

Update

ISSUE 5/24

September - October 2024

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

What a change in the weather we have experienced. Welcome to the autumn edition of *eUpdate*!

We have noticed that since Covid, August is slightly quieter than usual in terms of enquiries received and meetings held. It used to be that way decades ago, but in the ten or fifteen years prior to Covid we didn't see any dip in activity at all in August. My interpretation of it is that since Covid clerks and councillors are trying to win back that work/life balance. Whereas before, clerks and councillors may have stayed "plugged in" to their council over the summer, now there is a definite and conscious "switching off". The quid pro quo however is that all the enquiries and meeting requests that would have previously come in during August hit us in September. I cannot remember a busier September than the one we've just had.

Our programme of online briefings in partnership with West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) has carried on over the summer. We have done two briefings on the Local Transport Plan, a Planning Surgery, and two briefings on the Trees & Woods Strategy. These briefings, which are typically online lasting one hour, are a very efficient and effective way of parish and town councils and WNC engaging with each other. It's far better than WNC simply whizzing out lengthy consultation documents to parish councils and expecting them to be read and responded to. There is still room for improvement, but it is moving in the right direction. North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) is persisting with the geographically based, in-person parish forums, which undoubtedly have their place but tend to attract much lower numbers. We've had up to one hundred and twenty clerks and councillors at the WNC online briefings, whereas twenty would be a good showing for an in-person forum in the north.

Northants CALC is a member of the Federation of East Midlands Associations of Local Councils (FEMALC), which includes Northamptonshire, Leicestershire &

"...Whereas before, clerks and councillors may have stayed "plugged in" to their council over the summer, now there is a definite and conscious "switching off"..."

Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Lincolnshire. The FEMALC secretariat rotates annually, and it has been Northants CALC's turn for 2024. We have introduced monthly FEMALC Officers meetings, where the CEOs of each CALC get together to talk about operational matters, then there is a twice-yearly meeting for the officers, chairs, and National Assembly reps from each CALC. The FEMALC Officers also get together for an overnight Away Day, which took place this year in Kegworth on 7 & 8 August. We normally focus on sector-wide issues but used the opportunity this year to look inwardly at how to run a successful CALC. We compared notes and shared examples of where each CALC does something well and, hopefully, we each took something away to implement. Northants CALC is a comparatively strong, well-resourced CALC. We've been on a development journey over the past twenty years that some other CALCs are not yet as far advanced with. Our strategy is driven by a strong board of directors and delivered by a small but professional staff team. Of course, the whole is supported by member councils who resource the Association through membership subscriptions, for which we will always be immensely grateful.

Following the general election on 4 July 2024, I reached out to all the county's new MPs and requested a briefing with them. These started in August and will continue throughout the year. For me it is vital that there is close communication and co-operation between MPs and the parish and town councils in their constituency. Of course, some have it easier than others: Lucy Rigby, MP for Northampton North has just two parishes in her constituency (Kingsthorpe and part of Northampton), whereas Stuart Andrew, MP for Daventry has eighty-nine parishes in his constituency! Clearly the MPs with dozens and dozens of parishes won't be able to visit them all regularly, but it is still important that they keep in touch and that they know what the common issues are. I have spoken to MPs about local issues but also about national issues in the hope that the new government may make progress on some of the issues, such as allowing councillors to attend council meetings by remote means, and the reintroduction to the Standards regime of the sanction of suspension or disqualification, that the previous government did not have the appetite for.

September is also busy as our training programme ramps up after the summer. For me, I always look forward to delivering the Autumn New Clerks course, which is held on consecutive Saturdays in September. This year seven intrepid new clerks spent six hours on Zoom with me each day building the foundations of their knowledge, and I hope that some will go on to study the Certificate in Local

Council Administration (CiLCA) and to have glittering local government careers. There are around 180 clerks in Northamptonshire out of more than 7,000 nationally and there is no reason at all why we shouldn't have the best 180 clerks in England!

Another thing we have been doing over the summer is recruiting to fill a vacancy on the board caused by the retirement of Peter Allen (Towcester Town Council). At his last board meeting as a director, Peter, who joined the board on 14 October 2009, said a few words. He said that it had been "*a privilege and pleasure*" to be a director and described the other directors and staff as "*an outstanding bunch*". He said that directors were always ready to challenge things but were a "*cohesive, effective board*". Peter said that he would miss being a director and we will certainly miss him too! There was a brilliant response to the vacancy notice and the position will be filled at the AGM on 5 October 2024.

And talking of the AGM, at the time this *eUpdate* is published there is just one week left to the 2024 Annual Conference & AGM at Moulton Community Centre. It is fully booked once again, so thank you to all the clerks and councillors who are prepared to give up their Saturday to be there. We promise to make it worth your while!



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

PUBLIC SECTOR DECARBONISATION SCHEME

Phase 4 of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme has been launched. The scheme helps owners of public buildings to achieve net zero and switch to cleaner energy and can fund things like new insulation, double glazing and low-carbon heating. The scheme is run by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and is delivered by Salix Finance.

If your council has a building or facility that could benefit from the scheme, please see <https://www.salixfinance.co.uk/schemes/phase-4-public-sector-decarbonisation-scheme> for all the details. The application portal for the scheme will open by mid-October and will close on 25 November 2024.

MARKET WIDE HALF HOURLY SETTLEMENT AND THE IMPACT ON UMS

Parish and town councils that purchase electricity for street lighting will be familiar with the concept of Unmetered Supply (UMS), where the bill is calculated on the installed wattage and time profile, not the actual consumption. Even metered supply is not as accurate as one might imagine, because it depends on how often the meter monitors and reports usage. Parish and town councils may have recently received alarming-sounding correspondence from their electricity network provider about a new initiative in the electricity industry called the Market-wide Half-hourly Settlement (MHHS) Programme, so we asked our electricity supply partners at Clear Utility Solutions (CUS) for an easy-to-understand explanation. CEO, Ben Gunn, was happy to oblige:



“The energy industry is a fascinating and constantly changing environment. For the most part the changes are gradual or very much behind the scenes and are of little concern to the end user but occasionally, a fundamental change comes along that makes a little more noise.

The decision by OFGEM to move the entire UK energy market to market wide half hourly settlement or, rather snappily, MHHS for short, is one such change.

MHHS is, at its most simplistic, the industry’s ability to see how much electricity is used by each and every meter, every half an hour in real time. This information is vitally important in the push for net zero.

Under the current system of educated guesswork, your energy supplier will purchase power based on estimates of your consumption derived from historic readings and your consumption profile. Therefore, it is easy to understand the desire for the energy industry to know how much electricity it needs to generate at a given time of day to meet demand.

MHHS takes away the uncertainty, lowering costs for suppliers and laying the ground for grid efficiencies. It will also pave the way for more innovative products and services for example through the use of smart appliances and will lead to lower bills for consumers. OFGEMs own analysis predicts benefits of up to £4.5 billion for end users by 2045.

Half-hourly usage data enables the operators of the energy grid to better predict and manage energy demand, as we continue to move to greener sources of energy and the net zero target, this data will be vitally important. The extra precision MHHS brings will benefit energy users by encouraging energy suppliers to introduce even more innovative products that can offer cost-saving incentives for off-peak usage and reward those that curtail their energy consumption during peak times.

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Whilst incredibly important and beneficial, in practice the changes mean very little to customers with unmetered supplies and there is no requirement for Clerks to take any action ahead of the migration this April. The changeover will be handled entirely by your existing supplier and there should be no change to any fixed contracts that may be in force at the time so your existing tariffs will be unaffected.

Clerks should continue to manage their UMS inventories in exactly the same way they do now and will still require an up-to-date UMS certificate. However, any historic changes to equipment need to be reported ahead of April 2025 as there will be no capacity to backdate charges once the migration has taken place.

Perhaps the most noticeable change to the existing process is the consolidation of multiple MPANs for each supply into just one MPAN. The reduction in meter points is unlikely to yield much savings as the network costs previously spread across multiple MPANs will simply be aggregated, although there may be some small administrative savings that can be passed on.

Usage data will now be provided by a new UMSDS service which will use a combination of intelligent software, existing inventory data and external data points such as sunrise and sunset to generate half hourly data in a very similar fashion to the way in which existing UMS certificates are calculated. This will mean future UMS bills will show actual consumption in a similar way to metered supplies, although it will show as estimated readings.

In summary there is very little to worry about and having spoken with industry insiders on the supplier, metering and distribution sides I am confident we will be fully prepared and ready to make the transition.

If you have a UMS supply and have any questions about the upcoming changes or any other issue you may be experiencing, please get in touch with the CUS team on 01327 601122.”

RESULTS OF THE MEMBERSHIP SURVEY 2024

Every two years Northants CALC conducts a survey of member councils and councillors to ensure that the Association is doing what its members want and need, and that the services provided are fit for purpose. It enables us to track trends across the sector, and to analyse significant differences based on location, size, and type.

The 2024 survey went out in June, and we had a fantastic response, with 134 or 62% of member councils completing the survey and we are very grateful that nearly two-thirds of our members took the time to respond. Ultimately, Northants CALC is a membership organisation, run solely for the benefit of member councils, and it is great that the membership demonstrates ownership through the survey.

Public Engagement

One of the indicators of council engagement with the public is the attendance of members of the public at both ordinary and annual council meetings. The 2024 survey shows an increase in public attendance at ordinary council meetings compared to 2022. In 2024, 85% of councils reported attendance between 0 to 5 members of the public, an increase from 71% in 2022. Attendance at annual council meetings also showed a slight uptick for smaller groups, with 43% of those

councils responding indicating 0-5 members of the public attending, compared to 37% in 2022.

Communicating well is another way to ensure parish and town councils engage with residents. Websites and noticeboards remain the most used forms of communication, with 99% of councils using websites and 100% using noticeboards. Social media has a strong presence as well, with 67% of councils utilising it, marking a slight increase from 66% in 2022. The increase in email bulletins (32%) and the use of magazines or newsletters (76%) also suggests that councils are broadening their communication strategies to reach a more diverse audience.

Zooming In

One of the aspirations expressed in the 2024 survey is the desire for legal powers to hold hybrid or online meetings. A significant 79% of councils indicated a preference for online meetings, while 81% supported hybrid options. We will use this level of interest in the ability to hold online meetings to lobby MPs and the Secretary of State at MHCLG.

Training and Development: Barriers and Needs

Training remains an area of focus for Northants CALC as we want clerks and councillors to be as informed as possible to get the most out of their respective roles. The most common barriers to training attendance in 2024 included the timing of courses (23%) and the costs involved (7%). However, a striking 66% of respondents reported no barriers to attending training, a notable increase from 53% in 2022. This change reflects improved accessibility to training programs and greater engagement in continuous personal development. Furthermore, 72% of clerks received training in 2024, up from 68% in 2022, showing a commitment to enhancing operational professionalism.

Councillor Development Framework and Benefits

The survey also explored the effectiveness of the Councillor Development Framework (CDF), with an emphasis on whether councillors find it beneficial. The CDF is gaining recognition, with 78% of councils aware of it and 52% finding it helpful to structure training. The increasing awareness suggests that it is a valuable tool for enhancing councillor competency and ensuring continuous professional development. See <https://www.northantscalc.com/councillor-development-framework>.

Relationship with Principal Councils

Parish and town councils' relationships with principal councils showed mixed feelings in 2024. In the West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) area, 18% rated their relationship as "good" and only 8% as very good, while in North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) area, only 4% rated their relationship as good, with 0% reporting very good. The majority of respondents in both areas rated their relationship with the principal councils as neither good nor poor. There was also a relatively high number of councils (55% in NNC and 39% in WNC) that had no opinion about their relationship with principal councils, reflecting either disengagement or neutrality.

Relationship	WNC 2024 (%)	NNC 2024 (%)	WNC 2022 (%)	NNC 2022 (%)
Very good	6	0	8	1
Good	18	4	20	17
Neither good nor poor	24	30	22	23
Poor	9	9	7	8
Very poor	4	2	5	2
No opinion	39	55	38	49

From the results above it is very clear that yet more effort needs to go into building relationships with NNC and WNC and we continue to work in that area.

Council Outlook: Feelings Toward the Future

In terms of outlook, parish and town councils in 2024 are generally optimistic but with notable indifference creeping into the mindset. About 50% felt "positive" about the future, while 37% were "indifferent," and a small 6% were "negative." Compared to 2022, when 54% of councils felt positive, there's a slight decline in overall positivity, suggesting that some challenges are weighing on local governance. Nevertheless, the rise in indifference is significant and could signal growing fatigue or uncertainty about the future of council operations and it is probably no coincidence that the next ordinary elections (May 2025), when we expect up to one third of councillors to retire, was only 11 months away at the time the survey went out.

Council Powers and Responsibilities

The survey explores the responsibilities councils currently hold and those they aspire to take on. In 2024, 23% of councils expressed interest in providing additional services, such as verge maintenance, streetlighting, and local bus services. Despite this, a significant 77% of councils stated they had no interest in expanding their service offerings, perhaps reflecting concerns over resource limitations or the complexity of these roles. Asset ownership was another key area, with 16% of councils expressing interest in owning assets like community buildings, or open spaces. While a majority (72%) were not interested in acquiring additional assets, the survey shows there is still a notable minority that sees asset acquisition as a potential area for growth.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

This year we added a question about Artificial Intelligence (AI), and it showed that 41 respondents (31%) have used AI in the course of their work. The most widely used was Chat GPT (76% of those who use AI indicated this tool), followed by Microsoft co-pilot (15%). The presence of this technology marks a new frontier in council operations, potentially offering greater efficiency and data management capabilities. As more councils explore AI, its potential to reshape administrative processes could grow substantially in the coming years.

Part of the membership survey is completed by “the council” (so usually it is the clerk filling it in) and then there is a separate councillor survey, completed by individual councillors. The 2024 councillor survey was completed by 279 councillors from 119 councils across the county...

Demographics and Employment

The gender balance among councillors remains consistent with previous years, with 64% male and 35% female respondents. The age distribution shows a notable increase in councillors aged 65-74, rising from 30% in 2022 to 34% in 2024. Employment patterns indicate a slight decrease in full-time employment, with 28% of councillors working full-time compared to 32% in 2022, whilst a slight majority of councillors (52%) are retired.

Motivations for Becoming a Councillor

Councillors are driven by a variety of motivations, with the primary reasons being to contribute to the community (83%) and to influence local decisions (47%). Other significant motivations include commenting on local planning applications

(35%) and helping bring about improvements through local projects (66%). These motivations highlight the councillors' commitment to enhancing the quality of life in their communities.

Councillor Areas of Interest and Sector Commitment

Councillors are particularly interested in planning and development control (61%), representing the community (75%), and environmental projects (57%). The survey also reveals a high level of sector commitment, with 83% of councillors willing to recommend councillorship and 63% intending to seek re-election. This demonstrates a strong dedication to public service and community engagement.

Parish Meetings

55% of member parish meetings responded. The results from 2022 to 2024 were very similar, the majority of parish meetings (83%) have in excess of 10 members of the public attending their annual parish meetings. 50% of the parish meetings have chairs who have been in post for 1-3 years, while 17% have chairs who have served for less than a year, 4-10 years, or over 10 years, respectively. Only 14% of parish meetings are registered with the ICO as data controllers (should be 100%!). 57%, are not registered, and 29% of the respondents were unsure. This highlights a potential gap in compliance with data protection regulations which we will work on with those parish meetings affected.

Member Satisfaction and Feedback

And finally, one of the standout results from the survey is the high level of member satisfaction with Northants CALC services. 89% of members felt the membership fee represented good value for money, mirroring the same level of satisfaction from 2022. Additionally, 99% of councils using the Internal Audit Service rated it as either "good" or "excellent," reflecting the strong trust placed in the service. Knowing that member councils are generally satisfied and supportive of the Association is fundamental to the way we do business.

It is essential that we constantly refer to our members to ensure that the Association stays on mission and that as the sector changes and the needs of member councils grow and change, the Association stays ahead of the curve and continues to provide excellent value for money.

Thank you very much to all respondents for helping us do that!

SEXUAL HARRASSMENT

From October 2024, employers, including all parish and town councils will be under a new statutory duty to take “reasonable steps” to prevent sexual harassment within the workplace. If you think “this doesn’t apply to us, we’re just a parish council”, think again. Or at least read the Cautionary Tale near the end of this *eUpdate* and then return to this article!

Here, Chris Moses, our retained HR partner describes the impact of the new legislation in the context of parish and town councils:

“From October 2024 new legislation (s40A Equality Act 2010) places greater responsibilities and legal requirements on parish and town councils, along with all employers, to take proactive steps to prevent Sexual Harassment at work.

Councils will need to take steps to demonstrate that they are preventing the problem. This doesn’t simply mean having an up-to-date Policy and Procedure, but actively taking steps to reduce the risk of harassment. However, the starting point needs to be for the full council, or a committee with delegated responsibility for HR affairs, to ensure that the council’s procedures are fit for purpose.

Current guidance from Acas (Preventing sexual harassment) sets out the requirements for Anti-Harassment policies and procedure to follow:

- *The policy should provide a range of options for reporting sexual harassment, depending on who the employee feels comfortable with.*
- *The policy should provide a range of informal options for dealing with sexual harassment.*
- *The policy should contain a formal complaints procedure for the employee to use if they wish.*
- *The formal procedure should allow union representation.*
- *The procedure should be clear about when disciplinary action is needed.*
- *The procedure should have one investigation to investigate the complaint and any subsequent disciplinary action.*
- *The policy should contain details of help and support available to the person who made the complaint.*
- *Someone who’s been sexually harassed will be given paid time off to get help with any resulting physical or mental health problems.*

In addition, specific guidance notes have been developed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) for all employers. In terms of how they apply to parish and town councils, the following need to be taken into consideration:

- *The full council, or a committee with delegated HR responsibility, will need to review existing procedures, including defining what constitutes harassment, steps to take should the problem arise, protection the council will provide to those reporting it, and sanctions against offenders. As a result, a policy and procedure that is specific to the needs of the council should be drafted.*
- *Staff should be consulted on the draft policy and procedure, to get their suggested adjustments, as well as commitment to the document.*
- *The procedure should be issued to councillors, staff and should be displayed.*
- *All councillors and staff should either attend a briefing session regarding how the new/updated policy and procedure works or be required to read the document and sign it to confirm that they understand and will comply with it.*
- *This will need to be repeated on an annual basis to ensure that the training doesn't become outdated. Provision of annual training would enable a council to demonstrate that it has taken reasonable steps to prevent the problem. This can provide the council with a valuable defence if it has to defend a claim of sexual harassment at an Employment Tribunal.*
- *The policy and procedure should include a simple and user-friendly reporting process should problems occur, as well as set out what action will be taken against offenders. For example, employees who are found to have committed acts of sexual harassment would be accused of gross misconduct.*
- *Councillors who are accused of sexual harassment may also have breached the "Integrity" principle under the Code of Conduct. In these circumstances the council could report the problem to the Monitoring Officer, asking for the matter to be addressed promptly and without undue delay.*
- *All councillors and employees of the council should be fully aware of the policy and procedure, and understand how it can be implemented.*

It is important to ensure that procedures, and the way that they are implemented, are appropriate to the size of the council and its resources. There is no point in developing elaborate procedures that are simply unworkable. There are no particular criteria or minimum standards for councils when implementing their anti-harassment procedures. They must be practical and, most importantly, are workable for the size of the council and its workforce.

From October 2024 councils could face a surcharge of 25% on top of any compensation awarded to an employee who successfully makes a claim of sexual harassment at an Employment Tribunal, if a council cannot demonstrate how they have complied with the new rules.

However, those Council's that have taken all 'reasonable steps' to implement workable procedures will have a defence against claims at the Tribunal for sexual harassment, under s109 of the Equality Act 2010."

This is a very important subject and one that is particularly relevant in the parish council sector, where there is a power dynamic between councillors and clerks, and where a majority of councillors are male, and a majority of clerks are female. However, it is also true that most councils have only one member of staff – the clerk – and so as Chris says, policies and procedures must be pragmatic and proportionate. Northants CALC has asked National Association of Local Councils (NALC) what templates and guidance it will produce for member councils to assist with compliance with the new provisions introduced by the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023. As soon as such material is produced, we will make it available to all member councils.

HEDGEROW PROTECTION

Another example of new legislation that may affect some parish and town councils is the Management of Hedgerows (England) Regulations 2024, which have just come into force. These rules restrict cutting or trimming hedges over 20 metres long or those connected at both ends from 1 March to 31 August, protecting wildlife during breeding seasons. Exceptions are made for safety reasons, to prevent disease, or for specific agricultural purposes.



Additionally, a 2-meter buffer zone must be established around important hedgerows. Within this zone, cultivation, pesticide application, and fertiliser use are prohibited. The goal is to protect the hedgerow's root system and support its health.

HOME WORKING

There are approximately 180 parish and town council clerks working in Northamptonshire (covering 220 councils) and over 150 of them work from home.



A council has a duty to provide a safe working environment for its employee(s) but that's not always easy to do when the employee works at home, particularly as clerks are sometimes reluctant to say where and how they work, or to allow the council as their employer access to their workplace. Furthermore, some clerks have only a temporary workspace, which might be the kitchen or dining room table, and others may have a workspace that is shared with other family members who have a right to privacy and are not obliged to share their working environment with their partner's/parent's council employer.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published new guidance and resources on home working, which includes straightforward actions to manage home workers' health and safety. Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for people working at home as for any other worker and this includes making sure their risk assessment covers home workers, which should consider:

- Stress and poor mental health
- Using equipment like computers and laptops safely
- The working environment
- Security and data protection

There is also specific advice for home workers, which includes a video and practical tips on good posture when working with display screen equipment.

To access all these resources, please visit <https://www.hse.gov.uk/home-working>.

CILCA 2025

The CiLCA 2025 programme is an excellent opportunity for clerks and council staff to enhance their skills and qualifications. The Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) is a Level 3 accredited and recognised qualification designed to test the competence of those working in local councils. The programme covers all aspects of the clerk's role, including core roles in local council administration, law and procedure, finance, management, and community engagement.



The CiLCA training consists of seven sessions, each lasting three hours, delivered over eight months. Participants will receive comprehensive training and support, including access to a CiLCA recognised trainer, digital training materials, and post-course learner support. This programme is an invaluable investment in your professional development and will equip you with the knowledge and skills needed to excel in your role.

Why Enrol in CiLCA 2025?

1. **Professional Recognition:** Achieve a nationally recognised qualification.
2. **Networking Opportunities:** Connect with other clerks and council staff, share experiences, and learn from each other.
3. **General Power of Competence:** If your council has two thirds of its members elected and you are CiLCA qualified then your council can claim eligibility to use the General Power of Competence.

Budget Setting for 2025

As we approach the end of the year, it is crucial to include the CiLCA 2025 programme in your budget setting process for the next financial year if you're thinking about joining the programme. Allocating funds for this training will ensure that your council staff can take advantage of this valuable opportunity without financial constraints. Early planning and budgeting will help secure places in the programme.

How to Register

You can express an interest in joining the 2025 programme via this link <https://forms.office.com/e/wBQiM15i8r>. Expressions of interest will also be invited in the upcoming Training Newsletter in November. To avoid missing out, please ensure that you register your interest by the end of the year. In the new year, we will confirm places and dates for the programme, and you will be able to book onto the group that suits you best.

For more information visit <https://www.northantscalc.com/cilca> or please contact Marie Reilly, Training Manager, at mreilly@northantscalc.com or call 01327 831482.



PROCUREMENT ACT 2023

The Cabinet Office announced in September that the Procurement Act 2023 will now commence on 24 February 2025 – a delay of four months from the original go-live date of 28 October 2024 to allow time for a new National Procurement Policy Statement (NPPS) to be produced. The new rules affect all parish and town councils and will specifically relate to any public contract issued for goods or services worth over £30,000. So, what are the main implications of the Act for parish councils and town councils?

- The threshold for public contracts has been updated. Contracts valued at £30,000 or below are exempt from a tendering or procurement exercise, while contracts over £30,000 must comply with the requirements of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.
- Parish and town councils must now advertise opportunities on the Contracts Finder website if they publish an open invitation to quote or tender for contracts exceeding £30,000.
- There is a growing need for sector-specific, market-sensitive training for parish and town councils to help them navigate the new regulations. Training sessions have been developed to address these needs, and you will find details at <https://www.northantscalc.com/training/procurement>.

If you have any specific questions or need further details, feel free to ask!

ALL CHANGE AT THE DEPARTMENT/MINISTRY

The government department that is responsible for local government has seen its fair share of change since it was created in 2001 as part of the Cabinet Office under the responsibility of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (remember John Prescott?).

In 2006 Tony Blair reshuffled government responsibilities and out of the mix came the bright, shiny, new Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), a department dedicated to and focused on local government and its impact on communities in the United Kingdom. DCLG survived for twelve years until 2018 when the then Conservative government, led by Theresa May, responded to the national housebuilding crisis by changing the department to a ministry and adding a specific responsibility to boost housing growth thereby creating the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Then, for Boris Johnson and Michael Gove's flagship "Levelling Up" agenda in 2021 the department not only got a new name – the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) – but it was also announced that its HQ would be moved out of London and would be based in Wolverhampton instead; the first government department not to be headquartered in the capital. And just four years later we are back to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), with the new Labour government dropping "Levelling Up" from the name on the basis that it was a gimmick, and their intention was to focus only on delivery.

In its illustrious 23 years, the department has had no fewer than 14 Secretaries of State. Indeed, the incumbent, the Rt Hon Angela Raynor MP, appointed just after the general election, has already been in post longer (79 days at the time of publication) than two of her three predecessors. In fact, you have to go all the way back to Eric Pickles to find a SoS that lasted more than two years.

The merry-go-round isn't only with the top job. There has been a veritable conveyor belt of Local Government Ministers over the past twenty years, including but not limited to a certain Rishi Sunak. Frustratingly, recent ministers have said at the start of their tenure that they intended to listen to the needs of the sector



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

before making decisions that would support and empower councils. Sadly, none of them survived in post long enough to get past the “listening” phase.

The incumbent is Jim McMahon OBE MP, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution. Mr McMahon, who is MP for Oldham West and Royton, was Leader of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, so at least he has reasonable local government credentials. Time will tell how long he stays and what impacts he makes. For more information about the minister, please see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/people/jim-mcmahon#biography>.

LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025

At the time of publication, there are just over two hundred days to go until the next local elections in Northamptonshire, when every parish, town, community, and unitary council seat will be up for election. Thursday 1 May 2025 is going to be a big day!

As our membership survey indicated (see article above) 63% of councillors who responded intend to seek re-election in May 2025, but that means that 37% do not intend to seek re-election. And because those figures relate to councillors who took the time to fill in our survey, one might reasonably expect that the average attrition rate for all councillors might be significantly higher. Maybe as high as 50%.



It's not a huge surprise that so many councillors will be leaving the sector in 2025. For a start, there's the impact of Covid, which has had a massive downward effect on the number of volunteer hours provided in the country. Of course, parish and town councillors are elected public officials, NOT volunteers, but the principles are the same. Individuals give their time to four realms: Self, Work, Family, and Others, and being a councillor, or a volunteer, fits in the “Others” realm. Since Covid, people have refocused and have prioritised “Self”, “Family” and “Work”, so something had to give. Reframing the role of councillor to reposition it partly in the “Self” realm might be one way forward: being a councillor can be personally

rewarding and fulfilling, and it can help a person build important life skills, or even improve their CV, so it should not be seen as an entirely selfless role.

Then there is the Northamptonshire effect. The county went through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in 2020/2021 and the local elections in May 2021 heralded a new dawn. Some councillors who may otherwise have retired in 2021 stayed on to see what LGR would bring, or to provide continuity. Others were displaced from the former borough, district, and county councils and not wishing to give up public service altogether, sought refuge at the parish and town council tier. It's fair to say that four years on from LGR, those councillors might reasonably judge that it is time to go.

Next is the impact of local government austerity. As principal councils are tasked with delivering more for less, the pressure squeezes out onto parish and town councils to pick up the slack for community services. There is an interesting argument to be had as to whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, but it is incontestably a different thing. If a councillor joined a parish council to comment on planning applications and make sure that the fabric of the village stayed pretty much the same, they may or may not be up for the brave new future that is imagined for them. It's a different proposition and they might reasonably judge that it is time to go.

So, it's all doom and gloom then? Not necessarily! It calls for a new cohort of people to come into the sector and take up the cudgels. Perhaps a new breed of councillor who is willing to take on the big issues of the day – climate change, austerity, physical and mental health and wellbeing, community safety – and see councillorship as a way of leading on those things and making their communities (and therefore themselves) more resilient, stronger, and better. A new breed of councillor that has the energy and oomph to deliver the mundane and the extraordinary. A new breed of councillor that wants to make a difference and knows that being a councillor is a way to do that.

So how can parish and town councils go about finding and attracting such people? Well, its going to be a challenge, it's going to take work, and its going to cost money. It certainly cannot be achieved by posting one boring government-speak statutory notice on the council's website between now and next April (when nominations close for the elections in May).

The theme for the Northants CALC Annual Conference 2024 is Democracy & Representation and it will be an opportunity for delegates to hear about candidate recruitment, share their own good ideas, and discuss as a sector how we can avoid the disaster of uncontested elections and higher numbers of vacancies following the elections. Northants CALC will disseminate information and guidance to all member councils after the conference and the campaign will gather speed towards Christmas, with the real push in terms of parish and town councils getting the message out to their communities starting in early January 2025.

To prepare for that, councils may like to think about creating a communications budget and deciding who will lead and co-ordinate the campaign to encourage candidacy. Consequently, we are asking every parish and town council in Northamptonshire to have an item on their November agenda along the lines of “To consider plans, budget, and arrangements for the Local Elections in 2025”.

Look out for all our updates on this important topic in the coming months.

RURAL HOUSING ROADSHOWS

Our colleagues at Northants ACRE are organising two rural housing roadshows to explore the vital housing needs of rural communities and how they can be addressed together. The events are:

- **Norton Village Hall** – 1100 to 1330 on 17 October 2024 (Includes an optional tour of a rural exception site)
- **Nassington Village Hall** – 1900 to 2100 on 7 November 2024



This is an excellent opportunity to gain valuable insights into rural exception sites and how they can benefit the community, learn more about housing needs surveys and how to assess local housing requirements, and engage with the Rural Housing Enabler at Northants ACRE and local housing providers to discuss the pressing need for affordable rural housing.

Please register at <https://tinyurl.com/3pubpnmr> and for any questions about the event please contact Jenni Hedges (Jennifer.hedges@northantsacre.org.uk).

A CAUTIONARY TALE

There is an article above about the new requirements to protect staff from sexual harassment. Thankfully, such cases in the parish sector are relatively rare, but the implications if it does occur can be enormous and devastating for the victim, for the perpetrator, and for the council.

Sexual harassment is never funny and should not be happening. Sexual harassment is any unwanted sexual behaviour that makes someone feel upset, scared, offended or humiliated, or is meant to make them feel that way. It can include sexual comments or gestures and can occur in person, in emails, or in texts. What one person might consider “banter” or even “chivalrous” might be considered by another person as sexist or harassment.

Examples occurring in the local government world include a male principal councillor in Wales who said that female councillors deserved a higher allowance because they “have to have a different dress or suit for most occasions” and a parish council chair in southern England who repeatedly called the new deputy clerk “love” and “my project”. The clerk sued the council in the Employment Tribunal claiming that she had been “*objectified*” by the remarks, which were “*humiliating*” and “*unprofessional*”.

The demographics of the parish sector can sometimes present challenges, but the days when behaviour can be excused by saying “It’s just how things were in their day” are long gone. Not so much in Northamptonshire, but even regional idioms can cause problems. For example, in parts of South Yorkshire some men of a certain age refer to everyone, men and women, as “darling”. They may not mean anything by it but remember that it is the person receiving the sexual behaviour who decides if it’s unwanted – NOT the person doing the behaviour.

Parish and town councils should operate in a professional and business-like way. They can be friendly but care should be taken with familiarity. Always address people by their names or roles; there is no real need to use terms such as “love” or “darling” in a council setting.

If your council is experiencing problematic behaviours, from councillors, officers, or the public, please don’t ignore it. Contact Northants CALC for advice and guidance on how to protect the council and those who work within it.

SITUATIONS VACANT

Abthorpe Parish Council is looking for a new Clerk. Abthorpe is near Towcester and has 251 electors. Please note, the position is advertised at 2 hours per week, which is less than half the minimum recommended hours for the smallest council, although the council has indicated that some flexibility may be possible. The precept for 2024/25 is £5,400. The deadline for applications is 30 September 2024.



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

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Here is just a selection of the courses available to you in the first half of October 2024. There have never been more training opportunities for the parish sector:

- Budgeting for Clerks and Finance Staff, 1 October 2024 - 10:00
- VAT - Partial exemption, 3 October 2024 - 10:00
- Communicating with Your Community Part 2, 3 October 2024 - 13:00
- Data Protection and GDPR Part 3, 4 October 2024 - 13:00
- New Clerk's Finance, 8 October 2024 - 10:00
- Procurement, 9 October 2024 - 10:00
- Social media for councils Part 2, 10 October 2024 - 09:30
- Budgeting for Clerks and Finance Staff, 10 October 2024 - 10:00
- How Councils Can More Effectively Engage with Young People, 11 October 2024 - 09:30
- Freedom of Information for Councils, 14 October 2024 - 09:30
- Canva Part Two - Advanced, 15 October 2024 - 09:30
- VAT for VAT registered councils, 15 October 2024 - 10:00

See our dedicated web page <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of these courses and many, many more.

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