

Update

ISSUE 3/26

May - June 2026

CONTENTS

- **THE CHIEF'S BRIEF**
- **STRENGTHENING STANDARDS – STILL WAITING**
- **THE RESOURCEFUL CLERK**
- **Q&A WITH SHARON**
- **THE 2026/27 PRECEPT**
- **POTHOLE ARMAGEDDON**
- **THE (PLANNING) GOALPOSTS HAVE MOVED**
- **A RIGHT ROYAL OCCASION**
- **SO MUCH MORE THAN PUTTING OUT FIRES**
- **SITUATIONS VACANT**
- **A CAUTIONARY TALE**
- **NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS**

THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

As May draws to a close, I would like to begin by congratulating all those who have recently been re-elected or newly elected as mayors and chairs across Northamptonshire. These roles carry real responsibility at the heart of community life, and it is always encouraging to see councils placing their confidence in elected leadership. I would also like to thank those mayors and chairs who have now stepped down for their public service and commitment over the past year. Leadership in the parish and town council sector is more challenging and demanding than it was a decade ago, so selfless personal commitment is a highly precious thing and should always be recognised and cherished.

This edition also marks an important moment for Northants CALC as we welcome Sharon Long to the team, who joined us on 11 May 2026. Sharon's appointment follows a challenging period in which we have been operating a person down since the start of the calendar year. I am extremely grateful to Sophie and Marie for the professionalism and commitment they have shown in maintaining service levels throughout, and I hope members will have seen that, despite the pressure, there has been no significant dip in the support provided. I would also like to recognise the support of John Kilcoyne, Deputy CEO at the Leicestershire and Rutland ALC, who stepped in to assist us when it mattered most. You can read more about Sharon in the article below.

I am pleased to be the CALC representative on the national steering group for Project Keystone, the sector-wide strategic review being led by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). Project Keystone is looking at the needs of parish and town councils in England over the next decade and considering how the sector support bodies (NALC, CALCs etc) can be best structured to meet those needs. A survey is currently circulating, and I would strongly encourage clerks and councillors to take a few minutes to contribute (details were in the Friday mini *eUpdate* on 21 May 2026). This is an important opportunity to help shape the future direction of our sector at a national level.

And, talking of surveys, thank you to the many councils and councillors who have already responded to our own 2026 Membership Survey. The deadline is 31 May 2026, so at time of publication there are still a few days left to have your say if you have not yet done so. The feedback we receive will be invaluable as it feeds

directly into our Board Away Day on 18 June 2026 and informs the development of our new Strategic Plan for 2026–2029.

At a national level, it was extremely disappointing to see the omission of standards reform from the recent King’s Speech. This remains a critical issue for the sector, particularly in ensuring that parish and town councils have access to a robust and proportionate standards framework. There is an article below which sets out what this means in practice and what may happen next.

Closer to home, I had the opportunity on 14 May 2026 with Northants CALC vice chair, Geoff Paul, to attend the EMYA (East Midlands and Yorkshire Associations) meeting in Derbyshire. These gatherings are always valuable, not only for sharing intelligence but for building the relationships that underpin effective collaboration between County Associations. There are clear strategic benefits in working together on common challenges and influencing at a wider level than any one association can achieve alone.

“There are clear strategic benefits in working together on common challenges and influencing at a wider level...”

Finally, it has been encouraging to see the continued energy and engagement through our networks. The CAN Champions focus session on 20 May 2026, led by Diana Sandon, was particularly inspiring, prompting thoughtful discussion about how we communicate climate change in ways that genuinely resonate with our communities. See <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/can-champions> for a report and a copy of the slides. This was followed by the Community Energy meeting on 27 May 2026, which brought partners together to explore practical opportunities for developing community-led energy projects in West Northamptonshire. Both sessions are strong examples of how convening and connecting can translate into meaningful local action.

And finally, don’t forget that Local Council Clerk Week is 8 – 12 June 2026. Please celebrate, support, and cherish your clerk (<https://www.slcc.co.uk/lccw>).

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

STRENGTHENING STANDARDS – STILL WAITING

In the March/April *eUpdate*, we reported that the government had listened to the sector and accepted the case for strengthening the local government standards regime. The long-awaited return of powers to suspend councillors for serious breaches of the Code of



Conduct appeared to be within reach, following a consultation that received a strong and unified response from across parish and town councils. The expectation was clear: the next step would be legislation.

The King's Speech on 13 May 2026 provided the opportunity for that expectation to be realised. It was not.

There was no Bill on standards sanctions. There was no provision for remote or hybrid meetings. And there was no indication of when either reform might come forward.

The reaction across the sector has been immediate and consistent. National representative bodies including the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), and the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO), have expressed disappointment in the strongest terms. Yet what is striking is not just the tone, but the alignment. Organisations representing councils, clerks, monitoring officers and democratic services professionals are all saying essentially the same thing: the case for reform has been made, the consultation has been completed, and the need is urgent. What is now lacking is delivery by the government.

Behind the scenes, however, the picture is more complex. There is no doubt that significant work has taken place over the past year. Detailed policy proposals have been developed through task and finish groups involving the sector, and there has been sustained engagement with ministers and officials at The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The government has

also shifted its position materially, moving from the long-held view that “the ballot box will sort it” to broad agreement that the standards regime requires strengthening.

The explanation now offered is that the omission reflects pressure on the legislative programme, rather than any loss of commitment. That may be the case. But for parish and town councils, the distinction is of limited comfort. The reality is that the powers needed to deal effectively with serious misconduct are still not available.

This matters because the issue is not theoretical. Across the country, councils continue to face situations where unacceptable councillor behaviour cannot be addressed within the current legal framework. In the most serious cases, this includes bullying and harassment that can drive clerks out of their jobs and livelihoods. The expectation created by the 2025 consultation was that this gap would finally be addressed. That expectation has not yet been met.

The absence of legislation on remote and hybrid meetings only adds to the frustration. The Covid pandemic demonstrated that councils can operate effectively in more flexible ways, improving accessibility and participation. Wales has already moved forward in this area where community councils (the Welsh equivalent of parish councils) have been able to meet remotely for years. England, by contrast, remains bound by a meetings framework rooted in the Local Government Act 1972.

So where does this leave the sector?

The immediate response from national bodies has been to continue working collectively and to press for alternative legislative routes. That is understandable and, in many respects, necessary. The progress made to date has been achieved through that joint approach, and maintaining it will be important in securing eventual reform.

However, there is also a growing sense that the next phase requires something more visible. The sector has moved beyond making the case for change. That work has been done and done well. What councils and clerks now need is clarity: a clear route map setting out how and when these reforms will be delivered, and

what will happen if progress stalls again. In other words, “*when parliamentary time allows*” is no longer justifiable as a holding position.

For parish and town councils, the message is twofold. First, the direction of travel has not changed. The commitment to reform remains, and the groundwork has been laid. Secondly, the pace and certainty of that reform now depend on continued pressure. The strength of the consultation response showed what can be achieved when the sector speaks with one voice. That voice now needs to be heard again, with an emphasis not just on the need for reform, but on the need for a clear and credible plan to deliver it. If you have any connection with your MP, now is the time to use it. And if you don’t have a connection with your MP, now is a good time to establish it. Write to them with your stories of how the lack of meaningful sanctions impacts you and your council’s ability and capacity to do brilliant things for the community.

The journey is not over, but it has stalled at a critical point. The sector has done the hard work to get this far. The next stage will require persistence and perhaps a firmer insistence that the long-promised reforms move from intention to action.

THE RESOURCEFUL CLERK

There is something quietly brilliant about public money being spent well. Not extravagantly, not timidly, just well. A recent internal audit at King’s Sutton Parish Council highlighted a second-hand noticeboard sourced by the clerk for just £35 via Facebook Marketplace, now fully in use and delivering real value to the community.



It is a simple example, but an important one. Instead of drifting towards over-specification and unnecessary cost, this is a reminder to ask a basic question: do we really need new? Within proper boundaries, there is plenty of scope for creativity. Councils that think laterally can stretch their budgets further than many might expect.

The notice board may not feature on Antiques Roadshow, but in terms of public value, this is exactly the kind of procurement worth applauding.

Q&A WITH SHARON

We're delighted to welcome Sharon Long as our new Senior Advisory Services Manager (SASM) at Northants CALC. We caught up with Sharon to learn more about her career journey, experience, and what she's looking forward to in her new role.

What's your role at Northants CALC?

I've joined Northants CALC as the Senior Advisory Services Manager, where I'll be leading and delivering advisory support to member councils. My focus is on providing clear, practical guidance on governance, procedures, and day-to-day operations, helping councils feel confident and well-supported in their roles.



What are you most excited about in your new role?

I'm particularly excited about working with member councils across Northamptonshire, helping them navigate challenges and build confidence in governance and compliance. Being able to draw on my previous experience, both in legal practice and in local council leadership, to provide practical, meaningful support is something I'm really looking forward to.

What did you do before joining?

Before joining CALC, I was the CEO/Clerk at Chorleywood Parish Council, where I led a range of organisational improvements, strengthened governance and compliance, and managed a multi-disciplinary team. During my time there, we achieved Local Council Award Scheme Foundation status in 2024, reflecting the progress we made as a council.

I also have experience of running a small parish council with a precept of around £30,000, eight councillors and around 800 electors, which I did on a remote basis during the COVID-19 Pandemic whilst studying for my CiLCA qualification.

Earlier in my career, I worked as a solicitor specialising in Administrative Law with a strong focus on Planning and Environmental Law. This gave me a strong grounding in legal frameworks, risk management, and governance. The project management experience I gained has been invaluable in my work for town and parish councils to deliver effective and sustainable services.

Why did you choose to join Northants CALC?

I was really drawn to Northants CALC's role in supporting parish and town councils and its reputation for promoting high standards across the sector. It's a great opportunity to use my legal and governance background to support a wide range of councils and help strengthen local decision-making and community outcomes.

What are your interests outside of work?

Outside of work, I'm a keen amateur cook and enjoy walking my two dogs (we used to regularly take part in canicross but we're all too old now), Pilates, travel and spending time with family and friends. Learning and professional development is also something I'm passionate about, and I'm always keen to build new skills and knowledge that I can bring back into my work.

What's a fun fact about you?

I was responsible for getting the alcohol licence for the 1998 Glastonbury Festival. Conversely, in the context of local councils, I'm also responsible for there not being Christmas lights in 2019 in the town that I live in on health and safety grounds! Having originally trained and worked in the legal sector before transitioning into local government I bring a slightly different perspective to the world of parish and town councils!

Final thoughts

I'm very pleased to be joining Northants CALC and becoming part of such a supportive and knowledgeable network. I look forward to getting to know member councils and colleagues. Please feel free to get in touch and say hello (contact details on the back page of this *eUpdate*).

THE 2026/27 PRECEPT

Parish and town councils, unlike their unitary council cousins, are not subject to the imposition of referendum principles by the government (aka capping). Several years of high inflation is still exerting upward pressure on precepts, particularly due to increased energy and staffing costs. However, the ongoing cost-of-living challenge exerts downward pressure on some councillors' appetite to raise the precept.

Thirty-five councils in Northamptonshire set the same precept for 2026/27 as for 2025/26, which must be a political decision, because the maths never works out that coincidentally. Councils are required to calculate their budget requirement and derive their precept from that; starting from the precept and working backwards is technically unlawful. And any council that has increased its precept by less than inflation (4%ish) has effectively reduced its spending power and therefore its ability to provide vital community services. 17 councils even reduced their precept this year, and behind each one of those there must be an interesting story given inflation rates and the ever-increasing demands on parish and town councils to step in where the unitary councils are stepping out.

Here we look at the precepts set by all parish and town councils in England and compare them with what happened in Northamptonshire:

There are 10,246 local precepting bodies in England. Of these, 8,901 are parish and town councils that have raised a precept for 2026/27. The remainder are mostly small parish meetings that have not raised a precept.

In England, parish and town council precepts total £942 million in 2026/27, an increase of 9.7% on 2025/26. It represents just under 2% of the total council tax raised by all local authorities.

The national totals and averages hide the enormous diversity in the sector. For example, the twenty highest-precepting town councils in England account for just over 8.4% of the total precept raised by all 8,901 precepting councils.

All the twenty highest-precepting councils have precepts higher than £2.5 million. The highest precept is set by Taunton Town Council in Somerset, whose precept for 2026/27 is £6.9 million.

Northamptonshire's highest-precepting council, Northampton Town Council (NTC), is not yet in the top twenty nationally and for its size has a relatively modest precept for 2026/27 of £1,944,400.

All top twenty precepting councils nationally are in unitary authority areas, and for all councils, Band D tax rates are nearly 20% higher in unitary authority areas than in three-tier areas (parish/district/county).

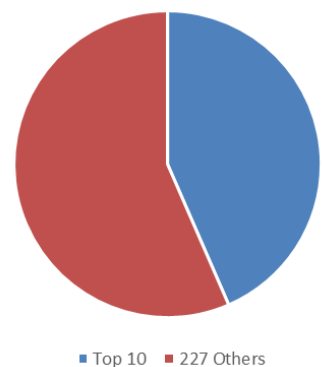
The average Band D tax rate for all precepting councils in England in 2025/26 is £99.79, an increase of £7.59 or 8.2% over the previous year.

In Northamptonshire there are 277 local precepting bodies, but of those 39 are financially inactive parish meetings (zero precept) and other non-council bodies.

The total raised by the 238 precepting bodies for 2026/27 is £24,625,721, an increase of £1,965,505 or 8.6%. The average Band D tax rate in Northamptonshire for 2026/27 is £97.40, an increase of £5.74 or 6.3%.

There are four town councils in Northamptonshire in the million-pound club: Northampton Town Council, Daventry Town Council, Rushden Town Council, and Brackley Town Council.

The top ten precepting councils raise a total of £10,697,779 or 43.4% of the total for all 238 precepting councils. The average Band D tax rate for the top ten councils is £137.21 (compared to the county average for all councils of £97.40).



The highest Band D tax rates in Northamptonshire are levied by West Haddon Parish Council (£268.99) and Oundle Town Council (£254.84). There are now 99 councils (out of 238) with a Band D tax rate over £100.

The lowest precepting body is always Catesby Parish Meeting, with a precept of just £90 and a Band D tax rate of just £2.42!

Most parish councils in Northamptonshire have a very modest income. 50 councils (21%) have a precept of £10,000 or less and a further 66 councils

(27.7%) have a precept between £10,001 and £25,000. 77 councils (32.3%) have a precept between £25,001 and £100,000, and just 45 councils (18.9%) have a precept over £100,001.

There remains a significant difference between the two unitary authority areas, due mainly to the fact that precepts in the former borough of Kettering (in North Northamptonshire) have been much lower than average in the past.

Unitary Area	Precepting Bodies	No Precept	Precept 26/27 (Precept 25/26)	Av Band D 26/27 (Band D 25/26)
North	96	10	£9,584,481 (£8,762,628)	£88.35 (£83.27)
West	141	24	£15,041,240 (£13,897,588)	£103.62 (£98.01)

The figures for the north will increase rapidly over the next ten years as Corby Town Council, Kettering Town Council, Wellingborough Town Council, and the parish councils in the former district of Kettering gradually come into line with county and national averages. Wellingborough Town Council's Band D tax rate for 2026/27 is £25.46 and Kettering Town Council's is £34.85.

In terms of percentage change, the biggest mover was King's Cliffe Parish Council, which increased its precept from £38,000 in 2025/26 to £85,000 for 2026/27. The Band D increase was £75.59 or 223%. King's Cliffe's situation illustrates why the government would find it difficult to apply referendum principles to local precepting bodies in the way that it does for principal councils. Principal councils were permitted to increase their Band D tax rate by 3.99% this year (excluding adult social care), but if the same figure was used for parish councils, then 126 (53%) of the 238 councils that raised a precept would have needed to hold a referendum! A precept referendum in Kings Cliffe could cost up to £1,000, meaning that the precept would have needed to increase even more to pay for the referendum! A fixed percentage figure for referendum principles would make no sense at all for the parish sector and creating a more complex equation that didn't create anomalies is probably more trouble than it is worth.

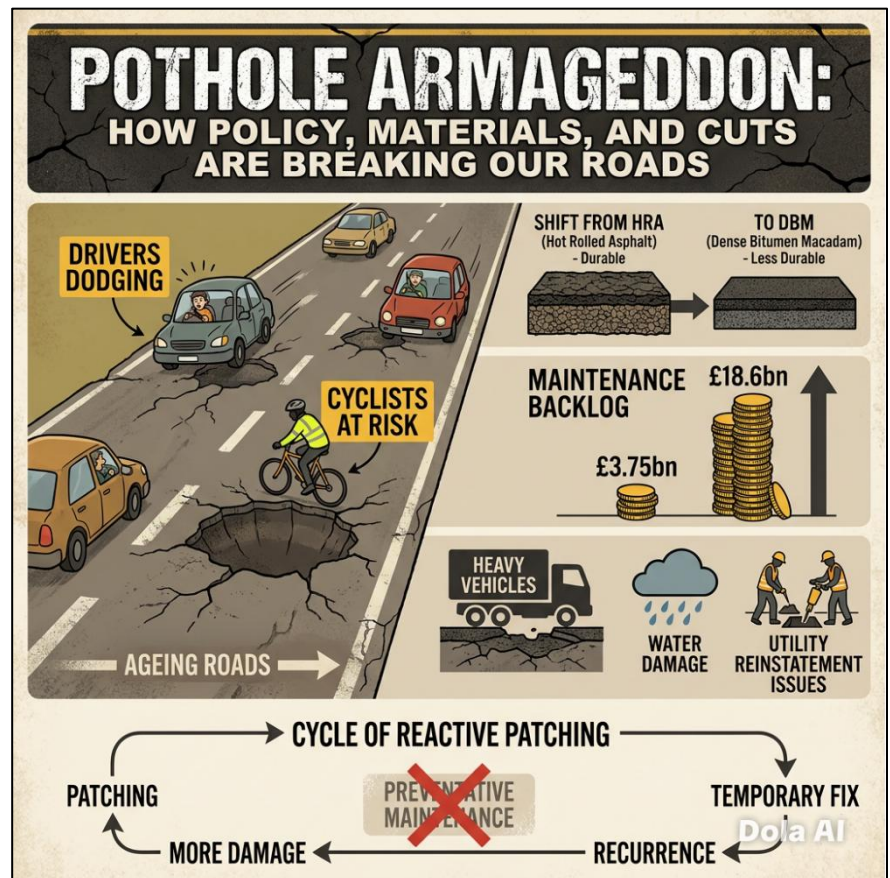
Compare your council against others in Northamptonshire by downloading the spreadsheet at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/precepts>.

POTHOLE ARMAGEDDON

There is little higher on the list of woes for parish and town councils than potholes, and this past winter seems to have been particularly bad. Mr Pothole (the nickname of Mark Morrell) is a well-known UK road safety campaigner based in Brackley, Northamptonshire. He is a retired operations manager and former Brackley mayor who started campaigning around 2013 after becoming concerned about dangerous road conditions. He built a national profile through media appearances and social media, where he highlights poor road maintenance and pushes councils and government to act. Here, Mr Pothole shares his thoughts on the causes of the state of highways in the country and some possible solutions:

Pothole Armageddon: How Policy, Materials, and Cuts Are Breaking Our Roads

Across the country, drivers are dodging craters, cyclists are risking injury, and councils are firefighting an ever-growing maintenance crisis. The so-called “pothole Armageddon” didn’t appear overnight. It is the predictable outcome of decades of decisions about materials, funding, and maintenance strategy, decisions that have quietly eroded the resilience of the road network.



One of the most significant, yet under-discussed, changes was the shift in surfacing materials. Historically, many UK roads were constructed using Hot Rolled Asphalt (HRA), a robust and durable material capable of delivering a service life of 25–30 years when properly maintained. In the pursuit of cost savings, however, there was a

widespread move toward Dense Bitumen Macadam (DBM). While cheaper to install, DBM typically offers a much shorter lifespan, often just 10–15 years.

On paper, the savings looked attractive. In reality, the economics only work if resurfacing cycles are increased to compensate for the reduced durability. That didn't happen. Instead, resurfacing programmes were scaled back, leaving roads in service long past their intended lifespan. The result is a network of ageing carriageways, many of which are structurally compromised and increasingly vulnerable to failure.

The financial picture tells the story starkly. In 2000, the carriageway maintenance backlog in England and Wales stood at around £3.75 billion. By 2025, that figure has ballooned to £18.6 billion. This isn't just inflation, it reflects a system under sustained strain, where necessary work is deferred year after year. As budgets tighten, highways authorities are forced into reactive maintenance: patching potholes rather than preventing them.

Meanwhile, the demands on the road network have intensified. There are more vehicles than ever, and they are heavier too, particularly with the rise of SUVs, delivery vans, and electric vehicles with large battery packs. These loads place greater stress on already weakened road surfaces. Once cracks and surface defects begin to form, they allow water to penetrate the structure beneath.

Water is the true enemy of road integrity. When it seeps into cracks and voids in the asphalt, it undermines the layers below. Traffic loading then accelerates the breakdown, pumping water through the structure and causing further deterioration. In colder months, freeze-thaw cycles expand this damage, turning small defects into full-blown potholes. However, this is a key point often overlooked: water and weather are catalysts, not root causes.

Each winter, highways authorities and government bodies point to cold and wet weather as the primary reason for pothole outbreaks. While weather undoubtedly plays a role, it disproportionately affects roads that are already in poor condition. Well-maintained carriageways – those with intact surfaces and proper drainage – are far more resilient. They do not suddenly disintegrate after a few frosty nights. Blaming the weather obscures the deeper issue: a lack of sustained, preventative maintenance.

Funding constraints have compounded the problem. A major structural change came with the New Roads and Streetworks Act of 1991. Before its introduction, utility companies were required to pay highways authorities to carry out permanent reinstatements after streetworks. Councils often used this as a valuable income stream, in some cases charging significantly more than the actual cost and reinvesting the surplus into broader maintenance budgets.

After 1991, responsibility for reinstatement shifted to the utility companies themselves. While this reduced direct income for councils, it also introduced a new challenge: quality control. Evidence suggests that around 55% of potholes in urban areas are associated with utility works. Poor reinstatements, whether due to inadequate materials, insufficient compaction, or rushed processes, create weak points in the road. These patches often fail prematurely, allowing water ingress and accelerating deterioration around them.

The loss of income from utility works, combined with rising maintenance costs and shrinking budgets, has left highways authorities with fewer resources to manage an increasingly fragile network. Preventative maintenance, such as surface dressing and timely resurfacing, has been squeezed out in favour of short-term fixes. Yet this approach is inherently inefficient. Patching potholes is far more expensive over time than maintaining the structural integrity of the road in the first place.

The current situation is not inevitable. It is the result of policy choices that prioritised short-term savings over long-term resilience. Reversing the trend will require a shift in thinking: investing in durable materials, restoring adequate resurfacing cycles, enforcing higher standards for utility reinstatements, and providing stable, long-term funding for maintenance.

Until then, the cycle will continue. Roads will crack, water will seep in, and potholes will multiply. And each year, as winter arrives, the same explanations will be offered, while the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

We are grateful to Mr Pothole for his insight and knowledge. If you would like to contact Mr Pothole (Mark!) directly, please email mrpotholeuk@gmail.com. And look out for more features from Mr Pothole in future *eUpdates*!

THE (PLANNING) GOALPOSTS HAVE MOVED

If your parish or town council last sent someone on planning training a few years ago, you could be forgiven for assuming that the system still broadly works the way it always has. Applications come in, parish and town councils comment, the local planning authority decides, and if the decision is controversial there may be an appeal where the arguments are replayed and refined. That picture you had is now badly out of date.



Over the last few years, planning law, national policy and, most recently, the planning appeals process have changed in ways that have quietly but fundamentally altered how the system works. If you learned “how planning works” five or ten years ago, parts of that understanding will no longer help you – and in some cases may actively mislead you.

It is hardly surprising that many parish and town councils are feeling weary, frustrated, or cynical about planning. We increasingly hear councillors say that decisions feel remote, that national policy always seems to trump local views, and that neighbourhood plans do not carry the weight people hoped they would. Some councils have started to ask, quite openly, “what’s the point anymore?”

That reaction is understandable, but it is based on a misunderstanding of where influence now lies. The deal has changed – but it has not removed the vital role of parish and town councils. In an important sense, it has made that role more critical than it has been for a long time.

For years, parish councils operated on a set of assumptions that were never formally written down but were widely understood. If an application was refused, the case could be strengthened at appeal. If important points were missed, there would be another opportunity to raise them later. If residents were unhappy, there

might be a hearing or inquiry where local voices could be heard directly. Those assumptions no longer hold.

One reason is the gradual evolution of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), particularly around the presumption in favour of sustainable development. This does not mean that all development is automatically approved, but it does mean that objections must now be rooted firmly in planning policy and material considerations. Vague harm, general opposition, or expressions of local anger carry far less weight than they once did.

The more radical change, however, has come through the reform of the planning appeals system. Appeals are no longer a second bite of the cherry. From April 2026, most planning appeals are dealt with in a very different way to the system many councillors remember. For most appeals, inspectors will decide cases using ONLY the material that was available to the local planning authority when the original decision was made.

In practical terms, that means the appeal is no longer a forum for refining arguments, submitting new reports, or filling gaps. It is a review of whether the original decision was justified on the evidence ALREADY on the table.

For parish and town councils, this is a profound shift. In many cases there will be no opportunity to submit new comments once an appeal is lodged. What you said at application stage is likely to be ALL the inspector ever sees. Equally important, what you did not say may never be said at all.

This change explains why some councils feel increasingly sidelined. But it also explains why disengaging from planning now would be exactly the wrong response. Because the appeals process is now effectively “locked” to the original decision, the application stage has become the most important point in the entire system. And parish and town councils are a statutory consultee at that stage.

Your comment is no longer just background noise or local colour. It may be the only place where Neighbourhood Plan policies are properly explained, where weaknesses in a planning statement are identified, or where cumulative and localised impacts are set out clearly and calmly. Inspectors will read your views as part of the official record, not as an after-the-event protest.

This particularly matters for Neighbourhood Plans. Despite widespread pessimism, Neighbourhood Plans remain part of the statutory development plan and continue to attract significant weight. What has changed is that they are increasingly misunderstood, selectively quoted, or underplayed in applications and even in officer reports.

Under the new system, parish councils are often the last body in the process with the local knowledge and policy familiarity needed to challenge that drift. But that influence only exists if councils engage at the right moment and in the right way.

Planning is still the *raison d'être* for many parish and town councils (as evidenced in our biannual membership surveys), but it needs a reset. For many parish and town councils, planning is not just another agenda item. It is central to why councils exist, how communities judge them, and how councillors themselves understand their role. That has not changed. What has changed is that effective engagement now requires councils to recalibrate how and where they put their energy. The system rewards early, focused, policy-based engagement. It no longer rewards scattering objections widely, relying on appeals to fix weak decisions, or assuming that someone else will make the crucial arguments later.

The real danger is not that parish councils have lost their role in planning. The danger is that councils continue to operate as if the old system still exists, become disillusioned when it does not behave as expected, and quietly withdraw from the very stage where their influence is now greatest.

The planning system may look familiar on the surface, but it works very differently underneath. So, parish and town councils still have a role – a vital one – but only if they understand how the modern system really functions and adjust accordingly. If planning truly is one of the most important reasons parish councils exist, then now is not the time to step back. It is the time to re-equip, refocus, and re-assert their place in the process.

Here are nine tips to make your councils planning responses clear, relevant, and “appeal-ready”, without turning the clerk and councillors into planning officers or lawyers:

- 1) **Start from a different mindset** - An appeal-ready response begins with accepting one basic shift. You are no longer writing solely for the case officer

or committee. You are writing for three audiences at once: the decision-maker, a future planning inspector, and the public record. That does not mean your response needs to be technical or legalistic, but it does mean it must stand on its own if read months later by someone with no local knowledge. If the point matters, it needs to be written down clearly at application stage.

- 2) **Be selective about what you engage with** - Appeal-readiness is not about responding to every application with maximum effort. Most parish and town councils have limited time and volunteer capacity, and that reality needs to be acknowledged. The key is to identify which applications genuinely warrant detailed attention. These are typically schemes where refusal is plausible, where neighbourhood plan policies are engaged, or where cumulative or precedent impacts are likely to matter. Spending more time on fewer, more consequential applications will usually produce better outcomes than spreading effort thinly across everything.
- 3) **Anchor your response in policy, not popularity** - Expressions of local feeling are important, but they are not usually decisive at appeal. Inspectors are required to determine cases on policy and material considerations, not on the strength of opposition. An appeal-ready response therefore needs to explain **why** the proposal conflicts with policy, not simply that residents dislike it. That might mean referring to the local plan, the neighbourhood plan, or national policy where relevant. You do not need to quote policy verbatim. It is usually enough to identify the relevant policy and explain, in ordinary language, how the proposal fails to meet it. The strongest responses connect policy directly to the specifics of the application and to the characteristics of the place.
- 4) **Use neighbourhood plan policies properly** - Neighbourhood plans remain part of the statutory development plan and still attract significant weight. The problem is not that they no longer matter, but that they are often applied vaguely or defensively. An appeal-ready response should show that the council understands its own neighbourhood plan and is applying it deliberately. That means being precise about which policy is engaged and what that policy is trying to achieve. Inspectors tend to be persuaded not by the number of neighbourhood plan references, but by the clarity with which a council shows that a proposal undermines the purpose of a policy in practice.

- 5) **Identify what is missing or unclear** - One of the most valuable contributions a parish or town council can make is highlighting gaps, assumptions, or weaknesses in the application material. If a planning statement glosses over an issue, downplays an impact, or asserts compliance without evidence, say so. An appeal-ready response does not need to resolve the issue, but it should flag clearly that the information before the authority is incomplete or misleading. Under the new appeals regime, if something is missing at application stage, it may never be supplied later. Calling that out early matters.
- 6) **Explain local impacts clearly and calmly** - Parish and town councils bring something to the planning process that no other consultee can replicate, a lived understanding of the place. Appeal-ready responses should use that strength, but they should do so in measured language. Assertions such as “this will overwhelm the village” are far more effective if followed by a brief explanation of how, where, and why. The aim is not to dramatise impact, but to describe it accurately and in a way that a non-local inspector can visualise.
- 7) **Avoid trying to cover everything** - There is a temptation, particularly on contentious applications, to list every possible concern. This can dilute the force of the most important points and make a response easier to dismiss as unfocused. An appeal-ready response prioritises the issues that genuinely matter. It is often better to make three or four strong, well-explained planning points than to raise ten weaker ones. Less, in this context, is more.
- 8) **Record disagreement clearly** - Where the parish or town council disagrees with an officer recommendation or with aspects of the application, the reason for that disagreement should be explicit. Stating that the council “objects” is not enough. The response should make clear which elements of the proposal are unacceptable and on what planning basis. This clarity becomes especially important if the application is later approved against local advice, because the inspector will need to understand exactly what the council’s concerns were at the time.
- 9) **Write for the file, not the room** - Planning committees change. Case officers move on. Appeals are decided by people with no memory of the original debate. An appeal-ready response therefore needs to make sense as a standalone document. Avoid relying on references to “as discussed previously” or “as residents have said”. If it matters, it needs to be written

down. Imagine the response being read a year later by someone who has never visited the area. If it still makes sense, you have probably got it right.

The modern planning system places far more weight on what is said early and far less on what is said later. That change can feel uncomfortable, but it also gives parish and town councils a renewed sense of purpose.

Appeal-ready responses do not require councils to be technical experts. They require focus, clarity, and confidence in explaining local policy and local place.

Done well, they ensure that the parish or town council's voice is heard at precisely the point where it now matters most.

A RIGHT ROYAL OCCASION

Each year, Northants CALC invites two councillors and their guests to attend the Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace to represent parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. This year's recipients were Mike Scott from Great Addington Parish Council, and Gillian Greaves from Hollowell & Teeton Parish Council and former member of Hardingstone Parish Council. Mike took his wife Elaine, and Gillian took her daughter Claire, both of whom have also been in the parish council sector in the past.

The weather was superb for a garden party, and the hosts were Their Royal Highnesses The Prince and Princess of Wales with Prince William looking particularly dapper in top hat and morning coat.

The recognition acknowledges the quiet, often uncelebrated contribution that people make to their communities, and affirms that local service and civic commitment truly matter at a national level. For those selected, it is a moment of pride and reflection; for the wider sector, it reinforces a culture of appreciation, inspiring others to continue their work with renewed purpose and confidence.



Mike and Elaine Scott at Buckingham Palace in May 2026.

SO MUCH MORE THAN PUTTING OUT FIRES

Parish and town councils are being urged to contact the Fire Service if residents in their area could benefit from fire, water and road safety support.

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's dedicated Prevention team travels across the county to deliver safety information – and this can be tailored to rural communities.

Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service aspires to be visible and accessible for the whole county but understands that some rural areas may feel more isolated and less protected, especially if it takes fire crews longer to get to these locations.

The Prevention team has already hosted several sessions with councils over the last 12 months – giving attendees confidence and reassurance, and educational safety messaging that gives them the best chance of reducing risk.

Now the Service is inviting councillors to get in touch, if it feels their communities can benefit.

Darren Carson, a Prevention Team Leader at Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service, said: *"We have had a successful and enjoyable time working with our Parish and Town Councils and associated community groups in our more rural areas so far."*



“We want to remind you that we can be contacted to visit and deliver engaging safety sessions covering fire, road and water safety.

“Northamptonshire is a predominantly rural county. Two thirds of our road network are in rural areas, and we have more than 1,300km of waterways and rivers.

“You may have concerns regarding repeat road traffic collisions or young people entering dangerous sections of water.

“We can help local communities to help themselves – so please get in touch if you think we can help to create a safer and more resilient neighbourhood in your area.”

If you feel your residents or any groups in your area would benefit from having a visit from Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service, then you can call 01604 797000 and ask to speak to a member of the Prevention Team.

You can also contact the team via email:

North Northamptonshire area: dnoone@northantsfire.gov.uk (Dan Noone)

West Northamptonshire area: nking@northantsfire.gov.uk (Neal King)

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

Trouble usually begins in local government, not with fraud, not with scandal, but with a good idea, backed by confidence, optimism, and just enough oversight to feel safe. A council sets out to deliver something significant for its community and the vision is compelling. A major asset is acquired, funded by borrowing and local taxation, and a separate organisation is established to run it. Everything looks, at least initially, like progress.

But over time, the questions start. Residents raise concerns. Correspondence builds. Formal objections are submitted during the audit process. The spotlight shifts from ambition to accountability. And what auditors often find in these situations is not one dramatic failure, but something softer: the gradual loss of financial grip.

At a parish council in Cheshire, basic disciplines had slipped. Reserves were not properly managed. Budget monitoring was weak. Records were incomplete, and key figures could not be relied upon with confidence. At points, the council had effectively overcommitted itself, with earmarked reserves exceeding available balances and general reserves falling below the council's own stated policy.

There was no assumption of criminality. But there was a failure of stewardship. To its credit, the council eventually acknowledged this, formally recognising that it had not managed public money properly and commissioning an independent investigation to understand why.

The concerns were sufficiently serious for the external auditor to issue a Public Interest Report (PIR), requiring the council to consider the findings in public and demonstrate its response to the community.

The remedies are not complicated: Action plans, regular monitoring, clear records, transparent reporting; all basic stuff. But the lesson runs deeper. This is what happens when ambition runs ahead of governance. When systems do not keep pace with scale. When decisions accumulate faster than they are scrutinised.

The message for parish and town councils is simple. Ambition is welcome (and increasingly, expected), but the fundamentals are non-negotiable. No matter how strong the vision, it will only ever be as sound as the governance beneath it.

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

Sharon Long

Senior Advisory Services Manager

slong@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

