

# Update

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## THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

When this goes out there will be just over a week until the Annual Conference & AGM, which is being held on Saturday 7 October 2023 at Moulton Community Centre. We are fully booked (115 parish delegates), the exhibitors are readying their displays, and the speakers are putting the final touches to their presentations. If you haven't seen already, the delegate information and all the papers are on our website at <https://www.northantscalc.com/annual-conference>. If you are one of the lucky ones to be attending, we look forward to seeing you there!

Unusually, August was slightly quieter at Northants CALC. Years and years ago August used to be quiet, but it hasn't been over the past decade or so. This year it was, so what's at play? It could be just coincidence of course but my feeling is that it is part of the wider societal change we are seeing since Covid. I think the population at large is somewhat fed up at the moment, so since Covid people are perhaps prioritising themselves and family over other areas of their life (the "domains" I've spoken about in previous editions). I can imagine lots of clerks and councillors saying, "We're going to have a proper holiday this year and I'm not going to look at my council emails!". The only downside of a slightly quieter August is that September has been full bore. All those enquiries that were set to one side have now come in, all those meetings that we're put in the diary for "after the summer": it's been relentless! But it keeps us out of mischief, and we love it, so long may it continue.

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*“... We can solve a problem for an individual council, but if we can then get upstream and solve it for ALL councils then even better...”*

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One of the key roles Northants CALC plays is representing all parish and town councils in the county to try to make things better/easier for all. We can solve a problem for an individual council, but if we can then get upstream and solve it for ALL councils then even better. One such example occurred in early September when a member council was contacted by Unity Trust Bank for "Know Your Customer (KYC)" information on all their councillors. We were able to assist the

council to deal with the issue, but we then sought a meeting with Unity Trust Bank to talk about their KYC procedures and the impact that they have on parish and town councils. I'm pleased to report that the KYC team at Unity were very open and approachable, and following our meeting they will modify their requirements to make it easier for parish and town councils to comply. For example, instead of requiring detailed KYC information for all councillors, they will only need it for councillors who are signatories, and names and date of birth will suffice for all other councillors. We could have just helped each individual council if/when they had the problem, but getting ahead of things like this saves councils time and money, and hassle!

We are constantly developing and innovating too. In mid-September we put on a brand-new training course on how to handle complaints against the council. It was very well received, and the delegate feedback was very positive. We are going to add it to our suite of regular courses, so look out for dates in the future. Another innovation was our inaugural AI Task Group meeting held on 20 September. My thanks to the clerks and councillors who volunteered to go on the task group to discuss Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the impact on parish and town councils. There's more about the task group in an article below.

Northants CALC also represents parish and town councils on things that are not new at all. The Local Access Forums (LAFs) have existed for many years, and they advise decision making organisations (such as principal councils) about making improvements to public access for outdoor recreation and sustainable travel. LAFs can set their own priorities depending on local issues and respond to consultations and draft policy documents. When making recommendations, LAF members consider land use, as well as the need to conserve flora, fauna, geological and physical features. Northamptonshire now has two LAFs, one for West Northamptonshire (which I attend) and one for North Northamptonshire (which Lesley Sambrook Smith attends) and both met on 13 September to consider lofty issues such as the impact of HS2 on rights of way, and active travel in the north. The LAFs are strategic, so they don't (or shouldn't) talk about individual broken stiles, but if your council has any wider issues with rights of way, access, active travel, or anything else related to getting people around (other than on the roads) then get in touch and we will make representations on your behalf.

In early August I attended a day-and-a-half workshop in Leicestershire with my fellow CALC CEOs from the East Midlands region. We were facilitated by Steven

Griggs, Professor of Politics at Staffordshire University and we looked at the future of the parish and town council sector. It was fascinating to go through various exercises that helped us define the opportunities for the sector and some of the risks. We will use the thinking to develop and shape the services we offer to member councils and given that the French system of local government is hailed as a good model, we might have to start language classes too!

The directors at Northants CALC use the summer to conduct an annual self-assessment, which provides them with an opportunity to think about what value they have added in the past year, and what they can offer in the future. I am pleased to report that seven of our eight directors are putting themselves forward for reappointment at the AGM. The eighth director is Ally Chang (Clerk to Finedon Town Council) who has decided to not seek reappointment, which is a great shame. Ally had the opportunity to travel this year and felt it was right to step away. She said, *“Thank you so much for the experience and opportunity to be part of the board of directors for Northants CALC. The last two years have been thoroughly enjoyable, and you have provided me with great support I am very appreciative of.”* We will miss Ally and I put on record my thanks for her contribution to the Association over the past two years. The Association has an Appointments Panel whose job it is to fill vacancies, and I am delighted to report that following a tough selection process the panel will be recommending to the AGM that Kate Houlihan (Clerk to Far Cotton & Delapre Community Council) joins the board of directors. Many clerks in Northamptonshire will already know Kate and we are really looking forward to making the most of her knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm for the sector on the board.

The next few months look busy, and Christmas will be here before we know it, but it's a great time to be involved in local government. There is so much to do, and parish and town councils have so much to offer.

It is tough at times being a clerk or councillor – and you must accept that your reward is in heaven – but communities need their councils more than ever, so hang in there, keep going, and keep doing brilliant things for your village or town.

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

## TEN TOP TIPS FOR HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

As a clerk or councillor there may be times when you need to have a difficult conversation with someone. It might be one councillor having a conversation with another councillor about a subject on which they disagree, a councillor talking to the clerk about something they've done or not done. Or a clerk explaining the nuances of the planning system to a member of the public who blames the parish council for their planning application being refused.

Approaching these difficult conversations takes time, effort, diplomacy, and buckets of patience. Here are ten top tips to help you plot your way through successfully...

1. Don't ignore the issue hoping it will go away. Listen and act on concerns and be proactive.
2. Tackle issues early. A stitch in time saves nine. The longer you leave it the more the issue might escalate.
3. Gather information to get a better understanding of the issue and how it could be resolved in everyone's best interests.
4. Be open, honest, and assertive. If necessary, state what behaviours are not acceptable and explain the impact these behaviours are having on others.
5. Provide specific examples to illustrate what you are saying and ask for examples from the other person to illustrate what they are saying.
6. Try not to be positional and adversarial from the start.
7. Listen. Listen. Listen. Listen more than you speak.
8. Agree next steps together and confirm in writing afterwards.
9. Monitor the situation and keep on top of it. If the agreed next steps are drifting, ask for another conversation.
10. Have boundaries and be prepared to take a break or disengage entirely if the difficult conversation is impacting your health/mental health.

If you are a clerk or councillor for any length of time you are probably going to encounter the need to have a difficult conversation. Thinking through how you would deal with it, and following the tips above will help the conversation turn out well for you and for the other person.

## FLY TIPPING? ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR? DOG FOULING?

When communities experience issues such as fly tipping, anti-social behaviour, and dog fouling, gathering the evidence is often a challenge. Here, local company Crimewave explains how they help...



Crimewave specialises in the collection and identification of evidence and information for various public bodies. We work with parish and town councils to help support their residents and communities. Our specialist re-deployable CCTV cameras can be supplied for a range of issues our clients may have. The cameras are installed on street lighting columns, and we review all the footage in search of evidence or information as required. We then liaise with the police, principal council enforcement teams (or other relevant authorities) as required ensuring action is taken depending on what evidence is found from the camera deployment.

We review all the CCTV footage, complete the reports required, and provide all the evidence and statements to the relevant authorities. Crimewave provides an all-inclusive service, so our clients don't have to do anything or have any further spend. We offer a service and do not sell any CCTV or other products.

- Anti-social behaviour
- Fly tipping and littering
- Dog fouling
- Illegal parking
- Dangerous driving
- Knife crime evidence and support
- Prosecution of offences identified with support from authorities.
- Protection of school crossing patrols and pedestrians, school parking issues
- Crime hotspots

Our service can cover many issues that affect your parish, such as the above, but not limited to these subjects. We have supported councils in many unique and complex issues effecting local communities.



We co-ordinate closely with the police and unitary councils. This allows for good communication producing efficient and effective actions for the offenders found on our deployments. Our service is unlimited and all CCTV review and evidence gathering is dealt with by us, so this does not impact on your team's time and resources. We keep your team regularly updated with camera locations, activity and outcomes and we continually review the locations, liaising with you to keep redeploying the service to areas of concern.

Councillors have reported that this service is a tangible benefit that residents appreciate. Parish resident surveys have also shown that this service was the highest priority for parishioners. Councillors also report the benefits of being able to tackle issues in their areas directly. We have regular reports of successful prosecutions and fixed penalty notices and many long-term problem areas have remained clear of issues following deployment operations.

- We have identified offenders in robberies who have been arrested and convicted who would otherwise not have been caught.
- Whilst reviewing footage we identified males fighting with weapons, these males were involved in a fatal stabbing and our footage helped to identify who was involved.
- A camera located in a littering hotspot identified criminals changing the number plates of a vehicle, this intelligence then led to arrests of individuals after a spree of thefts from commercial vehicles.
- We have identified large fly tips from road sweepers dumping their waste which have led to prosecutions and FPNs.
- Our cameras have identified wanted individuals after we have seen appeal posts on social media.
- A camera located in a busy street with commercial businesses identified individuals dumping commercial waste, this has led to prosecutions and individuals appearing in court.

If your council recognises these issues and thinks we can help, please get in touch for more information. Email: [info@crimewaveltd.co.uk](mailto:info@crimewaveltd.co.uk) Telephone: 01908 511965 Website: [www.crimewaveltd.co.uk](http://www.crimewaveltd.co.uk).

## TEN PAINFULLY HONEST TRUTHS ABOUT BEING A COUNCILLOR

inspired by a LinkedIn post from Steve Allman, Charity Coach and Consultant. Follow his posts here: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/steveallman/>

1. Most inductions are rubbish. Some councils don't even bother. At the very least, cover the basics; legal, finance, roles & responsibilities.
2. Every council will have a nitwit on it at some point. Make sure it's not you. Lead with compassion, empathy, curiosity, and kindness.
3. Some councillors don't understand their role months after joining. Don't be one of them. Ask questions and do your own homework.
4. New councillors join with passion and energy, but some quickly succumb to the status quo. Resist! Be yourself. Believe in yourself.
5. Councillors often pussyfoot around each other. They're often nice people who don't want to offend others. Constructive honesty is always best.
6. "Two hours a month" is rubbish. A couple of days a month is about right when you add everything up. Make sure you can commit.
7. Some people don't read the papers then ask daft questions which the papers have already answered. Just read the papers, for goodness' sake!
8. Meetings can be tedious, and it can feel like ages before a decision eventually gets made. Don't be afraid to challenge this and change it.
9. Conflict often occurs when Councillors forget it's about the council and residents, not about them. Leave your ego at the door.
10. If you're willing to share your skills and experience, you love teamwork and you've got the confidence and drive to overcome some of this stuff, being a councillor can be ALL KINDS OF AWESOME!

**All** parish and town councils in Northamptonshire have elections on 1 May 2025 and if you want your council to have a contested election, or even just to attract a full complement of candidates, the work starts now! It's not about active recruitment of new candidates this far out, but it is about getting the council into a good place, promoting the great work it does, and boosting its public image. That way, people will notice and want to be part of it when the opportunity arises. Time is precious and people aren't going to stand for election unless it looks like a fun, worthwhile, and rewarding thing to do. So, make it look that way, starting now!



## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In July we decided to set up an AI Task Group to

- Consider the risks of AI to parish and town councils.
- Identify the opportunities AI offers.
- Identify and disseminate good practice to all member councils.
- Collaborate with the unitary councils on AI.
- Inform and feed into any similar national initiatives (i.e., from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) or the Local Government Association (LGA)).

The inaugural meeting of the group was held on 20 September 2023, and it was a fascinating discussion. The group comprises of a dozen clerks and



councillors from councils across the county, large and small. Some are tech enthusiasts and have already found practical uses for AI, whilst others are self-proclaimed technophobes, Luddites, or just late adopters. It's a great mix and has already proved itself a useful group.

The group considered a whole range of impacts of AI, from the increased efficiency of producing agendas and minutes, through to the risk to the very foundation of representative democracy. It was certainly a stimulating hour and a half! It was agreed to try to stay grounded in the practical implications, both to avoid going off on flights of fancy, and to ensure that whatever is communicated about AI to clerks and councillors is meaningful and not too intimidating. The use of real-world examples will be a useful tool in communicating the benefits – and potential pitfalls – of AI.

It was also agreed to begin identifying AI tools that parish and town councils can make use of, from apps such as Microsoft Copilot (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/ai/>) and Microsoft Decisions (<https://www.meetingdecisions.com/>), through to sector-specific apps such as Hello Lamp Post (<https://www.hlp.city/>). AI isn't the future; these tools are available now.

The AI Task Group will meet monthly for the foreseeable future to ensure that parish and town councils in Northamptonshire are at the vanguard.

## SUCCESSION PLANNING FOR PARISH COUNCILS

Succession planning is the process of identifying and developing potential successors for key leadership positions within an organisation. It is an important part of ensuring that the organisation has the talent and expertise it needs to continue to succeed in the future.

Succession planning can be challenging for even the largest and most well-resourced organisations, but it is especially important for small organisations with limited staff resources, which is the case for most parish councils.

If your parish council has only one member of staff – the clerk - succession planning is even more important. It is essential to have a plan in place to ensure that the council can continue to operate smoothly and effectively if the clerk leaves or is unable to work.

There are a number of steps that all parish and town councils can take to implement succession planning, even with limited resources.

1. **Identify key roles and tasks.** The first step is to identify the key roles and tasks within the parish council that are essential to its operation. In councils with multiple staff this may include the clerk, assistant clerk, and other administrative roles.
2. **Assess the skills and experience of the current clerk.** Once you have identified the key roles and tasks, you need to assess the skills and experience of the current staff member. This will help you to identify any gaps that need to be addressed.
3. **Develop a plan to expand the skills and experience of the current clerk.** This may involve providing training and development opportunities in house or externally, and delegating tasks to other members of the council to free up time for the clerk's continuous professional development.
4. **Identify potential successors.** In councils with multiple staff, it might be possible to identify potential successors. This may involve looking for internal candidates, such as other members of staff or volunteers, or external candidates.

Succession planning is easiest when the short to medium term staffing situation is known. For example, let's imagine that a clerk announces their intention to retire in two years. The council has decided to start succession planning early to ensure that there is a smooth transition when the clerk leaves.

The council begins by identifying the key roles and tasks within the council, then assesses the skills and experience of the current clerk. The clerk has a wealth of experience and knowledge about the council and its operations.

The council also identifies potential successors to the clerk. The council has a part time deputy clerk and develops a plan to transition them into the clerk's role. The deputy clerk is given training on the clerk's duties and responsibilities. They are also given the opportunity to shadow the clerk and attend council meetings or to take over sole responsibility for one of the council's committees.

Two years later, the clerk retires. The council is confident that the assistant clerk is ready to take over the role of clerk and the assistant clerk has the skills and experience necessary to be successful in the role.

Of course, most councils only have one employee – the clerk – but assuming the council knows in advance that the clerk is leaving it is still often possible to bring in a successor and have an overlap period. Doubling the wage bill for three or even six months adds cost but will pay dividends in the long run if there is a thorough and smooth handover. Too many councils end one employment then start the next, sometimes even with a gap of several weeks or months in between. This can set the council back and present a serious risk to its ability to deliver the planned services and projects.

The key is to start as early as possible. Don't wait until the clerk is leaving to start succession planning. It is important to have a plan in place well in advance. The current clerk should be involved in the succession planning process because they can provide valuable insights into the key roles and tasks within the council, and the skills and experience that are needed.

Things don't always go according to plan, so it is important to be flexible and adaptable, but a little planning can go a long way to ensuring continuity and the continued success of the council.

## OPERATION POPPY

We are coming up to Remembrance Day and commemoration events and services will be held by parish and town councils across Northamptonshire. It is very important that Northamptonshire Police and the Emergency Planners at the unitary councils are informed of events where there are significant numbers of people, uniformed members of the military, or public processions.



Fortunately, it is straightforward to give notice of an event because the unitary councils have worked together to create the Event Safety Partnership (ESP):

- West: <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/community-safety-and-emergencies/west-and-north-northamptonshire-event-safety-partnership>.
- North: <https://www.northnorthants.gov.uk/community-safety-and-emergencies/west-and-north-northamptonshire-event-safety-partnership>

A very small village remembrance event with no military attendance whatsoever does not need to be notified to the ESP but if even a single member of the armed forces, regulars, reservists, or cadets attend, then the ESP must be informed. Also, if there is a procession (defined as an organised “*public procession intended to mark or commemorate an event*”) it is a legal requirement to inform the police (which is best done via the ESP portal).

The murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013 and recent terrorist attacks at public events has led to heightened security measures being put in place and to new legislation such as the draft Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, (aka Martyn’s Law) being brought forward.

The current National Threat Level is “Substantial”, which means that “*an attack is likely*”. It is level 3 of 5 levels of threat. Consequently, the Joint Operations Team (JOT) at Northamptonshire Police says “*We will be cracking down and asking people to do what they have always meant to be doing. Saying “we’ve done this for 20 years with no problems” just isn’t acceptable anymore.*”

## HOME WORKING ALLOWANCE

Most parish clerks work from home, and incur costs in heating, electricity, and other services. There has been confusion over home working allowances for a very long time, particularly whether a multi-councillled clerk can claim the allowance once, or once per employment.

The confusion is caused partly because there are two very clear and distinct methods of addressing the issue of home working expenses:



- 1) The right of an employer to pay their staff for home working expenses, where the threshold applies to each **employer**, in the same way that the NI threshold applies to each employer.
- 2) The entitlement of an individual who doesn't get paid extra to claim tax relief on their costs, where the limit applies per **individual**.

Where two or more employers pay the same person a homeworking allowance, they can each pay up to £6 per week (£26 per month) tax free, provided that each employer is satisfied that the total amount paid (e.g., £52 if there are 2 employers) does not exceed the additional household expenses involved. If the amounts paid exceed the employee's extra costs, anything extra is taxable pay.

Where an employer does not pay a home working allowance, employees may be able to obtain tax relief from HMRC. This allows them to avoid paying tax on £26 a month, so it only saves the employee a maximum of £5.20 a month, or nothing at all, if they are not a taxpayer. Tax relief should not be seen as a substitute for paying an allowance.

For general guidance on claiming tax relief for home working see <https://www.gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home>, or for sector specific advice on home working Northants CALC has a guidance note on "*Payments for working from home – April 2022*", which is available on request.

## SAVE THE PUB – AND OTHER COMMUNITY ASSETS

A pub is often a vital community hub, providing benefits that extend well beyond the supply of alcohol and/or food. With rural pubs especially under pressure since Covid, what you don't want to do as a community is wake up to a "Sold" board being hammered into the ground outside the local hostelry. The way to avoid that is to register the pub as an Asset of Community Value (ACV).



Note that listing a pub (or any other eligible community asset) as an ACV does not prevent it from being sold. It only prevents it from being sold without the community knowing about it and having the opportunity to save it if they want. And even if a community can rally support to save a community asset, there is no guarantee that such an ambition will end successfully. The owner of an ACV is not obliged to sell it to a community venture.

When a listed asset is considered for disposal, owners of the listed asset are required to inform the principal council, which is responsible for maintaining the register of ACVs, of their intention to dispose. Eligible groups will then have up to 6 months to prepare a bid for the property, during which time the owner is unable to enter any other arrangements to dispose of the property. The relevant legislation defines disposal as a freehold sale or a leasehold transaction of 25 years or more.

The legislation does not provide a right for the eligible group(s) to purchase the property, nor does it restrict the use of the nominated property for community activities. The process affords eligible groups up to six months (the moratorium period) to raise finance, develop a business plan and make a bid to acquire the property. On the expiry of the six-month moratorium period, the owner of the listed asset may sell to whomever they wish.

A building or land may be registered as an asset of community value if:

- 1) The primary current use of the asset furthers the social wellbeing or social interests (cultural, recreational and/or sporting) of the local community; and
- 2) It is realistic to think that there can continue to be use of the asset which will further the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community, although not necessarily in the same way as before, and
- 3) The asset had a use which furthers the social wellbeing or social interests (cultural, recreational and/or sporting) of the local community in the recent past and it is realistic to think that there is a time in the next 5 years when it could do so again (whether or not in the same way as before).

If a village values its pub, it should be registered as an ACV. Proactively. Don't wait until there is a real or perceived threat. If an unregistered pub has been shut for a while, then a parish council should still apply to register it. The longer the pub has been shut, the more compelling the case to the principal council needs to be regarding the definition of "recent use as a community asset".

Locality is the government-funded body providing support to communities on the Community Rights introduced by the Localism Act 2011, including the Community Right to Bid. There is a dedicated web site at <https://mycommunity.org.uk/>.

If an application to register an ACV is successful, the principal council will inform the nominating community body, the owner, any leaseholders/tenants, the parish or town council (if it is not the nominating body) and the relevant ward members. The list of nominations held by the principal council will be updated and the ACV will remain on the list for up to five years. The listing will be registered as a local land charge and a restriction is registered against the title to the land at Land Registry to ensure that the land is not disposed of in breach of the rules.

For parish and town councils in North Northamptonshire, you will find guidance on the ACV registration process at <https://www.northnorthants.gov.uk/communities-assets-and-grants/assets-community-value>, and for those in West Northamptonshire, you will find guidance at <https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/business-licensing-and-regeneration/assets-community-value>.

## HANG ON JUST A MINUTE

The minutes of a council meeting are the shop-window document of any council. It's worth spending a bit of time on them and making sure that the clerk and all councillors understand their purpose.

The minutes record the decisions made at a meeting. They are not a complete record of it, nor are they a transcript of everything that was said. They are most certainly not the place to record the pontifications of councillors, or indeed, members of the public!

Good minutes don't just happen. They require thought and good procedures generally. Muddled minutes are evidence of a muddled council. Clear, concise, and precise minutes are an indication that the council is operating efficiently and effectively.

The first step to having good minutes is to have good agendas. The law requires that the agenda should **specify the business to be transacted**. It is unlawful to make a decision, particularly a decision to spend money, unless there has been a specific agenda item. Items such as "Highways matters", "Planning matters" and "Any other business" do not specify the business to be transacted and should not appear on a council agenda. Including such items inevitably leads to a rambling, nebulous "chat" that concludes with a woolly, loose agreement to do something, or to not do something. Such items are impossible to minute clearly, concisely, and precisely.

Where the agenda specifies the business to be transacted, the minutes almost write themselves. For example, if the agenda item is "*To install a wooden bench at a cost of £950 on the corner of Church Street and Chapel Street*" then, assuming the vote was in favour, the minute would be "**RESOLVED:** *To install a wooden bench at a cost of £950 on the corner of Church Street and Chapel Street*". Clear. Concise. Precise.

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It is not necessary to record “*It was proposed by Cllr Smith and seconded by Cllr Jones that a bench be installed on the corner of Church Street and Chapel Street. After a lengthy conversation the matter was put to a vote and by show of hands it was agreed unanimously that the bench be installed*”. Clear, maybe. Concise and precise, no. The decision is that the bench be installed. The fact that the motion was proposed and seconded and who by is superfluous. As is the length of the debate and the nature of the vote. The minutes simply need to record the decision made.

Writing good minutes is a skill that not everyone possesses, but it can be learnt and practiced. And producing good minutes is not just the clerk’s responsibility; councillors need to play their part too. For example, councillors should speak clearly and audibly at council meetings and only speak one at a time (a good chair will ensure this happened always). Clerks need to be good listeners in order to capture what is said, and the tone and intonation of what is said, and to summarise the debate and pick out the salient points, but they should also have the confidence and wherewithal to ask for clarifications, or for a motion to be repeated (and if necessary, committed to writing) before being voted on.

It is acceptable to include some detail, particularly on complex, sensitive or contentious matters. The general principle is that the minutes should contain just enough background information for clarity and accuracy and to allow the minutes to be read as a standalone document, without having to refer to another document for interpretation.

The minutes should be well laid out, ideally in a table, which allows a column to be added to the right-hand side to clearly record the initials of the person to which any actions are assigned.

The minute numbering sequence should match the agenda reference and should make it possible to demonstrate a complete and continuous record. For example, a number format such as 456/23/FC would indicate that it’s item number 456, transacted in 2023 at full council (FC). The three-digit number simply increments one for each item of business, year after year until 999 then reverts to 001. Such a numbering system is infinitely preferable to having items numbered 1 – 20 at each meeting, which makes it impossible to demonstrate a continuous and complete record (even if each page is numbered).

The minutes must also contain the basics, including the name of the council (obvious, but not always done!), the date, time and location of the meeting, the names of the councillors in attendance and those having given apologies and, ideally, the date, time, and location of the next meeting.

Action points resulting from resolutions are what drives the council forward. All actions should be clearly marked in the minutes so that the council's officer(s) and members know exactly what is expected of them once the meeting is over. Deadlines become clear and there is a better overview of the division of tasks.

It is good practice for the clerk to write up the minutes as soon after the meeting as possible. Organised clerks set aside time in their diaries for the task very soon after the meeting so that it's done and out of the way. The draft minutes are usually sent to one or more councillors for an accuracy and fact check. It is not the councillor's job to dispute the minutes or to suggest substantive changes to the text; the draft minutes belong to the clerk and not the councillors. The check is simply for typos, misspelt local names, and that kind of thing. Once the clerk is happy with the draft it should be published immediately on the council's web site. It is a common fallacy that the minutes cannot be published until they have been signed off by the council at the next meeting. As long as the draft minutes clearly show they are draft (use a watermark or header text) then they can be published.

The decisions recorded in draft minutes can be acted on because they were binding decisions as soon as the vote was declared at the meeting. However, the minutes themselves are not a legal record until they are signed. For that purpose, the minutes are presented to the council for approval for signature. By so resolving, the council is asserting that the minutes are true and accurate and when the council instructs the chair of the meeting to sign the minutes, they become the legal record of the council's decisions and are admissible as evidence in court proceedings.

Once signed, the minutes must never be altered. If an error is discovered after signature, it can only be corrected by including an erratum in a subsequent set of minutes.

Always remember that the minutes will be distributed internally and externally. It is a public document and should be kept in perpetuity. The document should be accessible and the electronic version should be in a format that is widely readable,

e.g., PDF. Historic minutes are an important source of social history and should be protected. The Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO) is happy to receive archive minutes from parish and town councils, so aim to deposit them there at suitable intervals (e.g., every five to ten years).

There's an interesting question about what version to display on the council's web site. The draft minutes can be a PDF copy generated by printing a Word document as PDF. But for the signed copy it is not so easy. Either the Word version has to have an image of the chair's signature included in it before printing as PDF, or the hard copy that was signed at the meeting has to be scanned as a PDF image. The text in the latter is not machine-readable, so accessibility is reduced, but it is a faithful facsimile of the actual signed document. Whatever the technological approach it is the hard-copy, wet-signature version that is the official version and the one that must be produced as evidence, if required.

The minutes reflect the council's professionalism, culture, and standards so the document is worthy of proper care and consideration. Councillors, and in particular the chair, must do their part in ensuring that meetings are efficient and effective, and then the clerk has the best chance of creating clear, concise, and precise minutes. The council's minutes will hopefully survive long after the clerk and councillors are gone, so make sure they reflect well on you and the council!

## **SITUATIONS VACANT**



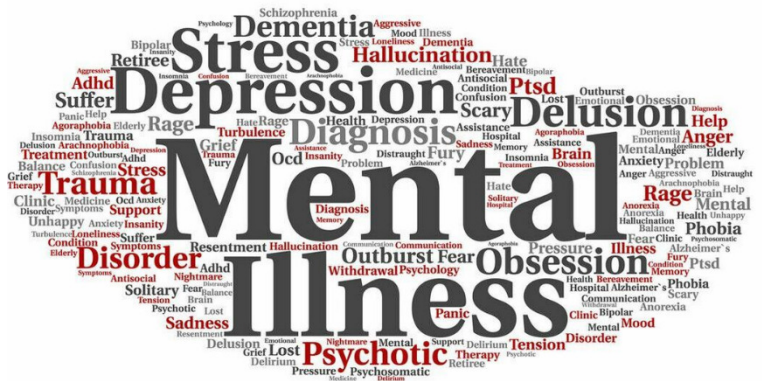
All parish and town council officer vacancies in Northamptonshire are posted at <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies>.

There is currently a vacancy for a Library Manager at Kingsthorpe Parish Council working 35 hours per week. The deadline for applications is 20 October 2023.

If you or anyone you know might be looking for a clerkship and there isn't one on <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies> that fits the bill, please email [dmoody@northantscalc.com](mailto:dmoody@northantscalc.com) to receive details of potential future opportunities.

## MENTAL HEALTH & LOCAL COUNCILS

It should come as no surprise that not every person thinks the exact same way. Even people with good mental health exhibit a wide variety of learning and thinking patterns, but the prevalence of mental health issues in the general population means that most parish and town councils will at some point experience a clerk or councillor with a mental health issue that impacts on their work with the council.



In addition to general mental health, there is a whole gamut of personality disorders that are normally expressed as a spectrum (and we're all on that spectrum somewhere!). An example is Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), which, according to Wikipedia is characterised by “*persistent grandiosity, excessive need for admiration, and a personal disdain and lack of empathy for others*” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissistic\\_personality\\_disorder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissistic_personality_disorder)). As such, *the person with NPD usually displays arrogance and a distorted sense of superiority, and they seek to establish abusive power and control over others*”. Sound familiar?!

The article goes on to say that “*Self-confidence (a strong sense of self) is different from narcissistic personality disorder; people with NPD typically value themselves over others to the extent that they openly disregard the feelings and wishes of others, and expect to be treated as superior, regardless of their actual status or achievements. Moreover, the person with narcissistic personality disorder usually exhibits a fragile ego (self-concept), intolerance of criticism, and a tendency to belittle others in order to validate their own superiority.*”

The prevalence of bullying in the parish and town council sector (councillor on clerk, councillor on councillor, clerk on councillor) is such that urgent research is required, and NPD sounds like a good place to start.

The demographics of the sector can't be ignored either. The average age of a councillor is around sixty years and there are all sorts of mental health issues that

get more common in older age. Dementia is one such condition and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) made a strategic commitment that it will:

- Work with County Associations to help member councils develop the necessary awareness, skills and understanding to recognise and support people living with dementia in the communities we serve.
- Encourage member councils to work together and with their local partners to help maintain and improve the general safety, health and wellbeing of people living with dementia, their families, and carers.
- Support Alzheimer's Society in their quest to develop more dementia-friendly communities and Dementia Friends in line with the Prime Minister's Challenge on dementia.
- Work with Alzheimer's Society and other recognised experts to share best practice and publicise effective policies, procedures, practices, and training.

If you would like to find out more about how to become a Dementia Friendly Community, please visit <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-involved/dementia-friendly-communities/resources-creating-dementia-friendly-communities>.

Mental health issues should not be ignored. According to *Psychology Today* five warning signs of mental health risk are:

1. A change in personality where someone starts to act or think differently
2. Uncharacteristic anxiety, anger, or moodiness
3. Social withdrawal and isolation
4. Lack of self-care or risky behaviours
5. A sense of hopelessness or feeling overwhelmed

Mental health issues are complex and potentially difficult to deal with, but clerks and councillors should look out for each other and remember that certain behaviours may not always be because the person is “difficult” or “nasty” but instead might be a sign of a mental health issue that needs to be recognised, understood, and handled in a sensitive and appropriate way.

## A CAUTIONARY TALE

The Localism Act 2011 introduced the criminal offence of failing to disclose a pecuniary interest in business being transacted by a council. Prior to the Act, prosecution of an individual councillor was extremely unlikely because councillors act together as a corporate body. Since the 2011 Act, an individual councillor's actions, or inactions, could lead to criminal charges. However, since the introduction of the Act there has only been one criminal conviction, and that resulted only in a small fine for the subject councillor.

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) include things such as a councillor's paid occupation, the property they own, and contracts they have. Councillors are required to declare their own interests and those of their partner or spouse.

Charges under the Localism Act are rare but in September two members of the same parish council in Cheshire appeared in court facing charges of failing to disclose pecuniary interests. It is alleged that in 2021 and 2022 they participated in discussions and voted in council meetings while having a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest, in contravention of section 31(4) of the Localism Act 2011. Both councillors pleaded not guilty to all charges and further hearings are scheduled.

A complaint alleging that a councillor had failed to declare a DPI would be handled by the police in the first instance, but any such allegations would be assessed against the Code for Crown Prosecutors, including whether there is enough evidence to provide a "realistic prospect of conviction", and whether a prosecution is needed in the public interest. The bar is high, and it is difficult to imagine a complaint reaching the required thresholds unless it involved a significant financial gain for the subject councillor. More likely, the police would refer the complaint back to the Monitoring Officer at the relevant principal council to deal with by way of sanction.

The fact that the likelihood of criminal charges is low, and prosecution even lower should not lull parish and town councillors into a false sense of security. If you are a councillor, when was the last time you checked your Register of Member's Interests and updated it where necessary? Do you read the agenda for every meeting carefully to consider what interests you have and the nature of those interests? And do you declare your interests when you become aware of them? As the saying goes, ignorance is not a defence!

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

We are running more courses than ever before. There is lots of 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

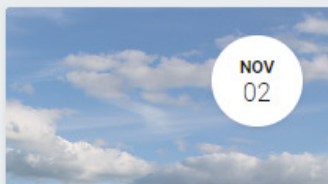


See our website for the latest courses available [www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events](https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events)



VAT for unregistered councils (VAT126)  
31 October 2023 - 10:00

ODF: Skilled Councillor: Finance Clerk and Officer: Finance



Off To A Flying Start  
2 November 2023 - 10:00

CDF: Foundation Councillor: Governance

Sold Out



Finance for Councillors  
2 November 2023 - 10:00

CDF: Foundation Councillor: Finance



Freedom of Information for Councils  
3 November 2023 - 09:30

ODF: Skilled Councillor: Governance Clerk and Officer: Governance



Finance for Councillors  
7 November 2023 - 10:00

CDF: Foundation Councillor: Finance

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