

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

Welcome to the first edition of *eUpdate* for 2026. It might seem like a long time ago now, but I hope that all clerks and councillors in Northamptonshire managed to take a well-deserved break over Christmas to recharge the batteries and coming back fighting fit to do brilliant things for the community.

2026 has started with a bang and it looks like it will be as busy as ever. Our long-standing colleague, Lesley Sambrook Smith, retired at Christmas, so we are currently down a member of staff, which is challenging, but we are recruiting and hope to fill the position soon, which is exciting.

Our current Strategic Plan expires in April 2026, so work has started on a new plan for 2026 – 2029. Local government, politics, and the world in general seems so turbulent currently. Plotting a calm way forward is going to be hard, but having a clear, written plan to provide a “north star” in times of uncertainty is vital. The process of building the next Strategic Plan will involve member councils and other stakeholders, so watch out for opportunities to get involved.

In December we were out and about fitting in lots of meetings before the break. This included a meeting of the Internal Audit Service (IAS) panel hosted by the award-winning West Haddon Parish Council, which looked forward to the internal audit process for the year ending 31 March 2026 and looked at proposed changes to the audit regime for parish and town councils. The IAS panel comprises of 14 auditors who hold the Principles of Internal Auditing Local Councils (PIALC) qualification, and most also have the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA). It is a high-quality panel that now provides internal audit services to 185 (84%) of the 220 parish and town councils in Northamptonshire and to 5 of the 17 precepting parish meetings. The panel meets three times per year for a technical update to ensure that it remains at the cutting edge of local council audit. Few other county associations provide such a comprehensive and professional service to member councils.

Another key meeting in December was a regular meeting of the Federation of East Midlands Associations of Local Councils (FEMALC), which is comprised of the county associations from Northamptonshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire. Over the past twelve months, we

have welcomed colleagues from the East Riding & North Lincolnshire and the Yorkshire Associations, and this meeting formally resolved to incorporate those Associations into the federation and, consequently, change the name to “EMYA”, the East Midlands and Yorkshire Associations. Collectively, EMYA covers 2,724 civil parishes, so it is an important and influential grouping. I meet with my EMYA Chief Officer colleagues monthly and there are two big meetings each year which include the chairs and National Assembly representatives from each county association. Membership of EMYA helps Northants CALC identify common issues, co-design solutions for member councils in Northamptonshire, and ensure the voice of parish and town councils is heard when it comes to regional and national matters, such as on mayoral combined authorities and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

Following Lesley’s retirement, we are reorganising things slightly internally. Previously, I held responsibility for the relationship with West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and Lesley held responsibility for the relationship with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and then we split member council enquiries between us. Now, I will look after the relationship with both unitary councils and our new Senior Advisory Services Manager, when they are appointed, will lead on the member enquiry service, providing advice directly or routing enquiries to me or wherever is most appropriate. Consequently, Lesley’s diary for meetings in North Northamptonshire transferred to me from 1 January 2026 and it has already been quite an eye-opener. If you are from a parish council in the north and can explain the logic and interrelations of all the parish forums, focus groups, place-based partnership meetings, and roundtables, please do get in touch with me and fill me in! I’ll get up to speed quickly but it is likely that I will be proposing some rationalisation in due course!

“There is no shying away from the perilous state of local government finance, so open and honest dialogue is welcomed.”

Talking of the unitary councils, NNC and WNC are both consulting on their budgets for 2026/27. It is important that parish and town councils respond, even if only to the proposals that are most relevant. In mid-January WNC hosted a public “Budget Question Time” event online to engage with members of the public, parish and town councils and anyone else who was interested. It was brave of the

Leader, Cabinet Member for Finance, and Section 151 Officer to put themselves out there, but it was a good initiative and was well-received. There is no shying away from the perilous state of local government finance, so open and honest dialogue is welcomed. There is more about local government budgets below.

Our training and development programme didn't skip a beat over the Christmas break. Our last training and development event of 2025 was on Christmas Eve, and we were straight back into it on 5 January. Between Marie Reilly and I we delivered 13 training events with 169 delegates in December 2025 and January 2026, including online and in-person events covering the whole county and even attracting some delegates from over the border! On 14 January 2026, Marie and I conducted a Review Visit to Northampton Town Council, England's largest parish council. We interviewed sixteen officers and members and then compiled a report for the council's consideration. Northampton Town Council (NTC) was formed in 2020/21 as part of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Northamptonshire and it has made huge strides in its first five years. The council is dynamic and ambitious and has strong executive and political leadership. Northants CALC was instrumental in the creation of seven new parish and town councils during LGR, so it is a real pleasure to see Northampton Town Council flourishing.

One of the other town councils created in 2020/21 was Kettering Town Council (KTC) and having been in membership of the Association since its creation, it then lapsed. I am delighted to report that KTC recently made the decision to rejoin Northants CALC from 1 April 2026. It takes our membership rate by electorate to 99.13%, and we are so much stronger together. It should be noted though that our mission statement says: *"Northants CALC will empower Local Councils in Northamptonshire to be at the heart of community leadership and development, providing them with information and services, and enabling them to promote the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of their communities. Northants CALC is the voice of the first tier of local government in Northamptonshire and will understand and represent locally, regionally, and nationally the views of the 220 parish, town, and community councils and 51 parish meetings in the county."*, so we represent all parishes, regardless of membership status, albeit that the councils and parish meetings covering the 0.87% of electors don't feel too left out!

Like parish and town councils, we are extremely busy, but we wouldn't have it any other way! Please do continue to get in touch with your questions, comments, and queries. That's what we're here for!

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

In his 2025 Christmas Broadcast, His Majesty King Charles III spoke of a world "*spinning ever faster*," urging us to find the "*still point*" amid modern tensions.

Parish and town councils across Northamptonshire are increasingly working in an environment marked by social pressure, economic uncertainty, and heightened public anxiety. In such times, the role of the most local tier of government becomes even more important.



Community cohesion is not built through grand gestures, but through everyday actions that bring people together and reinforce a shared sense of belonging. Councils are uniquely placed to set the tone locally – by encouraging respectful dialogue, supporting inclusive events, and ensuring that all voices feel heard, particularly those who may feel isolated or overlooked.

Simple initiatives can have a powerful impact. Supporting volunteers, celebrating community champions, and creating welcoming spaces for people to meet can strengthen trust and reduce division. Local commemorations, cultural events, and inter-generational activities all help to remind residents that, despite differences of opinion or background, they are part of the same community.

In times of tension, visible and calm leadership matters. Councils that communicate clearly, listen carefully, and act with empathy can help defuse conflict and build confidence. This includes working constructively with local groups, faith organisations, charities, and the unitary councils to respond to emerging concerns before they escalate.

Resilient communities are those where people look out for one another. By championing kindness, neighbourliness, and civic pride, parish and town councils can help ensure that Northamptonshire's towns and villages remain places where people feel safe, valued, and connected – not just in times of celebration, but especially when pressures are greatest.

FROM FARM TO FORK

An article from Matthew Passchier, Sustainable Food Partnership Project Manager for West Northamptonshire

Join the West Northants Harvest Campaign 2026

In 2026, West Northamptonshire will be celebrating Harvest together in a new and exciting way, and parish and town councils are invited to be part of it.



The West Northants Sustainable Food Network brings together community groups, growers, charities, businesses, and public services to improve how food is grown, shared, accessed, and valued locally. It promotes healthy eating, reduces food insecurity, supports local producers, and works collaboratively to build a fair, resilient, and sustainable local food system.

Harvest is more than a tradition; it's a reminder of how food connects us to the land, to our neighbours, and to the wellbeing of our whole community. Whether it's a windowsill herb pot, an allotment patch, or a school growing bed, every seed sown helps strengthen local resilience and pride.

This year's campaign gives you opportunities to be involved in the journey of food:

**Seed → Grow → Cook → Share → Recycle → Harvest West Northants
Celebrate our Heritage**

Why get involved?

- **Fresher food, fuller flavour:** Local and homegrown food tastes better and travels less.
- **Stronger communities:** Cooking and sharing meals bring people together.
- **Better wellbeing:** Time outdoors and hands in soil support physical and mental health.
- **Local pride:** Harvest is a chance to celebrate the food stories and traditions that make West Northants unique.

How your community can take part

Residents Can

- Grow herbs or salad on a windowsill
- Cook one meal from scratch each week
- Share surplus through a local larder
- Compost at home or join a community scheme

Schools Can

- Plant a class bed or run a “seed-to-soup” activity
- Celebrate Harvest with families
- Link with local growers or farms

Community groups Can

- Host a community cook-up lunch of local produce
- Set up a seed or tool library
- Collect peelings for composting
- Share local food heritage stories

Local businesses Can

- Offer a “Harvest Special”
- Use local or seasonal produce
- Run staff cooking or surplus-swap sessions
- Donate surplus food to community groups

A shared celebration

Let’s show the vibrant energy of what our communities across West Northants can grow, cook and share. Every contribution, big or small, helps build a healthier, more connected, more sustainable place to live.

Get involved

Through the year we are asking you to send into the Good Food Network stories and pictures of what you are doing. Tell us what your community is growing, cooking, and celebrating. We will help amplify it across the district as part of **Harvest 2026**.

To learn more please email: hello@goodfoodwnorthants.org.

HI SOCIETY

Northants CALC recommends that all parish and town clerks join the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and that the council pays the fee. Meanwhile, the SLCC recommends that all councils are members of their County Association of



Local Councils (CALC). The two memberships serve entirely different purposes; the SLCC represents the clerk's profession, and the membership belongs to the individual, whereas the CALC represents councils and membership is corporate. A council should never rely solely on advice provided by the SLCC since it is provided to the clerk as an individual and is not indemnified for the council.

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

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

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

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

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

NEURODIVERSITY – A HIDDEN FACTOR IN LOCAL COUNCIL DYNAMICS?

Parish and town councils are the backbone of community life, delivering services, shaping communities, and ensuring democratic representation. But have you ever wondered why some clerks and councillors seem brilliant in certain areas yet challenging to work with in others? The answer might lie in neurodiversity.

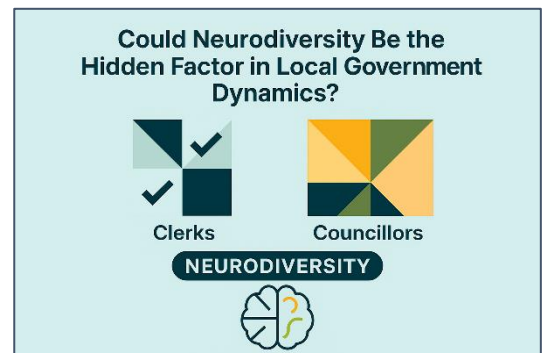
Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in how human brains process information, including conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. Around 15 to 20% of the population is neurodivergent, meaning that in any council or committee, it's highly likely you're working alongside someone whose brain works differently from yours.

This article explores why the varied roles of clerk and councillor often align with neurodiverse strengths, and why misunderstandings can arise. Most importantly, it argues for neurodiversity training as a practical step toward better collaboration.

The Nature of Clerk and Councillor Roles

Local council roles are diverse and demanding. Consider the clerk: the guardian of governance, responsible for compliance, record-keeping, and ensuring meetings follow statutory procedures. This role requires:

- Meticulous attention to detail
- Consistency in applying rules
- Ability to manage complex documentation



Now think about the councillor: a community advocate and strategic decision-maker who must:

- Engage with residents
- Think strategically about policy
- Balance competing priorities creatively

Whilst there are always exceptions that prove the rule, these roles often require contrasting cognitive styles, and that's where neurodiversity shines.

Why These Roles Suit Neurodiverse Strengths

Imagine a clerk who thrives on structure and precision. For someone on the autism spectrum, the clarity of rules and predictable processes can feel reassuring, enabling them to excel in governance tasks. Their ability to spot inconsistencies others miss can prevent costly errors.

Now picture a councillor with ADHD. They might bring high energy and creative problem-solving to community projects. While they may struggle with rigid processes, they often excel at thinking outside the box, generating innovative ideas for local challenges.

Other examples:

- A dyslexic councillor might have exceptional big-picture thinking, seeing connections others overlook.
- A clerk with dyspraxia might develop unique workflow strategies that improve efficiency for the whole team.

These strengths are not hypothetical, they're documented in research showing neurodivergent individuals often outperform in areas like pattern recognition, analytical thinking, and creative reasoning.

The Hidden Challenge: Misunderstandings

Here's the catch: what looks like a strength in one context can be misread in another.

- A clerk's insistence on following procedure might be seen as inflexibility.
- A councillor's rapid-fire ideas could be misinterpreted as disorganisation.
- Lack of eye contact or a monotone voice might be mistaken for rudeness, when it's simply a different communication style.

These misunderstandings can create friction, not because anyone is "difficult," but because neurological differences affect communication and behaviour. Research shows that 91% of neurodivergent employees mask their traits at work, often at great personal cost, to avoid such misinterpretations.

Why Training Is Essential

So, what's the solution? Awareness and education through neurodiversity training, which helps clerks and councillors recognise that differences are not deficits, to understand common traits and how they manifest in workplace behaviour, and to learn practical strategies for communication and collaboration.

After neurodiversity training, instead of assuming a councillor is ignoring you because they avoid eye contact, you'll know it could be a sensory preference. Instead of labelling a clerk as "rigid," you'll appreciate their commitment to compliance and find ways to introduce flexibility without stress. Imagine this scenario: You're frustrated with a councillor who seems abrupt in emails and resists last-minute changes. After attending neurodiversity training, you realise they may be neurodivergent and value predictability. You adjust by giving more notice for changes and using clear, concise language. Suddenly, collaboration improves, and so does your council's output.

Training also benefits the whole council. Studies show neurodiverse teams can be 30% more productive and make fewer errors when properly supported, which in local councils translates into better service delivery and stronger community trust.

This isn't just about being "nice." It's about reducing conflict in the council, improving retention and the morale of clerks and councillors, and unlocking hidden talent. If you've ever thought, "Why is this person so hard to work with?", pause. The challenge might not be personality; it might be neurodiversity. Understanding this could transform your working relationships and your council's effectiveness.

Sign up for neurodiversity awareness training today. It's not just compliance, it is collaboration, innovation, and inclusion. Please visit

<https://northantscalc.gov.uk/training-neurodiversity-awareness> for all the details.

SECTION 137 EXPENDITURE LIMIT

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) confirmed an increase in the Section 137 expenditure limit for parish and town councils in England for the 2026/27 financial year. The new limit is £11.60 per elector, up from £11.10 in 2025/26.

THE BALANCED BUDGET (TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLY)

North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) are consulting on their 2026/27 budgets, and the outlook is bleak. Both councils have in-year overspends to recover from and face ever-increasing demand for statutory services.

Parish and town councils are encouraged to respond to the consultations, even if only on the parts that seem or feel most relevant. Parking charges, bin collection fees, highway spend, planning fees... these are all things that will vex residents, even if the meatier topics of adult's and children's social services are beyond the scope of parish and town councils to comment on directly.



The state of local government finance is perilous. It is a national issue: Northamptonshire is no different to anywhere else in the country. The current Reform UK administrations face the same challenges and “difficult decisions” that the former Conservative administrations faced.

Many of you will, like us, have been reading the emerging 2026/27 budget consultations from principal councils across England. “Challenging”, “difficult choices” and “significant efficiencies” are familiar phrases, and on paper some of these budgets look just about balanced. Which is impressive - until you look closely at the small print.

To understand the position many principal councils in England now find themselves in, it may help to think in domestic terms.

Imagine announcing very proudly that your household budget for 2026/27 is fully balanced. Income matches expenditure perfectly. You've cracked it. The bank manager applauds. The spreadsheet is immaculate.

There is, of course, a tiny caveat.

A sizeable chunk of the savings depends on “efficiency measures”, such as persuading your children to turn the lights off when they leave a room. Anyone who has ever raised a child will know this is less a savings strategy and more a lifestyle aspiration. But it’s in the plan, so it counts.

Another element involves a generous-sounding government grant to replace your ageing boiler. You haven’t applied for it yet. You’re not entirely sure when the application window opens, what the criteria are, or whether there will still be money left by the time you do. But if it comes through, wonderful, you’ll be warmer and richer at the same time. If it doesn’t, then either the old boiler limps on, guzzling money inefficiently, or you dip into savings you were rather hoping not to touch. Either way, the budget assumes success.

The masterstroke is putting off the roof repairs. You know that slipped tile is leaking rainwater increasingly, and the rafters underneath it are gradually getting wetter and wetter, but the budget won’t be balanced if it includes a small provision to fix the roof.

On the income side, things are positively entrepreneurial. You plan to supplement household earnings by selling bags of kindling from your front gate. Demand is, at this stage, unknown. Pricing unclear. Market research minimal. But the spreadsheet contains a reassuring round figure anyway because optimism, at least, is free.

Not stopping there, you’re also introducing a small “coat hanging fee” for visitors. Nothing onerous, just a fair contribution towards household running costs. Whether friends will continue visiting once this is introduced is, admittedly, an open question, but it would be premature to let that cloud the financial forecast.

Add all this together, ambitious savings, unconfirmed grants, deferred maintenance, and speculative income and hey presto, the household budget balances!

This, in broad terms, is the position many principal councils in England now find themselves in. It is not about recklessness or bad faith or even bad politics. It is the rational outcome of a system where demand-led services continue to rise,

core funding struggles to keep pace, and the scope for genuinely new, recurring savings has been steadily exhausted.

After more than a decade of financial pressure, most “easy efficiencies” have already been taken. What remains may well be sensible and necessary, but is rarely guaranteed, rapid, or painless. External funding has become essential, but is competitive, time limited and uncertain. New income ideas may succeed, but they also carry risk and depend on public tolerance that spreadsheets sometimes overestimate.

What this means for parish and town councils

For parish and town councils, this matters. Not because they are responsible for fixing it, but because they inevitably feel the consequences.

When principal council budgets are this finely balanced, resilience is thin. When reality diverges from best case assumptions (as it often does), pressure flows outward and downward. Expectations increase around local solutions, community capacity, asset transfer, partnership working and doing more with less (frequently without matching resources transferring alongside responsibilities).

Parishes may find themselves being asked to step in where services are reduced, to support facilities that are no longer financially viable at district or unitary level, or to “help bridge the gap” in ways that, individually, seem reasonable, but collectively shift risk and cost closer to the local doorstep.

None of this means parish and town councils should say “no” to everything. But it does mean that realism matters. Clear-eyed conversations about funding, liability, sustainability, and long-term commitment are essential. Innovative revenue generation schemes and charges for local government services are fine, but only if everyone is honest about how much they are really worth.

Understanding the fragility behind the figures helps explain why these conversations are coming and why they are likely to continue. Balanced budgets may be signed off, but the margin for error is slim. For parishes, the challenge is not just responding helpfully but doing so without accidentally inheriting somebody else’s boiler problem.

PARISH ONLINE: QUIETLY IMPROVING IT RESILIENCE (WITHOUT THE HEADACHES OR BONKERS COSTS!)

An article from Chris Mewse at Parish Online

Local Councils have made big strides in recent years: accessible websites, secure GOV.UK email addresses, and sensible IT policies that don't involve writing passwords on Post-it notes. That's real progress.

That said, anything labelled "IT change" can still feel daunting, time-consuming, or best left for another day. We get it. Which is why we're proud to have helped many councils in Northamptonshire make the move to more resilient systems quickly, calmly, and without anyone needing to lie down in a darkened room. Some councils have gone a step further by subscribing to our Cloud Office service. It's designed to make the clerk's day-to-day work easier, while quietly improving resilience for the council as a whole.

What does that mean in practice? You'll get secure cloud storage for all council documents, synced to your computer and easily shared with councillors and published on your website. No more excuses for that councillor that claims they didn't get the docs! It also protects you from data loss if a laptop fails, goes missing, or is accidentally launched into a canal in a moment of frustration.

You also get office apps for writing documents, managing spreadsheets, and creating presentations, a password manager linked to your GOV.UK email address, a document scanner, and internal chat and meeting tools.

All of this makes life easier for the clerk, but it's also about continuity. When clerks change, everything stays with the GOV.UK email address, not on someone's old laptop in a cupboard.

Cloud Office costs £42 + VAT per year per mailbox and we'd recommend just starting with a licence for the clerk. That's a lot of benefit for a small annual cost. To make this even easier, Parish Online is offering a free trial upgrade of the clerk's mailbox to Cloud Office until your next renewal. You can always downgrade if it's not for you. To take us up on the offer, email support@parish-online.co.uk with the subject "NCALC Cloud Office Upgrade" and we'll sort it. If your renewal date is soon, we'll add an extra 12 months free, because we're nice.

ROYAL RECOGNITION

A great way to acknowledge and recognise long and/or meritorious service is nominating someone for the King's New Year or Birthday Honours.

In the King's New Year Honours List 2026, Northamptonshire's Jennie Fell and Debbie Scotting were awarded the British Empire Medal (BEM) for their extensive contributions to their respective communities. Warm congratulations both!

Jennie Fell, is the postmistress at the Hellidon Post Office near Daventry. She has been a central figure in village life for over 50 years. Jennie has run the Post Office since November 1974, even adapting her own home to house the branch when the village needed a new location. Beyond her work at the Post Office, she served as the parish clerk for 13 years and has been the joint editor of the parish magazine for more than 20 years. Her voluntary efforts include serving as a Meals on Wheels volunteer, a prison visitor, and a Brownie group leader. She also helps to look after the village church and organise local events. An avid historian, she earned a history degree from the Open University and authored a book on the history of Hellidon.

Debbie Scotting was recognised for her dedicated service to the community in Warmington, Northamptonshire and was awarded the British Empire Medal (Civil Division). Debbie is a member of Warmington Parish Council and has served as chair for several years (confirming this year that it will be her last year). She has been heavily involved in planning and neighbourhood planning leadership, civility and standards work, HR and developing policy. She has been instrumental in flood mitigation and building community safety.

Honours nominations can be made using the MHCLG form at <https://tinyurl.com/4bj6nkjp>. At least two letters of support for each nomination need to be submitted in reply to the automated acknowledgment email. Nominations can be made at any time and would be included in a subsequent New Year or Birthday Honours list.

Information and support are available from the Office of the Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire and you will find details at <https://lord-lieutenantnorthamptonshire.co.uk/awards-honours/>.

ACTION ON POTHOLES

15 January is National Pothole Day, an initiative started by The Pothole Partnership, which includes British Cycling, the AA, JCB, and the National Motorcyclists Council.

The Pothole Partnership is calling for a step change in road maintenance standards, including a minimum five-year warranty on all non-emergency pothole repairs. The Partnership is urging local authorities and contractors to end the cycle of short-term fixes that often fail within weeks or months.

The Partnership believes a five-year warranty would ensure pothole repairs last, reducing vehicle damage for motorists and preventing serious, sometimes life-changing injuries for cyclists and motorcyclists.

Despite billions of pounds of government investment, new AA data shows patrols attended 613,638 pothole-related incidents in 2025 – an average of 1,681 a day. While the Partnership welcomed a slight reduction compared with the previous year, it says the figures demonstrate the need for a radical new approach.

The proposed warranty, submitted to the Department for Transport, would require whoever fixes a non-emergency pothole repair or small patching repair to repair any pothole that reappears within five years at no additional cost.

It is also calling for clarity on the way local authorities measure and repair potholes. A 2024 FOI request revealed that local authorities have 78 different ways of measuring the effectiveness of their pothole repairs. One council even admitted that it doesn't bother measuring the longevity of their repairs, underlining the wide chasm between the best and the worst local authorities.

Adapted from an article by British Cycling (<https://tinyurl.com/3z2x59zc>). For additional information, see <https://www.theaa.com/about-us/newsroom/pothole-partnership>.



AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE NEW NALC CHAIR

Iain Hamilton (right) was elected as Chair of the National Association of Local Councils in December. Here is his first open letter...



"I am honoured and excited to be elected as chair of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) at such a pivotal moment for our sector. I am grateful for the trust placed in me by county association representatives on our National Assembly and optimistic about what we can achieve together.

I want to pay tribute to the late Keith Stevens for his leadership, dedication, and commitment. He leaves a lasting legacy and solid foundations on which we can continue to build. I am conscious of the responsibility that comes with following in his footsteps.

Parish and town councils are the bedrock of community life across England. They are an invaluable asset to our country, essential to strong local government and paramount to the success of devolution. At a time of significant change, it is more important than ever that our collective voice is heard. As your chair, I am determined to ensure that voice is stronger, louder, and more influential at every level of government.

Across the country, parish and town councils are stepping up to meet growing expectations and increasing responsibilities. Many are taking on new assets and services, responding to financial pressures, and navigating the impacts of local government reorganisation. They are doing so with resilience, innovation, and a deep commitment to their communities. NALC must continue to step up alongside them, shaping the national conversation about the vital role of grassroots local government and championing high standards across our sector.

Stronger governance will be central to this work. We must continue to drive forward good governance in parish and town councils, from financial accountability and transparency to professionalism and the highest standards of ethical leadership. It is the cornerstone of our credibility. It means supporting parish and town councils and councillors with clear advice and guidance,

training, and access to best practices, while also ensuring that NALC itself remains transparent, accountable and responsive to its members.

As we move forward, I will continue to champion a culture of respect, compassion and care within our sector. Councillors balance public service with demanding personal and professional responsibilities, while clerks and council staff work tirelessly behind the scenes. We must recognise that dedication and support the wellbeing of those who serve residents every day. Strong parish and town councils rely on strong people, and we must never lose sight of that truth.

Looking ahead, NALC and county associations have a critical role to play in helping parish and town councils prepare for the future. From digital transformation and climate adaptation to community resilience and new service models, the challenges and opportunities facing our sector are evolving rapidly. We must anticipate change, share learning widely and ensure that councils of every size are equipped to thrive and remain at the heart of local decision-making. Strong partnerships will underpin our success. The relationship between NALC, county associations and parish and town councils is fundamental. I am committed to strengthening communication, engagement, and working better across our network. One size does not fit all, and our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. We must all continue to listen carefully, respond constructively and ensure our sector feels connected, represented and supported. It will also require continued engagement with sector bodies, stakeholders and partner organisations.

These priorities, stronger voices, stronger governance and stronger partnerships, will guide my approach as chair and shape how NALC supports parish and town councils at every level. Working with the vice-chairs, Cllr Sue Baxter and Cllr David Francis, and the National Assembly, I look forward to building an effective and inclusive organisation that equips councils and county associations to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.

By strengthening our voices, our governance and our partnerships, we can ensure that parish and town councils remain a powerful force for the communities they serve. Thank you for placing your trust in me. I look forward to working with you all as we shape the future of our sector together.”

STATUTORY TRAINING: PROPORTIONATE AND PRACTICAL

Every parish and town council has a legal duty to ensure its staff and volunteers receive appropriate training to meet statutory obligations. However, the level and scope of training should reflect the size of the council, the number of employees, and the complexity of its activities.

Statutory vs Mandatory Training

Statutory training is required by law to ensure compliance with legislation, such as Health & Safety or Data Protection. Mandatory training, on the other hand, is set by the council to meet its own standards or policies. While not legally required, it supports best practice and risk management.

What Training Does the Law Require?

Core statutory areas include:

- Data Protection – All staff handling data must complete basic training, with additional modules for those managing sensitive information.
- Health & Safety – Adequate training for the role is essential, covering risk management and workplace safety.
- Fire Safety & Display Screen Equipment – Induction training and refreshers when workstations change.
- Sexual Harassment Awareness – Compliance with the Worker Protection (Sexual Harassment) Act 2024.
- Emergency First Aid – Based on a needs assessment; not always mandatory for homeworkers but strongly recommended for council event organisers.



Scaling Training to Council Size

Smaller Councils (typically any council with a less-than-full-time clerk) should focus on essentials. Training can often be tailored to suit the council's size and activity. For larger councils with more staff and complex operations, a structured programme is vital. This includes advanced modules, refresher schedules, and specialist courses.

The Importance of Recording Training

Completing training is only half the job; recording it is critical. Insurers often require evidence that staff have been trained, and failure to keep accurate records can lead to serious consequences.

A council faced a liability claim after an incident involving display screen equipment. Although staff had received training, there was no documented proof. The insurer refused to cover the claim, leaving the council to absorb legal costs and compensation. Recording training protects your council against insurance disputes, regulatory investigations, and legal claims for negligence. A simple training matrix and signed attendance records can make all the difference.

How Northants CALC Can Help

Councils of all sizes can turn to us for:

- Training delivery – tailored to statutory requirements and scaled to your council's size and activities.
- Advice and guidance – helping you understand what's essential and what's proportionate.
- Training matrices – to map out who needs what training and when, ensuring compliance without unnecessary complexity.

Our aim is to make statutory training practical, achievable and not onerous, so you can focus on serving your community while meeting your legal obligations.

Contact mreilly@northantscalc.gov.uk to discuss your statutory training needs.

COMMUNICATION FOR ALL – INCLUSIVE PLAY IN GRANGE PARK

Grange Park Parish Council (GPPC), in collaboration with Woodland View Primary School, a local resident, and Fairfield's School, has recently introduced Communication Boards in all Grange Park play parks.

These boards are designed to support children with speech, language, and communication needs, helping to make GPPC's play areas

more inclusive and accessible. The initiative has been very positively received by the local community. Further information about the Communication Boards and guidance on their use is at www.grangeparkpc.org/communication-boards.



GPPC is currently exploring the potential for the Grange Park Communication Boards to be used as a template that other parish and town councils can customise with their own logos and park-specific photographs. If your council would be interested in learning more about this, please contact enquiries@northantscalc.gov.uk and we will put you in touch with GPPC.

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.



A CAUTIONARY TALE

Most parish and town councils will face the occasional Code of Conduct complaint; it comes with being the tier of government closest to local passions. A recent case in Milton Keynes however serves as a stark reminder of the financial and reputational risks associated with a breakdown in councillor conduct and the subsequent "over-reliance" on formal standards complaints.

Kents Hill and Monkston Parish Council (KHMPC) found itself the subject of a stern rebuke from Milton Keynes City Council's Standards Committee this January. Despite representing less than 3% of the city's electorate, the parish was responsible for a staggering 64% of all parish-level standards complaints received by the principal authority during the current financial year.

This "unprecedented volume" of complaints led to two formal investigations commissioned by the Monitoring Officer, costing the City Council over £10,000. Further costs for consulting Independent Persons are expected to exceed £3,000.

In a move that should interest all local councils, the Chair of the Standards Committee, Cllr Mandy Legg, wrote to the Parish Council asking them to consider contributing toward these investigation costs. While the legal framework for standards (Localism Act 2011) typically places the financial burden of investigations on the principal authority, Milton Keynes Council is challenging this norm due to the "disproportionate pull" on its resources.

Milton Keynes Council's recommendation was clear: parish and town councils must move away from using the standards process as a primary tool for resolving internal friction. Instead, they urged the adoption of "preventative and holistic measures," including professional mediation, targeted training to ensure all members understand the Code of Conduct and their roles, and governance reviews using external auditors or bodies like county associations to identify structural failures in decision-making.

For member councils in Northamptonshire, the message is simple: formal investigations are an expensive and reactive cure for a preventative problem. If a council's culture begins to sour, the time to act is before the Monitoring Officer is involved. As principal councils face their own budget pressures, we may see more "requests for contributions" toward the costs of parish disputes.

NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

Danny Moody

Chief Executive

dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk

X: [@ceo_ncalc](#)

Marie Reilly

Training Manager

mreilly@northantscalc.gov.uk

Sophie Harding

Business Support Manager

sharding@northantscalc.gov.uk

General enquiries

enquiries@northantscalc.gov.uk

Member Enquiry Service (MES)

mes@northantscalc.gov.uk

Data Protection Officer Service

dpo@northantscalc.gov.uk

Telephone

01327 831482

Address:

Northants CALC
PO Box 7936
Brackley
NN13 9BY

Web:

www.northantscalc.gov.uk

