Strategic Plan

2026 - 2029

Empowering parish and town councils

Resilient. Connected. Future-facing.

Funding	Staff	Services	Leadership	Partnerships

www.northantscalc.gov.uk

Executive Summary

This Strategic Plan sets out what Northants CALC intends to do during the period 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2029. It provides direction and focus for decision-making and a framework within which the board of directors and staff team can prioritise the Association's work.

The Strategic Plan 2023 - 2026 served the Association well. It provided a clear mission, vision, aims and objectives, and structured the Association's work around five strategic themes: Funding, Staff, Services, Leadership, and Partnerships. Those themes remain relevant and are retained for the 2026 - 2029 plan period but updated to reflect the changing environment in which parish and town councils now operate.

Northants CALC enters this plan period in a strong position. Membership remains high, member satisfaction is strong, the Association is financially resilient, and its services continue to be highly valued.

However, the next three years are likely to be challenging. Member councils are facing increasing pressure from planning, principal council finances, devolution and asset transfer, councillor recruitment, clerk workload, public engagement, standards and behaviour issues, and the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence. The relationship between parish and town councils and the two unitary councils remains a key strategic issue.

The Association must therefore balance ambition with resilience. It will continue to provide the core services that members value, while also modernising, developing new support where there is clear evidence of need, and ensuring that Northants CALC itself remains strong, trusted, relevant, and financially sustainable.

By 2029, Northants CALC aims to remain a trusted membership service provider, a strong strategic advocate, a capacity-builder for member councils, a convenor between councils and partners, and a resilient, future-facing sector leader.

Northants CALC is a member-led organisation and thanks go to all the clerks and councillors who engaged with the development of this plan.

Introduction

This document sets out the strategic plan for the Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils Ltd (Northants CALC) for the period 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2029.

For a small service-based organisation operating in a fast-moving environment it is not possible to foresee every eventuality and plan accordingly, but priorities identified within this plan will aid all decision making. This strategic plan will ensure that the membership offer is the best it can possibly be.

The author of the plan is the CEO. Stages in its development include:

- Board Away Day – 18 June 2026
- Various staff meetings – November 2025 to July 2026
- Membership Survey – May/June 2026
- Member council focus sessions – March 2026

Local government in Northamptonshire operates with the unitary council model. North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) were created on 1 April 2021. The Membership Survey 2026 identified "Working with the unitary councils" as a continuing major challenge facing their council. It is critical that Northants CALC continues to act as a bridge between the unitary councils and local councils.

Northamptonshire is fully parished; there are no unparished areas. This is a significant advantage for the county, and it means that the unitary councils can confidently work with parish and town councils knowing that they cover every single resident and place in the county.

At its Away Day in June 2026, the board of directors agreed that this Strategic Plan should combine resilience and ambition. The Association will continue to offer its highly valued core services and develop new services that are relevant to the needs of member councils and provide excellent value-for-money. The new services will support member councils with planning and development control and with employment.

The importance of effective CALCs was recognised in Government research carried out into the features and characteristics of successful CALCs to identify what makes a successful County Association and develop models of and recommendations about good practice. The characteristics identified were:

1. Funding
2. Staff
3. Services
4. Leadership
5. Partnerships

This plan will use the above key characteristics to provide “themes” within which to set the Association’s priorities and actions.

There are 38 County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) in England, all of which are independent and autonomous organisations supporting their member councils. Northants CALC is recognised as a progressive and leading CALC and wishes to continue being a beacon of good practice in the sector.

The services that Northants CALC provides to its member councils are set out in the Member Services & Benefits Booklet (2026), which can be downloaded from https://www.northantscalc.gov.uk.

Membership

Northants CALC has achieved virtually full membership. Of the two hundred and twenty local councils in Northamptonshire, only four are not currently in membership. This represents a council membership rate of 98%.

Decision making

The sovereign body of the Association is the Annual General Meeting (AGM). The AGM appoints a board of eight directors who are responsible for the governance of the Association. The board appoints a CEO who is responsible for the management of the Association.

The board holds six business meetings per year, three topic focus sessions and one Board Away Day. The CEO is accountable to the board, and the board is accountable to the membership via the AGM. The Association is “owned” by member councils and operates solely in their interests.

Monitoring and review

The monitoring and review process adopted alongside this plan will be simple and will take the form of quarterly, annual, and end of plan reports to the board:

- Quarterly monitoring will be by exception, i.e., where there is lack of scheduled progress/activity against actions within the plan, with any proposed remedial actions.

- Annual monitoring will be in the form of a summary report to the board against each action within the plan, and any recommended changes, on the anniversary of the plan’s adoption.

- End of plan monitoring will take the form of a final report to the board against the priorities and actions in the plan.

Glossary

The following terms are used in this document:

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AMS	Association Management Software
CCLA	Charities Churches and Local Authorities
CDF	Councillor Development Framework
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DPO	Data Protection Officer
EMYA	East Midlands and Yorkshire Associations
IAS	Internal Audit Service
LGR	Local Government Reorganisation
MES	Member Enquiry Service
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NCALC	Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC)
NNC	North Northamptonshire Council
SASM	Senior Advisory Services Manager
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise
WCR	Wilkin Chapman Rollits
WNC	West Northamptonshire Council

Mission Statement, Aims and Objectives

Mission Statement

Northants CALC will empower local councils in Northamptonshire to be at the heart of community leadership and development, providing them with information and services, and enabling them to promote the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of their communities.

Northants CALC will be the voice of the first tier of local government in Northamptonshire and will understand and represent locally, regionally, and nationally the views of the 220 parish, town, and community councils and 51 parish meetings in the county.

Vision

Northants CALC wishes:

- Local councils to be recognised as local authorities serving their communities as the first tier of local government.

- All tiers of local government in Northamptonshire to work in partnership and respect each other's role.

- Local councils to modernise, professionalise, and increase their capacity to be able to make a real difference to people's quality of life.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives listed below link to the Strategic Themes set out later in this plan:

- To use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the Association, and to provide sector leadership in the adoption and safe use of AI tools.

- To provide an excellent legal and procedural advisory service to local councils (*Theme 3*).

- To provide publications, guidance, and information to local councils (*Theme 3*).

- To provide training for clerks ranging from basic introductory courses to the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) and to promote the continuous professional development of paid staff (*Theme 3*).

- To provide training for councillors on general and specialist subjects and to promote the continuous professional development of elected members via the Councillor Development Framework (CDF) (*Theme 3*).

- To encourage and develop partnership working so that the two tiers of local government in Northamptonshire work well together (*Theme 4 & 5*).

- To provide an Internal Audit Service (IAS) for local councils (*Theme 3*).

- To ensure that all local councils are developing their governance standards and improving community engagement (*Theme 3 & 4*).

- To cascade and disseminate national, regional, and local information to member local councils. To hold, update and manage the master list of local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 3*).

- To respond to consultations, either as an individual organisation or on behalf of local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 3 & 4*).

- To participate in conferences, events, networks, and meetings as appropriate and be a strong advocate for local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 4 & 5*).

- To act as the conduit between local councils in Northamptonshire and the National Association of Local Councils (*Theme 5*).

- To encourage candidacy at local council elections and encourage and promote vibrant and healthy local democracy where people feel they can influence decisions in the areas they live (*Theme 4*).

Organisation

Northants CALC is a membership organisation representing the parish, town and community councils and parish meetings (collectively: local councils) of Northamptonshire, England.

The organisation started in 1947 when local government reforms began after World War Two. For eighty years Northants CALC has provided legal and technical advisory services to member councils with the backing of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) based in London.

The members range from the smallest of parish meetings with less than one hundred electors to the largest town councils with tens of thousands of electors.

The Association provides a range of services to member councils and is the primary representative and advocate for local councils in Northamptonshire.

Key Issues for Local Councils 2026 - 2029

During the plan period the Association will support member councils on the following key issues:

Issue	Detail
Working with the Unitary Councils	▪ Developing Engagement Strategies ▪ Agreeing a Charter for Working Together ▪ Identifying and developing key officer contacts ▪ Communications, including briefings and forums ▪ Responding to consultations
People	▪ Councillor recruitment and retention ▪ Officer recruitment and retention ▪ Employment support ▪ Support on standards, conduct, and member behaviour
Technology	▪ Maximising the benefits of Artificial Intelligence ▪ Developing governance and safe use of Artificial Intelligence ▪ Increasing capacity and efficiency through use of technology
Environment	▪ Actions to combat climate change ▪ Demonstrating leadership via the Climate and Nature Champion Scheme ▪ Development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies ▪ Reducing energy consumption and cost ▪ Using renewable energy wherever possible
Devolution	▪ Further developing the evidence base ▪ Encouraging clear unitary council policy positions on devolution and asset transfer ▪ Developing Asset Transfer policy & process
Planning	▪ Creating new Planning Service ▪ Development of new Local Plans ▪ Neighbourhood Planning support ▪ Developing planning policy ▪ Establish Planning Partnerships
Highways	▪ Re-establishing Parish Highways Rep Scheme ▪ Re-establishing Parish Paths Warden Scheme

Civic Events	▪ Bridges Planning ▪ Continue to develop the Northamptonshire Civic Protocol
Civility & Respect	▪ Addressing incidences of bullying and harassment ▪ Creating conflict resilience ▪ Improving governance standards
Transport	▪ Rural bus services ▪ Demand Responsive Transport ▪ Modal shift / Active Travel

Strategic Theme 1 – Funding **Priorities: High % of local councils in membership; fair and sustainable membership rates; successful applications/negotiations for external funding; Increasing self-generated income; providing value for money.**				
What?	**How?**	**When?**	**Resources**	**Comments**
Member retention	Determine satisfaction levels through biennial member survey. Ensure member services are fit for purpose and represent good value for money.	Q2 2028	Officer time	Survey to be completed and outcome reported to board in July 2028.
Member recruitment	Encourage non-member councils into membership by demonstrating purpose and value for money.	Ongoing	Officer time	Develop Individual Recruitment Plans (IRPs) for each non-member council.
Generate income from paid-for services (e.g. training and audit)	Continue to increase training throughput and number of courses. Continue to market IAS and DPO to non-users. Where possible and appropriate, develop new paid-for services.	Ongoing	Officer time	Use AMS data to identify opportunities for promoting paid-for services.
Maximise return on reserves and investments	Keep investment strategy under review.	January 2027	Officer time	Reserves currently invested with CCLA.
Seek and apply for grant funding	Keep a look out for opportunities for grant-funded project work.	Ongoing	Officer time	Funding could contribute towards

				Strategic Projects.
Budget management	Produce quarterly and annual budget monitoring reports.	Quarterly	Officer time	Ensure reports are transparent and concise.

Strategic Theme 2 – Staff

Priority: Trained, experienced and professional staff equipped to do their job; Competent and experienced trainers; High calibre full time County Officer (CEO); Appropriate administrative and other support.

What?	How?	When?	Resources	Comments
Maintain permanent contracted staff at agreed levels	Continued allocation from budget and development of succession plan and business continuity plan.	Ongoing	Core budget	Current staff establishment is 4.0 Full Time Equivalents, and this should be maintained as a minimum.
Business continuity and organisational resilience	Develop a plan covering all staff positions for the plan period.	Autumn 2027	Officer and Appointments Panel time	Appointments Panel (Chair, Vice Chair, CEO) to develop proportionate plans.
Support and train staff to aid retention and ongoing professional development to support delivery of strategic aims	Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Scheme at 3% of gross salary.	Ongoing	Core budget	Training, conferences, and events at discretion of CEO within CPD budget.
Explore opportunities for fully funded project officers for Strategic Projects.	Develop Planning Service and Employment Service	Ongoing	Staff time and Director time	Evaluate directly employed versus contracted models.

Strategic Theme 3 – Services **Areas of activity: high quality support to members (engagement, dissemination, and communication); strong networks and partnerships; high quality training; additional 'paid-for' services.**				
What	**How**	**When**	**Resources**	**Comments**
Generic/basic advice	Continue to operate the Member Enquiry Service (MES).	Ongoing	Volunteer advisors and officer time	MES has been a volunteer-delivered service since 2014/15.
Non-generic/complex advice	SASM to provide timely advice and guidance and escalate where appropriate.	Ongoing	Officer time	Need to ensure appropriate allocation.
Legal advice	Partnership with WCR Law for legal support.	Ongoing	Officer time	Partnership subject to annual review.
Training	Review and develop training programme and increase throughput.	Ongoing	Officer time / training team	Training programme recognised as one of the best in the country.
Internal Audit	Continue to operate IAS, encouraging take up from non-users.	Ongoing	Officer time/auditor team	Service well-established. Used by approx. 80% of members.
Information and guidance	Continue to provide timely, accurate and concise information to	Ongoing	Officer time	*eUpdate* is the flagship publication, supported with weekly Friday *mini*

	member councils.			*eUpdate* briefings.
Promote local council elections and encourage candidacy	Provide support to councils with elections or by-elections.	Main campaign starting autumn 2028.	Officer time	Ordinary elections scheduled for May 2029.
Planning Service	Develop new service to proactively support member councils on planning and development control.	Develop in late 2026; launch by 1 April 2027 or earlier.	Officer time and potential use of Strategic Project Reserves to support a three-year project.	Monitor project risks and build in regular review points.
Employment Service	Develop new service to support member councils on staffing and employment.	Develop in late 2026; launch by 1 April 2027 or earlier.	Officer time and potential use of Strategic Project Reserves to support a three-year project.	Monitor project risks and build in regular review points.

Strategic Theme 4 – Leadership Priorities: Strong board of directors, Effective representation of local councils, Strong lobbying and influencing on behalf of local councils, Promotion of local councils.				
What	**How**	**When**	**Resources**	**Comments**
Director recruitment	Fill vacancies on the board as soon as reasonably practicable in accordance with the Board Member Composition and Diversity Policy	Ongoing	Officer time and meeting(s) of the Appointments Panel	The Board Member Composition and Diversity Policy includes a person specification.
A strong and fit for purpose board of directors	Ensure joiners receive induction training and provide refresher training to existing directors as requested.	Ongoing	Director time/Officer time	The board provides the Association's strategic leadership.

Represent local councils on issues of common interest	Respond to local and national consultations as appropriate, ensuring member councils have an opportunity to feed their views into responses. Make representations to NALC on issues of concern to member councils.	Ongoing	Officer time	Respond to unitary council, NALC, and government consultations as appropriate.
Advocate role of local councils in delivering social, economic, and environmental wellbeing	Use every opportunity to promote the sector in a realistic and evidence-based way.	Ongoing	Director time/Officer time	Every external contact provides an opportunity.
Board Away Day	Annual event to review progress against aims and objectives and to think creatively.	Annual (June)	Director time/Officer time	A key opportunity for the board to set and monitor progress.

Strategic Theme 5 – Partnerships Priorities: Strong relationship and positive engagement with key partners (e.g. Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), National Association of Local Councils (NALC), East Midlands and Yorkshire Associations of Local Councils (EMYA), CALCs, unitary councils, police and other relevant public sector bodies, and Northants ACRE and other VCFSE bodies). Delivery of joint projects and events with appropriate partners.				
What	**How**	**When**	**Resources**	**Comments**
Build and maintain strong relationship with public sector bodies in Northamptonshire	Continue to work with unitary councils, police, etc on issues of relevance to member councils	Ongoing	Officer time	Align with or demonstrate relevance to partners' corporate plans.
Build and maintain strong relationships with local council sector bodies	Continue to work with NALC, CALCs and the SLCC on issues of relevance to member councils.	Ongoing	Officer time	Engage with Project Keystone and any successor arrangements affecting the CALCs/NALC relationship.
Build and maintain strong relationships with private sector partners	Continue to work with business partners on strategic commercial relationships.	Ongoing	Officer time	Opportunity to increase income from sponsorship whilst bringing useful services to the attention of member councils.

Key Performance Indicators

As a membership association, our success is best measured in terms of membership rate (the number of local councils in membership divided by the number of local councils in the county). However, membership rate measured in a single year does not indicate whether those members will renew the following year. Membership rate in one year could be extremely high but satisfaction levels could be very low such that many member councils leave the following year. Therefore, success is defined as achieving high membership rates **and** maintaining high membership rates year on year.

It should be noted that a high membership rate does not necessarily mean 100%. The membership rate is monitored very closely and reported to the board on an annual basis.

To maintain high membership rates year on year it is necessary to have:

Factor	**As measured by**
Satisfied member councils	▪ Biennial member survey ▪ Complaints received
Satisfied Association staff	▪ Retention/attrition rates ▪ CPD record ▪ Appraisal outcome
Reputation of Association with external bodies	▪ Anecdotal evidence ▪ Awards and prizes ▪ Invitations to participate
Member councils that are improving/developing	▪ No. of councils that have two-thirds elected councillors and a qualified clerk. ▪ No. of councils taking up training places ▪ External audit performance

Key Projects - 2026/2027

Key Project	Tasks
Business Continuity and Operational Resilience	▪ Appointments Panel to produce issues and options paper ▪ Board to consider in September 2026 ▪ Proposals developed for adoption in Q1 2027
Planning Service	▪ Develop project proposal ▪ Identify best delivery mechanism (employee or contractor) ▪ Recruit Project Officer or agree partnership arrangement with contractor ▪ Launch on or before 1 April 2027
Employment Service	▪ Develop project proposal ▪ Potential market testing ▪ Recruit Project Officer ▪ Launch on or before 1 April 2027

Budget Commentary 2026 – 2029

The Association is financially stable and is predicted to remain financially stable throughout the plan period. It is in a very strong position to weather external factors.

The Association continues to have forecast expenditure that outstrips core income from membership and paid-for services, so the key financial issue in the plan period is managing the planned deficit budgets. The Association's policy is to keep £70,000 in Operational Reserves, and the predicted reserve at the start of the plan period (1 April 2026) is c.£220k. This reserve has been built up through several years of increasing income from new councils and from training, and reducing expenditure, e.g., by not having a permanent office premises. A combination of increasing income from services and reducing costs, coupled with the one-off opportunities to generate income from projects puts the Association in a good position for the next three years at least.

Deficit budgets are predicted for each of the three plan years. This would reduce the reserves at the end of the plan period (31 March 2029) to c.£215k without any project work, or around £65k with a £50k per year project spend, which is still a very healthy position.

The Association has prudent and tight financial management and is well resourced to continue to deliver excellent value for money member services.

Northants CALC Budget For Year Ending 31 March 2027 to Year Ending 31 March 2029				
		Budget	**Budget**	**Budget**
Income		**31 March 2027**	**31 March 2028**	**31 March 2029**
	Membership Subscriptions	203,948	213,268	223,014
	Training	50,000	51,300	52,634
	IAS Council Fees	72,227	76,120	80,223
	Grants + Projects	-	-	-
	Interest	12,000	12,000	12,000
	DPO Council Fees	2,318	2,318	2,318
	Other Income	3,000	3,000	3,000
		343,493	**358,006**	**373,189**
Expenditure				
	Staff Costs	223,128	231,540	240,269
	Staff CPD	5,434	5,639	5,852
	Insurance	2,600	2,860	3,146
	NALC Affiliation Fee	39,431	40,890	42,403
	IAS Auditor Fees	45,667	47,991	50,434
	Training Costs	8,000	8,320	8,653
	Travel - Staff	3,616	3,761	3,911
	Travel - Directors	350	361	372
	County/National Events	2,789	2,956	3,133
	Office Admin	12,000	12,600	13,230
	Projects	-	-	-
	Contingency	3,000	3,000	3,000
		346,016	**359,918**	**374,403**
Surplus / Defecit		**-2,523**	**-1,911**	**-1,214**
Reserves		**218,668**	**216,757**	**215,543**