

Openness of Local Government, Councillor Panel Survey, February 2014

The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC) used its Councillor Panel to conduct a survey on proposed regulations that would make it mandatory to allow reporting from parish and town council meetings (*Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014*).

The survey was open from 18 to 25 February 2014 and 44 councillors from member councils in Northamptonshire responded.

73% of respondents agreed that parish and town council meetings should be subject to open reporting whilst 27% thought they should not.

The main positive impacts were thought to be that "*Members of the public will be more informed about the parish council*" and that "*Councils will feel, and therefore become, more accountable*".

The main negative impacts were thought to be that "*Councillors will feel intimidated knowing their words are being recorded*" and that "*Council meetings will become sterile events simply ratifying decisions that are made elsewhere*".

Many of the "other" comments on positive impacts suggest that recording council meetings could result in an overall improvement in meetings and councillor behaviour, which may attract people to join the council. However many of the "other" comments on negative impacts suggested that some councillors may resign if filmed or that new councillors won't join because they would feel intimidated.

When asked "*If the advice is that a parish council should make its own recording of meetings would your council be happy to do so?*" a roughly equal number replied "*The council would probably consider recording its meetings*" (44%) as said "*The council is unlikely to wish to record its meetings*" (42%).

43% said that it was "*quite unlikely*" that a member of the public will wish to report from council meetings but 36% said that it was "*quite likely*".

When asked about the probable intentions of a member of the public reporting from council meetings 51% thought that members of the public would be "*simply reporting facts and*

neither attempting to show the council in a good or bad light”, but 49% said “They are probably doing so with bad intentions, trying to show the council in a bad light to a wider audience”. Interestingly, no one thought that members of the public would be recording “with good intentions, trying to promote the council in a good light to a wider audience”.

When asked about the practical implications of recording at council meetings 97% said “We do not have microphones for councillors”, 70% said “There is no wireless internet connection available” and 62% said “There is no 3G/4G connection available”. The practical realities of reporting from village halls may therefore present a significant barrier to the proposals.

When asked for any other comments the responses ranged from the very positive (e.g. “I support anything which makes local councils more transparent & more accessible to the local electorate”) to the very negative (e.g. “I have no wish for this to happen and would give up being a councillor. It will be a complete disaster for local government”).

Conclusion

The majority of respondents support the recording of meetings but feel that it will be practically difficult and that the impact on the council may be negative. If the proposal to make it mandatory to allow reporting from parish and town council meetings goes ahead there will need to be very clear guidance provided by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). Government may need to think about providing financial assistance to overcome the practical and technical difficulties members of the public may face.

The impact on the sector in terms of elected member and/or officer attrition as a result of this proposal should not be underestimated and it would be good to see government having a clear understanding of this impact before finalising the legislation.

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