

Update

ISSUE 5/21

September - October 2021

CONTENTS

- **THE CHIEF'S BRIEF**
- **COUNCILLOR PANEL SURVEY - PLANNING - AUGUST 2021**
- **VACANCY FOR A DIRECTOR AT NORTHANTS CALC**
- **PLATINUM JUBILEE**
- **NORTHAMPTONSHIRE VILLAGE AWARDS 2022**
- **POINTS OF LIGHT 2021**
- **PAY AWARD 2021/22 UPDATE**
- **NORTHAMPTONSHIRE HIGHWAYS PROCURMENT**
- **LAND REGISTRY SURVEY REPORT**
- **SOS AND ALL**
- **RURAL CRIME**
- **CONSULTATIONS, CONSULTATIONS**
- **INTERNAL AUDIT – COMMON ISSUES ARISING**
- **SITUATIONS VACANT**
- **A CAUTIONARY TALE**
- **TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS**
- **NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS**

THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

This is the first bi-monthly *eUpdate* since the summer break. An opportunity to rest up and enjoy the sunshine, and I hope that all clerks and councillors managed to find a little bit of down-time somewhere. Now we have our shoulders back to the wheel, chomping through business.

September is always an extremely busy month for Northants CALC. The number of enquiries we receive doesn't really abate over the summer in the way it used to, but there are fewer meetings in the diary from mid-July to the end of August due to people being on holiday. Consequently, the September diary fills up rapidly!

Many of our meetings are with various officers and members at the unitary councils. For example, I meet monthly with the Heads of Legal at each unitary to discuss issues such as Code of Conduct complaints, governance concerns, and constitutional matters. I meet monthly with the Assistant Directors for Housing, Communities & Wellbeing to talk about localism, devolution, and parish forums.

Then there are all sorts of ad hoc meetings, for example this month with the Assistant Directors for Highways and Waste on the procurement of the new highway contracts (more on that in an article below), and with the Direct Services Managers for Assets & Environment on the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), more about which you will find in future

eUpdates. We have regular catch-ups with the unitary councils' Chief Executives and Leaders to ensure that parish and town councils are kept in their minds.

Some of this work is ongoing, but some is project based too. For example, Lesley Sambrook Smith met with the unitary council Election Officers recently to debrief the local elections held in May and to see what lessons can be learned. We are then holding a small focus session next month on elections to gather the views from parish councils, and then we will feed our evidence and thoughts on to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Electoral Commission.

“We have regular catch-ups with the unitary councils’ Chief Executives and Leaders to ensure that parish and town councils are kept in their minds.”

We don't report to member councils on every meeting (which would be a bit boring!) but rest assured that we are extremely busy on your behalf making sure that the unitary councils understand the importance of working well with the parish and town councils in the county. We will continue to look for opportunities to build the relationship between the tiers, iron out operational difficulties and frustrations, and look for ways that all councils in Northamptonshire, regardless of what level they are at, can work well together to deliver excellent services for the county.

Our training programme has also been in top gear since the summer. Marie Reilly and her team of associate trainers have been delivering at least five training events every single week. Never was the training offer for parish and town councillors and clerks so comprehensive and so accessible. I deliver some training myself, and a particular highlight of the autumn is the New Clerks training, which I very much enjoy as it is fascinating to see new clerks just setting out on their careers as local government officers. The cohort this autumn were drawn from some of the smallest councils in Northamptonshire, to some of the biggest.

We are starting to get out and about again too. In 2019 I was at One Angel Square in Northampton at least weekly to have meetings about Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), but my meeting there on 22 September 2021 (about Operation London Bridge) was the first-time setting foot on the premises since March 2020. We are starting to deliver training face to face too, particularly where the topic necessitates interactivity and engagement.

In early August and late September, I convened and hosted meetings of the Police Liaison Representative (PLR) Steering Group. There are now 165 PLRs across Northamptonshire appointed by their parish or town council (or parish meeting), which is a fantastic effort. Thank you. The Steering Group is conscious that the network of PLRs hasn't really been "used" much yet, but it is hoped that more information will begin to flow back and forth later this year. All the news and information about the PLR scheme is at www.northantscalc.com/plr.

On 20 September 2021 Northants CALC was 74 years old (so we are doing very well for our age!). It is important to remember that the Association has been there fighting its member councils' corner for a long time and will continue to do so long after the current staff, directors, and volunteers have retired into the sunset. The Association is only as strong as its membership, so it is also an opportunity to say thank you to you, the parish and town councils and parish meetings in

Northamptonshire for your continued and valued support. And here's to next year, when I hope we can celebrate our 75th in person with member councils!

This *eUpdate* is published the day before our 2021 Annual Conference & AGM, which is being hosted this year by West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) at One Angel Square in Northampton on 2 October 2021. We have over 100 delegates booked from councils the length and breadth of the county. We have a good line-up of speakers and a range of sector-specific exhibitors to whom we are very grateful for their sponsorship (see www.northantscalc.com/agm). One of the items of business at the AGM is to appoint directors for the ensuing year. This year we will have one vacancy due to the retirement from the board of Gill Wells and there is a vacancy notice below. Please do consider applying; the Association is run for member councils by members councils and the board is the personification of that. Any clerk or councillor at a council in membership can be a director so please do put yourself forward. I hope the AGM goes well, and I'm looking forward to catching up with people.

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

COUNCILLOR PANEL SURVEY - PLANNING - AUGUST 2021

The Northants CALC Councillor Panel was established to:

- Provide a mechanism for gauging the views of parish councillors in Northamptonshire
- Provide Northants CALC with a way of engaging with the wider membership
- Enable Northants CALC to collect data and evidence to respond to partner organisations (e.g. government, NALC, Unitary Councils) wishing to consult with or understand the needs and views of parish councillors

Membership of the Councillor Panel is open to any elected or co-opted member of a parish or town council or chairman of a parish meeting in membership of Northants CALC. We currently have just over 100 members and would like to encourage more councillors to join the panel. We have no more than 6 polls/surveys per year and most of those surveys will take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

The most recent survey was conducted during August and a total of 48 councillors (46% response rate) completed the survey looking at planning applications and Area and Strategic Planning Committees.



The first section of the survey looked at the number of planning applications a council receives, how they are dealt with within the council and how the council reviews the decisions made by the planning authority. The second and third sections were focused on the new planning committees formed in both the North and West council areas. Both unitary councils have Local Area Planning Committees covering the householder developments, and Strategic Planning Committees covering larger scale developments.

58% of responders have between 0-2 planning applications a month, 25% have between 3-5 and 17% have over 6 planning application a month. 48% of the councillors report that their councils have a planning committee to look at the applications. However, of those 23 councils who have a planning committee, only 41% of the committee members have attended planning specific training.

Looking at planning applications in more detail, councillors were asked if site inspections were carried out: 63.5% of councils visit the site often or sometimes, whilst 23% rarely or never visit a site.

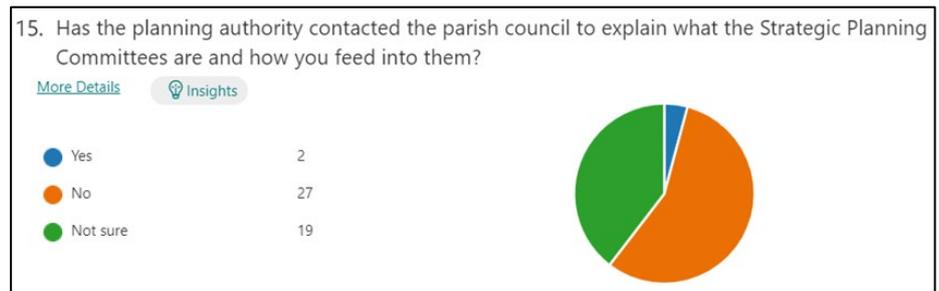
To keep track of planning applications, councils can use a planning register to record when applications are received, comments made by the parish/town council, decision date and the decision made by the planning authority. 35% of respondents have a planning register and 52% of those councils review the register either monthly or quarterly.

When looking at comments submitted by the parish council and the decisions made by the planning officers, it can be seen that councils and officers at the principal councils regularly have different views:

Councillors were asked to comment on the day-to-day interactions with the planning departments at the principal councils. A wide range of comments were received ranging from “We regularly communicate with the members of the NNC Area Planning Committee. Our members also make heavy use of the NNC planning portal” to “I am not sure we 'interact' with the planning authority. We respond, but there is no 'back and forth'” and “I wish they would take into consideration local views. We understand the impact decisions can make within our community which cannot always be seen on a map or by a single visit”.

The second section of the survey dealt with Local Area Planning Committees (LAPCs) and how much the councillors already knew about them. 37.5% of councillors did not know anything at all about the LAPCs, whilst 50% knew a little and 12.5% knew a lot. The survey also asked what communication there had been from NNC and WNC regarding LAPCs. Communication from the unitary councils does not appear to have been widespread regarding LAPCs as can be seen above, however, on a positive note, 77% of councillors would like to know more about the LAPCs.

The third section of the survey dealt with Strategic Planning Committees (SPCs) and how much the



councillors already knew about them. 42% of councillors did not know anything at all about the SPCs, whilst 52% knew a little and 6% knew a lot. Again, communication from the unitary councils has not been widespread, however, 75% of councillors would like to know more about the SPCs.

In light of the number of councillors who would like to know more about the LAPCs and SPCs, Northants CALC will work with WNC and NNC to determine the best way to disseminate this information to all member councils. Some councillors who responded to the survey were happy to be contacted to discuss the results of the survey in more detail and we will be in touch shortly to work with them.

If you are a councillor in Northamptonshire and might be interested to join the Councillor Panel, please simply send an email to cllrpanel@northantscalc.com and your details will be included on the list for the next survey.

Northants CALC has a vacancy on the board for a Director

Northants CALC is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. It is a membership organisation representing the parish and town councils and parish meetings in Northamptonshire. Our board is comprised of eight Directors selected from the membership (clerks or councillors). The term of office is for one year until the AGM when all Directors step down together but may seek re-appointment.

The board is looking for a high-quality individual to help lead the organisation as it continues to grow and develop. You will find it demanding but satisfying, being part of a small volunteer team advancing the interests of the Association and its member councils.

Directors must be able to commit sufficient time to prepare for and attend monthly meetings. Visit www.northantscalc.com/the-association.html to find out more about how the Association operates. Further information on the role of a Director, including an application form and details of the selection process, is available on request by e-mail to Danny Moody, Chief Executive: dmoody@northantscalc.com.

**Applications must be completed and returned
by 5:00 p.m. on Friday 22 October 2021.**

Any clerk or councillor from a council in membership of Northants CALC may apply. However, the board operates a composition and diversity policy and based on the current makeup of the board applications are particularly encouraged from Northamptonshire's clerks.

If you feel that you would make a significant contribution to the work of the Association, then please apply; we would be pleased to welcome you.

www.northantscalc.com

NCALC

PLATINUM JUBILEE

The Platinum Jubilee celebrations taking place over the weekend of 2 – 5 June 2022 are something to look forward to and are an important opportunity to bring communities together. Street parties, beacon lighting, The Big Jubilee Lunch, and much, much more are all part of the mix. See <https://platinumjubilee.gov.uk> for lots of ideas and information.



Under the chairmanship of HM Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire, James Saunders-Watson, a committee has been established to oversee and co-ordinate Platinum Jubilee activities in Northamptonshire. Northants CALC is representing parish and town councils, there are representatives from both unitary councils, and the immediate-past High Sheriff, Paul Parsons, who is overseeing the Queen's Green Canopy (QGC) project in the county. The committee is working on a web site to bring all the local information together in one place.

Northants CALC will soon be conducting a survey of parish and town councils to find out what is planned, how parish and town councils want to get involved, and what resources and assistance they might need. Please look out for it arriving in your inboxes in October and please do respond so that we can build up a countywide picture.

The QGC project, or "*Plant a Tree for the Jubilee*" is gathering pace too, so thank you to all the parish and town councils that have had it on their agendas recently to consider what action to take. It might be as simple as planting one small sapling on a green or verge, right up to new community woods or orchards, new avenues of trees, or even responding to the national call to plant a seventy-acre wood! (if any councils want to do the latter, please contact Northants CALC!). An event is being held on 11 October 2021 for the thirty largest parish and town councils in Northamptonshire, who between them cover 75% of the population in the county, to share ideas and thoughts and receive an update on the national plans. The notes from the meeting will be disseminated to all parish and town councils.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE VILLAGE AWARDS 2022

Northamptonshire ACRE has announced that the annual Northamptonshire Village Awards, which are an opportunity for villages and groups to celebrate and share what they like about their village and what makes it a great place to live, are back.



The awards have been put on hold for the last two years due to the pandemic but they will go ahead again in 2022. Villages can enter from now until 31st January 2022 and the judges will visit each entrant during April and May to assess them. Every entrant will receive either a Bronze, Silver or Gold level award as well a cash prize, courtesy of CPRE Northamptonshire's sponsorship. Groups can also separately enter the Creative Use of a Communal Space category. One village will be chosen as the overall Northamptonshire Best Village 2022 and everyone will receive their awards at the Presentation Evening, on Monday 11th July 2022 at the Hunsbury Hill Centre in Northampton.

The 2022 Northamptonshire Village Awards are again sponsored by CPRE Northamptonshire and are open to all villages in the county with a population under 6,000. These awards are a wonderful way for residents to showcase their rural community as well as a chance to audit village life and build for the future, just like Glapthorn did in 2019. *‘We knew that our village is special, so we decided to go for it!’* says 2019 Best Village Winners Glapthorn Parish Secretary, Elizabeth Garnish. *‘We simply could not believe our success when the results were announced...We are all so proud to see our trophies and certificates on display – fitting tributes to our amazing community spirit’.*

The level of award given is based upon how well the village does across a range of criteria that covers all aspects of village life, from its facilities and amenities, local activities, tidiness and presentation to its environment, future sustainability and most importantly community spirit!

To help groups who are interested in entering but would like to know more about the sort of information to include in their entry, we are running two free Q&A sessions on Tuesday 12 October at 1.30pm and Thursday 14 October 2021 at

6pm where the judges will be able to answer any questions. If any parish council, community group, or individual would like to book a place on one of the sessions, please email acre@northantsacre.org.uk.

So, if you are proud of your village and want to share that with others, why not enter? As Elizabeth Garnish from Glapthorn remarked, "*The whole process turned out to be really good fun. The awards have been an inspiration!*"

Full details on how to enter the competition, along with the application form can be found at <https://www.northantsacre.org.uk/northamptonshire-village-awards-2022>. The closing date for applications is Monday 31 January 2022.

POINTS OF LIGHT 2021

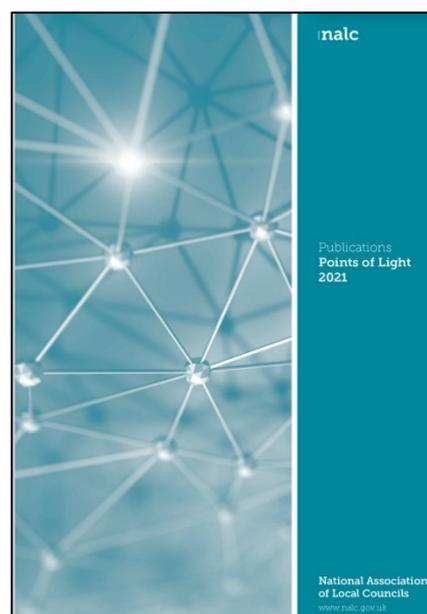
The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has published the 2021 edition of *Points of Light*, highlighting the excellent work that parish and town councils have done to support their communities.

This edition includes case studies from Deanshanger Parish Council and West Haddon Parish Council in Northamptonshire.

Points of Light aims to promote good practice and raise awareness of the various services local councils facilitate. Managing the local water supply, providing free breakfast packs for families on low incomes, employing a family support worker, operating a discounted housing scheme, and setting up a food bank are just some of the examples contained in this year's edition.

Points of Light is a collection of case studies that include summaries and information on the electorate, precept and expenditure that highlight the work of England's 10,000 local councils. So, if you are looking for ideas and inspiration, please download your free copy at:

www.nalc.gov.uk/library/publications/points-of-light/3585-points-of-light-2021



PAY AWARD 2021/22 UPDATE

In the July/August *eUpdate* it was reported that “negotiations on local government pay for 2021/22 are ongoing” and unfortunately that is still the case.

The public sector union, Unite, is holding a consultative ballot to see if its 70,000 workers in local government want to proceed to an industrial ballot, with options up to strike action, following the “derisory” pay offer of 1.75 per cent. The ballot opened on 1 September and closes on 4 October 2021. There will then be consideration of the outcome of the ballot before deciding next steps.

Some councils are asking what to do about budgeting for 2022/23. It is a difficult question to answer. The pay award for 2021/22 isn’t going to be lower than 1.75%, but it is unlikely to be as high as 10%, which is what the unions are asking for. Perhaps budgeting based on a 5% increase for 2021/22 and 2022/23 is realistic. Northants CALC will be issuing its usual budget information guidance sheet around mid-October.

As soon as there is further news on salaries, we will disseminate it to member councils.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE HIGHWAYS PROCUREMENT

The contract to maintain Northamptonshire’s highways has been held by KierWSP since 2008. The contract was due to end in 2021 but in February it was extended until March 2022 to give the unitary councils an opportunity to say how they wanted highways services to be delivered in the future.



A procurement process started in early 2021 and the intention was to award the new contracts in November 2021, to provide for a period of mobilisation prior to KierWSP finishing in March 2022. The process has remained the same, but the timetable has slipped by approximately 6 months owing to the complexity of

procuring contracts for two separate councils. It is now hoped to award contracts in April 2022, with KierWSP continuing until the end of August 2022.

Much is unknown at this stage, but two things appear to be certain. Firstly, there will not be a countywide contract; North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) will each have their own contract. That's not to say that they might not both choose the same contractor, but there will be separate contracts. Secondly, whether there is one contractor or two, it won't be KierWSP. KierWSP is a partnership between Kier, an infrastructure services company and WSP, a design, engineering, and management consultancy, which initially came together to deliver the Northamptonshire highways contract with a view to then providing services across the UK. KierWSP will not be bidding for the new contracts as a partnership.

The new contracts are being procured on a like-for-like basis. In other words, if a service is currently being provided under the existing contract, it will be provided under the new contracts. Service standards are yet to be agreed, but the procurement team says it expects the bidders to be innovative and to use the latest technology.

Highways-related services that were delivered in-house by Northamptonshire County Council (NCC), such as Rights of Way, the Definitive Map, and Highways Development, will continue to be delivered in-house and have been or are being disaggregated between the two unitary councils. Clearly there will be a need for NNC and WNC to work very closely together on highways issues to avoid creating a hard border for roads and footpaths and other infrastructure between the north and west.

It is not yet known where the Parish Paths Warden scheme will sit, or whether the unitary councils will be minded to relaunch the Parish Highways Representative scheme. Both things are under review. The same applies to Street Doctor, which now runs on the FixMyStreet platform. That may or may not continue, depending on who the contractors are.

Highways is an important subject for parish and town councils, so Northants CALC has formally requested that briefing sessions are held with the new contractor(s) in the mobilisation period (April to August 2022). Further information on these briefing sessions will be circulated to member councils in due course.

LAND REGISTRY SURVEY REPORT

Thank you to all the parish and town councils that responded to the HM Land Registry (HMLR) survey that was circulated in January 2021. Nationally, 1,231 councils responded, which is an excellent return (approx. 11%).

HM Land
Registry



The government's aim is that all publicly held land will be registered by 2025, so HMLR needed to understand the problems, issues and barriers that parish and town councils face. Here is a summary of the findings:

Land owned by Councils:

- Respondents were mainly from **rural** areas and confirmed the **majority** of the land the council owned is **open land and fields** (playgrounds, parks, memorials etc) rather than buildings (community buildings, village halls).
- 2% of respondents said that they owned **no land at all**.
- 22% confirmed that land being **registered with HMLR** is the main way they know what land they own.

It may be more challenging to persuade Councils to lodge applications as they may not see the benefit in doing so:

- 85% said that they are either confident or very confident that the land, they believe the council owns, isn't owned by someone else.
- The majority of respondents are **not aware of any disputes** over the land in which the Council own.

There is also a lack of awareness of HM Land Registry:

- 40% of respondents have had **no personal experience with HM Land Registry**. Either using a solicitor, or other third party, or having never had any dealings at all.
- Only **1% have had regular contact with HM Land Registry** and frequently submitted applications.

Councils will require a lot of help and guidance when trying to register their land:

- Only a third of respondents said that they feel confident or very confident in preparing and lodging an application.
- Just under half of respondents confirmed that, being **unsure of how to make an application**, was a **barrier** to registration.
- Respondents felt that **help lodging applications** and a **point of contact** while the applications were being processed would make them **more likely to consider registering** their land.

HMLR has developed a set of recommendations:

1. Have help and guidance available for councils wanting to make applications.
2. Ensure help and guidance is easily located and accessible.
3. Have a dedicated team or pool of people available that can deal with applications from prelodgement to completion. Consider replicating something similar to the managed services model.
4. Consider a communication strategy on the benefits of registration and the risks of not registering including links to help and guidance and articles for One Voice Wales and the National Association of Local Councils.

Watch this space for further developments. The full report is available at <https://www.northantscalc.com/uploads/hmlr-land-survey-report-2021.pdf>.

SOS AND ALL

Local government has a new Secretary of State (SoS), and a new departmental name. As a result of the recent Cabinet reshuffle, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP is now Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). He replaces Robert Jenrick, who returns to the back benches, having served two years at MHCLG.

Mr Gove is the sixth Secretary of State at the department since the Conservatives took power in 2010 succeeding Robert Jenrick, James Brokenshire, Sajid Javid, Greg Clark, and Eric Pickles. He is known for shaking things up, and likely that means more than just the name. Clearly the levelling up agenda is being given greater prominence and attention, but whether that is at the expense of “local government”, which is dropped from the departmental name, remains to be seen.

RURAL CRIME

Northamptonshire is a very rural county, which means rural crime, including wildlife crime, is a big issue. Northamptonshire Police takes it very seriously and has a dedicated Rural Crime Team of six constables headed up by Sergeant Andy Maher.



The Rural Crime Team wants to engage with and build effective working relationships with local communities to offer reassurance and crime prevention advice, and to develop intelligence to proactively target criminals.

Sgt Andy Maher also chairs the Rural Action Group (RAG), which is a multi-agency group that looks at the issues of rural crime and the impact on local communities. Northants CALC attends RAG meetings to represent parish and town councils.

The Rural Crime Team visits farms, rural industrial estates, rural businesses, and other rural properties and takes a proactive approach. During a recent proactive operation, vehicles such as agricultural machinery, cars and vans with trailers, and pickup trucks were stopped and searched. The Team also has a Rural Crime Engagement Trailer, which can be taken to shows and community events.

Fly-tipping is a crime that often blights rural areas and the Office of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) has funding available. A private landowner who has been the victim of fly-tipping can apply for a grant of up to £1,500 to help deal with the problem. The money can be used to cover the cost of having fly-tipping removed, as well as to fund prevention measures to make land less vulnerable to fly-tippers in the future. The scheme is funded by the OPFCC in partnership with NNC and WNC. If you know of a landowner that might benefit, please contact info@northantscalc.com for further details.

Another scheme that tries to fight back is HorseWatch, which has recently been rebranded as Volunteers on Horseback (VOH). VOH is looking for more riders to act as extra sets of eyes and ears for the police, keeping a look-out for problems in rural areas and letting the police know about any issues. If you know anyone that might be interested in becoming a VOH, please email co-ordinator Jean

Mears (jean.mears@northants.pnn.police.uk), and you can find out more by following <https://twitter.com/NorPolVoH1>.

Sgt Andy Maher says, "The support and information offered by the rural community is key to helping us achieve our aims so please get in touch with the team by email and follow us on Twitter."

Email: RuralCrime@northants.police.uk

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NorPolRural>

And to further increase the police presence and visibility in the rural areas of the county, Northamptonshire Police has just launched the Beat Buses, one for the west and one for the north. Local Policing Commander, Chief Superintendent Ash Tuckley, believes the new vehicles will be a valuable asset for the neighbourhood policing teams, giving the public greater access to their local officers. He said: *"The two new 'beat buses' will be a great addition to our neighbourhood policing toolkit, helping to get our officers closer to the public and their local communities. They'll provide a mobile office enabling officers to spend more time in different communities across their beat."* You can read all about the new Beat Buses at <https://bit.ly/3CWrcwO>, and look out for them as they traverse the county!

CONSULTATIONS, CONSULTATIONS

There have been a lot of consultations recently. Too many really. It's great that organisations seek the views of others, but consultations must be targeted, relevant, proportionate, and meaningful. Parish and town councils are generally good at responding to consultations when the impact on their area is clear and obvious, but sometimes the size and complexity of the consultation puts it beyond the resources of most councils. There have been three examples recently:

The Ox-Cam Arc development could be the biggest thing to impact Northamptonshire in a generation, yet the consultation on it is virtually impregnable. Even if there was time to wade through all the material, the questions are technical and obscure and sometimes require a degree in spatial planning to understand. Yes, there was a toolkit that enabled groups to put on local events, but without proper support it could have been the blind leading the blind. Northants CALC asked WNC if it was planning to put on a Local Engagement Event for parish and town councils, using the Arc Toolkit, and the

response was “... *the Planning Policy team at WNC aren't planning an event.*” In these days of online meetings surely a one-hour briefing session on the Ox-Cam Arc consultation, delivered by the experts at WNC, would have increased both the quantity and quality of responses from parish and town councils in the area.

Then there was the Local Audit Framework technical consultation from the National Audit Office, based on the Redmond Review of council audits. Again, the views of individual parish and town councils was sought, but most of the questions related to councils with a turnover exceeding £6.5 million. There aren't many of those in Northamptonshire!

The third example was the Defra consultation on Local Nature Recovery Strategies: how to prepare and what to include. The consultation was open to community groups and organisations, and even members of the public, yet the questions were really aimed at environmental experts. It's almost dangerous to seek the layman's view on matters that require specific expertise.

The concern is that parish and town councils are suffering from “consultation fatigue”. With the snowdrift of consultations, the limited resources available to respond, and the increasing demands from the community, never mind from outside, the temptation is to focus inwards. “*I don't expect they will listen to us anyway, and we'll just deal with whatever comes along*” is the resultant attitude. The danger, of course, is that when there is a consultation that is relevant and meaningful it gets missed.

Northants CALC tries to identify the most relevant and meaningful consultations and normally highlights them in the Friday mini *eUpdates*. The Association will also respond to consultations directly on behalf of parish and town councils, often not responding to the whole consultation, but just picking out the questions that are most relevant. All parish and town councils are encouraged to register with the unitary council Consultation Hubs (<https://westnorthants.citizenspace.com> & <https://northnorthants.citizenspace.com>).

It is a difficult situation. Most parish and town councils just don't have the time to engage in every national, regional, and local consultation, but then when something happens that impacts them, they say “You should have consulted us!”. There is no quick or easy solution, and it often comes down to just doing the best that can be done in the time available. Oh, and strong coffee!

INTERNAL AUDIT – COMMON ISSUES ARISING

Each summer the Northants CALC Internal Audit Service (IAS) has a washup of the audit season just completed and the internal auditors compare notes on the common issues found. Here are some highlights:



Exercise of public rights

Residents have legal rights to inspect, ask questions about, and challenge items in your council's accounts. To facilitate that a single thirty working-day period is set by the council called the "*period for the exercise of public rights*". The period must include the first 10 working days of July. Detailed guidance for the exercise of public rights is available at <https://www.pkf-l.com/services/limited-assurance-regime/useful-information-and-links/>.

All subscriptions and grants being labelled as s137 payments

Section 137 (of the Local Government Act 1972) is a reserve power to do things that a council doesn't have a specific power to do. It is limited in its scope and in the amount of expenditure that can be incurred. Councils should identify specific powers for subscriptions and grants. For example, a grant to the local cricket club for new practice nets would come under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976. There is a list of the available powers in the Good Councillor's Guide (<https://www.northantscalc.com/uploads/the-good-councillors-guide-2018-18.pdf>).

Confusion as to whether the council needs to have signed part 1 and 2 prior to the Internal Auditor signing off the AGAR

It is best practice to have the internal audit visit and report (AIAR) completed **before** approving the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) (i.e. Section 1 of AGAR Part 2 or 3), but it is not a statutory requirement (the AGAR guidance note says 'should' not 'must'). If the date of the AIAR is after the date of the AGS, then the external auditor will simply look at the previous year's AIAR date to ensure that it occurred between 1 April and 31 March of the year under review, thereby providing evidence that there was internal audit provision during the year (as specified in the wording of assertion 6).

Confusion between committees and working groups - do working groups need Terms of Reference

A committee is established under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972. A committee can be advisory, or can have certain functions delegated to it (e.g. commenting on planning applications). Working groups can only be advisory; they cannot discharge a function on behalf of the council. Working groups are normally established for a specific and temporary purpose. All committees, sub-committees, and working groups should have written terms of reference that specify what they are, what they do, and what scope and limits they have.

VAT reclaims if the parish council orders goods on behalf of another parish body and then gifts the item to that body for nothing in return.

In most cases parish councils can recover VAT on items that have been purchased by the council and then gifted to another body. However, it is illegal for a council to use its ability to recover VAT to assist another body to evade tax by purchasing something for that body and then receiving the net amount back from that body. "You buy this for us cos you can reclaim the VAT and we'll give you the net amount" are words that should send a shiver down any RFO's back.

Bank and other financial mandates out of date.

This one is usually on the list in an election year. A council might only have two signatories, and if both retire at the elections it can cause a real headache. Councils should ensure that there are sufficient signatories to maintain the minimum required at all times and should frequently review the list of signatories to make sure it is kept up to date. This applies of course to the council's main bank account, but also to that obscure investment account the council set up 20 years ago and that no one bothered to tell the new clerk about.

Netting Off

There has been an issue over two years of the external auditor requiring councils to net off related receipts and payments, which is counterintuitive. One council received a VAT refund from HMRC, which was intended for a different council and had to be returned (shame!), another received a charge from Eon for maintenance which was then refunded because the streetlights were found to be under warranty. PKF requires these ins and outs to be netted off and councils were given the option of restating or of having a black mark against their audit outcome. Northants CALC has raised the issue with the Joint Panel on Accountability and Governance (JPAG) and has asked for clear guidance to be written.

Non-compliance with the Transparency Codes

Councils with a turnover of less than £25,000 must comply with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities, which demands, for example, ongoing publication of agendas, minutes, and reports, and annual publication of financial and audit information. Councils with a turnover exceeding £200,000 must comply with The Local Government Transparency Code, which has similar but beefed-up requirements. Bizarrely, councils with a turnover between £25,000 and £200,000 have no mandatory transparency code to follow, although it is considered good practice for ALL councils to at least follow the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities. For more about transparency requirements, see <https://www.northantscalc.com/uploads/the-good-councillors-guide-on-finance-and-transparency-digital-19.pdf>.

Annual Parish Meeting and Annual Meeting of the Council Confusion

Will this one ever go away?! The Annual Parish Meeting (APM) is a meeting of the electors in the area. It must be held between 1 March and 1 June. It is not a council meeting. The Annual Meeting (AM) of the Council is a council meeting. It must be held in May (in 2020 only that requirement was relaxed due to the Coronavirus pandemic). The annual meeting (of the council) is where the chairman is elected, as the first item of business on the agenda. Good practice is to hold the APM and AM on different dates to avoid confusion.

Budget/Precept not minuted properly

Councils have a legal duty to prepare a budget, and out of that process falls the precept figure. The process must be thorough and transparent, and the minutes must record the decisions made. The precept amount must be included in the minutes. "*The budget was reviewed and the precept agreed*" is not sufficient. Copies of the budget papers must be published on the council's web site.

Publish, publish, publish

The internal auditor's letter/report to the council and the Annual Internal Auditor's Report page of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) should both be published as soon as possible to the council's web site. (not mandatory but recommended on the page 1 of the AGAR in the Notes). When I mention it, they normally say they were unaware.

Overall, governance and accountability standards were found to be good in the year under review. It's just the old chestnuts that still need working on!

SITUATIONS VACANT

Please see <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies.html> for details of all the below vacancies.

Twywell Parish Council

Twywell is a small parish which lies three miles west of the town of Thrapston, in North Northamptonshire. Twywell Parish Council is one of the smallest in the county with just 167 electors. The precept for 2021/22 is £6,240. The Parish Council now seeks a suitably qualified and experienced parish clerk, although enthusiasm to learn will be an alternative to formal qualifications. Salary will be £14.86/hour, with 3 hours per week required, with the potential for overtime at certain times of the year. To apply for the position or for more information, contact the clerk at clerk@twywellparishcouncil.co.uk. The closing date for applications is Sunday 24 October 2021.

Greatworth Parish Council

Greatworth is a medium sized village approximately 4 miles northwest of Brackley. The parish includes the village of Greatworth and the hamlet of Halse. Greatworth Parish Council has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 10 hours per week. The council has 9 seats and there are 720 electors. The council's precept for 2021/22 is £23,549. The closing date for applications is **1 October 2021**.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Cemetery management always has the potential to cause sensitive and serious issues. Northants CALC has advised over the years on issues such as people being buried in the wrong plot, and on family disputes over exclusive rights of burial. One area that is often contentious is the laying down of headstones where they pose a risk to health and safety. A clerk in Devon has been recently suspended for her part in laying down some headstones following a routine inspection. The clerk was presumably taking steps to protect visitors to the cemetery from harm, but members of the public weren't happy. An investigation is underway, but it appears that the council's policy framework may not be as robust as it might, and that the owners of the headstones (where known) were not informed of the action. Clearly when dealing with such a sensitive matter it is vital that everyone involved is working in accordance with clear, written policy, and that the reasons for any work carried out are transparent and clearly communicated.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Look below for a course or event that may be of interest and make a booking through the Clerk to the Council. All councils must have a training budget from which councillors can book courses under the authority of the clerk. See <https://www.northantscalc.com/events.html> for full course details.

Agendas and Minutes

Wed, 06 Oct 2021 10:00 - Online

Includes preparation of the agenda, what should and should not be included? Publication of the agenda; when and how? Minuting meetings: what should and shouldn't be included in the minutes; the importance of accurate note taking; signing of the minutes; publication of the minutes, when and how; and the policy for preserving Parish/Town Council minutes.

Chairmanship Training

Mon, 11 Oct 2021 18:30 - Online

How to conduct an efficient and effective council meeting. Dealing with disruptive Councillors and/or members of the public. The statutory role of Chairman – and all the other roles you weren't told about when you were elected! How to deal with new legislation affecting meetings. The one secret that will make your meetings better – and shorter! How to build a council that works effectively as a team.

Planning Nuts and Bolts - FULLY BOOKED

Tue, 12 Oct 2021 18:30 - Online

An introductory training session for Parish/Town Councillors and Clerks covering the basic principles of planning including policy, applications, appeals and enforcement. This two-hour session will also include tips on increasing the effectiveness of the responses that Parish and Town Councils send through to local planning authorities and the opportunity to ask questions of an experienced planning consultant who has worked for local Councils, a volume house builder and a planning consultancy.

Using Facebook to enhance your Council's Communications

Thu, 21 Oct 2021 10:00 - Online

Facebook provides town and parish Councils a unique opportunity to significantly enhance their communications – yet few Councils are fully reaping the benefits on offer. Discover how to build up effective two-way conversations with local

communities, make use of time-saving tools and learn techniques to improve digital engagement, all within the constraints of existing Officer time and resources. This course will provide you with strategies, tools and techniques to get the most from your Council's social media presence.

Off to a Flying Start - FULLY BOOKED

Thu, 21 Oct 2021 18:30

This course is designed to help all Clerks and Councillors make an early, effective, and confident start to their careers, by providing quality, constructive and participative training on the roles and responsibilities of Clerks and Councillors.

Social Media Skills for Councillors

Tue, 02 Nov 2021 18:30 - Online

Social media offers Parish and Town Councillors as individually elected members a fantastic opportunity to engage and communicate with their residents. Building up two-way conversations through the power of digital platforms has never been easier, but it can be tricky to get started and to know where to focus your time and effort as an individual Councillor. We walk you through the essential ways to get the most out of key social media platforms as a local Councillor and provide top tips to engage with your residents.

The Code of Conduct in Practice

Wed, 03 Nov 2021 19:00 - Online

Are you aware of your responsibilities as a Councillor under the Code of Conduct? If there was a planning application next door, would you declare an interest? What type of interest? What if the application was down the road but opposite your good friend's house? This course will look at the practical operation of the Code of Conduct at parish and town council level and will answer all your questions as to what interests to declare and when. We will look at how the Standards regime has changed from a rules-based system to a principles-based one and we'll look at what the future might hold.

For more information on any of the courses mentioned above, and to make a booking please see <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events.html>, and if you would be interested in a training session specifically designed and delivered for your council, please contact Marie Reilly on 01327 831482 or email mreilly@northantscalc.com to discuss your requirements.

NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

Danny Moody

Chief Executive

dmoody@northantscalc.com

Twitter: [@ceo_ncalc](https://twitter.com/ceo_ncalc)

Lesley Sambrook Smith

Deputy Chief Executive

lsambrooksmith@northantscalc.com

Twitter: [@deputyceo_ncalc](https://twitter.com/deputyceo_ncalc)

Marie Reilly

Training Manager

mreilly@northantscalc.com

Sophie Harding

Business Support Manager

sharding@northantscalc.com

General enquiries

info@northantscalc.com

Member Enquiry Service (MES)

mes@northantscalc.com

Data Protection Officer Service

dpo@northantscalc.com

Telephone

01327 831482

Address:

Northants CALC
PO Box 7936
Brackley
NN13 9BY

Web:

www.northantscalc.com

