

# Update

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## THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

It's been a busy time for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire and across the country and the Coronation celebrations provided a welcome boost of civic pride and community spirit. The weather over the Coronation weekend was just about OK, and certainly didn't dampen enthusiasm! Parish and town councils organised street parties, live screenings of the Coronation service and Coronation concert, Big Lunches, tea parties, dances, and all manner of other celebrations. There's a page of photos below. The Monday was the Big Help Out and some councils used it to encourage residents to get involved in litter picks, tidying up open spaces, and repainting sports pavilions and community buildings. Most parish and town councils depend on volunteers as it would be too expensive to provide all services via paid staff. Often the councillors are a ready pool of volunteers (note that the two roles are entirely different and should be clearly separated) but it is important to also attract volunteers from the wider community.

I would like to thank all clerks, other officers, and councillors who gave up their time to organise and facilitate events and celebrations across the Coronation weekend. Individuals often go above and beyond to make sure everything goes as well as it can on the day, and the effort is not always noticed. Your reward will be in heaven, but in the meantime, a big, big thank you from me.

The Coronation might have been the highlight, but April and May are always incredibly busy months in local government. The council year ends on 31 March, so Responsible Financial Officers (RFOs – normally part of the clerk's role) have been busy preparing the year-end accounts, facilitating the internal audit, and making all the preparations for completing the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR). Our team of internal auditors met on 5 April 2023 to prepare for the audit season and have been conducting audits across the county in recent weeks. Northants CALC now provides internal audit to 80% of parish and town councils in Northamptonshire and we are always happy to add to that number.

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*“...the Coronation celebrations provided a welcome boost of civic pride and community spirit.”*

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April/May is also annual meeting time. There are two types of annual meeting, one is a meeting of the electors (the Annual Parish/Town Meeting), which can be held on any day between 1 March and 1 June, and the other is a meeting of the council (the statutory annual meeting), which must be held in May. Good practice is to hold the two types of annual meeting on different days to avoid confusion. There is an article on Annual Parish Meetings below, which is intended to challenge councils to reflect on the 2023 meeting and start thinking about the 2024 meeting.

Northants CALC is so busy now. It seems to be a permanent state and the days of “quiet weeks” are long gone. When I started in the role in 2007, I was told by my predecessor that “*the summer months are usually very quiet*”. How times have changed!! Northants CALC staff have been out and about across the county, with me focusing on engagement with West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and Lesley Sambrook Smith focusing on engagement with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC). We now have a series of regular monthly meetings with senior officers from the departments of greatest relevance to parish and town councils (planning, highways, legal (including elections) and community). Lesley, Marie Reilly, and I have been delivering training right across Northamptonshire, whether it be specific topics or whole-council development sessions, and as well as the in-person training our online training programme is now fully established. In May 2023 there were twenty-eight training and development events: almost one a day! The Northants CALC board of directors has also been out and about. On 20 April 2023 the board held a meeting with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) hosted at the Corby Cube. It was a good opportunity for the board to meet senior officers and members at NNC (thanks go to Guy Holloway and Cllr David Howes) and for NNC to see that Northants CALC is a well organised and well supported Association.

I am a CALC rep on the National Employment Strategy Advisory Group (NESAG), which includes the Chief Executives and Member Services Managers of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC). The group’s job is to look at trends in employment practices in parish and town councils and to consider what support and services need to be provided. A NESAG meeting was held on 17 April 2023 and the thorny issue of the clerk’s model contract of employment was discussed. I think that some progress is at last being made, which is very welcome as I first highlighted the

issues in 2009!! There is a way to go yet, but I am cautiously optimistic that a new contract might be available this calendar year.

One area of increasing interest is health and wellbeing, driven by the introduction last year of the Integrated Care System (ICS) and the creation in north and west Northamptonshire of Local Area Partnerships (LAPs). Most of the services that parish and town councils contribute to health and wellbeing in some way, so it has always been a *raison d'être* for the sector, but now it is time to better understand and develop that contribution. We are talking to the unitary councils about the possibility of creating a Parish Health & Wellbeing Manager role at Northants CALC to focus on and help co-ordinate activity in this important area, so watch this space!

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

## **NORTHANTS LITTER WOMBLES**

**Article by Sally Romain, Chair of the Northants Litter Wombles**

The Northants Litter Wombles (NLW's) was formed in January 2021 following the lockdown period during the Covid 19 pandemic. People went walking for their daily exercise and began to notice how littered Northamptonshire had become. Nicola Elliott our founder, started a Facebook group which has rapidly grown to some 3,400 members. To date (April 2023) we have collected over a staggering 59,000 bags of litter, improving the environment both for people and wildlife alike and saving the taxpayer some £3 million.



We strongly believe that everyone deserves to live, work, study and play in a place free of litter. It improves the well-being of all and helps to engender pride in local communities and improves the local economy as companies want to invest

in the county and tourism blossoms. Unfortunately, our litter problem is caused by people who think it is acceptable to throw their litter out of car windows, drop their drink can or crisp packet or fly tip their rubbish in the hedgerows for someone else to clear up, including numerous bottles of urine discarded by lorry drivers onto the verges of our main roads.

Our group, named after the famous TV programme, is a group of ordinary people doing the extraordinary every day who say, "enough is enough" and take positive action to clean up our towns and countryside for the benefit of all. We pride ourselves on a 'can do' attitude.

We work through our 40 or so affiliated subgroups throughout Northamptonshire whether it be in the major towns, villages, or hamlets. We not only take direct action by litter picking, but most importantly we educate children and young adults through our school's programme 'Creating Litter Education and Awareness in Northamptonshire' (CLEAN).



We raise awareness by promoting our work to encourage others to help out. We hold free 30-minute assemblies in schools and for Scouts, Brownies, Beavers etc. Our presentation is informative, engaging, interactive and challenging. By involving children in caring about the problem that litter causes, we aim to encourage and empower them to change their habits and those of the people around them. So far, we have reached around 10,000 children across Northamptonshire and have more assemblies booked in. We also follow up with litter picking sessions to support and encourage the children. We use funds to buy little purple Wombles jackets and pickers which the children love to use!

We link with other voluntary, statutory, and commercial organisations to promote our aim of having a litter free county, thus improving the environment for people and for the wildlife. The latter suffers hugely from the endless plastic both in their habitat and in the waterways, of which there are many throughout the county.

NLW's is an organisation run entirely by volunteers and is reliant on donations and grants to continue its work. We are an unincorporated association, with a bank account, constitution, policies, and an elected committee. It costs around £40 to kit out a volunteer Womble with picker, hoop, high vis vest etc. We also run a website and have a webmaster to keep it relevant and current. Many large companies want to work with us such as Panther, Wickes, Barclaycard, and Nationwide, to address some of their environmental policies and areas of corporate social responsibility.

We are also involved in other initiatives such as lobbying our Members of Parliament to bring about change not only locally but at a national level too. We realise that littering is a huge problem along the motorway system and A-roads which we are unable to access for safety reasons. At some stage, we hope to host a 'litter conference' and bring all the interested parties together for the benefit of the environment.

Are you ready to play your part? Could you help us with any expertise such as marketing, grant funding, conference hosting, social media, liaison with change makers, influencers or simply joining us on one of our group litter picks? If so, we would love to hear from you. Please contact Sally Romain, Chair of the Northants Litter Wombles at [sally.romain@northantslitterwombles.co.uk](mailto:sally.romain@northantslitterwombles.co.uk) or have a look at our website at [www.northantslitterwombles.co.uk](http://www.northantslitterwombles.co.uk).

## **ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY EVENT**

To coincide with the national Armed Forces Day (<https://www.armedforcesday.org.uk/>) the Northamptonshire Armed Forces Covenant Partnership is organising an Armed Forces Community Event on Friday 16 June 2023 from 1230 onwards at Delapré Abbey in Northampton. The event is open to all and features guest speakers, market stalls, and interactive activities. Whether you are a council hoping to provide services and support under the Armed Forces Covenant, or whether you are a veteran, reservist, currently serving, spouse, or a family member of someone with a link to the Armed Forces, this event has something for you. Look out for the VR Therapies workshop, Pets as Therapy, a talk from the Frank Bruno Foundation, fishing taster sessions, wellbeing walks of the Abbey Grounds and more. Look up and [book event activities](#) or for more information contact [Covenant.NCC@westnorthants.gov.uk](mailto:Covenant.NCC@westnorthants.gov.uk).



## **INTERESTING, ALARMINGLY INTERESTING**

Let's consider two relatively straightforward questions...

### **Q1. What is Northants CALC?**

*Northants CALC stands for Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils. It is a non-profit organization that represents the interests of parish and town councils in Northamptonshire, England. Northants CALC provides support and advice to parish and town councils, and it works to promote the role of local government in the community.*

*Northants CALC was founded in 1974, and it currently has over 200 member councils. The organization is governed by a board of directors, which is elected by the member councils. Northants CALC is funded by membership fees and grants.*

*Northants CALC provides a variety of services to its member councils, including training and development, information and advice, advocacy, networking, and events and publications.*

*Northants CALC also works to promote the role of local government in the community. The organization does this by:*

- *Lobbying central and local government*
- *Raising awareness of the importance of local government*
- *Working with other organizations*

*Northants CALC is an important organization for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. The organization provides support and advice, and it works to promote the role of local government in the community.*

*Here are some of the services that Northants CALC provides to its member councils:*

***Training and development:*** *Northants CALC provides training and development opportunities for parish and town councillors, including training on topics such as finance, planning, and communication.*

**Information and advice:** Northants CALC provides information and advice to parish and town councils on a wide range of topics, including legislation, policy, and best practice.

**Advocacy:** Northants CALC advocates on behalf of parish and town councils to central and local government.

**Networking:** Northants CALC provides opportunities for parish and town councillors to network with each other and with other organizations.

**Events and publications:** Northants CALC organizes events and publishes a range of materials to support parish and town councils.

*If you are a parish or town councillor in Northamptonshire, I encourage you to get involved with Northants CALC. The organization can provide you with valuable support and advice, and it can help you to make a difference in your community.*

## **Q2. Who is the Leader of West Northants Council?**

*The current Leader of West Northamptonshire Council is Councillor Jonathan Nunn. He is a member of the Conservative Party and has been a councillor for the Nene Valley ward since 2011. He was elected Leader of the Council in May 2021.*

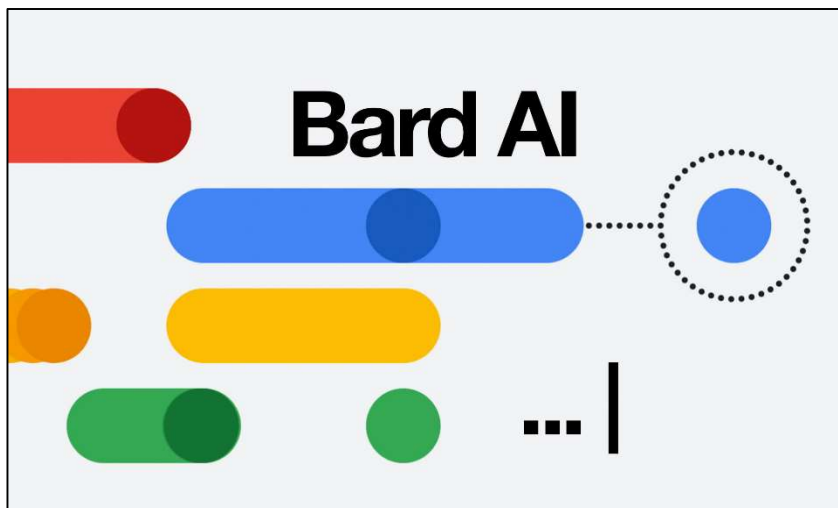
*As Leader of the Council, Councillor Nunn is responsible for setting the council's strategic direction and overseeing its day-to-day operations. He is also responsible for representing the council to the public and other organizations.*

*Councillor Nunn is a strong advocate for West Northamptonshire and is committed to working with partners to improve the lives of local people. He is also a passionate advocate for local democracy and believes that councils play a vital role in serving their communities.*

Now, it might surprise you to learn that the entirety of the text above in blue was generated automatically by Artificial Intelligence (AI); in this case the Large Language Model generative AI chatbot Google Bard (<https://bard.google.com>). The questions were inputted, and Bard generated the answers in seconds. The only real giveaway is the use of “z” instead of “s” in spellings, and the slightly



repetitive (robotic!) nature of the text. Other than that, it's certainly passable. I did delete one fact claiming that Cllr Nunn was a former police officer, which as far as I am aware is not true, so be careful what AI tells you!



The rise of AI in recent months is both fascinating

and alarming. Apparently, AI has the potential to cure cancer by 2030, but may choose to do so by eliminating humans from planet earth! But what relevance is this to parish and town councils, you may well ask. Well, let's ask Bard...

### **Q3. What is the impact of AI on parish councils?**

*Artificial intelligence (AI) is having a significant impact on parish councils in a number of ways. AI can be used to improve efficiency, transparency, and communication. It can also be used to better understand the needs of residents and to provide more targeted services.*

*Here are some specific examples of how AI is being used by parish councils:*

***Improving efficiency:*** AI can be used to automate tasks such as data entry, record keeping, and correspondence. This can free up staff time to focus on more important tasks.

***Improving transparency:*** AI can be used to make council meetings more accessible to the public. For example, AI can be used to live stream meetings or to provide transcripts of meetings.

***Improving communication:*** AI can be used to create more personalized and targeted communications with residents. For example, AI can be used to send residents reminders about upcoming events or to provide them with information about services that are relevant to them.

***Understanding the needs of residents:*** AI can be used to collect and analyze data about residents' needs. This information can then be used to develop policies and services that better meet the needs of the community.

***Providing more targeted services:*** AI can be used to identify residents who are in need of assistance. This information can then be used to provide those residents with the services they need.

Overall, AI has the potential to make parish councils more efficient, transparent, and communicative. It can also help councils to better understand the needs of residents and to provide more targeted services.

*Here are some of the challenges that parish councils face in adopting AI:*

***Cost:*** AI can be expensive to implement and maintain.

***Skills:*** Parish councils may not have the skills or resources to implement AI effectively.

***Data privacy:*** Parish councils need to be careful about how they collect and use data.

***Bias:*** AI systems can be biased, which can lead to unfair decisions.

*Despite these challenges, AI has the potential to be a valuable tool for parish councils. By carefully considering the challenges and opportunities, parish councils can use AI to improve their services and better serve their communities.*

Again, all the blue text above was generated by the chatbot in just seconds, but it is certainly realistic and plausible. AI will impact the parish and town council sector just as it will impact every other sector and every part of our lives. It is important that the sector starts “*carefully considering the challenges and opportunities*” and with some urgency too given the pace at which AI is developing. Early adopters will reap the benefits. Luddites will be left behind.

If you thought that AI is just something that the boffins are messing about with in the lab, or that its main function was enabling Alexa to tell you the weather forecast, then think again. AI is a revolution, and it is approaching like a storm.

## THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

Schedule 12, Part III, para 14(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 provides that “*The parish meeting of a parish shall assemble annually on some day between 1st March and 1st June, both inclusive, in every year.*” It is usually called the Annual Parish Meeting, or Annual Parish Assembly, or Annual Town Meeting/Assembly. The APM is a meeting of the local government electors in the parish, but where there is a parish or town council the APM is usually convened by the chair of the council. Consequently, to members of the public the APM often looks and feels like a parish council meeting. This misapprehension is further reinforced when the APM and the annual meeting of the council (when the chair is elected) are held on the same night.

Given that the APM must be held between 1 March and 1 June it might seem odd to be writing about it in this edition of *eUpdate* when, by definition, all APMs will already have been held. The objective is to encourage you to reflect on whatever happened at the 2023 APM and to decide what you intend to do for the 2024

APM, because if you want to make something of it then planning (and maybe even budget) needs to be thought about by the end of the calendar year.



At the extremes there

are two schools of thought. One is that the APM is an anachronism that harks back to a time when local government electors needed to gather physically to hear about what was going on in the area, to discuss “parish affairs” and to demand “polls” on important local matters, and that consequently the APM is pointless and should be abolished. After all, even the exulted Charles Arnold-Baker says, “*Many parishes do not hold such meetings and there is no sanction for not holding*

*such a meeting.*” The other school of thought is that the APM is a shop window for the council and for the community, and that it is a precious opportunity to build community spirit and enhance community cohesion in an age of digital (mis)information.

A typical APM a few years ago looked and felt like a council meeting, with the chair, clerk, and councillors sat at the top table, and with the audience comprising of representatives of groups and organisations in the parish who had been invited along to present their annual reports. No one was there unless they were giving a report, no one **wanted** to be there, and fascinating as it might have been to hear about the Gardening Club’s July outing to Wisley, most people who were interested in that read about it at the time on the group’s Facebook page (and the 40-minute detailed report from the Gardening Club secretary was a little longer than had been requested anyway).

The options then are to knock it on the head or to make something of it. It’s one or the other really because anything in the middle is probably doing more harm than good.

Some councils have reported success by choosing a topic of local interest and, where appropriate, having an outside speaker on it. What is the one thing that residents are concerned about... what is exercising everyone on the community Facebook groups? Maybe it’s about community safety, or climate change, or recycling, or a warehouse development, or whatever. If that topic provided the theme and then there was an opportunity for residents to raise any other question, then that might make for a worthwhile evening out.

The civil parishes of Harlestone and Harlestone Manor (just north of Northampton) appear to be a centre of APM innovation. The 2023 APM for Harlestone Manor (429 electors) had over 90 residents attend with a little help from a live band in the park, and the APM for Harlestone (344 electors) had 75 residents attend for a quiz and a fish n’ chip supper. Whatever gets them through the door... once they’re there you have a captive audience!

Maybe put it on your agenda for June or July to think about the approach for your APM in 2024. If the decision is to go for it, then you have time to organise something good. If the decision is to consign it to history, then that’s one less thing on the “to do” list.

## A RIGHT ROYAL GARDEN PARTY

Each year, Northants CALC has a pair of tickets to allocate to a long-standing and well-respected parish or town councillor in Northamptonshire in recognition of their service and contribution to their council and community. After a call for nominations in early 2023 the tickets this year went to Stephen Borrett, Chair of Wilby Parish Council. The Garden Party this year was the week before the Coronation, which made it extra special and afterwards Stephen sent the following words...

*"It was with amazement that I received an invitation to this lovely occasion held at such an important time in King Charles' reign.*

*Fortunately, this news was given in good time which enabled my wife and myself to*

*fully prepare – new wardrobes all round! Despite the early spring date, the weather gods smiled on the 8,000 or so guests, as we enjoyed blue skies and sunshine throughout. How lovely it was too to be able to approach the Palace along the Mall and to see all the preparations for Coronation Day.*



*As might be expected, the event was conducted with military precision amid much friendliness and warmth despite the all-important security checks in place.*

*A wonderful tea was taken and, later, ice creams provided to keep us all cool.*

*Despite the numbers, we did manage a glimpse of the King chatting with Lionel Richie, who is to perform at the Windsor Coronation Concert.*

*We will be forever grateful to our friends in Northants CALC for giving us this once in a lifetime opportunity to attend.*

*With best wishes to all serving our Parishes in Northamptonshire – what a privilege it was to be asked to represent you!"*

# THE CORONATION OF KING CHARLES III



*Parish & town councils in Northamptonshire put on a great show!*

## HOW SECURE IS YOUR PASSWORD?

A typical parish or town councillor might have two or three passwords associated with their role as a councillor. One for the council’s email system, one for the web site, and perhaps one for the bank. A typical clerk may have a dozen or more passwords for all the different accounts and systems.

A password should be secure, that’s the whole point of it, but the challenge of remembering passwords and login details encourages people to adopt passwords that are virtually pointless. Thankfully, parish councils are not a very high target for scammers and fraudsters, but clerks and councillors can and do suffer cyber-attacks.


If your password is “password” then you may as well not bother. It can be cracked instantly. If you are very careful and clever and have added a number to it, such as “password1” then don’t bother either because that can be cracked in a matter of minutes too. In fact, you would have to add at least four numbers (e.g., password3679) for it to be remotely secure. And that’s remotely secure by today’s standards, next year a password like that will be cracked in minutes too.

Cybersecurity experts Hive Systems carry out tests each year to analyse the strength of passwords and the results are presented in a table (right).

The data assumes random characters are used. So, the moment you use birthdays, or your pet’s name, the time comes down even further.

### TIME IT TAKES A HACKER TO BRUTE FORCE YOUR PASSWORD IN 2023

Number of Characters	Numbers Only	Lowercase Letters	Upper and Lowercase Letters	Numbers, Upper and Lowercase Letters	Numbers, Upper and Lowercase Letters, Symbols
4	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly
5	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly
6	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly	Instantly
7	Instantly	Instantly	1 sec	2 secs	4 secs
8	Instantly	Instantly	28 secs	2 mins	5 mins
9	Instantly	3 secs	24 mins	2 hours	6 hours
10	Instantly	1 min	21 hours	5 days	2 weeks
11	Instantly	32 mins	1 month	10 months	3 years
12	1 sec	14 hours	6 years	53 years	226 years
13	5 secs	2 weeks	332 years	3k years	15k years
14	52 secs	1 year	17k years	202k years	1m years
15	9 mins	27 years	898k years	12m years	77m years
16	1 hour	713 years	46m years	779m years	5bn years
17	14 hours	18k years	2bn years	48bn years	380bn years
18	6 days	481k years	126bn years	2tn years	26tn years


> Learn how we made this table at [hivesystems.io/password](https://hivesystems.io/password)

The good news is that a password can be secure. For example, a password such as “DZxhYg&fty!90024r” would take 380 billion years to crack, according to Hive Systems. That should suffice but remember that if your password is exposed or disclosed in a phishing attack it doesn’t matter how complex it is.

Of course, even the sharpest clerk or councillor might struggle to remember a password like “DZxhYg&fty!90024r” every time they log in somewhere, so that’s where password managers come in. Browsers include password management and should suffice for non-mission critical users, but for clerks particularly a standalone password manager such as NordPass (<https://nordpass.com>) or RoboForm (<https://www.roboform.com>) come with lots of useful features, such as strong encryption, two-factor authentication, and auto form filling.

One of the very useful features of a password manager is secure sharing, so that the clerk can share all passwords with one or more councillors. This is a critical element of a council’s business resilience plan... it is not advisable for the clerk to be the only one with the login details for the council’s accounts.

Even the policy governing sharing of passwords needs to be carefully thought through. The clerk might want the chair to have the passwords just in case the proverbial bus comes along, but probably doesn’t want the chair logging in to accounts, particularly if they are using the clerk’s login credentials to do so. With a password manager such as RoboForm a clerk can create Emergency Access by identifying one or more emergency contacts. The emergency contact can at any time request access to the clerk’s RoboForm account and if the clerk does not decline or respond before the timeout period lapses (because they are incapacitated), the emergency contact will receive access to their RoboForm data. The emergency contact can be revoked at any time (e.g., when the chair changes) and the timeout period is chosen in settings. Note that this is a premium feature, but password managers are relatively inexpensive, so even the premium versions are affordable for most councils.

There’s no point panicking about it, but it is important to take simple and proportionate steps to reduce the likelihood of it happening to you. And don’t put off taking action because there is no point locking the stable door after the horse has bolted! Whenever one hears about someone being hacked or suffering a cyber-attack it sends chills down the back. There but for the Grace of God – and good password management - go us all.



## DEVOLUTION AND ASSET TRANSFER

Article by Lesley Sambrook Smith

Neither unitary council has indicated that wholesale devolution is on the table, but if local councils want, or think they want, to take over an asset or service, there is nothing preventing them from contacting their relevant unitary council to begin discussions. A word of caution, the council must do this with their eyes wide open and should spend some time considering the potential pitfalls and costs that may be associated with any transfer.



We have previously offered two sessions looking at Localism with the focus on devolution. Broadly, six areas were considered as being very important when thinking about councils taking over assets and services. Those areas were:

- Community Engagement and buy-in
- Insurance, liabilities, and risk assessments
- Sources of funding
- Employment related implications
- Financial liability, considerations, VAT
- Legal process of transfers, legal liabilities, contracts, leases

A council really needs to know if their residents will support the council when thinking about taking over an asset or service. For instance, is it something that the local community really value? What would happen if that asset or service was no longer available? Would the community support an increase in precept to cover any costs associated with the asset or service transfer? Understanding the community needs and their appetite for the council to step forward and take on a new asset or service is critical. The council needs to communicate pro-actively and be in listening mode and, most importantly, shouldn't make any promises to residents about securing the future of an asset. If the community aren't that enthusiastic, it will be an uphill struggle to bring them with you. So, before the council approaches WNC or NNC, it should have held some community engagement events, social media surveys or written newsletter articles so they

understand what the public opinion is. Once the council has that information, it can start to think about the difficult questions. And those difficult questions are all around employment, legal and financial matters.

If it's a building, does the council want to own the building or lease the building? Is the building fit for purpose, or does remedial work need to take place before the council considers taking it on? What are the insurance costs and running costs for the building? How will the council fund the purchase of the building? Are there staff that manage the building that would be transferred to the council? Does the clerk have the capacity and experience to manage those staff? Who will pay for the surveys and legal costs?

If it's a service, what contracts are there already in place, do they need to be honoured? Will there be Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment (TUPE) considerations if staff are transferred to the council? Is the clerk up to date with employment law and do they have the capacity to manage those additional staff?

The list of questions seems endless and daunting, don't they? But they don't have to. To approach any potential asset acquisition, take a step back and follow the steps below to get a good overview of the project.

1. Review the use of the assets and if they are valued within the parish.
2. Prepare a list to determine the likely outcomes if the asset was no longer provided by the principal council (risk list).
3. Determine what powers the parish council has to take over and run the service.
4. Consult with the community to determine what assets are really important to them (use a ranking system to get meaningful numbers).
5. As a full council, review the ranked risk list and decide which assets (if any) the parish council should consider running in the future.

If the council is then minded to begin discussions with WNC or NNC, it should be prepared for a long process and should involve ward members. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the council needs to fully understand what it is potentially taking on, full and frank discussions must be had before entering into any agreement. If you feel this is something the council wants to pursue, please get in touch and we can help steer you through the process.

## ASSETS OF COMMUNITY VALUE

Do you know your ACV from your elbow? The Northants CALC Asset Mapping project (AMP) carried out in 2022 suggests that there is confusion about what ACVs are. An ACV is an **A**sset of **C**ommunity **V**alue as defined in the Localism Act 2011 and the Assets of Community Value (England) Regulations 2012.

In other words, an ACV is a statutory thing, whereas in the AMP many parish and town councils interpreted it in the literal sense, listing an asset that the community values but which is not an ACV.

For example, one council listed a local bed and breakfast as an ACV because it provides local employment. It may well be an asset that the community values, but it is not, and cannot be, an ACV.

An ACV is defined as a building or other land that *“has recently been or is presently used to further the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community and could do so in the future”*. The Localism Act states that ‘social interests’ include cultural, recreational, and sporting interests. A good example of an ACV might be a community centre, a public house, or a sports club.

The idea of registering ACVs is to protect them from being sold from under the noses of the community. If the first the community knows that the local pub is under threat is when the “Sold” board goes up outside, it doesn’t give the community time to react. If the pub is listed as an ACV and the owner wants to sell, they must inform the unitary council (which is responsible for maintaining the ACV register) and a moratorium period of six weeks begins, which gives the community time to decide if, and how, it might react. If there is any community interest in taking on the asset, then a further moratorium period of six months is available. It doesn’t mean that the owner must sell to the community, just that the community must be given a chance to bid, if it wishes.

Working in partnership with the unitary councils, Northants CALC has developed a new course on ACV that explains how to identify the ACVs in your village or town, how to go about registering them, and what happens if a registered ACV is put up for sale. The course is running on **12 June 2023** at 1900 and on **21 June 2023** at 1000. For details see <https://www.northantscalc.com/assets-of-community-value-acv.html>. Afterwards you will definitely know your ACV from your elbow!

## JAMS TOMMOROW

In the coming few weeks, we will be moving over to a new website which will have more functionality than our current site; the web address will remain the same ([www.northantscalc.com](http://www.northantscalc.com)).



The website is the front end of our new Association Management System (AMS), which is provided by software developer Junari, hence the acronym “JAMS”. It has been developed by a group of CALCs working together in partnership with Junari.

We will let you know by email and in the Friday mini *eUpdate* when the site goes live. Clerks will have a portal for their council and will be invited by email to log in to it (or can log in by going to the web site, clicking “Log in”, then forgotten password. Once you enter the clerk’s email address you will receive an email to set a password.) Once logged in, clerks will be able to update their contact details, add the details of their councillors, select assets and services the council owns and manages, and access a Knowledge Base to download model policies, documents, and past *eUpdates*.

One of the biggest changes will be the ability to book training directly from the website. Clerks will be able to view training courses, see the dates with places available, and quickly make bookings.

The website and portal will be easy and intuitive to navigate, but as a belt & braces measure, we have created a user guide which will be circulated by email in the next few weeks. The site was tested earlier this year by a group of clerks (thanks all, you know who you are) who had various levels of love or loathing of IT and happily all were able to find their way round and use the site proficiently.

Deciding to join with other CALCs to procure JAMS means unfortunately giving up our 2Commune web site and switching over to the JAMS front end. 2Commune will continue to be our domain registrar and remains a very important partner in the delivery of parish and town council websites.

## SITUATIONS VACANT



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

There are vacancies currently at Spratton Parish Council (Clerk/RFO, 15 hrs/wk) and Brixworth Parish Council (Admin Assistant, 10 hrs/wk), but 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.

## A CAUTIONARY TALE

It is easy to be lulled into thinking that members of the public aren't really interested in what parish and town councils do, but when a council doesn't have its house in order, particularly where the finances are concerned, then sooner or later the deficiency in good standards of governance and accountability will be noticed. And if you are unlucky, it will be noticed by someone who is like a dog with a bone.



One such unlucky council is Weasenham Parish Council in Norfolk, which attracted the attention of the so-called "Weasenham Whinger" who has spent the last five years going over Weasenham Parish Council's annual financial returns with a fine-tooth comb (see <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11933799/Victory-Weasenham-whinger-27-villagers-31-complaints-upheld.html>).

Earlier this year 27 of 31 complaints that Mr Fairchild, to give him his proper name, submitted were upheld by the external auditor, with the cost of investigations topping £15,000. In the face of the barrage last year, the clerk and all the councillors resigned.

And Weasenham Parish Council has had a relatively easy ride compared to Potto Parish Council in North Yorkshire, where a group of whistleblowers raised 366

issues, of which 344 were upheld by the external auditor. The investigation resulted in an audit bill of £37,000 (see newspaper coverage at <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/potto-council-hit-out-obsessive-24978735>) and a Public Interest Report (see [https://saaa.co.uk/PIRs21-22/PottoPC\\_PIR2017-22.pdf](https://saaa.co.uk/PIRs21-22/PottoPC_PIR2017-22.pdf)). The council then defended itself via an ICO Tribunal, where the judge said, “*the pattern of behaviour adopted in their [the complainants] pursuit, the colossal amounts of material sent, the triviality of the subject matter and the abusive language employed are all characteristics which point firmly to an obsessive and vexatious mindset.*”

The Weasenham Whinger and the Potto posse are not unusual. Northants CALC usually has two or three councils at any one time that it is supporting through a similar situation. In almost all cases the complainant has a point. How they go about putting that point across is sometimes not altogether healthy, but they have a point. It's probably not possible to make a parish council bullet-proof, but if basic governance standards are not observed then it is no wonder that a member of the public starts digging. And if the more they dig, the more they find, it is also no wonder that they keep on digging!

The prevalence of various personality disorders in the general population should not be underestimated either. Next time your council finds itself dealing with a “persistent and vexatious complainant” look up Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), the features of which include obsessions with rules, lists, schedules, and order, a need for perfectionism, rigidity and zealotry on matters of morality and ethics, and a preoccupation with trivial details. If a council says it will publish its minutes within 14 days of the meeting, and there's nothing on the council's website on Day 15, then the person with OCPD explodes. To them it's not just that the minutes haven't been published on time, it's an indication of the clerk's sloppy standards of work, the councillors' complete lack of scrutiny and management, and the council's complete and total ineptitude. It's a major catastrophe, and one that clearly only they can sort out. Welcome, your persistent and vexatious complainant.

Good clerks pay attention to detail anyway, and the benefits of a well-ordered and well-managed council extend far beyond keeping members of the public with personality disorders happy, but it's certainly a motivating factor, especially if doing so saves the council potentially thousands of pounds of external auditor fees!

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Below is a couple of examples of the training opportunities we have over the next few weeks. Look for a course or event that may be of interest and make a booking through the Clerk to the Council. All councils must have a training budget from which councillors can book courses under the authority of the clerk. See <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of all courses.

### **Communicating with your community Part 1: creating a communications strategy** - 01 Jun 2023 10:00

Everything should start with a strategy – and good communication is no different. To get the most from an increasing range of communications platforms and tools, it's vital that your Council has a strategy that supports the delivery of your Council's existing aims and objectives. We walk you through best practice for creating an effective communications strategy that fits with the needs and aspirations of your Council, whilst making best use of communication opportunities available to you.

### **Data Protection for Councillors** - 02 Jun 2023 18:00

Whether you are an experienced Councillor or have only recently been elected, it is vital that you understand how data protection fits with your role as an elected member. With legislation and case law evolving, this interactive session will provide you with an opportunity to make sure you are getting the essentials right and ensure you are meeting your legal obligations as a Councillor.

### **Data Protection & GDPR for Clerks & Officers: Part 1** - 05 Jun 2023 10:00

In an ever-evolving legislative landscape, it is vital that Councils ensure they have the most up-to-date understanding of their data protection and related obligations. This session walks Councils through the principles of GDPR and related legislation including PECR, what it means in practical terms and the systems and processes Councils should have in place to ensure they are working towards sustainable compliance.

### **Finance for Councillors** - 06 Jun 2023 10:00

This session is designed to give councillors a greater understanding of their duties with regard to the council's finances. Topics include roles and responsibilities, setting a budget and precept, financial control, how VAT applies to local councils, the Annual Return, and internal and external audit.

### **Communicating with your community Part 2** - 06 Jun 2023 11:00

This session will help you consider practical and effective ways for your Council to systematically and proactively find out what really matters to people living within your parish, through a range of print and digital tools. Discover the tools, strategies and techniques needed to not just better promote your own messages but also to better hear and respond to the voices within your local community and get buy-in on your vision for your community's future.

### **How councils can effectively engage with young people** - 07 Jun 2023 10:30

Young people are often a hard-to-reach demographic for councils to engage with. In this session we explore what we mean by young people, what issues matter to them, how to effectively reach and engage with them both online and offline, and how to build partnerships with youth-focused organisations.

### **New Clerk's Finance \*\*\*NEW\*\*\*** - 08 Jun 2023 10:00

This introductory session is for inexperienced clerks in their first few months and is designed to give them an overview of a council's year, along with a basic understanding of the RFO's role. If you have 9 months' experience or more, this session is unlikely to cover anything you don't already know so you may benefit from our more detailed sessions on budgeting, Internal Control, Year-end, and VAT instead.

### **Councillor Development Framework**

When you become a councillor, it is not always clear what training you need to attend, so we've brought together all the

advice around training for councillors and developed a framework of training.

There are four key stages: Foundation, Core, Advanced, and Leader. To complete each stage, you attend the training courses, complete the reading and/or e-learning for each stage then complete the relevant form so we can send you your certificate. You don't even need to complete them in order or by each stage. We've included a suggested timeframe for each stage, but you can complete the stages in a timeframe to suit you and your council, so if you want to go faster or slower than we've suggested then that's great.



We are now running more courses than ever before, so the above is just a small selection of what is available to you as a clerk or councillor in Northamptonshire. See <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of all courses.



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