

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Welcome to the first edition of *eUpdate* for 2024. It promises to be yet another epic year in the world of local government, politics, and democracy both at home and abroad with an estimated 4 billion people in 64 countries going to the polls, representing nearly half of the global population. The US election in November 2024 will be pivotal for that country and for the world, and the UK election (date tbc... May, June, November?) will usher in a new era and new policy directions, whoever is in government by Christmas.

It is also a big year for elections in Northamptonshire, with the Wellingborough by-election on 15 February 2024 following the successful recall petition held in late 2023 that removed the incumbent MP Peter Bone, a by-election for a councillor for the East Hunsbury & Shelfleys Ward of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) to be held on 8 February 2024, a by-election for a councillor for the Kingswood Ward of Corby Town Council (CTC) to be held on 22 February 2024, and the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election to be held on 2 May 2024. The main parties' campaign machines are at full throttle.

Elections are the lifeblood of democracy. They bring renewal, a clean(ish) slate, and the hope of new beginnings. All parish and town councils in Northamptonshire have their next ordinary elections on 1 May 2025 and it is important that as a sector we strive towards having contested elections everywhere, i.e. where the number of candidates is greater than the number of seats available. Too many councils in 2021 had uncontested elections, i.e. where the number of candidates is equal to or less than the number of seats available. A parish or town councillor who is elected uncontested is no lesser a councillor than one who has won through a hotly contested election, but they are in office because they stood, not because they were preferred. It is vital for democracy and for the image of the sector that most parish and town councils have contested elections in 2025. Our work to support member councils to have contested elections will begin in earnest in September 2024 when we will help lay the groundwork for the campaigns to

“...an estimated 4 billion people in 64 counties are going to the polls, representing nearly half of the global population...”

promote candidacy, which will begin in early January 2025. It's going to be a challenge, but if we all work together, we can make something good happen.

One of the reasons that we need an urgent policy reset and new direction is that principal local government is facing a major fiscal crisis, which a group of MPs has recently described as "out of control." Every day in the news there is another county or unitary council announcing, "major cuts" and "tough choices." Despite an extra £600 million for councils announced earlier this month, the Local Government Association (LGA) is warning that it is not enough to plug the estimated £4 billion gap caused by "systemic underfunding".

When household budgets get squeezed the things to go first are the takeaways, the TV subscriptions, and the foreign holidays; all the things that are nice to have but not essential. It's the same with principal councils. They necessarily focus on the services and functions that are required by law, such as adults' and children's services, education, highways, and waste, and find there is less left over for the discretionary "nice-to-haves." Sometimes the cash-strapped principal councils look to parish and town councils to take up the slack. For example, Somerset Council wrote to all the parish and town councils in its area in November with a menu of services, functions, and assets saying: "*We are asking city, town and parish councils to consider which (if any) of the services we've listed below, they think their communities would like them to support financially.*" And West Berkshire Council is talking to parish councils about "*stepping up a bit*" and is hoping that parishes can "*take a bit of strain off*" services provided by the principal council.

The two principal councils in Northamptonshire - North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) - have no current wholesale plans for transferring services to parish and town councils. However, Northants CALC has urged both councils to think ahead because any transfer of assets and services (and therefore cost) will take more than two year's preparation if it is to be managed properly and effectively. Parish and town councils cannot take things on at the drop of a hat; there needs to be time to think, plan, budget, do due diligence, and engage with the community. Those things take years. Unless a new UK government radically alters the structural funding of principal local government, there are only two possible outcomes: parish and town councils "*step up*" and "*take a bit of the strain*" or vital community services will disappear. In

Northamptonshire we still have time to avoid the worst impacts of that, but it requires everyone to recognise the issues, be honest, and work together.

The staff at Northants CALC had a good Christmas and enjoyed some time off to rest and recuperate. We returned to work on 2 January and enjoyed a couple of days back, and then it all went crazy! On 5 January 2024, 2Commune, a trusted supplier of websites to parish and town councils across England, announced that it was ceasing its website business as of 31 March 2024. 79 parish and town councils in Northamptonshire used 2Commune, so our inboxes filled up quickly! We approached it using the model of other recent crises, and quickly set up a web page (<https://www.northantscalc.com/2commune>) to keep members informed via daily and then weekly updates. It was an intense couple of weeks, but the market eventually responded with both Cuttlefish Media and Parish Online tailoring generous rescue packages for 2Commune customers (see link above). At the time of writing, some councils have already decided where to take their business, and others are still considering the options.

Our training programme also took a short break over the festive period but is now back with a bang. Between us we have delivered training already this year from Eydon in the west to Stanion in the north and many points in between. And, with the help of some external trainers, we have a very comprehensive range of online learning and development opportunities too. There is something for everyone, no matter what your starting level of knowledge is.

I just wanted to end with a thank you to all the clerks and councillors who contacted us with kind messages of appreciation at Christmas time and during the 2Commune crisis. Really, we are just doing our job and it is our absolute pleasure to help and support member councils with whatever they need, but it is genuinely nice to know that our efforts are useful, effective, and appreciated.

Please do continue to get in touch with your queries and questions... that's what we're here for!



Tina (left) and Ray from 2Commune talking to delegates at our 75th Annual Conference in 2022.

HIGHWAYS IN FOCUS

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Northamptonshire was an opportunity to design better ways of working between the new unitary councils and the parish and town councils in their areas. In North Northamptonshire there are 106 civil parishes, and in West Northamptonshire there are 165, and they range from tiny hamlets with 20 electors, to big towns with tens of thousands of electors. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach wouldn't work because parishes of different sizes have different needs, different resources, and different outlooks, so understanding that is key to designing better and more efficient ways of working.

Part of the innovative design envisaged by Northants CALC was the creation of "Operational Focus Groups (OFGs)" in each unitary council that would focus on a particular area of service delivery, such as planning, or highways. West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) has adopted this approach, largely driven by WNC Parish Liaison Officer, Alan Burns, who was appointed in early 2023. The first service-based group to be formally established is the WNC Highways OFG, which had its first meeting on 13 December 2023. The group comprises of six clerks from a range of parish and town councils in West Northamptonshire, a representative from Northants CALC, two representatives from WNC Highways and the Parish Liaison Officer. The purpose of the Highways OFG is to:

- Provide a single place for parish and town councils to feed in general thoughts, comments, and concerns with the highway service (which may be obtained reactively or proactively via questionnaires and surveys.)
- Provide a single place for WNC Highways to feed in general thoughts, comments, and concerns about parish councils and their engagement with the service.
- Understand issues from both "sides," to work through things together, to manage expectations, and to reach consensus on the way forward.
- Review and improve communications between WNC Highways and parish councils and vice versa.
- Explore and design better ways of working between WNC Highways and parish councils.
- Be on top of and lead developing issues.
- Foster a less adversarial and more collaborative Relationship between WNC Highways and parish councils.

Over time, and if it works, the purpose of the OFG may shift but for now it has plenty of work to get its teeth into. It is envisaged that each meeting of the OFG will focus on just one or two issues to really get to grips with the



detail. For example, the next meeting will focus on Street Doctor/FixMyStreet. As things stand, WNC Highways gets frustrated that highway issues are not reported, or not reported properly, on Street Doctor/FixMyStreet, whilst parish and town councils are frustrated that when issues are reported they are not always properly handled and updated. Instead of both “sides” shouting at each other across the void, the OFG brings them together to try to understand each other’s point of view and to attempt to get to the bottom of the underlying causes of frustration.

Time will tell whether the approach works and delivers real benefits for all concerned, but it’s certainly worth a try. The fact that the first meeting identified so many things to work on is evidence of the need.

As well as the Highways OFG, a Larger Councils OFG started last year to focus on issues of relevance to the town councils and very big parish councils, and a Planning OFG will be introduced in the next few weeks operating along similar lines to the Highways OFG. These focus groups are on top of and additional to the resources WNC is putting into engaging with every one of the 165 parishes in its area, including the appointment of Alan Burns as the Parish Liaison Officer and the monthly Parish Briefing newsletter. It’s far from perfect, but it’s all moving in the right direction.

North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) is also developing how it engages with parish and town councils. It is at the point of allocating a Parish Liaison Officer and is pursuing the traditional area-based approach with geographical parish forums, rather than the thematic-based OFGs.

FOR, AGAINST, OR ABSTAIN?

Based on an original article from Hayling Matters <https://haylingmatters.co.uk> and adapted with kind permission.

Parish and town councils are essential in facilitating local governance, addressing the specific needs of communities, and ensuring that decisions made at the local level are reflective of the desires and priorities of the residents. Their impact is felt directly in the quality of life and the overall development of the communities they serve. Every matter decided by a parish or town council is decided by show of hands (unless otherwise provided for in Standing Orders) and there are three possible ways to vote: for, against, or abstain.

So, let's look at the intriguing practice of councillors abstaining from voting, shedding light on the reasons behind this often-enigmatic choice and the impact it has on communities and the decision-making process.

Responsibility and Accountability: Councillors are elected to represent their community and to make decisions on their behalf. Abstaining from voting means they are not fulfilling their duty to make decisions in the best interests of the community. This can lead to a lack of accountability for their actions or inaction.

Wasted Representation: When councillors abstain from voting, it effectively means that the people they represent are not being heard or represented in that decision-making process. This undermines the democratic system and can lead to disenfranchisement among constituents.

Ineffective Governance: Abstentions can result in tied votes, which can lead to delays in important decisions and hinder effective governance. Councils and external bodies rely on their members to actively participate in the decision-making process to function efficiently.

Missed Opportunities: Abstaining from votes means missing the opportunity to influence or shape policies and decisions that may have a direct impact on the community. It also means missing the chance to advocate for the interests and needs of the community.

Perceived Lack of Commitment: Abstaining frequently can lead to a perception that a councillor lacks commitment or is disinterested in their role. This can erode trust among constituents and fellow councillors.

Conflict of Interest: In some cases, councillors may abstain due to conflicts of interest. Councillors should properly declare and manage interests in accordance with their council's Code of Conduct. There are no circumstances where abstaining is the appropriate way to manage an interest; having declared an interest, a councillor is either permitted to vote or they are not, and if they are permitted to vote they should ideally vote for or against.

Failure to Provide Leadership: Councillors are expected to provide leadership and make difficult decisions, even if those decisions are unpopular. Abstaining may be seen as an unwillingness to take a stand or provide direction to the community.

Wasted Resources: The process of convening meetings, preparing for votes, and conducting discussions consumes time and resources. Abstaining without a valid reason can be seen as a waste of these resources.

It's important to note that there can be legitimate reasons for abstaining from a vote, such as a genuine belief that one cannot make an informed decision on a particular issue. In such cases, councillors should clearly state their reasons for abstaining to maintain transparency and accountability.

Overall, while there may be situations where abstention is appropriate, it should be the exception rather than the norm, and councillors should exercise their voting responsibilities diligently to ensure that they fulfil their roles as representatives of the community. It involves a commitment to transparency, ethical decision-making, and ongoing engagement with the community.

SECTION 137

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has confirmed that the amount that parish and town councils can spend under Section 137 for 2024/25 is £10.81 per elector. This figure is calculated by increasing the amount of £9.93 for 2023/24 by the percentage increase in the retail index between September 2022 and September 2023, in accordance with Schedule 12B to the Local Government Act 1972. Section 137 is the power to incur expenditure for certain purposes not otherwise authorised.



D-DAY 80

Organised by the King's Pageantmaster, Bruno Peek CVO OBE OPR, D-Day 80 on 6 June 2024 commemorates the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day landings which took place on 6 June 1944 on five beaches in Normandy, France.

Parish and town councils can use this occasion to pay tribute to the many, many thousands that sacrificed so much in helping to secure the freedom we all enjoy today. There are several ways in which parish and town councils can take part in this special occasion:



1. **BEACONS:** Light a Beacon at 9.15pm on 6 June 2024. Details on Beacons can be found in the official Guide to Taking Part (see pages 41 to 45) where you will see there are several styles of Beacons that can be used for this occasion, many of which you may have used for previous occasions. Councils with permanent Beacon Braziers and gas fuelled Beacons produced for our late Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee, are urged to re-use these to save money. Bonfire Beacons (see pages 41 and 42) are ideal for country parks, village greens and farms.
2. **LAMP LIGHT OF PEACE:** Beacons are not appropriate in all areas, so an alternative is the Lamp Light of Peace (see page 39 of the Guide) providing a simple and cost-effective way of being part of this event suitable for most places. The simple handheld lanterns are £55 and must be ordered by 23 May 2024. As with Beacons, the lanterns should be lit at 9.15pm on 6 June 2024. They can be reused, for example for Remembrance services. The flame in the Lamp, along with the Beacons, will represent the 'light of peace' that emerged from the dreadful darkness of War.
3. **RINGING OUT FOR PEACE:** With the valuable assistance of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers the Pageantmaster is encouraging every Cathedral and Church throughout the UK, Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man to ring their bells at 6.30pm on 6 June 2024, so we ask you to contact your local churches etc, inviting them to take part.

All those taking part in the above will be sent an electronic Certificate of Grateful Recognition, which can be printed and framed as a permanent reminder of the involvement. The Guide to Taking Part describes all the activities taking place nationally, making up this commemoration/celebration event.

The Pageantmaster hopes that many parish and town councils will participate in one or more of the above and asks that any participation is registered (see page 52 of the Guide to Taking Part for what information needs to be submitted).

You will find the Guide to Taking Part and all the D-DAY 80 resources at <https://www.northantscalc.com/d-day-80-6-june-2024>.

If your council is organising a public event in Northamptonshire and you would like one of the county's Deputy Lieutenants (DLs) to attend, please email the Deputy Clerk to the Lieutenancy, Janet Lodge, at Lord-Lieutenant@westnorthants.gov.uk stating the date, time, and type of event.

THE BIODIVERSITY DUTY

There surely isn't anything more important than looking after the planet we live on and the flora and fauna that lives on it with us. It can be a daunting topic, but small actions by parish and town councils can add up to big change. And, since 1 January 2024, parish and town councils have a new duty "*To consider what the council can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in the area*".



In December, Northants CALC suggested that all member councils should have an agenda item at their January 2024 meeting to give the first consideration. The duty is intended to be self-monitored and there is no regulatory or enforcement body responsible for checking compliance, but parish and town councils should demonstrate community leadership and be seen to be doing all it can to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

One way that all parish and town councils can make a difference is by giving regard to biodiversity and climate change when responding to planning applications. Consider, for example, completing a simple checklist for all planning applications, such as:

Climate Change & Biodiversity Consideration	YES/NO/NA
Does the proposed design aim to minimise energy requirements?	
Does the application justify any use of carbon-intensive materials?	
Is the use of reclaimed or recycled materials apparent in the application?	
Does the application address standards for energy efficiency?	
Are new homes to be fitted with a source of renewable energy?	
Are sites allocated for new housing easily accessible by walking / cycling / public transport?	
Does the application avoid loss of local nature sites and green spaces?	
Where the application includes a new open space, does it include sufficient new native tree coverage and other plant life?	
Does the application support low-carbon vehicles, for example, with electric vehicle charging points easily accessible?	
Does the application specify that LED lights are to be used?	
Does the application propose building on a flood plain?	
Does the application include where appropriate water saving measures such as using water butts, toilet flushers that save water and runoff water in concrete areas?	

To further consider what your council can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity you could:

- Note what the council is already doing to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Review biodiversity or nature recovery plans from other parishes.
- Contact local voluntary groups working on nature conservation.
- Carry out a biodiversity audit of council landholdings or the whole council area.
- Gather expert advice on possible actions in support of biodiversity.
- Draft an action plan for what the council will do itself as well as supporting other activity.

A very handy guide and template has been produced by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) which sets out at a practical level what parish and town councils can do. Download your copy at <https://www.northantscalc.com/blog/news-1/model-biodiversity-policy-2023-61>.

You can also find masses of practical resources at The Great Collaboration website including a toolkit and other resources developed specifically for parish and town councils: <https://greatcollaboration.uk/for-local-councils/>.

GOVERNMENT COFS UP

Parish and town councils across England are benefitting from the government's Community Ownership Fund (COF), which will provide £150 million to support community ownership of local assets.

The successful bidders under Round 3 of the fund were announced just before Christmas and include Anston Parish Council in Kent, which was awarded £272,803 for the purchase of The Old Library, Clun Town Council in Shropshire, which was awarded £53,385 for renovation works at Clun Town Hall, and Cranleigh Parish Council in Surrey, which was awarded £307,754 for Cranleigh Village Hall. In all, parish and town councils secured £4.5 million in this latest round.

Northamptonshire was awarded some money with the Delapré Abbey Preservation Trust winning £299,549, but none went to parish and town councils in the county.

Whether it's the pub on the high street that's facing closure, a village shop or a local sports team that might lose its ground, the Fund offers a great opportunity for local groups to take them over and to run them as businesses – by the community, for the community.

There will be further rounds of funding in 2024 and the fund closes in March 2025. For full details please see <https://mycommunity.org.uk/community-ownership-fund> as well as the government's official prospectus on the fund, which is at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund-prospectus/community-ownership-fund-prospectus--3>.

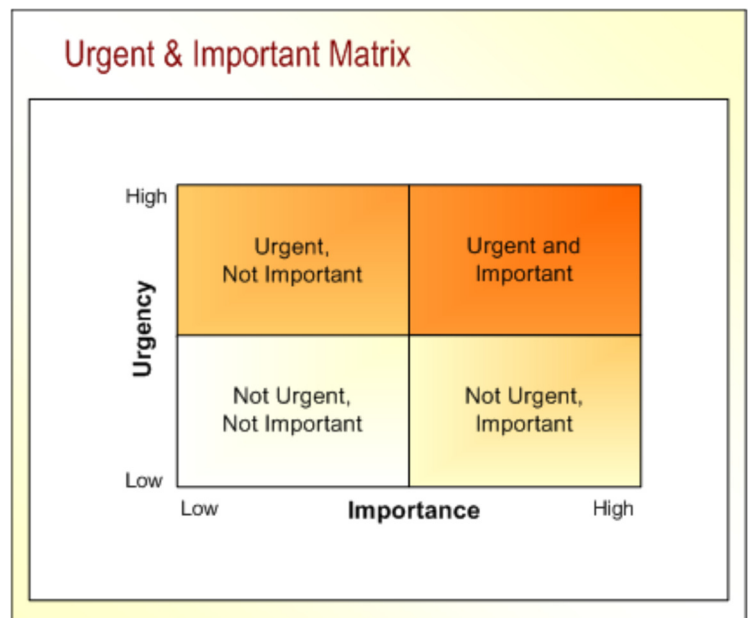
HOW IMPORTANT IS IT - REALLY?

The capacity of a parish or town council to implement the decisions arising from a meeting of the council is often limited by the amount of staff time available to the council. A council will often chomp through its agenda and end up with a long list of actions for the clerk. Just look down the minutes of most council meetings and you'll see "Action: Clerk"! But how often does the council stop to think how many hours of work have been generated by its decisions? And how often does it give the clerk clear expectations as to what is required to be done and by when?

In the councillors' minds most actions that the council agrees should be implemented in time for the next meeting, but that might mean that the work created exceeds the contracted hours available. Clerks will often work flexibly on annualised hours (i.e. "5 hours per week" actually means 260 hours per year), which is fine to get the council over a particularly busy period where more than 5 hours per week is required, but only if there are correspondingly slack periods where less than 5 hours per week is required. However, as we all know, that elusive "quiet week" rarely or never actually materialises!

It is incumbent on the council as the employer to make sure that the workload matches the staff capacity and to give a clear indication of where the priorities are.

The grid on the right divides actions into four categories. The temptation, particularly for councillors that don't understand the resource limitations, is to place everything in the "Urgent and Important" box, e.g.: "Clerk to do [x,y,z] and provide a report to the next meeting". There will always be genuinely urgent and important things, but often the "urgency" is created internally through a lack of planning and foresight. If the council is constantly firefighting (urgent and important) then it might be necessary to take a look at the council plan and see if some of the fires can be predicted far enough in advance that the response can be more thought-through.



The biggest council achievements will be in the “Not Urgent, Important” box. Think of the biggest project your council has been involved in... it probably wasn't anything “urgent”. Important, definitely. Time sensitive, maybe. But “urgent”? Probably not. Trying to work more in the “Not Urgent, Important” box should be the objective of all councillors and clerks.

And, cognisant that staff resource is not unlimited, it may also be necessary to sacrifice some of the stuff that fits in the “Not urgent, not important” box. This is where the council and its clerk need a clear and open dialogue to ensure that little energy is expended on tasks in this box, particularly if there is anything in any of the other boxes. Interestingly, some clerks will be drawn to this box even when there are more pressing or important things to do. In fact, the more swamped a clerk feels the more likely it is that they seek the solace of the “Not urgent, not important” box, because tasks in there are normally relatively quick and easy and need less thinking about.

So, next time the council makes a decision that results in “Action: Clerk” just take a moment to consider a) how long will it take b) how urgent is it and c) how important is it. You never know, you might discover that it could even wait until the meeting after next!

RURAL COMMUNITY NEEDS FUND

The Rural Community Needs Fund has been established by the Northamptonshire Community Foundation (NCF) following its campaign to “*Shine a Spotlight on Rural Community Needs.*”



The aim of the fund is to support rural communities to address issues such as access to community transport, fuel poverty, refurbishment of community buildings and equipment, access to wellbeing and health services, activities and education services for young people and support for older people. Grants awards will be up to £10,000 for projects such as creating community hubs, providing community transport schemes, improving the health and wellbeing of socially isolated people, helping people to become more physically active, providing mental health wellbeing activities, improving digital connectivity, and building community resilience through the provision of community larders. Parish and town councils can apply. The deadline for applications is 5 April 2024 and you will find all the details at <https://www.ncf.uk.com/rural-community-needs-fund>.

THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

Do you love being a parish or town clerk and wonder why more school, college, and university leavers do not come into the sector? Are you a councillor with a business, professional, or commercial background who wants to share their experience and wisdom with the next generation of workers?



If you have answered “yes” to either of these questions, then the Southeast Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) would like to hear from you!

“Give an Hour” is a national initiative and is a wonderful way to make a difference and raise awareness of your business or industry. For some young people in the region who are preparing to make the next step into employment, the transition is daunting. Through a growing network SEMLEP is making high quality careers information a reality, working in partnership to support young people to make confident, informed choices. SEMLEP’s volunteer programmes have space for business professionals from across the region. For all the details, please see <https://www.semlepgrowthhub.com/careers-hub-give-an-hour>.

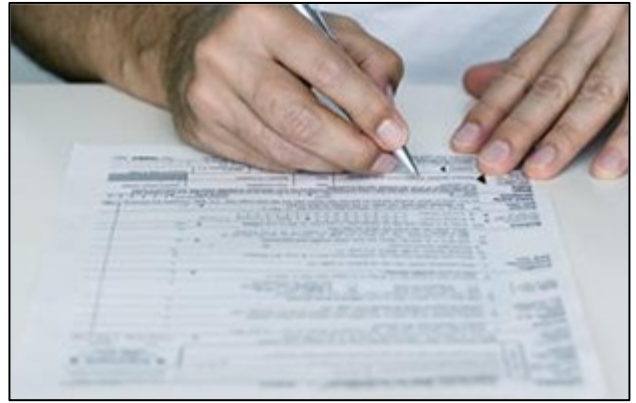
FLEXIBLE WORKING

Clerks and other parish and town council employees already enjoy flexible working arrangements, but from 1 April 2024 new provisions will be enshrined in law. The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023, which comes into force on 1 April 2024, provides employees with more rights to request a change to the number of hours they work each week, as well as their start and finish times. It also includes the right to request home working. These entitlements will start from day one of employment. This means that regardless of whatever appears in a job advertisement, job offer letter or contract of employment regarding the location of work, working hours or other working time details, a new employee can submit a request to change these terms from their first day in post. Any request made by a council employee will have to be subject to a consultation process. If your council needs guidance on any HR matter, please contact Northants CALC.

REGISTER OF INTERESTS

Warning: This article may cause you to shift nervously in your seat!

All councillors must complete a Register of Interests within 28 days of becoming a councillor. The register must be kept up to date, with any changes being registered within 28 days. It is a criminal offence to fail to complete a Register of Interests or to fail to keep it updated, and although legal action against councillors for failure to submit or keep updated a Register of Interests is incredibly rare, there is no room for complacency. Every councillor must register their own Disclosable Pecuniary Interests **and** those of their partner, spouse, or person they are living with as though they were their partner or spouse.



So, what information needs to be provided?

Employment, office, trade, profession, or vocation

You must provide details of any employment, trade, profession, or vocation carried out for profit or gain. If employed, you should put the name of your employer, the title of the post held, or brief description of the activity concerned. If retired, simply put "Retired."

Sponsorship

You must provide details of any payment or provision of any other financial benefit made in respect of any expenses incurred by you in carrying out duties as a member, or towards your election expenses. This does not include any allowances paid to you by the Council, but it does include any payment or financial benefit from a trade union within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. You do not need to declare the amounts of any payments, only the name of the person or organisation making them.

Contracts

You must provide details of any contract made between you (or a body in which you have a beneficial interest) or your partner and the council you are a member

of for goods or services or works to be executed. You must also provide details of any contract made between you and any organisation contracted to carry out business on the council's behalf. You do not need to state what the financial arrangements are but should say how long the contract is for.

Land

You must provide details of any beneficial interest in land which is within the area covered by the council you are a member of. This includes the house in which you live, whether owned or rented. You should include any land in the parish in which you have a beneficial interest, including any land or property from which you receive rent, or of which you are the mortgagee, and should give the address of a brief description of the location. For this purpose, "land" excludes an easement, servitude, interest or right in or over land which does not carry with it a right to occupy the land or to receive income from it.

Licences

You must provide details of any licence held (alone or jointly with others) to occupy land in the parish for a month or longer. This includes any allotments, garage licences, grazing arrangements or any other short-term arrangements to use the authority's land or property.

Corporate tenancies

You must provide details of any land owned by the council where you or your partner, in a personal or business capacity, are a tenant or have an interest or connection with a body which is a tenant and has a beneficial interest in the land. This includes all tenancies of property where the landlord is the council, and the tenant is a company in which you or your partner have a beneficial interest or of which you or your partner are a director.

Securities

You must provide details of any beneficial interest in securities (i.e. stocks, shares, or bonds) of a body where that body (to your knowledge) has a place of business or land in the area covered by the council you are a member of. You should list the names of any companies, industrial and provident societies, co-operative societies, or other bodies corporate that (to your knowledge) are active in the area and in which you have a substantial interest. You do not need to show the extent of your interest. Deposits with banks or building societies do not need to be shown. You only need to provide details of your interest when the total

nominal value of the securities exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body, or if the share capital of that body is of more than one class, the total nominal value of the shares of any one class in which the relevant person has a beneficial interest exceeds one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that class.

Other Registrable Interests

Depending on the requirements of your council's Code of Conduct there may be other interests you wish to declare but which are not Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. Examples include:

- A body of which you are in a position of general control or management and to which you are appointed or nominated by the council.
- A body exercising functions of a public nature; directed to charitable purposes, e.g. Freemasons; or one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion or policy (including any political party or trade union) of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management.
- Any gifts or hospitality which you have received by virtue of your office, or a series of gifts or hospitality, from the same source within any 12-month period which together are worth more than the value specified in your council's Code.
- Anything which relates to any of the interests set out above, but which affects a family member or other person with whom you have a close association other than your spouse or partner.

Please note that the examples listed above are not exhaustive.

Sensitive Information

Where you consider that disclosure of the details of an interest could lead you, or a person connected to you, being subject to violence or intimidation, and the Monitoring Officer at the relevant principal council agrees, any published version of the register will exclude details of the interest but may state that you have an interest, the details of which are withheld.

Each councillor's Register must be made available on their council's website and a copy must be sent to the Monitoring Officer at the relevant principal council who will publish it on the principal council's website. Because the copy that the Monitoring Officer holds is the official copy, it is common practice (and good practice) for the councillor's parish or town council website to simply link to the Register on the principal council's website. That way there is only one version of the truth and only one Register/website to update when there is a change.

Responsibility for completing the Register and keeping it updated rests with the councillor. A parish or town council clerk may facilitate the completion of the Register by furnishing new councillors with a blank form, providing guidance on how to complete it, and occasionally reminding councillors to check whether any updates are required, but it is not the clerk's responsibility to ensure that a councillor's Register is completed and returned to the Monitoring Officer.

The purpose of the Register of Interests is to ensure openness and transparency in decision making. It is not intended to be a salacious invasion into the private circumstances of elected members, and compliance monitoring has always been extremely light touch. For example, if a person complains to a Monitoring Officer about a councillor's Register being incomplete or out of date, the Monitoring Officer is likely to provide the councillor with an opportunity to make amendments (within 28 days) rather than going straight to the police. Wilful noncompliance is a serious matter, but inadvertent omissions caused by not understanding what information was required, or forgetting to notify an update, will usually be dealt with pragmatically and proportionately.



Accountability
Honesty
Integrity
Objectivity
Selflessness
Openness
Leadership

The call to action for councillors having read this article is to go to your council's website and see if you can find your Register of Interests or at least a link to your Register on the website of the relevant principal council (North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) or West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)). If you cannot find it, then nor can a member of the public. Once you have found your Register, check it is accurate, complete, and up to date. If anything needs to be amended, make sure you do it within 28 days of becoming aware of it.

DO SOMETHING NEW IN 2024

If you have any spare time to give, the Northampton Emergency Response Corps (NERC) would love you to consider becoming one of their volunteers.



NERC brings together voluntary organisations and recruits individual volunteers from across the county to help where they can. NERC Reservists are called upon in times of need to assist in all kinds of ways. It could be a flood, a disruption in the energy supply, a health crisis, or any other emergency. Part of the response to such events is always dependent on volunteers who help to keep their communities informed, distribute supplies, and check on the vulnerable. Specialist skills like dealing with flooding can also be used and even when the county is not having to respond to an emergency, NERC would love people to get involved helping to run the charity by working on the website, managing finances, or helping with administration.

NERC has begun a new programme of training, providing a great chance for volunteers to learn new skills. You could become a flood warden, learn first aid or safeguarding skills, become part of the search and rescue team, or be taught how to deal with those in distress using psycho-social support. Really valuable skills like home fire safety, neuro-diverse training and conflict management will also be available. It is a great chance to develop yourself, support your community, and build your CV!

Andy Smith, Chair of NERC, says: *"Our wonderfully dedicated volunteers, and volunteer organisations, consistently show their commitment by supporting our county's varied communities in all manner of different ways. Their hard work is particularly evident in time of resilience/need and when supporting and complementing our professional Emergency Services."*

If helping others was one of your New Year's Resolutions, you can sign up to become a NERC volunteer here: <https://forms.gle/sLhAzeSP5BPxKrm5A>.

Visit www.facebook.com/NorthamptonshireEmergencyResponseVolunteer for more information or e-mail nerc@outlook.com.

ACCESS TO CASH

High street banks up and down the country are still closing, and for fairly obvious reasons. But often the bank housed a cashpoint which served a crucial purpose in the community for those that still require



cash, and the loss of it can be quite impactful. Enter the Community Cash Advisory Panel, an independent national body that oversees LINK's work as the co-ordinating body that assesses the overall impact of bank branch closures on communities.

LINK evaluates communities against criteria agreed by the major UK banks and consumer groups in any location where bank branches are closing, or where a member of a community highlights a problem accessing cash. LINK can recommend new shared services in locations which meet a minimum threshold using these criteria, which are detailed at <https://www.link.co.uk/initiatives/bank-branch-closures/>.

If your community is losing a bank and it could affect access to cash locally, then see if the criteria are met for an intervention. It will not save the bank, but it may mean that for those that need it, there is still vital access to cash.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

You can treat your own money however you wish, but parish and town councils spend public money and the council taxpayers in the area whose money it is have a reasonable expectation that it is looked after securely, that it is properly administered, and that it is spent wisely.

A councillor should never spend the council's money. That includes placing orders, making purchases, and any other form of committing a council to a financial transaction. Such things are the sole domain of the management side of the council; usually effected by the clerk or Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) in accordance with Financial Regulations and Standing Orders. A councillor's role is limited to approving transactions when instructed to do so by the council based on the council's approval of a schedule of bills for payment presented to an appropriate council meeting.

Clerks and RFOs must take reasonable steps to ensure the complete and total separation of the council's finances from their own personal and private finances. That means never paying for council purchases using their own credit card or bank transfer from their personal account. A clerk may try to be helpful to the council by making purchases on their own credit card for things like antivirus software, which normally requires payment by credit card with no option for bank transfer or for an invoice to be sent, but such practice is contrary to good practice. Paragraph 6.20 of the Model Financial Regulations 2019 (a brand-new version is due out by March 2024) states that “*Any corporate credit card or trade card account opened by the council will be specifically restricted to use by the Clerk [and RFO] and shall be subject to automatic payment in full at each month-end. Personal credit or debit cards of members or staff shall not be used **under any circumstances.***”

Financial Regulations can sometimes appear somewhat restrictive or pernicky, but they are there for very good reason. Tight internal controls and very transparent financial procedures are the bedrock of good governance. Don't be tempted to cut corners just because it seems convenient at the time.

SITUATIONS VACANT



Cold Ashby is a village of less than 350 residents approximately thirteen miles northeast of Northampton. Cold Ashby Parish Council has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 4.6 hours per week. There are seven councillors and the precept for 2023/24 is £12,000. The deadline for applications is 29 February 2024.

Towcester Town Council is looking for an Office Administrator working 30 hours per week with salary £25,545 - £26,873 pa (pro-rata). The deadline for applications is 5pm on 2 February 2024.

Silverstone Parish Council has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 14 hours per week. The council has 11 seats and set a precept for 2023/24 of £74,989. The deadline for applications is 25 February 2024.

Full details of all vacancies at <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies>.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

We are running more courses than ever before. There is almost unlimited training available to you as a clerk or

councillor in Northamptonshire. See our dedicated web page

<https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of all courses.

Northants CALC Training and Events



NCALC
Training



COUNCILLOR
DEVELOPMENT
FRAMEWORK



OFFICER
DEVELOPMENT
FRAMEWORK



CiLCA
RECOGNISED TRAINER

See our website for the latest courses available www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events

THE PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

The Equality Act 2010 consolidated over 40 years of domestic equality law into a single act and restated existing legal protections from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation in the areas covered by the act. The Equality Act introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), which applies to all parish and town councils, and requires them to have due regard to certain equality considerations when exercising their functions, like making decisions.

New guidance published by the government in December 2023 calls for the proportional operation of PSED, saying: “*The duty should always be applied in a proportionate way depending on the circumstances of the case and the seriousness of the potential equality impacts on those with protected characteristics. Overly bureaucratic and burdensome approaches without reference to the equality aims specified in the legislation should be avoided.*” The general duty requires public authorities, in the exercise of their functions, to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and any other unlawful conduct prohibited by the act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share and people who do not share a relevant protected characteristic.
- Foster good relations between people who share and people who do not share a relevant protected characteristic.

Visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance-for-public-authorities> to read the new guidance, which is non-statutory.

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