary of State for Local Government at that time. He praised us as parish and town councillors for our hard work for our communities. A copy of his speech can be accessed from the NALC website. Cllr Sue Baxter was returned as the Chairman of NALC for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year.

I continue, along with our Chairman and CEO to attend the South West Local Council Associations meetings in Devon, where we are able to meet up with representatives from all seven county associations in the South West. We are able to discuss matters that affect the region and present a united front to NALC and at lobbying meetings.

## **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. This year's meeting was attended by civil servants from DHCLG and much time was devoted to expressing the sector's frustration at the continued threat of precept capping; bearing in mind the softening of the government's position later in the year, this felt like time well spent.

In addition, the County Executive Officer has continued to attend at 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 completed a programme of visits to Standards Committees in July 2017. 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 parish forum 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, SPFA, SPARK, Avon and Somerset Constabulary and the Heart of the South West Partnership. 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 2017/18

**Total Number of Parish Councils in Membership 260**

**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			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			

<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 &amp; Forton PC  Tintinhull PC  Wayford PC  West &amp; Middle Chinnock PC  West Camel PC  West Coker PC  West Crewkerne PC  Wincanton TC  Winsham PC  Yeovil TC</p>
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