

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Welcome to the first edition of *eUpdate* for 2025, and I hope that all clerks and councillors in Northamptonshire managed to take a well-deserved break over Christmas. What a year 2025 has already been, and what a year it promises to be. We've got local elections in Northamptonshire on 1 May 2025, which at the time of publication is just ninety days away, and there's an article on elections and why they are so important below. We've also got the possible creation of a Strategic Authority that would see unitary councils in Northamptonshire working more formally with other unitary councils to the south. Again, there is an article below that explores the possibilities.

The staff team at Northants CALC had a good break, but since our return on 2 January it has been full on (in a good way!). I think member councils stored up their enquiries in December and sent them all to us in the New Year, and then there's been the meetings... so many meetings. Typically, from about mid-November when people are thinking about the date for the next meeting the refrain is "*Let's leave it for December, how about January?*" Consequently, our diaries have been rammed. Fortunately, a lot of the meetings have been online, and I cannot think how we coped when we had to factor in travelling time between meetings. I'm not convinced that the so-called "back-to-back" frequency of online meetings is altogether healthy or, for that matter, productive. It sometimes feels like there is a lot of activity, but not much getting done. I think the local government sector, and society in general, needs to guard against being "busy fools". All meetings, including council meetings and business meetings, should be focused, purposeful, and effective.

One effective meeting I attended was the Community Carousel event organised by the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) as part of the selection process for the new Chief Constable. I and several Police Liaison Representatives (PLRs) and other community representatives took part in the interviews where each of the candidates outlined their priorities, said how they will work with communities, and why they think they should be the next Chief Constable. It was a high calibre field and Danielle Stone, the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner, who had the final word, appointed Ivan Balhatchet, who had been Acting Chief Constable since October 2023 and the suspension of Nick

Adderley. Mr Balhatchet says that he understands the importance of community and I look forward to continuing to work with him and his team.

Our Artificial Intelligence (AI) Task Group met in December, which included an AI Christmas Quiz (generated by AI, obviously) and a roundup of all the latest developments. 2025 could be a big year for AI, both generally and specifically in our sector. We will see a proliferation of AI tools for parish and town councils, and more and more clerks and councillors using AI in their day-to-day council activities. There's an article below on where we are now, and where we might be by the end of the year.

I am always impressed by the wealth of knowledge and expertise in the parish and town council sector, which is evident whenever a group of clerks and/or councillors get together. One such occasion was a meeting we

organised on 20 January 2025 for clerks in West Northamptonshire from councils where there has been significant housing growth (defined as >50 dwellings of +10%, whichever is lower). The session looked at the issues before, during, and after construction and around 25 clerks shared their knowledge and experience. It was an illuminating and useful session, so thank you to the clerks that attended.

Part of creating highly efficient and effective councils is having councillors who operate at a high standard of ethical behaviour. Bad behaviour creates internal tension, which detracts from the overall effort of the council and sucks the fun out of being a councillor. That's why the government's consultation on the standards framework is so timely and important. I hope that all councils in Northamptonshire have responded already but the consultation doesn't close until 26 February 2025 so there's still time. The specific proposals are to reintroduce the power to suspend and/or disqualify a councillor for serious breach of the Code, and to create a new national body to oversee the standards framework in England. See <https://tinyurl.com/2p8xhnmv> for all the details.

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

“...I am always impressed by the wealth of knowledge and expertise in the parish and town council sector, which is evident whenever a group of clerks and/or councillors get together...”

LOCAL ELECTIONS, AND WHY THEY MATTER

In the article titled *Stand & Deliver*, in the November/December *eUpdate* (<https://northantscalc.gov.uk/eupdate>) we looked at why people become councillors, what motivates councillors to keep going, and how councils can use those factors to generate materials to promote candidacy. Here, we look at the fundamentals of elections and why having a strongly contested election is vital to democracy and to the functioning of the council over the next term.

Thomas Jefferson said, “*The government you elect is the government you deserve.*” and it appears that all is not well with democracy in America. To start with, there needs to be a fair electoral system, and the US system of primaries, caucuses, and electoral colleges, doesn’t lend itself to plurality, either of candidate selection or of party. That in a country of 350 million people, the two people to rise to the top of the system were Donald Trump and Joe Biden is a worry. In the UK, proportional representation has failed to replace first-past-the-post, so elections are reduced to a popularity contest. Which leads to the next issue, presentation. Ideally, an elected representative, from a parish councillor to the President of the United States, should be elected on merit and policy. But what we are seeing is a growing trend towards populism, where the contest becomes all about who has the deepest pockets, the biggest marketing budget, and the whitest teeth. Parties and candidates who know how to leverage social media and who can afford to have the algorithms tipped in their favour have the greatest chance of success. There are parish, town, and unitary councillors in Northamptonshire who suddenly become more active and visible on social media in the run up to an election; it is by design. And then there is the electorate. Gone are the days of electors studying election leaflets, manifestos, and white papers. A candidate can rise or fall based on a single campaign gaffe. The electorate doesn’t have the attention span for serious deliberation at election time, and the way the ballot papers are



presented, particularly for parish and town council elections, Archie Aardvark has a higher chance of election than Zachary Zachariah.

As Winston Churchill said, *“Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried.”*

Parish and town councils thrive on elections. It is fundamental to their *raison d'être*, their longevity, and their mandate, so it is extremely frustrating to hear a long-in-the-tooth councillor say, “We haven’t had elections here for a long time!”. Yes, you have! It might be that there hasn’t been a contested election (i.e. where there are more candidates than places) but there has been an election. All parish and town councils have elections every four years, unless of course they are postponed by global pandemics or Local Government Reorganisation.

Every parish, town, community, and unitary council in Northamptonshire has elections on 1 May 2025. Every existing parish, town, community, and unitary councillor retires. If you are an existing councillor and you wish to stand for re-election for another four-year term, you will need to submit nomination papers by 4pm on Wednesday 2 April 2025.

Candidates in North Northamptonshire will need to deliver their nomination papers to North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) in Kettering, and candidates in West Northamptonshire need to deliver their nominations papers to West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) in Northampton or Towcester.



A councillor is elected under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and there is a clue in the name. A councillor is a representative, and electors should have the opportunity to choose who represents them. That opportunity is taken away if the election is uncontested (i.e. where there are fewer or the same number of candidates as places). An uncontested election is still an election, but all the candidates are declared elected, and no poll is held. Local electors do not have the opportunity to choose who elects them.

A lack of candidates to cause a contested election poses issues of varying degrees of seriousness. It means everyone that stands is elected, regardless of their suitability, character, or agenda. So, a disreputable person can become a

councillor and, under current rules, has four years to wreak their havoc. A contested election brings no guarantee of course that the disreputable person will be rejected, but at least if they are elected then the public have spoken. And that's democracy. In a situation where a council has one or two vacancies after the election it means that the new council will spend some of its time recruiting and will need to put off its forming, storming, and norming. It means that some members of the council will be elected (uncontested) and some will be co-opted. It means that the council cannot truly feel like it has a mandate from the electorate. In a situation where there are so many vacancies after the election that the council is not quorate, things are even worse. The council is put into the local government equivalent of special measures, with the relevant principal council having powers to step in and appoint councillors, who may or may not be from the community. The new council is holed beneath the water before it starts.

The only real drawback of a contested election is the cost, but what price democracy? Parish and town councils are advised to save a quarter of the likely cost of an election each year to avoid peaks and troughs in election expenditure. A contested election will cost roughly £1 - £2 per elector (the bigger the parish, the lower the cost per elector), but a contested election creates a vibrant, active, and ambitious council that can easily recover that money in grant funding for a community project. Cost must not be used as an excuse for deliberately trying to avoid a contested election.

The reputation of the parish and town council sector is at stake, and every council shares the responsibility of ensuring the sector in Northamptonshire shows a strong electoral performance. That means all or most councils having a strongly contested election, where there are at least one and a half times the number of candidates as there are places. If parish and town councils expect to be taken seriously by the government and treated as partners around the local government table, it is vital that the elections on 1 May 2025 go well.

In the May/June 2025 *eUpdate* there will be a report on what happened at the local elections. Please do everything you can to ensure your council is in the contested election column.

You will find all sorts of resources, information, and guidance to help your campaigns to promote candidacy at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/elections>. Good luck and best wishes!

WHATSAPP GROUPS – BEWARE

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) plays a crucial role in protecting information rights, from enforcing data protection laws, overseeing compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), taking enforcement action against those who breach data protection laws to offering advice and guidance to be compliant. The ICO also helpfully publishes tribunal notices and decision notices where the ICO has received a complaint from a person/organisation who feels their information request or subject access request has not been handled correctly.



A recent tribunal ruling regarding a Freedom of Information request from a newspaper to a government department (specifically correspondence between Matt Hancock as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and Gina Coladangelo) was published.

In appeal reference [2024] UKFTT 00581 (GRC), the First-tier Tribunal considered a government department's handling of two information requests for correspondence between a minister and an individual, about government business. The second request was for non-email correspondence.

The Tribunal found that the department held relevant WhatsApp messages for the purposes of FOIA (section 3(2)(b) – held by another person on behalf of the authority) despite the messages not being transferred into its official record in line with its records management policy.

It also found that WhatsApp group messages, where the minister and the individual were members of the group, comprised “correspondence” between the two.

What does this decision mean for parish and town councils?

- Messages on non-corporate communication channels such as WhatsApp can be held for the purposes of FOIA, regardless of whether they've been transferred to an official record.

- Failure to transfer such communications to an official record can indicate that you're not conforming with the section 46 Code of Practice on Records Management.
- WhatsApp group chats can comprise "correspondence" between members of the group.

Any parish and town councils using WhatsApp groups as a communication method should take care what is posted in them as they can be considered records. Treat any messages you send as though they would be read by members of the public - be respectful and responsible. If you do get a Freedom of Information request or Subject Access Request, and it specifically asks for ALL communications, you will have to look through information held in WhatsApp.

We are here to help, so if that does happen and you're not sure what to do or where to start, email lsambrooksmith@northantscalc.gov.uk for guidance.

AWARD WINNING YOUTH PROVISION

The village of Cogenhoe and the hamlet of Whiston nestle in countryside on the River Nene just east of Northampton. Cogenhoe & Whiston Parish Council has eleven members, a precept of £34,650 (£58.55 Band D) and there are 1,150 electors. It is an ordinary council with an extraordinary track record, led by extraordinary people.

In December 2024 the council won the "New group of the year" award for its youth provision from the Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs (NAYC - <https://youth.naycacuk.co.uk>). Here, Deborah Rush, Clerk to Cogenhoe & Whiston Parish Council, tells us all about it...

"The Cogenhoe & Whiston Parish Council has worked hard to develop a comprehensive community outreach program that aims to meet the needs of our rural community. To date we have set up a dementia support group, community lunch club, chatty cafe, rural cinema & a craft club. Feedback from residents suggested that we also needed to look at provision for young people. We carried out an after-school consultation event in the play area to which we invited the Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs, the local Scout group & cricket club (to help promote their clubs). Families were asked to complete a questionnaire

asking what they thought we should look to provide, gathering a database and names of possible volunteers as we did so.

The questionnaire results confirmed the need for some sort of youth provision. There had previously been a youth club (affiliated to the NAYC) which had closed due to a lack of volunteers, so we were aware of their services. We began discussions with Becky at the NAYC but at that stage they didn't have staffing capacity to help us. However, our conversations with them led them to subsequently build a new model that met our needs. We set-up our new youth provision with a youth leader from the NAYC acting as group leader, the Parish Council coordinating 2/3 volunteers per session (we now run 2 sessions, one for younger years (4,5 & 6) followed by a session for the older years (7,8 & 9) monthly. The Parish Councils pays for the youth leader who deals with all paperwork, polices, safeguarding, DBS for volunteers and provides the equipment (apart from craft materials which we source if required). This costs £150 per session but the young people who attend pay £2 per session and we also generate some income from the tuck shop (which the Parish Council also provides the tuck for). The ultimate aim is for 50% of the cost to be covered by income, currently we are at approx. 40%. The remaining cost is covered by our community outreach budget which makes up part of our precept.

The number of kids attending is gradually building and we ensure we send flyers into the village school at the start of each term. Following an initial 6 -month trial, feedback from the NAYC, volunteers, parents and the kids we are changing the times slightly. The group for the older kids isn't as popular as the one for the younger ones but feedback from them is that they really value having a 'safe space' just to relax and be themselves. They are also keen to help-out with the earlier group, so we are going to have a cross-over period with the older ones running the tuck shop etc. followed by a youth café just for them. We are hoping that eventually these young people will engage with the emerging leaders program run by the NAYC and become our future volunteers!

Our efforts ended the year with us winning the NAYC award for 'new group of the year'! The group would not be so successful without the support of our fantastic team of volunteers and the NAYC, if you are considering youth provision, we would strongly recommend you talk to the youth development team at NAYC.



BOLD VISIONS

There are seven hundred and fifty thousand people in Northamptonshire, but sometimes it feels like the principal councils over the years have created one million strategies, plans, and vision statements for the people. “We want people to be the best they can be”. “We want the area to thrive and prosper”. It’s all meaningless because no council would ever create a vision that said, “We want people to be worse off than they are now”!

North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) are each developing for their respective areas overarching, high-level visions that bring together all the other visions, plans, and strategies. NNC has the BIG50 initiative, and WNC has the One West Northamptonshire Plan.

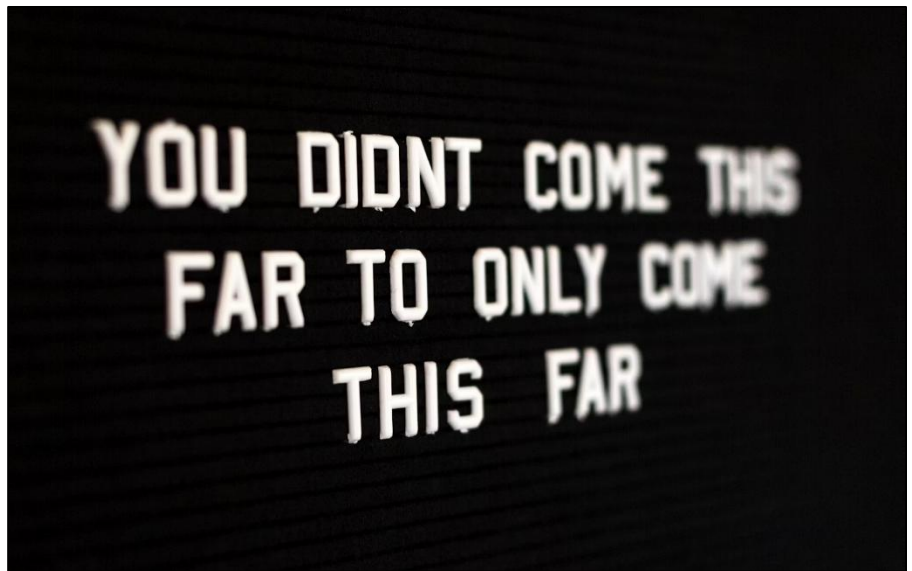
BIG50

In early Autumn 2022, the Leader of NNC, Cllr Jason Smithers and the then Chief Executive, Rob Bridge, began discussions on what wider aspirations could be created for the whole place of North Northamptonshire and that could be shared and co-designed by all key stakeholders and residents in the North Northamptonshire area. The BIG50 vision for North Northamptonshire is a project that is currently driven by NNC, but has stakeholders from business, education, housing, voluntary and community sector, and parish and town councils.

Two conferences have been held bringing together over 200 attendees helping to shape the vision. Both events were well attended and gave lots of food for thought as well as actions to define the three key priority areas: Proud Place, Prosperous Place, and Proactive Place. What do those titles mean in reality?

- **A Proud Place:** A place with clear goals and a plan of how to get there, where people feel inspired and safe.
- **A Prosperous Place:** A place full of thriving businesses and a skilled population who can achieve their ambitions.
- **A Proactive Place:** A place which understands the issues its people face and how to address them early, so everyone can live the best life.

To further drive the vision, a newly formed BIG50 Board has been established, including a representative from Northants CALC and the first meeting is on 5 February 2025. This initiative will build upon the efforts of the Steering Group, of which Northants CALC was on



also, that has diligently worked to achieve this milestone. The Board will be agreeing a workplan for the first year and a website is being created which will give a lot more information as the weeks and years move on.

The vision can only be developed and realised if all stakeholders work together, and the residents of the North Northamptonshire area are able to help shape a Proud, Prosperous and Proactive Place. Northants CALC will let member councils know when the new BIG50 website is launched.

One West Northamptonshire Plan

Town and parish councils across West Northamptonshire are being encouraged to get involved in creating a new partnership vision for the area – The One West Northamptonshire Plan.

In 2024, the Local Government Association (LGA) undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), its first independent review of the council since its formation in 2021. Feedback from WNC's partners highlighted that they wanted to work more closely and strategically with WNC to shape the future communities and that West Northants would benefit from a single vision of shared ambitions that everyone could achieve by 2030.

WNC has drafted the beginnings of this new strategic partnership plan but needs the input and involvement of others to shape it further and town and parish councils are critical to its success.

Feedback from parish and town councils will be invaluable in ensuring the plan reflects the needs and priorities of local communities, particularly in an era where WNC will be pursuing a route of closer, more collaborative working with town and parishes to deliver services to local communities. This is an early opportunity for colleagues to join the journey towards shaping the future approach for the area.

A stakeholder consultation is now under way, running until 20 February 2025 where councils and individual clerks and councillors can give their views on suggested priorities and objectives of the draft plan and provide further feedback and ideas.

To ensure town and parish councils are represented, councils are encouraged to spend a few minutes completing the One West Northamptonshire Plan survey on the Council's website.

You can view the Draft One West Northamptonshire plan and complete the One West Northamptonshire plan survey at <https://tinyurl.com/2wpaxma5>. The consultation closes at midnight on Thursday 20 February 2025. There is also a special focus session being held for parish and town councils at 0930 on 6 February 2025 on Zoom. An invitation was sent to every parish and town council on 28 January 2025. The voice of parish and town councils carries great influence. By supporting and promoting the consultation, you can help ensure that as many local voices as possible contribute to shaping the future.

Please Get Involved

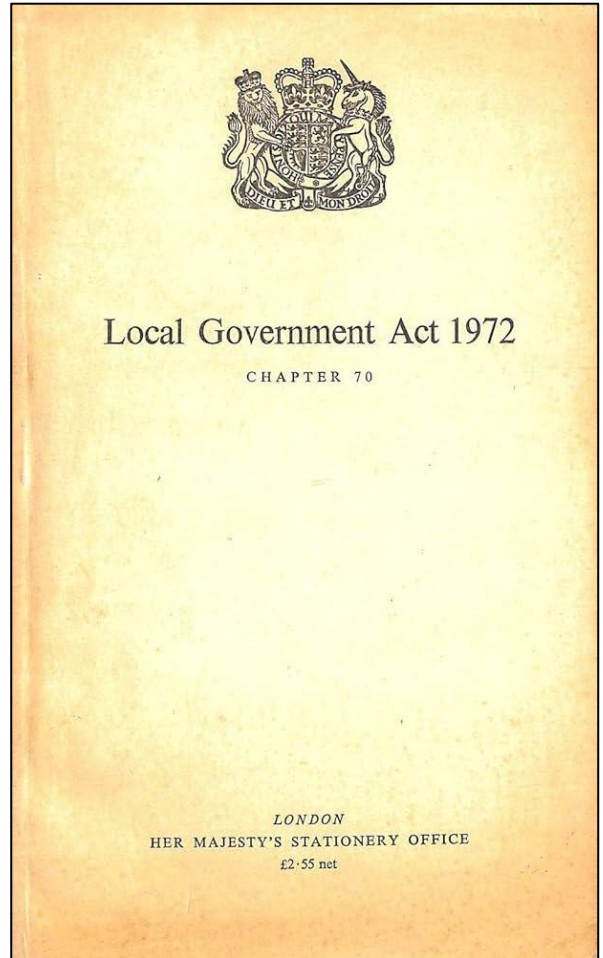
Parish and town councils across the county are encouraged to get involved in the development of their relevant plan (BIG50 or the One West Northamptonshire Plan). Successful place plans are fully owned and adopted by strategic partners, stakeholders, and businesses, and are not seen as solely the principal council's responsibility. This indicates the importance of parish and town councils taking part in the consultation process to ensure the plan reflects the needs and priorities of the communities they represent. The plans emphasise the need to use collective resources to deliver better place and resident outcomes. Parish councils, as local representatives, hold valuable insights into local needs and can contribute to the effective use of resources. And finally, parish and town councils are closest to the communities they serve and can provide invaluable local input, ensuring that the plan addresses specific local needs and opportunities.

WHEN CAN WE HOLD OUR ANNUAL MEETING?

Paragraph 7(2) of Schedule 12 to the Local Government Act 1972 provides that *“In a year which is a year of ordinary elections of parish councillors, the annual meeting of a parish council shall be held on, or within fourteen days after, the day on which the councillors elected at that election take office, and in any other year the annual meeting shall be held on such day in May as the parish council may determine.”* So, when it is a year without elections, it is relatively straightforward to plan the date of the Annual Meeting of the Council; it can be on any day in May. But every four years, when the year of elections rolls round, the enquiries flood in as to when a council can meet.

The '72 Act is unhelpful in that it uses the word “day” to mean different things in different sections. Sometimes it means calendar days, sometimes Sundays are excluded, sometimes Saturdays, Sundays, and bank holidays are excluded. It all comes down to interpretation, and there is no common agreement on the correct interpretation. There could of course be a legal challenge in the courts which would provide an interpretation that everyone can rally around, but the fact that it hasn't happened in the fifty-three years since 1972, suggests that the likelihood of a legal challenge is low. Perhaps it is more likely that there will be a Local Government Act 202X, which would clean up all the ambiguity and confusion.

The Legal Team at the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) says, *“The 2025 local election date is 1 May, and councillors would ordinarily take office on 5 May. As that day is a bank holiday, our view is that councillors will now take office on 6 May, making the relevant 14-day meeting period for the purposes of paragraph 7(2) of Schedule 12 to the Local Government Act 1972 7 May to 22 May inclusive. This an area where we are aware there have been different interpretations of the computation of days, and we have not counted Sundays in*



our 14-day calculation. We are also asked about the earliest date a council annual meeting can be held where there is no contested election. Our view is that where there is no contested election, so it is known whom to summons, the summons can be served with the requisite three clear days' notice, which could be the day councillors take office. Councils have to know who they need to summons so notice cannot be given before results are known where there are contested elections."

So, the NALC interpretation is that if a council has an uncontested election and therefore knows just after 2 April 2025 when nominations close who the councillors will be, the earliest date for its Annual Meeting is Tuesday 6 May 2025 and the latest date is Thursday 22 May 2025.

But what about a council that has a contested election? NALC's view is that councillors cannot be summonsed until they are councillors and bearing in mind that both North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) envisage counting the parish votes on Saturday 3 May 2025, that is the earliest a council will know who its new members are. An eager clerk could post notice of the Annual Meeting and issue the summons to councillors on Saturday 3 May 2025, but then allowing the requisite three clear days means that the earliest date for the Annual Meeting would be Friday 9 May 2025. The latest date would still be Thursday 22 May 2025.

Whilst the NALC interpretation is logical, it reads a lot into paragraph 7(2), Sch 12, LGA72. The law says "*the annual meeting of a parish council shall be held on, or within fourteen days after, the day on which the councillors elected at that election take office*" so appears to ignore the logistical issues of parish counts and notice periods. Surely, if the draughtsmen had concurred with NALC, they would have been more explicit in the Act? Perhaps the draughtsmen were relying on para 10(3) of the same schedule, which provides that "*Want of service of... summons... on any member of the parish council concerned shall not affect the validity of the meeting.*"

Where there is a contested election, a council's decision as to when to hold its Annual Meeting of the Council in 2025 is a matter of risk assessment. If the meeting is held between 9 and 22 May inclusive, then it is legally bulletproof. Holding it on 6, 7, or 8 May is not. However, if this point of legal minutiae hasn't been challenged in over fifty years, and if needs must...

What would be an example of something that would breach the pre-election rules? A good example might be a unitary council's communications department organising a photo shoot for the Conservative Leader of the council to open a new sports centre in the area to go on the front cover of the council's newsletter and web site. That might be deemed to be using the resources of the authority "*to affect public support for a political party*".

A member council got in touch with us recently saying "Obviously we can't hold our Annual Parish Meeting in April because of the pre-election period". This is incorrect. The pre-election rules do not apply to the ordinary activities of the council. The only thing the council should be careful of is providing a platform for a political candidate (typically the unitary council candidates). Nor do the pre-election rules restrict the perfectly acceptable (and useful!) dissemination of factual, objective, information related to the election or to anything else.

Furthermore, the rules apply to local authorities, not to individual councillors, who may issue publicity promoting themselves and their party (subject to the relevant rules on such material), as long as they do not use the resources of the local authority. For parish and town councils the restrictions of the pre-election period for a general election are light. Even for the larger town councils, it is not very likely that they would be producing publicity on matters which are politically controversial or making references to individual party candidates and parties in press releases or arranging proactive media or events involving political candidates.

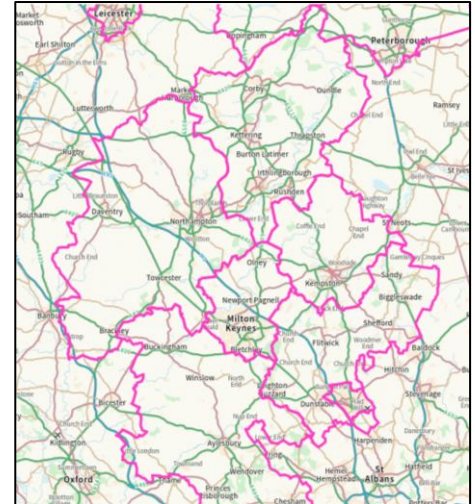
It would be wrong to say that parish and town councils do not need to worry about the pre-election period rules at all – the Publicity Code is a statutory instrument after all – but the rules were really designed to prevent a political party using the resources of a council it controlled to bolster its own election chances. They were not designed to stop a parish council publishing its April newsletter or inviting its ward councillor to its March meeting (both things that have been subjects of recent enquiries!).

There is further information and guidance at www.northantscalc.gov.uk/elections, but if you are in any doubt about publicity or an activity that your council has planned for the pre-election period, please contact info@northantscalc.gov.uk for guidance – and reassurance!

STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

A strategic authority is a legal body that enables a group of two or more principal councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries. Their precise function, powers, and operations will be set out as part of the English Devolution Bill.

The proposed Strategic Authority for the South Midlands is a new regional governance structure being considered for the six unitary authorities of Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes, North Northamptonshire, and West Northamptonshire. This proposal is part of the government's devolution agenda, which aims to transfer more power and funding from central government to regions.



The proposed Strategic Authority would be led by a directly elected mayor and would have enhanced powers and funding to make collective decisions on issues such as economic growth, transport, housing, skills, and employment. This would allow the region to better address its unique challenges and opportunities, such as improving transport connectivity, boosting economic productivity, and tackling skills shortages.

The creation of the Strategic Authority is still in the early stages of development, with the six councils currently exploring the potential benefits and risks associated with such a move and it is well documented that the six councils have had differences of opinion as to whether North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) should be included. If the proposal moves forward, it will require further consultation and agreement from all parties involved, including businesses, parish and town councils, and residents.

If a strategic authority for the South Midlands is created, and if Northamptonshire councils are part of it, and if it has a directly elected mayor, then all local government electors in Northamptonshire would get to vote for that person, probably on 7 May 2026. Where the mayor would be physically located, what engagement they would have with parish and town councils, and how they would be scrutinised and held to account, are all questions for further discussion.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The March/April 2024 edition of *eUpdate* predicted that “*there will be a tool available to every clerk and councillor in England that will be able to assist with questions about procedures, rules, legislation, and best practice in the parish and town council sector. Let’s call it*



LocalCouncilWise - the AI-Powered Local Council Assistant. It will be available 24/7 and will be trained not just on generic parish and town council material, such as guidance notes and briefings, but also on your own council’s information, such as its website and its minute record.” it went on to say, “*if such a tool has not been published, at least in beta form, by Christmas 2024 it would be very surprising indeed.*” So, did the prediction come true? Yes, it did! Local government IT experts, CloudyIT, spent 2024 developing its GovAssist suite of AI tools (<https://www.cloudyit.co.uk/govassist/>), which were launched commercially this week at the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) Practitioner’s Conference. There are four GovAssist tools currently available: GovAssist Meetings, GovAssist Companion, GovAssist Governance, and GovAssist Planning, each with a specific role and able to assist with a specific area of council work. Take GovAssist Planning for example, which is an expert on planning and development control. It has more knowledge than any parish or town councillor (unless you are lucky enough to have a KC on your council), and you can train it on the Local Plan, any supplementary planning guidance, your council’s Neighbourhood Plan, Design Statements, and any other relevant planning policies you have. Then you simply feed it a planning application and it will respond with comments, all completely objective, all based on material planning considerations, and all in conformity with planning policy. The GovAssist tools are in their infancy, but the nature of AI tools is that they learn and improve. Quickly.

CloudyIT is to be applauded for its innovation and for being first to market, but the world of tech has always been one where it isn’t necessarily always best to be first. As an example, we have seen the launch recently of DeepSeek, a Chinese-based competitor of ChatGPT and Google Gemini. Its performance is broadly

similar to the other tools, but it took a fraction of the time to develop, at a fraction of the cost, and it is cheaper to use. It's launch wiped hundreds of billions of pounds off the share price of some very big tech companies. For parish and town councils looking to invest in AI tools, how do we know that something even better, cheaper, and faster isn't about to be launched next week.

And then there's the free AI tools that are getting better and better all the time and are so good already that they are all that some parish councils might need. The two tools mentioned above, ChatGPT and Google Gemini have free versions that are enormously powerful, and if you are a clerk and aren't yet using them to generate website, newsletter, and social media content then you are missing a trick.

Another potentially game-changing tool is another offering from the Google stable, Notebook LM (<https://notebooklm.google.com>). Credit goes to Paul Hitchcock, chair of Brigstock Parish Council for bringing it to the attention of the Northants CALC AI Task Group in December. NotebookLM is a powerful AI-powered tool for organising and understanding information from various sources, including documents, web pages, and audio files. Users upload materials into "notebooks," which are then analysed by the AI to provide summaries, outlines, study guides, and audio overviews. A chat interface allows users to ask questions and receive answers directly grounded in the uploaded sources, with inline citations for verification. Northants CALC created a notebook for the WNC Budget 2025/26 consultation. The fifteen separate PDF documents provided to members of the public for the consultation, comprising of one hundred and thirty-one pages of text and tables, was uploaded into the notebook and approximately thirty seconds later it was possible to ask it questions about the consultation using real language, *"What will the impact of this budget be on a parish council in West Northamptonshire?"* and *"Will the budget result in job losses?"* for example. It also provides a summary of whatever length you desire, which is really useful for generating council reports. For example, the shortest summary is *"West Northamptonshire Council's draft 2025-26 budget proposes a 4.99% Council Tax increase (2.99% core, 2% adult social care precept) to address rising costs and increased demand for services like adult and children's social care, SEND, and temporary accommodation. The budget also includes fee, and charge increases for various services, reflecting increased costs and inflation. A public consultation is underway to gather feedback on these proposals, which aim to balance the budget while maintaining service provision. The council anticipates ongoing*

financial challenges in the medium term, driven by continued demand pressures and uncertainty around future government funding. The budget documents detail proposed spending allocations and revenue projections across numerous departments.” As with all AI tools, it is not infallible, but the good thing with Notebook LM is the inline citations and references, with the source material popping up in a separate window, allowing users to read the original text for themselves.

It is highly unlikely that any member of the public would ever read all one hundred and thirty-one pages of detailed technical budget consultation documents, its even quite unlikely that any parish or town councillor or clerk would or, for that matter, any member or officer of WNC, although I'm sure there might be one or two. Now, the heavy lifting can be done with an AI tool like Notebook LM, which means it is quicker and easier to engage with such consultations.

2025 will be the year we see generative AI become used routinely by parish and town councils. The journey is just beginning, and who knows where it will lead.

DOT GOV

Parish councils wishing to move over to a .gov.uk domain can now access guidance on the GOV.UK website at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/moving-your-parish-council-to-a-govuk-domain>. It is laid out in a step-by-step format, taking the reader all the way through the process, from getting council approval all the way through to choosing your Approved Registrar and what to do when you're set up.



**Government
Digital Service**

Hosting the guidance on GOV.UK means that parish councils can access up-to-date information at any time. You don't have to attend a virtual session with the Parish Council Domains Helper Service team unless you want or need to, even the contact list for the Approved Registrars can be found there. It's a one-stop-shop for everything to do with the .gov.uk domain.

Any questions regarding the new GOV.UK guidance can be sent to parish-helper@domains.gov.uk.

HIGH SOCIETY

Northants CALC recommends that all parish and town clerks join the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and that the council pays the fee. Meanwhile, the SLCC recommends that all councils are members of their County Association of Local Councils (CALC). The two memberships serve entirely different purposes; the SLCC represents the clerk's profession and membership belongs to the individual, whereas the CALC represents councils and membership is corporate. A council should never rely solely on advice provided by the SLCC since it is provided to the clerk as an individual and is not indemnified for the council.



Joining the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) offers numerous benefits for clerks working in local councils. As a professional body dedicated to supporting clerks, the SLCC provides a wealth of resources, networking opportunities, and professional development programs that can significantly enhance a clerk's career and effectiveness.

One of the primary benefits of SLCC membership is access to a vast array of resources. Members can utilise a comprehensive library of guidance documents, templates, and best practice advice tailored specifically for local council clerks. This can save time and ensure that clerks are well-informed about the latest regulations and procedures.

Networking is another key advantage. The SLCC hosts regular events, conferences, and regional meetings where clerks can connect with peers, share experiences, and discuss common challenges. These interactions can lead to valuable collaborations, fostering a sense of community among clerks.

Professional development is at the heart of the SLCC's mission. Members have access to a wide range of training courses, webinars, and workshops designed to enhance their skills and knowledge. These opportunities not only help clerks stay current with industry trends but also provide pathways for career advancement.

If you a clerk in Northamptonshire not yet in membership of the SLCC please visit <https://www.slcc.co.uk/membership/> where you will find all the details.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Christmas is a time of cheer, celebration, and goodwill to all people. Or at least it should be. Sadly, two parish councils were left with a bitter taste in their mouths this Christmas after the decorations they provided were half-inched.

In Kent, a 13-foot LED Christmas tree worth almost £2,000 was stolen from a roundabout within weeks of being deployed. The parish council offered a reward of £500 for its safe return.

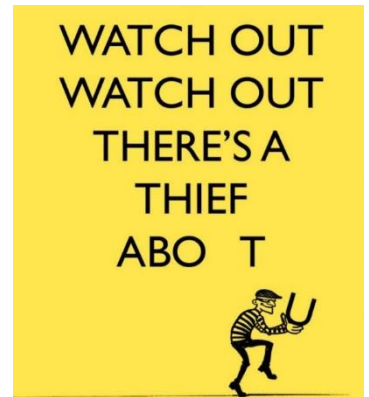
Meanwhile, in Derbyshire another parish council had its Christmas lights, also worth around £2,000, nicked by thieves just days before Christmas. The chair said, "It's incredibly upsetting to see such a senseless act. These decorations were a favourite feature and key part of our community's festive joy."

Theft of council property does not just occur at Christmas time though. A parish council in Suffolk had its bespoke metal village signs worth nearly £1,000 stolen in September 2024, and in June 2023 a flag celebrating Pride Month was stolen from a parish council in Derbyshire.

It is unpleasant to imagine that thieves would target items in the public realm that have been provided for the community at public expense, but it is too much to expect these people to have morals or scruples. If it isn't fixed down securely, it can walk.

Councils should consider the risk of theft whenever installing something that is accessible by the public. It is essential to keeping things locked and/or permanently secured, ideally by being welded or concreted in place. Security marking and CCTV help if things do go walkabout, and holding appropriate insurance can soften the financial blow.

Some people do have a conscience. After someone made off with a village entry sign for a village in Kent, they clearly had an attack of remorse. Several weeks after the theft, the sign was reinstalled where it had been. Sadly though, and perhaps because they were working under the cover of darkness, the sign was reinstalled upside down. Welcome to APPLDORÉ !



SITUATIONS VACANT

Parish and town councils in Northamptonshire collectively employ almost four hundred staff. Vacancies for clerks come up regularly and there is a growing array of other support jobs being advertised too.

If you or anyone you know might be interested in working in the local council sector, please contact Northants CALC and we can match you with upcoming opportunities.



Full details of vacancies are at www.northantscalc.gov.uk/council-vacancies.

REMEMBERING COVID

The government has confirmed that a COVID-19 Day of Reflection will take place on Sunday 9 March 2025 to remember the pandemic and its impact on communities.

The COVID-19 Day of Reflection is one of the ten recommendations set out by the UK Commission on COVID-19 Commemoration.

To mark the fifth anniversary of the pandemic, people in the UK are invited to come together to remember and reflect on this period of our history as well as their own experiences.

The day will be an opportunity for the public to remember and commemorate those who lost their lives during the pandemic, reflect on the sacrifices made and the impact on our daily lives, and pay tribute to the work of health and social care staff, frontline workers, researchers, and all those who volunteered and showed acts of kindness during this unprecedented time.

See <https://dayofreflection.campaign.gov.uk/> for all the details and for suggestions about how parish and town councils can take part.

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