

# Update

ISSUE 2/24

March – April 2024

---

## CONTENTS

- **THE CHIEF'S BRIEF**
- **D-DAY 80**
- **HEY SIRI, FIX MY STREET!**
- **CHURCH FUNDING**
- **THE NOLAN PRINCIPLES**
- **ALRIGHT GOV**
- **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**
- **UNITARY COUNCIL ROUND UP**
- **BROADBAND COVERAGE UPDATE**
- **A CAUTIONARY TALE**
- **SITUATIONS VACANT**
- **TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS**
- **NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS**

## THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Goodness me there is a lot going on in local and national government at the moment, and some of it is rather unsavoury. From the disgraced Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) for Northamptonshire to the national parties' political point-scoring over matters as important as the Middle East, it has all been a rather unedifying period in local and national leadership. Northants CALC runs a popular training course on the Code of Conduct, and the subtitle of it is "*Confidence in local democracy.*" If people do not trust their elected representatives to behave in a certain way, it undermines the entire construct of representative democracy. If people switch off from local and national politics and think "*There's no point in voting; they're all as bad as each other*" then extremism and populism flourishes (because they are the only things left that grab attention). The conviction politicians who have a strong moral compass and a determination to do the right thing even, if it is unpopular, fade away and leave the stage to the blow-with-the-wind popularists, with their sound bites and slogans for click bait who seek to polarise rather than build consensus.

Elections are the life blood of democracy, and thankfully we are not far from a welcome shot in the arm. The PFCC election in Northamptonshire is on 2 May 2024, my guess for the general election is 3 October 2024, and the local elections, when every unitary council and every parish and town council seat in Northamptonshire is up for election, is on 1 May 2025 (400 days precisely at the time of writing). Whoever is successful, their first job will be to rebuild confidence in democracy by behaving in a way that is consistent with the Nolan Principles for standards in public life. The Nolan Principles, underpinned by a strong Code of Conduct, are so important that I have included an article below to refresh your memory. All parish and town councillors should exhibit the highest standards of ethical behaviour, and the Nolan Principles set out what that looks like.

---

*"... If people do not trust their elected representatives to behave in a certain way, it undermines the entire construct of representative democracy..."*

---

It's not just the elected side that's struggling though, there's trouble too on the officer side of parish and town councils. The number of clerk vacancies recently

has not gone unnoticed by some readers of our weekly Friday mini *eUpdate* bulletin, and in an article below there is an analysis of all vacancies so far in 2024 to identify common issues.

Thankfully, there is a huge amount of good stuff going on to more than balance out the doom and gloom. One of the highlights of the year for me is delivering the New Clerks course, which is run twice per year in March and September. It is always fascinating to meet the new people coming into the clerkship and to find out how they found their way into the sector, what their aspirations are, and what they think the job entails. In a typical cohort of 5 – 8 new clerks, there will be one who sadly doesn't make it to their first work anniversary (normally because they have been recruited to a role that is very different to what they thought (or were told)), and there will three or four who go on to attain the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) in the coming years. It is wonderful to be able to help with the first step on that journey.

And talking of the future, our Artificial Intelligence (AI) Task Group has been meeting monthly since September 2023 and barely a day goes by without a breakthrough in AI technology. Its use in local government is proliferating and there is an article below with all the latest news.

Our work with the unitary councils continues and I feel that we are making gradual progress. It's two steps forward, one step back most of the time and it can be incredibly frustrating to get even simple things done. The root cause is staffing. Both unitary councils are still struggling to build full and stable teams of permanent staff. There are still too many leavers, and still too many posts filled by expensive interims. There are signs that things are just beginning to stabilise, and there's a roundup of the current state of play in an article below.

And finally, how long ago do you think the requirement for parish and town councils to make all payments by cheque was removed? Five years? It was TEN years ago! The Legislative Reform (Payments by Parish Councils, Community Councils and Charter Trustees) Order 2014 was made on 11 March 2014 and enabled parish and town councils to make payments by whatever method they choose. If your council is still using cheques, it might be time for a review!

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

## D-DAY 80

D-Day 80 on 6 June 2024 commemorates the 80th Anniversary of the D-Day landings which took place on 6 June 1944 on five beaches in Normandy, France.

There are several ways in which parish and town councils can take part in this special occasion, including lighting a beacon (at 2115 on 6 June 2024), having a Lamp Light of Peace (also at 2115), or ringing church bells (at 1830).



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

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

## HEY SIRI, FIX MY STREET!

Over the past year, local government has been exploring how to make the most of the AI revolution and leading principal councils in England are already generating savings in the tens of millions of pounds, which makes councils that haven't even started on the journey yet look positively archaic. With the perilous state of local government finance, and with an increasing number of principal councils issuing the dreaded Section 114 notices (as Northamptonshire County Council did in 2018), the benefits of AI cannot accrue fast enough. In fact, AI might be the only thing that can save local government.

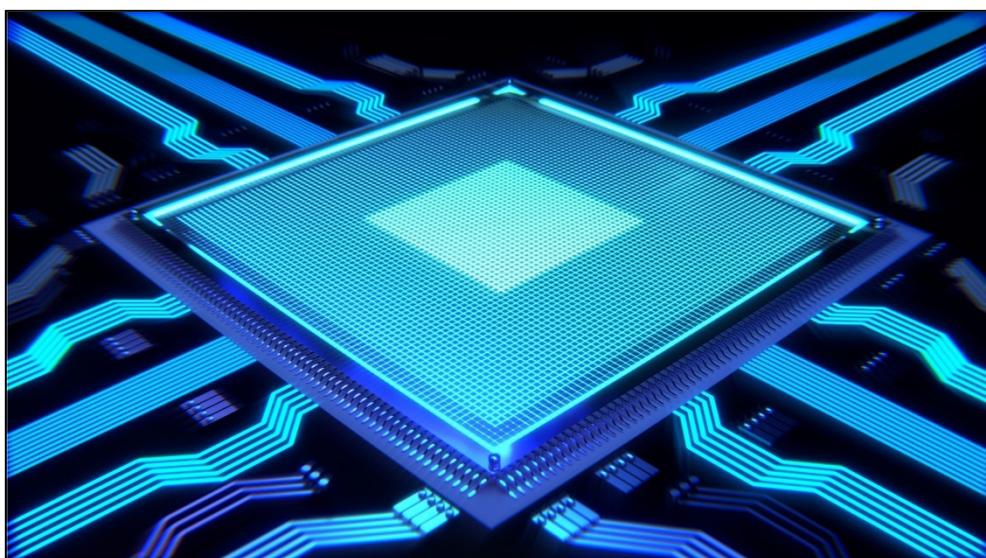
So how can AI save councils money? One good example is Swindon Borough Council that used AI to improve the efficiency of its response to fly-tipping. Members of the public and council officers report fly-tips online and upload photographs of what has been dumped. AI analyses the photos and automatically allocates the right resource to collect it – a large truck, a smaller vehicle, or

something more specialised. It identifies fly-tips that need to be prioritised because they contain hazardous materials, and it calculates the most efficient route between jobs. The system has saved the council £3,000 per year in fuel (and carbon), but more importantly has saved over 2,000 staff hours. Fly-tipping clear up rates have reduced from 10 days to 4, and 98% of residents said they were pleased with the new system. Cheaper, better, faster.

Meanwhile, Derby City Council has just signed a new deal worth £7 million to further leverage the benefits of AI. The investment follows a successful pilot where AI was used for Customer Services with 43% of enquiries being resolved without any input from staff, resulting in a £200,000 saving. The AI agents even improved satisfaction by eliminating the need for the dreaded “Dial 1 for...” The new contract is expected to generate nearly £4 million in 2024/25 and at least £12.25 million when fully rolled out.

Contrary to public expectations, the parish and town council sector can be a surprisingly early adopter of new technology and an example of that was the rapid adoption of virtual meeting technology during the Covid pandemic. Parish and town councils are relatively small organisations with shallow – very shallow – chains of command, which makes them extremely agile compared to their principal council partners. A parish or town council can implement a new practice or procedure in hours or days, whereas a large principal council may take months or even years. Also, parish and town councils are relatively low risk when it comes to data, so unplanned or inappropriate use of data may not be as disastrous as it could be for a council handling sensitive children’s records, for example. Of course, data protection matters as much to parish and town councils as it does to

principal councils, but the type and sensitivity of personal information held by parish and town councils is normally very low risk, so risk mitigation is proportionately easier.



Some parish and town councils in Northamptonshire have started using AI. A leader is Corby Town Council, which is using Microsoft Decisions to automate the production of agendas and minutes, and Microsoft Co-pilot to enable AI and increase efficiency across all Office 365 products. Many clerks say that they now use generative AI tools such as Chat-GPT and Google Gemini to produce text for newsletters and website content. Give it a try... go to <https://gemini.google.com/> and enter a prompt such as “*Produce a 200-word website article to encourage the residents of [insert placename] in Northamptonshire, England to increase curb side recycling.*” Unfortunately, you will not have time to make a cup of tea whilst it whirrs away; the article will be produced for you in less than ten seconds.

In the future there will be a tool available to every clerk and councillor in England that will be able to assist with questions about procedures, rules, legislation, and best practice in the parish and town council sector. Let’s call it LocalCouncilWise - the AI-Powered Local Council Assistant. It will be available 24/7 and will be trained not just on generic parish and town council material, such as guidance notes and briefings, but also on your own council’s information, such as its website and its minute record. Such a tool is inevitable but there are big questions about who should launch it and how it should be used. There would be a big difference, for example, between the tool being developed within the sector by the national bodies (the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)), and it being developed by a commercial entity that makes it available as an advertisement-supported or subscription-based service. And as with most things AI, what we mean by “in the future” is sometime in the next 6 months. In fact, if such a tool has not been published, at least in beta form, by Christmas 2024 it would be very surprising indeed.

The Northants CALC AI Task Group will continue to follow developments in the sector and make sure that member councils are kept up to date and put in the best place to make the most of the developments.

There are great changes coming and there is a great deal of potential to transform local government services for the better. It is important to stress however that there is no law or regulation that requires parish and town councils to adopt AI. Many councils will remain blissfully and, maybe, deliberately oblivious to AI and its benefits. Adopting a wait-and-see stance is a perfectly acceptable approach for some councils and it will be at least five years before such a stance will start to have a noticeable negative effect on the council and its community.

## CHURCH FUNDING

For years there has been confusion and disagreement about whether parish and town councils have the legal power to incur expenditure for ecclesiastical purposes. For example, is a grant from the parish council towards the repair of the church bells lawful? The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) historically said no. The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) said yes. And, not surprisingly, the Church of England (CofE) agreed with the SLCC.



It was a situation that was crying out for new legislation to clarify matters, and that happened, or was supposed to happen, pursuant to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, Section 82 of which amends the Local Government Act 1894 by inserting into it a new Section 19A.

Section 19A(1) of the 1894 Act provides that “*Nothing in this Part affects any powers, duties or liabilities conferred on a parish council by or under any other enactment (whenever passed or made).*” The “Part” refers to Part 1 of the 1894 Act, which specified certain powers and duties of parish councils and parish meetings, although much of Part 1 has already been repealed by other legislation made since 1894.

The view of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) had been that the 1894 Act contained a prohibition to funding churches because Section 6(1)(a) transferred powers from the Church Vestry and Churchwardens to the newly formed parish council “**except** so far as relates to the affairs of the church or to ecclesiastical charities” and for the “*The holding or management of parish property, not being property relating to affairs of the church or held for an ecclesiastical charity*”. The intention of the legislation was clearly to transfer many powers and duties to parish council but to leave responsibility for church affairs

and church property clearly with the church. NALC's interpretation of that was that it was therefore not possible to use subsequent generalised legislation, such as Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972, or Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 (i.e. the General Power of Competence (GPoC)) to circumvent the express and specific restrictions contained in the 1894 Act.

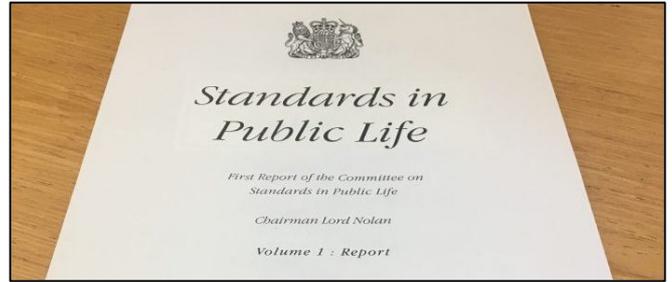
The government's view, with which NALC now agrees, is that the new Section 19A clarifies that the 1894 Act does not affect the discretionary powers of parish councils in England to fund church repairs or improvements or property held for an ecclesiastical charity. In other words, that parish councils do have the power to provide financial assistance to the church, including all Christian and non-Christian faith-based organisations.

It must be stressed that whilst there may no longer been any prohibition on powers to provide financial assistance to the church, there is no duty to do so. A parish or town council is under no obligation whatsoever to provide financial assistance. Parish and town councils wishing to make grants of any type to any person should have a Small Grants Programme and an associated policy that sets out what the council will, and will not, consider providing a grant for. This policy should be reviewed in light of the recent change. Clearly a parish or town council is unlikely to want to fund something that had a purely ecclesiastical purpose, but often there are things that a church does or provides that are in the wider community interest and that might attract funding from the parish or town council. An example might be the provision of a space within or adjoining the church that is used by the wider community for non-church purposes, where a parish council could make a grant under Section 133 of the Local Government Act 1972 (or, for eligible councils, GPoC), to "*contribute towards the expenses incurred by [the church]... in acquiring or providing and furnishing buildings... to be used for public meetings and assemblies*".

The legislative changes stop short of providing complete clarity because they are expressed in the negative... "we're not saying you cannot do it." It would have been better – clearer – if there had been law that expressed the new powers positively, e.g. "parish councils shall have the power to provide assistance of any kind, including by way of a grant or loan, to any body having an ecclesiastical purpose." However, what is now clear is that NALC and the SLCC are singing from the same hymn book, and that comes as a welcome relief to us all.

## THE NOLAN PRINCIPLES

All parish and town councils must, by law, “*promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members*” of the council and are required to adopt a Code of Conduct that is consistent with the Seven Principles of Public Life: the so-called Nolan Principles.



So, what are the Nolan Principles and what do they mean? The principles were drawn up by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) under the chairmanship of Lord Nolan in 1995. Each principle has a definition set out, and these are kept under review by the CSPL to ensure they remain fit for purpose. They are updated from time to time.

The principles apply to all parish and town councillors in England, as they do to every unitary councillor and to every MP.

The seven principles and their associated definitions are:

### **Selflessness**

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

### **Integrity**

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

### **Objectivity**

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

### **Accountability**

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

## **Openness**

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

## **Honesty**

Holders of public office should be truthful.

## **Leadership**

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour and treat others with respect. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Any incidence of bad behaviour is clearly in breach of one or more of the Nolan Principles. For example, one councillor shouting at another councillor in a council meeting is failing to exhibit Leadership because shouting at someone is not treating them with respect. A councillor voting against providing a grant to a local charity because they don't like the person who runs it is failing to exhibit Objectivity. And so on. A council's Code of Conduct provides detailed rules for its councillors to follow, but if the councillors are cognisant of and compliant with the Nolan Principles then 99 times out of 100, they will be on the right side of the rules. It is a principles-based, not rules-based system.

The current CSPL chair, Lord Evans, has called for the government to strengthen the sanctions available under the Code of Conduct. In particular the CSPL has recommended the reintroduction of the power to suspend or disqualify a councillor for a serious breach of the Code. Without that ultimate deterrent the system lacks teeth. Lord Evans said recently "*The principles haven't changed but the polarised and unstable nature of British politics in recent years has placed them under great pressure,*" he said, adding "*The damage done to the trust and confidence that the public have in those in political and public life has been significant.*"

Parish and town councils should bring the Nolan Principles into the spotlight. Have a banner made up including the council's logo or crest and the seven Nolan Principles and pop it up at council meetings. Put the Nolan Principles in the header of your council's agenda. Make them highly visible on your council's website. Doing these things helps keep the Nolan Principles in councillors' minds and may, just may, make them think before they act.

## ALRIGHT GOV

Hitherto, parish and town councils have used a variety of domain name extensions, including .org.uk, .net, and .gov.uk. In an ideal world, all parish and town councils should be using .gov.uk because it is the domain suffix of choice for national and local government bodies in the UK. The suffix .org.uk was originally intended for charities although it is now used by a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations, and the suffix .net was for network infrastructure organisations. Suffixes such as .com and .co.uk were intended for commercial outfits. It should be easy for anyone to identify government organisations on the internet. Your community shouldn't have to guess whether the site they're on, or the email in their inbox, is genuine. Use of a .gov.uk domain means that you are instantly recognisable as an official, authentic government organisation and your communications can be trusted.



The main two reasons for parish and town councils not adopting .gov.uk were cost and difficulty of registration. Now, both of those barriers have been removed.

Firstly, the Cabinet Office has set up the Parish Council Domains Helper Service (PCDHS) to help parish and town councils to own and operate a .gov.uk domain more easily. Essentially, there are three aspects to the service:

1. A suite of practical advice, guidance, and reference materials - taking councils through the process of registering, adopting and maintaining a .gov.uk domain.
2. An enhanced level of support from .gov.uk domain registrars who understand the needs of parish councils.
3. Help with costs - a one-off contribution (£100 + VAT) towards a new .gov.uk domain.

Councils wishing to access the service can email [parish.helper@domains.gov.uk](mailto:parish.helper@domains.gov.uk) or can fill in an Expression of Interest form at <https://tinyurl.com/kyjwy4en>.

The funding is available through to 31 March 2025. Thereafter, the Cabinet Office plans to reduce the wholesale cost of a .gov.uk domain name to around the same price of any other domain name, meaning that the price should not be a barrier in the future.

The format of a .gov.uk domain name is fixed for consistency. There are two choices:

1. [name][parish/town/community]council.gov.uk, e.g. corbytowncouncil.gov.uk or easthunsburyparishcouncil.gov.uk.
2. [name]-[pc/tc].gov.uk, e.g. kingsthorpe-pc.gov.uk or raunds-tc.gov.uk.

Once a council has registered a domain name then it should be used for the council's website – e.g. [www.kingsthorpe-pc.gov.uk](http://www.kingsthorpe-pc.gov.uk) and for its email system – e.g. [clerk@kingsthorpe-pc.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@kingsthorpe-pc.gov.uk).

Out of 271 civil parishes in Northamptonshire, 62 currently use .gov.uk, so there is still some way to go and hopefully the Cabinet Office's initiative will push that figure up rapidly. It isn't yet compulsory for a parish or town council to use .gov.uk, but that would be the next logical step, so it makes sense to convert to .gov.uk whilst there is funding and support available.

Northants CALC will soon be following suit. The Association used northantscalc.gov.uk for many years until some kind person reported it to the Naming Committee, which was responsible for the proper and authorised use of the domain suffix. The Association had just incorporated as a company limited by guarantee, and the Naming Committee ruled that a limited company couldn't use .gov.uk. Despite our protestations we were forced to give up northantscalc.gov.uk and convert to northantscalc.com. Now, as part of the Cabinet Office drive to ensure consistency across local government, County Associations of Local Councils have been specifically included in the list of organisations permitted to use .gov.uk, regardless of their legal status.

We have registered northantscalc.gov.uk again and will probably convert to it as soon as we receive confirmation in writing from the Cabinet Office that we are authorised to do so.

# WHY SHOULD YOUR PARISH COUNCIL HAVE A .GOV.UK DOMAIN?

## TRUSTWORTHY

The .gov.uk domain name is familiar and trusted by the general public and by other parts of government.

It's a signal to say that your Parish Council is an official part of government.



## TRUSTED EMAILS

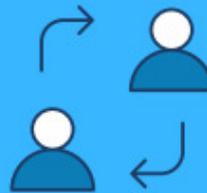
Outgoing .gov.uk emails are more likely to be cleared by security filters and delivered successfully.

The content of your emails will be recognised as official government business.

## BETTER CONTROLS

You can control access to official papers and correspondence day to day.

When staff and councillors leave, information is not lost and email accounts can be easily re-allocated.



## EASIER TO RESPOND TO A DATA REQUEST

You and your Parish Council colleagues won't have to surrender private emails if you have a freedom of information or data request.

## PROACTIVELY MONITORED

Your domain is monitored by the Central Digital and Data Office's Domain Management Team.

They make sure your domain is configured correctly, and any security vulnerabilities are quickly spotted.



## LEGAL PROTECTION

As .gov.uk domains are based within UK jurisdiction they have better legal protection.

## RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The clerk's role has changed markedly over the past twenty years, but employment practice and HR standards have struggled to keep up. Despite a lot of effort by Northants CALC and the two main national sector bodies, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), many councils still struggle with being a responsible employer. The issues include:

- Inappropriate recruitment where a candidate is selected that does not have the calibre or capacity to do the job well.
- Clerks being bullied and harassed in the workplace.
- Clerks being forced out of their jobs (unfair dismissal).
- Clerks being expected to work above their contracted hours.
- Clerks working for low pay and no additional benefits (e.g. pension).

There are issues in the employment relationship from the council's perspective too:

- Clerks not providing the hours they are contracted for.
- Poor performance (although see 1.1. above).
- Clerks not working efficiently and effectively.
- Clerks not taking up training opportunities and not developing professionally.

At its meeting held on 16 July 2022 the board of Northants CALC agreed to put a motion to the NALC AGM in October 2022: "1) That NALC recognises that the workforce challenge is one of the biggest challenges of our time and that there is an issue with recruitment, retention, and capacity in local councils, and 2) That NALC engages a consultant to benchmark clerks' terms and conditions." The NALC AGM adopted the motion, but it is not clear what, if anything at all, has happened since. Northants CALC has asked NALC for an update.

Since 1 January 2024, Northants CALC has been notified of sixteen vacancies for clerks across the county. That's approximately 7% of the clerkship turning over in a three-month period. The number for the same period last year was seven.

The reason for the posts becoming vacant is difficult to determine firstly because there is no requirement for exit interviews and, even if there was, outgoing clerks

may choose to keep their counsel, particularly if they intend to stay in the sector at another council, and secondly because the reasons might be complex and nuanced. For example, a clerk may leave citing retirement, but they may not have contemplated retiring in the first place if the job had generated a better salary for the hours worked.

Of the sixteen vacancies, six can be put down to genuine retirements in that Northants CALC is not aware of any ongoing situations at the councils and the outgoing clerk is not intending to work elsewhere. Three are down to clerks dropping their council work to concentrate on other jobs outside the sector, and it is always disappointing when local councils cannot compete with the terms and conditions offered elsewhere and good clerks are lost to the sector as a result. In the other seven vacancies, Northants CALC is aware of historic or ongoing issues at the councils and five of the outgoing clerks cite bullying and harassment as a cause or partial cause of their resignation, with three of those identifying a member of the public as the source, and two identifying one or more members of the council as the source. There is no comfort in “only five out of sixteen clerks” citing bullying and harassment as a causal factor. One clerk leaving their job because they have been bullied or harassed is one too many.

The approach to employment issues in the sector over the past twenty years has been to educate and empower local councils to be better employers. That was the right approach to try, but there is no evidence that it is working for everyone. The structural issues remain.

Alternative solutions are available. For example, the Covid pandemic showed the potential of remote working, and there is no legal reason why the clerk needs to ever be physically present in the parish. Obviously, remote attendance by the clerk at a council meeting would necessitate good and reliable broadband and appropriate IT/AV kit, but the advantages could be huge. Instead of a council's recruitment geography being a 30-minute radius of the council's meeting place, remote working expands that to the clerk being anywhere on Planet Earth. It would also mean that a central clerking service, potentially operated by one or both national bodies, would be possible. Clearly such a radical change would need careful thought, and it certainly would not be a solution that every parish and town council would wish to explore. For some councils though, particularly the sub-£25,000 councils, it might provide a better alternative than struggling on trying to be an employer of one.

## UNITARY COUNCIL ROUND UP

As North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) approach their third birthdays on 1 April 2024, we look at how things are going so far.



The success of most organisations is dependent on a strong and stable workforce. From the CEO to the receptionist, each member of staff plays a critical role in delivering the organisation's mission.

A sign of a high performing council is having a very stable senior management team, with very few leavers and joiners. It takes several years for a senior manager to make their mark and create real and lasting difference, so if the top team experiences significant and rapid churn it is difficult to ever build consistent vision and leadership. Following that, departmental teams with good retention rates will always outperform those with high churn. Some churn is inevitable, even desirable, but ideally it should be achieved through retirements and internal promotions. When churn increases, either in the top team or in the rank and file, it is a sure sign that all is not well.

Unfortunately, both unitary councils have struggled with recruitment and retention since their Vesting Day on 1 April 2021. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) caused more staff churn than was ever imagined or planned for. It is difficult to think of very many officers from manager level upwards in either unitary council who are still doing the same job in the same place as they were before LGR. North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) has suffered more than West Northamptonshire Council (WNC). Starting right at the top, WNC attracted a CEO who had been a senior director in the former county council who lives in the area and who has years of corporate knowledge. NNC went for a CEO with no connection to Northamptonshire's past (which at the time might have been a fair selling point!) who came in from a small borough council and who never lived in the county. He left in June 2023, a little over two years after Vesting Day, to take up a position at a combined authority. Several senior officers from NNC have followed him there, which must be testament to his management style and personality, but it has done nothing for stability and leadership at NNC. NNC was then lucky enough to appoint internally, although that didn't happen until January

2024, so there was a seven-month interregnum (out of 36 months of the council's lifetime). The new CEO is a lawyer, and this is her first time in the top job. The two operational departments of most interest to parish and town councils are Planning & Development Control and Highways. Here, both councils have experienced huge change from top to bottom, with both departments in both unitaries carrying high vacancies and high numbers of interim and contract staff.

The impact is huge. When departmental teams are that depleted it is impossible to deliver a high-quality service. Those that remain must cover multiple jobs, and working faster and harder just to stand still is demanding and demoralising. Sickness absence due to work-related stress increases. Good people look for jobs elsewhere, which further exacerbates the situation.

Thankfully, there are signs that the situation is beginning to stabilise. WNC in particular now has an almost-fully staffed planning department with a very low number of interims left. The department's performance is noticeably improved. WNC's new in-house legal team won a highly commended award last month at the LexisNexis UK Legal Awards 2024. The green shoots of recovery are there.

One regrettable and unacceptable consequence of the recruitment and retention crisis, and the resulting pressure on remaining staff, is a culture that has pervaded both unitary councils is that of not responding to communications. Clerks in Northamptonshire cite lack of response from unitary council officers and elected members as their No.1 frustration. A short, focused enquiry sent directly to the right person normally elicits a response, but any enquiry that is remotely complex, contentious, or sensitive disappears into the black hole. It's simple to understand why: when people haven't got time to do everything they necessarily prioritise, but they might prioritise incorrectly favouring the "urgent/not important" enquiries (see article in the previous *eUpdate*) because they are easiest and quickest to deal with. There are solutions to the no response problem. For example, both unitary councils now have a Parish Liaison function, so that clerks who don't know where best to direct an enquiry, or who are struggling to get a response, have a named officer they can go to for assistance. Clerks can play their part too by reducing avoidable contact. Is the information already available from another source, e.g. the unitary council's website? Is it necessary to copy every email to the Chief Exec and Leader? If unitary council members and officers are already swamped with emails, then sending more probably isn't the answer!

Overall, there are signs of progress at NNC and WNC, but in terms of engagement with parish and town councils, both unitary councils went backwards after LGR and are yet to get back to where they were before. It may take another few years, and maybe an election cycle or two. Of course, engagement with parish and town councils is not very high on the list for the senior managers and senior elected representatives at the unitary councils. Yes, there is an increasing awareness of the role parish and town councils can play in areas such as health and wellbeing, but the unitary councils' focus is rightly on adult social care and children's services, which continue to be by far the biggest challenge in terms of cost and performance.

The challenge for Northants CALC and for individual parish and town councils is to find the right balance between holding the unitary councils' feet to the fire but not causing so much pain that it becomes intolerable. It would be easy (and is very tempting) to take the gloves off and be brutally honest, but the Association and parish and town councils must work with the unitary councils in the long term. If the tiers of local government work against each other it is counterproductive and, ultimately, not in the best interests of the good people of Northamptonshire.

## **BROADBAND COVERAGE UPDATE**

An update from Sarah Naylor, Senior Project Manager, Digital Infrastructure Team, North Northamptonshire Council

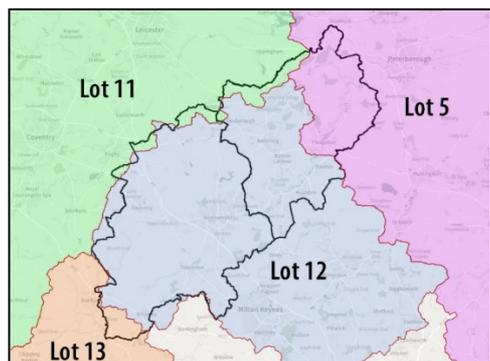
Northamptonshire continues to perform strongly as gigabit capable and full fibre broadband networks extend into more areas. 93% of premises across Northamptonshire (North and West combined) now have access to gigabit broadband which compares to 82% for England (source of all coverage figures [www.ThinkBroadband.com](http://www.ThinkBroadband.com)).

Full fibre coverage is also outstripping progress in England, reaching almost 84% of premises across Northamptonshire compared to 63% across England. West Northamptonshire full fibre coverage is particularly strong at over 90% of premises.

Some residents are seeing multiple telecoms providers building networks as competition in the area is strong. Whilst this means more disruption for residents with each fibre installation, this should be relatively short and residents will benefit as consumers for years to come, having much more choice of broadband services and more price options. Telecoms providers make commercial decisions about

where to build – this is not something managed by Councils. They do not share their plans with other telcos because they are in competition with each other. It is also difficult for them to undertake civils works at the same time. This is due to considerations regarding liabilities, wayleave complexities, resource management and re-instatement guarantees for works on the highway, amongst other issues. Email any broadband enquiries to [bigidea.ncc@northnorthants.gov.uk](mailto:bigidea.ncc@northnorthants.gov.uk).

## CityFibre Scoops Project Gigabit Contracts



CityFibre (<https://cityfibre.com>) has been successful in winning 9 government Project Gigabit contracts to date. The latest announcements include Lots 11 and 12 covering parts of North and West Northamptonshire. This is in addition to Lot 5 which CityFibre was awarded last year. Lot 13 which covers the tip of West Northants was recently won by Gigaclear (<https://www.gigaclear.com>).

Lot 5	Lot 11	Lot 12
Cambridgeshire and surrounding areas (includes eastern part of North Northants)	Leicestershire and Warwickshire (includes top edge of North and West Northants)	Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, and Milton Keynes (includes most of West Northants and the west part of North Northants)
Contract awarded March 2023 Worth up to £69m BDUK.	Contract awarded Feb 2024. Worth up to £71m BDUK	Contract awarded Feb 2024. Worth up to £51.4m BDUK.
CityFibre plans to serve around 45,000 of almost 50,000 eligible premises.	CityFibre plans to serve around 38,000 of the 45,000 eligible premises.	CityFibre plans to serve around 25,000 of the c.30,000 eligible premises.

These headline figures give you an idea of the scale of planned Project Gigabit delivery, although the extent of coverage within Northamptonshire has not been released. Coverage figures will change over the coming months as CityFibre and

BDUK review needs. This includes considering any new planned commercial coverage by other telecoms providers and looking at additional build opportunities. This period of flux is one of the reasons why more information on the localities to be served has not been announced in full, although we expect coverage to include Eton, Great and Little Addington, and Greatworth in Northamptonshire and other rural towns and villages surrounding Corby, Daventry, Kettering, and Wellingborough. More details will be released by CityFibre and BDUK as each planned delivery phase comes forward. Updates will be posted on the Superfast Northamptonshire website at [www.superfastnorthamptonshire.net](http://www.superfastnorthamptonshire.net).

## Gigaclear Delivery – Superfast Northamptonshire



The Superfast Northamptonshire contracts with Gigaclear are drawing to a close on delivery. Around 30,000 premises have benefitted from the full fibre network build as a direct result of the public investment to serve around 6,800 of these. Over 120 villages have been served in full or in part through the programme.

Although the Superfast project is winding up, Gigaclear is continuing to invest through its commercial programme which remains focused on the rural areas. They are also continuing to support a number of other community initiatives including Community Hubs (<https://gigaclear.com/community-hub> - around 50 across Northamptonshire to date), warm rooms, and sponsorship of local sports teams (<https://gigaclear.com/ruralsportsclubfund>) including Deanshanger pictured below. Recent events included a virtual reality experience held in Wollaston in February.



## A CAUTIONARY TALE

We've all done it. We wanted to send an email to a group of people, but we didn't want them to have each other's email addresses, so we used blind copy (bcc), or at least we intended to use it, we thought we'd done it, we really did.

Unfortunately, the distribution list went into cc, not bcc, and now everyone has each other's addresses. If the offending email was to the allotment plot holders' group it might not be the end of the world, but if it was to a group of people on a witness protection programme it might be a tad more serious.

Failure to use bcc correctly in emails is one of the top data breaches reported to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) every year. These breaches can cause real harm, especially where sensitive personal information is involved. Last year the ICO reprimanded the Patient and Client Council (PCC) for sending an email to 15 people across Northern Ireland, each of whom had lived experience of gender dysphoria, using the carbon copy (cc) option. Although the body of the email did not contain personal information, the people who received the email could reasonably infer that the other recipients also had experience of gender dysphoria, given their inclusion in the email. This could have been information the recipients would not wish to be shared with people unknown to them.

Parish and town councils should:

- Consider using other secure means to send communications that involve large amounts of data or sensitive information. This could include using bulk email services (e.g. Mailchimp), mail merge, or secure data transfer services, so information is not shared with people by mistake.
- Consider having appropriate policies in place and training for clerks and councillors in relation to email communications.
- For non-sensitive communications, councils that choose to use bcc should do so carefully to ensure personal email addresses are not shared inappropriately with other people or organisations.

The ICO has produced a helpful guidance note on this topic, which you can find at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/security/email-and-security/>.

## SITUATIONS VACANT



**Crick Parish Council** has a vacancy for a **Clerk/RFO** working 20 to 30 hours per week (flexible) at LC2 SCP 24 – 28 (£33,024 - £36,648 pro rata). The council has 11 seats, and the current precept is £126,503. There are 1,785 electors. The closing date for applications is **12 April 2024**. The council would also like an **Interim Clerk** to join the council as soon as possible for up to 18 hours per week on a 12-

week contract initially. This is to cover the transition period and ensure a smooth handover. The successful candidate will be paid at their existing pay rate if currently working as a clerk and by negotiation otherwise. The closing date for the Interim Clerk role is **5pm on 5 April 2024**. If you are interested in either or both opportunities, please find the full details at <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies>.

**Little Harrowden Parish Council** has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 20 hours per month. The council has 770 electors, 9 councillors, and a precept of £28,560. The deadline for applications is **26 April 2024**.

Weldon is a growing community to the east of Corby. **Weldon Parish Council** has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 20 hours per week. This proactive council has 11 councillors and a precept of £115,000. There are 5,262 electors. The deadline for applications is **5 April 2024**.

**Upton Parish Council** has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 20 hours per week. The council has a precept of £57,540, there are 11 councillors and just under 5,500 electors. The closing date for applications is **5 April 2024**.

Also, **Moulton Parish Council** has a vacancy for a part time Parish Administrator working 22.5 hours per week at £29,250 per annum (pro rata). This is a great opportunity to get into a council that is very proactive and forward thinking.

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

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

See our dedicated web page <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of all courses. Here is just a selection to bring to your attention:

### **Being a Good Employer and Changes to Employment Contracts Briefing**

Being a good employer is vital for parish and town councils as it fosters a positive work environment, enhances employee satisfaction, and boosts productivity. Treating employees fairly, providing opportunities for growth, and recognising their contributions promotes loyalty and commitment. April 2024 sees the introduction of a number of new employment rights for employees, so to enable parish and town councils to respond to these new entitlements we're running a session to update you on these changes.

*Being a Good Employer* – 7 May 2024 10:00-12:00 Online

<https://www.northantscalc.com/training/being-a-good-employer>

### **Appraisal Training**

Appraisal training ensures effective evaluation of employee performance, facilitating constructive feedback and goal setting. This process enables councils to identify strengths, address weaknesses, and align individual objectives with the council's goals. Ultimately, investing in being a good employer and appraisal training strengthens the council's workforce, promotes accountability, and enhances overall effectiveness in serving the community's needs.

*Effective Appraisals* – 10 July 2024 10:00-11:30 Online

<https://www.northantscalc.com/training/appraisal-skills>

### **Changes to Planning Legislation**

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) is bringing about various changes to planning law in England. These changes aren't being introduced at once but rather drip fed throughout the year. To keep on top of these changes we recommend sending a council representative to the following courses:

- Planning Nuts and Bolts - <https://tinyurl.com/3uaj5y6b>
- Responding to Planning Applications - <https://tinyurl.com/4c83fpsm>
- Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas - <https://tinyurl.com/2bsdn8p4>

## NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

**Danny Moody**

Chief Executive

[dmoody@northantscalc.com](mailto:dmoody@northantscalc.com)

X: [@ceo\\_ncalc](#)

**Lesley Sambrook Smith**

Deputy Chief Executive

[lsambrooksmith@northantscalc.com](mailto:lsambrooksmith@northantscalc.com)

X: [@deputyceo\\_ncalc](#)

**Marie Reilly**

Training Manager

[mreilly@northantscalc.com](mailto:mreilly@northantscalc.com)

**Sophie Harding**

Business Support Manager

[sharding@northantscalc.com](mailto:sharding@northantscalc.com)

**General enquiries**

[info@northantscalc.com](mailto:info@northantscalc.com)

**Member Enquiry Service (MES)**

[mes@northantscalc.com](mailto:mes@northantscalc.com)

**Data Protection Officer Service**

[dpo@northantscalc.com](mailto:dpo@northantscalc.com)

**Telephone**

01327 831482

**Address:**

Northants CALC  
PO Box 7936  
Brackley  
NN13 9BY

**Web:**

[www.northantscalc.com](http://www.northantscalc.com)

