

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

In October I did a talk for my local history group titled “*What ~~Have the Romans~~ Has the Parish Council Ever Done for Us*” based on the premise of the famous Monty Python sketch that whilst the People’s Front of Judea (or Judean People’s Front!) despise Roman occupation, they grudgingly admit the Romans improved their lives significantly. And so it is with a parish or town council; the electorate may not be falling over themselves to congratulate their local council on all the wonderful things it does but, if they stop to think, their council does all sorts of things that improve their lives significantly. The audience was amazed at the list of functions and services that the parish council provides, and I hope it went some way towards generating a new-found appreciation and understanding.

The past two months have been extremely busy. October is conference month and whilst it is always good to take opportunities to see the wood, not the trees, it means several days out of the office with the email enquiries piling up. The conferences are important though because we always learn things that can be used for the benefit of member councils in Northamptonshire and the conferences put an annual marker in the sand that allows us to track progress and developments from one year to the next.

The Northants CALC Annual Conference is on the first Saturday in October, so that kicks off the season. We had an excellent conference this year, with guest speaker Professor Colin Copus. Thank you very much to all the clerks and councillors that joined us on the day and helped make the event so good. There is a report below. Then it was on to the national conference of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), which is held conveniently in Hinckley, just up the A5. A good contingent of Northamptonshire clerks attended, and it is always good to catch up in person and share learning. Then West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) held its inaugural Annual Parish Council Conference with approximately one hundred and forty delegates in attendance and an array of WNC senior officers and elected representatives. The consensus was that it had been a very useful event and that delegates liked what they heard and now want to see the words materialise into deeds and actions.

Our training programme has been exceptionally busy. Marie Reilly, our Training Manager, and I have covered the length and breadth of Northamptonshire

delivering whole-council training sessions, as well as all the sessions that are delivered online. The variety of training courses we provide now is incredible. No matter what your needs as a councillor or officer, there is a course to suit you, and we are adding new ones all the time. See <https://northantscalc.gov.uk> for more.

We have continued our series of Planning Briefings held in partnership with the Planning Policy team at WNC and would love to get the same thing going with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC). They are held online and usually last one hour and provide a wonderful opportunity for parish and town councils to engage directly with the policy officers.

In November we partnered with CloudyIT and Breakthrough Communications to put on an event at The Forum in Towcester called “AI Demystified.” I’m not sure we fulfilled the brief completely, but we certainly had some fascinating discussions looking at what impact Artificial Intelligence (AI) will have in our sector in the coming years. There’s an article on AI developments below.

On 17 November 2025 we held the inaugural meeting of the CAN Champion Scheme with approximately seventy CAN Champions present plus guests and speakers. The CAN Champion acts as a single point of contact for their council on all things environmental. It was a very positive and motivating event that highlighted how much is going on already and how more can be achieved by working together. You can find out all about the scheme at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/can-champions>.

The Northants CALC board holds its annual meeting in November, and I am pleased to report that Lynn Lavender (Ashton Parish Council) was re-elected as chair for her third and last year in the role, and Geoff Paul (Moulton parish Council) was re-elected vice chair. It was also the first board meeting for Andrew Holt (Upton Parish Council) and Steve Tucker (Raunds Town Council) who were elected as directors at the AGM. The board has a good mix of clerks and councillors, from small and big councils, and from West and North Northamptonshire. It should be a good year ahead for the board and for the parish and town council sector in the county. We look forward to serving you.

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ASSERTION 10 – WHAT YOU ACTUALLY NEED TO KNOW

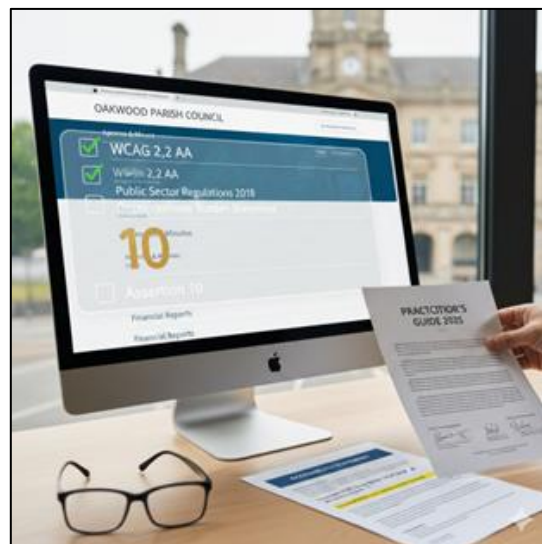
Occasionally a new provision is introduced that places an extra administrative or compliance burden on parish and town councils. Sometimes the new provision is aimed directly at parish and town councils, but often it is something that is aimed at big principal councils, but parish and town council are caught in the definition of “local authorities.” Commercial bodies sniff the opportunity to provide training courses and provide services aimed at assisting councils to comply with the new rules and on rare occasions there can be scaremongering as a tactic to encourage councils to part with money that really, they didn’t need to.

The new rules regarding digital and data compliance, referred to commonly as “Assertion 10”, is a good example. Don’t misunderstand; all councils must work towards compliance with Assertion 10, which is effectively now a legal requirement for parish and town councils but, like all legislation, practical compliance is not a black and white thing, monitoring is limited, and enforcement is proportionate. Take speeding as an analogy: Doing 30.001mph in a 30mph zone is technically breaking the law, but it cannot be detected (speed guns aren’t calibrated to that accuracy), and even if it could be, it is unlikely that it would be, and even if it were detected, prosecution is highly unlikely. Now, that’s not to say that speeding can ever be condoned, but it is an example of how “breaking the law” comes in shades of grey and is partly a matter of risk assessment. Furthermore, legislation that requires compliance often comes with a reasonable test, or an unreasonable burden caveat.

So, what is behind Assertion 10, what is it trying to do, and how concerned should parish and town councils be about compliance?

Assertion 10 aims to address what is potentially a weak area for some parish and town councils: Information Governance. Parish and town councils do not usually have an IT Department, IT Managers, a team of Information Governance Managers, and a council-owned IT infrastructure including servers and user devices. Instead, it is quite common for a parish councillor to access their parish council email from a Gmail account on a personal laptop that is also used by other family members. Clearly, that raises alarm bells for those who think there is a massive risk if these things aren’t completely locked down; maybe the database of allotment plot holders could be inadvertently seen by a councillor’s partner! Assertion 10 is a heavy-handed attempt to address the problem.

It requires councils to “*have a generic email account hosted on an authority owned domain, for example clerk@abcparishcouncil.gov.uk or clerk@abcparishcouncil.org.uk rather than abcparishclerk@gmail.com or abcparishclerk@outlook.com.*” Consequently, many parish and town councils have moved to the .gov.uk domain and some have issued council email addresses to all councillors. Note though that there is no legal requirement to use .gov.uk. Using it is best practice but a .org.uk, for example, is perfectly acceptable legally. Neither is there any requirement for all councillors to have a council email address. Again, it is best practice but not a legal requirement. Councils that are still working towards having a .gov.uk domain and council email addresses for all councillors should therefore rest easy; no one is coming to haul you off to jail for non-compliance.



The next part of Assertion 10, which is about website accessibility, is more problematic and could be described as a sledgehammer to crack a nut. All public websites should of course be accessible as far as reasonably practicable – meaning that the content on them should be accessible to those with sight impairments or other disabilities. For a public sector organisation that provides services directly from its website to disabled people, such as benefit applications, accessibility is obviously critical. But expecting a typical parish council to conform to the same standards as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which processes millions of applications for Disability Living Allowance, is nonsense.

The Assertion 10 expectation is that all parish and town council 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).*” It is understandable that this new requirement feels daunting. WCAG 2.2 AA is a very high bar, and for most parish councils with limited budgets and part-time clerks, achieving “100% perfection” overnight (or ever) is unrealistic. The good news – and the news that some people don’t want you to know – is that the regulations anticipate this. A council does not necessarily need to achieve perfect compliance immediately to pass Assertion 10, provided it follows the correct legal process to document why it cannot meet certain standards. The

Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018 (which Assertion 10 enforces) allows for an exemption called "Disproportionate Burden."

If complying with a specific part of the standard (e.g., fixing 10 years of archived PDF minutes) would cost a significant amount of your annual budget or require resources you do not have, you are legally allowed to not fix those specific items, provided you:

1. **Assess the burden:** formally calculate the cost/time vs. the benefit to disabled users.
2. **Document it:** keeping a written record of this assessment.
3. **Declare it:** specifically listing what you are *not* doing in your website's Accessibility Statement.

Important: You cannot use "we don't have time" or "we don't know how" as reasons. You must use arguments based on *resources* (e.g., "It would cost £500 in staff time to fix these archives, which is 10% of our precept").

To pass Assertion 10, you need to separate your website into two problems:

1. **The Platform:** This is the code your website runs on (menus, colours, mobile responsiveness, navigation etc). This must generally be compliant. If your council uses a website from Parish Online or Cuttlefish or one of the other reputable providers, then the platform already is compliant.
2. **The Content:** This is what you upload (Minutes, Agendas, PDFs, News). New content (published after Sept 2018) should ideally be accessible. Councils can use the "Disproportionate Burden" principle to state that retrofitting the archive of scanned PDFs is disproportionate. Content loaded after 2018 should be as accessible as reasonably practicable. Use the tools already available to you (such as the "Check Accessibility" button in Microsoft Word) to create reasonably accessible documents or to at least avoid the worst accessibility howlers.

If you are worried about your council's ability to tick "Yes" to Assertion 10 on the 2025/26 Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR), take these practical and lost-cost steps now:

- **Step 1:** If you haven't already done so, register a council owned domain name (e.g. nameparishcouncil.gov.uk). Most councils in Northamptonshire have already done this.
- **Step 2:** Run a Basic Audit - Use a free tool (like the WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool or Microsoft Accessibility Insights) on your home page. If it shows hundreds of accessibility errors in the code, then your platform is the issue. Contact your web host and ask them: *"Does this platform meet WCAG 2.2 AA?"* If they say no or don't know, plan to migrate to a compliant provider before March 2026.
- **Step 3:** Adopt a "Line in the Sand" Policy - don't worry about fixing the past. Start being as compliant as reasonably possible from today. Stop uploading scanned images of text as PDFs. (Screen readers cannot read a photo of a document). Save Word documents as "PDF (Best for electronic distribution)" which keeps them readable.
- **Step 4:** Write an Accessibility Statement (many website providers already provide a standard statement – check your website). You must have a page linked from your footer titled "Accessibility Statement." It must follow the government model format stating what works ("We strive to meet WCAG 2.2 AA.) and what doesn't ("Scanned PDFs from 2018-2024 are not accessible."). Then state why some bits aren't accessible ("We have assessed that fixing these files would be a disproportionate burden given our limited resources.") and offer an alternative ("If you need these documents in a different format, please contact the Clerk at [Email].")

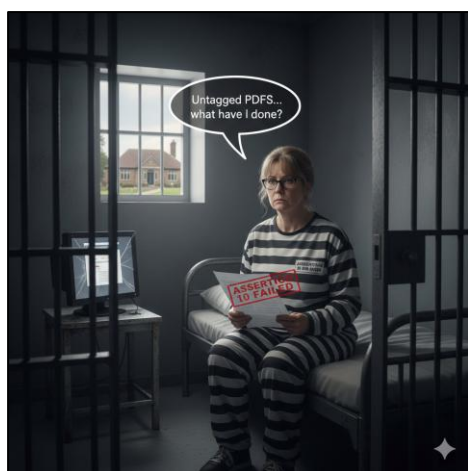
A council does not need a "perfect" website to be able to tick "Yes" to Assertion 10 in the AGAR. It needs:

1. A platform that is technically capable (or a plan to move to one).
2. A valid Accessibility Statement that admits where you fail and explains why (using Disproportionate Burden).
3. A commitment to making new content accessible.

If a council is making a reasonable (there's that word again) effort, then that's all that can be asked.

The last part of Assertion 10 is about having an IT Policy. Most councils have already put one in place in 2025 (if they didn't have one already) and templates are available (contact info@northantscalc.gov.uk if you missed it).

Training and awareness for staff and councillors is obviously important but again please do apply reasonableness. For example, the template IT Policy says the council “... *will provide regular training and resources to educate users about IT security best practices, privacy concerns, and technology updates. All employees and councillors will receive regular training on email security and best practices.*” but that doesn't necessarily mean every councillor going on a day-long course costing hundreds of pounds. “Training” might be the clerk providing a ten-minute refresher on a particular aspect of IT before or as part of a council meeting.



And finally, a word about enforcement and penalties. No one is going to jail in summer 2026 for failure to comply with Assertion 10 requirements. Worrying too much about Assertion 10 can cause issues itself; a bit like worrying so much about the speed your car is travelling at that you focus only on the speedometer and end up crashing into a lamppost! Your council's Internal Auditor (IA) will do a quick compliance test, but they are never going to look at every page on your website and open every document. They might 1) check that your council has a council-owned domain name, 2)

check there is an Accessibility Statement in the footer of your website (but not necessarily read it), and 3) form an overall opinion of the layout and design of your council's website. The council's External Auditor (PKF Littlejohn for all parish and town councils in Northamptonshire) will then look at how a council has responded to Assertion 10. If a council answers “No,” they raise an “other matter” in their report. If a council answers “Yes” but is subsequently found to be non-compliant, they might issue an “except for” qualification. Having a Qualified Audit Opinion (QAO) is not ideal, but neither is it the end of the world. It is the External Auditor saying that something is wrong and challenging the council to fix it. If the council does fix it, fine. Having a qualified audit opinion for three years in a row (especially about the same thing!) becomes more serious, but if a council considers the (internal and external) auditor's comments and does its best to address them, then that's all that can reasonably be expected.

Assertion 10 is new, and like all new requirements it will take some time to assimilate into normal practice. The auditors understand that. What auditors want to see in 2025 and 2026 is that a council has made a reasonable effort to work towards compliance as best it can. It's the councils that have made no effort whatsoever that will be in the spotlight first. Thankfully, there are none of those in Northamptonshire!

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025

The 78th Northants CALC Annual Conference and AGM took place on Saturday 4 October 2025 at Moulton Community Centre, bringing together parish and town councils from across Northamptonshire for a morning of learning, networking, and inspiration. The event reaffirmed its reputation as the premier gathering for local councils in the county, setting the tone for collaboration and innovation in the year ahead.



This year's conference came at a pivotal moment for local government, with ongoing discussions about strategic authorities and the evolving role of parish and town councils. The keynote address was delivered by Professor Colin Copus (pictured above), Emeritus Professor of Local Politics at De Montfort University, who explored the theme "Keeping Local Government Local." Professor Copus, a respected voice in the sector, last spoke at a Northants CALC conference in 2014 and was warmly welcomed back. His thought-provoking presentation challenged delegates to consider how councils can maintain their local identity while adapting to structural changes.

Braybrooke Parish Council won Council of the Year for its major contribution to the Griffin Trail Project and for its leadership on Artificial Intelligence (AI). The conference also celebrated those who have completed their Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) qualification during the year or who have obtained accreditation under the Officer Development Framework (ODF) or Councillor Development Framework (CDF).

By bringing together local leaders, the conference fosters collaboration, sparks innovation, and reinforces the collective voice of grassroots democracy. As Professor Copus reminded attendees, "*Local government works best when it remains close to the people it serves.*"

Planning for 2026 is already underway and we will be back at Moulton Community Centre; please put Saturday 3 October 2026 in your diary and we look forward to seeing you there! See www.northantscalc.gov.uk/annual-conference for details of recent conferences.

STRENGTHENING STANDARDS

The government consulted, it listened, and has said it will act – eventually. The power to suspend and disqualify a councillor for serious or repeated breaches of the Code of Conduct will return – “*when parliamentary time allows.*”

The spring 2025 consultation on “*Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Framework for local authorities in England*” received over 2,000 responses, 57% of which were from parish and town councils. The sector spoke with a strong and unified voice, and thanks go to all those councils in Northamptonshire that took part. The government has pledged to introduce a whole raft of changes, including:

- The introduction of a mandatory code of conduct.
- Powers for authorities to suspend elected members for a maximum of 6 months for serious code of conduct breaches, with the option to withhold allowances during suspension for the most serious breaches and introduce premises and facilities bans either in addition or as standalone sanctions.
- A new disqualification criterion for any elected member subject to the maximum period of suspension more than once within 5 years.
- A requirement that individual support is offered during any investigation into code of conduct allegations to both the complainant and the councillor subject to the allegation.
- The introduction of a ‘right for review’ for both complainant and the subject elected member to have the case reassessed on grounds that will be set out in legislation.

Parish and town councils have been clamouring for the return of the power to suspend a councillor for a serious breach of the Code, such as bullying and harassment of the clerk. There are clerks in Northamptonshire who have been bullied out of their jobs, which is totally unacceptable, particularly when hitherto no one has the legal power to remove the offending (and offensive) councillor from the situation. Such people bring the sector into disrepute and are not fit to hold

public office. Now, “*when parliamentary time allows*” Monitoring Officers (MOs) will have the powers to do something about it.

The strength of feeling was evident in the forcefulness of the consultation responses. 86.4% of respondents agreed that the power to suspend elected members for serious code of conduct breaches should be returned and 88.3% agreed that there should be the power to ban suspended councillors from council premises and to withdraw the use of council facilities. 74.3% agreed that a councillor should be disqualified if subject to suspension more than once. These are responses that the government just couldn't ignore.

So, now we need action. The changes will require new legislation so the question is when will that happen? It must be said that fixing the local government standards regime has not been a high priority for any government of the past decade. We can only hope that in the next King's Speech – which is expected in spring 2026 – there is a commitment to bringing forward a Local Government (Standards and Democracy) Bill, which will need to go through the normal parliamentary process. Best case scenario is that the new legislation is available by this time next year. The parish and town council sector has lobbied very effectively to get to this point but do keep up the pressure on your MPs to ensure they understand that this should – must – be in the King's Speech.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAY

The local government unions and the Employer's side reached an “agreement” on local government pay for 2025/26 in July, and the increase (3.2%) was backdated to 1 April 2025. However, since the agreement inflation has been consistently above 3.2%, so local government workers – including parish and town council clerks – have effectively experienced another real-terms pay cut.

The GMB Union, which represents around 150,000 local government workers, has called out the Employer's side saying, “*In recent years the [Employer's side] has made below inflation pay offers without even meeting unions to discuss.*” and has warned that it “*will demand a 'significant' pay rise for 2026.*”

The opening shots will be fired before Christmas and negotiations will likely rumble on well into 2026. Industrial action could follow.

PRE-APP DEVELOPER ENGAGEMENT

Parish and town councils are recognised as key voices in shaping the future of their communities. The pre-application stage of the planning process, when developers may seek early feedback before submitting formal proposals, offers councils a unique opportunity to influence development, address local concerns, and ensure that new projects reflect the needs and aspirations of residents.



The Value of Early Engagement

Engaging with developers at the pre-application stage brings a host of benefits. Councils can raise community concerns before plans are finalised, giving developers the chance to adapt proposals in response. Councillors become better informed about major developments, enabling them to represent their communities more effectively. Sharing local knowledge, such as insights into flooding or infrastructure, can help developers and planning officers create proposals that are more suitable for the area.

Early discussions also have practical advantages. By identifying and addressing issues before a formal application is submitted, the planning process can be streamlined, reducing uncertainty for developers and potentially speeding up decision-making. For councils, this involvement reinforces their role as community representatives and demonstrates their commitment to transparent and constructive engagement.

Understanding the Council's Role

During pre-application discussions, councillors must approach proposals with an open mind. The aim is to understand the developer's intentions, the scale and nature of the proposed development, and its potential impact on the community. Councils should represent the best interests of residents, voicing concerns,

highlighting local needs, and sharing valuable insights. While informal guidance can be offered on aspects such as layout or design, any feedback at this stage should be clearly stated as informal and without prejudice to the council's future position when a formal application is considered.

It is important to remember that pre-application engagement is confidential and initiated by the developer. Councils should only consider participating if invited, respecting the developer's discretion and the integrity of the planning process.

Principles for Effective Engagement

Transparency and openness are at the heart of successful pre-application interactions. Wherever possible, meetings should be open to councillors and the public, ensuring that discussions are accessible and accountable. If private meetings are necessary, at least two council representatives should attend, and detailed notes should be kept. Councils are advised to request comprehensive information from developers in advance, including plans, drawings, and written summaries, so that councillors and residents have time to understand the proposals and prepare questions.

Impartiality is essential. Councillors should avoid expressing detailed opinions or prior views that could be seen as pre-determination. Using phrases such as "in principle" or "subject to further information and debate" can help emphasise that initial views are not final. Discussions should focus on material planning considerations, such as the impact on local infrastructure, the environment, and compliance with planning policies.

Record keeping is also important. Detailed notes of meetings should be filed and made available to anyone who reasonably requests them. Sharing these notes with the relevant Local Planning Authority (LPA), i.e. either North Northamptonshire Council or West Northamptonshire Council, helps maintain transparency and ensures that all parties are informed.

Formal negotiations regarding planning obligations or community benefits should be conducted by the LPA's Planning Officers. Councils can highlight potential benefits, but these should be promoted through the formal consultation process. All correspondence with developers should be channelled through the council clerk, and private lobbying of individual councillors is not permitted.

Practical Advice for Meetings

When engaging in pre-application discussions, councils should always request detailed information in advance. For significant or complex developments, it may be appropriate to ask the developer to hold a public meeting within the parish, allowing residents to hear about the proposals and provide feedback. The developer should meet reasonable costs for such meetings, including providing large-scale plans.

Meetings should be structured effectively, with the chair clearly explaining the council's role at the outset. Councillors should ask clarifying questions to understand the proposals and their potential impacts. If immediate feedback is not possible, it is acceptable to explain that the proposals will be considered at a future council meeting, with a written response provided later. Councils may wish to seek advice from Planning Officers or ward councillors before responding, and any feedback should be clearly caveated as informal and without prejudice. If the council's position changes between the pre-application stage and the formal application, this should be explained to the developer promptly, along with the reasons for the change.

Working with the Local Planning Authority

Effective communication and collaboration with the relevant LPA is essential throughout the process. Councils should contact Planning Services early if a proposal raises complex issues, share notes of discussions, and involve ward councillors for community leadership and local intelligence. Planning Officers are available to provide advice, and councils should familiarise themselves with the LPA's Statement of Community Involvement.

Conclusion

Pre-application engagement is a powerful tool for parish and town councils to influence development and represent their communities. By adhering to principles of transparency, openness, impartiality, and collaboration, councils can maximise the benefits of this process and contribute to shaping sustainable, well-considered development in Northamptonshire. Adopting a local protocol based on this guidance is strongly recommended to ensure a consistent and transparent approach to engaging with developers.

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL COUNCIL AUDITS

Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments (SAAA) is the sector-led body that procures external audit services on behalf of parish and town councils in England. Its mission is to ensure the provision of effective and sustainable external audit for all "Smaller Authorities," which includes all parish and town councils with an annual turnover below £15 million as well as Internal Drainage Boards and other bodies that fall into the "local authority" definition.



The SAAA Strategic Plan 2025-2028 sets out an ambitious agenda for the future of local council audits all underpinned by a vision in which the correct completion and publication of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) empower communities to hold their councils and local bodies to account.

SAAA works closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and other sector partners to enhance audit processes, with the aim of promoting greater accountability and transparency across the sector. It will also work with the newly established Local Audit Office (LAO).

More practically, SAAA has started a project to make the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) fully digital. It is developing a secure, user-friendly, digital portal for AGAR submissions, ensuring that forms are accessible and compliant with relevant legislation. This digital transformation is designed to make the process more efficient and accessible for councils, while also offering guidance and support to clerks and RFOs as they adapt to the new system. It is a two-year project, so perhaps 2027/28 will be the trial year.

There is also a root-and-branch review of the Practitioner's Guide underway, for which SAAA has commissioned the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). There is a feeling that the Practitioner's Guide, which sets out the "proper practices" of governance and accountability for parish and town councils to follow, has grown organically over many years and has reached the point where it needs rewriting completely.

Northants CALC will track all these developments and will keep member councils in Northamptonshire informed.

LAND REGISTRY REFORM

An article from Simon Escreet at LPR Terrier

In early November, HM Land Registry finally produced its “Strategy 2025+”. It sets out where the service wishes to be by 2030 and by 2035.



Where they are now

Land registration has historically been based on processes that involve paper legal documents – whether that was property title deeds, signing contracts in front of witnesses or checking physical maps to understand where the boundaries of properties lie. That has changed. They now exchange information electronically everyday – through emails, online, through smartphones.

Where they want to be

They want a future where HM Land Registry’s services are fast, and their information is up to date, even when demand for their services is high. They will have developed new, simpler systems and processes that no longer rely on old technology. They believe in the power of digital technologies to transform land and property services, making them more efficient, accessible, and responsive to market needs.

By 2030

They will be using Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technology to automate as much as possible and as quickly as possible, focusing on the areas that make their services faster, more reliable and more secure.

They will use agreed data standards to digitalise, sort, and share their data, focusing on what’s most useful, first. They will create and maintain the highest data security and integrity standards. They will re-engineer the land register, so it provides the most useful modern mapping and property ownership information. They will support the creation of the National Data Library, so it includes their data.

By 2035

Their information is near instant and accurate, supporting the property market and beyond with their data. They will have made all property information held by them available and instantly accessible online.

They will complete the creation of a register that shares property information as spatial data, so it can be viewed and used by others in countless ways to map the data they are most interested.

Through the National Data Library, people are using their spatial and other data in countless ways to support their research and businesses.

Conclusion

If any deeds in your council's possession have not been checked for many years, then you need to get them scrutinised. The cut-off date for any "old registrations" will be December 2030. That is not far away!!

For larger councils with property, they should consider putting their records online to comply with the Transparency regulations.

Councils should ensure that all their land holdings are properly and accurately registered with HM Land Registry, and if there is any "ownerless" land in the parish or land where ownership is not 100% certain, now is the time to address it.

LRP Terrier is a specialist service that helps parish and town councils to put their land records in good order and to meet the requirements of Data Transparency regulations and the Land Registry's desire to achieve comprehensive registration. If your council needs these services, please contact LRP Terrier at info@lprterrier.co.uk / 01235 206517 / www.lprterrier.co.uk.

NO CAPPING FOR NEXT TWO YEARS

The government has confirmed that it has no intention to apply council tax referendum principles (aka "capping") to parish and town councils for 2026/27 and 2027/28. Principal councils remain capped at 3% for core council tax plus 2% for adult social care.

IT'S A BIT PETTY

Petty cash has been a traditional feature of parish and town council finance, providing members of the public a convenient way to pay for small, incidental expenses. However, in an era of electronic banking and prepaid cards, its relevance is increasingly questioned and parish and town councils are under pressure to modernise financial practices, reduce risk, and comply with transparency requirements. So, should councils refuse to take cash altogether? And if they don't, what controls are essential to safeguard public money?



Why Avoid Cash Handling?

Cash handling introduces risks of theft, fraud, and error. It also complicates audit trails and VAT recovery. Robust internal controls and transparency are harder to achieve with physical cash. Electronic payments offer better traceability and security, aligning with modern governance standards.

Many councils have already moved away from petty cash. Internal audit reports frequently highlight that councils maintaining cash floats (even unused ones!) are exposed to unnecessary risk and poor compliance. Best practice now favours banking all income intact and reimbursing minor expenses through electronic means or prepaid cards rather than maintaining a cash float.

Should Councils Refuse Cash Payments?

Legally, a parish or town council is permitted to refuse cash, but it is not always practical to do so. Certain services, such as allotment rentals, small community events, or market stalls, still attract some users who prefer cash. Going “cashless” could exclude residents without access to digital banking, particularly older or vulnerable individuals. Equality and accessibility considerations mean councils should think carefully before imposing a blanket ban. That said, councils can encourage electronic payments by widely publicising bank transfer options,

offering card payment facilities, and setting clear deadlines for cash acceptance to phase out reliance gradually. Any decision to refuse cash should be formally resolved, documented in financial regulations, and communicated to residents to avoid disputes.

Essential Controls if Cash is Accepted

Where councils continue to handle cash, whether for income or petty cash, robust controls are non-negotiable. Model financial regulations and policies provide clear guidance:

- **Segregation of Duties** – No single individual should control the entire process. Responsibilities for receiving, recording, and banking cash should be divided among different people where possible. Where there is only one Clerk/RFO the process should be scrutinised by the Internal Controls Councillor (ICC).
- **Secure Storage** – Cash must be kept in a locked container within a locked location. Petty cash floats should be minimal (typically £30 to £100) and stored separately from income. Access should be restricted to authorised officers only.
- **Documentation** – Every transaction should be supported by a consecutively numbered voucher, a valid receipt, and signatures from both the claimant and the authorising officer. Petty cash should never be used to bypass normal authorisation procedures. All payments must be logged in a summary sheet showing the running balance.
- **Regular Reconciliation** – The RFO should reconcile petty cash monthly, verifying that cash on hand plus vouchers equals the authorised float. The ICC should check records quarterly. Discrepancies must be reported immediately and investigated.
- **Banking Income Intact** – Cash received for services must not be used to replenish petty cash. It should be banked promptly, ideally within 24 to 48 hours, and never mixed with the petty cash float. This maintains a clear audit trail and prevents misuse.

- **Reporting** – Details of petty cash expenditure and any top-ups should be included in financial reports to the council. Transparency is key to compliance with the proper practices and to maintaining public trust.

Alternatives to Petty Cash

Many councils now use prepaid debit cards or trade accounts for small purchases. These methods reduce the need for cash while retaining flexibility. Where petty cash remains, it should be treated as an exception, not the norm, and should be subject to strict limits and oversight.

Conclusion

Petty cash is not inherently wrong, but it is increasingly outdated. Councils should aim to minimise cash handling wherever possible, adopting electronic alternatives for efficiency and security. Where cash cannot be avoided, rigorous controls such as segregation of duties, secure storage, full documentation, regular reconciliation, and transparent reporting, are essential. By following best practice, parish councils can balance convenience with accountability, safeguarding public funds while serving their communities.

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.

SAVING FOR A RAINY DAY

When you hear the phrase “council reserves” you might imagine a secret stash of gold coins hidden under the village hall floorboards, guarded by the chair with a rusty pitchfork. Sadly, reality is far less dramatic, but no less important. Reserves are the financial equivalent of a warm cup of tea on a stormy day: comforting, sensible, and occasionally life-saving.

In simple terms, reserves are the money a parish or town council sets aside for unexpected events (general reserves) or future projects (earmarked reserves). Think of the general reserve as the council’s emergency biscuit tin, there when you need it, but not for everyday nibbling. It’s not there to fund spontaneous spending sprees on hanging baskets or a new village sign in neon lights. Instead, it provides stability and reassurance that the council can cope if something goes wrong.



Imagine the community centre roof suddenly springs a leak during the annual cheese and chutney festival. Or the playground slide decides to retire early with a dramatic snap. Without reserves, the council would be scrambling faster than a parent who realised on Christmas Eve that their child’s present needs four ‘C’ batteries. With reserves, however, the council can calmly fix the problem without raiding next year’s budget or cancelling the Christmas lights.

What is the right level to keep? Too little in reserves and the council risks financial indigestion when emergencies strike. Too much, and residents start wondering if the council is secretly planning to buy a private jet. The golden rule? Enough to cover unexpected costs and keep the council ticking over, but not so much that it looks like a dragon hoarding treasure. Or to put it a more technical way, between three and twelve months of net revenue expenditure.

There is no upper limit on the amount of earmarked reserves held, although clearly the earmarked purpose must be reasonable and justifiable!

Reserves often attract suspicion. “Why are you sitting on all that money?” residents cry, as if councillors are plotting to build a moat around the parish office. In truth, reserves are not a luxury; they’re a necessity. They ensure the council can deliver services without panic or borrowing from the local pub’s swear jar.

Managing reserves is a bit like gardening: too much water and the plants drown, too little and they wilt. Councils must review their reserves regularly, making sure they’re proportionate to the size of the parish and the risks it faces. It’s not glamorous work, but it’s the backbone of good governance.

Debating council reserve levels may not set hearts racing, but it’s important stuff. So next time you hear about council reserves, don’t picture a secret vault, picture peace of mind, prudence, and a council that is prepared for whatever life (or the British weather) throws at it.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

A clerk in Cheshire has been awarded nearly £50,000 at an Employment Tribunal, which found that his council had breached his contract and treated him unfairly. “Ah,” I hear you say, “It must have been a large council with a fulltime clerk.” Well, no; it was a small council with a precept of £8,655 serving a population of under 400. The tribunal award is nearly six times the council’s annual precept income, and it doesn’t have the reserves to pay for it (although the council’s website is down currently so it is difficult to get the latest news).

The council unfairly dismissed the clerk, failing to follow any proper process or provide a valid reason. The dismissal was found to be partly motivated by his request for reasonable adjustments due to disability, amounting to victimisation. The council failed to make reasonable adjustments for the clerk’s disability, harassed him in relation to his disability, and victimised him after he requested adjustments. The Tribunal found the council’s conduct to be both reckless and, at times, malicious. The council refused to participate in the Tribunal proceedings, provided almost no defence, and its councillors resigned en masse during the process. The vice chair even threatened the Tribunal with police action for sending case updates, further undermining the council’s credibility.

After dismissal, the council made unfounded allegations of theft and dishonesty against the clerk, reporting him to the police and professional bodies, and

spreading damaging rumours in the local community and his professional circles. Furthermore, the council failed to pay agreed expenses, storage costs, and proper salary increments, and the clerk was paid less than his female predecessors for the same role, with no justification, breaching equal pay laws. The council did not provide appraisals, failed to pay for use of the clerk's home as an office, and did not ensure proper insurance cover for the council, despite repeated warnings.

The Tribunal awarded substantial sums for unfair dismissal, discrimination, aggravated damages, breach of contract, and equal pay, reflecting the seriousness of the council's failings. The judgment paints a picture of a dysfunctional and negligent employer, whose actions (and inactions) led to severe financial, reputational, and operational consequences.

Thank goodness there are no councils like that in Northamptonshire!

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE TO CLERKS AND COUNCILLORS

As we approach the festive season, we want to take a moment to reflect on the extraordinary efforts of clerks and councillors across Northamptonshire this year. 2025 has been a year of challenges and change: from navigating the local elections in May to worrying about Assertion 10 and all the other rules and regulations that drift down like snow. These tasks have tested resilience and have demanded unwavering commitment to transparency and good governance.



We know it hasn't been easy, but there have been moments of inspiration too: brilliant examples of community engagement, councils innovating to provide new and valuable services, and a renewed focus on collaboration between parish and town councils and the unitary councils.

Northants CALC will be taking a little break for Christmas, closing our doors on Wednesday 24 December 2025 and reopening on Monday 5 January 2026.

May this Christmas bring you peace, joy, and the chance to recharge for the year ahead. Thank you for all you do. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

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