

JG/SS/261010/CLG TRANSPARENCY & PUBLICATION OF DATA

26 October 2010

Philip Worsfold
Local Public Data Unit – Transparency Division
Local Government & Economic Growth
Department for Communities and Local Government
Eland House, Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Dear Philip

PRACTITIONERS' GUIDE TO PUBLISHING LOCAL SPENDING DATA

We are writing on behalf of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) regarding the Local Government Group Transparency Programme's Practitioners' Guide to Publishing Local Spending Data, which follows our meeting on 7 October.

NALC is the nationally recognised membership and support organisation representing the interests of around 9,000 local councils and their 80,000 local councillors in England. The local (parish and town) councils we support and represent serve electorates ranging from small rural communities to major cities, are all independently elected, and raise a precept from the local community. Together, they can be identified as among the nation's most influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers. Over 15 million people live in communities served by our local councils, around 35% of the population, whilst over 200 new local councils have been created in the last 10 years.

SLCC is the formal professional body representing chief officers (clerks) to local councils. Since 2001 the Society has developed and grown rapidly following the National Executive Council's decision to appoint professional officers and to invest in new services. Membership has increased to the point where members now serve over 4200 councils in England and Wales. A new modern terms and conditions agreement was negotiated and a whole range of new services established. Today the Society is a vibrant and purposeful place which helps local council officers not only to survive, but to develop and grow and to achieve significant recognition for their work. The formation of the Institute of Local Council Management and the building of a comprehensive Continuous Professional Development programme have further raised the profile, standing and terms and conditions of a profession which may double in size in the next decade.

Both organisations support in principle the need for principal local authorities to publish data on payments of over £500 by January 2011. However, as we made clear at our meeting with you on 7 October, it is very surprising that your Department did not think to engage with the local councils' sector on how the new proposed transparency initiative would be implemented in practice, particularly in the local council sector.

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It is furthermore unsatisfactory that there was no request made for our sector to be represented on the Local Public Data Panel when drafts of the Guide(s) were being developed. We now understand that your Department has now accepted both of these points, which is a positive development and is welcomed.

The approach to the consultation in respect of the Guide(s) (both practical and technical) to publishing local data is wholly unsatisfactory in respect of our sector. These have been largely drafted by the Local Government Group – without involvement from NALC or SLCC – for principal authorities. Very little or no cognisance has been made of local (parish and town) councils in this process, let alone how the requirement for publication of spending of £500 or more would work for our councils. Following your advice at our recent meeting, this is another reason why we are writing to you to formally submit our policy position on this important matter.

Both organisations do understand the policy reasons behind the Secretary of State's wish for local authorities to publish all spending over £500. Subject to such requirements having a statutory basis, NALC and SLCC would like to again re-iterate the fact that many local councils have one part-time employee or do not have websites, broadband access or computer accounting packages which are compatible or which facilitate online publication of expenditure. We would once again urge you to take account of our view that the relevant code of practice should not be prescriptive. We also appreciate your knowledge of the regulatory pressures already on local councils and principal authorities and that your Department does not wish to over-regulate them or introduce further burdens.

We hope this submission on the Guides is useful, and that you have a clear update of the National Association and Society's views on this crucial topic. We will continue to remain alert for further policy updates on this matter, and would ask that your Department includes both organisations in any and all relevant correspondence on this subject.

We very much hope that the Department finds this correspondence helpful. Should you require any further information on this matter then please do not hesitate to contact us on 020 7290 0741 or via email at chris.borg@nalc.gov.uk .



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