

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

So, that was May and all parish, town, and community councils and parish meetings have held their annual meetings for 2024. Good wishes and good luck to the newly elected or re-elected chairs and mayors across Northamptonshire. Being chair or mayor is a leadership position, and the office holder will have a big impact (good or bad) on the council's year. It is not easy an easy role and it requires a blend of tact, diplomacy, and fortitude. A particular challenge for this year is that it is the last year before the ordinary elections in May 2025, when all councillors retire together. A proportion of councillors (normally around 60 – 70%) will put themselves forward for re-election, but that means that councils will need to promote candidacy at the elections to fill the places left by those not seeking re-election. There is more about the 2025 elections in an article below.

They say a week is a long time in politics, so imagine what can happen in two months! Since the last edition of *eUpdate* was written two months ago, Stephen Mold has been replaced as Police Fire and Crime Commissioner by Danielle Stone, and Cllr Jonathan Nunn has been replaced as Leader of West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) by Cllr Adam Brown. And as I write this edition, we await the outcome of the gross misconduct hearing, scheduled for 28 – 30 May 2024, into allegations of “false valour” against Chief Constable Nick Adderley. It is easy to roll one's eyes and think that it doesn't really matter, but it does. These are key leadership positions within Northamptonshire, and the destabilising effect of scandal, allegations, and unethical behaviour has real and lasting impact. There are things – important things – that Northants CALC has not been able to progress in recent months due to all that's been going on, and we are but a small cog in the public sector machinery of the county. I hope that the new incumbents will stabilise the ship and get it moving in the right direction again.

“... It is easy to roll one's eyes and think that it doesn't really matter, but it does....”

Closer to home – and I cannot believe I am saying this – but the surge of clerk vacancies in the first quarter of 2024 is showing signs of abating. I hope those are not famous last words! Some excellent appointments have been made, with some clerks moving from one council to another, and some new entrants just

embarking on their careers as local government officers. Good luck to all and we are here to support you on your journey. I've always said that a good council has a good chair, a good clerk, and a good team of councillors all pulling in the same direction. When those three ingredients are in place, good things happen.

In early April, Northants CALC deployed Copilot, Microsoft's Artificial Intelligence (AI) system, across all staff. It has already proved worthwhile and beneficial, and some tasks that used to take hours now take seconds. The time saving is going back into learning what Copilot can do and how it works but in time the Association will be even more efficient and effective than ever. There is an article below on recent developments in AI as related to parish and town councils.

The Northants CALC training and development offer is second to none and is nationally recognised, but we never rest on our laurels. In April, we introduced a new event called Lunchtime Lowdown, where we pick a topical subject and provide a detailed but bite-size briefing on it. The events are held online from 1230 to 1330 and cost just £10 for member councils and they are aimed at busy councillors or clerks who might struggle to attend a longer daytime or evening session. If it goes well, we might consider repeating the sessions in the evenings, for those that can never attend daytime events, no matter how short and focused they are. The first Lunchtime Lowdown was on annual meetings, and it was well received by attendees. The next one focuses on casual vacancies and co-option, and takes place on Tuesday 4 June 2024, 1230 – 1330 online. Councils can register online by going to <https://t.ly/3OIC0>.

Last week, the chair, the National Assembly representative, and the Chief Executive of Northants CALC represented Northamptonshire at a meeting of the Federation of East Midlands Associations of Local Councils (FEMALC), which is a grouping of all the county associations in the East Midlands. The meeting explored the bigger issues affecting the sector including councillor recruitment, strategies to address councillor recruitment, workforce challenges and a review of the National Employment Strategy, plus partnership working and collaboration between the sector bodies. It was a very useful meeting and a great opportunity to step back and see the wood, not the trees. The outcomes of the discussions will help steer our work in Northamptonshire and with the National Association.

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

THE 2024/25 PRECEPT

The cost-of-living crisis continues, which exerts downward pressure on councillors' appetite to raise the precept. Conversely, high inflation and the looming shift from principal councils of discretionary services and assets to parish and town councils, exerts upward pressure. Certainly, a council that has increased its precept this year by less than inflation has effectively reduced its spending power at a time when the community might need the council to step up and do more.

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

There are 10,235 local precepting bodies in England. Of these, 8,887 are parish and town councils that have raised a precept for 2024/25. The remainder are mostly parish meetings that have not raised a precept.

In England, parish and town council precepts total £783 million in 2024/25, an increase of 10.6% on 2023/24. It represents 1.9% of the total council tax raised by all local authorities.

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

All the twenty highest-precepting councils have precepts higher than £2 million, compared to thirteen out of twenty last year. In fact, twenty-one councils now top the £2 million mark, with the highest being Taunton Town Council in Somerset, whose precept for 2024/25 is £5,904,630.

Northamptonshire's highest-precepting council, Northampton Town Council (NTC), has fallen out of the top twenty and is now at number twenty-eight with a precept for 2024/25 of £1,811,000.

Note that 18 of the top twenty precepting councils are in unitary authority areas, and for all councils, Band D tax rates are 14.6% higher in unitary authority areas than in three-tier areas (parish/district/county). It is inescapable that parish and

town councils in areas where there are unitary [have to] precept more than those in three-tier areas.

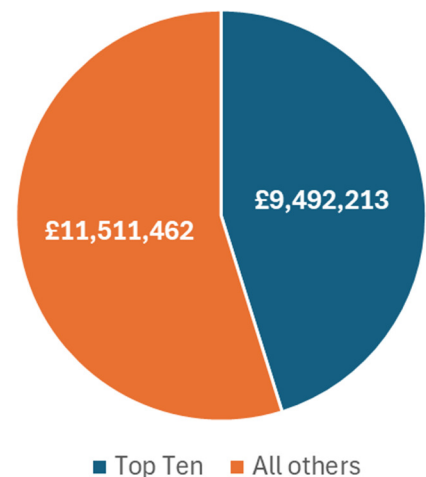
The average Band D tax rate for all precepting councils in England in 2024/25 is £85.89, an increase of £6.76 or 8.5% over the previous year.

In Northamptonshire there are 277 local precepting bodies, but of those 40 are financially inactive parish meetings (zero precept) and other non-council bodies.

The total raised by the 237 precepting bodies for 2024/25 is £21,003,675, an increase of £1,375,085 or 7.0%. The average Band D tax rate for 2023/24 is £86.33, an increase of £4.47 or 5.4%.

The highest precepting council is Northampton Town Council at £1,811,000. It is one of four councils in Northamptonshire in the million-pound club, along with Daventry Town Council, Rushden Town Council, and Brackley Town Council.

As an indication of the diversity of the sector, the top ten precepting councils raise a total of £9,492,213 or 45.2% of the total for all councils. The average Band D tax rate for the top ten councils is £146.40 (compared to the county average of £86.33).



The highest Band D tax rates in Northamptonshire are levied by Oundle Town Council (£249.91) and West Haddon Parish Council (£233.39). There are now 6 councils over £200 Band D and a further 67 over £100.

The lowest precepting body is Catesby Parish Meeting, with a precept of just £90 and a Band D tax rate of just £2.51!

Most precepting bodies in Northamptonshire have a very modest income. 58 councils (24.4%) have a precept of £10,000 or less and a further 65 councils (27.5%) have a precept between £10,001 and £25,000. 74 councils (31.2%) have a precept between £25,001 and £100,000, and just 40 councils (16.9%) have a precept over £100,001.

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

Unitary Area	Precepting Bodies	No Precept	Precept 24/25 (Precept 23/24)	Band D 24/25 (Band D 23/24)
North	96	10	£8,073,364 (7,466,408)	£76.50 (£72.44)
West	141	24	£12,930,311 (£12,162,111)	£93.02 (£88.28)

The figures for the north will increase rapidly over the next ten years as Corby Town Council, Kettering Town Council, Wellingborough Town Council, and the parish councils in the former district of Kettering gradually come into line with county and national averages.

In terms of percentage change in precept the biggest mover was Lutton Parish Council, which increased its precept from £1,000 in 2023/24 to a more realistic £4,400 for 2024/25, an increase of £3,400 or 340%. Lutton's situation illustrates why the government would find it difficult to apply referendum principles to parish and town councils in the way that it does for principal councils. Principal councils were permitted to increase their Band D tax rate by 3.99% this year (excluding adult social care), but if the same figure was used for parish councils, then 131 of the 237 (55%) councils that raised a precept would have needed to hold a referendum before increasing the precept by the amount they did. A precept referendum in Lutton might have cost up to £1,000, meaning that the council would have needed to increase its precept even more! Clearly a fixed percentage figure for referendum principles would make no sense at all for the parish sector, and creating a more complex approach that doesn't create anomalies is probably more trouble than it is worth.

Legally the precept falls out of a calculation of budget requirement. The council should work out its budgeted expenditure, decide whether it wishes to take money from reserves or put money into reserves, and the resulting amount is the precept. It is a process prescribed in law. Given that a council's budget requirement changes from year to year (by inflation if nothing else) it is almost unimaginable that the precept could work out to precisely the same figure from year to year.

Therefore, most of the forty-seven councils in Northamptonshire that set the exact same precept for 2024/25 as they did in 2023/24 almost certainly started from the precept and worked backwards. Six councils took an even more “sophisticated” approach and made sure that the Band D tax rate was the same for 2024/25 as 2023/24, which means taking the Council Tax Base into account in the calculation. Again, this is not part of the process prescribed in law.

If you would like to compare your council against others in Northamptonshire, you will find a spreadsheet of precept, Band D, and Council Tax Base per parish at <https://www.northantscalc.com/precepts-24-25>.

LOCAL ELECTIONS 2025

All parish, town, and community council seats will be up for election on Thursday 1 May 2025, which is now less than a year away. All unitary council seats will also be up for election, which is good news as it means the costs of the elections will be shared between the two tiers of local government in the county.

All councils should aim to have a contested election, i.e. where the number of candidates standing is more than the number of seats available. Only 1 in 5 councils achieved that in 2021 at the last election, which for a sector that is part of democracy is poor. There are all sorts of reasons why councils have uncontested elections, i.e. where the number of candidates standing is the same as or less than the number of seats available. Some of those reasons are outside a council’s control (such as the reduction nationally of people wanting to be formally involved in the running of their communities), but some are very much within the gift of a council to do something about (such as advertising the election and the opportunity for people to join the council).

Each individual council must take responsibility for its own campaign. Therefore, Northants CALC will produce templates, information, and social media assets that member councils can customise and tailor for their own purposes. Northants CALC is putting together a project plan and would ask councils to do the same. Plot out the time between now and 1 May 2025 with all the key milestones along the way (including council meetings) and start thinking about how your council can achieve a contested election in '25. Your public-facing campaign shouldn't start until early January 2025, but there is no time like the present to start planning!

CIVIC NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

In 2021, there was a risk that the essence of “Northamptonshire” might get lost due to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). After the demise of Northamptonshire County Council, there is no longer a local government body responsible for the whole county and people outside the county even ask, “Does Northamptonshire actually still exist?” The answer is a resounding and resolute “Yes!”.



The ceremonial county of Northamptonshire was not affected by LGR, but it is true that there is a need to protect the civic apparatus. Step forward James Saunders Watson, His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Northamptonshire, who in 2022 convened the Northamptonshire Civic Committee to protect and enhance the county's civic heritage and tradition. The committee includes representatives from West Northamptonshire Council (WNC), North Northamptonshire Council (NNC), Northants CALC, Northampton Town Council (NTC), and the Rector of Northampton and it is chaired by the Lord Lieutenant.

At its last meeting on 25 April 2024, it was agreed to establish a Civic Protocol Working Group to write down how civic Northamptonshire will work in the future. The protocol will recognise and define the county's civic heads, make provision for civic events, and seek to codify the entire civic function. Clearly, parish and town councils are vital to the civic heritage of the county, so Danny Moody, Chief Executive of Northants CALC is on the working group to represent the sector. Key to that is understanding the civic role that parish and town councils play and understanding the differences between councils. For example, town councils and their mayors tend to have a higher civic profile than most parish councils, but there are parish councils in Northamptonshire that are much bigger than some town councils, so it is not just about size or naming style. The protocol needs to tease out and provide for all the complex nuances and sensitivities of civic proceedings, which will be no easy task.

Please contact Danny Moody (see back page for details) if you would like to make any representations or suggestions for the consideration of the working group, which meets next on 17 June 2024.

EMPLOYMENT UPDATE

Clerks and other officers working for parish and town councils are employees. Their employment is dependent on local government legislation (notably Section 112 of the Local Government Act 1972) but also the wider law and regulations that pertain to all workers in the UK, notably the Employment Rights Act 1996



(as amended), the Pensions Act 2008, and the Equality Act 2010. Employment law is changing, and councils need to keep up to date to ensure that their clerk and any other staff have the appropriate rights and freedoms and to avoid potential claims of unfair dismissal on grounds of breach of contract.

Following a period of inactivity after Brexit, the government introduced several significant changes to employment law in 2023, which came into force in April 2024. The aim is to make the workplace more employee-friendly and to encourage people back into work after Covid. Here, we look at the key changes and how they affect parish and town councils (we refer to “clerks”, but the changes apply to any and all members of staff).

Employment Rights (Flexible Working) Act 2023

Requests for flexible working have been possible for a while, but the new flexible working laws mean that clerks will be entitled to request flexible working arrangements from the very first day of their employment, rather than after 26 weeks as previously. Flexible working includes the number of hours worked each week, term-time only working, compressed hours, and varied working locations, including home working. Whilst it may be relatively unlikely to happen, a council could advertise a vacancy for, say, 10 hours per week and on the newly appointed clerk’s first day they could submit a request to reduce the hours to 8 hours per week. In a large organisation employing one hundred people such a request may not have a very big impact, but where there is only one employee, as with most parish councils, it could cause significant difficulties.

Under the new rules, before it rejects any request for flexible working arrangements, the council must explain the reasons behind its decision. Previously, councils could deny any request for flexible working without explanation. In addition, councils are now obliged to respond to flexible working requests within two months, compared to three months previously, and clerks are entitled to make two requests for flexible working in any 12-month period, as opposed to one request previously.

Never has there been a greater argument for all parish and town councils to establish an HR committee with delegated authority to deal with such matters.

There are of course grounds for refusal. For example, is the example above where a clerk wishes to reduce from 10 hours to 8, the council could say that it would be unable to recruit another member of staff to provide the other 2 hours. Other reasonable grounds for refusal could include:

- Additional cost to the council.
- Not being able to provide an acceptable service to residents.
- Inability to share work out amongst other staff.
- Impact on a worker's performance.

The council (or HR Committee) must consult with the clerk and there must be a reasonable and meaningful assessment of the evidence. A typical consultation may be conducted over a period of a few weeks, i.e. it cannot be a one-off conversation between the clerk and the chair of the HR Committee. If it can be proven that one or more of the reasons above apply, the request can be rejected. There is a right of appeal, and a clerk could go to Employment Tribunal (ET) if they remain dissatisfied. Previously, a worker would need to have been employed for two or more years to go to ET (unless it was on the grounds of discrimination) whereas the right to flexible working is now a Day One right.

Carer's Leave Act 2023

The Act makes provision for unpaid leave for employees with caring responsibilities. This is also a new Day One right and it applies to anyone caring for a spouse, civil partner, child, parent or other dependant who needs care because of a disability, old age or any illness or injury likely to require at least three months' care.

In addition to reasonable paid time off, a clerk can now request up to one week per year of unpaid leave. The request can be for the whole week in one go or for any combination of days and half days. A council cannot refuse a clerk's request for one-week unpaid carer's leave, but it can negotiate the dates on which the leave is taken if it reasonably considers that the council would be unduly disrupted if it were approved.

Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023

Under the current law, clerks on maternity leave, shared parental leave or adoption leave already have special protection in a redundancy situation. From 6 April 2024, this legislation extends that priority status to pregnant employees and those who have recently returned from maternity or adoption leave and shared parental leave.

A clerk who is pregnant and who takes maternity leave would be protected for 18 months from the child's date of birth if they notify the employer before the end of maternity leave. New fathers taking shared parental leave will also be protected in a redundancy situation for 18 months.

Summary

Clerks are protected under employment law just like any worker is. These new rights provide clerks with greater flexibility and protection. They also impose new duties and responsibilities on councils as employers, and in some cases, it might be challenging for councils to comply. If they haven't already got one, councils are advised to create an HR Committee that can discharge these duties and responsibilities on behalf of the council in a timely and efficient way.

Further changes that have already been enacted in law will be introduced in the autumn and various bodies are calling for yet further extensions to employee rights. The general election and a change of government may accelerate the pace of change.

Northants CALC provided briefings in March and April to member councils on the above changes in partnership with our retained HR Advisor, Chris Moses, from Personnel Advice and Solutions Ltd. If your council needs HR support, please contact Northants CALC and we will help, or put you in direct contact with Chris.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

A year ago, Artificial Intelligence (AI) was a new and exciting concept. Now it is becoming commonplace and, as with all technologies, it is starting to fade into the background and become part of normal, everyday life. You used and benefitted from AI today, and you did yesterday, and will tomorrow. If you have watched TV, been to the shops, or travelled on the roads, then you have interacted with AI even if you didn't realise it at the time.



If you think that AI is “basically just Google but beefed up a bit” or that “AI doesn't know anything; it can only give you what it has found on the Internet” then you have fundamentally misunderstood what AI is. AI is proficient at learning and is capable of originating data (text and images) that did not previously exist.

As mentioned in the Chief's Brief above, Northants CALC deployed Copilot for all staff in April. It sits within our Microsoft tenant and can access certain files and emails and, optionally, it can look for further resources on the web. Nothing that it produces or looks at is communicated or stored outside the organisation, which was one of our first considerations because the Association wants to maintain control of its data security and integrity.

Copilot costs around £30 per month per user, but free generative AI tools may be all that some parish and town councils need to start with, and they certainly provide an opportunity to jump in and see what they can do. The two AIs that are most often cited are ChatGPT (<https://chatgpt.com>) and Google Gemini (<https://gemini.google.com>). Give them a go, but remember that unlike the paid-for Copilot, these free AIs are Internet based, so don't put any personal or proprietary information into them.

The national sector bodies for local government are starting to wake up to the possibilities of AI. For example, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has appointed one of its Management Board as Member with Special Responsibility for AI and Data, and the Local Government Association has set up an AI Network, which has met monthly (online of course) for the past few months since the start of the year. Principal councils are developing all sorts of use cases

for AI, and even West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) announced in April the start of a new project to design a digital service to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) working in partnership with Jadu and Amazon Web Services (AWS).

One of the areas that AI might benefit parish and town councils is in responding to consultations. Consultation documents tend to be lengthy, technical, and complex tomes and one needs a strong constitution and a fair amount of time just to read the thing, let alone analysing it and extracting the issues that might be of greatest concern or interest. Now, you can get AI to do the heavy lifting. For example, we asked Microsoft Copilot to look at the draft West Northamptonshire Local Plan, which is currently out for consultation. We then asked Copilot to *“Identify three issues in the document that would concern a medium sized parish council in West Northamptonshire.”* After whirring round for all of two seconds, its answer was:

“Based on the document "Regulation 18 Local Plan_0 (2).pdf" here are three issues that might concern a medium-sized parish council in West Northamptonshire:

- 1. **Spatial Strategy and Settlement Hierarchy:** The document outlines a spatial strategy for the region and a settlement hierarchy which could affect the development and categorization of different areas within the parish. This could impact local decision-making and future development plans.*
- 2. **Housing Development and Affordable Housing:** The plan includes policies on the scale and distribution of housing development, affordable housing, and housing mix. A parish council might be concerned with how these policies align with the local needs and character of the area.*
- 3. **Infrastructure and Community Facilities:** The document discusses infrastructure delivery and funding, as well as community and sports facilities, open spaces, and allotments. A parish council would likely be interested in how these plans integrate with existing local infrastructure and community resources.*

These issues are based on the contents and sections of the document as provided by the search results. If you have specific concerns or areas of the document you would like to discuss further, please let me know.”

So, all quite helpful and we could have delved further and focused in on the circumstances of a particular village or town. We could also have also asked it to focus on a policy area of particular interest, such as roads, the environment, or self-build housing.

If AI can assist with the often-painful task of responding to consultation, then it is definitely worth having!

The less helpful and darker side of AI is that it can be exploited and manipulated by bad actors. A pressing concern is the abuse of AI to influence elections, and if you want to know more there was a very interesting event held in March by the Institute for Government called “General election: How big a threat is AI and disinformation to elections in 2024?” You can view a video of the event at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/event/threat-ai-disinformation-elections-2024>. So, if you receive a phone call from someone sounding like Rishi Sunak or Kier Starmer asking you for your credit card details for a donation towards their election campaign, you should probably hang up!

LOCAL COUNCIL CLERK WEEK

Local Council Clerk Week (LCCW) 2024 takes place from 10 to 14 June 2024. It is a celebratory week aimed at raising the profile of the role of the clerk and to recognise the work clerks do for their communities. LCCW, which started last year, is an initiative of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), the professional body for clerks and council officers in England and Wales.

All parish and town councils should recognise the work their clerks do, not just during Local Council Clerk Week but throughout the year. LCCW serves as a useful reminder though, so please engage with it, follow it on social media (#LCCW) and help raise the profile of the role in your community.



THE PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

Prime minister Rishi Sunak has announced a general election on 4 July 2024 and, as with all elections, there are complex laws and regulations about the process and timetable to be followed.

Special rules apply to the period before an election takes place to ensure that public money is not used for party political advantage. The timing is not set in law, but the pre-election period started from 00.01 on Saturday 25 May 2024. The days between 25 May 2024 and 4 July 2024 inclusive are officially referred to as the “pre-election period of heightened sensitivity on local authority publicity”.



Some people may refer to the period as “Purdah”. This term is not politically correct and should not be used as it is derived from the Hindi word “parda” meaning “screen” or “veil” and refers to the practice of seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home.

The underlying regulatory framework for the pre-election period is the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, which is issued by the Secretary of State under powers conferred on him under section 4(1) of the Local Government Act 1986 (‘the 1986 Act’). It applies to all local authorities, including parish and town councils. Publicity is defined in section 6(4) of the 1986 Act as “any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or a section of the public”.

The main objective of the pre-election period is to avoid favour to one political party or another. So, parish and town councils, which are constitutionally apolitical (even if party politics are present), can already rest more easily.

Essentially, local authorities must not “*publish any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party*”. The primary restriction is on proactive publicity by a local authority which particularly relates to candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election.

So, what would be an example of something that would breach the pre-election rules? A good example might be a unitary council’s communications department organising a photo shoot for the Conservative Leader of the council to open a new sports centre in the area to go on the front cover of the council’s newsletter and web site. That might be deemed to be using the resources of the authority “*to affect public support for a political party*”.

A member council got in touch with us recently saying “*Obviously we can’t hold our meeting in June because of the pre-election period*”. This is incorrect. The pre-election rules do not apply to the ordinary business activities of the council. Nor do they restrict the perfectly acceptable (and useful!) dissemination of factual, objective information related to the election or to anything else. Furthermore, the rules apply to local authorities, not to individual councillors, who may issue publicity promoting themselves and their party (subject to the relevant rules on such material), as long as they do not use the resources of the local authority.

For parish and town councils the restrictions of the pre-election period for a general election are very, very light. Even for the larger town councils, it is not very likely that they would be producing publicity on matters which are politically controversial, making references to individual party candidates or parties in press releases, or arranging proactive media or events involving political candidates.

It would be wrong to say that parish and town councils do not need to worry about the pre-election period rules at all – the Publicity Code is a statutory instrument after all – but the rules were really designed to prevent a political party using the resources of a council it controlled to bolster its own election chances. They were not designed to stop a parish council publishing its June newsletter, or to stop a parish council inviting its ward councillor to its June meeting (both things that have been subjects of recent enquiries!). There is further information and guidance at www.northantscalc.com/elections, but if you are in any doubt about publicity or an activity that your council has planned for the pre-election period, please contact dmood@northantscalc.com for guidance - and reassurance!

TAKE HIM TO THE PALACE!

Cllr Lorne Murray, Chair of Roade Parish Council, attended the Royal Garden Party on 8 May 2024, hosted by HM King Charles.

Each year, Northants CALC receives two invitations for the garden party, which we allocate to a member of a parish or town council in Northamptonshire and their guest. Guidance from the palace says that *“Nominated guests should be drawn from a diverse range of individuals and organisations. They should recognise excellent contributions in their field, and in public service, voluntary or community work.”* We therefore choose a councillor with long and/or meritorious service to their council.



Lorne said: *“It was a great honour and privilege to represent Northamptonshire Parish and Town councils, and of course Roade, at the Royal Garden Party. Seeing The King, The Princess Royal, Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh, and being introduced to and shaking hands with HM Queen Camilla, was truly unforgettable. I took my mum as my guest to the party, and we had an amazing time, it was an incredible afternoon. My sincere thanks to Danny and NCALC for asking me to be their representative at the Royal Garden Party, a memory I will always cherish.”*

And thank you Lorne, for all you do for your council and community and thanks to all the chairs and mayors and other councillors and staff across the county who makes such excellent contributions to their communities.

There are so many worth recipients of our nomination, so it is a shame that we only receive two invitations each year; we could easily allocate dozens. The Lord Lieutenant also has invitations, and they are not restricted to parish and town councillors, so if you know of a person in your community that fits the criteria above, please consider nominating them. You will find further information at <https://lord-lieutenantnorthamptonshire.co.uk/awards-honours/>.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAY NEGOTIATIONS

The merry dance continues. In mid-May the employers' side of the national local government pay negotiations announced a "full and final" offer for local government workers, including all clerks employed under National Joint Council (NJC) terms and conditions, which is most clerks in England. The offer is:

- An increase of £1,290 (pro rata for part-time employees) to be paid as a consolidated, permanent addition on all NJC pay points 2 to 43 inclusive.
- An increase of 2.50 per cent on all pay points in grades 44 – 62.

The award would be backdated to 1 April 2024.

The offer is in response to the unions' pay claim in February when the three big unions representing local government staff (Unison, Unite, and the GMB) submitted a pay claim for 2024/25 asking for £3,000 or 10% whichever is higher across all Spinal Column Points (SCPs).

Unison responded on 23 May 2024 describing the employer's side offer as "disappointing" and will consult its members with a recommendation that they vote to reject it saying that "Staff have seen the value of their pay plummet, while often being asked to do even more. They provide vital services to their communities..."

The negotiations typically continue well into the autumn, and very occasionally beyond. Northants CALC will keep member councils updated with significant developments.

ELIGIBILITY UPDATE

Those wishing to be elected or co-opted to a parish or town council must satisfy certain eligibility criteria, one of which is nationality. The definition has now been updated following the UK's exit from the European Union. Prior to May 2024 a candidate had to "*be a British citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of any member state of the European Union*". From May 2024 the wording is changed such that a candidate must "*be a British citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen, a qualifying EU citizen or an EU citizen with retained rights*". Councils are advised to update their websites and policies accordingly.

BANKING FOR COUNCILS



Any clerk who has been in post a while knows how difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating it can be to deal with the council's bank. Anecdotally, this appears to especially the case with the traditional high street banks, that normally have no understanding of parish and town councils and their unique characteristics and needs. That's why Northants CALC recommends Unity Trust Bank (UTB), a socially responsible, ethical bank that has taken the time to understand the local council market and develop a banking product and experience that meets the needs of councils and takes away the common "pain points" of banking. And the bank is not resting on its laurels. As UTB celebrates 40 years of helping to create positive social impact across the UK, a new project is underway to review the current proposition offered to parish, town, and community councils.

Listening to feedback from local council clerks, UTB has highlighted the challenges some customers have faced, from account opening stage, through to daily banking issues, including digital banking, flexibility around mandate changes, and more recently, confusion around regulatory changes and information gathering for due diligence (Know Your Customer (KYC) regulations). These are being addressed by a specialist project team, and consultations have begun to identify areas for improvement and future development. UTB is inviting feedback from councils and county associations, and in addition to this, a newly appointed specialist relationship manager for parish and town councils, Sarah Johnson, will be available to assist councils with more complex issues; complementing the existing customer support team, Unity Connect.

Unity has recently added a range of new deposit accounts to its current transactional banking facilities to expand our offering. A new 18-month fixed term deposit account was launched early in 2024 to complement the instant access account and other fixed term deposit accounts already on offer.

If you would like to offer any feedback to the project team as the parish and town council offer is developed, please contact Sarah Johnson at Sarah.johnson@unity.co.uk or see the website at www.unity.co.uk/sectors/parish-councils. Clerks attending the SLCC Annual Conference in October will find UTB exhibiting there, so make sure to say hello!

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

There is nothing more satisfying or rewarding than involving young people in the work of parish and town councils. Whether it is engaging with young people to co-design a facility or service, setting up a youth council, or providing work and volunteer activities within the council, the fresh perspectives, and innovative ideas that young people can bring is positive and energising.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), and One Voice Wales (OVW) are joining forces to host the Youth Engagement Summit. This virtual event for local councils, councillors, clerks and council staff across England and Wales will explore innovative ways to engage and inspire young people. Join the summit to discover how to create meaningful apprenticeship opportunities that equip young individuals with valuable skills and experience, cultivate the next generation of political leaders – learn ways to empower young people in your community to take their rightful place in the political arena, and delve into the intricacies of how young people can influence policy decisions. This event promises to be a transformative experience that will equip you with the tools and knowledge to unlock the full potential of youth influence in policy-making, celebrate the remarkable achievements of young councillors, be inspired by their dedication and leadership and explore how local councils can support and promote the prestigious Duke of Edinburgh Award, fostering personal development and community service among youth.

The Youth Engagement Summit takes place on 18 July 2024 from 1000 to 1600 and costs £65 + VAT. Buy tickets from via the SLCC website (an existing account is required) at <https://www.slcc.co.uk/event/youth-engagement-summit>.

SURVEY OF FORMER COUNCILLORS

We are supporting a request from Sharon Pyke, a locum clerk in the region, who is in the final year of her advanced clerking studies for a BA (Hons) in Community Governance. Sharon's dissertation research is: *Why do parish or town councillors in England resign or choose not to stand for re-election?* If you know any former councillors within your community who may be interested in taking part in this voluntary and confidential survey, please contact them and forward this link: <https://t.ly/4FUUo>. The survey introduction includes additional details about the research and how to contact Sharon.

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY

Would you and/or your council like the opportunity to help shape the plans for nature recovery in Northamptonshire?

A Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) is being developed by North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council as the lead authorities, with the help of local people and representatives living and working in the landscape.

The LNRS will set priorities for nature recovery by identifying habitats and species which are important to conserve and seek opportunities where biodiversity can be increased.



Nene Rivers Trust has been commissioned by the unitary councils to lead the engagement work for the LNRS and it has organised an online workshop specifically for parish and town councils, which will be held on Thursday, 20 June at 4.30pm – 6pm. This workshop is for clerks and representatives who are interested to hear more about Local Nature Recovery plans and help feed into the development of the strategy. Please use the following link to book your attendance: <https://nene-rivers-trust-cio.idloom.events/lnrs-parish-council-workshop>.

If any parish or town council would like Nene Rivers Trust to come and talk directly to them, there is some availability between 17 to 20 June 2024, days and evenings. Please contact info@neneriverstrust.org, including 'LNRS Parish engagement' in the subject line. A workshop (typically 90 minutes) or a short presentation is possible. Please include your preferred dates, time and location.

Parish and town councils in Northamptonshire are encouraged to subscribe to the LNRS e-newsletter for updates about events and progress. This will be published monthly via an e-mail, the first being issued at the end of May 2024.

To learn more about the progress of the strategies in your area, please visit www.northnorthants.gov.uk/lnrs for the North and www.westnorthants.gov.uk/nature for the West, and for additional information and to see how you can get involved, please visit: <https://neneriverstrust.org/lnrs>.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

There have been some high-profile cases recently where internal communications between representatives of public bodies, including HM Government, have been scrutinised. You'll probably remember that 5,000 WhatsApp messages apparently went missing from Boris Johnson's mobile phone at the start of Covid. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is concerned about the use of private messaging systems for official business and any attempts to put messages beyond the easy reach of Freedom of Information requests.

If an email is sent from `cllr_a@parishcouncil.gov.uk` to `cllr_b@parishcouncil.gov.uk` then it is fairly obviously official business (since councillors must never use their council email for anything other than official council business). But supposing Cllr A sends a text message from their private mobile phone to Cllr B's private mobile phone. Is that "official business" and is the message FOIable? The ICO says yes, if the information in the message relates to the business of the council, which depends on the context and content of the information itself. For example, a text message saying "*Hope all's well. What's your score prediction for the Saints match on Saturday?*" probably does not relate to the official business of the council, but a text message saying "*Cllr C is going to propose a new policy at next week's council meeting. We need to derail it. Agree?*" does relate to the official business of the council and would be FOIable. In other words, using unofficial messaging systems does not circumvent the laws on openness and transparency. "*Ah ha...*", I hear you say "*...I just won't tell anyone about the messages, and if the clerk asks me for them, I'll just delete them.*" Well, that would be unlawful too. If a council receives an FOI request for "all communications between Cllr A and Cllr B" and the person handling that request – normally the clerk – reasonably believes that some of the communications are in Cllr A's personal messaging systems, then they have a right to ask for copies. If Cllr A deletes said messages after the request was received to avoid having to disclose them, then that is a criminal offence. The difficulty with "communications" is that there are usually two or more copies (the sender's and the recipient's) so even if Cllr A denies ever sending a message, there is always a risk that Cllr B stitches them up by surfacing their copy.

The message is simple, never use private comms channels for official business. And never put anything official in writing that you wouldn't be happy to see copied and pasted – even in redacted form – into an FOI response.

SITUATIONS VACANT



Roade Parish Council has a vacancy for a full-time Clerk (37 hours per week) at £15.21 - £16.67 per hour. There are 2,587 electors, 13 councillors, and the precept 2024/25 is £132,276. The deadline for applications is 5pm on 21 June 2024.

Newnham Parish Council near Daventry has a vacancy for a clerk. The council has 8 seats and there are

472 electors. The role is permanent part time at 30 hours per month and the precept for 2024/25 is £34,722. The deadline for applications is 31 May 2024.

Full details of all vacancies at <https://www.northantscalc.com/council-vacancies>.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Here is just a selection of courses over the next couple of weeks to bring to your attention:

- **Lunchtime Lowdown - Casual Vacancies and Co-Options**, 4 June 2024 - 12:30
- **Recruiting and Retaining a More Diverse Pool of Councillors**, 4 June 2024 - 13:00
- **Emotional Intelligence and Resilience**, 5 June 2024 - 13:30
- **Communicating with your community Part 1**, 6 June 2024 - 13:00
- **Data Protection and GDPR for Clerks and Officers: Part 1**, 10 June 2024 - 11:30
- **Data Protection for Councillors**, 10 June 2024 - 18:30
- **Cemetery Management and Compliance Day 1**, 11 June 2024 - 09:30
- **Chairperson and Leadership**, 11 June 2024 - 10:00
- **Cemetery Management and Compliance Day 2**, 12 June 2024 - 09:30

See our dedicated web page <https://www.northantscalc.com/training-and-events> for details of these courses and many, many more.

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