

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

The months following the local elections held on 1 May 2025 have been full on. Parish and town councils have been forming, storming, and norming with their new teams of councillors, vacancies following the election have been filled, new plans for the coming term of office have been developed. We have dealt with hundreds of enquiries regarding the related procedures. Then there's been the end-of-year and Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) processes, which always generates questions and queries. Note though that the audit performance of parish and town councils is spectacularly good compared to their principal council cousins!

All the new councillors require training of course, so Marie Reilly (Training Manager) and I have been at full stretch providing Off to a Flying Start, Code of Conduct, Chairperson and Leadership Training and more. I think between us we have covered every corner of the county in the past two months, including delivering a lot online as well. The training programme takes a dip in August and is then back with a bang in September. Whatever your training needs or desires, you will find something for you at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training-page>.

We were pleased to celebrate Local Council Clerks Week last month (7 to 14 June 2025) and take the opportunity to recognise the extraordinary work that clerks do for their councils and communities. Clerks are quietly powerful, endlessly knowledgeable, and fundamentally essential. While councillors may steer the ship, it's the clerk who keeps the engine running, the compass calibrated, and the quarters stocked. They provide institutional memory (particularly in a year of elections), the administrative backbone, and they are often the first port of call for residents. With a deep understanding of governance, finance, and community needs, clerks ensure that decisions are not only made but implemented effectively. In truth, the real power in a parish council lies not in the chair, but in the steady, capable hands of the clerk.

“Clerks are quietly powerful, endlessly knowledgeable, and fundamentally essential.”

The county's principal councils (North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council) have also been busy forming, storming, and norming and there are signs that the new Reform UK administrations are settling into their work. Lesley Sambrook Smith and I have been busy developing relationships with the Leaders and Cabinet/Executive members and the early meetings have been positive and encouraging. The Reform UK councillors recognise the steep learning curve they are on and are leaning on the officers (see para above!) for support and guidance. I think both councils are in a honeymoon period currently that may last until the autumn. Many decisions being made currently had their roots in the previous administrations, because it takes so long to grind things through the councils' governance machinery. With a few notable exceptions, Reform UK is transacting business bequeathed to them by the Conservatives. And whilst efficiency drives, staffing reviews, and policy appraisals might be underway, it will be months before the effects of those things become apparent. Both unitary councils have made the right noises about reconnecting and engaging with parish and town councils and working together as the two tiers of local government for Northamptonshire. Certainly, Reform UK councillors have been very visible at parish and town council meetings across the county, which is a welcome development. It is an opportunity to build strong relationships, which will be required for what's coming down the road in terms of devolution (from government to strategic and principal councils, and from principal councils to parish and town councils), the continuing dire state of local government finance, increasing demand, and the effect of many years of chronic underinvestment coming home to roost.

The Police Liaison Representative (PLR) scheme has been highly successful and on 17 June 2025 we held the Annual PLR Conference online. The scheme helps build a bridge between Northamptonshire Police and parish and town councils and the PLR is the single point of contact (SPOC) at their council for information from the police and from the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC). PLRs receive a monthly update and are connected via the Northamptonshire Talking platform. The conference heard from the Chief Constable, Ivan Balhatchet, and from the Commissioner, Danielle Stone. I would like to thank all the PLRs who attended and fed in their ideas, views, and comments. You can find out more about the PLR scheme at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/plr> including a role description and a wealth of information on policing, crime statistics and community safety.

And talking of representative schemes, Northants CALC was very pleased to launch on 1 July 2025 the Climate and Nature (CAN) Champion Scheme. The scheme copies the successful format of the PLR scheme, with parish and town councils identifying a SPOC for all things related to the climate, nature, and the environment. Councils are appointing their CAN Champions now, so it's early days, but I hope that the scheme is as successful as the PLR scheme. There is an article about the CAN Champion Scheme below.

In June, the Northants CALC board held its Annual Board Away Day and I would like to thank Oundle Town Council for hosting us at their wonderful HQ, Fletton House. The board considered the impact of the local elections, and the notes record that *"The board recognised that the emergence of Reform UK as the dominant political force in Northamptonshire presents both challenges and opportunities. The lack of experience among new councillors raises concerns, but it also opens the door to fresh dialogue and potentially innovative approaches to local governance."* The afternoon session considered "The Sector in 2035" and asked, "What Will Be the Role of Parish and Town Councils and What Support Will They Need?". It was a fascinating discussion! And finally, retiring director, Richard Lewis and retiring President, Jeffrey Greenwell, spoke on their "Reflections on the Past and Message for the Future". Jeffrey concluded his speech by saying that he had a wonderful forty years in local government and that he had faith in the directors and staff to take the Association forward saying, *"The future is in good hands"*. Northants CALC will have two director vacancies come October 2025 and there is an advertisement below with the details. If you would like to join the Northants CALC board, please consider putting in an application.

On 8 July 2025 we held a meeting of our Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP), which comprises the thirty or so largest parish and town councils in Northamptonshire based on electorate. We had a fascinating presentation from Leila Friar on "Making Every Contact Count" (MECC), a public health approach that encourages the use of everyday interactions to support people in making positive changes to their physical and mental wellbeing. It was interesting to think about how the MECC concept can be embedded into the operations of parish and town councils.

So, there is never a dull day at Northants CALC. Please do continue to get in touch with your queries and questions; that's what we're here for!

IT'S AN HONOUR

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is inviting councils to submit nominations for The King's Birthday Honours list which will be published in June 2026.

MHCLG is keen to receive nominations for those who have made exceptional contributions in local government and communities, which includes clerks and councillors that have gone above and beyond. Nominations are sought for OBEs, MBEs and, particularly relevant for the parish and town council sector, the British Empire Medal (BEM), which recognises “*a role or activity that has a significant impact on smaller communities.*”



Nominations can be made using the MHCLG form at <https://tinyurl.com/4bj6nkjp>. At least two letters of support for each nomination need to be submitted in reply to the automated acknowledgment email. If the acknowledgment email is not received, then please email the letters of support to honours@communities.gov.uk making it clear in the subject title which nomination the letters relate to.

The deadline for nominations for The King's Birthday Honours list 2026 is 8 August 2025, so you need to act quickly! However, if you miss this boat remember that nominations can be made at any time and would be included in a subsequent New Year or Birthday Honours list. Information and support is available from the Office of the Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire and you will find details at <https://lord-lieutenantnorthamptonshire.co.uk/awards-honours/>.

Many parish and town councillors and clerks have given meritorious service and are worthy of a nomination. Those that have made a significant impact in or have demonstrated a sustained commitment to communities in Northamptonshire should be recognised.

An award such as a BEM might be received with greater appreciation and humility than a gift such as vouchers or a carriage clock. An honours award is an enduring reminder to the recipient and their family and descendants of the service given and the esteem in which they were held.

SIGN ON THE DOTTED LINE

Clerks and councillors regularly need to sign things: The chair signs the council's minutes, the clerk/RFO and chair sign the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR), bank signatories sign mandates, change request forms, and cheques.



And sometimes because the documents being signed might end up in the public domain, clerks and councillors adopt a “council” signature that is subtly or even radically different to their private signature (see picture above). A difficulty may arise therefore when remembering which signature to use for which purpose.

Hannah Parkhouse, Deposit Desk Manager at Unity Trust Bank (UTB), which specialises in banking for parish and town councils (<https://www.unity.co.uk/sectors/local-councils>) and other non-profit entities in England, says *“As part of the account management change sign off, every signature is currently manually checked by a member of the team and then quality checked by another. This is to ensure we are minimising the number of cases that have to go back out to customers for re-signing, as well as ensuring they correctly comply with the signatures we hold on file.”* Hannah adds: *“The team try their best to ensure the forms do not need to be returned, however if they are not comfortable there is a strong enough match in the signatures, they do need to return these. Some advice we would give to customers who update their signatures or are newly added to the account would be to keep a record of the specimen signature they provide us with, so they can refer back to this and reduce the risk of the signatures not being accepted.”*

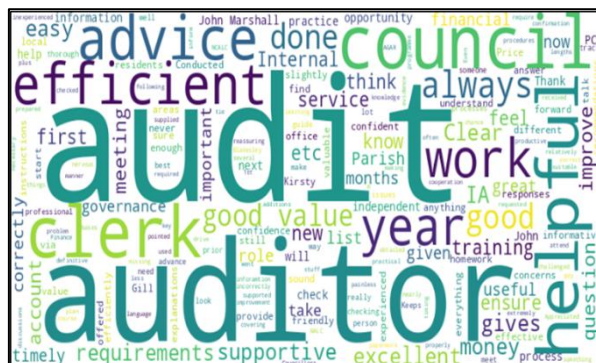
If you are a signatory for your council, make sure you scan and keep a copy of the signatures you have provided to your council's bank, so that if or when you are required to sign something you can remind yourself, if necessary, of which signature you used and how you signed.

Advances in biometrics will probably make signatures superfluous soon, but we are not there yet, so how you wield your pen still matters!

INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE

All councils must appoint an internal auditor who is independent and competent.

For more than twenty-five years, Northants CALC has managed a panel of auditors on behalf of member councils that provides independent auditors, most of whom are qualified clerks in the county, at affordable rates for member councils. The Internal Audit Service (IAS) provides internal audit to over two thirds of the councils in Northamptonshire, supporting them to improve governance and accountability standards and to avoid expensive fines and penalties. Northants CALC ensures that the auditors are competent through quarterly briefing meetings and recently supported all auditors to achieve the Principles of Internal Auditing Local Councils (PIALC) qualification.



Following the 2025 audit round, Northants CALC conducted a satisfaction survey of IAS users. With a 65% response rate, the survey reflects a wide range of experiences and feedback from clerks and councils, but the clear message is that member councils continue to value the professionalism, clarity, and support that the internal auditors provide.

During Covid, the IAS necessarily moved to an online service and whilst a few councils have returned to an in-person audit, there remains a strong preference for online, which is more efficient and sometimes easier for document viewing and sharing.

96% of responders rated their internal auditor Excellent or Good and 91% rated the overall value for money of the service as Excellent or Good. Responders were happy or very happy (94%) with the speed of receiving the internal audit report and with the report content.

98% said they would recommend IAS to another council, with 85% rating the service as 5 stars.

Auditor Performance: This was the most frequently mentioned theme, with overwhelmingly positive sentiment. Responders praised auditors for being

supportive, friendly, and professional, reassuring in stressful or unfamiliar situations, and consistent and thorough without being overly critical.

Process Clarity: Several responders highlighted the need for clearer, more standardised processes. Key concerns included complex or intimidating instructions, the lack of a unified checklist or crib sheet, and inconsistencies between auditors.

Communication: Feedback in this category focused on the value of clear and practical advice, responsive and understanding communication, and avoiding unnecessary meetings.

The Internal Audit Service is generally well-regarded, with high satisfaction in both auditor performance and audit value. A few councils expressed concerns about audit depth or communication, which will feed into future development. The mantra of the Internal Audit Service has always been “Guide dog, not guard dog”, so it is important that it strikes the right balance between being robust and comprehensive whilst not being disproportionate and overbearing.

Thanks go to the team of internal auditors who have provided yet another year of exemplary service. Governance and accountability standards in Northamptonshire are higher than average because of them.

STAR COUNCILS AWARDS

Has your council got the best clerk? Has your council got a councillor who consistently goes above and beyond? Then why not consider making a nomination under the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Star Council Awards 2025/26! These prestigious awards celebrate the innovation, dedication, and outstanding achievements of parish and town councils, councillors, young councillors, county associations, and clerks. The award categories include Council of the Year, Councillor of the Year, Young Councillor of the Year, Climate Response of the Year, County Association of the Year, and Clerk of the Year.

For all the details on the awards, including details of how to submit nominations, please visit <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/support/star-council-awards.html>. The deadline for nominations is 5 September 2025.

Northants CALC has two vacancies on the board for the position of Director

Northants CALC is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. It is a membership organisation representing the parish and town councils and parish meetings in Northamptonshire. Our board is comprised of eight Directors selected from the membership (clerks or councillors). The term of office is for one year until the AGM when all Directors step down together but may seek re appointment.

The board is looking for two new high-quality individuals to help lead the organisation as it continues to grow and develop. You will find it demanding but satisfying, being part of a small volunteer team advancing the interests of the Association and its member councils.

Directors must be able to commit sufficient time to prepare for and attend monthly meetings. Visit the Association's website to find out more about how the Association operates. Further information on the role of a director, including an application form and details of the selection process, is available on request by e-mail to Danny Moody, Chief Executive:
dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk.

**Applications must be completed and returned
by 0900 on Monday 1 September 2025.**

Any clerk or councillor from a council in membership of Northants CALC may apply. However, the board operates a composition and diversity policy and based on the current makeup of the board, applications are particularly encouraged from councillors from medium and larger councils.

If you feel that you would make a significant contribution to the work of the Association, then please do apply; we would be delighted to welcome you.

www.northantscalc.gov.uk

***N*CALC**

PAYROLL FOR PARISHES

Every parish and town council should be registered as an employer with HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and should operate a PAYE (Pay As You Earn) scheme to collect Income Tax and National Insurance contributions from their employees' wages or salaries on behalf of HMRC.

Payroll is a service that can be done by the clerk in-house or by a third-party professional payroll service. Doing it in-house obviously requires a clerk that understands PAYE and payroll processes and who is confident and competent with payroll software. The advantage of doing it in-house is potential short term cost savings and immediate access to payroll records and employee data. For councils with a very experienced clerk and low complexity, in-house payroll may be an option.

The obvious drawback with in-house payroll is that the person providing the service (the clerk) is usually also the only beneficiary of it. There is no separation. Payroll can sometimes be resource intensive (anyone that has ever had to phone HMRC knows that!) and requires precious staff time, training, and software maintenance. Errors can be costly and time-consuming to fix, and staying up to date with HMRC regulations, pensions, and Real Time Information (RTI) submissions demands expertise and vigilance. It is times like pay agreement implementation, calculating back pay, and reporting to HMRC correctly and on time where problems can often arise, and using an outsourced service ensures that doesn't happen.

In 2021, Northants CALC wanted to explore a cost-effective payroll solution suitable for even the smallest parish councils and we worked with Lisa Hanmer from DCK Payroll Solutions to design Payroll Lite. Originally part of the well-established DCK Accounting Solutions, DCK Payroll Solutions has grown into a dedicated provider of payroll services tailored for parish and town councils.

The **Payroll Lite Service**, which launched in Northamptonshire in 2022, is a streamlined, cost-effective payroll solution designed specifically for councils with:

- A single employee
- A stable payroll (no regular changes such as overtime or expenses)
- No need for additional support or guidance

This service is available exclusively through select CALCs in England and offers a professional payroll experience at an affordable price to member councils.

What's Included?

- Processing of standard payroll information
- Calculation of pension contributions (employee and employer)
- Real Time Information (RTI) submissions to HMRC
- Monthly reports: Summary, Payslip, and Pension Summary (if applicable)
- Paperless processing with consistent process dates
- Year-end processing (P60s and HMRC submissions)
- Secure, encrypted file delivery via email

What's Not Included?

- HMRC payment reminders
- PAYE account monitoring
- Pension uploads or account management

Payroll Lite starts at £15+VAT per month, which is money well spent to ensure that the payroll function is separated from the beneficiaries and that the council is compliant with its PAYE duties. Bearing in mind that HMRC fines can be hundreds of pounds per day and can be back dated to the first date of late submission or non-compliance, paying for a service like Payroll Lite can buy a significant amount of peace of mind!

To find out more or to make an enquiry, please visit

<https://dckpayrollsolutions.co.uk> or call Lisa and her team on 01793 550347.

PAY AWARD 2025/26

The unions and Local Government Employers have agreed the pay award for 2025/26 for local government staff, including parish and town council clerks and other employees on National Joint Council (NJC) terms and conditions. The new pay scales, each increased by 3.2% are at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/payscales> (login required). Councils are encouraged to implement this pay award as swiftly as possible, with the increase backdated to 1 April 2025.

CAN CHAMPION SCHEME

In February and March 2025 Northants CALC conducted a countywide survey of parish and town councils focusing on climate and nature action to understand current activities and future aspirations.

An incredible 181 out of 220 councils responded. The survey showed that the top five activities that parish and town councils are already providing are:

- Planting native trees and plants (118)
- Organising community clean-up events (117)
- Creating and maintaining wildlife habitats (111)
- Implementing LED street lighting (108)
- Protecting local biodiversity (104)

Additionally, parish and town councils wanted to know more about establishing green community awards, promoting water conservation, supporting local conservation projects, and supporting heatwave preparedness programs.

Inspired by the phenomenal response and the activity already going on, Northants CALC wanted to find a way to encourage and co-ordinate activity across councils, share good practice, and disseminate relevant updates and funding opportunities.

Consequently, on 1 July 2025, Northants CALC launched its Climate and Nature Champion Scheme (CAN Champions). The scheme will copy the successful formula of the Police Liaison Representative (PLR) Scheme and will hopefully see the positive appointment of a CAN Champion in every one of the 271 parishes in Northamptonshire. The CAN Champion will act as the single point of contact (SPOC) for government, local authorities, agencies, and organisations wishing to contact parish and town councils regarding climate, nature, and environmental issues.

The CAN Champion acts as their council's key point of contact and advocate for environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and climate resilience. This voluntary



role supports the council in identifying, promoting, and coordinating local action on climate and nature priorities. The CAN Champion can be a councillor, officer, or even a member of the public.

As with the PLR scheme, where a parish or town council has not positively appointed a CAN Champion, the clerk to the council will remain the proper officer to receive such communications and so will be the de facto CAN Champion.

If you have a passion for environmental and climate issues, are a good communicator, can work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders, and you have a willingness to learn and stay informed on relevant topics, then you can be a CAN Champion.

Northants CALC has asked councils to register the details of their CAN Champion as soon as possible, and by Friday 3 October 2025 at the latest. There will be a welcome event for all CAN Champions online at 1900 - 2100 on Wednesday 19 November 2025 (details will be sent to all CAN Champions in due course). Once CAN Champions are appointed, they will receive regular communications from Northants CALC (monthly or quarterly, to be decided) and will be invited to meetings. We are thinking about an annual online meeting for all CAN Champions in Northamptonshire and then thematic focus meetings three or four times per year, online, focused on a particular area of climate and nature action with external speakers.

For more information on CAN Champions including a draft role description and to register details please visit <https://www.northantscalc.gov.uk/can-champions>.

NORTHANTS CALC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

The 78th Northants CALC Annual Conference will be held on Saturday 4 October 2025 at Moulton Community Centre. The conference comes at an interesting time for local government in Northamptonshire and beyond, so what better guest speaker than Colin Copus, Emeritus Professor of Local Politics at De Montfort University who is speaking on the theme of Keeping Local Government Local. Colin last spoke at a Northants CALC conference in 2014 and was very well received! Member councils can send up to two delegates and attendance is free with hot refreshments provided on arrival from 0915. Bookings details have been sent to all clerks. We look forward to seeing you there!

BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY

**Article by Sarah Naylor, Senior Project Manager,
Digital Infrastructure Team, North
Northamptonshire Council**

The broadband roll out in Northamptonshire continues to perform well. At the end of June 2025, gigabit capable networks were available to 96% of premises in North and West Northamptonshire. This coverage has increased from just 15.7% and 26.5% in North and West Northants respectively just 4 years ago! Full fibre coverage has also seen a boost, mirroring gigabit network coverage

back in June 2021 and now extending to 88.9% and 94.9% of premises in North and West Northants in June 2025 (source: ThinkBroadband.com). This coverage compares to 88.6% gigabit and 78.5% full fibre coverage across England.



In early July 2025, West Northants ranked joint 7th highest amongst 317 local authorities in England for full fibre coverage, which is a good news story. This is helped by coverage in the town of Northampton. North Northants ranks 27th out of 317 local authorities in England for gigabit coverage while West Northants ranks at 38th highest (source: Thinkbroadband.com).

CityFibre's commercial coverage in the area and now their roll out for the government's "Project Gigabit" is helping to boost coverage performance and is now connecting some of the harder to reach communities and targeting holes left in some localities. Places already benefitting from Project Gigabit or due to be connected over the next two years include unserved parts of:

Wansford, Yarwell, Nassington, Kings Cliffe, Apethorpe, Woodnewton, Fotheringhay, Cotterstock, Glapthorn, Warmington, Barnwell, Duddington, Collyweston, Easton on the Hill, Wadenhoe, Lilford, Thorpe Waterville, Titchmarsh, Thrapston, Twywell, Woodford, Denford, Ecton, Little Addington, Irthlingborough, Finedon, Wollaston, Earls Barton, Raunds, Hargrave, Pytchley, Broughton, Desborough, Stanion, Weldon, Brigstock, Gretton, Corby Town. Castle Ashby, Nether Heyford, Bugbrooke, Stowe IX Churches, Hackleton, Denton, Dodford, Staverton, Preston Capes, Badby, Daventry, and Arthingworth.

More areas are also set to benefit in future years. CityFibre will contact parish and town councils in advance of works commencing and once deployment timescales in these localities are firmed up. Note that plans can be subject to change as new commercial coverage by other telecoms providers may be delivered, requiring a descope from the subsidised Project Gigabit programme, or there may be constraints which, even with best endeavours, can't be resolved, blocking network upgrades to some premises.

Openreach's rollout of full fibre broadband continues at pace across Northamptonshire, with more than 117,000 properties now enabled in North Northamptonshire and around 122,000 in West Northamptonshire, representing a £71m investment from Openreach in the county. This rollout is part of Openreach's £15bn programme to rollout full fibre broadband to 25 million properties across the UK by the end of 2026. Rollout continues, currently focusing in exchange areas such as Brackley and Weston Favell, and take-up of the new services amongst businesses and residents in Northamptonshire is in line with national averages (38%).

The two Superfast Northamptonshire contracts with Gigaclear have completed their build, extending full fibre networks to 38,500 premises including around 6,800 target premises in need of faster connectivity. These premises are now able to access gigabit services. Almost 50 communities have been served. You can view the list of served or partially served communities at <https://superfastnorthamptonshire.net/project-delivery/the-roll-out-schedule/>.

The Superfast Northamptonshire programme has now completed build and has boosted faster broadband connectivity massively over the last 10 years or so. Two contracts with Openreach and two contracts with Gigaclear have provided 80,000 premises with access to superfast broadband (download line speeds over 30Mbps (max 80Mbps)), including 71,000 target premises and over 40,500 premises with gigabit capable full fibre connectivity, including almost 9,000 target premises. The project has helped to change lives, bringing people virtually closer together, enabling access to digital modern life and providing critical connectivity to boost business performance and their access to markets. Other telecoms network providers contributing to gigabit coverage performance commercially include VirginMedia (one of the largest gigabit network providers), Nexfibre, Full Fibre, Glide, Hyperoptic, OFNL, Jurassic, and Voneus. For broadband enquiries in Northamptonshire, please contact bigidea.ncc@northnorthants.gov.uk.

PROVIDING SUPPORT TO CAMPAIGN GROUPS

Northamptonshire has had more than its fair share of big planning applications, including warehousing, solar parks, and wind farms. Such development proposals often spawn a local group to campaign against the proposals and there have been some excellent recent examples, including Save Towcester Now, Save Titchmarsh, Thrapston and Upper Nene Valley Countryside & Habitats (STAUNCH), and others.



Parish and town councils are usually not far away from such campaign groups and there is often an overlap in membership, but it is important to remember that a campaign group and a parish or town council have entirely different roles. There is a place for both, but understanding the key differences is vital.

Campaign groups usually require funding for their activities, and the parish and town councils in the area impacted by the proposed development are an obvious source. A question that Northants CALC receives frequently is “Are we allowed to fund campaigns and, if so, what are our legal powers for the expenditure?”

If a parish or town council wants to fund a campaign group directly with a cash grant, it could do so under the General Power of Competence (GPC) if the council is eligible to use that power, and at a pinch under Section 137 if it is not eligible.

However, local authorities (including parish and town councils) do not often support campaign groups financially. Some reasons include:

- The council must represent everyone, and there might be people in the community that don't support the campaign group's position or approach (albeit they are in favour of what the campaign group is campaigning about).
- The council should be objective, which is difficult if it has funded a campaign group with a necessarily biased position. Losing objectivity can make it more difficult to negotiate with the developer IF the appeal is upheld and permission is granted.

- The council may have a reputational risk by association if it has funded a campaign group that then does something improper/illegal or even just something that sails a little too close to the wind.
- The council may get drawn into providing further funds if the campaign group runs out of money but “just needs a few extra thousands to finish the task, having come this far already.” It may be difficult to refuse making further grants having set a precedent with the first one.

All the above points can be mitigated, so none are deal breakers necessarily.

There are alternatives to providing direct financial support in the form of a cash grant. For example, responding to a development proposal sometimes necessitates having an Environmental Impact Statement, or a Noise Impact Statement, or an Ecology Survey. These things can be commissioned by a parish or town council using Section 111 powers and will assist with the council’s own response to the planning application. The results of such studies can then be made available to campaign groups in lieu of support in cash.

Of course, there are circumstances when it is time for a parish or town council to put all its eggs in one basket. If 99% of the community is against a development proposal, and the council is not too bothered about maintaining its objectivity, then it should do whatever it thinks will give the best chance of the planning application being refused, and if that means directly funding a campaign group, then so be it.

Where a cash grant is made, the parish or town council should expect the campaign group to be formally constituted, to provide the council with a copy of said constitution, and to have a bank account in the name of the group, ideally with multiple-authority signatories. The constitution should provide for what happens to unspent monies when the campaign has concluded.

The above sets out some of the considerations a parish or town council should think about when it is approached by a campaign group for assistance. Individual councillors should also think about their personal involvement in such groups and any implications of that under their council’s Code of Conduct, making the appropriate declarations and withdrawing, if necessary, from any consideration of financial or other support. Feel free to contact Northants CALC if you have a specific situation you wish to talk through.

MARKET-WIDE HALF-HOURLY SETTLEMENT

As reported in the Sept/Oct 2024 *eUpdate*, the electricity market is undergoing a significant change in how electricity is used and accounted for. Announced in April 2021 by energy market regulator Ofgem, Market-Wide Half Hourly Settlements (MHHS) requires all UK energy suppliers to settle energy trades and payments on a half-hourly basis by May 2027. Here, nationalgrid provides a Q&A on unmetered supply, which most councils with street lighting use:

Will this affect Unmetered Supply Customers?

Yes. Customers with Unmetered Supplies traded by Non-Half Hourly (NHH) settlement arrangements are required to transition to Half Hourly (HH) settlement.

When is this change happening?

Non-Half Hourly (NHH) settled Unmetered Supplies are mandated to transition to Half Hourly (HH) settlement by September 2025.

What is the difference between HH and NHH Settlement?

In Unmetered Non-Half Hourly (NHH) settlement, Estimated Annual Consumptions (EACs) are calculated across the customer's inventory by the Unmetered Supplies Operator UMSO and sent on to the Supplier. This data is then applied to a static profile which does not reflect the consumption pattern of the actual unmetered services. Therefore, NHH calculations do not take account of longer days in summer or shorter days in winter. Unmetered Half Hourly settlement calculations use actual sunrise and sunset times or derives them from the Astronomical Almanac, making the consumption calculations more accurate as they model the behaviour of each piece of equipment listed in a customer's inventory. For example, if a streetlight is switched off for a period during the night the energy calculation will reflect the behaviour within a Settlement Period (30-minute intervals, 24/7). Unmetered HH Settlement Period data is calculated and sent on to Suppliers by a Meter Administrator (MA).

What is the Meter Administrator (MA) role?

The Meter Administrator (MA) is responsible for providing Half Hourly consumption data into Settlement. This is the consumption of a particular Customer in kilowatt-hour (kWh), for each half hour of every day. Customers transitioning to Half Hourly settlement will be appointed an MA, behind the scenes, by the Supplier. Customers wishing to have greater access to their data

and better manage consumption costs can enter direct contract with their preferred MA – traditionally this has been customers with a maximum demand greater than 100kW.

Is the Unmetered Supply Operator (UMSO) role changing?

From September 2025 the UMSO activity to determine NHH Estimated Annual Consumptions (EACs) will cease. The UMSO will however continue to be responsible for receiving, validating, and summarising customer inventories, issuing Certificates of Unmetered Supply, Connection agreements and providing Meter Point Administration Numbers (MPANs).

Will Unmetered Supply records look different?

Once moved into the HH settlement, unmetered supply customers will only require one MPAN per Inventory and the Certificate of Unmetered Supply will no longer display an Estimated Annual Consumption (EAC) value. However, customer inventories will only change if the UMSO is notified of amendments by the customer &/or the UMSO agrees changes with the customer.

What else should Unmetered Supply Customers know?

Over the coming months, Suppliers will communicate specific details regarding the changes occurring and advise what, if anything, their customers need to do. For those customers transitioning from Non-Half Hourly to Half Hourly settlement it is important to ensure the inventory and customer details are accurate prior to transitioning, as retrospective changes will not be permitted beyond the date of migration/change of settlement.

Where can I find more information?

Electricity settlement reform:

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/energy-policy-and-regulation/policy-and-regulatory-programmes/electricity-settlement-reform>

Mandate to Half-Hourly Settle the Non-Half Hourly Unmetered Supplies Metering Systems (P434):

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/P434%20PDF.pdf>

Thanks to nationalgrid for the FAQ and to Cllr Andy Crisp at Hollowell & Teeton Parish Council for forwarding it for inclusion in the *eUpdate*.

ASSERTION 10

The addition of “Assertion 10” on digital and data compliance in the Annual Governance Statement (Section 1 of the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR)) has caused quite a stir. Here we look at what it means in practice.

Firstly, the new assertion will be in the AGAR for the year ending 31 March 2026, so parish and town councils should be compliant now because the AGAR relates to the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. If your council is not yet compliant, it should be actively working towards it.

So, what does “compliant” mean? The Practitioner’s Guide 2025 says that to warrant a positive response to Assertion 10, a parish or town council needs to have taken the following actions:

- E-mail management - Every council must have a generic e-mail account hosted on a council-owned domain, for example clerk@abcparishcouncil.gov.uk or clerk@abcparishcouncil.org.uk rather than, e.g., abcparishclerk@gmail.com or abcparishclerk@outlook.com.
- All councils (parish meetings are excluded) must meet legal requirements for all existing websites regardless of what domain is being used.
- All websites must meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.2 AA and the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (where applicable).
- All websites must include published documentation as specified in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Transparency code for smaller authorities (where applicable).
- All councils and parish meetings must follow both the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016 and the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018.
- All councils and parish meetings must process personal data with care and in line with the principles of data protection.

- The DPA 2018 supplements the GDPR and classifies a council or parish meetings as both a Data Controller and a Data Processor.
- All councils (excluding parish meetings) must also have an IT policy. This explains how everyone - clerks, members, and other staff - should conduct authority business in a secure and legal way when using IT equipment and software. This relates to the use of authority-owned and personal equipment. A template IT policy is available at <https://tinyurl.com/bdf8v7bs>.

Section 5 of the Practitioner's Guide suggests that it is best practice (i.e. not yet a legal requirement) to use the .gov.uk domain for parish and town council e-mails and websites. This helps maintain a consistent and professional image for the council and ensures all communications are easily identifiable as coming from the council.

If a council has not met the requirements above it must declare a 'no' response to Assertion 10. It is expected that the internal auditor will record the lack of compliance in the Annual Internal Audit Report section of the AGAR, which in turn will allow electors to be aware of the matter at the point of inspection of the accounts. Councils that have not complied with Assertion 10 will find that the external auditor will, following a 'no' response being given, need to raise an 'other matter' drawing public attention to this fact. If, however, the council wrongly responded 'Yes' and the external auditor found evidence of non-compliance, they would then need to raise an 'except for' (qualification) matter in their report, to highlight the fact that an incorrect response has been given.

Whilst the requirement for a council to have "*an email account hosted on an authority owned domain*" is a sensible requirement, it completely misses the point that some councillors persist in using their personal email addresses over which the clerk (and council) has no real control from an information governance point of view. It's like locking all the doors and downstairs windows but leaving the upstairs windows wide open. However, 99% of the council's external comms should go through the clerk, so theirs is the most important mailbox to lock down.

Nothing in Assertion 10 is new. And nothing in Assertion 10 is particularly difficult or costly to comply with. Any council, clerk, or councillor not using an official council email system by the end of 2025 is just being wilfully intransigent.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Recent heartbreaking incidents across the country, including the tragic deaths of young children due to falling gravestones (<https://tinyurl.com/3x7fvj3s>) and trees (<https://tinyurl.com/vrehnpex>) serve as stark and sombre reminders of the critical importance of robust risk assessment and unwavering commitment to health and safety in public spaces.

Parish and town councils hold a significant responsibility for the safety of residents and visitors using facilities under their management. While these recent events occurred elsewhere, they underscore universal principles of vigilance and proactive management that every council in Northamptonshire must embrace.

Parish and town councils are generally low risk operations, but they are often responsible for a wide array of public assets, including cemeteries and churchyards (gravestones, monuments, and mature trees within these spaces), parks and open spaces (playgrounds, trees, benches, street lighting, pathways, and sports facilities), and council-owned buildings (village halls, community centres, and offices).

Under health and safety legislation, including the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, councils have a duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety, and welfare of anyone who may be affected by their activities. This isn't just a legal obligation; it's a moral imperative.

The recent incidents highlight two specific areas where vigilance is paramount:

- **Gravestones and Memorials:** Older gravestones can become unstable due to weathering, ground movement, or inadequate foundations, posing a serious toppling hazard, especially to children. Councils should implement a systematic program of regular inspections for all gravestones and memorials under their control, identifying loose or damaged memorials. Immediately cordon off and clearly mark any identified dangerous memorials. If the cemetery isn't solely council-owned, work closely with landowners like churches to ensure a coordinated approach.
- **Trees in Public Spaces:** Even seemingly healthy trees can pose risks, particularly older or diseased specimens, or those in areas of high public

traffic. Councils must commission regular, professional tree surveys by qualified arborists. Act promptly on survey recommendations, undertaking necessary pruning, felling, or bracing. Be especially mindful of trees in areas where children play and conduct immediate tree inspections after periods of high winds or heavy rain.

Building a culture of safety and conducting comprehensive risk assessments are the cornerstones of good health and safety management. Don't just tick boxes; conduct thorough, documented risk assessments for all council-managed sites and activities. Identify potential hazards, assess the likelihood and severity of harm, and implement control measures to mitigate risks. Remember to review and update these regularly.

Develop and adhere to a clear schedule for inspecting all council assets. Ensure trained personnel are conducting these inspections or engage qualified contractors where specialist expertise is required (e.g., playground inspectors, arborists). Maintain detailed records of all inspections, identified hazards, and remedial actions. Ensure that those responsible for health and safety, and those carrying out inspections or maintenance, are adequately trained and competent for the task. Consider relevant training for councillors and staff on health and safety awareness.

Parish and town councils must make adequate budget allocation to meet their health and safety responsibilities. Recognise that health and safety measures, including professional surveys and necessary maintenance, require appropriate financial allocation. This is an investment in community safety, not an optional extra. Work effectively with other stakeholders, such as local authorities and landowners. Crucially, encourage residents to report any concerns they may have about hazards in public spaces.

The recent tragedies serve as a powerful and painful reminder that safety can never be taken for granted.

By embracing a proactive approach to risk assessment, implementing robust inspection and maintenance regimes, and fostering a strong culture of health and safety, parish and town councils in Northamptonshire can significantly reduce the likelihood of similar devastating incidents.

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