

Update

ISSUE 5/26

September - October 2026

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

At the time of writing, it is the eve of our 79th Annual Conference. I am very much looking forward to seeing all our delegates, speakers, exhibitors, and special guests. Our conference this year was fully booked much earlier than usual and I'm sorry that some of you have had to miss out. Next year, for our 80th, we are planning to go to the Waterside Campus at the University of Northampton, so more delegates will be able to join us! Northants CALC came into being on 20 September 1947 and it is a testament to the support of member councils that it has been providing support and guidance ever since. In a rapidly changing local government environment, society, and world in general, Northants CALC is a resilient, forward-looking organisation, with eight decades of experience and a commitment to helping meet the challenges and opportunities of the future.

And talking of the future, the past two months have seen quite a bit of sector activity on Artificial Intelligence (AI). On 12 August 2026, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) held the inaugural meeting of its AI Network, which will bring together interested parish and town councils to share knowledge and best practice, and to discuss all the benefits, risks, and opportunities of AI. The AI Network was proposed by the NALC AI Working Group, which I sit on as a CALC representative. Our own AI Task Group, which first met in January 2024, continues to plot the introduction and now widespread adoption of AI in parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. It is difficult to predict what the next few years will bring, but these groups and networks mean that whatever happens, we will have our finger on the pulse and be well-placed to support member councils.

Another national activity that I am involved with as a member of the steering group is Project Keystone, which is a strategic review of how parish and town councils should be supported in the future. It is exploring the roles of NALC and County Associations, the case for stronger and more capable support organisations, clearer accountability and formal relationships, and improved arrangements for innovation, professional development, and sector improvement. A report and recommendations will be produced in November, and I will include a summary in the next eUpdate. Project Keystone represents a big and rare opportunity to secure better national support and recognition for parish and town councils in this county and beyond and by being on the steering group I can make sure that the

practical experience and future needs of councils in Northamptonshire are properly reflected in the final recommendations.

Closer to home, another representative and advocacy role for Northants CALC is as a parish and town council representative on the Local Access Forums, which are statutory advisory bodies established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to advise local authorities, National Parks, and other organisations on improving public access to the countryside. They help shape policies and plans relating to public rights of way, access land, and outdoor recreation. The West Northants LAF met on 9 September, and the North Northants LAF met on 23 September. The Parish Paths Warden Scheme (such as it was) was discussed at both meetings and I am pressing for the unitary councils to bring the scheme back to life. I hope to have more news in early 2027.

I am very pleased to see our Climate and Nature (CAN) Champion Scheme flourishing and at the CAN Champion focus meeting held on 20 August 2026 we explored how wildlife recording by residents, community groups, and parish and town councils can support nature recovery across Northamptonshire. Richard Coppins from the Northamptonshire Biodiversity Records Centre explained how local wildlife records contribute to conservation and planning, while Claire Poulton of the Nene Rivers Trust outlined support for councils developing Parish Nature Recovery Plans using Local Nature Recovery Strategy data. We will continue to push this work, and it would be brilliant if in a few years every parish and town council in Northamptonshire had a Parish Nature Recovery Plan!

We are also working on devolution, which in our context means the transfer of assets and services from the unitary councils to parish and town councils. Whether it be a community building, a piece of public open space, or a play area, our view is that local community assets are best owned and operated by the relevant parish or town council, which is closest to the asset and the community it serves. Northants CALC is working with both unitary councils to design a process for such transfers that is fair, transparent, and proportionate. It has been a long and tortuous process but progress is being made, which I expect to come to fruition in 2027.

The small team at Northants CALC works every day to make things better for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire. Please do continue to get in touch with your questions, comments, and queries. That's what we're here for!!

WHO'S WEARING WHICH HAT?

One of the first things councillors and clerks are taught on training courses is that councillors provide governance and the clerk provides management.

Councillors decide what the council wants to achieve, set budgets, establish priorities, and make decisions on behalf of the authority. The clerk and any other staff then implement those

decisions. It is a useful principle and one that underpins effective local government. However, the reality of parish and town council life is often more complicated than the simple distinction suggests.



Most parish and town councils do not employ large teams of officers. Many operate with a single part-time clerk and a handful of contracted services. At the same time, councillors often possess valuable professional expertise and are willing to volunteer significant amounts of time to support council projects. Indeed, many councils depend upon members helping to organise events, maintain websites, oversee assets, obtain quotations, support community initiatives, and assist with project delivery. If every councillor confined themselves solely to attending meetings and voting on resolutions, many parish councils would struggle to achieve everything they currently do.

The real issue is therefore not whether councillors become involved in operational work. The real issue is whether councillors begin exercising operational control. There is an important distinction between helping to deliver a council decision and having authority to make decisions on the council's behalf. Being elected as a councillor gives a person authority to participate in decision-making. It does not automatically give them authority to manage staff, direct contractors, commit expenditure, choose suppliers, or determine priorities for officers.

Perhaps a more useful way of thinking about this is in terms of hats. The same individual may wear different hats at different times. On Monday evening, Councillor Smith may participate in a debate about whether the council should redesign its website. On Tuesday morning, the same individual may be uploading agendas and minutes as the council's volunteer webmaster. There is nothing

wrong with this arrangement. In the first situation they are acting as a councillor helping to make decisions. In the second they are acting as a volunteer helping to deliver a decision that has already been made, and as a volunteer working for the council, they effectively report to the clerk.

This distinction can be applied to many common parish council activities. A councillor who is asked by the clerk to obtain quotations for a new bench from a list of possible suppliers is providing an operational contribution. A councillor who decides which supplier will be appointed and places the order without authority is exercising operational control and has crossed the line from delivery into decision-making. Likewise, a councillor who updates the council website is making a valuable operational contribution, but a councillor who independently decides what information will be published, responds to complaints in the council's name, or changes council communications without reference to agreed policies may be exercising operational control that belongs to the clerk (or another officer).

The same principle applies to project delivery. Many councils are fortunate to have members with extensive professional expertise. A retired engineer may be invaluable when considering a building project. A former procurement specialist may know exactly how to obtain the best value from suppliers. An accountant may provide helpful financial insight. Councils should absolutely make use of these skills. The important distinction is that these individuals contribute expertise to support decisions rather than replacing the council's decision-making processes. Expertise is valuable, but expertise does not in itself create authority.

Why does this matter? Because most governance difficulties do not arise because councillors are too helpful. They arise because the boundary between contribution and control becomes blurred. Staff may begin receiving instructions from individual councillors rather than through agreed management arrangements. Contractors may be unsure who is authorised to make decisions. Other councillors may find that important matters are effectively being decided outside meetings. In some cases, a particularly active councillor can unintentionally become the focus of operational authority, undermining the principle that the council acts collectively as a corporate body. What starts as enthusiasm and commitment can gradually lead to confusion, inconsistency, and frustration for everyone involved.

One common example is the "helpful Chair" who becomes heavily involved in day-to-day matters. The Chair may simply be trying to ensure that things get done, but if they begin setting work priorities for the clerk, directing employees, or making decisions on behalf of the council, the clerk can quickly find themselves accountable to both the council collectively and the Chair individually. Similarly, councillors who take a close interest in staffing matters can sometimes stray into informal supervision, performance management, or instructions to employees, creating risks for both the council and the individuals concerned.

Perhaps the most useful question councillors can ask themselves is this: "Am I helping to deliver a council decision, or am I making a decision that has not been delegated to me?" That simple test can often resolve grey areas surprisingly quickly. Helping to organise a community event, maintaining the website, obtaining quotations, supporting volunteers, or contributing specialist expertise will usually be entirely appropriate. Directing staff, choosing suppliers, authorising expenditure, or making commitments on behalf of the council are activities that should normally rest with the council itself or those officers to whom authority has been formally delegated.

Parish and town councils are at their best when councillors are willing to contribute their time, enthusiasm, expertise, and energy. Indeed, that willingness is one of the sector's greatest strengths. The lesson is not that councillors should never become involved in operational activity. The lesson is that contribution and control are not the same thing. Healthy councils encourage the former whilst keeping the latter clear, transparent, and accountable. When everyone understands which hat they are wearing, councillors can make an enormous contribution to their communities without creating governance problems along the way.

WEST NORTHANTS CANVASS

West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) electoral canvassers will be visiting residential properties in the district between 28 September and 6 November 2026 that have not yet responded to the annual household canvass. The visits are typically between 0900 and 2000. Canvassers will carry WNC photo ID and wear high-visibility vests. They will not ask to enter properties. Anyone with concerns should contact the council on 01604 526130. North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) is just coming to the end of its annual canvass activity.

WHEN THE MAYOR BECOMES THE PLANNING AUTHORITY

Northamptonshire does not currently have a Strategic Authority or directly elected strategic mayor. Nevertheless, a new government consultation on planning powers for mayors provides an important indication of how the planning system could operate here if Northamptonshire eventually becomes part of a mayoral strategic arrangement.



The consultation concerns the implementation of powers provided by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026. It proposes that mayors of Strategic Authorities should have three significant planning tools: powers to intervene in planning applications of “potential strategic importance,” powers to make Mayoral Development Orders, and powers to introduce a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy. These would sit alongside the duty of a Strategic Authority to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy setting the broad framework for growth, development, and supporting infrastructure across its area.

Calling in major planning applications

Under the proposed system, certain applications would be designated as applications of “potential strategic importance.” These would include large-scale housing and commercial developments, major infrastructure schemes, and proposals affecting strategic policies, such as development in the Green Belt or involving the loss of playing fields. The government proposes a common national framework, initially modelled on the arrangements used in London.

For large-scale development, the consultation identifies possible thresholds of 150 dwellings or 15,000 square metres of commercial floorspace. It also asks whether mayors should be able to intervene where a local planning authority is minded to refuse an application for 50 or more homes. This latter proposal is particularly significant because it would give the mayor an opportunity to revisit a proposed

refusal, potentially in the interests of housing delivery across the wider strategic area.

The procedure would have three stages. First, the local planning authority (i.e. North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) or West Northamptonshire Council (WNC)) would refer a qualifying application to the mayor. Secondly, before making its final decision, the authority would notify the mayor that it was minded to grant or refuse permission. The mayor would then have 14 days to decide whether to leave the decision with the authority, direct it to refuse the proposal, or call in the application. If the application were called in, the mayor would become the local planning authority for the purpose of determining it.

For Northamptonshire, that could eventually create a further tier of planning decision-making above NNC and WNC. The two unitary councils would continue to determine the great majority of applications, but the most substantial or strategically important proposals could be drawn upwards into a mayoral process. A major development affecting one town or parish might therefore be decided at a level covering a much larger geographical area of several English counties.

What happens to the parish council's representations?

There is an important protection in the proposed process. Where an application is called in, the local planning authority would be required to send the mayor all the representations it has received, including those submitted by parish and town councils and members of the community. The mayor would then determine the application on the same statutory basis as the local planning authority, having regard to the development plan, including the Spatial Development Strategy, local plan, and any applicable neighbourhood plan, unless material considerations indicated otherwise.

A called-in application would be dealt with either at a public hearing or through written representations. The consultation proposes giving mayors considerable discretion to choose the written procedure, although safeguards would require the mayor to publish who may make representations, the procedure to be followed, and the applicable deadline.

This reinforces a message we have made previously in eUpdate: parish and town council responses must be clear, timely, evidence-based, and capable of standing

on their own. A council should not assume that its local context will be obvious to decision-makers operating across a much larger strategic area. Its representation may eventually be read by mayoral officers who have no detailed knowledge of the settlement, site, highways, drainage history, community facilities, or relevant neighbourhood plan policies.

The practical answer is not simply to submit longer objections. It is to submit better ones. Parish and town councils will need to identify the relevant planning policies, explain the local evidence, distinguish material planning considerations from general opposition, and say precisely what harm, benefit, mitigation, or condition should be considered.

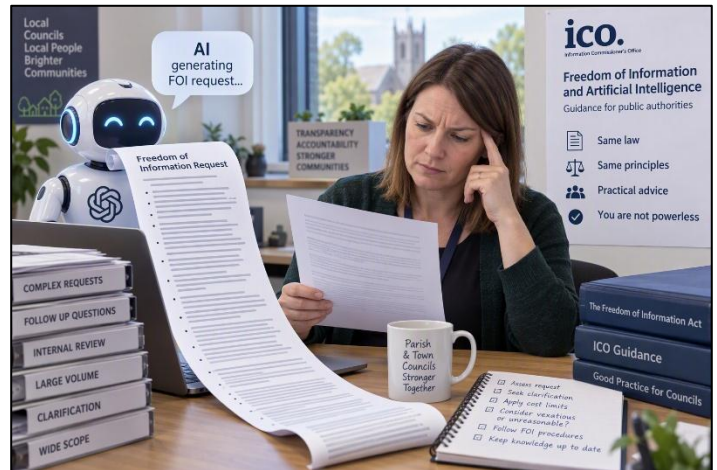
So, nothing is changing immediately. These powers are designed for mayors of Strategic Authorities, and Northamptonshire does not currently have one. Much would depend upon the eventual geography of any Strategic Authority, the relationship between its mayor and the two Northamptonshire unitary councils, and the content of its Spatial Development Strategy. However, the direction of travel is becoming clearer. If Northamptonshire joins a mayoral Strategic Authority, some of the most important planning decisions affecting the county could be made at a level above NNC and WNC. Strategic housing, employment, infrastructure, and growth priorities could be considered across a geography extending well beyond the county, while the mayor could acquire powers to intervene directly in individual applications and grant permission through development orders.

For parish and town councils, the answer should not be to resist strategic planning simply because it is strategic. Many of the issues that determine whether development succeeds, including transport, water, energy, health provision, and wider infrastructure, cannot be resolved parish by parish or even necessarily within a single unitary area. There is a sound case for looking at them across functional economic and geographical areas.

The challenge will be to ensure that strategic decision-making does not become remote decision-making. Any future Strategic Authority involving Northamptonshire will need a robust and systematic way of engaging parish and town councils, both when preparing its Spatial Development Strategy and when exercising development management powers. Local councils possess evidence and knowledge that cannot be reproduced from regional datasets alone.

FREEDOM OF (ARTIFICIAL) INFORMATION

Parish and town councils have noticed a steady increase in Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in recent years. Now, some FOI requests are getting longer, more detailed, and more complex than anything councils have previously encountered. According to new guidance from the Information Commission (ICO), one reason may be the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by requesters. The ICO says that AI tools are increasingly being used to draft FOI requests, which may explain the rise in both the volume and complexity of requests received by all types of public authorities, including parish and town councils.



The guidance will hopefully come as a reassurance to councils. The ICO is clear that existing FOI legislation is generally capable of dealing with AI-generated requests and that councils should continue to apply the same principles and procedures as they always have. Just because a request has been created using AI does not make it invalid, nor does the presence of inaccuracies, references to non-existent case law, or a misunderstanding of FOI rights automatically invalidate a request. Councils must focus on what information is actually being requested and deal with it accordingly.

That said, the ICO recognises the practical challenges. Our member councils report receiving requests that are excessively long, repetitive, wider in scope than necessary, or difficult to understand. AI can also generate lengthy follow-up correspondence, clarification requests, and internal review submissions, all of which consume valuable officer time. For smaller councils with one part-time clerk, this can be particularly challenging.

Importantly, the ICO reminds public authorities that they are not powerless. Councils can still seek clarification where a request is unclear, apply the normal cost limits where appropriate, and rely on the existing provisions of the Freedom of Information Act when dealing with vexatious or unreasonable requests. The

key message is that the arrival of AI has not changed the law; it has simply changed the way some people interact with it.

For clerks and councillors, the best response is to ensure that FOI knowledge remains up to date, that procedures are followed consistently, and that requests are assessed on their merits rather than on how they were drafted. AI is likely to become an increasingly common feature of public life, and information rights are no exception.

Interestingly, parish and town councils are also using AI to respond to FOI requests. Doing so is potentially useful and time saving, but the pitfalls are obvious. No AI-generated FOI response should be issued without it first having been checked by the clerk for accuracy.

The ICO's guidance is concise, practical, and well worth reading, particularly for councils experiencing an increase in complex FOI requests. You can access it at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi/freedom-of-information-foi-and-artificial-intelligence/>.

THE (MOST COMMON) COMMON ISSUES

Northants CALC runs an Internal Audit Service (IAS) for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire.

The logo for Northants CALC IAS. It consists of the text "Northants CALC" in orange on a white background, followed by "IAS" in white on an orange background.

We administer a panel of experienced internal auditors, many of whom are serving or former clerks and RFOs, whom we allocate to member councils as required.

After each audit season, the IAS panel meets to discuss common issues encountered during the year. The purpose is not to name and shame councils, clerks, or RFOs, but to identify recurring difficulties, share experience, and help councils avoid the same problems in future.

The first piece of good news from the 2026 discussion was that councils generally appeared to be working earlier and were better prepared than in previous years. One auditor, who also audits councils in other counties, observed that clerks and RFOs in Northamptonshire generally seemed more organised. That is

encouraging and shows the value of planning ahead rather than waiting until the audit deadline is looming. Nevertheless, some familiar issues continue to arise.

Issue 1: New and inexperienced clerks

A recurring theme was the number of newly appointed clerks who had inherited records and decisions from their predecessors. When asked why something had happened, the perfectly truthful answer was sometimes: “I don’t know because I wasn’t here.” A new clerk cannot be expected to know everything that happened before their appointment. However, the council remains responsible for its records and financial administration. Councillors should therefore ensure that there is a proper handover whenever the clerk or RFO changes. The incoming clerk should receive the accounting records, bank information, contracts, insurance documents, asset register, policies, minutes, audit reports, and any outstanding action lists. Where there has been no effective handover, councillors may need to help reconstruct the audit trail. Minutes, bank statements, invoices, emails, and previous audit reports can all help. The council should not leave the new clerk to struggle alone with gaps in its corporate memory.

Some new clerks were also working very few contracted hours. Small councils naturally have limited resources, but the council must be realistic about the time required to maintain adequate financial and governance arrangements. If the hours allocated to the role are insufficient, essential tasks will either be rushed or left undone.

Issue 2: Insufficient financial knowledge and training

Several auditors encountered clerks and RFOs who had received little or no finance training. In a small council, the clerk is often also the RFO, but the two roles are distinct. The clerk advises the council on governance and administration, while the RFO holds statutory responsibility for the council’s financial administration.

Bank reconciliations seemed to cause particular difficulty. A bank reconciliation is not simply a copy of the bank statement or a statement of how much money the council has. It reconciles the balance shown in the accounting records with the balances shown on the council’s bank statements, taking account of any legitimate timing differences. Reconciliations should be prepared regularly,

independently verified by a councillor, and reported to the council. The year-end reconciliation must support the figure recorded at Line 8 of the AGAR Accounting Statements. Councils should budget properly for training. Training is not an optional extra or a reward to be offered once a clerk already knows the job. It is one of the controls that helps the council safeguard public money and comply with its statutory responsibilities.

Issue 3: Not reading the instructions

Every year, the external auditor, PKF Littlejohn, issues detailed instructions explaining how to complete and submit the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR). Nevertheless, some clerks and RFOs do not read them fully and consequently use the wrong form or follow the wrong procedure.

There are different versions of the AGAR for different circumstances. Choosing last year's form, copying another council, or downloading the first form found online is not a safe approach. Councils should use the current form and read the instructions issued for that particular audit year. The instructions are long because the process is detailed, but they are also clear. If clerks and RFOs read and follow them carefully, they will not go far wrong. It is much easier to spend an extra hour checking the instructions than to spend several hours correcting an avoidable mistake later.

Issue 4: Payments not being properly approved and minuted

Auditors found instances where a finance report had been presented to the council, but the payments themselves had not been expressly approved. In other cases, payments may have been discussed or approved, but the decision to spend was never clearly recorded in the minutes. The budget authorises spending at a strategic level, but it does not necessarily authorise every individual transaction. The council must follow its own Financial Regulations, including any properly adopted arrangements for delegated authority and regular contractual payments. Model Financial Regulation 6.10 provides for a schedule of payments requiring authorisation to be presented to the council or finance committee. The council should review the schedule, authorise the payments by resolution, and disclose a detailed list within or as an attachment to the minutes. The important point is that someone reading the minutes and accompanying papers should be able to see what was approved, when it was approved, and by whom. A vague

minute stating that “the finance report was noted” may not demonstrate that the payments were actually authorised.

Issue 5: Financial information missing from minutes

Closely connected to payment approval was a wider concern about financial transparency. Some clerks appeared to believe that financial information should not be included in council minutes. Confidential personal information must, of course, be protected and any personal payments, including salaries, can be summarised to avoid disclosing private information. That does not mean that the council’s wider financial decisions should disappear from the public record.

For a small council, the approved payment list may sit conveniently within the body of the minutes. For a larger council, it may be more practical to include it as an appendix. Either approach can work, provided the information is clear, accessible, and formally linked to the council’s resolution.

Good minutes do not need to reproduce every word of a finance report, but they should provide an adequate and transparent audit trail.

Issue 6: Homeworking allowance

Finally, auditors discussed conflicting advice about homeworking allowance, particularly where one clerk works for several councils. The uncertainty was whether the allowance can be claimed once only or separately in respect of each employment. This is precisely the sort of issue on which councils should seek current, authoritative advice from Northants CALC rather than relying on custom, hearsay, or what another council happens to do!

Our top tip for surviving the audit process is ask, ask, ask! Governance and accountability for parish and town councils is not straightforward, and no clerk, RFO, or councillor is expected to be an expert from day 1.

For a clerk/RFO, preparing your first Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) is a big deal but there is plenty of help available. From dedicated training courses to one-off bespoke advice and guidance, Northants CALC will support you all the way. You just need to ask!

COUNCILLOR CONDUCT: MORE THAN JUST COMPLAINTS!

Guest article from West Northamptonshire Council

When people hear the words "*standards complaint*", they often imagine lengthy investigations and formal hearings. In reality, the standards framework is designed to promote good governance, support positive behaviours and maintain public confidence in local democracy.

At West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), the standards process is overseen by the Monitoring Officer, Sarah Hall, Corporate Director for Law and Governance. Whilst many people associate the role solely with councillor conduct and governance matters, the Monitoring Officer function is only one part of a much broader portfolio. Sarah leads a wide range of services including Legal, Democratic Services, Elections, Information Governance, Regulatory Services and Coroners, Registration and Bereavement Services, whilst also providing statutory governance advice to the Council and its Members.

Sarah is supported by colleagues in Legal and Democratic Services, including two Deputy Monitoring Officers Nicki Agalamanyi (Head of Legal (Corporate and Place)) and Julia Rickards (Head of Legal (People)), Paul Hanson (Head of Democratic Services and Elections), Wendy Binmore (Democratic Services Manager) and Marianne McCarthy (Principal Lawyer (Governance)). The team also works closely with a panel of six Independent Persons, appointed under the Localism Act 2011. An Independent Person is consulted on every standards complaint and provides an impartial external perspective to help ensure complaints are considered fairly, consistently, and transparently.

For a complaint to be considered under the Member Complaints Procedure, it must generally relate to a named councillor, acting in their official capacity, and allege a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct. The process focuses on the conduct of individual councillors and is not intended to resolve disagreements with council decisions, administrative matters or broader governance concerns affecting a council as an organisation.

The good news? Formal investigations are not always the best or most proportionate outcome. Many concerns can be resolved through training,

mediation, improved communication, or a simple apology, helping councils move forward and continue serving their communities effectively.

A separate and more detailed guide to the standards regime is at <https://northantscalc.gov.uk/web/content/37028>, which provides an overview of the complaints process, the role of the Monitoring Officer, the factors considered when assessing complaints, and the range of outcomes available under the standards framework.

Did You Know?

✓ Most standards complaints do not progress to a formal investigation because they either fall outside the scope of the Code of Conduct, there is insufficient evidence to justify further action, or the issues can be more effectively addressed through informal resolution such as training, mediation or an apology.

✓ Every complaint is considered with input from an Independent Person, bringing an external and impartial perspective to the assessment process.

✓ Training, mediation and informal resolution are often more effective than formal proceedings, particularly where relationships have broken down and councils need practical solutions to move forward.

✓ The standards framework is guided by the Nolan Principles: Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, and Leadership.

✓ Not every concern is a standards issue. Many complaints about council decisions, governance arrangements or administration fall outside the Members' Code of Conduct process.

"Standards are not about catching people out. They are about promoting confidence in local democracy and supporting high standards of public life."

A Final Thought: The Committee on Standards in Public Life has observed: *"High standards are fundamental to maintaining public trust in democratic institutions."* By understanding the standards framework and encouraging respectful, professional conduct, Clerks and councillors can help create a positive culture that benefits both their council and the communities they serve.

NATIONAL SCHEME OF DELEGATION: WNC AND NNC REACTION

In the previous edition of *eUpdate*, we explained that a new National Scheme of Delegation for planning decisions would come into force on 31 October 2026. Both West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) and North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) have now approved the constitutional changes needed to implement it.



The national scheme replaces locally designed delegation arrangements with a more consistent system across England. “Schedule 1” applications must be determined by planning officers, apart from limited exceptions. “Schedule 2” applications are also presumed to be officer decisions but may be referred to a planning committee if the statutory tests are met and the nominated officer and nominated member agree.

This has an important consequence for parish and town councils. An objection from a parish or town council, a request from a ward councillor, or a specified number of public objections can no longer trigger consideration by a planning committee. Local opposition may remain relevant to the planning merits, but it cannot determine who makes the decision.

North Northamptonshire

NNC’s Democracy and Standards Committee considered the changes on 7 September 2026, and Full Council approved the revised scheme on 24 September. It takes effect on 31 October 2026.

NNC has removed its former referral triggers based on ward-councillor requests, parish or town council objections, and numbers of public objectors. Instead, it has adopted a limited referral process for selected Schedule 2 applications, including major development, changes of use, minor traveller caravan sites, and certain listed-building applications involving substantial heritage harm.

Referral requires agreement between the Head of Development Management and Planning Enforcement, or an authorised substitute, and the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Planning Committee. They must agree that the application raises 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. If they do not agree, the decision remains with officers. NNC has decided that several other Schedule 2 categories will remain delegated without going through its local referral process. These include advertisement consent, works to protected trees, most listed-building applications, minor industrial and warehousing development, most retrospective applications, and the modification or discharge of planning obligations. NNC has retained a 13-member Planning Committee, the maximum permitted under the new regulations.

West Northamptonshire

WNC's Democracy and Standards Committee considered the changes on 9 September 2026, and the recommendations went to Full Council on 24 September.

WNC has removed its ward-member call-in procedure and replaced it with an "Application Referral Process." A Schedule 2 application may be referred to committee only where the Service Director: Planning, or a nominated substitute, and the Chair or Deputy Chair of the relevant Planning Committee agree that the statutory tests are met.

WNC will retain its Strategic and Non-Strategic Planning Committees. The Strategic Planning Committee will continue to deal with the largest and most important developments that pass through the new referral gateway, including proposals for 200 or more houses, very large commercial developments, major renewable-energy projects, and other strategically important proposals. The Non-Strategic Planning Committee will deal with referred applications below those thresholds.

The local thresholds determine which committee considers an application after it has been validly referred. They do not provide an automatic entitlement to committee determination.

WNC had explored whether an Informal Member Review process could replace call-in. Legal advice concluded that a structured review forming part of the decision-making process would be inconsistent with the new regulations. Instead, ward members may discuss an application with other affected ward members and submit a consultation response within the normal consultation period. That response may explain why the statutory tests for committee referral are met, but it cannot compel a referral.

What does all this mean for parish and town councils?

The approaches adopted by WNC and NNC differ in detail, but the practical message is the same. A parish or town council objection will no longer provide a procedural ticket to the planning committee, and support from a ward councillor will not guarantee a public committee hearing. That does not make local council comments pointless. In fact, it makes their content more important. Where a parish or town council considers that a Schedule 2 application should be determined by committee, its response should explain:

- Which development plan or neighbourhood plan policies are relevant;
- What material planning effects are expected;
- Whether the application raises an economic, social, or environmental issue of significance; and
- Why the issues justify consideration by elected members rather than determination by officers.

A bare resolution of “objection” will carry less practical weight than a concise, well-evidenced explanation of the planning harm or wider local significance.

Parish and town councils should also review their meeting cycles and delegated arrangements. Waiting for the next ordinary meeting may leave insufficient time to prepare an effective response, so lawful arrangements must be available for submitting comments within the consultation period.

The National Scheme of Delegation does not take parish and town councils out of the planning system. It does, however, remove some familiar routes to a committee decision. Effective local influence will depend increasingly on engaging early, responding on time, using material planning considerations, and explaining precisely why an application matters to the community.

BUDGETING SEASON IS HERE

Autumn is budgeting season for parish and town councils. Every council, regardless of size, must prepare a budget and use it as the foundation for setting the precept, managing spending, and monitoring financial performance throughout the year. The budget should never be seen as a once-a-year exercise though; it is one of the council's most important governance tools.



A good budget starts with a simple question: what services, projects and priorities does the council want to deliver over the coming year? Members can then assess the likely costs, expected income, and the level of reserves needed to manage risk and support future plans. Councils should think beyond 31 March and consider longer-term commitments such as elections, asset replacement, building maintenance, training, and any opportunities to take on local services or assets.

The current financial climate remains challenging. Inflationary pressures have not disappeared, salary awards remain uncertain, and principal councils continue to face significant financial pressures. Councils should therefore ensure that budgets are realistic, prudent, and supported by an appropriate level of reserves.

Budget setting is not simply an exercise in keeping the precept as low as possible. Some councillors understandably see themselves as guardians of the council taxpayer's money, but the real test is whether the council is delivering value for money. A council that freezes its precept year after year while local services decline may not be serving its community as well as a council that invests carefully in facilities, events, environmental improvements, health and wellbeing initiatives, or support for local organisations. The question should not be "How low can we keep the precept?" but "What do residents need, what can we realistically deliver, and what is the fairest way to pay for it?"

The Northants CALC Budgeting Information Guide 2027/28 will be published in the Friday Mini *eUpdate* on 9 October 2026, providing further updated guidance on budgeting, precepting, salaries, audit fees, reserves, elections, and other financial considerations for the year ahead. If your council has not yet started its budgeting process, there is no time like the present!

WORK EXPERIENCE BENEFITTED BOTH PARTIES

Conor, who is studying A Level Politics, wanted some relevant work experience so he contacted East Hunsbury Parish Council, which was delighted to help. Here, Conor describes his experience...

"When I came to the council for a week on work experience I didn't expect much. Maybe to be in an office filling out paperwork and being a tiny part of a faceless bureaucracy. Instead I have been welcomed with open arms. The reality is not like I envisioned beforehand; the parish council staff actually get stuff done in the real world, it's not just endless paperwork. They put on so many events for the community each and every week and they are always trying to do more. The level of senior engagement is impressive and as I spoke to some seniors during a Tai Chi class they all were very grateful for the services the council provides to them. Tai Chi was used as an opportunity to socialise with others and you could tell all the people that attended enjoyed it. The council also partially subsidises it so the seniors get it at a much lower cost. All of the staff work tirelessly for the community and for the good of the people.



While on work experience I gained valuable knowledge of how local governance functions and also valuable life lessons from my experienced co-workers. I would never have been aware of all that they do and I will certainly be more respectful and caring of my local area now that I know how much work goes into it. I went in knowing little to nothing and now I feel as if I have the knowledge to be a councillor. There is much diplomacy involved in being a councillor or member of staff - you cannot just stop working with someone because you disagree with them. You have to work with them and negotiate and understand how they reached that viewpoint and then sometimes meet in the middle, sometimes concede your point, sometimes they concede theirs. And through this process of deliberation you can find an option closer to the best option as both of your arguments are tested against each other's and sharpened against each other's.

From my week long experience I learnt that the parish council is hardly a bureaucracy. The parish is able to do things and put on events with much less

difficulty and deliberation than other “higher” rungs of local governance. I guarantee you the parish have more interactions with normal people than anybody in Westminster. The more ground level you go the less bureaucracy and the more community you build. In an age where people are further driven apart by things like politics and technology it was a ray of hope seeing the parish bring people together, providing a genuine sense of community. The council means so much to so many people especially the retired who use the events the council put on to socialise and as things to do. I wish the council all the best and I think overall they are a huge net positive for the local community and many people are much better off with them there to help. They are definitely underappreciated for the amount that they contribute to society.

I am very grateful to the staff that helped me. Thank you to Chris, Jayne, Liz, and Caroline. I would especially like to thank Caroline who organised my placement and took time out of her busy schedule to explain things to me when I didn’t understand.”

Caroline Holgate, Clerk to East Hunsbury Parish Council, said: *“Having a young person in the office brings a different perspective to things – he did some really useful research into youth clubs and engaging young people, and tested a new AI tool. It was a really positive experience for us too!”*

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. The following vacancies are live at www.northantscalc.gov.uk/council-vacancies:



Council	Hours per week	Deadline for applications
Wilbarston Parish Council	8	2 October 2026
Pilton, Stoke Doyle and Wadenhoe Parish Council	5	2 October 2026
Spratton Parish Council	18	5pm on 16 October 2026
Hartwell Parish Council	24	5pm on 23 October 2026

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Most parish and town councils will recognise spirited debate, occasional frustration, and strongly held views. Healthy challenge is part of local democracy. Abuse is not.

A recent national standards report concerned a district councillor who was jailed after a sustained campaign of abusive and harassing communications directed at council officers. The court heard of repeated insulting emails whose purpose was found to be causing distress rather than advancing legitimate concerns.

Many parish and town clerks and councillors will know that public service can sometimes attract behaviour that crosses the line and councils have reported that abuse is no longer directed solely at clerks. Councillors, too, can find themselves on the receiving end of personal attacks that damage confidence and wellbeing.

Interestingly, the rail industry has been confronting a similar problem. South Western Railway recently launched a campaign reminding passengers that thoughtless words can stay with frontline workers long after a difficult interaction has ended. Their message is simple: people may forget a moment of anger, but the person on the receiving end often does not.

The lesson for councils is not to suppress disagreement or avoid difficult conversations. Robust governance depends on challenge. However, civility creates the conditions for challenge to be heard, considered, and acted upon. Respect is not weakness; it is a prerequisite for effective leadership today.

The Civility and Respect Project (<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/campaigns/civility-and-respect.html>) was created because this challenge is real. More than 2,000 councils have already signed the Civility and Respect Pledge, committing themselves to respectful behaviour, positive working relationships, and a culture where disagreement does not become hostility.

The cautionary tale is straightforward. Challenge decisions. Scrutinise proposals. Hold councils and officers to account. But never lose sight of the fact that local government is delivered by human beings. Once criticism becomes intimidation, harassment, or personal abuse, everybody loses, including the communities we are elected or appointed to serve.

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

