

Update

ISSUE 2/25

March - April 2025

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Local elections are a time of democratic renewal. A time for a fresh start and a clean slate. It feels like a reset is due, maybe even overdue. The last local elections in Northamptonshire were in 2021, still under the shadow of the Covid pandemic, and the first elections following Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Northamptonshire that saw the creation of the unitary councils on 1 April 2021. Many councillors from the former county, borough, and district councils who did not want to be (or weren't selected to be) members of the new unitary councils sought a new home in parish or town councils. Some brought a new and fresh perspective and a wealth of knowledge and experience, whilst others never really adjusted and flexed to the critically different role that parish and town councils play compared to their principal council cousins. At these elections, many of those councillors and the councillors that stayed on in 2021 "to see Covid through" are retiring, which makes way for new people to come into the sector who are not weighed down by the baggage of pre-LGR or pre-Covid days.

The number of retiring councillors will be higher than usual, so the number of new people coming forward to be councillors also needs to be higher. Sadly, the initial evidence is that a strong new wave of councillors will not materialise, certainly not in the numbers required to force contested elections at parish and town councils across the county. With just days to go at the time of writing until the close of nominations for the elections, many parish and town councils are scratching around trying to achieve a full complement of councillors. Some councils are struggling to meet even the first bar, which is to achieve a quorum of councillors to at least enable the council to be able to function legally after the elections.

The reasons that people are not falling over themselves to become parish and town councillors are many and various, and it is a countrywide issue. There is certainly a lack of awareness and understanding of the role and responsibilities of parish and town councillors and the impact they have on local communities. That causes a perceived lack of influence, which can discourage people from seeking office because they question whether their efforts could make a real difference. One has to be a parish or town councillor, maybe for several years, to understand the role and the impact that it can have.

The general disillusionment with politics and politicians (in this country and abroad!) deters people from entering local government, and the negative media coverage and public perception of political processes creates a sense of apathy. People see others who stick their head above the parapet getting it shot off, which is a huge disincentive. Often the work that is done at a parish and town council level can be very granular, dealing with very difficult local issues. This can be off putting to some people who may not want to get involved with those types of problems, exposing their actions to the keyboard warriors.

And finally, the shift in demographics, such as increased mobility and changing work patterns, can make it harder to find people willing to commit to their community and to being a local representative. People with full-time jobs or family commitments find it difficult to

allocate the necessary time to do the role justice, and if they only intend to live in the community a relatively short time before moving elsewhere for work, then they are unlikely to be interested in a four-year commitment.

Of course, for every reason against being a councillor there are a raft of reasons for being one... giving something back to

your community, influencing local decisions, making your community a better place to live, creating new skills of tact and diplomacy, helping others, and being a community advocate, to name but a few. These things can be a difficult sell though, particularly when trying to encourage diversity in candidacy. Much as we would like more young professionals in the sector, more people from different socio-economic backgrounds, and all with a healthy gender and ethnic mix, the reality is that for many in those groups, being a councillor is too big an ask.

So, for all those existing councillors that are staying on, and for all those new councillors about to join this wonderful world, thank you for rising to the challenge and for being community champions. For all those existing councillors who are retiring in May, thank you for your public service and for your contribution in making your community a great place to live. And for those choosing to let the

“...the shift in demographics, such as increased mobility and changing work patterns, can make it harder to find people willing to commit to their community and to being a local representative...”

prospect of being a councillor slip by this time, you are missing out on a great opportunity, but you'll have another chance in 2029!

The elections have dominated our enquiry inbox at Northants CALC over the past two months, but it's been on top of business as usual. We have delivered a very wide range of training and development events, ranging from bite-size online learning modules to in-person whole council development sessions. In the summer we are increasing our training programme, particularly the very popular Off to a Flying Start course and the Code of Conduct course, to cater for the influx of new councillors. See <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training-and-events> for all the details and to book courses.

Running from 3 February to 3 March 2025, our Climate & Nature Actions Survey captured information from parish and town councils across Northamptonshire on what they are already doing and what they would like to do more of. The response rate was an incredible 82%, which gives us a very robust and powerful data set. It will take a while to crunch the numbers, but there will be a full report in the May/June *eUpdate*. Thank you very much to all the councils that responded, it is very much appreciated.

The board at Northants CALC has been busy too. In February the board held a focus session on the standards that councils operate at, and who decides what that standard should be. The board discussed whether it was ever appropriate to exclude a council from membership if it was wilfully and continually acting badly. Whilst the PR risk to the Association and to the sector was recognised, the consensus was that it was the job of the Association to support all councils regardless and that it would disadvantage communities if their parish or town council was refused membership support. It was recognised that there will always be a range of standards of governance and accountability, but that all councils deserved support. It was suggested that Northants CALC could specify a minimum expected standard, so that it was clear that any council not achieving that standard was operating below expectations. This would help promote the sector and identify councils that needed additional support. The work will continue during 2025.

The next *eUpdate* will report on what happened at the elections, so good luck for yours and here's to whatever the next four-year term brings. Please do continue to get in touch with your queries and questions... that's what we're here for!

END OF YEAR

The council year runs from 1 April to 31 March and all local precepting bodies, including parish meetings and parish, town, and community councils, are required to complete and submit an Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) by 30 June following the year end. There are no exceptions, and the 30 June deadline is set in law. If your council has not completed and approved its AGAR by 30 June 2025, it is breaking the law.



For a council to have approved its AGAR by 30 June it must have 1) prepared its annual accounting statement, 2) had an internal audit, and 3) held a meeting to approve and sign off the AGAR. In theory, all those things could happen in the first few days of April, but in practice the steps are spread throughout April and May and sometimes into June.

The AGAR is submitted to the external auditor, which for all councils in Northamptonshire is PKF Littlejohn, a firm of accountants based at Canary Wharf in London. PKF has the audit contract for all of Northamptonshire and many other counties. It is the biggest of the four audit firms providing external audit for parish and town councils in England.

PKF issued its instructions by email to all parish and town councils during the week commencing 24 March 2025, so if your council didn't receive it then it's gone missing (check spam or email SBA@pkf-l.com to check they've got the correct email address for your council). You'll also find the instructions at <https://www.pkf-l.com/services/audit-assurance/limited-assurance-regime/useful-information-and-links>, and the AGAR forms for YE 31 March 2025 are at <https://www.pkf-l.com/services/audit-assurance/limited-assurance-regime/submission-requirements>.

Councils are required to prepare their accounts and annual return in accordance with the "proper practices", which are set out in the Practitioner's Guide produced by the Smaller Authorities Proper Practices Panel (SAPPP), formerly known as JPAG. The Practitioner's Guide is reissued every year at the end of March and

applies to the following year but can be applied retrospectively. For example, the 2025 edition of the Guide applies in respect of financial years commencing on or after 1 April 2025 but may be applied to the year ending 31 March 2025. The 'proper practices' laid down in Sections 1 and 2 of the Guide are statutory. You'll find the 2025 Practitioner's Guide at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/practitioners-guide> (login required).

The end of year process is complex but not complicated, and there is plenty of help available. The starting point is the guidance and instructions issued by PKF. Read it all carefully and thoroughly. PKF identifies common issues arising each year, such as the incorrect dates used for the exercise of public rights, which is frustrating because the guidance and instructions are clear in what councils should do. The mistakes are usually caused by a clerk/RFO not reading the instructions or not asking for help. For obvious reasons, the internal auditor and external auditor cannot provide advice to an individual council (otherwise they would be auditing their own advice) but help is available from Northants CALC to all member councils, so please just shout!

ROSE OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE AWARDS

Do you have that special someone in your community who deserves recognition for all they do? It might be an unsung community volunteer who just quietly goes about their business helping others, or a councillor who is retiring this May after years of sterling public service, or that person who never expects thanks or praise but deserves it, nonetheless.

If so, please consider nominating them for a Rose of Northamptonshire Award. Run by the Northamptonshire Community Foundation (NCF) in partnership with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), nominations for the 2025 awards are now open, and the process is quick and simple. For all the details, please visit <https://www.ncf.uk.com/our-work/rose-of-northamptonshire-awards>.



Nominations close on Tuesday 22 April 2025.

LET'S MOVE TOGETHER

One of the speakers at the Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) meeting held on 4 March 2025 was Alex Mitchell, Funding and Enterprise Officer at Northamptonshire Sport. Here, Alex sets out what Northamptonshire Sport has to offer to parish and town councils across the county...



"Northamptonshire Sport is a health, physical activity, sport and wellbeing charity focused on empowering Northamptonshire people to be active and healthy. We advocate for change at a government level, while also running local projects promoting positive mental health and tackling obesity. Northamptonshire Sport is passionate about ensuring physical activity and wellbeing opportunities are open to all – taking the pressure off the NHS, with a focus on prevention rather than cure."

Many thanks to Northants CALC for the invite to speak at the recent NLCP meeting, and if you wish to engage Northamptonshire Sport to look at funding opportunities to help improve local facilities please email alex.Mitchell@Northamptonshiresport.org. You can also view our upcoming funding webinars at https://www.northamptonshiresport.org/course-finder/?filter_course_type=funding and visit our funding finder page at <https://www.northamptonshiresport.org/findfunding>.

Northamptonshire Sport has recently employed four members of staff to brand new positions; Emma Kirk as Strategic Lead: Active Environments; Natalie Lawrence as Strategic Director: Children & Young People; Korri Lenney as Strategic Lead: Place, and Alex Mitchell, Strategic Lead: Funding & Enterprise.

Korri's role was funded as part of a £430,000 investment into Northamptonshire Sport from Sport England to expand our place-based work into new areas across the county, including Kings Heath and Spencer in Northampton, Kingswood in Corby, Lodge Park in Corby and Queensway in Wellingborough.

In a joint project with Northampton Town Football Club, Northampton Saints RFC & Northamptonshire County Cricket Club, we are also delighted to launch our new

mental health project “Team-mates” (northamptonshiresport.org/teammates). This new project will work with men living with mental ill-health, risk of suicide, and social isolation, those from lower socioeconomic groups and people recovering from drug and alcohol abuse to provide an early intervention programme to support their mental health.

We have also announced the dates for our popular 5k race series for 2025. We welcome all who wish to enter the races, and anyone who would like to volunteer their time to help run these events. Please email info@northamptonshiresport.org for more information:

- Race 1 = Sunday 27th April 2025 = Delapre Abbey
- Race 2 = Wednesday 14th May 2025 = West Lodge Farm
- Race 3 = Wednesday 18th June 2025 = Blackpit Brewery
- Race 4 = Wednesday 9th July 2025 = Fermyn Woods
- Race 5 = Sunday 7th September 2025 = The Chester House Estate”

If your council has any plans or projects aimed at getting people moving, being more active, and leading a healthier lifestyle, please do get in touch with Northamptonshire Sport and see how they can help make your ideas a reality.

SECTION 137 SPENDING LIMIT

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has confirmed an increase in the Section 137 expenditure limit for parish and town councils in England for the 2025/26 financial year. The new limit is £11.10 per elector, up from £10.81 in 2024/25.

Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 allows parish and town councils to incur expenditures for purposes that benefit their communities when no other specific statutory power is available.

Remember that Section 137 is a power of last resort. There are a wide range of legal powers that parish councils can explore before resorting to Section 137. Remember also that any expenditure under Section 137 must benefit the community, not an individual.



THE 2025/26 PRECEPT

Parish and town councils continue to exercise prudence when increasing their precepts and, consequently, continue to escape the imposition of referendum principles by the government. Several years of high inflation is still exerting upward pressure on precepts, particularly due to increased energy and staffing costs. The ongoing cost-of-living challenge and the forthcoming local elections exert downward pressure on councillors' appetite to raise the precept.

Forty-six councils in Northamptonshire set the same precept for 2025/26 as for 2024/25, which must be a political decision, because the maths never works out that coincidentally. Councils are required to calculate their budget requirement and derive their precept from that; starting from the precept and working backwards is technically unlawful. And any council that has increased its precept by less than inflation (4%ish) has effectively reduced its spending power and therefore its ability to provide vital community services.

Here we look at the precepts set by all parish and town councils in England and compare them with what happened in Northamptonshire:

There are over 10,000 local precepting bodies in England. Of these, 8,911 are parish and town councils that have raised a precept for 2025/26. The remainder are mostly small parish meetings that have not raised a precept.

In England, parish and town council precepts total £859 million in 2025/26, an increase of 9.7% on 2024/25. It represents 1.9% of the total council tax raised by all local authorities.

The national totals and averages hide the enormous diversity in the sector. For example, the twenty highest-precepting town councils in England account for just over 8% of the total precept raised.

All the twenty highest-precepting councils have precepts higher than £2 million. The highest precept is set by Taunton Town Council in Somerset, whose precept for 2025/26 is £6.6 million.

Northamptonshire's highest-precepting council, Northampton Town Council (NTC), is not in the top twenty nationally and has a relatively modest precept for 2025/26 of £1,841,300.

All top twenty precepting councils nationally are in unitary authority areas, and for all councils, Band D tax rates are 15.1% higher in unitary authority areas than in three-tier areas (parish/district/county).

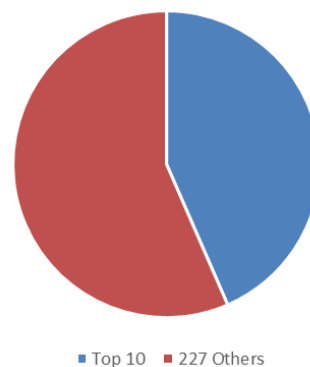
The average Band D tax rate for all precepting councils in England in 2025/26 is £92.22, an increase of £6.32 or 7.4% over the previous year.

In Northamptonshire there are 277 local precepting bodies, but of those 40 are financially inactive parish meetings (zero precept) and other non-council bodies.

The total raised by the 237 precepting bodies for 2025/26 is £22,660,216, an increase of £1,656,541 or 7.8%. The average Band D tax rate in Northamptonshire for 2025/26 is £92.04, an increase of £5.70 or 6.6%.

Northampton Town Council is one of four councils in Northamptonshire in the million-pound club, along with Daventry Town Council, Rushden Town Council, and Brackley Town Council.

The top ten precepting councils raise a total of £9,852,917 or 43.5% of the total for all councils. The average Band D tax rate for the top ten councils is £149.14 (compared to the county average for all councils of £92.04).



The highest Band D tax rates in Northamptonshire are levied by Oundle Town Council (£246.85) and Nether Heyford Parish Council (£233.95). There are now 85 councils (out of 237) with a Band D tax rate over £100.

The lowest precepting body is Catesby Parish Meeting, with a precept of just £90 and a Band D tax rate of just £2.40!

Most parish councils in Northamptonshire have a very modest income. 52 councils (21.9%) have a precept of £10,000 or less and a further 63 councils (26.5%) have a precept between £10,001 and £25,000. 77 councils (32.5%) have

a precept between £25,001 and £100,000, and just 45 councils (19.0%) have a precept over £100,001.

There remains a significant difference between the two unitary authority areas, due mainly to the fact that precepts in the former borough of Kettering (in North Northamptonshire) have been much lower than average in the past.

Unitary Area	Precepting Bodies	No Precept	Precept 24/25 (Precept 23/24)	Av Band D 24/25 (Band D 23/24)
North	96	10	£8,762,628 (£8,073,364)	£83.27 (£76.50)
West	141	24	£13,897,588 (£12,930,311)	£98.01 (£93.02)

The figures for the north will increase rapidly over the next ten years as Corby Town Council, Kettering Town Council, Wellingborough Town Council, and the parish councils in the former district of Kettering gradually come into line with county and national averages. Wellingborough Town Council's Band D tax rate for 2025/26 is £21.00 and Kettering Town Council's is £28.25.

In terms of percentage change in Band D tax rate, the second biggest mover was Upper Heyford Parish Meeting, which doubled its precept from £1,500 in 2024/25 to £3,000 for 2025/26. The Band D increase is £42.82 or 105%. Upper Heyford's situation illustrates why the government would find it difficult to apply referendum principles to local precepting bodies in the way that it does for principal councils. Principal councils were permitted to increase their Band D tax rate by 3.99% this year (excluding adult social care), but if the same figure was used for parish councils, then 116 of the 237 (49%) councils that raised a precept would have needed to hold a referendum. A precept referendum in Upper Heyford would cost up to £1,000, meaning that the precept would have needed to increase even more to pay for the referendum! A fixed percentage figure for referendum principles would make no sense at all for the parish sector and creating a more complex equation that didn't create anomalies is probably more trouble than it is worth.

If you would like to compare your council against others in Northamptonshire, you will find a spreadsheet of precept, and Band D Tax Rates per parish at <https://www.northantscalcul.gov.uk/precepts-25-26>.

FIX MORE POTHOLES, GET MORE MONEY

Sir Kier Starmer has told highway authorities to demonstrate greater urgency and efficacy in fixing the country's roads.

In March 2025, the prime minister announced a £1.6 billion investment to “*tackle the scourge of potholes*” in England, with measures requiring highway authorities to publish how many potholes they’ve filled or lose further funding.



To get the full amount, highway authorities in England must publish annual progress reports and prove public confidence in their work. Any that fail to meet the conditions will see 25% of their uplift funding withheld. The first report is due by 30 June 2025 detailing how much has been spent, how many potholes have been filled, what percentage of roads are in what condition, and how councils are minimising street works disruption. By the end of October 2025, councils must also show they are ensuring communities have their say on what work they should be doing, and where.

If North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) meets the conditions, the full government funding for potholes for 2025/26 is £12,377,000. For West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) the amount is £14,618,000. This is on top of any budget the highway authorities have allocated to roads maintenance from their own funds.

Sir Kier said, “*The broken roads we inherited are not only risking lives but also cost working families, drivers and businesses hundreds – if not thousands of pounds – in avoidable vehicle repairs. Fixing the basic infrastructure this country relies on is central to delivering national renewal, improving living standards and securing Britain’s future through our Plan for Change.*”

Further details on what NNC and WNC must publish by 30 June 2025 is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/highway-maintenance-funding-guidance-for-local-authorities>. We wait with bated breath.

TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Is your parish or town council facing challenges with speeding traffic or requiring expert assistance with other traffic management issues? Simon Taylor, a parish councillor from Weldon Parish Council in Northamptonshire, has set up a new commercial service that might be of interest...

Simon brings over twenty-five years of experience in the Traffic Management industry, working extensively with Highways and Local Authorities. Now, he is offering a new service specifically designed to get better and more efficient results for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. Key services include:



- Traffic Calming Design: Expert design of measures to reduce traffic speed and improve safety.
- Traffic Calming Project Management and Installation: Full management of traffic calming projects, including road closures.
- Traffic Orders: Drafting the necessary orders to enable the police to enforce traffic violations, particularly in areas affected by speeding.
- Project Engagement: Acting as a crucial link between house builders/construction companies and Town/Parish councils to ensure effective planning and conflict resolution.
- Project Management: Comprehensive project oversight from site consultation and design through to the delivery of a 278 Project.
- Event Management Support and Planning: Assistance with all aspects of event management, including permitting, local authority applications, road closures, and diversions.
- Traffic Management Drawings: Expertly created drawings detailing your traffic and pedestrian management requirements.

There are all sorts of expertise within the councillorship in Northamptonshire. Whilst other traffic management consultancies exist, one of the advantages Steve has is that he has been a parish councillor and knows what it's like. See the flyer at the end of this *eUpdate* for all the details of this new service.

PLANNING & INFRASTRUCTURE

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill was introduced on 11 March 2025 and is currently at Committee stage in the House of Commons. It is a Bill *“to make provision about infrastructure; to make provision about town and country planning; to make provision for a scheme, administered by Natural England, for a nature restoration levy*



payable by developers; to make provision about development corporations; to make provision about the compulsory purchase of land; to make provision about environmental outcomes reports; and for connected purposes.”

The stated aim of the new legislation is *“creating the biggest building boom in a generation”* and delivering significant economic growth. At its core, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill seeks to speed up the delivery of new homes and key infrastructure. The government intends to achieve this by streamlining planning decisions, reducing bureaucracy, and tackling blockages in the planning system.

Northamptonshire, with its mix of urban and rural areas and ongoing development pressures, particularly related to the larger towns, is likely to experience significant impact. The drive to build 1.5 million homes nationally by 2029 will lead to increased numbers of planning applications and development proposals across the county, so parish and town councils may find themselves engaging with a higher volume of such activity. Furthermore, reforms to the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) regime aim to speed up decisions on large infrastructure projects. Where such projects are planned for or pass through Northamptonshire, such as major transport or energy infrastructure, the consenting process could be more rapid. The introduction of a system of 'strategic planning' across England known as spatial development strategies will see the creation of plans looking across multiple local planning authorities for the most sustainable areas to build and ensuring infrastructure needs are met. While the exact structure for Northamptonshire is yet to be determined, parish and town councils will need to be aware of and align their local considerations with these broader strategic directions. Finally, the Bill prioritises the connection of approved

clean energy projects to the grid. This could lead to even more renewable energy developments, like wind and solar farms, being proposed in the county, potentially impacting local landscapes and requiring engagement from parish and town councils.

The Bill introduces a national scheme of delegation which will set out which types of planning applications should be determined by planning officers, and which should go to committee. The Bill also proposes controls over the size of Local Planning Authority (LPA) planning committees and mandatory training for LPA planning committee members.

As new spatial development strategies are introduced, Neighbourhood Plans prepared by parish and town councils will need to be in general conformity with these strategies, as well as the local plan. This reinforces the importance of parish and town councils engaging with the development of these broader strategic plans to ensure local priorities are considered.

Proposed amendments to the Highways Act 1980 and the Transport and Works Act 1992 aim to streamline the delivery of transport infrastructure. Parish and town councils may see changes in the processes related to new roads, railways, or other transport infrastructure in their areas.

Planning is a hugely important topic for parish and town councils and is often cited as one of the top *raison d'être*s for parish and town councils. Northants CALC will keep across the progress of the Bill through Parliament and will alert member councils to subsequent government guidance and regulations.

We will also continue to work with the two Local Planning Authorities in Northamptonshire (North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)) to discuss the potential implications of the Bill and how it might affect local planning processes, including delegation to committees and fee structures. We will design and deliver training on the new legislation when it is made and on the new opportunities and threats the legislation presents to parish and town councils.

One thing is for sure, if there really is going to be 1.5 million houses built in England in the next four years, the whole planning system will need to look radically different from now.

THE GREAT FIRE OF NORTHAMPTON

A packed county-wide programme of cultural events and celebrations is being lined up to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of Northampton.

2025 marks 350 years since flames ripped through the streets of Northampton, destroying 700 of the 850 buildings in the town centre and claiming 11 lives.

To observe the anniversary, cultural and historical groups from across the county are teaming up with partners including Northampton Town Centre Business Improvement District (BID), Northampton Town Council (NTC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) to put together a series of events to showcase the story of the fire and the rebuild that followed.

The celebrations will be launched on Thursday, 29 May 2025 with an Oak Apple Day parade and service at All Saints Church in Northampton – including the annual hanging of a wreath in honour of King Charles II who donated 1,000 tonnes of timber to help rebuild much of the town.

Art historian James Miller, who is spearheading the project, said: *“The Great Fire of Northampton is a hugely significant moment in our local history and we are looking forward to marking the 350th anniversary in style.*

“There will be a five-month programme of activities that we are encouraging all community groups and organisations across Northamptonshire to get involved with, including everything from art exhibitions and light shows to processions and window displays.

“This will be an opportunity for the county to come together to celebrate Northamptonshire’s extraordinary resilience, civic pride and independent spirit. It is that character that shone through 350 years ago and is still very much in evidence today.”



The blaze is believed to have been caused by sparks from an open fire in a home on St Mary's Street, near the former castle site. The fire quickly spread and engulfed the surrounding buildings. As the flames raged, residents sought refuge in the Market Square, but the situation grew increasingly dire, and the authorities ordered the evacuation of the area, with terrified residents forced to flee.

The fire's destructive path left behind a scene of devastation, with prominent buildings such as All Hallows Church reduced to ashes.

While the Great Fire of Northampton caused immense destruction, it also marked a turning point in the town's architectural development. Following the fire, efforts were made to rebuild and revitalise Northampton, leading to the construction of new buildings and a renewed focus on urban planning.



In a remarkable display of community spirit and determination, residents and businesses rallied together, raising £25,000 to finance the ambitious reconstruction of the town centre, centred around the bustling Market Square.

Mark Mullen, operations manager of Northampton BID, said: *“The memory of All Hallows’ Church and its destruction in the Great Fire of Northampton serves as a reminder of the resilience of the town and its ability to recover and rebuild even in the face of catastrophic events.”*

“The anniversary celebrations will channel that community spirit and shine a light on the history and heritage that gives Northamptonshire such a proud identity.”

"As we begin the next phase of regeneration, we're hopeful for a similar renaissance, where once again, the people of Northamptonshire unite to shape a brighter, more vibrant future for all."

Northampton Town Council has commissioned a virtual trail as part of the celebrations, to transport users back to the day of the Great Fire, with characters telling the story of the catastrophic event as it unfolded. The trail will be available on the Explore Northampton app from 29 May 2025.

Cllr Jane Birch, Chair of the Community Services Committee at Northampton Town Council, said: *"The Great Fire 350 app will allow users to step back in time and learn more about the fire and its impact, including information about the buildings it affected, some of which survive to this day."*

"We are excited to be working with so many partners to mark this anniversary year, beginning with Oak Apple Day, which is an important event in Northamptonshire's civic calendar."

Further events will include exhibitions at Delapre Abbey, 78 Derngate, NN Contemporary, Northampton Museum and Art Gallery and the County Records Office while there will be a dedicated season of screenings at Northampton Filmhouse.

For more details, please visit <https://www.discovernorthampton.co.uk/gfon350>.

2025/26 MEMBERSHIP INVOICES

Northants CALC's Business Support Manager, Sophie Harding, will be sending out the invoices for membership for 2025/26 on Tuesday 1 April 2025. The invoices are sent by email to the clerk, so please look out for them. If you haven't received it on 1 April, check your spam or email sharding@northantscalc.gov.uk.

Membership is based on the number of electors in the parish, which is shown on the invoice. The invoice includes membership of Northants CALC, membership of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and, if your council uses it, there will be lines for the Internal Audit Service (IAS) and the Data Protection Officer (DPO) service. We very much appreciate your support and look forward to prompt payment, ideally by electronic transfer (who still uses cheques!!?).

EMPLOYMENT-RELATED COSTS

Are you a parish or town councillor in Northamptonshire? Ask yourself this question: Is your council up to date with its payments to HMRC?

If your answer was “I have no idea” then potentially that’s a bit of problem. If your answer was “I think so, at least I’m sure the clerk is on top of it” then potentially that’s a bit of a problem. If your answer was “I don’t know, but the HR committee will know” then potentially that’s a bit of a problem. If your answer was “Yes, I am certain it is” then well done! But how are you certain? What documentary evidence is your certainty based on?



The trouble is that most parish councils have only one member of staff, and that person is the clerk, the chief officer, the head of paid service, the Responsible Finance Officer (RFO), the person processing the payroll on behalf of “all” employees and setting up and making all employment-related payments. Sometimes there is no scrutiny at all, beyond the receipt of regular or occasional reports presented to councillors at council or committee meetings.

The starting point is for a council to know precisely what the clerk should be paid and what other employment benefits there are, such as pension and home working allowances. Knowing these figures enables the council to calculate precisely what the monthly salary, pension, and other payments should be, to create a detailed budget, and then to monitor expenditure against budget. For example, if the calculation at the start of the employment, which should be refreshed each year thereafter, shows that £1,000 per year should be going to HMRC in tax, and the Month-4 report shows “HMRC - £0.00” then you already know that you’ve got a problem.

A very small council might perform the checks at a full council meeting, but it is more common for a council to establish a Finance Committee or HR Committee and delegate to it the function of monitoring employment-related expenditure. Even where the scrutiny is good, it is normally based on information and evidence

provided by the clerk, so this needs to be checked carefully and thoroughly. Most clerks will welcome such scrutiny because it shows that the council is keen to get the payments right.

There will be clerks in Northamptonshire and across England that are being underpaid and there will be those that are being overpaid. There will be councils that should be paying HMRC but aren't, and there will be clerks who are entitled to receive employer's pension contributions (because their salary is above £10,000 per year) but aren't because the council hasn't realised its obligation to auto-enrol eligible employees. Most of the time, these discrepancies will be down to simple error, but clearly there is an opportunity for an unscrupulous employee to pull the wool over the employer's eyes. It can and does happen.

One useful internal control is to separate the function of calculating the payroll figures from the function of making the payments by outsourcing payroll. Specialist payroll services for parish and town councils start from as little as £12 per month, which is a small price to pay to ensure that salary, HMRC payments, pensions, and expenses have all been correctly calculated. In 2018, Northants CALC partnered with DCK Payroll Solutions (<https://dckpayrollsolutions.co.uk>) to develop a cost-effective payroll solution aimed at small councils with a single employee, so there's no need for councils to go DIY. Very small councils with a competent and experienced clerk who knows their way around the HMRC Basic PAYE Tools system can do it all in-house, it's just that the beneficiary is the same as the person running the figures, so scrutiny is even more important.

Whether the payroll is done in house or by a contractor, the council (or appropriate committee) needs to review the payroll figures regularly and needs to check them against payments made and check those payments against budget.

Being paid the correct amount is an employment right, so at the very least a council getting it wrong (and it is always the council that is wrong, even if the errors were made by the council's employee) could have a disgruntled employee on their hands and in extreme cases could be facing HMRC fines and/or an Employment Tribunal.

So, go back to the start of this article and ask yourself the question again, and if your answer is anything other than "100% Yes", it might be time to request an agenda item on the matter!

YOU CAN'T BANK ON THEM

Maintaining sufficient active signatories to the bank account is a perennial issue for many parish and town councils. Councillors resign, die, become disqualified, and otherwise make themselves inconveniently unavailable to act as signatories. This is particularly the case at election time, and it is not unheard of for a council to lose all its signatories, either because they retired, or were not re-elected.

The answer is to be prepared. The close of nominations for the elections being held on 1 May 2025 is 4pm on 2 April 2025. On 3 April 2025 the elections authorities (North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)) will publish either a Notice of Uncontested Election for parishes where the number of candidates is the same as or fewer than the number of seats available, which will list all the candidates and declare them elected uncontested, or a Statement of Person's Nominated for parishes where the number of candidates is greater than the number of seats available, which will list all the candidates whose names will go to the poll on 1 May 2025.

In the former case, where the election is uncontested, you know on 3 April who the councillors will be in May, so you can start planning as soon as possible by having an item on the agenda for a council (or appropriate committee) meeting to appoint additional signatories. If your council doesn't usually meet in April, it might even be worth having an extraordinary meeting just for that purpose. The clerk can obtain all necessary forms, have them signed at the meeting, and whizz them off to the council's bank.

Even where the election is contested, so a council doesn't know precisely who the councillors will be come May, it is often possible to predict with a reasonable degree of accuracy whether sufficient signatories will remain post-election and if it is looking doubtful, to take steps as above to add more.

Do not leave it until the clerk's salary and other important payments are due at the May meeting to discover that there aren't sufficient signatories available. Unity Trust Bank (<https://www.unity.co.uk>) is fairly slick now at adding signatories, but some other banks can take months.

And whilst focusing on adding signatories, don't forget that removing old ones who are no longer members of the council is just as important and pressing.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Parish and town councils are tax-raising bodies, so it isn't really possible for a council to go bankrupt. However, it is entirely possible for a council to run out of money and have a significant and serious cashflow issue until the following year's precept comes in.

Sometimes, council's may find themselves in financial difficulty through no fault of their own. For example, some town councils in the southwest of England had cashflow issues during Covid because the income from tourism that they relied on dried up overnight in March 2020. In that case, the principal councils stepped in to provide bridge funding.

In other cases, councils create their own mess by getting involved in projects that are too big to chew, or that are not properly thought through, or are dependent on future receipts of S106 or CIL that never materialises. Others are just poorly managed, with inadequate reserves and a precept that doesn't cover budgeted expenditure.

Staveley Town Council in Derbyshire appears to have combined all the above factors; systemic historic mismanagement of resources, which the council was slowly recovering from when Covid took its legs away by reducing income from events to zero during lockdown. The council had neither the revenue nor reserves to cope, resulting in staff not being paid and a hole in the finances to the tune of £400,000 (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-64324922>). Eventually, Chesterfield Borough Council agreed to lend money to the town council, which enabled it to pull back from the abyss.

A council's general reserve helps cover unexpected inflation, unforeseen events and unusual circumstances. The generally accepted recommendation is that this should be maintained at between three and twelve months of net revenue expenditure. The smaller the authority, the closer the figure may be to 12 months expenditure, the larger the authority, the nearer to 3 months. Setting the minimum level of reserves requires not only consideration of level of income and expenditure but also the risks to that income. Councils with significant self-generated income (other than the precept or levy) should anticipate situations that may lead to a loss in revenue as well as increased costs and should adapt their general reserve accordingly.

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.

PLEASE CHECK YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

Virtually all bookings for our training and events are done online now, although if a person does not have access to the Internet, they are welcome to telephone, and we'll take the booking that way still. One advantage of booking online is that the delegate receives an automatic confirmation of the booking by email and then receives reminders of the booking and joining instructions one week and then one day before the event. The booking confirmation is copied to the clerk and the delegate (if the delegate is a councillor), and the reminders go just to the delegate.

Or at least they will, IF the email address used when booking the course is correct! We have occasional situations where a delegate doesn't show up to a course they booked on, then when we investigate, they say they never received the reminders. Normally, we discover that the email address used at booking time was incorrect... for example cllr.joe.bloggs@anytowncouncil.go.uk, (can you spot the error?!).

When making bookings, please check that the details are entered correctly, especially the delegate's email address. Where a clerk has registered on our portal and listed their councillors there, it picks up their email automatically, which is a good way to reduce typos, and a very good reason to register!

NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

Danny Moody

Chief Executive

dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk

X: [@ceo_ncalc](#)

Lesley Sambrook Smith

Deputy Chief Executive

lsambrooksmith@northantscalc.gov.uk

X: [@deputyceo_ncalc](#)

Marie Reilly

Training Manager

mreilly@northantscalc.gov.uk

Sophie Harding

Business Support Manager

sharding@northantscalc.gov.uk

General enquiries

info@northantscalc.gov.uk

Member Enquiry Service (MES)

mes@northantscalc.gov.uk

Data Protection Officer Service

dpo@northantscalc.gov.uk

Telephone

01327 831482

Address:

Northants CALC
PO Box 7936
Brackley
NN13 9BY

Web:

www.northantscalc.gov.uk





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"SJT has helped Weldon Parish Council in many ways over the passed 7 years, We highly recommend this service to every Parish Council and wouldn't hesitate to use SJT with any further traffic management issues"

Angela Page Current Chair of Weldon Parish Council.

For further information contact Simon Taylor on **07841138409**
or Email: **SjtconsultancyLtd@gmail.com**