

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

At the time of publication, there are one hundred and fifty-three days until the local elections in Northamptonshire, which take place on 1 May 2025. It already feels like we are in the grip of the elections, both in terms of the excitement of the democratic renewal not far off, but also in terms of the dampening effect elections have. More and more conversations start or end with “it depends what happens at the elections” and various initiatives and projects are now on hold “until after May”. This particularly affects the unitary councils, where there is concern about what might happen at the elections. Both councils – North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) – are Conservative controlled, but looking at what happened with elections in 2024, there is concern from ruling councillors, particularly in North Northamptonshire, that the outcome of the election cannot be guaranteed. Whatever happens, the unitary councils need to get back on track as soon after the elections as possible; they cannot afford six months of inaction.

Every parish and town council in Northamptonshire has elections on 1 May 2025 too. Our Membership Survey 2024 suggests that around two-thirds of councillors intend to seek re-election, which means that one third do not. The pressure is on to promote candidacy and get enough candidates to have a contested election.

There is more about the Membership Survey and what it tells us about the elections below.

Talking of the elections next year, we held our 77th Annual Conference on 5 October 2024 at Moulton Community Centre and the theme was Democracy & Representation, focusing on why we have elections, how they are fundamental to our sector, and how to encourage people to stand to be a councillor. Thank you very much to all the delegates for coming along and joining in the discussions. There is more about the conference in an article below.

“... Whatever happens, the unitary councils need to get back on track as soon after the elections as possible; they cannot afford six months of inaction...”

October is certainly conference month. I attended the National Conference of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) held once again in Hinckley, which is very convenient for Northamptonshire delegates! It was great to see a dozen or more clerks from councils in Northamptonshire there and I would strongly encourage any clerks to go. Not only is it a useful opportunity to update a clerk's technical expertise, but it is great for networking and building connections that can benefit clerks and their councils for years to come. The next one is in Hinckley too, so take the opportunity whilst it's so close!

Another important event at that time was the West Northamptonshire Climate Conference, held at Delapre Abbey on 9 October 2024 with approximately 60 parish and community representatives present. The event was a collaboration between West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), Northampton Town Council (NTC), Climate Action West Northants (CA-WN), Northants CALC and others. Cllr Andrew Stevens, Chair of the Environmental Services Committee at NTC, led the Steering Group and is keen for the conference to be the start of something new and bigger, so watch this space!

On 6 November 2024, I attended the public launch of the "ONE West Northamptonshire" vision held at the Catesby Innovation Centre. WNC says *"Over our first years we have started to construct a reputation for innovation, building strong partnerships, and have a track record for delivery and creating the environment to get business done. But now is the time to take this to the next stage and create a single vision for our area that encompasses these and articulates the kind of place we all want West Northants to be and what that means for our communities. This ONE West Northamptonshire Plan starts to fulfil that need, creating a proposed single shared medium-term roadmap to achieve our ambitions by 2030."* NNC is developing a similar plan called Big50 (it goes to 2050), which many parish and town councils in North Northamptonshire have already fed into. I will bring you more as these "visions" develop.



WNC hopes that there is light at the end of the (Catesby) tunnel.

As always, our bread and butter is meeting the needs of member councils and we have had the pleasure of traversing the county, east to west, and north to south, meeting clerks and councillors, delivering whole-council development sessions, and attending council meetings. Some councils have required intensive support and there have been four or five over the past few months that have been in a bit of a pickle. We are there to help them pick up the pieces and get back on track. You've heard me say it before, but a good council has a good clerk, a good chair, and a good team of councillors all pulling together in the same direction. When one or more of those legs of the stool are missing it can get a bit wobbly. In all cases – and some of them are quite extreme – we can trace the issues back to simple and quite basic governance and organisational failings. For example, a council that has imploded because the clerk and most of the councillors have resigned after an onslaught from a disgruntled member of the public who was upset about the way the council dealt with a matter. “Why didn't you deal with it formally and properly in accordance with your council's Complaints Procedure?” I enquire innocently. The response, “Should we have a Complaints Procedure!?” tells me everything I need to know! We talk about councils being “conflict resilient,” and doing the boring well is fundamental to building that resilience.

On 21 November 2024, the Northants CALC board of directors held its annual meeting. Lynn Lavender (Clerk to Ashton Parish Council) was re-elected chair, and the board welcomed Greg Lavers (Chair of Silverstone Parish Council) to his first board meeting since his appointment at the AGM in October. Apart from the routine annual business, the board received a report on the recent meetings I've had with the unitary councils on place-shaping and localism, and it considered a paper on the changes to National Insurance (NI), which will impact parish and town councils across Northamptonshire. I have written to the county's MPs about the matter, and it was agreed to write also to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). There's more about the NI issue in an article below, and you can find out more about the directors by reading their biographies at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/board-of-directors>.

As Christmas approaches, I would like to extend season's greetings to all clerks and councillors across Northamptonshire. What a poorer place it would be if not for the effort of all you community champions.

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

TOTAL TRANSPARENCY

Parish and town councils are public bodies. They spend public money, and they are accountable to residents. Key to that accountability is transparency. Everything that a council does should be transparent, unless there is a very good reason for it not to be (such as employment records, which are confidential).

Take one of the core governance documents – the minutes of council meetings – as an example. The minutes should be published in draft as soon as possible after the meeting to which they relate. The law provides for them to be published immediately following the meeting, but that is normally impractical. The Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities, which applies by law to councils with an annual turnover below £25,000 and is a minimum standard for all councils, specifies that the draft minutes must be published within four weeks of the meeting to which they relate, which is generous. Typically, the minutes should be published within a week or ten days of the meeting. When a council has not published minutes for several months, despite having meetings, it is not acting with the required transparency.

When councils fail to conduct their business openly and transparently it tends to attract attention. Members of the public start to wonder why information is not being made available and might conclude, rightly or wrongly, that the council has something to hide.

17 December 2024 marks the ten-year anniversary of the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities (see <https://tinyurl.com/u4vu5mvt>). The Code requires the publication of all sorts of information on a website and was brought in “to meet the government’s desire to place more power into citizens’ hands to increase democratic accountability.” At the time, the government provided funding to parish and town councils “to move to online publishing of this information, ensuring these bodies are transparent and accountable to their local communities and up-to-speed in the digital age.” Councils were able to apply for money towards new websites, computer equipment, and training. Northants CALC helped disseminate nearly £100,000 to councils in Northamptonshire.

So, ten years on we decided to do a “secret shopper” exercise to see how councils were doing. I am pleased to report that most councils are doing a reasonable job, but there is still room for improvement. Northants CALC Business

Support Manager, Sophie Harding, visited twenty-one council websites, chosen at random across the range of type and size of council. Sophie looked to see whether the Transparency Code information was present and how easy it was to find.

Compliance with the publication of meeting agendas and Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) information was particularly good, with all councils performing well in these areas. However, only 11 councils out of 21 had published their minutes within the timescales required by the Code.

The main area of concern was around councillor details. The Transparency Code requires that parish and town councils should publish a list of councillor or member responsibilities. The list should include the following information:

- Names of all councillors or members of the authority,
- Committee or board membership and function (if Chair or Vice Chair) of each councillor or member, and
- Representation on external local public bodies (if nominated to represent the authority or board) of each councillor or member.

Furthermore, Section 29, paragraph 7, of the Localism Act 2011 requires the publication of the Register of Members' Interests (ROMIs) and that a "*parish council must, if it has a website, secure that its register is published on its website.*" It is considered acceptable to provide a link to the master register on the principal council's website. 8 out of 21 councils didn't refer to ROMIs at all, which is unlawful. A good and compliant councillor listing looks like this:



Cllr Jane Bloggs

cllr.jane.bloggs@bestparishcouncil.gov.uk

Vice Chair of Council

Member of Planning Committee and Finance Committee

Representative on Village Hall Management Committee

[Register of Member's Interests](#)

Obviously, each councillor's Register of Member's Interests must be accurate and up to date. A councillor's failure to provide a compliant register is a criminal offence.

Whilst Sophie found that most councils published most of the information required, much of it was hard to find. Councils should review their website structure and navigation elements to ensure that information is presented in a logical, consistent, and accessible way. This becomes ever-more crucial as a council's website grows, and more and more information is added.

Larger councils fared somewhat better than smaller ones, although there were exceptions that proved the rule at both ends. All councils, regardless of size, should follow the Transparency Code: It is a minimum standard.

Maintaining a website and complying with the Transparency Code is a necessary task and cost/staff overhead. The council's website is its shop window, and members of the public are watching! Hopefully, most are watching out of genuine interest and support, but remember that the keyboard warriors are watching too, so don't give them any excuse to bash you over the head for missing information.

If you have any questions about transparency or need any support, please contact Northants CALC (see back page for contact details). We would be happy to help!

TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

How would you like a council-related Christmas present every day from 2 to 14 December 2024?

Our communications and information governance partner, Breakthrough Communications, is celebrating the Christmas season with "*12 Days of Christmas Presents for Your Council.*"

This free, festive series offers daily gifts to inspire and support your council's communications and compliance efforts.



Sign up now to unwrap your exclusive Christmas gifts and bring seasonal cheer to your council! Sign up for free festive communications and compliance content at <https://www.councilhive.co.uk/12DaysSignUp>.

STAND AND DELIVER

The Northants CALC Member Survey is a biennial snapshot of the state of the sector in Northamptonshire. We use it to measure member satisfaction, to ensure our services are cutting the mustard, to collect information on member councils which we then use for lobbying and representation activities locally and nationally, and to gauge how clerks and councillors are feeling about their roles.

The 2024 survey, which was conducted in June and July 2024, contained various questions that probed the mood of councillors and explored their attitudes towards councillorship and to standing for re-election in 2025.

In terms of demographics, 64% of councillors said they were male, and 35% said they were female. The youngest councillor is 18, the oldest is “prefer not to say”, but there are plenty (21%) in the over-75 bracket. The average age is 64. 28% of councillors work full time and a further 18% work part time. 52% are retired.

27% of councillors have been in post more than ten years, whilst as the other end, 13% are in their first year. Over half the respondents had done more than one term of office (4 years).

When asked about elections, a pleasing 92% said that they were an important aspect of local government, and 85% said that elections were an opportunity to renew their democratic mandate.

Interestingly, and maybe counter to what we often hear, 83% of existing councillors would recommend the role to others, with 14% not sure, and only 3% saying that would not recommend being a councillor. This shows that despite it being tough sometimes, most councillors feel that it is a worthwhile role. However, only 63% of respondents said that they intend to seek re-election in 2025, which is down from 72% in 2020 (the year before the last ordinary elections). More councillors were undecided, with 24% saying they hadn't made up their mind, versus 14% in 2020.

We asked, “Who has the greatest responsibility to promote candidacy in elections?” and 51% said that it was each parish and town council's job. 27% thought it was the unitary council's job, 8% thought it was the CALC, and 14% said that national government bodies (e.g. The Ministry of Housing, Communities

and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Electoral Commission (EC)) had the greatest responsibility. Northants CALC has meetings with the Elections Teams at the unitary councils and, whilst they are generally supportive and will do what they can in terms of district-wide public communications, they have neither the capacity nor the granular reach to encourage candidacy at individual parish and town councils. It's up to parish and town councils to push candidacy; Northants CALC and the unitary councils can help, but it really falls to each council to do all it can to highlight the opportunity and encourage people to come forward.

Part of encouraging people to become councillors is understanding what they can get out of it. In our survey, we asked, "Why did you become a councillor?" and the responses were as follows:

Reason	2024 (%)	2022 (%)	2020 (%)
To influence local decisions	47	45	60
To comment on local planning applications	35	34	42
To contribute to improving the quality of life in your community	84	85	92
To identify issues which are important to local residents	61	64	62
To help bring about improvements through local projects	66	63	73
To find out more about being a Councillor before standing for election as a principal Councillor	1	0.8	5
To give something back to the community	83	79	79
To represent a political party	3	3	3
Other	7	5	8

Parish and town councils can use those results to craft social media and website content such as "Do you want to **give something back**, contribute to improving the **quality of life** in our community, and help bring about **improvements through local projects**? Then join us on the parish council! For details, please see... etc etc." Text like that should strike a chord, as it is based directly on what existing councillors say encouraged them to join.

Similarly, we asked, “What areas of council work interest you most?” and the responses were:

Area of Work	2024 (%)	2022 (%)	2020 (%)
Planning & development control	61	62	66
Highways	57	47	42
Representing the community	75	73	81
Environmental projects	57	64	64
Play	38	35	31
Sports & leisure	34	30	37
Community buildings	38	30	37
Youth services	21	21	20
Grant making	20	16	18
Other	10	9	6

Again, these results can be used to highlight areas of your council’s work, which maybe could be presented as case studies on your council’s website, one a month over the next four or five months. For example: **“Did you Know?** Your parish council makes comments on all the **planning applications** in the area. We do that to ensure that the community continues to **grow and thrive**, but in an appropriate and sustainable way. Meet **Cllr Sally Smith**, chair of our Planning Committee who says, “Being on the planning committee helps me to... etc etc.”

By using the feedback from our survey, you can be sure that you are not making it up when selling the role of councillor. People genuinely believe it is a worthwhile activity, that is personally fulfilling and makes a difference to the community. Promoting candidacy is going to be a big challenge because we know that volunteering has fallen dramatically since Covid, and although a councillor is not a volunteer, the same principles apply. It’s about asking someone to give up their time to help others (the fundamental purpose of being a councillor) when Covid has caused so many people to shrink back from community. So, good luck, and Northants CALC will do all it can to help and support your efforts.

MONEY (THAT'S WHAT I WANT)

Here is a round-up of current funding opportunities that parish and town councils are eligible to apply for:

Neighbourhood Planning Funding: Grant and Technical Support

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) offers grants of up to £10,000 for groups undertaking a neighbourhood plan or neighbourhood development order in England. This funding aims to support the development of these plans or orders, ensuring communities can shape their local areas. The application process is ongoing, and more information can be found on the Neighbourhood Planning website (<https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/apply/>).

Mick George Community Fund

The Mick George Community Fund provides grants ranging from £10,000 to £30,000 for projects located near landfill sites and other waste treatment sites in the East Midlands and Anglian regions. This fund supports community projects that deliver capital improvements to public amenities such as village halls, playgrounds, sports fields, and nature reserves. The deadline for applications is 5 March 2025. More details and application criteria are available at <https://grantscape.org.uk/fund/mick-george-community-fund/criteria/>.

The Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC)

The OPFCC has two grants available that councils can apply for. The Small Grant Schemes offers small grants of £500 to £3,000 to schools, parish councils, and community groups. These grants support initiatives that prevent and tackle crime and support victims. The application process is ongoing, and decisions are made swiftly. More information can be found at <https://northantspfcc.org.uk/our-work/grant-schemes/small-grant-schemes/>.

Supported by the Northamptonshire Safer Roads Alliance, the **Road Safety Community Fund** offers grants of £500 to £5,000 for initiatives that support the Northamptonshire Strategic Road Safety Plan. The fund prioritizes projects addressing speed reduction, anti-social road use, distraction driving, and road safety education. Applications are reviewed on an ongoing basis. Further details are available from <https://northantspfcc.org.uk/our-work/grant-schemes/road-safety-community-fund/>.

Tesco Stronger Starts – Tesco

Tesco's Stronger Starts program provides grants of £1,500 to local good causes, with a priority on projects supporting children's food security and health.

Applications are open to all local good causes, and the application process is ongoing. More information can be found on the Tesco Stronger Starts website at <https://tescostrongerstarts.org.uk/apply-for-a-grant/>.

The Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF)

Through Project Visibility Grants, the Architectural Heritage Fund offers grants of up to £15,000 to support early-stage work on historic building projects. These grants help establish the viability of projects by focusing on the building's condition, potential uses, and sustainability.

For development work on historic building projects, through the **Project Development Grants** the Architectural Heritage Fund provides grants of up to £20,000. These grants cover costs associated with developing and coordinating projects towards the start of work on site. Deadlines for applications for both are 23 December 2024, and 27 January 2025. More information about both grants can be found on the AHF website at <https://ahfund.org.uk/grants/england/>.

Defibrillator Funding

The Department of Health & Social Care offers match funding (approximately £750) for defibrillators through Defibrillator Funding for Community Spaces. Eligible spaces must have an external wall accessible to the public 24/7 and an electrical power source. The application process is ongoing, and more details are available on the Defibgrant website: <https://www.defibgrant.co.uk/#apply>.

The British Heart Foundation provides free, BHF-funded defibrillators to community groups as a part of their Defibrillator for your Community initiative. This aims to improve survival rates from cardiac arrest by providing defibrillators and CPR training. Applications are open until 28 February 2025 but may close earlier depending on the volume received. More information can be found on the British Heart Foundation website: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/how-you-can-help/how-to-save-a-life/defibrillators/apply-for-a-free-defibrillator-for-your-community>.

National Lottery Grants

The National Lottery's **Awards for All** programme offers grants of £300 to £20,000 for projects that bring people together, improve community spaces, or

support people facing challenges. The application process is ongoing, and applications should be submitted at least 16 weeks before the start of activities. Details at <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/national-lottery-awards-for-all-england>.

The **Reaching Communities** programme provides grants of £20,001 or more, for up to 5 years, to projects and organisations making positive changes in their community. The application process is ongoing, but new criteria will be launched in Spring 2025. More information can be found on the Reaching Communities website: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/reaching-communities-england>.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAY

The national local government employer bodies and the local government unions agreed the pay award for 2024/25 in late October 2024 and it was back dated to 1 April 2024. The headline was an increase of £1,290 (pro rata for part-time employees) on all Spinal Column Points (SCP) up to SCP43, and 2.5% on SCP44 and above.



Concluding the pay negotiations six months after the start of the financial year to which they relate is clearly not ideal and it causes all sorts of practical issues, particularly for workers that have left an employment in that time. It is not the latest it has ever been, and six months late is about average.

Things could be about to get slightly better though because the government launched the 2025-26 Pay Review Body (PRB) process in September 2024. This meant the 2025-26 PRB process started a whole three months earlier in the year than for 2024-25. The government says: “This is a step towards restoring confidence in the PRB process and ensuring public sector workers receive more timely pay awards. The PRBs are expected to deliver their recommendations for 2025-26 pay awards in the spring.”

Northants CALC will keep member councils posted!

AN INSIGHT INTO THE NEW THINKING

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government and Deputy Prime Minister is the Right Honourable Angela Rayner MP (pictured right). On 24 October 2024, the Deputy PM gave a speech to the Local Government Association Conference in Harrogate that outlined the new government's thinking on local government, which gives an insight on several policy initiatives that may emerge during 2025.



Speaking about standards and ethical behaviour in local government, Angela Rayner said “...most councillors meet the highest standards of public office and I am so proud to be representing you in government. But sadly we all know there are rare occasions where bad behaviour occurs. I’ve been made aware of cases of persistent bullying and harassment by councillors, even, in some cases, leading to victims’ resignations. We don’t have a system that protects victims or empowers councils to deal with unacceptable behaviour. And this cannot go on and we will give councils the powers to address poor conduct. We will consult on reforms to the local government standards framework, including a proposal to allow for the suspension of members who violate codes of conduct.”

Remember that the words in these speeches are very carefully chosen, so it is a concern that the measures stop short of disqualification. Suspension of an elected member is obviously a serious sanction and would be welcomed by the sector, but if the perpetrator simply sits out for three months and can then return and continue to wreak havoc then it won’t change much. The power to disqualify for serious breaches or after repeated suspensions needs to be there as a deterrent, even if hopefully never used.

Speaking about remote meetings, which the former local government minister, Kemi Badenoch MP failed to progress, the Secretary of State said *“My starting point is that we should be clear about what we ask of you and then give you the autonomy and the support you need to deliver. So, where we don’t need to get involved, we won’t. It’s not our place, for example, to decide whether councillors should attend your meetings remotely or use proxy votes when they need to. So, I can announce today that we’re putting forward proposals to let councils make the decision for themselves. Which means making it possible for people from all walks of life to have a stake in local democracy, whether they have caring responsibilities or aren’t able to make it to the town hall in person because of illness or disability. It’s right that we make it easier for more people to get involved in making their community a great place to live.”*

The government intends to amend the law to introduce provisions for remote attendance at local authority meetings and wants to hear from parish and town councils, individual councillors, CALCs and NALC, and even members of the public. It is very important that the provisions are wide-ranging and that they allow for fully remote meetings. The questions are straightforward, and it takes less than 15 minutes to complete. Go to <https://consult.communities.gov.uk/local-government-standards-and-conduct/remote-attendance-and-proxy-voting/> to submit your response. The deadline is 19 December 2024.

Speaking generally about the state of local government finances, Angela Raynor said: *“We knew things were bad, but on entering office, we uncovered a shocking crisis in local government which was far beyond what we had anticipated.”* adding *“And more and more authorities are struggling to stay afloat with communities in the most deprived parts of our country disproportionately affected, through cuts to services that they desperately depend on..”*

Only time will tell whether the new team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) will fare any better than the last. With regards to the things that are important to the first tier of local government – the ten thousand parish and town councils in the country – it is partly up to those councils and their representative county and national bodies, to ensure that they do.

The full text of the speech by the Secretary of State is available to read at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/local-government-association-conference>.

77th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

On Saturday 5 October 2024, the Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC) held its 77th Annual Conference and AGM at the Moulton Community Centre.



The event was a resounding success, bringing together 134 attendees, including 127 registered councillors and clerks representing seventy-six member councils. The day was filled with insightful presentations, important appointments, and well-deserved recognitions.

The AGM saw the reappointment of Jeffrey Greenwell as President for 2024/25. Jeffrey expressed his gratitude and excitement for continuing to serve the Association. Kate Brown Accountant was appointed as the auditor for the year ending 31 March 2025, ensuring the Association's financial integrity.

Eight directors were appointed en bloc for 2024/25, including David Fuller, Kate Houlihan, Lynn Lavender, Greg Lavers, Richard Lewis, Geoff Paul, Mike Scott, and Lynne Taylor. The board also bid farewell to retiring director Peter Allen, who was presented with a gift in appreciation of his service.

The Annual Report for the year ending 31 March 2024 was received and noted. Key highlights included the development and implementation of the Strategic Plan 2023 – 2026, the launch of a new members' portal, and enhanced member engagement through training and conferences. Despite a small deficit, tight cost control led to a strong financial performance, underscoring the Association's role as a vital advocate for parish and town councils.

The board recommended and approved an increase in the Northants CALC membership fee by inflation (CPIH July 2024 – 3.1%) for the year starting 1 April 2025 and ending 31 March 2026. This adjustment ensures the Association can continue to provide valuable services and support to its members.

Danny Moody, Northants CALC CEO, delivered two engaging presentations. The first, "Build-a-Councillor," focused on recruiting better councillors through modern, engaging vacancy notices. Danny emphasised the importance of creating a person specification for councillors to attract a new, professional breed of councillors, ultimately improving the council's efficiency and effectiveness.

In his second presentation, "Empowering Local Voices," Danny highlighted the role of local elections in increasing diversity and strengthening democracy. He discussed the upcoming Local Elections on 1 May 2025, where every seat on every parish and town council in Northamptonshire will be up for election. Danny stressed the importance of contested elections and provided practical tips for promoting candidacy.

Delegates then shared their ideas for how the sector can present itself more positively and how more people can be encouraged to come forward to stand for election in May 2025.

The conference also celebrated the achievements of various councils and individuals. Brixworth Parish Council was awarded Council of the Year, with Danny Moody commending their recovery and focus on serving the community. The award was presented by Northants CALC President, Jeffrey Greenwell, to the Clerk to Brixworth Parish Council, Josie Flavell, and Administrative Assistant, Gavin Kirkup.

Recognition Awards were given to officers who completed their Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) and to councils and individuals who achieved awards under the Councillor Development Framework (CDF) and Officer Development Framework (ODF). Moulton Parish Council was recognised for achieving Quality Gold under the Local Council Award Scheme, a testament to their high standards of governance and management.

The event concluded with a prize draw, with Sarah Fox from Daventry Town Council emerging as the lucky winner. Northants CALC Chair, Lynn Lavender, thanked all sponsors, exhibitors, delegates, and the team at Moulton Parish Council for their contributions to the event's success. Lynn also announced that the 78th Annual Conference & AGM will take place on Saturday 4 October 2025, at Moulton Community Centre, encouraging everyone to mark their calendars.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CHANGES

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget, published on 30 October 2024, included changes to National Insurance that will come into effect on 6 April 2025:

- The rate for Employer's NI will increase from 13.8% to 15%.
- The Secondary Threshold – the level at which employers start paying national insurance on each employee's salary – will be reduced from £9,100 per year to £5,000.
- The Employment Allowance will be increased from £5,000 to £10,500 pa.

The government announced that "public bodies" would be compensated for the NI increase, but parish and town councils are not considered by the government to be public bodies, so are not going to receive any kind of compensation or protection.

Neither are parish and town councils considered to be businesses, so they are not eligible for the Employment Allowance.

Many parish councils have a single member of staff (the clerk), and many clerks are part time with a salary of less than £9,100. Those councils will from 6 April 2025 become liable for Employer's NI.

For example, a parish council with a clerk paid £17 per hour working 10 hours per week (a typical scenario) will currently have £0 to pay in Employer's NI. From 6 April 2025, the same council, with a clerk paid £17 per hour working 10 hours per week, will pay £576 in Employer's NI. Which means either £576 less community services, or £576 more on the precept.

The government surely did not intend to have this impact on grassroots community services, particularly at a time when the squeeze on principal councils nationally means that those councils are focusing on their statutory services and looking to pass discretionary services over to parish and town councils.

Northants CALC has written to all the county's MPs, and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has held talks with officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), but it looks like the government is going to stick to its guns. Time to build this new cost into your 2025/26 budgets.

TRAINING? NO THANKS

Continuous training and development is an essential element of good councillorship. All councillors should receive basic training within six months of joining the council (see <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/councillor-development-framework-foundation>). Additionally, all councillors should receive the relevant specialist training within six months of being appointed to a committee. Don't be on a planning committee without doing the basic training in responding to planning applications (<https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training/responding-to-planning-applications>), and don't be on a finance/resources committee without doing the basic training on finance (<https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training/finance-for-councillors>).

Following on from the above basic requirement, is a whole plethora of training on every council-related subject you can imagine. Browse <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training-page> to see the wide range of courses available in Northamptonshire.

As you might imagine, there are plenty of excuses for not doing training:

- I'm a [doctor/solicitor/accountant] so I don't need training.
- I've been a councillor for years.
- I haven't got time.
- I attended councillor training ten years ago.
- The dog ate my copy of the training bulletin.

Even the most experienced individuals need to engage with lifelong learning and development to remain knowledgeable and effective in their roles. If your council has on it a councillor that has been there for decades and thinks they know everything there is to know about being a parish councillor, perhaps it would be interesting to ask them, for example, for their view on the practical implications of Chapter 7 of the Localism Act 2011. If they look back at you blankly then you may just have identified a training need! Councillors don't need to be experts in every topic, but a working knowledge is essential. With great power comes great responsibility, especially when it comes to spending public money, so members of the public might have a reasonable expectation that their elected representatives know what they are doing.

Twenty years ago, “training” for a parish councillor in Northamptonshire meant travelling to a classroom in Northampton and sitting there for two hours listening to someone talk. Now, it is so much more than that. The traditional-style training courses still exist, but a lot of training is online now, which saves time, money, and carbon, and courses range from ten-minute bitesize tasters to whole-day deep dives. Training can even come to you, as a fast-growing area is whole-council development sessions, where the trainer comes to your council and all councillors and staff learn together. The sessions are engaging and, dare it be said, can even be good fun!

Similarly, “training and development” doesn’t just mean going on a course. If you are reading this article (thank you, by the way!) then you are engaging in training and development. Reading, attending conferences and networking events, and even leading a council project where you might get involved in researching the subject and producing information for fellow councillors, all counts as training and development. For those with a continuous desire for personal growth, there is always a training and development opportunity to grab.

Being a council that understands the importance of training and demonstrates to prospective councillors that they will be supported in their role makes being a councillor a more attractive proposition. No one is born a councillor, and you cannot (yet) go to school or college to learn how to be one. You learn on the job. The role can seem intimidating at first and it is common for people to say “I could never be a councillor, I don’t have the skills or knowledge”, so it is essential that when recruiting councillors either when there is a vacancy or when there are elections, that the promotional material makes it clear that councillors will be supported through the provision of training and development, indeed that it is expected that if they join the council they will engage in training and development. This is best achieved by having three crucial elements and evidencing them on the council’s website in the councillor section: 1) A Training Statement of Intent (essentially a policy on training, 2) A training budget, and 3) A Training Plan, which identifies councillors’ training needs and records their training activities. If your council needs help putting these in place, please contact the Northants CALC Training Manager, Marie Reilly (mreilly@northantscalc.gov.uk).

Councillors routinely expect their clerk to be trained or to take up training and it is no different the other way around. Remember, continuous training and development is an essential element of good councillorship.

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY

In the May/June edition of *eUpdate* (see <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/eupdate>), we introduced the concept of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), which is a statutory document that sets priorities for nature recovery by identifying habitats and species which are important to conserve and seeks opportunities where biodiversity can be increased.



By mapping valuable natural areas and proposing specific actions, the LNRS supports informed decision-making and fosters collaboration among local authorities, landowners, and the community. The LNRS not only aids in protecting local wildlife and ecosystems but also enhances community resilience to climate change, contributing to a sustainable and thriving environment for future generations.

There will be two LNRSs in the county, one for North Northamptonshire and one for West Northamptonshire, with the respective unitary councils as the lead authorities, working with people and representatives living and working in the landscape.

North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) is furthest ahead and is now out to consultation on its draft LNRS (<https://www.northnorthants.gov.uk/conservation-and-protection/local-nature-recovery-strategy>). The consultation opened on 25 October 2024 (councils were notified on 28 October 2024) and closes on Monday 9 December 2024. It is a public consultation, so anyone can respond.

West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) expects to go out to public consultation on its draft strategy in February 2025 (www.westnorthants.gov.uk/nature).

Meanwhile, the West of England Combined Authority published its LNRS on 7 November 2024, the first of 48 LNRSs that are being prepared in England. Lessons learned from the West of England LNRS will help other responsible authorities in preparing their own strategies, which are expected to be published in the first half of 2025 (see <https://tinyurl.com/mrynzzxw>).

A CAUTIONARY TALE

While fraud and scams are not new, advances in technology give criminals more ways to attempt to access your money. Knowing the techniques they use can help you protect yourself and your money.



Parish and town councils are public bodies, and the contact details of their staff and councillors are often readily available online, so they are particularly vulnerable. Also, councillors are normally a quite helpful and trusting bunch, so if one councillor receives an email purportedly from the chair of the council saying something like *“Have you got a minute, there’s something I need urgently”* their natural inclination is to respond straightaway. This is the so-called CEO Scam (see <https://www.takefive-stopfraud.org.uk/advice/business-advice/ceo-scam>), and councillors get caught out with it frequently.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is both a saviour and an enemy. Communications company O2 recently announced that it had created an “AI Granny” to answer calls in real time from fraudsters, keeping them on the phone and away from customers for as long as possible (<https://tinyurl.com/j5dvz2hh>). However, scammers are also using AI voice generators to impersonate people, including harvesting samples of a young person’s voice from their social media accounts and then phoning a parent pretending to be that young person in trouble and needing cash sent to them urgently (obviously giving false payment details).

The Take Five campaign (<https://www.takefive-stopfraud.org.uk>) has three simple messages:

- 1. Stop** - Taking a moment to stop and think before parting with your money or information could keep you safe.
- 2. Challenge** - Could it be fake? It’s ok to reject, refuse or ignore any requests. Only criminals will try to rush or panic you.
- 3. Protect** - Contact your bank immediately if you think you’ve been scammed and report it to Action Fraud at www.actionfraud.police.uk or on 0300 123 2040.

Sadly, scams and frauds have become part of everyday life, but if you remember to Stop, Challenge, Protect, you can hopefully avoid getting caught out.

SITUATIONS VACANT

Crick is a large village just off the M1 between Daventry and Rugby. **Crick Parish Council** has a vacancy for an Assistant Clerk working 8 – 12 hours per week. The responsibilities include managing burials. The council has 11 councillors and set a precept for 2024/25 of £138,260. There are 1,730 electors. The closing date for applications is 5pm on Friday **6 December 2024**.



Rushden Town Council has a vacancy for a full time (37 hours per week) Contracts/Assets Supervisor. Rushden is a large town with 24,345 electors and a 21-seat council. The precept for 2024/25 is £1,355,196. Salary: £38,626 - £41,511. The main purpose of the role is the administration and monitoring of the Grounds Maintenance contract and monitoring of all assets owned, controlled, or managed by Rushden Town Council. The closing date for applications is **7 December 2024**.

Irchester is a large village two miles south-east of Wellingborough and two miles south-west of Rushden with the settlement dating back to Roman times.

Irchester Parish Council has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 20 hours per week. The council has 15 seats and a precept for 2024/25 of £105,281. There are 3,779 electors. The deadline for applications 12pm on **19 December 2024**.

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

CHRISTMAS CLOSING

Our office will be closing its doors at 12 noon on Christmas Eve as we dash away on our sleighs for a well-deserved holiday break. We'll be back, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, at 0900 on 2 January 2025, ready to tackle the new year with gusto. Until then, may your days be merry and bright, and may all your holiday wishes come true. Wassail!



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