

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

When the previous *eUpdate* was published at the end of May, Keir Starmer was the prime minister, we were relieved to have come through the May heatwave, and the nation was looking forward to football coming home. It is amazing how much can change in two months!

The leadership coup in the Labour Party and resulting change of prime minister is significant for parish and town councils everywhere, including in Northamptonshire. Firstly, we can expect to see an acceleration of English devolution, meaning the creation of strategic authorities and the transfer to them from Whitehall of powers and functions. Northamptonshire had a false start with the attempted creation of the South Midlands Strategic Authority but expect it to come back on the agenda soon. Secondly, Angela Rayner returns as Secretary of State at the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and we can expect the policy on housing to be build, baby, build. The relaxation of planning regulations in favour of developers, sorry, housing growth, will continue and accelerate. The delay in publication of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which was expected by the end of July, looks rather ominous.

The early summer wasn't all sporting doom and gloom. Northampton Saints were crowned English Champions when they beat Exeter in the final on Saturday 20 June. I had the privilege of joining several thousand other supporters in Northampton for the open-top bus victory parade the day after the final and it was a glorious occasion. To see the town centre packed with people singing "*No finer town you'll ever see!*" was uplifting (and rare) and I was pleased to see that dignitaries from Northampton Town Council (NTC) were front and centre in the celebrations. The biggest cheer of the afternoon though was for Saints lock forward Alex Coles, who grabbed the microphone during the celebrations and said "*There's something more important we need to address. The potholes! They're a joke! And we need to get them sorted out! Get them sorted out!*" Apparently, he has received more messages since then about potholes than he has about winning the Prem Rugby title!

It's been an epic few months at Northants CALC as we've battled through the extraordinarily hot days. We joined in with the sector marking Local Council Clerk

Week (8 – 12 June 2026) but this year felt different to me, and not in a good way. I think it is right and proper to recognise the amazing (and often unseen) work that clerks do, but there are significant growing structural issues with the clerkship concerning terms and conditions, workload, burnout, and councillor behaviours that all need to be addressed. An annual pat on the head on social media saying “Yay! Well done clerks everywhere, you do a great job!” starts to sound somewhat patronising in my view and I think the national sector bodies need to wake up and smell the coffee. The plaudits and recognition need to be accompanied by credible proposals for tangible improvements in clerks’ working conditions, otherwise we will be left celebrating a profession that no one wants to join. At Northants CALC we focus on addressing the underlying issues, both in the short term with training and guidance, and in the longer term by experimenting with new models. Yes, celebrate the here and now, but a clerk is not just for Local Council Clerk Week.

“The plaudits and recognition need to be accompanied by credible proposals for tangible improvements in clerks’ working conditions...”

The unitary councils are busy recruiting to senior posts over the summer, and it is always my pleasure to join the partner panels that form part of the recruitment process. It is an opportunity to meet all the candidates, and one always learns from what they have to say when they set out their vision for partnership working. In early June I was on the panel for the recruitment of the Executive Director for Place, Economy, and Environment at West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), whose directorate includes responsibility for highways and planning (amongst many others) so it is an important role from a parish and town council perspective. The successful applicant, David Harris from Birmingham City Council, joins WNC in October. In mid-July I was on the panel for the Chief Executive interviews at WNC and was delighted that internal candidate Martin Henry was appointed after an extremely rigorous process with competition from some excellent candidates. Martin is West Northamptonshire through and through and has been acting CEO since Anna Earnshaw departed in November 2025. The process will now begin to backfill Martin’s substantive Chief Financial Officer role. Next month I am on the panel for the interviews at North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) for a Director for Highways, Waste & Environment. I look forward to meeting the brave candidates prepared to take on that job!

In mid-June we held our 6th Police Liaison Representative (PLR) Annual Conference with over seventy PLRs in attendance from across Northamptonshire to listen to special guests Danielle Stone, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, and Chief Constable Ivan Balhatchet who provided updates on community safety priorities, neighbourhood policing, crime reduction, and road safety. The breakout room sessions were illuminating, and you can find a report and relevant materials at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/plr>. We are very grateful to Danielle and Ivan for their support of the scheme, and to all the PLRs across Northamptonshire who are helping make the county a stronger and safer place.

Another key event in the past two months was the Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) meeting held on 2 July 2026 with delegates from the thirty largest parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. We invited Adele Wylie, CEO of NNC and Martin Henry, Acting CEO of WNC. Both CEOs talked about financial pressures, devolution, and community asset transfers, while parish and town councils highlighted concerns about communication, planning, Section 106 agreements, and service responsiveness. All parties agreed that stronger partnership working, greater transparency, and improved communication are essential to delivering better outcomes.

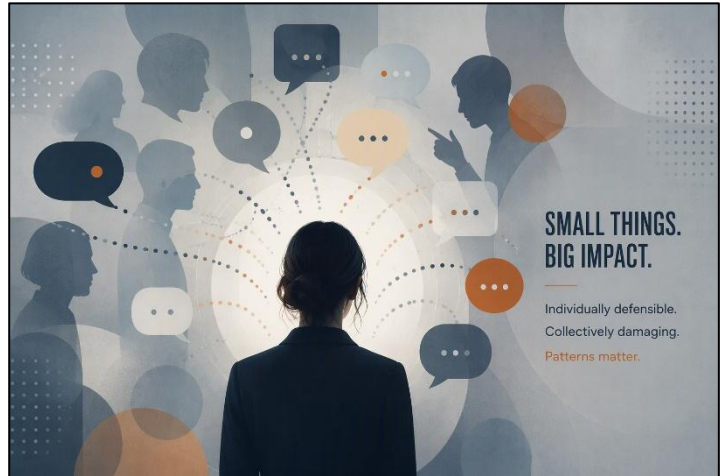
On 14 July 2026 we held our annual washup meeting of the Internal Audit Service (IAS) team, where we look at the common themes discovered by the internal auditors during the audit season. It was noted that many of the issues identified could have been avoided if the council had availed itself of the detailed guidance in PKF Littlejohn's "*Instructions relating to the Annual Governance and Accountability Return*." Things like setting the correct date for the exercise of electors' rights (which is one of the things that catches councils out every year) is very straightforward if clerks/RFOs read, understand, and follow the guidance. There will be a roundup of the common issues raised in a future *eUpdate*.

And finally, as well as all the external stuff, we have been working on our new Strategic Plan 2026 – 2029 and it was the focus at the Board Away Day held on 18 June 2026 at Stanwick Lakes. The draft plan contains a great mixture of keep-doing-what-we're-doing and exciting new projects. The Strategic Plan is due to be formally approved by the board at its September meeting.

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

MICROAGGRESSION – A PERNICIOUS PROBLEM

When “It’s only a small thing” happens every week, you might be dealing with a pattern of microaggression. It can happen between councillors, or from clerk to a councillor, but the real issue is when a councillor is the aggressor and the target is the clerk (or another officer). It’s like death by a thousand cuts; no single cut on its own is fatal but added together it can be a different story.



One of the more difficult conversations we have at Northants CALC happens when a clerk says, quite sincerely, that they feel bullied or harassed... but then struggles to explain why. You ask for an example. There is usually a pause. Then something comes out that sounds, frankly, rather unremarkable. “*Well... in meetings, he often corrects me.*” On the face of it, that is not bullying. Councillors are entitled to question officers. They are entitled to seek clarity. In a well-run council, constructive challenge is part of good governance. And yet, the clerk genuinely feels undermined, exposed, and increasingly reluctant to contribute.

So, what is going on? The problem with asking for “an example.” The difficulty is that we instinctively look for misconduct in the form of an incident. Something clear, identifiable, and obviously unacceptable. But many of the behaviours that cause the greatest strain in parish and town councils do not operate in that way. They are not about a single moment where a line has been crossed. They are about what happens repeatedly, and what that repetition comes to mean.

Taken in isolation, an action may be perfectly reasonable. A councillor asks a question. A councillor challenges a point. A councillor offers an alternative view. None of this is problematic in itself. But when the same councillor routinely interrupts the clerk mid-sentence, corrects minor points publicly, rephrases what the clerk has just said in a more authoritative tone, or revisits advice in a way that implies it was unclear or inadequate, something begins to shift. Not in a dramatic way, but in a gradual, cumulative one.

Over time, the pattern creates a subtle but persistent message: the clerk's voice carries less weight; their contribution is open to constant informal checking; their professional standing is quietly diminished. No single moment captures this. But the overall effect is unmistakable.

One of the most helpful ways to understand these situations is to separate what is happening from what it is doing. What is happening may be entirely defensible. Questions are being asked. Points are being clarified. Discussion is taking place. But what it is doing is something different. It is changing how the clerk is perceived in the room. It is making it harder for them to speak with confidence. It encourages others, consciously or otherwise, to treat their input as provisional rather than authoritative. When repeated often enough, this kind of behaviour can create an environment that feels uncomfortable, pressurised, or undermining. That is important, because harassment is not judged only by the nature of a single act, but by its overall effect on the working environment.

Clerks often find it difficult to articulate concerns about this type of behaviour, and that is entirely understandable. First, when examples are taken out of context, they sound trivial. Saying "*he corrects me in meetings*" does not feel like a strong complaint. Second, clerks tend to describe the action rather than the impact. They can tell you what is happening, but not always what it is doing to their confidence, their authority, or their ability to carry out the role. Third, there is an understandable hesitation about appearing oversensitive. Parish and town councils rely on open discussion and democratic challenge, and clerks do not want to be seen as resistant to scrutiny.

Left unaddressed, these patterns can have real consequences. What starts as a low-level dynamic can gradually erode the clarity of roles within the council. The distinction between member and officer becomes blurred. The clerk may begin to withdraw from active participation, contributing less in meetings, or avoiding situations where they anticipate being corrected or challenged.

In some cases, this develops into formal complaints. In others, it simply results in the loss of a clerk who no longer feels able to operate effectively in the role. It is worth remembering that councils have a responsibility to ensure that officers can carry out their duties without being undermined or subjected to behaviour that creates a hostile or intimidating environment. That responsibility is not limited to

overt or dramatic incidents. It includes patterns of conduct that have the same effect over time.

The answer is not to suppress challenge or discourage councillors from asking questions. Healthy debate is an essential part of local democracy. The key is awareness. Awareness, first, of the difference between constructive scrutiny and repeated correction that undermines rather than improves. Awareness, second, of how behaviour that feels minor in isolation can feel very different when experienced week after week in a public forum. And awareness, finally, that the clerk's role depends not only on technical competence but on the confidence of the council in their professional advice.

Where patterns like this are identified, the most effective responses are usually simple. Strong chairing (assuming the chair is not the aggressor!) can ensure that contributions are heard without interruption and that questioning remains proportionate and focused. A shared understanding of roles can clarify that the clerk is there to advise and support the council, not to be continually second-guessed in a performative way. And, where necessary, a quiet conversation outside the meeting can often reset expectations before positions harden.

If there is one takeaway from this, it is this. When a clerk says they feel undermined, but cannot point to a single serious incident, the question to ask is not "what happened?" but "what keeps happening?" In parish and town councils, it is often the accumulation of small things, each of them defensible, each of them minor, that does the greatest damage. And unless we learn to recognise those patterns for what they are, we will continue to hear concerns that sound insignificant... but to the person affected feel anything but.

79th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Our 79th Annual Conference & AGM takes place on Saturday 3 October 2026 from 1000 to 1300 at Moulton Community Centre and the theme this year is planning and development control. Invitations have been sent to all member councils (via the clerk) and bookings are coming in thick and fast. Please get your booking in as soon as possible to avoid disappointment! We look forward to seeing you there!



THE RETURN OF ANGELA RAYNER

The reappointment of Angela Rayner as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has been welcomed by the local council sector, not least because she returns to office already familiar with many of the issues facing parish and town councils.

Within days of her reappointment, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) wrote to congratulate her and to press for action on one of its longest-running campaigns: reform of the councillor standards regime.



Angela Rayner ©House of Commons

The letter from Cllr Iain Hamilton, Chair of NALC, strikes a careful balance between congratulations and challenge. It welcomes the Government's commitment to devolution and recognises the inclusion of parish and town councils within the new English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act. At the same time, it argues that meaningful local empowerment must extend beyond mayoral authorities and principal councils, giving communities of all sizes greater influence and autonomy.

Much of the letter, however, focuses on standards and conduct. NALC argues that intimidation, abuse, and poor behaviour towards councillors and staff are damaging public trust, discouraging people from standing for office, and making it harder to recruit and retain both elected members and employees. It calls on ministers to honour earlier commitments to strengthen the standards framework and to bring forward legislation without delay.

For many parish and town councils, this will feel like familiar territory. Standards reform has been discussed for years. Following the Committee on Standards in Public Life review in 2019, there was widespread expectation that councils would receive stronger powers to deal with misconduct. Yet progress has been slow, and many councils continue to operate within a framework that is widely regarded as limited in its ability to address persistent poor behaviour. NALC has consistently argued that councils need a clearer and more effective system of sanctions together with better protection for councillors and staff experiencing

bullying, harassment, or intimidation. The latest letter is therefore not a new campaign but the continuation of a long-standing one.

It is also a reminder of NALC's role within the sector. As the national representative body for around 10,000 parish and town councils, NALC's job is not merely to provide guidance and support but to act as the collective voice of local councils in discussions with government. Lobbying ministers, responding to consultations, appearing before parliamentary committees, and maintaining relationships with policymakers are all part of that role. Whether every member council agrees with every position taken by NALC is almost beside the point; without national representation, the views of parish and town councils would struggle to be heard in Whitehall.

The challenge, of course, is that influence does not always translate into immediate results. Those working within the local council sector can often feel frustrated by the pace of change. Over many years there have been calls for stronger standards powers, improved planning engagement, greater financial freedoms and a clearer role for parish and town councils in the wider system of local government. Progress has tended to come slowly and incrementally rather than through sweeping reform.

That does not necessarily mean that lobbying has failed. Government priorities change, ministers move on and legislative opportunities can be limited. Much policy influence happens behind the scenes and over extended periods. The fact that parish and town councils are now routinely referenced in discussions on devolution, community empowerment, and local government reorganisation suggests that the sector's voice is being heard more clearly than it was a decade ago. NALC has undoubtedly played a significant part in that shift.

Whether the latest appeal produces tangible action remains to be seen. The reality is that standards reform has been promised before and many councils will reserve judgement until legislation appears. Nevertheless, NALC is right to keep the issue firmly on the agenda. As parish and town councils take on greater responsibilities and become increasingly important community leaders, ensuring that those who serve in local government are properly protected and supported is not simply an employment or governance issue. It is fundamental to maintaining confidence in local democracy itself.

NATIONAL SCHEME OF DELEGATION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

A major change is coming to the way planning applications are decided in England. From 31 October 2026, local planning authorities will have to operate under a new National Scheme of Delegation. This is being introduced through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 and the Town and Country Planning (Discharge of Local Planning Authority Functions) (England) Regulations 2026. The statutory guidance, *Planning Committees and the National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions: Guidance for local planning authorities in England*, was published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 1 June 2026.

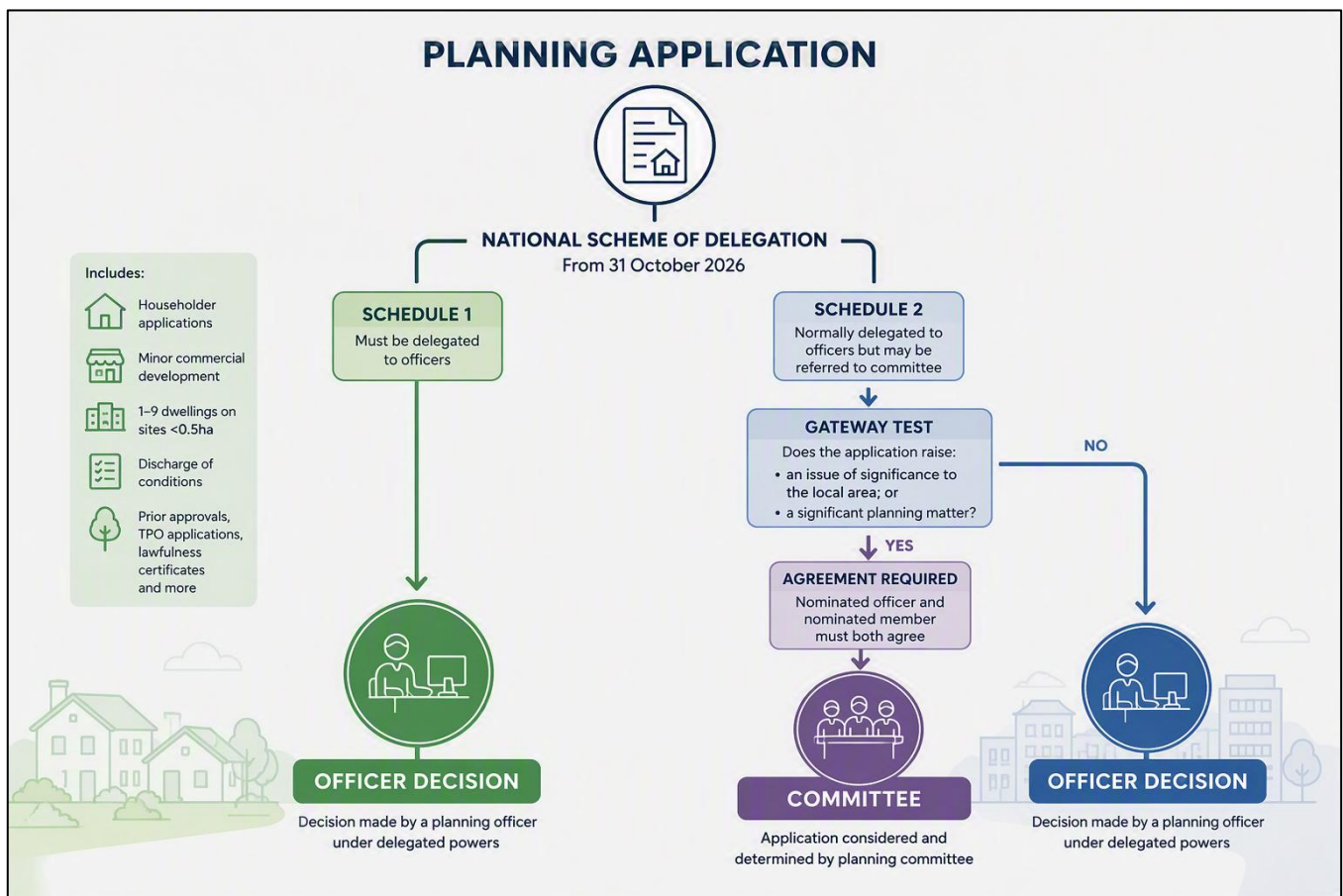
The purpose of the new scheme is to create a consistent national approach to deciding which planning applications are determined by officers, and which may go to a planning committee. At present, every local planning authority has its own local scheme of delegation. That has led to considerable variation between councils. The Government's explanatory memorandum states that 96% of planning decisions were made by officers in Q2 2024, compared with 75% in 2000, but the number and type of applications considered by planning committees still varies widely between authorities.

The new system divides planning functions into two main categories. Schedule 1 applications must be delegated to officers unless they fall within the special rules for "own interest" applications. These include householder applications, minor commercial development, minor residential development of one to nine dwellings on a site of less than 0.5 hectares, most reserved matters approvals that are not linked to very large outline permissions, discharge of conditions, prior approvals, permission in principle, non-material amendments, certificates of lawfulness, biodiversity gain plans and certificates of appropriate alternative development.

Schedule 2 applications are also presumed to be officer decisions but may be referred to committee if the statutory tests are met and both the nominated officer and nominated member agree. Schedule 2 includes applications for planning permission that are not householder, minor commercial, or minor residential applications, section 73 applications linked to previous Schedule 2 permissions, section 73A applications for development already carried out, listed building consent, advertisement consent, applications under tree preservation orders, and reserved matters applications linked to "large outline" permissions. For this

purpose, a large outline permission means one involving at least 500 dwellings or 50,000 square metres of floorspace.

The “gateway” for a Schedule 2 application to go to committee is narrow. The application must raise either an economic, social, or environmental issue of significance to the local area, or a significant planning matter having regard to the development plan and other material considerations. Even then, the matter can only go to committee if the nominated officer and the nominated member agree. The guidance says that the nominated officer should normally be the Chief Planning Officer or equivalent, and the nominated member should normally be the chair of the planning committee, or the vice-chair or equivalent where necessary.



This is a significant practical change for parish and town councils. Existing local practices such as ward councillor “call-ins” and automatic referral to committee when a certain number of objections is received will no longer be possible under the national scheme. The statutory guidance is explicit that local authorities will need to amend their constitutions to align with the national scheme and warns that if a planning committee determines an application that should legally have been delegated to officers, the decision may be vulnerable to judicial review.

For parish and town councils, the most important message is that all planning comments will need to be early, clear, and based on material planning considerations. If fewer applications reach committee, councils will have fewer opportunities to rely on later public speaking or lobbying of ward members. A parish council's written response to the consultation will become even more important. It should identify the relevant planning policies, explain the local planning impact, and avoid general objections that are not grounded in material planning considerations. In short, parish and town councils will need to influence the officer report, not wait for the committee debate.

Both Northamptonshire planning authorities are likely to need constitutional changes before 31 October 2026. West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) reported to its Planning Policy Committee on 23 July 2025 that many of the application types then proposed for mandatory delegation were already delegated to officers under its constitution unless called in by a ward councillor. The report also noted that WNC's structure included Strategic and Non-Strategic Planning Committees, with the Strategic Committee dealing with housing schemes of more than 200 units and associated large-scale schemes. Under the final national scheme, however, local call-in arrangements and local automatic committee thresholds will need to give way to the statutory Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 approach.

North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) has already been through a substantial review of its planning committee structure. In March 2023, NNC replaced its Strategic Planning Committee and four Area Planning Committees with two Area Planning Committees, North and South, following Planning Advisory Service (PAS) recommendations. That report recorded concerns that too many householder and minor applications were being considered by committee, and that committees should focus on the most significant applications. NNC's current constitution was last updated in May 2026 and contains planning committee, planning protocol, and officer delegation provisions, so it too will need to be checked against the final 2026 regulations before they take effect.

The National Scheme of Delegation should also be seen alongside wider planning reform. The current National Planning Policy Framework was published in December 2024 and amended in February 2025. A further consultation on proposed NPPF reforms ran from 16 December 2025 to 10 March 2026, and as at the time of publication of this *eUpdate*, the Government is still analysing

responses. A House of Commons Library briefing published on 15 July 2026 describes the proposed reforms as significant, including a more rules-based approach, national decision-making policies, and a proposed shift from the “presumption in favour of sustainable development” to a “permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development”. Those NPPF proposals are separate from the National Scheme of Delegation, but together they point towards a more standardised and officer-led development management system.

Northants CALC’s practical advice is that parish and town councils should review their own planning procedures before autumn. Councils may wish to consider whether their meeting cycle allows timely responses, whether they have delegated arrangements for straightforward applications, and whether their planning comments are sufficiently focused on material considerations. Larger councils may also want to identify local infrastructure priorities, emerging neighbourhood plan policies, and site-specific concerns in advance, so that when a significant application appears, the council can respond quickly and with evidence.

It would be understandable for parish and town councils to ask: “What is the point of commenting if fewer applications will go to committee?” The answer is that local council influence is not disappearing, but it is moving earlier in the process. A well-evidenced parish or town council response can still shape the planning officer’s assessment, highlight local impacts that may not be obvious from the plans, identify relevant neighbourhood plan or local plan policies, and explain why an application raises issues of wider significance. What will matter even more under the new system is the quality and timing of the response. Parish and town councils remain the most local part of the planning conversation, but they will need to be organised, timely and specific if they want their comments to have maximum effect (for guidance on how to create good responses, see article in the May/June *eUpdate* entitled “*The (Planning) Goalposts Have Moved*”).

The National Scheme of Delegation does not remove the role of parish and town councils in the planning process. It does, however, change where influence is most likely to be effective.

In future, the strongest local councils will be those that engage early, comment clearly, understand the development plan, and make it easy for planning officers to see precisely why a proposal matters to the local area.

RECRUITING STAFF? A MAJOR EMPLOYMENT LAW CHANGE IS COMING

A significant employment law change is on the horizon and, although it does not take effect until 1 January 2027, parish and town councils should be thinking about it now. From that date, the qualifying period for bringing an ordinary unfair dismissal claim is due to reduce from two years to six months. For many parish councils, particularly those with limited HR experience and only one or two employees, this will represent a major shift in employment risk. Any council recruiting staff during the second half of 2026 needs to understand the implications.

The key date is not actually 1 January 2027; it was 1 July 2026. Any employee recruited on or after that date could reach the new six-month qualifying threshold once the law changes come into force. In practical terms, councils recruiting now need to assume that they will have far less time to assess whether a new employee is suitable for the role before unfair dismissal protection applies. That means the traditional approach of "give it a year and see how things develop" may no longer be appropriate.

Performance concerns will need to be identified and addressed much earlier.

Many councils already have probation arrangements in place but now is a good time to review whether they remain fit for purpose. A probation period is intended to help both employer and employee decide

whether the appointment is right. It is usually evident within the first few months whether a new employee is attending reliably, following council policies, carrying out the duties required, and settling into the role.

Councils may therefore wish to consider a short probation period, perhaps three months, supported by a structured onboarding process and regular review meetings. Reviews at around one month, two months and three months can provide opportunities to discuss progress, identify any concerns, and agree support where needed. Importantly, a three-month probation period still leaves time for probation to be extended where appropriate, or for a fair and evidence-based decision to be made before the six-month point is reached.



This change is not just about probation policies though. Councils should also take the opportunity to review their capability and performance management arrangements. Ask yourself a simple question: if an employee was underperforming, would the council know exactly what steps to take? A good policy should enable concerns to be identified early, support to be provided where necessary and expectations to be clearly communicated. Those responsible for applying the policy must also be confident in using it consistently and fairly. Without clear procedures and evidence that concerns have been addressed properly, councils may find it much harder to defend employment decisions if they are challenged.

Who is responsible for managing this will vary from council to council. For councils with a single employee, the Staffing/Personnel/HR Committee is likely to have an important role in overseeing the onboarding process and monitoring performance during probation. In larger councils with several employees, day-to-day responsibility will often sit with the clerk for staff other than the clerk. Whatever the structure, responsibilities should be clear and someone should be actively managing the process rather than assuming issues will resolve themselves. One of the simplest and most effective ways of managing employment risk is also one of the easiest to overlook. Regular, honest conversations help employees understand what is expected of them, provide opportunities to resolve concerns at an early stage and reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings developing into disputes. Most performance issues do not improve through hope alone. They improve because concerns are identified, discussed, and addressed constructively.

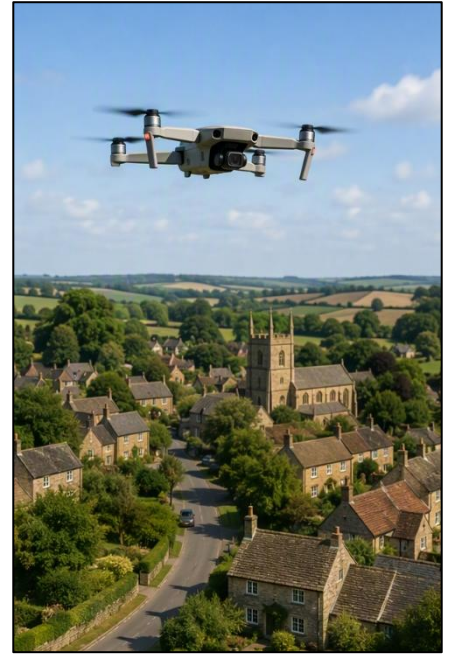
Councils should also remember that fairness is not enough on its own. They must be able to demonstrate fairness. Written notes of review meetings, concerns raised, support offered and actions agreed can become important evidence if decisions are later challenged. A consistent approach, supported by clear records, will place councils in a much stronger position than trying to reconstruct events months later.

The forthcoming changes provide a timely reminder for councils to check that their employment procedures are up to date. A review of probation arrangements, onboarding processes, capability procedures, and staff management responsibilities now may help avoid significant difficulties later.

EYES IN THE SKY? IT MIGHT BE A DRONE

A parish council contacted us recently following concerns about a drone being flown over gardens and close to people. Drones sit at that awkward meeting point between technology, privacy, safety, and neighbour relations.

Parish and town councils do not regulate drones and have no enforcement powers over drone pilots, but they can help residents understand that drones are not a free-for-all. There are rules, reporting routes, and a sensible middle ground between ignoring concerns and overreacting.



The starting point is the Civil Aviation Authority's Drone and Model Aircraft Code, often shortened to the Drone Code (<https://www.caa.co.uk/drones>). It sets out the basic rules for flying drones: keep your drone in sight, fly safely, avoid endangering people, respect privacy, and follow the rules on height, distance and where drones may be flown.

Most drone users are responsible. Others, such as "drone auditors," may deliberately film people, homes, or council assets. Some activity may be lawful, but pilots must still follow aviation safety rules and be mindful of privacy, data protection, and harassment.

When a drone is seen over gardens and concerns are raised, the council's role is to acknowledge the concerns and explain how to report them and to signpost to the Drone Code. Residents should not confront operators or interfere with drones and if there is an immediate risk or a crime in progress, should call 999. For non-emergencies, report concerns to Northamptonshire Police on 101 or online at <https://www.northants.police.uk/ro/report/>. Safety, privacy, or illegal flying can also be reported direct to the Civil Aviation Authority. Note the date, time, location and a description of the drone, its flight path, and any operator, plus why the flight caused concern. Photos or video may help if obtained safely.

Do not become the drone police, but do signpost to the rules, encourage responsible flying, and ensure concerns reach the bodies that can act.

RESOLVING CONFLICT INFORMALLY IN THE PARISH COUNCIL SECTOR

Conflict is a normal part of working with people, particularly in parish councils where councillors, clerks, staff, volunteers, contractors, and members of the public may all bring different priorities, communication styles, and expectations. The aim is not to remove disagreement altogether, but to prevent it becoming personal, entrenched, or damaging to the council's ability to serve its community.

Conflict is defined as a situation where ideas, opinions, feelings, or wishes are opposed, or where people are in active disagreement. In a parish council setting, this might appear as tension between councillors and the clerk, disagreement over roles and responsibilities, frustration about communication, differing views on priorities, or complaints about how decisions are being handled. Common causes of conflict include conflicting resources, different working styles, differing perceptions, contradictory goals, conflicting pressures, opposing roles, personal values and unclear or unpredictable policies.

Informal resolution is most effective when conflict is identified early before positions become entrenched. A facilitated conversation is a structured but informal approach that helps people explore differing perceptions, understand each other's concerns, and find practical solutions. It can be particularly useful in parish or town councils where tensions arise over communication styles, workload expectations, or working relationships. Unlike formal mediation, it is designed for less complex disputes and allows a facilitator to guide the discussion and, where necessary, set clear expectations for future behaviour if agreement cannot be reached. It is not suitable for serious allegations requiring formal investigation or procedures. In a parish council context, the facilitator might be the Chair, Vice-Chair, line manager, HR support provider, or another suitable person who is able to remain impartial and calm.

The key skills for facilitators are listening, questioning, summarising, empathy, and reframing. A good facilitator does not interrupt, explores the issue fully before suggesting solutions, asks open and probing questions, summarises to check understanding, and helps people move from blame-based language to constructive, future-focused language. For example, "*You never listen to me!*" might be reframed as "I would like communication to feel more respectful and responsive." This is particularly useful in councils, where written communication

can easily be misread and where personal comments can quickly undermine working relationships.

Neurodivergent people may experience conflict differently and need a more curious, collaborative approach, using mindful language, allowing time for reflection, and offering flexibility in how conversations take place. In practice, this may include providing advance notice of discussions, avoiding confrontational language, and allowing breaks where needed.

A facilitated conversation typically involves initially talking to each person individually, agreeing expectations and confidentiality, allowing each person to share their perspective without interruption, identifying shared interests, and exploring solutions. Any agreed actions should be clearly recorded, while unresolved issues may require clear, neutral, and future-focused expectations to be set.

For parish councils, informal conflict resolution can help maintain trust, reduce unnecessary escalation, protect the clerk-councillor working relationship and support good governance. It should sit alongside, not replace, the council's Code of Conduct, employment policies, grievance procedures, and any relevant legal or HR advice. Used well, it encourages people to pause, listen, understand what sits beneath the disagreement, and find a practical way forward before the matter becomes more formal, costly, or damaging.

If your council has a need for a facilitated conversation to resolve early conflict, please contact Northants CALC (enquiries@northantscalc.gov.uk) for further advice and guidance and, where required, help with identifying external facilitators.

AI: FROM CURIOSITY TO CONFIDENCE

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a distant technology waiting somewhere over the horizon. It is already here, already being used, and already beginning to reshape the way parish and town councils think about administration, communication, research, and decision-making.

That does not mean that every council is in the same place though. Far from it. Across the sector there is now a very wide spread of experience. Some councils

are forging ahead, using AI to draft newsletters, summarise lengthy documents, prepare responses to consultations, analyse planning papers, improve website content, support recruitment, and make better use of the council's own records and minutes. Others are still at the stage of wondering what AI is, whether it is safe, whether it is relevant, and whether it is something only larger councils need to think about.

That variety is entirely understandable. The parish sector has always been diverse. A large town council with specialist officers, a communications team and a significant budget will experience AI very differently from a small parish council with a clerk working a few hours a week from home. But the potential value of AI may actually be greatest for the councils with the least spare capacity. If a tool can help a clerk turn a dense report into a one-page summary, draft a clearer public notice, prepare a first version of a policy, or explore the issues raised by a planning application, then it can save time and reduce pressure. It does not replace the clerk, the councillors, or the council's judgement. It gives them a better starting point.

The important thing is to be grounded. AI is not magic. It does not "know" things in the way a qualified clerk knows them. It can be wrong, over-confident, out of date, or misleading. It can invent cases, misunderstand legislation, miss local context, or produce text that sounds plausible but is not quite right. That is why AI should be treated as an assistant, not an authority. It can help with drafts, summaries, options, and explanations, but council decisions must still be made by people, based on proper information, lawful process, and local democratic accountability.

There are also sensible questions about data protection, confidentiality, copyright, transparency, and record keeping. Councils should not be casually pasting personal data, confidential staffing matters, legal advice, or sensitive resident information into public AI tools. They should think carefully about what information is being used, where it is going, and whether the output needs to be checked before being shared. Those questions are not a reason to avoid AI altogether. They are a reason to use it properly.

For anyone who has not yet tried AI, the best first step is very simple: have a conversation with a free AI such as Google Gemini (<https://gemini.google.com>). Ask it to explain something for you. Ask it to rewrite a paragraph in plain English.

Ask it to produce three possible newsletter introductions. Ask it what questions a councillor might ask about a new policy. Ask it to summarise a publicly available report. Then look at the answer critically. What is useful? What is bland? What is missing? What would you change? That process quickly demystifies the technology.

The launch of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Artificial Intelligence Network is a timely and welcome development (to join or just for more information, see <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/group/artificial-intelligence-network.html>). The inaugural meeting takes place on 12 August 2026 and will provide a national space for parish and town councils, county associations, and sector colleagues to share experiences, compare approaches, and learn from one another. That matters because the sector needs practical examples, not hype. Clerks and councillors need to hear how others are using AI in ordinary council work, what has helped, what has gone wrong, and what safeguards have been put in place.



The next phase will not be about whether AI enters the parish sector. It already has. The real question is whether councils use it passively and unevenly, or whether the sector develops confidence, good practice, and shared understanding. The councils that start now, even cautiously, will be better placed to shape the conversation. Those that wait until the technology feels settled may find that the habits, platforms, and expectations have already formed around them.

The message for clerks and councillors is not “become an AI expert.” It is much more modest and much more achievable: be curious, be careful, and have a go. Start with low-risk tasks. Keep a human in control. Check everything important. Share what you learn. Used in that spirit, AI is not a threat to local democracy. It is another tool that can help councils communicate more clearly, work more efficiently, and make better use of the knowledge they already hold.

FREE RESILIENCE WEBINAR FOR CLERKS AND COUNCILLORS

Northants CALC is pleased to be working with Parish Online to bring a free wellbeing webinar to clerks and councillors across Northamptonshire.

Bounce Back: Build Your Resilience will take place on Monday 21 September 2026 from 1000 to 1100 and will be led by Parish Online's wellbeing specialist and business psychologist, Sarah Thum Bonanno.



The session is designed specifically for those working in the local council sector,

where heavy workloads, challenging meetings, public scrutiny, and professional isolation can sometimes take their toll. Attendees will explore what resilience really means in practice, how to recognise their own responses to pressure and setbacks, and how to develop practical techniques to maintain perspective and wellbeing when demands are high. The session will conclude with participants creating a personal action plan that they can start using immediately.

Parish Online launched its wellbeing service earlier this year as part of its commitment to supporting the parish and town council sector. As a not-for-profit social enterprise, it reinvests profits back into the sector and believes that healthier, more confident clerks and councillors help create stronger councils and better local services.

The webinar is free to attend, open to all Northamptonshire clerks and councillors, and attendance is not dependent on whether your council uses Parish Online products or services. It will not be recorded, helping to create a safe and supportive environment for discussion.

To book your place, please visit <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/bounce-back-improve-your-resilience>. Taking care of the council is important. Taking care of yourself is essential.

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 BBC News article (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crmvgym7wvzo>) has highlighted a deeply troubling case involving a Berkshire parish clerk who stole council money and spent it on cocaine binges. The sums involved were significant, the breach of trust was profound, and the damage to public confidence will be long-lasting. Cases like this are rare, but when they happen, they send a shockwave through the whole local council sector.

The purpose of this cautionary tale is not to dwell on one individual's personal failings. It is to remind every parish and town council that fraud usually becomes possible when trust is not backed up by checks. Councils quite rightly place considerable trust in their clerks and Responsible Financial Officers. 99.9% are honest, careful, and deeply committed to public service. But good governance does not rely on trust alone. It relies on systems, evidence, segregation of duties, timely reporting, and councillors who take their financial oversight role seriously.

One experienced Northamptonshire clerk, reflecting on the case, pointed to some familiar warning signs in the council's later audit documentation: gaps in bank reconciliations, weak financial risk assessment, and controls that were not operating as they should. His observation was simple and sobering: if reconciliations are not being done, if councillors are not seeing the bank position

regularly, and if payment controls are weak, it becomes much easier for money to be moved without prompt detection.

That does not mean councillors need to become accountants. It does mean they should expect to see regular financial reports, know that bank reconciliations are being completed and checked, ensure that payments are properly authorised and supported by invoices, and review the council's financial risk assessment at least annually. They should also be alert to delays, missing paperwork, explanations that do not quite add up, or a culture in which finance is treated as "the clerk's job" and not something for members to question.

Internal audit is important, but it is not a substitute for good day-to-day governance. It is a periodic review of systems and controls, not a forensic examination of every transaction. The first line of defence is the council itself: its financial regulations, payment controls, bank reconciliations, risk assessments, minutes, and the willingness of councillors to ask sensible questions.

For smaller councils, formal controls can sometimes feel unnecessary or even slightly mistrustful. They are not. Controls protect everyone. They protect public money, councillors, the clerk, and the council's reputation. A properly checked bank reconciliation is not an accusation; it is good stewardship.

Northants CALC encourages all member councils to review their financial controls, bank reconciliation arrangements, and financial risk assessments. Fraud thrives where procedures are informal, records are incomplete, and scrutiny is delayed. A few minutes spent tightening procedures today may prevent a far more difficult conversation in the future!

MEETING SCHEDULER

Don't use email to find a date and time that all members of a committee can do. It is inefficient and potentially creates dozens of unnecessary emails. Instead, use one of the freely available tools that are specifically designed to help people find a common time to schedule a meeting or event. For many years, Northants CALC has used <https://doodle.com>, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to use for free with it encouraging (for fair and obvious reasons) users to sign up for a paid account. Our new favourite is <https://rally.co>. Clean, simple, and (for the time being at least) easy to use for free.

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

