NORTHAMPTONSHIRE
COUNTY ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

NCALC

Update

ISSUE 5/25 September - October 2025

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Twenty years ago, there used to be a slowdown in the number of enquiries Northants CALC received in August. But then the local government world gradually got busier and busier and by 2020 we didn't notice any difference at all in August. Then Covid hit and people took the opportunity to reassess their work/life balance and realised that taking a break from work is important. Consequently, since 2020, we have once again noticed a small drop in enquiries received over the summer. However, the workload for parish and town councils hasn't been dented by Covid (if anything, the opposite) so the dip in August simply defers the inevitable and since 1 September 2025 our feet haven't touched the ground! We like to be busy and wouldn't have it any other way, but it means that it is currently taking a little longer to respond to enquiries than usual, so please bear with us.

As well as enquiries, the staff team has attended more than a dozen training and development events across the county in September, from Twywell in the northeast to Brackley in the southwest. Our training programme, led by Marie Reilly, is second to none, so if your council would like to consider a whole-council development session please contact Marie for more information (see back page).

> *"...there is always something to learn and bring back for the benefit of member councils in Northamptonshire."*

Due to the slightly quieter August, the Chief Executives of the five County Associations of Local Councils in the East Midlands (Northamptonshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire) take the opportunity to have an away day. This year it took place up the M1 in South Normanton organised by the Derbyshire Association. We had a very useful discussion about developments in the sector and where we think things will go over the next year and beyond. We discussed Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its potential positive and negative impacts on the parish and town council sector and on the operation of CALCs and we came up with all sorts of ideas for how CALCs can support their member councils as the technology develops. And considering the drive for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) across the East Midlands, we discussed the impact on parish and town councils of the creation of unitary councils using examples from Northamptonshire. I always find it useful to get away from the office and spend quality time with colleagues; there is always something to learn and bring back for the benefit of member councils in Northamptonshire.

We have two directors leaving the board this October. Richard Lewis (Rushden Town Council) is retiring after fifteen years of service to the Association as a director, and Greg Lavers (Silverstone Parish Council), whose tenure was short and sweet, is resigning due to an unexpected move away from the area. Vacancies on the board are filled through a selection process, and the advertisement went out in July. We received a lot of interest from a very high calibre group of applicants. We were able to shortlist and invite for interview the candidates with the best fit for the Association's current needs and the interviews were held on 9 September 2025. The Appointments Panel has recommended two people for appointment and the recommendations will be considered by the AGM to be held on 4 October 2025. We were extremely fortunate to receive such a great level of interest in the vacancies, and I would like to thank all those who expressed an interest. The board is made up of directors who are councillors or clerks from member councils in Northamptonshire, and it is great that the membership is so supportive.

And talking of membership, after a meeting held on 17 September 2025, we were delighted to welcome Wellingborough Town Council (WTC) back into membership after a two-year absence. Northants CALC helped create WTC in 2019/20 as part of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Northamptonshire, so the council is just moving into its second four-year term. WTC has significant potential to become even more central to the Wellingborough community, and we look forward to supporting the council in any way we can.

At the time of publication, there is just eight days until our 78th Annual Conference, which is now fully booked. We are looking forward to seeing everyone at Moulton Community Centre and to spending a morning thinking about the future of the parish and town council sector and celebrating our and our member councils' achievements this past year. Don't forget, hot refreshments on arrival from 0915!

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

(ANOTHER) NEW SECRETARY OF STATE

Another autumn, another Cabinet reshuffle, another Communities Secretary. The new man at the top of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), succeeding Angela Raynor, is the Right Honourable Steve Reed OBE MP.

Mr Reed was previously the Secretary of State (SoS) for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, a position he held for just over a year. He is the MP for Streatham and Croydon North.

Angela Raynor was SoS at MHCLG for four hundred and twenty days, not quite reaching Michael Gove's six hundred and nine days but far outstripping the two Communities Secretaries before that who managed fifty-nine and forty-nine days, respectively. Since 2005, the average SoS tenure at the department has been five hundred and twenty-two days, and that's including Eric Pickles who was there for five years.

Perhaps whoever is the incumbent SoS makes no difference whatsoever. After all, there is a ministerial team and a whole department full of civil servants. Or perhaps it makes all the difference and the department lurches from one brand new policy initiative to another, never really having the continuity to achieve anything lasting.

More relevant to the world of parish and town councils is who the Minister of State for Local Government is. The trouble is that each new SoS tends to appoint their own team, so a change of SoS creates a change of Minister. Under Angela Raynor, the Minister of State for Local Government was Jim McMahon MP, who spearheaded the government's push towards Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), Strategic Mayoral Authorities, and Combined Mayoral Authorities. Mr McMahon was widely respected for his practical experience as a former principal council leader and his understanding of local government challenges. He oversaw the introduction of the English Devolution Bill and was praised for his collaborative approach and commitment to empowering local communities. His successor is Alison McGovern MP, who has the title "Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness." Ms McGovern is expected to continue the work of her predecessor on local government reorganisation and fairer funding, with a focus on empowering local authorities and improving accountability. She is respected for her experience in both local and national government and for her pragmatic approach. However, don't get too attached because she is seen as a rising figure in the Labour Party and recently threw her hat in the ring for the Deputy Leadership, so may quickly outgrow MHCLG.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) spends a good deal of time and money establishing relationships with the ministerial team at MHLCG (and other key government departments such as Defra and the Cabinet Office) so it is enormously frustrating and challenging when the faces change so frequently. Perhaps now there will be a period of stability. Anything over one year will do.

PHOTOS ON YOUR COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

As previously advised in *eUpdates* and Friday mini *eUpdates*, it is a bad idea to use photos and images purloined from the Internet to illustrate your website and social media stories. Whilst hundreds of images are available without usage rights, many are proprietary or copyrighted. If you get caught using an image you shouldn't be, the penalties can be high, so what are the alternatives?

There are various dedicated image platforms that have Royalty-free or Creative Commons Zero (CC0) licenses, which means the images can be used by others without charge (sometimes accreditation is required). Examples include Unsplash (https://unsplash.com), and Pixabay (https://pixabay.com).

Even Microsoft Word has an extensive library of stock images which can be used when creating documents (but not saved separately to use on websites etc.). And if all else fails, there are a range of AI-powered image generators where you can create your own unique image, which is then usually free to use for non-commercial purposes.

It can be hard to find just the right image, but you get used to using precise search terms. For example, the photo above is from Pixabay using the search term "council meeting," although in fairness the search results did also include some rather more accurate offerings!

PARISH INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT PLANS

An article by James Wilson of James Wilson Associates

Are Infrastructure Investment Plans (IIPs) a way for parish and town councils to deliver more ambitious infrastructure and community development projects for their areas?

Ever since the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) through the Planning Act of 2008, many parish and town councils have been able to consider larger infrastructure projects due to CIL payments from developments in their area. CIL is a form of developer contribution which is payable on any development which has been assessed against viability issues and forms part of a CIL charging schedule which has been tested through a public inquiry. Developers pay a levy based on a per square metre fee. These payments replace the normal section 106 agreements, although limited site-specific agreements can still be negotiated on top of CIL, and form an accumulating pot for the collecting authorities to put towards 'strategic infrastructure'.

For parish and town councils a 'meaningful proportion' of the CIL collection is passed on to them from the collecting authority. For areas that have a Neighbourhood Plan in place this is 25% of all CIL fees generated within that area which are not capped. For other areas without Neighbourhood Plans the level is 15% which is capped at £100 per existing council tax dwellings per year. Even so, this can sometimes still generate significant revenue for parish and town councils depending on the level of development which is taking place – resources that they may not have been able to rely on previously. CIL collecting authorities need to identify infrastructure requirements across their areas, setting out what is needed, where, and when. This assists in developing their place-shaping vision and Local Plan as well as prioritising and allocating CIL revenues and other funding.

Parish and town councils are now considering what local infrastructure and facilities are important for their communities through Infrastructure Investment Plans (IIPs) and how this can help them to deliver more ambitious schemes with the benefit of CIL resources or other funding.

IIPs are not a statutory requirement, however, understanding the needs of the community and creating a strategy to prioritise funds for local projects and infrastructure can be a powerful way to allocate scarce resources and potentially deliver major projects to address long term issues. If significant growth is impacting your area, it is important to review what current assets you have and how these might require enhancement to serve the community. Identifying what the community wants should also be a key part of developing an IIP potentially through a participatory budgeting exercise or questionnaires and engagement. An appraisal of the development expected within the area over the course of the plan period and hence the level of CIL receipts that might be available can provide a useful guide as to future funding streams.

With the recent removal of funding and support for Neighbourhood Planning through Locality, it is more important than ever for parish and town councils to consider their community needs, planning challenges and alignment with existing or emerging Local Plans for the future. Infrastructure Investment Plans can be a part of this process alongside Neighbourhood Plans and other strategies which can help parish and town councils to guide development in the best way for local people.

For more information or advice contact James Wilson on 07832 753197 or james@jameswilsonassociates.co.uk

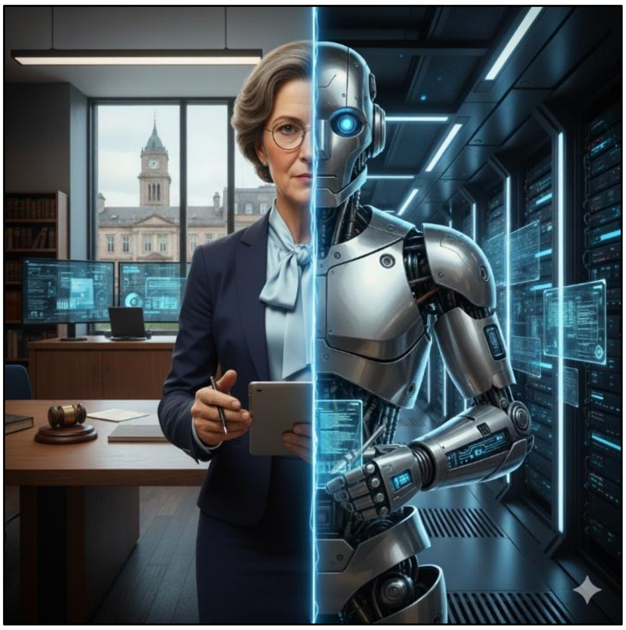
AGENTIC

If you haven't heard of the word before, you will soon see it everywhere. Get ready for "Agentic AI." Agentic AI refers to artificial intelligence systems capable of autonomous decision-making, goal setting, and action-taking. Unlike passive tools, agentic AI can plan, adapt, and pursue objectives independently, often interacting with environments or other agents. Agentic AI combines reasoning, memory, and learning to operate with a degree of self-direction and initiative.

For example, an agentic AI assistant could autonomously monitor planning applications, summarise key details, flag potential community concerns, and draft initial responses for council review—saving officers and councillors time while ensuring timely, informed engagement with local developments.

The future is AI. The future is now. (But see article below!)

WORKLOAD AND INTENSITY



Artificial Intelligence (AI) will impact every aspect of life. Some commentators think the impact will be quite gradual over the next ten to twenty years, and others think it will be a disruptive technology that changes everything within five years. Only time will tell, but the news and evidence point more towards the latter than the former. Maybe both scenarios will play out, but in different spheres. For example, individuals may see a more gradual impact, whereas organisations and governments will see bigger impacts more quickly. As with all new technology, the military is ahead of the game and if bad actors develop AI first then the impact could be huge.

Back in today's world, Northants CALC is thinking about the impact of so-called "efficiency drives" in the context of service-based jobs such as one might find in local government, including parish and town clerks. AI has the potential to drive efficiency and productivity, but clerks already work at high intensity, so AI "helping" them to work even more intensively is a great concern.

Apparent "down time" (when a clerk is not bashing away on the keyboard) is often time used for critical reflection, decompression, and big-picture thinking. Those things are very important for mental health and wellbeing. Yes, clerks could respond to even more emails every day, but there are already reports of burnout, even before the widespread implementation of AI.

It's completely understandable to be concerned about the potential impact of efficiency drives and AI on an already high-intensity job.

The Double-Edged Sword of "Efficiency Drives"

Historically, "efficiency drives" in service-based sectors often focus on quantifiable outputs and cost reduction. While seemingly logical, they can lead to:

- **Increased Workload:** The most common outcome is an expectation to do more with less, directly increasing individual workload and intensity.

- **Erosion of "Hidden" Value:** Activity-Based Costing (ABC) often struggles to quantify the value of less tangible activities like reflection, creative problem-solving, or relationship building. These are frequently mislabelled as "downtime", even though they are crucial for quality, innovation, and long-term effectiveness, particularly when it comes to “place-shaping” or “community building,” which are critical elements of the clerk’s role.

- **Reduced Quality:** When pressure mounts to process more, the quality of interactions, decisions, and services can decline. This can lead to more errors, re-work, and ultimately, a less effective service.

- **Burnout and Decreased Morale:** Sustained high-intensity work without adequate breaks or opportunities for decompression inevitably leads to stress, burnout, and a decline in staff morale and retention.

AI: Promise vs. Peril

AI's potential in parish and town councils is significant, but its implementation carries similar risks to traditional efficiency drives if not managed thoughtfully:

Potential Benefits (if implemented well):

- **Automation of Repetitive Tasks:** AI can excel at handling routine tasks like data entry, email triage, scheduling, and generating standard responses. This could free up clerks for more complex, nuanced, and empathetic work.

- **Improved Information Access:** AI-powered tools can quickly sift through vast amounts of council information, helping clerks find relevant policies, precedents, or data much faster.

- **Predictive Analytics:** AI can help identify trends, predict demand for council services, or flag potential issues, allowing for more proactive rather than reactive work. Councillors furnished with such data can look forward and make strategic decisions with far greater certainty.

- **Personalised Support:** AI can help tailor information or support to residents based on their specific needs, potentially streamlining interactions.

Potential Perils:

- **"Efficiency" Leading to Increased Output Expectation:** The most significant risk is that any time saved by AI is immediately filled with demands from councillors and residents for increased output. If AI automates 20% of a clerk's current tasks, will their workload be reduced by 20%, or will they be expected to take on 20% more new tasks?

- **Depersonalisation of Work:** If AI handles too much of the direct human interaction, the remaining human roles might become more purely supervisory or problem-solving, potentially leading to a less diverse and engaging work experience.

- **Erosion of "Soft Skills" and Professional Judgement:** Over-reliance on AI could diminish opportunities for clerks and councillors to develop and use crucial human skills like empathy, complex negotiation, or intuitive judgment, which are vital in all areas of public service, including at parish and town councils.

- **The "Always On" Culture:** AI tools could enable or exacerbate the expectation of constant availability and responsiveness, further blurring work-life boundaries.

- **Misunderstanding of Value-Add:** There's a risk that the thinking time that clerks value will be further scrutinised as AI provides more granular data on activity, without understanding the qualitative benefits of that time.

Protecting Well-being and Valuing Intangible Contributions

Here's how clerks might frame or approach these concerns:

1. **Advocate for a Holistic View of Productivity:**
   Push back against metrics that solely focus on quantifiable output. Argue for the inclusion of qualitative measures, such as resident satisfaction, resolution quality, innovation, and staff well-being. Clearly explain why your

so-called "downtime" is essential. Frame it as "strategic thinking," "complex problem solving," "quality assurance," or "professional development." Use examples of how this time prevents errors, improves service design, or fosters better relationships within the council and the community. Emphasise that sustained performance and quality service are impossible without healthy, engaged clerks and other officers. Burnout is expensive for councils in the long run leading to recruitment costs and loss of institutional knowledge.

2. **Shape the Implementation of AI:**
   Advocate for AI tools that assist and empower you. The goal should be to make council work more manageable and effective, not just faster. Be part of the conversation about which tasks AI should take on. Highlight the most tedious, repetitive, and low-value tasks that, if automated, would truly free up your time for higher-value activities. Push for pilot programs where AI tools are tested with your input, and where there are clear mechanisms for feedback to councillors on the impact on your workload, well-being, and service quality. Ensure that if AI changes your job, there's adequate training and opportunities for you to develop new skills that leverage the AI tools effectively.

3. **Set Boundaries and Manage Expectations:**
   Help your councillors understand the true demands of your role and the importance of those less tangible activities. Continue to hone your prioritisation skills and be prepared to articulate what you can realistically achieve given your current workload and the need for quality and sustainability. Remember always that self-care is not negotiable; reiterate and enforce your own boundaries around work hours and "off-duty" time. This is easier said than done, but crucial for your long-term health and for the success and sustainability of your council.

Raising these concerns is a critical part of the conversation about the future of work in parish and town councils. The goal should not be simply more "efficiency" for its own sake, but rather to create more effective, sustainable, and humane service delivery systems. This requires a nuanced understanding of human work, valuing not just output, but also the cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects that contribute to true community value.

CAN CHAMPION SCHEME

The Climate and Nature Champion Scheme launched on 1 July 2025 as an action arising out of the survey of member councils in spring 2025 on environmental activity.

The purpose of the scheme is to encourage and co-ordinate activity across councils, share good practice, and disseminate relevant updates and funding opportunities. The CAN Champion will act as a parish or town council's 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 as well as being the council's 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.

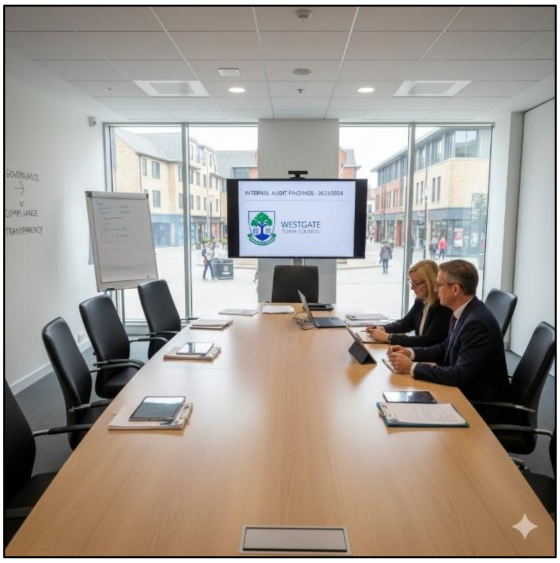
Councils were asked to appoint a CAN Champion at their meetings over the summer, and we already have 76 registered across the county. Registrations are still coming in as councils start up their meetings after the August break.

A welcome event for all CAN Champions will be held online at 1900 - 2100 on Wednesday 19 November 2025 (details will be sent to all CAN Champions in due course) and once the scheme is fully up and running, CAN Champions will receive regular communications from Northants CALC (monthly or quarterly, to be decided) and will be invited to meetings.

As with the Police Liaison Representative (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 communications and so will be the de facto CAN Champion.

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

THE (MOST COMMON) COMMON ISSUES



Northants CALC runs an Internal Audit Service (IAS) for parish and town councils ("smaller authorities") in Northamptonshire. The service comprises of a panel of sixteen internal auditors, most of whom are clerks in Northamptonshire, which Northants CALC allocates to member councils.

After each audit season, the IAS panel looks at the common issues arising during the year in review and then, normally in the September/October *eUpdate* , there is a comprehensive list of issues for clerks and RFOs to peruse and maybe shift nervously in their seats. This year, we are going wider and deeper. Instead of looking only at the year ending 31 March 2025, we have analysed the past five years and have identified the top three issues that have been raised over and over again in that period. And instead of simply listing the issues, we have provided top tips for how councils can avoid them for the year ending 31 March 2026 and, hopefully, everafter. When addressed proactively, this will significantly improve your council's governance and ensure a smoother audit process.

Issue 1: Weak Financial Controls and Records Management

This is the most frequent category of failure, spanning deficiencies in routine bank reconciliation, lack of mandated internal checks, and outdated controls.

How to Avoid this Pitfall for YE 31 March 2026:

- **Mandate Regular Internal Control Checks:** A council should appoint an Internal Controls Councillor (ICC) to conduct periodic checks of its internal controls, ideally at least quarterly. Record and minute these reviews formally. This review informs the Annual Governance Statement (AGS Assertion 2).

- **Ensure Robust Bank Reconciliation:** Bank reconciliations must be prepared routinely, covering all of the authority's bank accounts, and must agree with Box 8 (Total cash and short-term investments) on the Accounting Statements (Section 2). The year-end bank reconciliation is a key financial control and must be submitted to the external auditor. Councillors should verify and sign the reconciliations and original bank statements as evidence of this review.

- **Maintain Current Bank Mandates:** Routinely review and update the bank mandate for all council bank accounts. This is particularly vital following local elections or changes in the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) or clerk.

- **Adhere to Financial Regulations (FRs) for Payments:** Ensure that all expenditure is approved prior to payment. Avoid the bad practice of councillors or clerks making purchases on behalf of the council using personal cards for subsequent reimbursement, as this affects transparency and VAT claims. If delegated authority is used for payments, this must be clearly documented and monitored.

- **Review Reserves Annually:** Although there is no strict legal upper or lower limit on reserves, they must be justified and reviewed regularly (at least annually). It is recommended that general reserves should typically be maintained at between three and twelve months of net revenue expenditure.

Issue 2: Public Transparency and Statutory Publication Requirements

This issue relates to failure to disclose necessary documents as required by law (Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015) and Proper Practices, compromising accountability (AGS Assertion 4).

How to Avoid this Pitfall for YE 31 March 2026:

- **Strict Compliance with Public Rights Period:** The RFO must set the 30 working day period for the exercise of public rights. This period must include the first 10 working days of July. Crucially, the notice announcing the period, along with the unaudited Sections 1 and 2 of the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR), must be published the day before the public rights period commences. Failure to set or advertise the dates correctly, particularly the start date, leads to external audit qualification.

- **Comprehensive Website Publication:** Authorities must publish specific documents on a publicly accessible website. Required publications include:
    - The completed AGAR (Sections 1 and 2) and the Notice of Public Rights.
    - After audit conclusion (by 30 September), the Notice of conclusion of audit and the External Auditor Report and Certificate (Section 3).
    - The Annual Internal Audit Report.
    - Current Financial Regulations (FRs), Standing Orders (SOs), and Code of Conduct.
    - Budget details, bank reconciliations, and variance analysis.

- **Ensure Website Content is Current:** Policies and risk assessments must be reviewed and formally approved annually. Draft minutes must be replaced with approved versions promptly after formal adoption.

Issue 3: AGAR Procedural Compliance and Addressing Audit Reports

Failures in this area demonstrate a misunderstanding of the legally mandated sequence for annual sign-off and a breakdown in following through on corrective action recommended by auditors (AGS Assertion 7).

How to Avoid this Pitfall for YE 31 March 2026:

- **Follow the Correct AGAR Approval Sequence:** The authority must strictly adhere to the following order:
    - **Receive and Note Internal Audit Report:** The Annual Internal Audit Report must be completed by the internal auditor and presented to the authority first. The council must formally minute that the report has been received, considered, and that appropriate action will be taken to address any issues raised.
    - **Approve Section 1 (AGS):** The authority must approve the Annual Governance Statement.
    - **Approve Section 2 (Accounting Statements):** Section 2 must be approved after Section 1. The Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) must certify (sign) Section 2 before it is presented to the authority for final approval and signed by the Chair.

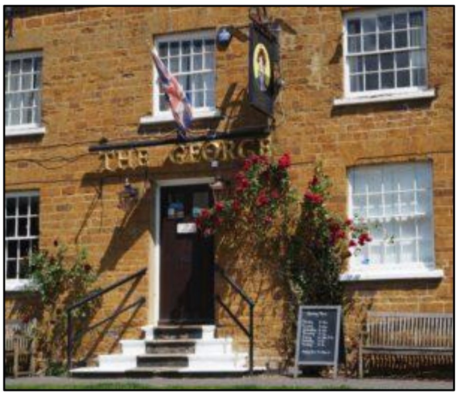
- **Ensure AGAR Accuracy:** Before submission to the External Auditor (if applicable), rigorously check that the AGAR sections are complete, calculated correctly, and contain no blank boxes (use £0 or Nil if required). Specific attention should be paid to ensuring Line 1 (Balances brought forward) equals Line 7 of the prior year.

- **Act on All Auditor Reports:** The authority must take appropriate action on all matters raised in reports from both internal and external auditors (AGS Assertion 7). If an authority has failed to implement corrective actions required in the previous year by the external auditor, they should answer 'No' to Assertion 7. The consideration and decisions regarding audit reports must be included in formal minutes.

By prioritising these three areas for the financial year ending 31 March 2026, smaller authorities can demonstrate adherence to Proper Practices and maintain high standards of financial governance.

The final top tip is ask, ask, ask! Governance and accountability for parish and town councils is not straightforward, and no clerk, RFO, or councillor is expected to be an expert from day 1. For a clerk/RFO, preparing your first Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) is a big deal but there is plenty of help available, from dedicated training courses to one-off bespoke advice and guidance, Northants CALC will support you all the way. You just have to ask.

SMALL CAN BE BEAUTIFUL



"*We're too small to take something like that on*" is not something you would hear said at Ashley Parish Council in Northamptonshire. It has 223 electors and a precept for 2024/25 of just £11,550, yet in April it secured a £250,000 Community Ownership Fund grant and took out a £200,000 Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) loan to buy and renovate the village pub. It is a huge undertaking, and it will be an incredible amount of work to pull it off, but one must admire the courage, ambition, and determination of the council to even get this far. Well done and good luck to Ashley Parish Council. For more information see https://tinyurl.com/mv6cu7sn and https://ashleyvillage.co.uk.

LIVE IN OR LIVE OUT?

Experienced Northamptonshire clerk, Alison Reynolds, describes the pros and cons of living in the parish you clerk for...

When I first became a Parish Clerk, I worked in the parish where I lived. At the time, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to clerk for a parish they didn't reside in. I loved my role and found great satisfaction in helping my own community.

Since having moved to clerk in a different parish, I've come to appreciate both sides of the experience and understand why clerks often clerk away from where they live. I have listed the advantages and disadvantages of clerking in both my home parish versus clerking in a neighbouring parish below:

The advantages of clerking where you live:

- **Deep connection for the Parish**
  Living in the community where I clerked fostered a strong personal investment in its success. I genuinely cared about the parish and its residents, which added immense job satisfaction.

- **Awareness of local issues**
  Being a resident meant that I had firsthand knowledge of what's happening in the parish. I saw and experienced the issues that needed addressing, allowing me to be proactive in my role.

- **Building strong relationships**
  Living and working in the same community helped in forming connections with councillors, colleagues, local groups, and residents. This led to new friendships and a sense of belonging.

- **Real job satisfaction**
  There was immense pride in seeing the positive impact of my work directly benefiting the community I lived in.

The disadvantages of clerking where you live:

- **Never fully switching off**
  One of the biggest challenges I found was maintaining a work-life balance. I found that I was never truly off duty, as residents would approach me in social settings, such as the local pub or while I was out with family.

- **Work and home life overlap**
  Walking through the parish often meant that I'd notice issues that need addressing. This led to me constantly emailing myself reminders. It became difficult to separate professional and personal life. My husband would often say '*You're never not working!*'

- **Dealing with complaints outside of work hours**
  Residents often approached me at inconvenient times, sometimes with complaints about matters outside the council's control, such as highways issues.

- **Personal and professional conflicts**
  Clerking where I lived sometimes blurred the lines between personal and professional relationships. I experienced this firsthand when a councillor, who lived nearby, acted unprofessionally on two separate occasions. Once by criticising me on social media and another time by threatening to file a complaint when I was ensuring the council acted lawfully. This created tension and I found it hard to not take it personally. They ultimately made me question whether working in my own parish was worth it.

Moving to a parish where I don't live

An opportunity arose to clerk for a larger parish council and given my experience with my neighbour, and the fact that it was a much larger parish council and a career step up, I decided to apply and was fortunate to be offered the role.

Now, clerking in a parish where I don't reside, I've found several benefits:

- **Better work-life balance**
  While I still love my role and take great satisfaction in serving the community, I can now switch off outside of work. I work hard during office

hours, but when I go home or visit a local pub, I'm no longer approached with work-related questions.

> *"…. I can provide unbiased opinions and professional guidance without a personal interest in the outcome..."*

- **Reduced emotional attachment**
  Not living in the parish removes some of the emotional weight from council decisions. I can provide unbiased opinions and professional guidance without a personal interest in the outcome.

- **Freedom from on-the-spot complaints**
  Since I don't live in the parish, I'm not confronted with complaints during my personal time. This allows for a more structured and professional approach to handling residents' concerns.

Final Thoughts

If I were to start my career as a Parish Clerk again or advise someone considering the role, I would recommend clerking where you don't live. While I cherished my time working in my home parish and miss being so closely connected to local happenings, I now enjoy a much healthier work-life balance. I have however also maintained the friendships I made during my time clerking where I live.

Both experiences have their merits, and the right choice depends on personal circumstances, the clerk's personality, and professional preferences. I would however suggest for those who want clearer boundaries between work and personal life, or if you're someone who naturally tries to please others then clerking in a different parish might be the better option.

Thank you to Alison for sharing that knowledge and insight. Twenty years ago, almost all clerks worked where they lived, whereas today most clerks live outside the parish. Both models can work, but it is useful to note the pitfalls described above of working where you live. Clerks working for multiple councils is much more common today also, where the clerk may work and live in one parish but also has the experience of working in parishes where they don't live. Ultimately, whatever works, works.

DEBATE V DIALOGUE

We sometimes hear councillors say after a council meeting, with unabashed enthusiasm, something like: "*Today we had a really good debate*." Individual contributions were thoughtful, well timed, and respectful of other participants. Each person felt their voice had been heard and their thoughts valued. It was safe to 'open up' and say what was really on their mind and what they did say added value to what others had already said. The exploration of an important issue was deep, intelligent, and produced a collective understanding that was illuminating and stimulating for everyone. Conclusions reached were likely to reflect new insights and a sense of opportunities to be grasped. It is very likely there was a collective 'aha!' as things suddenly made sense and the way forward became obvious. The shared experience was collegial, with a real sense of 'connection.' There was a sense of real teamwork taking place with unquestionable commitment to action what was decided.

Unfortunately, however, this type of positive experience is relatively rare. Many councillors express a sense of dissatisfaction with their council meetings. The subject matter fails to inspire and is inconsequential in terms of the true purpose of the organisation. There is no sense that the council is getting to grips with and making progress on important issues, with discourse typically dominated by a small number of people. Remaining councillors struggle to make their mark and may eventually 'tune out.' Some councillors may feel alienated or even marginalised. Decisions in such circumstances are often railroaded through and are unclear, if not disjointed. Commitment to the decision is low and subsequent action is frequently problematic.

In the worst cases, councillors' relationships with each other and their clerk progressively deteriorate, reflecting a low-trust environment in which the 'game' seems to be ego or personal agenda-driven points scoring. Division, discord, and dissatisfaction are rife. So, councillor turnover is high, and recruiting replacements is difficult. The clerk's performance and job satisfaction also suffer. Internal and external stakeholders, sensing these problems, experience a lack of confidence, which surfaces in ways that place further pressure on the council.

While the development of council ineffectiveness and dysfunctionality of this nature has many different causes, the way councillors engage with each other around the council table is among the most important.

Debate – purportedly producing the 'light of truth'

When councils meet, the term most often used to describe what they do is 'debate.' Inviting councillors to contribute to a debate is to set up adversarial positions that are attacked and defended. A debate by its very nature is a contest with winners (who are 'right') and losers (who are 'wrong'). While debate may bring some contestability to the evaluation of alternative propositions, it is essentially a confrontational process invoking aggressive and antagonistic models of interaction. Rigorous evaluation of proposals for decision is essential. However, creating an environment in which some councillors are unable, or afraid, to contribute their best thinking and work effectively with their colleagues in collective responsibility, is a fundamental barrier to effective governance.

Some councillors are good at debate and relish this type of contest with each other. Perhaps it is second nature to them because of the way they have been educated in their profession or vocation (e.g. lawyers, trade unionists, and other advocates). However, when councillors are going at each other, other councillors are forced to become little more than spectators. This is especially true if the usual protagonists are the chair and other 'senior' members of the council. Newer or less experienced councillors often feel that it is inappropriate to push back when apparently strong and fixed views are expressed by those they perceive as having higher status, particularly when a diversity of cultures is represented. Naturally quieter or less assertive councillors find it quite difficult, in a debate, to 'get a word in edgeways.'

A philosopher said, "*It is through the clash of differing opinions that the light of truth shines*," but the outcome of an adversarial debate seldom features enlightenment. "Facts" are either used as weapons or studiously avoided according to what might strengthen or weaken a preferred position. In some council debates, particularly in highly politicised contexts, intellectual honesty is often conspicuous by its absence.

Many councils operate based on politics (small or big P), persuasion and even coercion. We have been told by some councillors that they find the underlying aggressiveness and 'win/lose/right/wrong' nature of a debate off-putting, even offensive. The process is geared to attacking people as much as their positions, and does not promote the type of connection, co-operation, and collaboration implicit in the collective responsibility of a council. It is easy to see how distrust, scepticism, and misunderstanding can arise. The likelihood of reaching a broad-based agreement and commitment to a positive next move is greatly reduced. A common result of a debate is a loss of energy and goodwill.

The alternative is dialogue – creating a shared pool of meaning

The approach we commend is commonly known as "dialogue" – a process that can be learned and the more a council practises, the more capable it will become.

Instead of council discussions being like a game of tennis, where councillors and officers hit their solid ideas and well-defended positions back and forth trying to manoeuvre each other into a position of weakness to enable a winning shot, dialogue, in contrast, involves adding councillors' personal thinking (and feeling) to that of others to create a shared pool of meaning that continually flows and evolves, carrying the council into new, deeper levels of understanding that none of its members could have foreseen when they began. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change.

Dialogue, therefore, is essentially a collective learning process that aims to increase collective understanding. From greater understanding comes improved decision making because such a process increases a group's "collective intelligence." A likely – and welcome – byproduct is increased harmony between councillors and between councillors and officers.

In a council context, dialogue involves councillors working together to question and reflect on the assumptions underlying their individual and collective beliefs. The process enables a council to become more aware of any blind spots or areas of incoherency or inconsistency in its thinking.

The fundamental differences between dialogue and debate

The term "debate" is used loosely, and "dialogue" is a new concept to many people. So, the following table – based on a publication by the Co-Intelligence Institute – may be useful in highlighting the basic differences between these two styles of discourse:

Dialogue	Debate
Collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding	Oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong
Finding common ground is the goal	Winning is the goal
One listens to the other side(s) to understand, find meaning, and find agreement	To the extent one listens to the other side at all, it is to find flaws and to counter its arguments
Enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view	Affirms a participant's own (starting) point of view
Assumes the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions	Defends one's own solution as the best and excludes other options
Creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change	Fosters a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right
One searches for common ground and basic agreements	One searches for glaring differences
One searches for strengths in the other positions	One searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions
Involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend	Involves countering the other position without focusing on feelings or relationships; may belittle or deprecate the other person to gain advantage
Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution	Assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it
Remains open-ended	Implies a conclusion

This list of contrasting characteristics can be seen as a substitute for a comparison between effective governance on one hand (the “dialogue list”) and ineffective governance on the other (the “debate list”). For example: take the first contrasting statement (dialogue is collaborative) and convert it. It might appear as something like: “good governance is a collective decision-making process that produces a shared commitment to a particular course of action.” The obverse might be: “poor governance is disjointed decision making that produces fragmented, uncoordinated action.”

How to approach a dialogue – establishing desired norms of engagement

The following guidelines are central to dialogue in its most basic form. As councillors:

1. We agree to talk (and we do) about what is important to us as individuals.

2. We listen carefully to each other. Our explicit goal is to see how thoroughly we can understand each of our fellow councillors’ views and experiences.

3. We say what we think is true for us without saying (or even implying) that any of our colleagues with a different viewpoint is therefore wrong.

4. We thirst for what we can learn together through this joint exploration process (that we could not have learned on our own).

5. No matter what we think we know or how enthusiastic we might be about something, we restrain any tendency we might have to dominate or monopolise the conversation.

6. We commit to ensuring that our colleagues each have a chance to speak and to contribute to the “unfolding of meaning.”

Dialogue or debate—which is best for effective governance?

When there is a need to extract the best thinking from a council, to productively explore ideas and learn together and to build a high level of commitment to creative solutions and their effective implementation, debate is likely to be inappropriate, even counterproductive. Dialogue offers a much better pathway, both philosophically and practically. Many councillors and councils, however, will not find this easy initially. Dialogue requires both individual and group awareness and a commitment to its use. It needs effective facilitation of the process, and it requires perseverance in developing the capability.

In terms of good governance, the results will repay the effort many times over. If you have any doubt about this, go back to the start of this article. What was described was not “a really good debate” but was, in fact, “a really good dialogue.”

Based on an original article from Boardworks International (https://www.boardworks.nz).

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.

LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME

The Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS) exists to celebrate the successes of the very best local councils, and to provide a framework to support all local councils to meet their full potential. The scheme offers councils the opportunity to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assessed by their peers, and to put in place the conditions for continued improvement. The scheme provides the tools and encouragement to those councils at the beginning of their improvement journeys, as well as promoting and recognising councils that are at the cutting edge of the sector. For all the details, including details of the Bronze, Silver, and Gold awards, visit https://northantscalc.gov.uk/local-council-award-scheme.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Where a parish or town council has a regular, monthly recurring payment, it makes sense to automate it by setting up a Standing Order. The council authorises the budget allocation and the Standing Order instruction, and then the monthly payments go out as scheduled without the council needing to further authorise them. Such payments are simply reported to the council as part of the finance report at each council meeting.

A good example of a monthly recurring payment is the clerk's salary. Clearly, it is up to the council to set the salary (usually by agreeing the Spinal Column Point (SCP) at which the clerk will be paid), but the monthly pay can be easily calculated and a Standing Order created accordingly.

So far, so good. But remember this is the "*Cautionary Tale*," so there must be a kicker! The issue is that taking payments out of the normal routine can result in a loss of oversight and transparency. Standing Orders are automated payments, which means they can bypass the routine scrutiny that comes with manual approval. If the clerk's salary is paid without councillors reviewing timesheets, overtime claims, or changes in tax codes, it undermines transparency. As one councillor said, "*The Clerk seemingly pays themself… all without the councillors having sight of this or signing off the salary payment*." This lack of oversight can lead to misunderstandings, disputes, or even allegations of impropriety.

And often, it is the clerk (the beneficiary of the Standing Order) that has the best access to and deepest knowledge of the council's banking system. Two cases in northeast England highlight the risks: In one case a clerk created a duplicate Standing Order (human error!??) so was being paid double. Because the amounts and payment details were identical in both Standing Orders and identical to the detail being reported to the council, it went undetected for over a year. In another case, councillors assumed (never do that) that a former clerk's Standing Order would be cancelled by the new clerk, but it wasn't. Three monthly payments went out before anyone realised. Albeit highly embarrassing and awkward, normally recovery would be straightforward, but the former clerk had been in dispute with the council over termination pay, so the council's error had inadvertently put the former clerk in control of the disputed funds.

Use Standing Orders for convenience, but for goodness' sake keep tabs on them!

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