

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CIVIC OFFICERS
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
11th March 2015

CHAIR'S REPORT

Introduction

I'm pleased to report that today's AGM is the 17th in the history of NACO. NACO continues to be in good shape and financial health although as soon as we seem to solve one problem another appears! It has been noticeable that, whilst most councils are happy for their staff to attend these events, there is an increasing number that are questioning or limiting participation in Executive Committee meetings. This is clearly a problem as someone has to organise the work of the Association. There have been a number of resignations this year owing to 'pressure of work' and we need people to replace them and renew our work. The outlook for civic offices remains very challenging. This has inevitably had an impact on NACO which is why the Executive Committee now meet less frequently for one day only. Our events remain popular amongst civic officers but we are aware that we still recognise the need to make better use of the website in spreading our message and help.

Today's event is well attended and certainly as many delegates as we had two years ago at the similar event. It is heartening to see that Councils still recognise the need and benefit of our events for its staff. Our ability to run a 2 day event and still keep the price to below that of almost a decade ago is a testament to the work and influence that our members have.

NACO remains financially healthy, having, once again, spent very little this year. Our use of electronic communication has vastly reduced our costs. However, with no membership fee we require a reasonable profit from Training Days and any future events. The Training Day in Camden last year made a profit for both NACO and LB Camden Council and this enables us to continue our work. Today's event should make a reasonable profit for both NACO and LB Camden, which has enabled the Executive Committee to continue to recommend a nil membership fee.

Executive Committee

The Executive Committee has met on three occasions since the 2014 AGM (4th March 2014) with these meetings being held in Bath (12th June 2014), Ipswich (7th October 2014) and St Albans (29th January 2015).

The minutes of the meetings will be available on the NACO website (www.naco.uk.com). However, should any member wish for a 'hard copy' to be sent to them they can do so by contacting the Secretary, Penny Harrison, by email: info@naco.uk.com or by phoning me.

The Executive Committee had 25 members and one initial co-optee and meetings have been reasonably well attended.

There have been four resignations (all elected member) from the Executive Committee throughout the year.

Following the appointment of the Executive Committee at the 2014 AGM held in Camden on the 4th March 2014, the following people were appointed to the named Officer posts at the Executive Committee meeting on 12th June 2014.

Chair – Paul Millward;
Vice-Chair – Phil O’Brien;
Secretary (now incorporating Minutes Secretary/Actions co-ordinator) – Penny Harrison;
Treasurer – Gillian Allwright;
Membership Secretary – Catherine Wilkinson;

The Executive Committee made further appointments to the posts of:

Press Officer – Jim Babbington.

Webmaster - Alasdair Ross

Training Officer – Ann Tipper

As ever, we really do encourage members of NACO to join the Executive Committee if they can. In each delegate pack will be a brief note on the likely commitment required of Executive Members and the benefits of being on the Executive to you and your council. We are also keen to ensure a general mirroring of our membership, both gender wise and geographically on the Executive Committee.

Co-option to the Executive Committee 2014/15

There was one initial co-optee to the Executive Committee this year;
Sarah Holman – Bracknell Forest

Amendments to the constitution 2014/15

The Executive Committee considered the existing constitution at its meeting in October and considered that a number of minor updates were required. The new ‘tracked changed’ version is included in the AGM papers for the membership’s approval.

Membership Fee

The Executive Committee is recommending, later in the agenda, that the membership fee remain FREE for 2015/16. The Executive Committee debated this issue and has concluded that there are sufficient funds to make this gesture for the fifth year running to members and their councils in these times of financial hardship. The Treasurer’s report will show that the finances of the Association remain healthy.

The administration costs of the Association are minimal. However, any work arising from meetings undertaken by any Executive Committee member is refunded where necessary. We seek neither to build up a ‘cash fund’ to spend on large initiatives nor to fund a ‘give-away’. However, the dinner at this year’s Training Event is largely subsidised by NACO funds to avoid councils thinking that their funds are being used to pay for officers’ dinners and wine.

I have always been cautious about the use of member's fees and the long term viability of the Association. The Association is well placed to weather the current financial storm and it is our intention to be there for our members. My personal view is that the Association needs to have sufficient reserves to fund any losses from a 'disastrous' conference/training event. The constitution requires us to have a positive bank balance at the end of each accounting year.

Membership

In my 2013 Chair's report I said that I hoped that the new Executive would see the membership and generic databases as their top priority so as to build on the partial good work of the previous 12 months. I was pleased to report that this happened with good results.

I can report that as at 31/01/15 NACO has 291 members, down from 403 members on its database in 2014/15. Catherine Wilkinson of Norfolk County Council had done an excellent job of reviving the membership database, largely by 'starting again' and mass e-mailing all councils to register those who wished to be part of NACO. However, we have had an unfortunate setback with Catherine no longer being able to manage the membership list as a result of a) a new job and b) technical e-mailing problems. The renewal process, expected from October 2014 has only been partially undertaken and we wish to apologise to members for this unfortunate hiccup. The new Executive Committee should look at solving this issue as a matter of urgency. We still have a relatively up-to-date membership list of those working and interested in civic office but we need to improve it again.

The spread of membership is similar to previous years but we are still under-represented in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, our generic database of council e-mail addresses has both expanded and improved, enabling us to target our messages to the correct person where possible.

The Executive Committee are grateful to Catherine for her work and wish her well in her new job.

Training Event and AGM 2014

The 2014 Training Event and AGM was held in Camden and hosted by Margaret Humphrey and LB of Camden Council. I am immensely grateful to Margaret for taking on, yet again, the work associated with hosting a NACO event. Once again, the event attracted a good number of delegates and was well received and 'customer feedback' was very pleasing. The Executive Committee had agreed to promote the conference jointly between the Association and LB Camden with both parties liable for 50% of the profit of the conference, which as the Treasurer's report shows, was achieved.

We held a choice of six workshops and a keynote speaker on 'Civic Office and WWI centenary commemorations'. Delegate feedback was hearteningly warm.

Civic Office of the Year

The Association has been pleased to continue the Civic Office of the Year Awards. The Association remains committed to the exchange of best practice and we consider that the awards are an excellent way not only to highlight the work of civic offices but also to spread good practice. It has been heartening to see so many high quality entries over the years and it is clear to me that there is a lot of unsung work and pride in many civic offices throughout the country.

My thanks to Vaughton's and Logocloth for their continued support and the judges for this year's awards. My thanks also go to Christine Christensen and Malcolm Bartlett, who co-ordinate the scheme.

Finally, the winning entries of previous COYAs are on the website (one promise from last year's AGM I have managed to keep!).

Website

The Executive Committee took the decision a few years ago to provide its own website rather than one hosted by a 'member' local authority. This involved a small expense and a lot of work from Alasdair Ross of Aberdeen City Council. The website is operational although it is accepted that we need to use and develop it much more in the next 12 months. Not only did our e-mail system let us down on the membership renewal drive but we also had considerable problems with the operation of 'info@naco.uk.com' during registration for this Training day! A small Web Support Group was formed to help Alasdair (who has had a very busy work and personal year) to enable documents to be added/amended on the website quickly rather than expecting Alasdair to do all the work himself. I'm grateful to the WSG members for their work.

Please bookmark our address - www.naco.uk.com

Single Commemorative Act to mark WW1

As I write this towards the end of February, it is clear that a good number of councils will be participating in NACO's Single Commemorative Act on 9th March to mark the centenary of WW1. The concept for a NACO – countrywide initiative came from Bryan Magan of Warrington and was developed with a small group of Executive members into the Single Commemorative Act. A competition to find a simple, inexpensive way for all Mayors and Chairs etc. to mark each centenary year of WW1 was held and the winning Council will receive their prize at the Training Days Dinner.

NACO has worked with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, The Local Government Association and latterly with Bruno Peek in tying this year's event in with the Commonwealth Day celebrations.

Guidance on the Death of a Senior National Figure

As many of you will know, NACO has developed the document “Marking the Death of a Senior National Figure” with help, support and guidance from The Earl Marshal’s office and Buckingham Palace. This document will be kept up to date by NACO (at least yearly) and is available on the NACO website. Our document has been ‘taken up’ by the Lord-Lieutenants’ Association and I understand that each Lord-Lieutenant has been encouraged to discuss our document with each Council Chief Executive. If you haven’t already read the document please do so because your Chief Executive may well ask you about it shortly.

The BBC has also expressed an interest in the document, as part of their preparations for such an event.

My thanks to Jim Babbington of RB Kensington and Chelsea, who developed the document, with assistance from Beverley Wilson, formerly of Edinburgh City Council.

Communication with members

We have endeavoured to send you (slightly) more mass e-mails this year, which I hope have been of use. We have, certainly, used our communications to ‘plug’ the Single Commemorative Act, the Guidance of the death of a Senior National Figure, the Training Days etc. We still, in my view, need to communicate more with our members.

Training

The Association continues to put emphasis on the training of its members and this year we have, once again, been successful in holding NACO events in most regions throughout the UK with the help of our ‘partner’ Councillor Skills.

I should remind members that NACO offers a financial loss guarantee for these events (see Phil O’Brien for details) and they virtually always make a profit for the host organisation whilst also raising the profile of the civic office in the eyes of its own council.

Councillor Skills have already confirmed 10 dates for 2015 which will be placed on the website.

Thanks

I would like to thank all the members of the Executive Committee who helped during the past year. It's been a particularly tough year with a number of Executive members being 'withdrawn' by their Councils or being appointed to new posts which has lessened their ability to attend meetings or be involved. Other Executive members have given notice of impending problems. I am sure that members will appreciate that it is difficult to drive the work of the Association forward whilst also holding down full time jobs and that this commitment will become increasingly difficult in the coming years. The Association has increasingly relied on 'retired' members to support our work and this has been of tremendous value to me personally. However, I have always said that we should be an Association of the 'living' and I very much hope that new 'serving' civic officers will feel able to join the Executive Committee and play a prominent role in the Association.

In your delegate packs will be a short paper on what are the benefits of becoming an Executive member and the ways in which helping the Association doesn't necessarily mean travelling to meetings.

Finally, I want to pay a very warm tribute to Phil O'Brien of Derby City Council who has been Vice Chair of the Association since its inception in 1999 and, prior to that, a leading member of the Civic Secretaries Group from 1992. I first met Phil in 1992 and promptly stole his good ideas and I've been doing that ever since. Phil has undoubtedly been the 'powerhouse' of NACO and its existence and continuation is largely down to him. Typically and modestly, he never wanted to be Chair but just to help as much as he could. Phil is now retiring from Derby City Council (at still a young age) and, whilst he may continue his involvement with NACO, it feels like the end of an era for both NACO and Derby. I have nothing but praise and thanks for him.

Paul Millward
Chair
National Association of Civic Officers
Nottingham
February 2015