

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Welcome to the first edition of *eUpdate* for 2023. I hope this year is a good one for you and your council. Times are tough, and might get tougher, but parish and town councils provide vital services that improve peoples' quality of life and can help them get through tough times. A warm space and cup of soup to literally help someone survive, to provision of an open space to lift the soul and encourage an active lifestyle, the community-level services that parish and town councils provide are more important now than ever before. One councillor told me that to save money and "protect residents from increases" their council was planning to remove its small grants programme from the 2023/24 budget. That seems counterintuitive to me; it will save each household only pennies and ha'pennies but mean that vital groups and organisations in the village receive less financial support at a time when they need all the help they can get.

Looking at the year ahead, there are some things we know are happening that we can plan for, but recent years have taught us to expect the unexpected.

Focusing on the things we know will happen, a highlight for many will be the Coronation in May. Information on the national arrangements has started to emerge, and there is a round up in an article below.

We also know that the review of the unitary councils' ward boundaries will conclude this year, with a resulting change in the number of unitary councillors at North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) from May 2025. Community Governance Reviews (CGRs) will follow the ward boundary reviews, which will provide a once-in-a-decade opportunity for parish and town councils to propose tweaks to their boundaries, or to vary their number of councillors (up or down). There will be article on these reviews in the March/April *eUpdate*.

2023 needs to be a year that we make progress in rebuilding the relationship between each unitary council and the parish and town councils in its area. The

"... the community-level services that parish and town councils provide are more important now than ever before."

mantra during Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) was that service users would not notice any difference, that clerks and councillors would continue to have the same contacts in the new councils as they had always had, and that services would transition seamlessly. In reality, the widespread personnel changes and internal reorganisations at NNC and WNC have meant that communication and engagement with parish and town councils reached an all-time low in 2022. By the end of the year however, there were signs of recovery. For example, based on Northants CALC's vision in the *Building Communities* prospectus published in 2019 (<https://www.northantscalc.com/uploads/ncalc-building-communities.pdf>), in November WNC appointed a Parish Liaison Manager whose job it is to repair the relationship with parish and town councils, and that work is now well underway. NNC too worked with Northants CALC last year on a series of "Listening Events", and that engagement work can be built on this year. These initiatives may not progress as far and as fast as we would like, but we will do all we can to engage with the unitary councils and impress on them the important role that parish and town councils play.

On 31 December 2022 our Community Renewal Fund (CRF) Project concluded. I would like to thank all the parish and town councils in Northamptonshire that engaged so enthusiastically in the Asset Mapping Project (AMP) strand of the project. The Project Assessment Report was submitted in early January to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), which concluded that the project had been very useful and worthwhile. As a result of the project, parish and town councils are better prepared for devolution, the unitary councils have a greater understanding of the potential and constraints of the parish sector, and Northants CALC is better organised to efficiently support any transfer of assets and services from one tier of local government to the other. I would also like to thank the staff team and Northants CALC for their extraordinary effort in 2022 on the project. Some people thought we had bitten off more than we could chew... there was a lot of chewing going on!



UK Government



Regular readers of the Friday mini *eUpdates* will have noticed a large number of clerk vacancies already this year. There doesn't appear to be any single factor driving it, just a combination of retirements, multi-councillled clerks consolidating their portfolios, and some newly appointed clerks not working out. Employment matters dog the sector though, and I am hopeful that the National Employment Strategy Advisory Group (NESAG), which I am on as one of three CALC reps, will start to get to grips with some of the structural issues.

Our training and development programme, led by Marie Reilly, is now so dynamic that the notion of a winter break is very much in the past! As well as a whole host of scheduled courses in January, we have already delivered several whole-council development sessions across the county. And, unusually, we haven't been confined just to Northamptonshire either. In the second week of January I took officer and member representatives of Northampton Town Council and Corby Town Council to visit Weymouth Town Council in Dorset. Dorset went unitary just before Northamptonshire, and Weymouth Town Council provides a brilliant example of what new town councils can achieve in a unitary context. We all learnt a lot in a very short space of time (and not just that Weymouth in January can be very wet and windy!). You will find all the details of our training and development programme at <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events>.

We've also started the year strongly with our Police Liaison Representative (PLR) Scheme in collaboration with colleagues at Northamptonshire Police and the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC). A meeting of PLR Steering Group in early January was followed by the inaugural meeting of the PLR Comms Focus Group, which comprises of a dozen PLRs working with Dawn Allingham, the Police Communications Officer. The PLR Scheme, which was launched in 2021, provides an identified single point of contact between the police and the council, and is nationally recognised as an innovative approach to engagement between a police force and the parish and town councils in its area. 90% of parishes in Northamptonshire have appointed a PLR, and we hope to get to 100% by the end of the year! See <https://www.northantscalc.com/plr>.

Whatever 2023 throws at us, the one thing I am certain of is that Northants CALC will be beavering away guiding member councils, promoting the sector, and doing all we can to help you and your council. Please do continue to get in touch with your queries and questions. That's what we are here for!

SECTOR OOMPH

Parish and town councils are essentially people organisations. Their success depends on the calibre, capacity, motivation, and ambition of the councillors and clerk (plus any other officers) all working together as part of a team. At Northants CALC we've been thinking recently about how much "oomph" parish and town councillors have currently (a technical measure, I know!). Our theory is that a person's efforts – what they focus their time and energy on – typically falls into four realms: Family, Self, Others (i.e., not family or self), and Work. We did a poll on LinkedIn asking how people would prioritise those things and 46 of 59 respondents (78%) prioritised "Family" first, with 10 of 59 respondents (17%) putting "Self" first. Only one (honest?!) person put "Work" first, and only 2 put "Others" first.

The "Others" realm includes volunteering or taking an unpaid official position, such as becoming a parish or town councillor, so it is revealing that for many it is a low priority. If our sample had been limited to parish and town councillors only then perhaps "Others" might have scored better; after all, holding public office is by its very nature a Self-less activity.

Each councillor's circumstances are unique, but it appears that only when there is anything left after "Family" and "Self" is there any "oomph" left for "Others". Perhaps then when times are good, and the family is happily taking care of itself, and people are feeling good about themselves, there is plenty left over for Others. But when times are harder, and families are trying to hold things together, and people are just trying to make it through the day, there is understandably less to give to Others, however public-spirited one might be.

Then there's the "cost" side of the equation too. What is the personal cost of allocating time and energy to "Others"? For example, if being a parish or town councillor is a joyful, pleasurable, and rewarding experience, then people are more likely to summon up the energy to continue. If on the other hand the experience is negative or stressful, or the council is inward looking and unproductive, then the "cost" of expending energy on being a councillor outweighs the benefits.

Councils can be on an upward spiral or a downward spiral. Councils that are doing brilliant things for their communities, are fun to be part of, and have a great

team culture, are on an upward spiral. They have motivated councillors and staff. When there are casual vacancies they are easily filled, and the collective effort is focused externally on the community. Conversely, a council that is inactive, or not properly managed (chair and clerk), or is not fun to be part of, becomes demotivating for councillors, casual vacancies go unfilled, there is a turnover of clerks, and the collective effort is focused internally dealing with complaints and FOI requests.

Discretionary effort from councillors is the additional effort, beyond what is already expected in terms of simply attending meetings, and councils can, and should, do things to encourage this by, for example:

- 1. Showing appreciation** – a councillor will feel more appreciated when they given recognition for their efforts, leading to an improved sense of purpose and belonging.
- 2. Providing vision and inspiration** – collectively agreeing the purpose of the council and what it hopes to achieve in the coming three to five years gives councillors an understanding of how their efforts are helping the council to achieve its goals. A council is a for-purpose organisation whose role is to improve the environmental, economic, and social wellbeing of its area, so writing down what that looks like for your council in a simple business plan can be very inspiring.
- 3. Provide adequate resources and support** – imagine, for example, asking a councillor to organise a big community event for the Coronation, but they will have no help from other councillors or staff, and no budget. It's hardly likely to produce discretionary effort! Instead, make sure that all staff and councillors have the resources and support they need to be efficient and effective in whatever they are doing. Scrimping is likely to be a false economy in the long run.
- 4. Create a positive emotional culture** – when there is culture of kindness, respect, and trust then councillors will flourish and will be more inclined to work hard. There is no issue that cannot be resolved if people are kind, respectful, and trusting.

5. Encourage a healthy balance – recognise that most councillors have competing demands on their time and energy, and sometimes they will be more able to give the council discretionary effort than at other times. During a time when a councillor is able to give less – perhaps because something is going on in their “Family” realm – be understanding, supportive, and provide cover until they are able to refocus on the council again.

Councillors who are supported and appreciated and have a clear sense of purpose are more likely to be happy, engaged, and willing to put in the discretionary effort that makes the council fly. Rather than feeling burnt-out from non-stop council demands, stress, and pressure, they feel energised, positive, and ready to give 100%.

RURAL CRIME ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

Building on the success of last year’s events, Northamptonshire Police is holding a series of events around Northamptonshire focusing on rural crime:



Northamptonshire
Police

- **Monday 13 February 2023**, 1830 - 2200, Boughton House, Geddington Road, Kettering, NN14 1BJ – book your [free ticket](#).
- **Monday 20 February 2023**, 1830 - 2200, Towcestrians Sports Club, Greens Norton Road, Towcester, NN12 8AW – book your [free ticket](#).
- **Monday 27 February 2023**, 1830 - 2200, Althorp Estate, Althorp House, Northampton, NN7 4HQ – book your [free ticket](#).

These great venues have shown their support by allowing the Rural Crime Team at Northamptonshire Police to host these events, which provide an ideal opportunity to engage not only with the Rural Crime Team, but many partners ranging from the Office of the Police & Fire Crime Commissioner, NFU, Northants Fire, the Environment Agency, Northants ACRE, BASC, Crime Prevention, PIDs Systems, Tracker UK, Neighbourhood Watch, County Traveller Unit, Northants Search & Rescue, Firearms Licencing Canal & River Trust and many more. For more about rural crime see <https://bit.ly/3j5rU03>.

UPDATE ON ENERGY MARKETS

Northants CALC has an energy buying partnership with Northamptonshire-based Clear Utility Solutions (CUS). Not only does it save member councils money, but through preferring green energy suppliers it saves carbon too. It also provides a source of market news so that parish and town councils can keep up with what's happening in the energy markets. Here, Chris Draper, Director at CUS, gives us the latest news...



Clear Utility
Solutions

"I would like to wish you all a somewhat belated Happy New Year from the team at Clear Utility Solutions. It's been a hectic start to 2023, wholesale prices have been falling and we've been working hard to help clerks with energy contracts due to renew in the next few months switch to new deals.

The sharp rises in wholesale costs last year meant that many clerks and local councils have been better off on their supplier's variable tariffs over the last few months, but the recent fall in wholesale prices means fixed tariffs are now cheaper in most instances so it is incredibly important to check your tariff to make sure you are on the best deal.

I'm relieved to report that on 9 January 2023 the government announced the Energy Bill Discount Scheme (EBDS) which will replace the current help they are offering for businesses. The scheme will run for 12 months and will help to protect business from any future rises on wholesale costs and help businesses that are already in contracts agreed when wholesale prices were higher.

As ever, the team at Clear Utility Solutions are on hand to answer any questions that clerks have and if your council's contract is due to renew at any time this year, please get in touch about adding your council to our now national scheme.

Clear Utility Solutions council energy saving scheme highlights:

- *Over **£100,000** of public money saved since September 2020*
- *Over **half a million kgs** of CO2 emissions prevented by recommending 100% green suppliers*
- *Free post-contract support*

For more details or to get in touch, please visit our Northants CALC portal at <https://www.clearutilitysolutions.com/ncalc-partnership>.

I WISH TO MAKE A COMPLAINT

Receiving an email that starts with the words “*I wish to make a complaint about...*” is enough to strike fear into the heart of even the most experienced clerk. However, councils are public bodies that provide services to members of the public, and it is virtually impossible to get everything right all of the time. Complaints are inevitable, and so every council should ensure that they have appropriate procedures for dealing with them. If your council has never received a complaint, one will be along shortly.

The first thing for a clerk when receiving a complaint is to not panic. If the complaint has arrived by email, read it, and then go and make a cup of tea. When you come back, read it again. Then read it a third time, slowly and carefully. Try to get to the nub of the issue. Maybe copy and paste the email into Word and highlight significant sentences and key words. A complaint can be scattergun, even incoherent, so it is important to sift out the wheat from the chaff.

The next step is to ascertain the nature of the complaint and decide whether the council has agency or jurisdiction to handle it. A council’s complaints procedure deals with complaints about a service that the council provides, or something that the council has done, or not done. It cannot handle complaints from or about staff, which should be processed through the council’s grievance and disciplinary procedures, and it cannot handle complaints about councillors, which should be referred to the Code of Conduct complaints procedure. Sometimes a complaint may contain multiple strands, which need to be separated and sent down the appropriate route.

Having ascertained that a complaint is about a service that the council provides, or something that the council has done, or not done, it should be processed in accordance with a written procedure that has been formally adopted by the council. It is important to adhere to the procedure. Do what it says, and only what it says. Try to avoid “helpful” councillors going outside the procedure, even if they think that them “having a quiet word” with the complainant might “smooth things over”. It rarely works and can make an otherwise manageable situation much worse.

It is a good idea to have a complaint form for members of the public to use. Even if a complaint submitted in an ordinary email is quite clear it is a good idea to ask

the complainant to resubmit the complaint using the form, which can then capture all the salient information. It also gives the complainant an opportunity to reconsider making a complaint in the first place. A complainant should not be forced to use the form to submit their complaint, but point out that if they use the form, it will help the council to respond most appropriately to the complaint.

Another reason for having a form is that an anonymous complaint should be rejected, and if someone has only sent an email, and all you have is the email address, then you really have no idea of the identity of the complainant. A name and address are really required, and ideally a telephone number and email address too. The form

can provide the complainant with the option of the complaint being handled confidentially, but that is a very different thing to a complaint being made anonymously.



A good complaints procedure should provide for swift and informal resolution where possible, and so should delegate responsibility for responding to most complaints to the clerk, who is an objective, professional, and dispassionate officer. There should then be an option for the complainant to escalate the matter to a Complaints Committee if they are not satisfied with the response from the clerk. It should also provide for the complainant to go straight to the Complaints Committee (by submitting the complaint to the chair instead of the clerk) if they think that the clerk may be conflicted.

Consequently, the council should have a standing committee for handling complaints. The function could be included in the terms of reference of an existing committee, or a dedicated Complaints Committee could be established, perhaps with ex officio membership, e.g., chair, vice chair, and Internal Controls Councillor. Whatever the structure, the important thing is to have it in place ready. The worst time for a council to think about who should be handling a serious complaint is when it receives one.

The complaint will either be upheld or dismissed. The outcome should be communicated to the complainant within the timescales specified in the Complaints Procedure. The outcome should be concise, objective, and clear. If the complaint was upheld, offer an apology that the council got it wrong on this occasion and, more importantly, explain what remedial action the council is going to take. Complainants are often satisfied that their complaint has been listened to, that the council is going to learn from it, and that they have made a difference. If the complaint is dismissed, state why clearly but concisely.

A complaint response should be assertive. Never passive, never aggressive.

The jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman does not, at the time of writing, extend to parish and town councils, so having exhausted the council's complaints procedure, if a complainant remains dissatisfied their only recourse is to the High Court, and this should be set out in the Complaints Procedure.

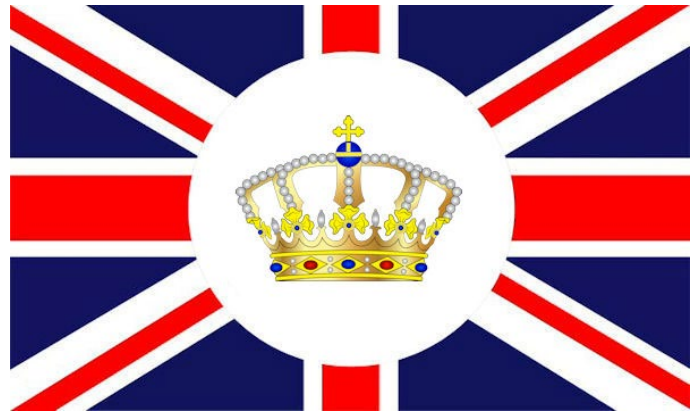
Complainants with legitimate and valid complaints should be treated with fairness and respect, but no council should feel that it is under any obligation to expose itself or its staff or members to intimidation, bullying or threatening behaviour from a complainant. The Complaints Procedure should include a section or appendix on unreasonable complainant behaviour that sets out examples of complainant behaviour that will not be tolerated. *In extremis* a complainant may have their access to the council restricted or even terminated.

Northants CALC has developed a sample complaints procedure for member councils to consider. Word and PDF copies are available at <https://bit.ly/3HcGgDQ>. Councils that do not currently have a written complaints procedure, or have not reviewed their procedure for several years, are advised to consider adopting the sample procedure.

When handling complaints, try to remember that each one is an opportunity to improve the council and enhance its reputation. A good council cares about its residents and its reputation with those residents. Nine out of ten disgruntled residents will never share their dissatisfaction directly with you but will find a way to spread the bad word about the council everywhere else. A bad reputation isn't something upon which a council can build its long-term success, so turning complainants into satisfied customers is a rare opportunity and one that should be taken full advantage of.

THE CORONATION OF KING CHARLES III

The Coronation of His Majesty The King and Her Majesty The Queen Consort will take place at Westminster Abbey on Saturday 6 May 2023, which on the date of publication of this *eUpdate* (27 January 2023) is just 99 days away!



The Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire has convened a Northamptonshire Coronation Committee, which includes representatives of the unitary councils, Northampton Town Council as the local council for the county town, representatives of the faith and voluntary and community sector, and Northants CALC as representative of all the county's parish and town councils. The inaugural meeting of the committee took place in early January and another meeting will be held in early February.

Buckingham Palace has invited communities across the United Kingdom to share food and fun together at "Coronation Big Lunches" on Sunday 7 May 2023, in a nationwide act of celebration and friendship. From a cup of tea with a neighbour to a street party, a Coronation Big Lunch brings the community together.

Monday 8 May 2023, which is a bank holiday, is dedicated to "The Big Help Out", which will highlight the positive impact volunteering has on communities across the nation. In tribute to His Majesty The King's public service, The Big Help Out will encourage people to try volunteering for themselves and use volunteering to bring communities together and create a lasting volunteering legacy from the Coronation Weekend. See <https://thebighelpout.org.uk>.

More information on the Coronation will be available on the Royal web site at <https://www.royal.uk/coronation-weekend-plans-announced>, and if you want to organise a Coronation Big Lunch on the Sunday you'll find plenty of help and guidance at <https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-big-lunch>.

Information from the unitary councils on road closures and Temporary Event Notices will be issued in February, along with details of the events they are organising for the Coronation. It promises to be a Right Royal Romp!

BRACKLEY TOWN COUNCIL ASSET MAPPING

An article by Alan Smith, Sales Manager, Oxford Data Consultancy (ODCGIS)

The Asset Mapping Project (AMP) sponsored by Northants CALC invited parishes and town councils in Northamptonshire to map all the important community assets and services within their parish, including those currently owned by the two unitary authorities - West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and North Northamptonshire Council (NNC). The plan being to build capacity in parish and town councils, develop a solid evidence base, and design an administrative framework for devolution in Northamptonshire. It was a unique and ambitious project which will enable NNC, WNC and the county's 271 parish and town councils and parish meetings to be well prepared for any future decisions about devolution.

Parish and town councils used Parish Online, an online platform which allows councils to collate and record their mapped data including assets (land and property), services, and any Assets of Community Value.



Brackley Town Council (BTC) had mapped some of its own assets onto Parish Online, but WNC assets remained unmapped, and it would have been a time-consuming exercise for BTC staff to do in-house. Oxford Data Consultancy (ODCGIS) offers a niche data capture service specialising in the capture of grounds maintenance, open spaces and other assets and was therefore ideally placed to support BTC.

The data capture is a desk top exercise utilising Ordnance Survey Mastermap Topography & Imagery and Google Streetview along with Grounds Maintenance Plans supplied by BTC and Land Registry Boundaries which identify the land owned by BTC and WNC.

A pilot exercise was carried out prior to a meeting to discuss the process and set some rules on anomalies that had been identified. ODCGIS then captured the grounds maintenance data contained within the LR boundaries using the coloured plan supplied by BTC as a guide. Grass, shrub beds, hedges, hard standing, bus shelters and bins were captured along with streetlamps. New developments were supplied as coloured up plans depicting ownership.

In some cases, the digital information isn't clear (maybe hidden under a tree or in shadow) and so a detailed PDF was supplied to BTC to ask them to use their local knowledge and resolve anomalies. These requests were resolved promptly allowing all data to be captured to a tight deadline. On approval, the completed data was loaded into Parish Online ahead of schedule and a detailed Bill of Quantities supplied. A separate Bill of Quantities was supplied for both BTC and WNC assets, each listed the number of features for each type of asset plus their area in square metres. The data was attributed to identify BTC land (above) and WNC land (below) allowing Northants CALC to develop a solid evidence base and design an administrative framework for devolution in Northamptonshire.

Alison Moses, Town Clerk at Brackley Town Council said, "Northants CALC, who were sponsoring the Asset Mapping Project, set an ambitious deadline for us to supply all the information and we didn't have the resources to complete the project in-house within the time frame. ODC was able to complete the process to our specification and we were very pleased with the result."

As a Brackley resident myself, it was particularly rewarding to be able to help my local town council fulfil their brief. They now have an accurate record of what they own and what could potentially be transferred to them in the future. Having the information in a GIS will help them to manage their assets efficiently and give their residents (including me) even better value for money!

Alan Smith, Sales Manager, Oxford Data Consultancy (ODCGIS)

To find out how your council can have assets captured contact Alan on 07957 806497 or email alan@odc.co.uk or visit www.odc.co.uk.

STAFF APPRAISALS

An article by Chris Moses, Managing Director, Personnel Advice & Solutions Ltd.

As we approach the end of the financial year, this is a time when many councils conduct their staff appraisals. It may also be a time when councils who do not do them, start wondering how they could start an appraisal process. The following is not a step-by-step guide on conducting an appraisal interview, but a set of points that a parish or town council may want to consider when carrying out the process.

We hear many different reasons why a council feels it needs to carry out this process, These include pay awards, starting the disciplinary process, or just because the NALC template contract states a council has to do them. An appraisal has a much more constructive purpose. It is a once-a-year opportunity for an employee to:

- Discuss how they feel about their job.
- Let you know what they are doing well and how the Council can help them do it better.
- Inform you of areas of concern and what support they may need.
- Plan how they can achieve their ambitions and aspirations.

However, there is no right or wrong reason to hold appraisals. It is up to the council to decide why it wants to invest time in the process. The council needs to be united on this reason. It can be damaging and counterproductive if some members think that it is about putting employee(s) back in line, while staff are worried about the effects on their pay. The council needs to agree to do appraisals and set out the purpose of doing them.

If a council has more than one employee, it would be normal for the clerk to carry out the appraisal of their subordinates on a one-to-one basis. Some councils prefer to have members carry out the appraisals instead of the Clerk, and there is no legal reason why this cannot happen. The big question is who appraises the clerk? The council is the default management body, and therefore responsible for the clerk but most councils will delegate employment issues such as appraisals to a separate Employment Committee. If that is done by clear resolution, and the Committee has clear terms of reference to enable it to carry out the process, it can take responsibility for appraisals. At the same time members of the council who

are not on the Committee would not have a legitimate aim in being involved in the appraisal process, and would not be able to justify seeing any of the appraisal details. Much of what goes into an appraisal form is sensitive personal data, such as performance data and personal information. Consequently, the Council GDPR obligations require it to ensure that only those councillors who have a legitimate aim in managing employment affairs can be justified in seeing this information.

The Employment Committee may have responsibility for appraising the clerk, but it may be impractical for all of its members to squeeze into a meeting room to do it. Instead, they may prefer to delegate conducting the meeting to a sub-committee.

No one individual councillor can do it. Conducting an appraisal involves exercising management responsibility, such as giving feedback on performance, producing improvement plans and agreeing an Action Plan. According to case law (Hillingdon) no individual councillor can exercise management responsibility. It must be a committee of at least two. Therefore, the clerk's appraisal would be conducted by two or three members with appropriate authorisation and terms of reference.

There are no hard and fast rules on the type of appraisal form used. Some are based on the employee putting a tick against a number to state how strongly or otherwise they agree with a statement or question. Others require the employee to provide a written response to a range of open questions about their employment. There is no saying which format is best for your council. However, it is fair to say that senior staff prefer to give a balanced explanation for their answers, rather than just tick a box. Our advice is for councils to get some examples of appraisal forms and ask employees and councillors who are involved in the process to review several template forms and pick out the bits they like. The council can then produce its own customised form which has input from all concerned. This can help to develop ownership of the process by employees who have been directly involved in producing the form.

The Appraisal process is aimed at measuring the employee's performance against the job description, which should be work oriented, objective and clear. By using this as a benchmark of performance, the council will hopefully help the employee to develop their contribution to the council, as well as avoid discriminatory assessment criteria.

However, many job descriptions are out of date, in which case the first appraisal meeting with an employee could simply entail a joint discussion on the list of activities on the document. Out of date tasks that are no longer relevant can be removed, and more recent activities can be added. This conversation can also include discussion about what the employee does well, what they need help with and what the council can do to support them. This can be a good way of easing the employee into an appraisal process, as this conversation is basically what an appraisal is. The resultant job description also needs to be approved by the HR Committee to ensure it delivers what the council needs, and not simply cherry picked the best bits.

Once an appraisal form is agreed, it can be issued to employees a week before the appraisal meeting, and they can be asked to complete it and bring it with them on the day. This should help to break the ice and get the ball rolling. The meeting needs to start by focusing on what the employee has done well during the year. Most people like to talk about their successes, and this is an ideal opportunity.

The appraisers should also ask what the council could have done to make the process better. Extra training, support or resources can be discussed, and the suggestions can become part of the resultant Action Plan.

If criticism is to be given, I would suggest no more than the top three concerns are addressed. If a long list of problems is issued, the employee may become defensive, and reluctant to attend future meetings. A long list of poor performance issues and/or misconduct can be addressed through the disciplinary process, but that is a different event. The top three concerns would be addressed as a counselling issue. The employee would be asked to explain what they would do to improve the issue, how they would approach it with the benefit of hindsight, and what the council can do to support them and help to improve on the matter.

At the end of the appraisal form there is the Action Plan. This sets out what has been agreed and what both parties aim to do to help develop the employee. To be effective it needs to be specific, objective, targeted and costed. The plan needs to set out what changes are required by the employee, how they need to perform, and what the council is doing to help them. Whether through training courses, coaching and mentoring at work, or distance learning, the plan needs to identify and set out how the employee will be supported in achieving the set goals. This can include dates of when these events will happen, and where, such as

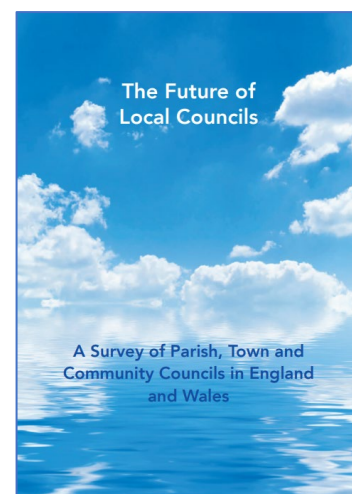
specific training events and dates. The Council (or relevant committee) can allocate a training budget for each member of staff, which is used to pay for these events. This will ensure that the employee can expect training and development events to happen on set dates and know that the money is there to pay for them. As a result, they can expect the Action Plan to be implemented, and they will receive the support they need to develop as an employee.

PROFILE

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THE FUTURE OF LOCAL COUNCILS

The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) has collaborated with the Local Governance Research Centre (LGRC) at De Montfort University (DMU) to conduct an important survey of parish, town and community council clerks across England and Wales; the first comprehensive, national survey of the local council sector in more than thirty years. It reveals how these local councils, the tier of government closest to the people they serve, have changed, taking on so much more and being central to the running of their communities.



Just under six hundred parish and town clerks from small and large councils across England and Wales responded to the survey.

The report concludes with a series of ten recommendations for local and principal councils, the support sector, and government to consider, including some that Northants CALC would wholeheartedly support and others that it would fundamentally disagree with. The good thing about the document then is that it gets the conversation going and it would be great to have structured debate on the report both in Northamptonshire and nationally.

You can download a copy of the full report from <https://www.slcc.co.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SLCC-Future-Report-2022.pdf>.

LOCAL AREA PARTNERSHIPS

Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) are partnerships that bring together NHS organisations, local authorities and others to take collective responsibility for planning services, improving health and reducing inequalities across geographical areas. Pursuant to the Health and Care Act 2022, ICSs were formalised as legal entities with statutory powers and responsibilities. The ICS for Northamptonshire came into being on 1 July 2022. Statutory ICSs comprise two key components:

- Integrated Care Boards (ICBs): statutory bodies that are responsible for planning and funding most NHS services in the area;
- Integrated Care Partnerships (ICPs): statutory committees that bring together a broad set of system partners (including local government, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE), NHS organisations and others) to develop a health and care strategy for the area.

You can find out all about the Northamptonshire ICB and ICP at

<https://www.icnorthamptonshire.org.uk>.

Integrated Care Northamptonshire (ICN) operates at a county level, so underneath is a new structure of boards, forums, and partnerships.

West Northamptonshire, which in this context is known as a “Place” has a Health & Wellbeing Board, and under that are two “Localities”, one covering the former borough area of Northampton and one covering the former districts of South Northamptonshire and Daventry. Under that are nine new Local Area Partnerships (LAPs).

North Northamptonshire also has a Health & Wellbeing Board, and under that are four “Communities”, each covering the former principal council areas of Corby, East Northamptonshire, Kettering, and Wellingborough. Under that are eight new LAPs.

The LAPs are likely to be of most interest to individual parish and town councils. Some urban LAPs cover only part of a parish (e.g. LAP N4 in Northampton), whereas some rural LAPs cover many parishes (e.g. LAP DSN1, which covers 56 parishes).

LAPs will *“Represent local areas and give a voice to residents, translating strategy into local action by delivering the outcomes framework. They contribute to system-wide priorities as the delivery vehicle, providing a strong evidence base through quantitative data (digital footprint) and deep local insight from frontline partners, empowering local leaders to take accountability for local action.”* Northants CALC is trying to find out what that means.

Two “pioneer” LAPs – N4 and DSN4 – have been in operation since the autumn and meetings of them have been held with GPs and members of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in attendance, but the governance structure is not clear in terms of how and when the LAPs meet, who attends, and how decisions are made.

Whilst the structures seem somewhat complex and cumbersome, the underlying vision is sound. A new strategy document, called *“Live your best life”* published by the ICP, includes a vision that *“We want to work better together in Northamptonshire to create a place where people and their loved ones are active, confident, and take personal responsibility to enjoy good health and wellbeing, reaching out to quality integrated support and services if, and when they need help.”* You can find the strategy at <https://bit.ly/3Y4jLrt>.

SITUATIONS VACANT

Please see <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies> for details of all the officer vacancies that are currently open in Northamptonshire. From Twywell Parish Council wanting a Clerk for 4 hours per week, to full time facilities and estate management posts at Brackley Town Council and Towcester Town Council, there is something for everyone!



As well as the vacancies currently posted we are also aware of two full time clerkships coming up soon, one to the east of Northampton and the other in the middle of North Northamptonshire. 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 to receive details of potential future opportunities.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Many parish and town councils own trees. If the council owns a piece of land and there is a tree on it, then almost certainly the tree is owned by the council and the responsibility for the tree's care and maintenance falls to the council. There may also be trees that the council is responsible for, even if it doesn't own the land the trees are on, for example where the council leases land and the responsibility for maintenance is held by the lessee under the terms of the lease agreement. And then there might be trees the council owns that it doesn't even realise it owns! There are lots of parcels of apparently ownerless public open space that it may turn out the council owns and is therefore responsible for, including any trees growing on it.



Councils are advised to do a full audit of the trees they own, to carry out a risk assessment of them, and to implement a tree inspection regime that is conducted by a suitably qualified and certified professional.

Trees falling on property or people is thankfully rare, but if it does happen the consequences can be absolutely devastating for the victim and their family. A principal council was fined nearly £300,000 recently after a young girl was killed by part of a decayed tree falling on her at school. The tree had been inspected in early 2018 when the need for further investigation was noted but no such investigation took place. The Health and Safety Executive concluded that the decay would have been detected on inspection and no doubt the tree would have been felled.

All councils, including parish and town councils, must take tree ownership seriously and must have trees regularly and professionally inspected. Public liability insurance of at least £10 million is standard, but insurance cover may be compromised if it can be shown that the council acted negligently (for example, by not having a robust inspection regime in place).

And no amount of risk assessment or insurance can make up for the loss of a person's life, when it could so easily have been avoided.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Below is a small selection 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.

Civility and Respect Part 1 - 2 February 2023 10:00-12:00 ****Last chance to book****

This course will uncover civility and respect issues for the public sector and the impact this has on the individuals involved and the organisation. As well as looking at personal resilience and self-protection, having a good understanding of yourself means you'll know what to do when someone tries to push your buttons. Book your place at <https://www.northantscalc.com/civility-and-respect-part-1.html>.

Data Protection for Councillors - Mon, 06 Feb 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.

Finance for Councillors - Tue, 07 Feb 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.

Managing difficult people and conversations - Wed, 08 Feb 2023 11:00

Managing professional relationships effectively is important, and this is particularly true for Clerks and local council officers. Yet whether it's with other officers or with councillors, sometimes difficult situations will present themselves, and it's vital to have the skills to manage the challenges. This session for local council officers explores practical techniques and ideas to manage difficult relationships in a council environment.

Year-end & Audit - Receipts & Payments accounts (over £25,000) *****NEW*****

Thu, 09 Feb 2023 10:00

This session introduces the Annual Return and the stages of the audit process, enabling you to complete all the relevant steps correctly. Topics include: Closing the accounts, assets and borrowing, internal audit, reviewing internal control, the Annual Return, electors' rights, and publication requirements.

Data Protection & GDPR for Clerks & Officers: Part 2 *NEW*****

Thu, 09 Feb 2023 11:00

This advanced data protection session deep dives into how councils are required to demonstrate accountability with GDPR. We consider the lawful bases for how councils process personal data and we explore how to create different policies and documents, including your Privacy Notice and Data Protection Impact Assessments.

Data Protection & GDPR for Clerks & Officers: Part 3 *NEW*****

Fri, 10 Feb 2023 12:00

This advanced data protection session considers how to deal with data subject rights requests, including Subject Access Requests. We explore specific steps to take to ensure you are compliant with the legislation, and we consider what exemptions may apply, and when. We also explore the importance of Information Security for local councils and what this means in practice.

Freedom of Information Essentials - Thu, 23 Feb 2023 14:00

This course looks at what requirements and obligations local councils have when it comes to Freedom of Information and related legislation. We look at what policies and procedures councils should have in place, how to ensure officers and councillors are aware of their obligations and what steps to take when you get an FOI request.

New Clerks Spring 2023 - Sat, 25 Feb & 4 March 2023, 10:00 – 16:00

This course provides a broad understanding of the role and responsibilities of a town or parish clerk. This course is a must for newly appointed clerks, or clerks who feel they could benefit from some formal training.

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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