

Northants CALC

Strategic Plan

2023 – 2026



April 2023

Executive Summary

The Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC) has adopted a strategic plan for 2023 – 2026 that sets out what the Association intends to do, how it will do it, and what resources will be required.

Events during the previous plan period, notably the Coronavirus global pandemic and the war in Ukraine, neither of which were predicted in the Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023, demonstrate that the Association needs to be resilient, agile, and quick to adapt to changing external factors.

The Association is in a strong position financially, and although there are deficit budgets predicted for the next three years, it is planned and carefully managed. Reserves are very high, and by the end of the plan period will still be much higher than the minimum allowed by policy. The Association has a strong staff time of 3.8 Full Time Equivalents, and this will be maintained throughout the plan period.

The key focus in the plan period will be (re)establishing the relationship between the unitary councils and the parish and town councils in their area. Many elements of the strategic plan hinge on getting this relationship right.

The strategic plan predicts significant change for parish and town councils over the plan period and identifies the threats and opportunities that these changes present. The Association will focus its attention and resources on the issues identified on page 9 - Key Issues for Local Councils 2023 – 2026. How it will do that is set out on the subsequent pages.

The plan was developed with input from the Association's board of directors, all staff, and with feedback and comments from clerks and councillors from member councils. Thanks to all.

Introduction

This document sets out the strategic plan for the Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils Ltd (Northants CALC) for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026.

It provides direction and focus for decision making and a framework within which the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Association is empowered to act.

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

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

- Board Away Day – 16 June 2022
- Various staff meetings – June 2022 to January 2023
- Membership Survey – June/July 2022
- Strategic Plan Review Sessions – September & November 2022, January 2023
- Member council focus sessions – January 2023

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Northamptonshire saw the previous three-tier system replaced with a two-tier system with parish and town councils forming the first tier and two unitary councils: North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) and West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) as of 1 April 2021 forming the second tier. The unitary councils are in a period of stabilisation and transformation. In the Membership Survey 2022, “Working with the unitary councils” was identified by councillors as the biggest challenge facing their council. It is critical that Northants CALC acts as a bridge between the unitary councils and local councils.

A consequence of LGR was the full parishing of Northamptonshire as from 1 April 2021. Six new councils were created in the previously unparished areas of Northampton, Wellingborough, Kettering, and Corby. The Association will work hard to demonstrate value for money to the new councils and ensure that they are all in membership by the end of the plan period. That Northamptonshire is now fully parished (an objective in the previous strategic plan) is a significant advantage because it means that the unitary councils can deliver services through local councils countywide, without having to develop alternative plans for unparished areas.

The previous plan period (2020 – 2023) was dominated by external events, notably the Coronavirus Global Pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. Both events, but particularly the pandemic, had a very significant effect on the Association, requiring it to respond rapidly to a fast-moving operating environment. The Association proved that it is agile and responsive, and in several ways turned challenges into opportunities, including for example a move to remote working where all staff now work from home, and training for local councils is delivered predominantly online. However detailed and well prepared this strategic plan is, it is likely that the Association will continue to be impacted by unplanned external events, and so it is important that it remains agile and financially robust.

At its Away Day in June 2022, the board of directors agreed that 1) cementing the relationship between the unitary councils and local councils and 2) helping local councils to build their capacity were the big ambitions for the plan period 2023 – 2026.

The role played by County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) has become increasingly important following a long period of austerity in public services, the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis that emerged in summer 2022, and the associated devolution of assets and services to local councils.

Local councils must be in a position where they are well-informed, fit for purpose, and resilient. It is important that local councils are in membership of the Association as non-membership puts councils at risk and disadvantage in these respects.

The importance of effective CALCs was recognised in Government research carried out into the features and characteristics of successful CALCs¹ to identify what makes a successful County Association and develop models of and recommendations about good practice. The characteristics identified were:

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

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

There are 38 County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) in England, all of which are independent and autonomous organisations supporting their member councils. Northants CALC is recognised as a progressive and leading CALC and wishes to continue being a beacon of good practice in the sector. In 2022 Northants CALC won the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Star Councils CALC Project of the Year Award for its work on devolution and capacity building.

The Articles of Association set out the framework for corporate governance, constitution, and decision-making structures for Northants CALC.

The services that Northants CALC provides to its members councils are set out in the Member Services & Benefits Booklet (2023), which can be downloaded from <https://www.northantscalc.com/uploads/ncalc-member-benefits-2023.pdf>.

Membership

Northants CALC has achieved virtually full membership. Of the two hundred and twenty local councils in Northamptonshire, there are three small to medium councils (Benefield Parish Council, Woodford Parish Council, and Burton Latimer Town Council), and two large councils (Kettering Town Council and Wellingborough Town Council) that are not currently in membership. This represents a council membership rate of 97.7%.

¹ The Features and Characteristics of Successful County Associations of Local Councils – Commission for Rural Communities July 2007

Decision making

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

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

Monitoring and review

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

- Quarterly monitoring will be by exception, i.e., where there is lack of scheduled progress/activity against actions within the plan, with any proposed remedial actions.
- Annual monitoring will be in the form of a summary report to the board against each action within the plan, and any recommended changes, on the anniversary of the plan’s adoption.
- End of plan monitoring will take the form of a final report to the board against the priorities and actions in the plan.

Danny Moody
Chief Executive, Northants CALC
April 2023

Glossary

The following terms are used in this document:

AMP	Asset Mapping Project (AMP) – Part of the CRF project (see below)
AMS	Association Management Software – Developed as part of the CRF project (see below)
CDF	Councillor Development Framework
CRF	Community Renewal Fund (CRF) – A £285k grant awarded to Northants CALC in 2022 for a one-year project on devolution of assets and services
DPO	Data Protection Officer
IAS	Internal Audit Service
LGR	Local Government Reorganisation
NCALC	Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils (Northants CALC)
NNC	North Northamptonshire Council
WNC	West Northamptonshire Council

Mission Statement, Aims and Objectives

Mission Statement

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

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

Vision

Northants CALC wishes:

- Local councils to be recognised as local authorities serving their communities as the first tier of local government.
- All tiers of local government in Northamptonshire to work in partnership and respect each other's role.
- Local councils to modernise, professionalise, and increase their capacity to be able to make a real difference to people's quality of life.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives listed below link to the Strategic Themes set out on pages 9 – 14.

- To provide an excellent legal and procedural advisory service to local councils (*Theme 3*).
- To provide publications, guidance, and information to local councils (*Theme 3*).
- To provide training for clerks ranging from basic introductory courses to the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) and to promote the continuous professional development of paid staff (*Theme 3*).
- To provide training for councillors on general and specialist subjects and to promote the continuous professional development of elected members via the Councillor Development Framework (CDF) (*Theme 3*).
- To encourage and develop partnership working so that the two tiers of local government in Northamptonshire work well together (*Theme 4 & 5*).
- To provide an Internal Audit Service (IAS) for local councils (*Theme 3*).

- To ensure that all local councils are developing their governance standards and improving community engagement (*Theme 3 & 4*).
- To cascade and disseminate national, regional, and local information to member local councils. To hold, update and manage the master list of local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 3*).
- To respond to consultations, either as an individual organisation or on behalf of local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 3 & 4*).
- To participate in conferences, events, networks, and meetings as appropriate and be a strong advocate for local councils in Northamptonshire (*Theme 4 & 5*).
- To act as the conduit between local councils in Northamptonshire and the National Association of Local Councils (*Theme 5*).
- To encourage candidacy at local council elections and encourage and promote vibrant and healthy local democracy where people feel they can influence decisions in the areas they live (*Theme 4*).

Organisation

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

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

More than 97% of the 220 parish and town councils in Northamptonshire are in membership. The members range from the smallest of parish meetings with less than one hundred electors to the largest town councils with tens of thousands of electors.

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

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Key Issues for Local Councils 2023 - 2026

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

Issue	Detail
Working with the Unitary Councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop Engagement Strategies ▪ Charter for Working Together ▪ Identify and develop key officer contacts ▪ Communications, including briefings and forums
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Actions to combat climate change ▪ Provision of Electric Vehicle Charging Points ▪ Development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies ▪ Reduce energy consumption and cost
Devolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preparing and developing an evidence base (AMP) ▪ Identify unitary councils' Statement of Intent ▪ Asset Transfer policy & process
Local Government Boundary Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review of principal councils ▪ Area-wide Community Governance Reviews (CGRs)
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development of new Local Plans (Part I and Part II) ▪ Promote Neighbourhood Planning and promote review of existing plans ▪ Developing planning policy ▪ Establish Planning Partnerships
Highways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implementation of new Highways contracts ▪ (Re)Establish Parish Highways Rep Scheme ▪ (Re)Establish Parish Paths Warden Scheme
Civic Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coronation of King Charles III ▪ Bridges Plans ▪ Civic Northamptonshire
Civility & Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Addressing incidences of bullying and harassment ▪ Creating conflict resilience ▪ Improving governance standards
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rural bus services ▪ Demand Responsive Transport ▪ Modal shift / Active Travel

Strategic Theme 1 – Funding

Priorities: High % of Local Councils in membership; fair and sustainable membership rates; successful applications/negotiations for external funding; Increasing self-generated income; providing value for money.

What?	How?	When?	Resources	Comments
Member retention	Determine satisfaction levels through bi-annual member survey. Ensure member services are fit for purpose and represent good value for money.	Q1/2 2024	Officer time	Survey to be completed and outcome reported to board in September 2024.
Member recruitment	Encourage the (5) non-member councils into membership by demonstrating purpose and value for money.	Ongoing	Officer time	Develop Individual Recruitment Plans (IRPs) for each non-member council.
Maximise income from paid for services (training and audit)	Continue to increase training throughput and number of courses. Continue to market IAS and DPO to non-users.	Ongoing	Officer time	Develop improved data collection and analysis capabilities to enable gaps in market to be identified.
Maximise return on reserves and investments	Keep investment strategy under review.	December 2023	Officer time	Reserves currently invested in the Local Authority Property Fund.
Seek and apply for grant funding	Keep a look out for opportunities for 100% grant-funded project work.	Ongoing	Officer time	Grant funding must cover all overheads of delivering project.
Budget management	Produce quarterly and annual budget monitoring reports and bring forward plans to manage the planned deficit budgets 2023 – 2026	Quarterly	Officer time	External funding and maximised membership will assist in managing the planned deficit budgets.

Strategic Theme 2 – Staff

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

What?	How?	When?	Resources	Comments
Maintain permanent contracted staff at agreed levels	Continued allocation from budget and development of succession plan and business continuity plan.	Ongoing	Core budget	Current staff establishment is 3.8 Full Time Equivalents, and this should be maintained as a minimum.
Support and train staff to aid retention and ongoing professional development to support delivery of strategic aims	Continuous Professional Development (CPD) agreed through appraisal process.	Ongoing (annual appraisal)	Core budget or CPD Scheme	Training, conferences, and events at discretion of CEO within budget.
Explore opportunities for fully-funded project officers, e.g. for Devolution or Health & Wellbeing	Demonstrate to the unitary councils the value of dedicated officers hosted by Northants CALC.	Ongoing	Staff time. Director time	The Essex ALC had a Health & Wellbeing Officer funded by Essex Public Health.

Strategic Theme 3 – Services

Areas of activity: high quality support to members (engagement, dissemination, and communication); strong networks and partnerships; high quality training; additional ‘paid-for’ services.

What	How	When	Resources	Comments
Generic/basic advice	Continue to operate the Member Enquiry Service (MES).	Ongoing	Volunteer advisors/management overhead	MES has been a volunteer-delivered service since 2014/15.
Non-generic/complex advice	CEO and DCEO to continue to provide timely advice and guidance.	Ongoing	Officer time	Need to ensure appropriate allocation
Legal advice	Partnership with Wellers Hedleys for legal support.	Ongoing	Officer time	Partnership to continue, subject to review in 2024.
Training	Review and develop training programme and increase throughput.	Ongoing	Officer time / training team	Training programme recognised as one of the best in the country.
Internal Audit	Continue to operate IAS, encouraging take up from non-users.	Ongoing	Officer time/auditor team	Service well-established. Used by approx. 75% of members.
Information and guidance	Continue to provide timely, accurate and concise information to member councils.	Ongoing	Officer time	<i>eUpdate</i> is the flagship publication, supported with weekly <i>mini eUpdate</i> briefings.

Association Management System (AMS).	Develop AMS software purchased in 2022	Ongoing	Officer time/core budget	AMS needs to be fully implemented and rolled out to member councils.
Promote local council elections and encourage candidacy	Provide support to councils with elections or by-elections.	Ongoing	Officer time	Ordinary elections scheduled for May 2025.

Strategic Theme 4 – Leadership

Priorities: Strong board of directors, Effective representation of local councils, Strong lobbying and influencing on behalf of local councils, Promotion of local councils, including the creation of new local councils.

What	How	When	Resources	Comments
A strong and fit for purpose board of directors	Ensure joiners receive induction training and provide refresher to existing directors as requested.	Ongoing	Director time/Officer time	
Represent local councils on issues of common interest	Respond to local and national consultations as appropriate, ensuring member councils have an opportunity to feed their views into responses. Make representations to NALC on issues of concern to member councils.	Ongoing	Officer time	
Advocate role of local councils in delivering social, economic, and environmental wellbeing	Use every opportunity to promote the sector in a realistic and evidence-based way.	Ongoing	Director time/Officer time	Every external contact provides an opportunity.
Board Away Day	Annual event to review progress against aims and objectives and to think creatively.	Annual (June)	Director time/Officer time	Held off-premises to encourage innovation.
Environment	Finalise, implement, and share Carbon Plan.	2023	Officer time	Very low carbon footprint. Plan in place to mitigate remainder.

Strategic Theme 5 – Partnerships

Priorities: Strong relationship and positive engagement with key partners (e.g. Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), National Association of Local Councils (NALC), Federation of East Midlands Associations of Local Councils (FEMALC), CALCs, principal councils, Northants ACRE, Voluntary sector, Police), Delivery of joint projects and events with appropriate partners.

What	How	When	Resources	Comments
Build and maintain strong relationship with public sector bodies in Northamptonshire	Continue to work with unitary councils, police, and NHS on issues of relevance to member councils	Ongoing	Officer time	Significant engagement opportunities exist post LGR.
Build and maintain strong relationship with educational bodies in Northamptonshire	Continue working with the University of Northampton to explore the role of local councils in delivering the University's Changemaker Challenge	Ongoing	Officer time	
Build and maintain strong relationships with local council sector bodies	Continue to work with NALC, CALCs and the SLCC on issues of relevance to member councils.	Ongoing	Officer time	CEO currently chair of the County Officers' Forum (COF).
Build and maintain strong relationships with private sector partners	Continue to work with P & D Solutions (retained HR), 2 Commune (web site), Wellers Hedleys (Legal), Came & Co and BHIB (insurance), Unity Trust (banking), and CUS (energy supply) on strategic commercial relationships	Ongoing	Officer time	Opportunity to increase income from sponsorship whilst bringing useful services to the attention of member councils.

Key Performance Indicators

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

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

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

Factor	As measured by
Satisfied member councils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Biennial member survey ▪ Complaints received
Satisfied Association staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Retention/attrition rates ▪ CPD record ▪ Appraisal outcome
Reputation of Association with external bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anecdotal evidence ▪ Awards and prizes ▪ Invitations to participate
Member councils that are improving/developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No. of councils that have two-thirds elected councillors and a qualified clerk. ▪ No. of councils taking up training places ▪ External audit performance

Key Projects - 2023/2024

Key Project	Tasks
Local Councils Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Define aspects of capacity ▪ Determine how to objectively measure each aspect ▪ Develop action plans for increasing capacity in each aspect
Unitary Council Relationship Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify key contacts ▪ Leverage use of social media to increase profile ▪ Develop Parish Liaison Function ▪ Establish and maintain Operational Focus Groups for planning and highways ▪ Establish 80:20 focus groups ▪ Establish robust S106/CIL provision
Association Management Software (JAMS) Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transfer all data into JAMS ▪ Develop front end (web site and portal) ▪ Transfer all marketing functions into JAMS and cease use of Mailchimp ▪ Roll out JAMS to pilot group of councils

Budget Commentary 2023 – 2026

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

Inflation rates in 2022 and 2023 were high but are expected to come down to 2 – 3% by 2024. Inflation is a factor in the 2023/24 budget but is manageable.

The biggest issue in the plan period is managing the planned deficit budgets. The Association's policy is to keep £60,000 in reserve, and the predicted reserve at the start of the plan period (1 April 2023) is £250,421. This reserve has been built up through several years of increasing income from, e.g., new councils created in 2020 and 2021 and from training, and reducing expenditure, e.g., by not having an office premises. A combination of increasing income from services and reducing costs, coupled with the one-off opportunities to make income from Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and from the Community Renewal Fund (CRF) project puts the Association in a good position for the next three years at least.

The CRF project was funded by a one-off grant of £285k from the UK government awarded in December 2021. The project had to be concluded by 31 December 2022. Half of the grant was dispersed to member parish and town councils. A proportion of the grant covered the staff time on the project, which was a significant percentage of total staff time in 2022.

Deficit budgets in the order of £50k per year are predicted for each of the three plan years. This would reduce the reserves at the end of the plan period (31 March 2026) to £90,046, which is still a very healthy position. Clearly deficit budgets are not sustainable forever, so opportunities to increase income or to improve efficiency are continually sought.

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

Northants CALC Budget For Year Ending 31 March 2024 to Year Ending 31 March 2026

	Budget	Actual	Budget	Predicted Actual	Budget		Budget		Budget	
	31 March 2022	31 March 2022	31 March 2023	31 March 2023	31 March 2024		31 March 2025		31 March 2026	
Income										
Membership Subscriptions	160,101	160,253	149,170	149,604	164,992	10.3%	174,062	5.5%	183,404	5.4%
Training	30,000	48,481	45,000	40,000	42,000	5.0%	44,100	5.0%	46,305	5.0%
CRF Grant	-	54,057	219,385	219,385	-	-	-	-	-	-
Interest	1,000	869	1,000	1,000	1,100	10.0%	1,200	9.1%	1,200	0.0%
DPO Council Fees	1,840	1,900	1,900	1,860	1,860	0.0%	1,880	1.1%	1,900	1.1%
IAS Council Fees	45,685	41,623	48,720	50,770	52,795	4.0%	55,435	5.0%	58,206	5.0%
Project Sales		68,471								
Misc income	4,000	3,075	3,000	6,000	3,000	-50.0%	3,000	0.0%	3,000	0.0%
	242,626	378,729	468,175	468,619	265,747	-43.3%	279,677	5.2%	294,015	5.1%
Expenditure										
Staff Costs	131,463	161,059	166,964	180,000	195,840	8.8%	205,632	5.0%	215,914	5.0%
Staff CPD			-	-	8,103	-	8,508	5.0%	8,934	5.0%
Insurance	901	1,363	1,500	1,500	1,650	10.0%	1,733	5.0%	1,819	5.0%
NALC Affiliation Fee	32,623	32,688	29,063	29,063	30,935	6.4%	31,863	3.0%	32,819	3.0%
IAS Auditor Fees	26,448	30,057	32,477	33,132	35,617	7.5%	38,288	7.5%	41,160	7.5%
Training costs	7,000	11,840	14,000	7,950	15,000	88.7%	16,000	6.7%	17,000	6.3%
Travel - Staff	2,000	1,021	1,500	2,600	1,750	-32.7%	2,000	14.3%	2,250	12.5%
Travel - Directors	500	104	300	350	400	14.3%	500	25.0%	600	20.0%
County/National Events	1,000	1,743	7,500	6,000	2,000	-66.7%	2,500	25.0%	3,000	20.0%
Office Admin	11,000	10,808	11,000	12,000	12,000	0.0%	13,000	8.3%	14,000	7.7%
Projects	28,725	45,476	10,000	2,500	10,000	300.0%	10,000	0.0%	10,000	0.0%
CRF Expenses	-	125,874	75,000	57,850						
Loss on Investments		(3,926)								
Contingency	3,000	-	3,000	500	3,000	-	3,000	0.0%	3,000	0.0%
	244,660	418,107	352,304	333,445	316,295	-5.1%	333,024	5.3%	350,495	5.2%
Surplus / Deficit	-2,034	-39,378	115,871	135,174	-50,548	-137.4%	-53,347	5.5%	-56,480	5.9%
Reserves		115,247	231,118	250,421	199,873	-20.2%	146,526	-26.7%	90,046	-38.5%