

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

They say that time flies by when you're having fun and I can't believe it is two months since I wrote the last *eUpdate*. I must be having lots of fun at the moment! It's certainly been a brisk couple of months across planning, devolution, standards and resilience. On the strategy side, we've kept up our national and local system-lead work, inputting to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Strategic Review and running our own engagement on Northants CALC's next Strategic Plan.

Our Strategic Plan engagement sessions on 23 March 2026, which over thirty clerks and councillors attended, usefully probed how national bodies and CALCs adapt to local context, while our workshop conversations with member councils continue to highlight pressure points around planning capacity, training and complex projects. I am very grateful to all those that took part and helped shape our next three years.

The consultation on the West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) Local Plan has just closed. On 10 February 2026 we ran a Regulation 18 briefing session with WNC for parish and town councils to help frame responses and I hope that most parish and town councils in West Northamptonshire made a response.

Interestingly, I have heard that many used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to create their response, and WNC is using AI to analyse the responses, so we already have AI talking to AI! This Local Plan will guide decisions up to 2043, so it was vital that parish and town councils had their say.

We also saw, again, how fragile confidence can be when communication falters. A parish escalation around a planning appeal decision underscored the need for timely officer engagement and transparent updates. If your council hits a similar issue with any planning matter, let me know. More broadly, the sentiments from our Planning Satisfaction survey show that many parish and town councils still struggle with planning consultation windows that don't sync with meeting cycles, difficulty reaching case officers, and uncertainty about the weight given to local views. There is an article on the Planning Satisfaction survey below.

On asset and service transfers, WNC presented an outline of process improvements at the West Northants Larger Parishes Forum on 17 March 2026.

We're feeding in practical changes, standardising an expression-of-interest pathway, tightening timescales and clarifying "the clause" (a £1 in the tin!) language so that due diligence and handovers are smoother for parishes. If your council is exploring an asset or service transfer from WNC or NNC, get in touch with us we will help test it through the emerging processes.

Engagement with the Monitoring Officers (MOs) has continued in both unitary areas. I had my regular catch-ups in March with the MOs to review complaints about members of parish and town councils and to consider early intervention. I usually know the background and context to the complaints, which very often stem from failures of governance and transparency. Through discussion with the MOs we can support restorative approaches and help de-escalate entrenched issues at parish level.

Nationally, standards sanctions remain on the agenda and NALC and other national sector bodies are pressing for stronger remedies for persistent misconduct following select committee evidence given by NALC's chair, Iain Hamilton. We look forward to the King's Speech in May and a much-anticipated announcement on legislation that would reintroduce the power to suspend or disqualify councillors (at any level) for seriously bad behaviour. I just hope that the legislation doesn't get kicked down the road due to all that's going on nationally and internationally.

Community safety and crime prevention were the theme for our Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) session on 3 March 2026 and there is a full report below. It is amazing how much is going on and what parish and town councils already contribute to community safety across Northamptonshire.

Our work on climate and nature resilience continues and we had a brilliant meeting with our Climate and Nature Champions on 26 February 2026, with inspirational input from national charity, Garden Organic. There's a report below that provides a summary of the session and how any council can get involved.

“We look forward to the King’s Speech in May and a much-anticipated announcement on legislation that would reintroduce the power to suspend or disqualify...”

On the training and development front, our Training Manager, Marie Reilly, and I have been very busy, delivering both online and in-person events across Northamptonshire. Online training is efficient, effective, and low-cost (money, time, and carbon) for both the trainers and delegates, whereas in-person training is a richer, deeper experience. I think we've got the balance about right and Marie is happy to speak to any council about their training needs and to design something that fits perfectly. I've said it before and I'll say it again, under Marie's leadership, there is no better county association training programme in England, which means that clerks and councillors in Northamptonshire get the best service and that therefore communities in the county are best served.

And talking of staffing, I announced in the Friday mini *eUpdate* on 27 February 2026 that we have appointed Sharon Long to our Senior Advisory Services Manager vacancy. Sharon joins Northants CALC with extensive experience in local council governance and a strong professional legal background, having served as CEO/Clerk at Chorleywood Parish Council in Hertfordshire and previously worked as a solicitor and Knowledge Management Lawyer. Sharon is due to start with us in mid-May and we are very much looking forward to welcoming her to the team.

Please do continue to get in touch with your questions, comments, and queries. That's what we're here for!

MERGED FUTURES

Merged Futures, run by Digital Northants, returns on Friday 26 June 2026 at the University of Northampton's Waterside Campus, offering a free,

full-day celebration of digital innovation across Northamptonshire. Parish and town councils will find it an energising opportunity to explore emerging technologies, discover practical digital tools, and hear how local organisations are using tech to improve services and community outcomes. With speakers, hands-on demonstrations, and exhibitors showcasing everything from AI to digital public services, the event is ideal for clerks and councillors wanting fresh ideas or inspiration for local projects. It is also a great chance to connect with innovators from across West Northants and beyond. Attendance is completely free and bookings are now open: <https://digitalnorthants.com/events2/merged-futures-8>.



NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING WEIGHT LOSS

Losing weight is usually a desirable but difficult thing to do, but for Neighbourhood Development Plans it comes naturally. Parish and town councils that have diligently created these plans in recent years will know that nothing good lasts forever, and that once a plan is made, it's not long before it's time to start again.



All planning policy documents have a natural shelf-life. They are written using contemporary evidence based on the prevailing social, economic, and environmental conditions, which naturally change over time, so the longer it is since the policy was written, the less “weight” it is given when determining new planning applications. In planning decisions, a made (adopted) Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) never “expires”, but there are clear points at which its policies can start to carry less weight.

Under the current National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the special safeguard in paragraph 14, which can tip the balance against housing proposals that conflict with a recently made NDP when the presumption/tilted balance applies, only applies if the NDP became part of the development plan within the last 5 years and it contains policies/allocations to meet its identified housing requirement. After that 5-year window, this additional protection falls away (even though the NDP still forms part of the development plan).

If the Local Planning Authority (LPA) cannot show a five-year housing land supply or has a Housing Delivery Test shortfall, the NPPF’s paragraph 11(d) “tilted balance” applies. That means the policies “most important” for the decision are treated as out of date, and decision makers will weigh NDP policies accordingly within that tilted balance (they still have weight; just less determinative).

The development plan is read as a whole, but where there’s a conflict, the most recent plan generally prevails. So, if the Local Plan is updated after the NDP and introduces different housing numbers, allocations, or strategy, the conflicting parts of the NDP will attract reduced weight.

The NPPF says existing policies shouldn't be treated as out of date just because of their age; instead, decision makers give "due weight" according to how consistent the plan policies are with the latest NPPF. If parts of an NDP no longer line up with new national policy, those parts will carry less weight. Courts have confirmed that "out of date" is a matter of planning judgment and can arise where policies are overtaken by changes on the ground or in national policy, not merely because a plan is time expired. In other words, age alone doesn't kill weight, but inconsistency and changed circumstances do.

An NDP still matters after 5 years but it loses the extra shield provided by NPPF paragraph 14. Decision makers will then ask how closely its policies align with current national policy and the up-to-date Local Plan, and they'll weigh them accordingly in the planning balance. If the authority lacks a 5-year housing land supply or fails the HDT, the tilted balance kicks in and restrictive housing policies (including in an NDP) generally command reduced weight, though they still count as material considerations.

There's no statutory expiry or set review cycle for NDPs, but many LPAs and support bodies suggest reviewing around the 5-year mark, or sooner if the Local Plan or the NPPF changes in ways that affect your policies. Minor updates can be done without a referendum; more material changes follow a proportionate update process.

With the withdrawal of national funding support for the development of NDPs, and with the Local Plans for West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire currently being revamped, it is a very uncertain time for parish and town councils to be making planning policy. Equally, given the uncertainty, maybe it is a vital time for parish and town councils to step forward, if they can afford to fund an NDP themselves and if they can predict what the new Local Plans will say to develop NDPs that conform. It should be said that any NDP under any circumstances at any time is supposed to be a positive planning document, i.e. one that plans positively for housing growth. In the very early days of NDPs they were seen as a way that a parish or town council could protect itself from increased development, but it is now clear that an NDP usually encourages development but makes that development subject to local wishes and needs in terms of design and site allocation.

If only it was always so easy to lose weight.

HOME WORKING ALLOWANCE

From 6 April 2026, HMRC is abolishing the employee claim for home-working expenses. The long-standing option for employees, including parish and town council clerks, to claim tax relief personally, often taken as the flat £6 per week (£26 per month), will end. This applies even where working from home is a contractual requirement.



What does not change is the ability for employers, including parish and town councils, to reimburse home-working costs tax-free. Councils may continue to pay a flat rate (currently £6 per week) or reimburse evidenced additional costs, without PAYE or NIC, provided the statutory conditions are met. The change is about the employee-claimed relief, not employer reimbursements.

HMRC's rationale is to tackle widespread ineligible claims; around 300,000 employees in England are expected to be affected. For those who were claiming, the loss equates to roughly £62 a year for basic-rate taxpayers and £124 a year for higher-rate taxpayers.

Clerks and some other council staff commonly work from home. Up to now, if a council chose not to pay an allowance, a clerk could claim the HMRC relief personally. From April 2026 that safety-net disappears. If the council wants staff to remain cost-neutral for reasonable additional household costs (heating, lighting, metered water, a fair share of broadband where conditions are met), it should reimburse those costs itself under the existing tax-free rules.

For multi-council clerks, councils can each pay an allowance so long as the combined payments do not exceed the employee's additional costs; as now, anything above the genuine additional cost becomes taxable pay. Councils should seek assurance from the clerk that the total remains within costs.

If you are a clerk and you currently rely on the HMRC claim rather than an employer allowance, you can still claim for 2025/26 (the final year) in the usual

way, but not for 2026/27 onwards. After that, raise the matter with each employing council so they can consider paying an allowance or reimbursing evidenced costs. Keep the usual records for any 2025/26 claim until submitted.

Parish and town councils should consider their home-working policies: If the council requires home-working (wholly or partly), consider paying the HMRC tax-free flat rate (currently £6 per week) or reimbursing evidenced additional costs. This keeps staff cost-neutral. Make sure to build any allowance into 2026/27 and future budgets. Pay allowances through payroll but treat qualifying reimbursements as tax/NIC-free (no PAYE/NIC where conditions are met). Keep a simple internal note recording that the employee regularly performs duties at home and incurs additional costs.

Councils should check their contracts of employment and staff handbook. A simple clause such as “Where the employee is required to work from home, the Council will pay a home-working allowance at the HMRC tax-free rate in force” remains appropriate. Let clerks and any other staff know that employee-claimed relief ends 6 April 2026 and confirm the council’s approach to employer-paid reimbursement.

As with all these things, standard practice in the parish and town council sector will emerge in the coming months, but if you have any questions at all about home-working generally, home-working allowances, or any other staffing matter, please contact Northants CALC at any time.

STAR COUNCILS

Congratulations to all the winners of the NALC Star Council Awards, who picked up their gongs at a ceremony held at the House of Lords on 24 February 2026. In particular, congratulations to Oswestry Town Council in Shropshire (<https://www.oswestry-tc.gov.uk>), which won Council of the Year.

The award categories included Councillor of the Year, Young Councillor of the Year, Climate Response of the Year, and Clerk of the Year and it is interesting to read about all the finalists and get inspiration and ideas from their achievements. For all the details, please visit: <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/support/star-council-awards/finalists.html> and lets make sure that there are plenty of nominees from Northamptonshire for next year’s awards!

PLANNING SATISFACTION SURVEY

Survey findings and responses from North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council

Earlier this year, Northants CALC carried out a countywide snapshot survey of parish and town councils to understand their level of satisfaction with their Local Planning Authority (LPA), either West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) or North Northamptonshire Council (NNC). The survey was intentionally short and focused, asking councils to reflect on their recent experience of planning services, including communication, access to officers, enforcement, and whether councils felt their views were being heard.

The response rate was exceptionally strong, with replies received from the clear majority of parish and town councils across Northamptonshire. That level of engagement gives confidence that the findings represent more than isolated frustrations and instead provide a meaningful picture of how planning services are currently experienced at parish level.

Overall, the results show that many councils are dissatisfied with their planning service or feel neutral at best. Across both LPAs, only a small proportion of respondents described themselves as satisfied, while a significant number reported dissatisfaction. A large “middle group” of neutral responses suggests that experiences vary considerably between applications and over time, rather than reflecting a consistently positive service.

Several themes emerged clearly. Councils frequently reported difficulty obtaining timely and clear communication, including challenges contacting case officers or receiving updates. Many councils also felt that their views, while formally submitted, did not always appear to carry weight in officer reports or decisions. Confidence in planning enforcement was low, with councils expressing frustration about perceived delays, lack of transparency, or limited feedback once enforcement issues were raised. In North Northamptonshire in particular, many councils felt that the planning service had worsened over the past year.

Northants CALC takes these findings seriously. Parish and town councils are statutory consultees in the planning process and play a vital role in representing local knowledge and community concerns. Persistent dissatisfaction risks undermining confidence in the system and discouraging constructive engagement.

At the same time, the survey was never intended to be a criticism exercise for its own sake. Its purpose was to provide evidence, highlight where pressures are being felt most acutely, and support informed, solution-focused dialogue.

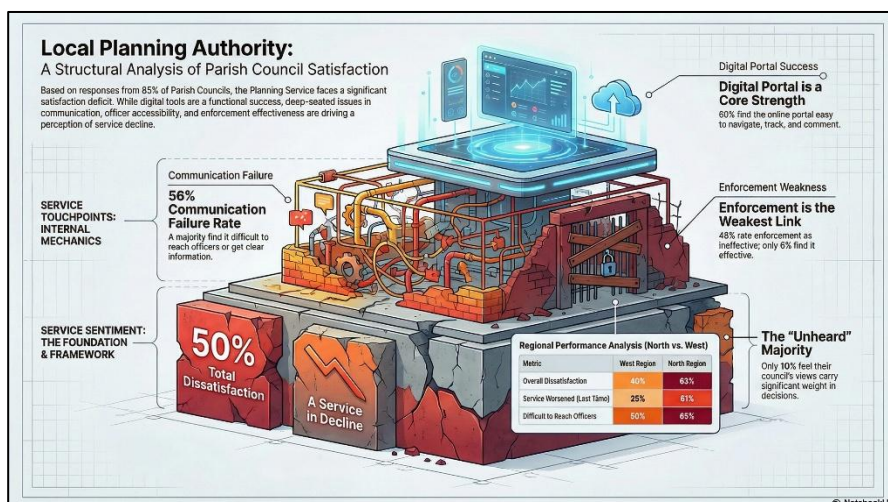
Both councils have now responded to the survey.

NNC has provided a detailed response, welcoming the feedback and recognising that there is work still to do. It has set out that it is undergoing a significant transformation of its

planning service, including restructuring and recruitment, the creation of a single planning team across the authority, the introduction of a new planning system to replace multiple legacy platforms, and increased capacity within planning enforcement. NNC has acknowledged that recent disruption has affected performance and timescales, particularly during system migration, but reports that improvements are now starting to be seen and that further progress is expected over the coming months.

NNC has also recognised the importance of improving communication and customer engagement, noting that changes are being made to how calls and emails are handled and tracked. It has reaffirmed the value of parish and town council involvement in the planning process and confirmed its willingness to continue offering training, briefings, and support to enable councils to engage effectively. While emphasising that planning decisions must ultimately be made on the basis of planning balance, NNC has encouraged parishes to continue submitting views and has expressed confidence that enforcement improvements will become more visible over the coming year.

WNC has also welcomed the survey findings and thanked parish and town councils for taking the time to respond. WNC has confirmed that the results will be considered as part of its Planning Service Action Plan for 2026–2030, which has recently been endorsed by Cabinet. The council has highlighted its ongoing



engagement with parishes through its monthly Parish Surgery and its work with an S106 volunteer group to obtain direct feedback.

The Cabinet papers considered by WNC in March provide important context to this response. WNC has publicly committed to a multi-year planning transformation programme, additional resourcing funded from existing income streams, and a further independent Planning Advisory Service (PAS) peer review in late 2026. Its own members have acknowledged that communication, enforcement timescales, performance measures, and stakeholder confidence remain areas requiring attention, even as internal performance indicators show improvement compared with the immediate post-reorganisation period.

Taken together, the survey results and the two LPA responses point to a common issue: while both planning services are engaged in improvement programmes, many parish and town councils are not yet consistently feeling the benefit of those changes in their day-to-day interactions. Improvements to structures, systems and performance frameworks take time to translate into better communication, clearer feedback, and restored confidence on the ground.

Northants CALC's role is not to take sides, but to ensure that the reported experience of parish and town councils is clearly understood and fairly represented. The survey provides a baseline against which future improvement can be measured. It also gives both LPAs valuable insight into where change will make the greatest difference to parish and town councils: predictable communication, visible enforcement processes, and clearer evidence that parish input is being heard and considered.

Northants CALC will continue to engage constructively with both NNC and WNC, welcoming the improvement work underway while remaining firm that parish and town council experience matters.

We will use the survey findings to inform ongoing discussions, encourage transparency about progress, and help identify practical ways in which councils and LPAs can work together more effectively. The planning system works best when all tiers of local government feel respected, informed and able to contribute meaningfully.

Download the full results of the survey at <https://tinyurl.com/ywb293k5>.

CAN CHAMPIONS FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Nearly 50 Climate and Nature (CAN) Champions from across Northamptonshire came together on 26 February for the first themed Focus Meeting since the Northants CALC CAN Champion Scheme launched last autumn. Designed

to be short, practical and engaging,

the session set the tone for future meetings by combining inspiration with clear, parish-level takeaways.



The guest speakers were David Garrett and Elaine Goold from national charity Garden Organic (<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk>). Their presentation focused on the “Grow, Cook, Eat” project currently running in West Northamptonshire and explored how councils can support community-led growing and biodiversity in simple, achievable ways.

Garden Organic works to promote what it calls “the organic way”, using natural methods to nurture land, encourage biodiversity and support healthier communities. Central to this approach are five principles of organic gardening, including building soil health, avoiding harmful chemicals, and making best use of local resources. The CAN Champions heard how these principles can be applied not only in gardens and allotments, but also across wider community spaces.

The Grow, Cook, Eat project, now in its fourth year, is a partnership led by the Hope Centre and funded by Public Health Northampton. It aims to build confidence and skills around growing food, cooking from scratch and eating well. Participants can engage with growing or cooking projects, apply for small grants, and access ongoing training, including food hygiene and practical cookery sessions. To date, more than 120 volunteers have been trained, supporting over 20 local projects.

A strong theme throughout the discussion was that impact does not depend on large or expensive schemes. Garden Organic encouraged councils to start by identifying underused spaces, celebrating what is already happening locally and building partnerships with schools, community groups and volunteers. Even small

interventions, such as tree or hedge planting, can have long-term benefits for wildlife and for community engagement. Hedgerows, in particular, were highlighted as being in decline despite their importance for nesting birds and biodiversity.

The Q&A session reflected the practical challenges parish and town councils face. Questions ranged from funding tree planting, to how best to use land to support wildlife, and how to sustain volunteer involvement in community allotments. The speakers acknowledged that volunteer energy can ebb and flow, and that successful projects often work best when there is shared ownership rather than reliance on one individual. The value of social activity alongside growing, such as seed swaps and visits to other sites, was also emphasised. Garden Organic is happy to support local events, either by attending with a stall where possible or by providing resources for councils to use themselves. Simple materials, such as the “Make Your Garden Matter” poster and monthly online tips, were highlighted as easy ways to engage residents through parish newsletters and social media.

The meeting also heard from Claire Poulton of the Nene Rivers Trust about Parish Nature Recovery Plans. These plans are being developed in North Northamptonshire to help parish and town councils identify existing habitats, prioritise improvements, and link local action to wider nature recovery objectives. A pilot involving around 20 parishes in the Rockingham Forest area has already taken place, with further support funding available for a small number of councils as the approach is refined and expanded.

The session closed with reflections on the importance of sharing learning across the county, particularly as parish and town councils in West Northamptonshire engage with the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

CAN Champions were encouraged to stay connected, share examples of good practice, and continue turning ambition into practical local action.

The next CAN Champion Focus Meeting is in May 2026, and the topic is “Climate Change – communication that actually works (it’s not what you think!)”, so we look forward to that with great interest!

For more about our CAN Champion Scheme, please visit the dedicated page at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/can-champions>.

THE INTERNAL CONTROLS COUNCILLOR

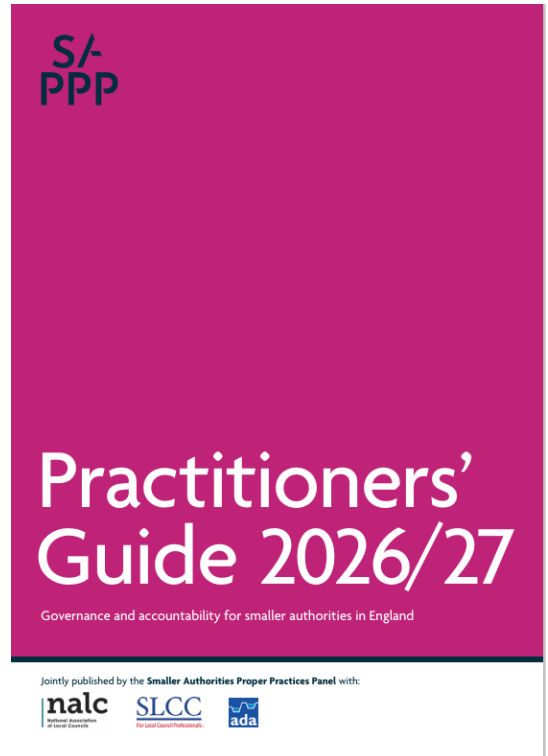
The recent publication by the Smaller Authorities' Proper Practices Panel (SAPPP) of the Practitioners' Guide 2026 (to download your free copy see <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/practitioners-guide>) has once again shone a bright light on internal control, member assurance, and the collective responsibility of councils to be able to demonstrate – not merely assume – that their governance arrangements are working as intended.

While the Guide does not prescribe how a council must organise itself to achieve this, it is unequivocal about what must be achieved: councils must review the effectiveness of their system of internal control each year, and members must be able to evidence that review when approving the Annual Governance Statement (AGS), particularly Assertions 2 and 6.

Against that backdrop, it is timely to revisit a role that has quietly become established in many parish and town councils in Northamptonshire over the past twenty years: the Internal Controls Councillor (ICC).

The concept of an ICC is not set out in statute, nor is it mandated by the Practitioners' Guide. In fact, it appears to be a distinctly Northamptonshire development, with most online references originating from local councils in the county. However, that does not make it informal or tokenistic. Quite the opposite. The ICC role has emerged as a practical response to the increasing expectations placed on councils to evidence member oversight of financial systems, risk management and internal control. Expectations that are reinforced, rather than diluted, by the 2026 Guide.

The Practitioners' Guide repeatedly refers to member involvement in controls such as reviewing bank reconciliations, monitoring budgets, considering risk registers, and responding to internal and external audit findings. Traditionally, these checks



have often been undertaken collectively at council or finance committee meetings. The ICC model builds on that foundation by designating one councillor to carry out more detailed, structured checks on behalf of the wider council, reporting the outcomes back transparently.

In councils that have adopted the ICC role, the councillor is usually appointed annually by resolution and ideally is neither the chair nor a signatory on the bank account. Their task is not to manage finances, and certainly not to replace the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) or the internal auditor. Instead, the ICC provides independent member assurance between meetings and between audits. Typically, the ICC will carry out periodic checks – often quarterly – looking at matters such as bank reconciliations, payment authorisations, budget monitoring reports, and the operation of key financial regulations. The focus is on confirming that agreed controls are being followed, rather than re-performing detailed transaction testing, which remains the role of internal audit.

The outcomes of these checks are then reported to the council or finance committee, creating a clear audit trail that members have actively reviewed the effectiveness of internal controls during the year. In several Northamptonshire internal audit reports, this arrangement has been cited positively as evidence of strong governance, with the ICC's work complementing, rather than conflicting with, the formal internal audit process.

The 2026 edition of the Practitioners' Guide places renewed emphasis on councils being able to justify a "Yes" response to AGS assertions with real evidence, not just good intentions. This is particularly relevant to Assertion 2 (Internal control) and Assertion 6 (Internal audit), but it also cuts across risk management, compliance, and digital and data governance. Importantly, the Guide makes clear that the review of internal controls is a member responsibility, not something that can be delegated entirely to officers or auditors. An ICC provides a structured, proportionate way for councils to discharge that responsibility, especially in councils without a finance committee or with limited officer capacity.

The ICC role sits comfortably alongside, but entirely separate from, internal audit. Internal auditors must remain independent and must not be involved in the management or operation of controls. An ICC, by contrast, is explicitly part of the council's governance framework and strengthens the council's ability to respond constructively to audit findings.

The ICC role is rooted in assurance, not suspicion and one of the quiet strengths of the ICC model is that it normalises scrutiny. Rather than internal control checks being triggered only when something goes wrong, they become a routine, expected part of how the council operates. This can be reassuring for clerks and RFOs, as well as for councillors, because it reinforces the message that internal control is about resilience and transparency, not mistrust.

In practice, councils that appoint an ICC often find that year-end processes are smoother, audit queries are fewer, and members feel more confident when approving the AGAR. The role also provides a valuable development opportunity for councillors who want to deepen their understanding of governance without straying into operational territory.

As with all governance arrangements, proportionality matters. A very small parish council may conclude that collective checks at meetings are sufficient. Larger or more complex councils may prefer a finance committee supported by an ICC-style role within its terms of reference. However, for many parish and town councils, and particularly those with a single clerk/RFO and limited meeting time, the ICC role has proved to be a pragmatic, low-cost way of strengthening assurance and evidencing compliance with proper practices.

The Practitioners' Guide 2026 does not require councils to appoint an ICC. What it does require is that councils can demonstrate, clearly and credibly, that their system of internal control is effective and has been reviewed by members. In Northamptonshire, the ICC has become one of the most effective ways of doing exactly that.

GOING FOR, GOING FOR GOLD!

Many congratulations to Higham Ferrers Town Council, which becomes the second council in Northamptonshire in 2026 to accredit at Bronze Award under the Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS) following the same achievement by Far Cotton & Delapre Community Council in February. The Bronze, Silver, and Gold Awards provide a clear pathway for councils to demonstrate their commitment to high standards of governance and continuous improvement. LCAS is operated by National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and you can find all the details at <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/support/local-council-award-scheme.html>.

CITIZENS IN POLICING

The Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) brings together the county's thirty largest parish and town councils to share experience, explore common challenges, and engage directly with key partners on issues that matter most to local communities. Meeting three times a year, the NLCP provides a space for strategic discussions with a particular focus on areas where larger parish and town councils can make a tangible difference on the ground.

The most recent NLCP meeting, held online on 3 March 2026, focused on community safety and the role that parish and town councils can play in supporting visible, trusted, and preventative policing in their areas. Presentations from Northamptonshire Police and Daventry Town Council highlighted how citizen involvement and local initiative can significantly enhance community safety outcomes.

A central theme of the evening was Citizens in Policing, a wide-ranging programme led by Northamptonshire Police that enables residents to contribute directly to keeping their communities safe. Julie Mead, Citizens in Policing Manager, set out how policing is no longer just about warranted officers, but increasingly about partnership with volunteers who bring local knowledge, time and commitment. Across Northamptonshire, hundreds of volunteers are already involved as Special Constables, Emergency Services Cadets, Police Support Volunteers, Street Watch members, and Volunteers on Horseback, contributing tens of thousands of hours each year.

What was particularly striking was the breadth of opportunities available. Some roles involve frontline visibility, such as Special Constables supporting neighbourhood policing teams or volunteers on horseback providing reassurance and intelligence in rural areas. Others are quieter but no less important, including



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Citizens in Policing

digital support, administrative roles, community engagement and safeguarding work. The Emergency Services Cadet scheme, open to young people aged 13 to 18, was described as a “jewel in the crown”, offering life skills, confidence, and a pathway for young people into volunteering, employment, or public service.

For parish and town councils, the message was clear: Citizens in Policing is not something that happens to communities, but something that can be shaped with them. Parish and town councils can play a vital role by encouraging residents to volunteer, promoting schemes such as Street Watch, and acting as a trusted conduit between local neighbourhood policing teams and the wider community. Simply helping to publicise opportunities through council websites, newsletters and social media can significantly widen reach and uptake.

The meeting also explored what parish and town councils themselves can do to strengthen community safety. Sarah Fox, Chief Officer at Daventry Town Council (DTC), shared a practical case study of how sustained local investment has created a visible and joined-up approach to safety in the town centre. DTC initiatives include CCTV, a Community Ranger role, a retail radio scheme, and participation in the county-wide retail crime partnership. Not all councils will have the scale or resources to replicate this model in full, but the discussion prompted useful reflection on approaches that could work in smaller towns and parishes, particularly where councils are looking for alternatives to sponsored PCSOs.

Throughout the evening, discussion returned repeatedly to the importance of visibility, trust, and prevention. Volunteer-led initiatives such as Street Watch, cadet-led speed checks, or community reassurance patrols were seen as ways of addressing residents’ concerns about antisocial behaviour and speeding, while also strengthening relationships between the police and the communities they serve. Importantly, these schemes were framed as supportive and preventative rather than enforcement-led. For parish and town councils considering their next steps, the key takeaway was not that every council must launch a new scheme, but that every council can play a part. This might mean signposting volunteering opportunities, hosting a police engagement event, supporting the launch of a Street Watch group, or simply asking how local volunteers could assist with a specific community issue.

Councils were encouraged to see themselves as partners in shaping local safety, rather than passive recipients of policing services.

Further information about Citizens in Policing volunteering opportunities can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/yudfpeyw>, including material that can be easily reused in local communications. Councils are strongly encouraged to help spread the word and to consider how volunteering for the police could be promoted as a positive, community-building opportunity for residents of all ages.

The next meeting of the Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership will take place in July 2026, with a focus on engagement with the unitary councils with the WNC and NNC Chief Executives as our guest speakers. Invitations will be sent to larger parish and town councils in due course.

INFORMATION RIGHTS WEAPONISED

Freedom of Information (FOI), Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), and Subject Access Requests (SARs) are essential public rights. They underpin transparency, accountability, and trust in local government. Most people who use them do so responsibly. However, parish and town councils across Northamptonshire increasingly report situations where these rights are used in ways that feel less like scrutiny and more like pressure, persistence, or harassment.

Two related issues frequently arise. The first is how councils should deal with requests that impose a disproportionate burden on very small authorities. The second is a more subtle but equally stressful problem: situations where an individual's behaviour prompts internal emails that later become the target of FOI or SAR requests. Understanding how the law approaches both issues can help councils protect themselves while remaining compliant.

The Dransfield Case and Why It Matters Locally

The leading case on vexatious FOI requests is Information Commissioner v Devon County Council & Dransfield. Although it involved a county council, the principles established apply to all public authorities, including parish and town councils.

Dransfield confirmed that an FOI request may be refused as vexatious where it amounts to a "manifestly unjustified, inappropriate or improper use" of the FOI

process. Importantly, the court rejected rigid tests and instead set out four broad themes that authorities should consider when making a judgement:

- the burden placed on the authority,
- the motive of the requester,
- the value or serious purpose of the request, and
- any harassment or distress caused to staff.

These themes are not a checklist. They are part of a holistic, common-sense assessment that recognises FOI as an important constitutional right, but not one that should be used to grind public bodies down.

Why Burden Looks Different for Parish and Town Councils

A key point often missed in discussions about vexatious requests is that burden is contextual. A request that is inconvenient for a unitary council with a legal department and an information governance team may be overwhelming for a parish council with a clerk working five or ten hours a week.

The ICO's own guidance explicitly acknowledges this reality. When assessing burden, authorities are entitled to take account of their size, staffing, and resources. For small councils, the threshold at which a request becomes disproportionate or oppressive is necessarily lower. That does not weaken transparency; it reflects proportionality.

This is particularly relevant where requests are repeated, overlapping, reopen settled issues, or require extensive trawling of historic emails and paper records. In such cases, Dransfield allows parish councils to say, with evidence, that the cumulative impact of a request (or series of requests) has crossed the line. It is also important to remember that FOI law targets vexatious requests, not vexatious people. A difficult requester does not lose their rights. But nor does the council have to pretend that context, history, and impact do not exist.

The “Smoking Gun” Problem: When Behaviour Creates Disclosable Emails

Alongside the legal framework, there is a very practical problem that many clerks will recognise immediately. A person – usually a member of the public, but sometimes a councillor – behaves in a way that causes persistent disruption. The

behaviour may be low-level but relentless: repeated complaints, provocative statements, social media posts, or antagonistic conduct at meetings.

Understandably, councillors and clerks begin to write to one another: “*Have you seen what Jane Smith has said now?*”, “*How are we going to stop this?*”, “*This feels like bullying.*”

FIVE GOLDEN RULES FOR WRITING EMAILS WITH FOI AND SAR IN MIND

- 1. ASSUME IT MAY BE DISCLOSED.**
Write every email on the basis that the person you are discussing may one day read it. If you would be uncomfortable seeing it quoted back to you, rewrite it or don't send it.
- 2. STICK TO FACTS, NOT FEELINGS.**
Record what has happened, when, and what action (if any) is required. Avoid speculation, labels, or character judgements, however tempting they may be in the moment.
- 3. AVOID 'VENTING' IN WRITING.**
Frustration is human, but email is not the place to express it. If you need to let off steam, do so verbally and privately, not in a written record.
- 4. KEEP LANGUAGE NEUTRAL AND PROFESSIONAL.**
Use calm, measured wording. Phrases such as 'we need to deal with this issue' are far safer than 'we need to stop him' or 'this person is a bully'.
- 5. REDUCE EMAIL TRAFFIC WHEREVER POSSIBLE.**
Fewer emails mean fewer records to search, review and disclose later. Use a single point of issue logs, or agreed reporting routes instead of reactive email chains.

Those emails are human reactions to a difficult situation. But they are also records. If the individual later submits an FOI request or a SAR for “all information relating to me” or “all correspondence about this issue”, those same emails must be reviewed and, in many cases, disclosed in redacted form. The result is renewed stress for the council and a sense that the system itself is being used to perpetuate the problem.

In more extreme cases, individuals who understand information rights can deliberately provoke this outcome, knowing that internal frustration will generate exactly the material they later seek to obtain.

Reducing the Risk Without Reducing Transparency

There is no way to remove FOI or SAR rights, nor should there be. But councils can take sensible steps to reduce their exposure to this kind of situation. The most effective change is cultural rather than legal. Councillors and clerks should

write with the assumption that anything recorded in writing may one day be disclosed. This does not mean avoiding discussion or support, but it does mean sticking to factual, neutral language and avoiding personal characterisations. A simple test helps: would I be content for this to be read by the person it refers to?

Many councils also benefit from moving away from informal, reactive email chains. Instead of councillors circulating emotional messages, issues can be logged centrally by the clerk in a neutral, factual way. This still creates a record, but one that is far less likely to escalate matters if disclosed.

Single-point-of-contact arrangements are another practical tool. Where behaviour becomes problematic, routing communications through the clerk (or chair, if appropriate) reduces duplication, limits emotional exchanges, and cuts down the volume of material that later has to be searched.

Unreasonable Behaviour Policies also have an important role. They do not restrict FOI or SAR rights, but they help councils manage conduct, set expectations, and reduce the behaviours that generate distress and reactive correspondence in the first place.

FOI, SARs and When the Law Can Help

In persistent cases, the law does provide some protection. Under FOI, a pattern of requests that forms part of a campaign of pressure or harassment may become vexatious under the Dransfield principles, particularly where the burden on a small authority is severe. Under data protection law, a SAR may be refused as “manifestly unfounded” in the rare cases where it is clearly being used to harass or intimidate rather than to exercise genuine access rights. These are high thresholds and should be approached cautiously, but they exist for good reason.

A Final Thought

The most important point is this: the part of this cycle that councils control is not the request, but the way they communicate internally. By adopting a more deliberate, disciplined approach to written communication, parish and town councils can significantly reduce their vulnerability to the “smoking gun” trap, protect the wellbeing of clerks and councillors, and remain open, lawful and transparent.

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

A recent case brought to our attention provides a timely reminder that even where councils outsource payroll or accountancy functions, responsibility never truly leaves the council itself.

In this instance, a parish council had for many years relied on a Northamptonshire-based external organisation to run its payroll. Payslips were produced, figures were sent across, and everything appeared to be ticking along quietly in the background. The clerk received the payroll information, submitted what was required, and understandably assumed that the technical aspects were being handled by those with the expertise. What was less visible was what was happening (or not happening!) behind the scenes. Recently, the council was presented with a substantial demand from HMRC. The total included historic underpayments, interest stretching back several years, fees, and staff time spent unpicking the problem. The overall cost ran into several thousands of pounds. The most troubling aspect was not that mistakes had been made (mistakes do happen!) but that no one had realised there was a problem until it had grown very large.

Two payments had been missed in previous years. Notifications and paperwork had been issued, but they were not acted upon. Crucially, the council itself did not

have access to the relevant online HMRC portals and therefore had no visibility of its own account. The expectation, albeit never clearly stated, was that the payroll provider would monitor the position. The payroll provider, meanwhile, assumed that the council was doing so. In reality, no one was actively reconciling the position.

HMRC's systems are largely automated. If payments are not made, interest accrues. If messages are issued via an online account that no one is checking, they simply sit there. Unlike the old days, councils should not assume that a formal letter will always land on the doormat in time to prompt action.

To its credit, the council involved has since engaged directly with HMRC and asked for leniency, but the experience has been a bruising one – financially and reputationally. There are some clear lessons here for all councils.

First, outsourcing a function does not remove accountability. A council remains legally responsible for its payroll, its tax affairs and its compliance, regardless of who processes the calculations. Second, councils must always have access to their own HMRC accounts and portals. Even if day-to-day processing is delegated, someone at the council should be able to log in, see messages, and understand what HMRC believes the council owes and when. Third, separation of roles matters. In this case, payroll processing, bank payments and HMRC reporting were all handled by different people or organisations, but no one was reconciling the whole picture. Where functions are split, reconciliation becomes even more important, not less. Finally, do not assume silence means everything is fine. Automated systems do not chase in the way people do, and interest quietly accumulates in the background.

This is not a story about blame. It is a reminder that governance often fails not because of dramatic decisions, but because of quiet assumptions. A few missed payments, a portal no one checks, and an outsourced function that everyone believes someone else is watching can, over time, become an expensive problem. Councils may wish to use this as a prompt to review their own arrangements: who has access to HMRC accounts, how payroll is reconciled, and whether there is clear written understanding of who is responsible for monitoring what.

Catching an issue early is almost always cheaper (and less stressful!) than discovering it years later!

NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

Danny Moody

Chief Executive

dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/danny-moody-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

