

Update

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THE CHIEF'S BRIEF

By Danny Moody, Chief Executive, Northants CALC

The political landscape in Northamptonshire and nationally looks radically different following the general election. There are seven parliamentary constituencies in Northamptonshire, and we started 2024 with all seven being held by the Conservatives. Now, just two constituencies have Conservative MPs, and the remainder are Labour. We don't yet know what the effect of the Labour victory will be on parish and town councils, but there will be an effect. There will be an effect on national policy, and we have already seen big announcements on the reintroduction of house-building targets and a promotion of devolution deals. There will also be an effect locally in terms of the dynamics between the mostly-Labour MPs and the Conservative controlled unitary councils, particularly as the countdown to the local elections in May 2025 begins.

Lobbying and representation is an important element of what Northants CALC does, so immediately following the general election we reached out to all the new MPs to establish contact and start to build relationships. Two have responded so far (Mike Reader and Lee Barron, both Labour). We have invited all Northamptonshire MPs to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Star Councils Awards Parliamentary Reception to be held in February 2025 and we hope to see them all there. Our lobbying and representation work locally is supported by NALC and there is a post-election interview below with the NALC Chief Executive and sector influencer, Jonathan Owen.

“...We don't yet know what the effect of the Labour victory will be on parish and town councils, but there will be an effect...”

The fun of the general election was on top of business as usual at Northants CALC and we've certainly had a busy couple of months. On 5 June we held a workshop at Moulton Community Centre (thanks to Moulton Parish Council!) focused on the important and growing role of parish and town councils in health and wellbeing. The workshops were part of some ongoing research we have been doing in recent years with Exeter University and we were delighted to host two professors who travelled all the way from Cornwall to facilitate. For the morning session we had the clerks of eight councils in West Northamptonshire that have led the way on health and wellbeing activities, and in

the afternoon session we had officers from West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) from the Place, Communities, and Public Health teams. Each session was useful in its own right, but the contrast between the sessions was particularly insightful. There is much to do to ensure that the vision, values, and approach of the two tiers of local government is better aligned. We will soon be issuing a full report and a follow-on survey for all councils.

On 14 June, I attended Merged Futures 6 held at the University of Northampton. This now-annual event was the brainchild of Richard Beards, Innovation Manager at WNC, and it showcases all the companies and organisations in Northamptonshire who are pushing the boundaries of technology. Innovations you might see at Merged Futures one year, will likely be mainstream over the next decade. I was particularly interested to see applications for Virtual Reality (VR) in adult social care and for children with special educational needs (see <https://vrtherapies.co.uk/> if you want to know more!) as well as the use of VR and Augmented Reality (AR) to help promote tourism. Parish and town councils that have significant tourist assets are missing a trick if they haven't already started exploring VR and AR.

Another now-annual event in June was our Police Liaison Representative (PLR) Annual Conference and the timing of this year's conference made it the perfect opportunity for PLRs to meet the new Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner for Northamptonshire, Dannielle Stone, who was elected in May. The event was extremely successful and was well supported by staff from the Office of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) and senior officers from Northamptonshire Police, including Deputy Chief Constable, Ashley Tuckley. After hearing from the Commissioner, the PLRs went into breakout rooms and discussed topics ranging from communications between PLRs and the police, the availability of crime statistics, and the pros and cons of uniformed police officer attendance at parish and town council meetings. The output from the discussions will be used to make improvements and the Commissioner and the police are very keen to work with PLRs and their parish and town councils. A full report on the conference was sent to all PLRs for dissemination to their councils.

Another excellent event recently was the latest Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP) meeting, held on 18 July. The NLCP brings together the thirty largest parish and town councils in the county who between them represent nearly 80% of the county's population. This meeting focused on localism and place-

shaping and the potential transfer of assets and services from the unitary councils to parish and town councils. Whilst there are no plans currently for such transfers, one only has to read the local government press (or past editions of *eUpdate!*) to know that it's coming sooner or later. Our guest speaker was Tony Blake from consultancy firm Shared Intelligence, who wrote the book, literally, on the topic. Tony said that early dialogue, preparation, and leadership are essential elements if vital community assets and services are to be protected. There is a report on the event at www.northantscalc.com/events/nlcp, which should make interesting reading for all parish and town councils in Northamptonshire, regardless of size.

Of course, our bread and butter at Northants CALC is providing an excellent advice and guidance service to member councils, usually by email or phone. No matter how many events we organise or attend, the focus always is being there for member councils when they need us. It's a bit like the AA or RAC: yes, you want them to lobby government on behalf of drivers on things like petrol prices and the state of the roads, but ultimately you pay your membership for the breakdown service and seeing that van pull up behind you on the road when you are in need. Whilst we don't (yet!) have a big yellow van with flashing lights, we do try to be there for our member councils when needed. Most of the time it is a simple problem, and we can get you back underway in no time at all. Other times it is a catastrophic breakdown, and various parts need to be replaced! One such council recently was travelling along with no problems at all until something suddenly went clonk and black smoke started billowing out of the engine. That's when you need us most. That's when we will be there for you, in our metaphorical yellow van!

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

SAVE THE DATE

The 77th Northants CALC Annual Conference & AGM will take place on Saturday 5 October 2024, 1000 to 1300 (Refreshments on arrival from 0915) at Moulton Community Centre, Moulton. Formal invitations will be sent to all member councils in early August.



THANKS, AND BEST WISHES

Northants CALC is a small organisation with just four permanent members of staff, but the whole operation involves a much wider group of people. There are eight directors and a president (all unremunerated), four clerks who volunteer to look after our Member Enquiry Service (MES), and a team of twelve auditors working on a self-employed basis through our Internal Audit Service (IAS) who between them provide internal audit to over one hundred and eighty councils in Northamptonshire.

Three stalwart supporters have hung up their boots in the last month whose service should be noted.

Firstly, Tina Charteress, who joined the MES team in 2021 and whose infectious positivity and enthusiasm for parish and town councils has shone through always. Tina has just retired as Clerk to Wootton Parish Council and is hoping to spend more time in the garden and travelling, although she is also a councillor and an internal auditor, so she won't be leaving the sector just yet.



Tina receiving her flowers from the staff at Northants CALC to say thank you for a job well done.

Secondly, Di Issacs and David Harries, who are retiring from the IAS team having completed no less than twenty-four audit years each. The IAS was created by Northants CALC in 2000. It was an innovation at the time, which responded to the need for parish and town councils to appoint a competent and independent internal auditor. Now, around a quarter of County Associations have copied the IAS and provide a similar service in their areas. Di and David were original members of the team and had a great deal of sector experience between them; Di as Clerk to Towcester Town Council and David as a parish councillor in Bugbrooke and principal councillor in South Northamptonshire. It is fair to say that the internal audit regime has changed a lot since 2000 and it is a credit to Di and David that they have kept their skills and expertise updated along the way. I am sure that the dozens and dozens of councils across Northamptonshire that have been audited by Di and/or David and who have benefited from their pragmatism and wisdom would join us in a vote of thanks and all best wishes for the future.

THE VIEW FROM LONDON

Northants CALC is one of forty-three County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) in England. Each one is independent and autonomous, but the CALC network is affiliated to and works closely with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) based in Bloomsbury in London. Following the general election and the change of government, we interviewed Dr Jonathan Owen (pictured right), Chief Executive of NALC, to find out what his vision is for the future of parish and town councils.



Q: Can you tell us about your journey to becoming the Chief Executive of NALC in 2014? What initially drew you to this role?

A: *I worked in large principal councils, often developing arrangements to engage with communities. My experience was that the best relationships were through parish and town councils rather than complicated and undemocratic neighbourhood arrangements. So, when the opportunity arose to join NALC ten years ago, I jumped at it!*

Q: NALC represents a vast network of parish and town councils across England. Could you elaborate on the unique challenges and rewards of advocating for such a diverse group?

A: *10,000 vastly different councils, 100000 highly individual councillors and 43 unique county associations is an intoxicating mix. They are all rooted in distinctive local places and passionate for those communities too. Developing simple messages to encapsulate those diverging views is not straightforward. I'm pleased NALC has developed mechanisms through its committees, networks and county associations to develop robust policy positions and advocate them on the sector's behalf.*

Q: Looking ahead, what are some of NALC's key priorities in supporting parish and town councils in the coming years?

A: *Getting the message across that parish and town councils are the first tier of elected local government. They have immense potential and can help address many of the big challenges facing the country.*

Encouraging more people from all backgrounds to get involved, stand for election, and make a difference to their communities.

Working with county associations, the society of local council clerks and others to build capacity in the sector. Qualified employees, trained councillors, effective processes, and sound finances. All working together with civility and respect.

Q: Devolution is a growing issue (see Somerset!). How can NALC ensure parish and town councils have a strong voice in these discussions and contribute effectively to local decision-making and place-shaping?

A: *NALC is working with the Local Government Association (LGA) to ensure councils' roles in devolution are appreciated and that they are given support from principal authorities to fulfil those roles in a timely and efficient manner. The recommendations developed with the LGA in their 2021 report, Local Service Delivery and Place Shaping remains relevant. Many counties, districts and unitaries are developing charters too which will help.*

Q: Local councils play a vital role in addressing issues like climate change and health and well-being. How does NALC support councils in tackling these challenges?

A: *At one level NALC is helping by saying to councils that they do have a part to play in these "wicked issues." Our sector has consistently demonstrated its relevance to tackling the problems of the day – whatever they might have been - over its 130-year history. Tackling these challenges are what matters now, and NALC is working to persuade other bodies – government, health, police, climate organisations and others that the sector has a part to play. In addition, with county associations we have a wealth of day-to-day support through networks to share good practice, inspirational monthly events, and resources on our website on*

climate change, health and wellbeing, young people, community safety and planning.

Q: What are NALC's key asks of the new government following the general election?

A: *Recognise our role and potential and invest in building the sector's capacity. Devolve to towns, villages and communities, not just metro mayors. And allow our councils to bid for national grants direct such as the community ownership fund. Commit to and enhance neighbourhood planning so that local councils can pursue housing growth and regeneration. Include the sector in the government's drive to improve standards in public life. Let local people decide how their local councils should meet. Oh, and parish the whole of England and bring the rules and laws impacting on us up to date!*

The Future of Local Councils

Q: Technology is rapidly evolving. How can parish and town councils leverage technology to better serve their communities?

A: *This is an area where the sector's diversity is particularly challenging, there is probably no one size fits all solution.*

“...the sector's legitimacy is its democratic mandate and getting residents to become local leaders representing their communities...”

For the largest councils, AI and other modern technologies will help them run services more efficiently.

For the smallest there may be extra more focussed support for part-time clerks. I'd like to see a digital AGAR form. And all councils to have a .gov domain and e-mail address and a professional, accessible website.

But technology isn't everything. At the end of the day the sector's legitimacy is its democratic mandate and getting residents to become local leaders representing their communities. I'm not sure AI will impact on that, though more efficient meetings, digital engagement with residents and on-line training may help.

Q: What are your thoughts on the potential for increased collaboration between parish and town councils, and perhaps even clustering/grouping, to enhance service delivery?

A: *We live in complicated times with complex challenges – climate change, local government and public sector funding crisis, inequality, health and wellbeing. They can only be solved by tiers of government and public sector working together. That partnership working applies to local councils too. Small councils coming together to build dementia friendly communities for example. Or larger councils providing “hub-support” on transport, leisure, and other facilities.*

Q: Attracting and retaining talented councillors is crucial. What initiatives is NALC undertaking to encourage greater participation in local government at this level?

A: *We are working with the Local Government Association to attract more people from diverse backgrounds to stand for election including through our own Make a Change campaign. With county associations we are providing resources to enable councillors to do their bit well – including training, the national accreditation scheme and events and case studies. Promoting civility and respect and the highest standards of public life play their part too.*

Looking Ahead & Personal Reflection

Q: Post the general election, what are your hopes for the future of parish and town councils in England?

A: *We have every reason to be extremely positive. Our councils can help deliver many aspects of the new government’s priorities and strengthen community resilience. If we can promote good standards, demonstrate sound governance, and strengthen our democratic mandate then I am sure our future will be secure.*

Q: On a personal note, what are some of the most rewarding aspects of leading NALC and advocating for local councils?

A: *Whilst a lot of what I do is at a national level, the real reward is seeing so many remarkable things being done by amazing councillors and clerks for their local communities.*

Q: Since you became CEO in 2014, what three things are you most proud of?

A: *Modernising some aspects of NALC and building better relationships with county associations through fortnightly Teams meetings. Persuading previous governments not to impose referendum principles or capping on the sector. Setting up the Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments (SAAA) to procure external audit and assurance for all councils.*

Q: What personal message would you like to send to parish and town councillors in Northamptonshire?

A: *Thank you. For the work you do for your communities and for stepping forward. Thank you too for getting involved in the work of your county association and NALC. And one ask: get to know your new MP, tell them about the brilliant work your council does and why local (parish and town) councils should be recognised, supported, and celebrated as the first tier of government.*

We are grateful to Jonathan for agreeing to take part in the interview and it is always interesting to hear the view from the centre. Whatever the future holds, we know that it will be better with strong sector leadership and representation both locally and nationally.

ENTITLED TO WORK?

Does your council have and hold evidence of each employees' entitlement to work in the UK, regardless of their national origins? It is a legal obligation for all employers, including parish and town councils, to check their employees' passport, birth certificate or settled status details. Passports or birth certificates must be photocopied in front of the employee and handed back to them straight away; the council cannot retain the original documents.

This requirement applies to all parish and town councils and all staff, regardless of their length of service with the council and regardless of their ethnicity. Failure to conduct these checks can result in the council being prosecuted.

For further information and guidance please see <https://www.gov.uk/check-job-applicant-right-to-work>.

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.

Due to retirement, the board is looking for high-quality individuals 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 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 0900 on Monday 16 September 2024.**

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 councillors from medium and larger councils.

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

www.northantscalc.com

The logo for Northants CALC, featuring the letters 'NCALC' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'N' is green, and the 'CALC' is blue. A green horizontal line is positioned below the 'CALC' portion of the text.

STAR COUNCILS 2024

Northants CALC is pleased to announce that it will be supporting the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Star Council Awards once again this year to celebrate the hard work and dedication of the parish and town council sector.



The Star Council Awards are the only awards programme in England specifically designed to acknowledge the impact and contribution of parish and town councils in their communities. The awards are open to all parish and town councils, councillors and clerks.

Entrants can apply for five award categories:

- Council of the Year
- Councillor of the Year
- Young Councillor of the Year
- Clerk of the Year
- Climate Response of the Year **NEW**

This year, NALC has introduced a new award dedicated to climate response. This award will recognise the proactive efforts of councils in addressing climate change, emphasising the importance of their role in mitigating impacts, adapting to new conditions, and building resilience for both people and nature. By highlighting successful long-term strategies and community engagement, it aims to inspire other councils to take similar actions for a sustainable future.

The nomination period ends on 6 September 2024, and the winners will be announced at a ceremony in the House of Lords in February 2025, where they will be presented with their awards.

We would like lots of nominations from Northamptonshire this year and hopefully some winners too! Please visit www.nalc.gov.uk/starcouncilawards for more information and details on how to submit a nomination.

AUDITS 2024 – COMMON ISSUES ARISING

After completing another audit season and putting the year ending 31 March 2024 to bed, our team of intrepid auditors met recently to share common issues arising during the 2024 audit work. Most councils have very good standards of governance and accountability, and the gradual improvement seen in recent years has continued. It should also be noted that due to the support and guidance provided by the Internal Audit Service (IAS) and the training and advice provided by the Association generally, governance and accountability standards in Northamptonshire are demonstrably higher than in some other English counties.

There is always room for improvement though and below are some of the common issues, including one or two “old chestnuts” that seem to be ever-present in this annual roundup!

- 1. The period for the exercise of public rights** – If a council had financial transactions in the year, it **must** arrange for the exercise of public rights to inspect the accounting records irrespective of whether it is claiming exemption from an external audit review and councils **must** give public assurance in Assertion 4 of the Annual Governance Statement (AGS) that this has been done in accordance with statutory requirements. The assurance refers to the arrangements during the year in question, so for YE 31 March 2024 the assurance relates to the exercise of public rights for YE 31 March 2023, which will have happened (hopefully!) around July 2023. A council must inform the electorate of a single period of 30 working days during which public rights may be exercised, by publishing the relevant Notice and Sections 1 & 2 of the approved AGAR at least the day **before** the period for public rights commences. The Notice must not be dated the same date as the first day of the 30 working days and the inspection period **must** include the first 10 working days of July. So, for the exercise of public rights in 2024 (related to the accounts for YE 31 March 2024) the common period was 1 to 12 July 2024 inclusive. In practice this means the earliest the inspection dates could have been was between Monday 3 June and Friday 12 July 2024 and the latest dates were between Monday 1 July and Friday 9 August 2024. If the period does not comply with the requirements above then the external auditor, PKF Littlejohn, **will** raise an adverse audit opinion. The common issues were that the period was less than 30 working days in length (note that bank holidays do not count as a working day), the period did not include the first 10 working days

of July, the period started either before or on the day of approval of Section 2, and the Notice was not been advertised with the approved AGAR on a website **before** the start of the period (posting on a noticeboard alone is not sufficient). The requirements are spelled out in PKF's *Detailed Instructions* annual publication including suggested dates; it could hardly be made any easier and yet still councils get it wrong. The message is clear: read and follow the instructions!

2. **Secret voting** – This is a relatively new one but seemed to crop up several times this year. The Local Government Act specifies that voting on business at council meetings should be by show of hands unless otherwise provided for in Standing Orders. The model Standing Orders do not provide for any alternative to voting by show of hands; councils are supposed to be open and democratic organisations after all! A very small number of councils have inserted a Standing Order to provide for voting by secret ballot, but it is not advised and is easily circumvented by a councillor demanding a recorded vote (where the votes are recorded in the minutes). However, regardless of whether provided for in Standing Orders or not, some councils are resorting to secret ballot seemingly out of embarrassment or sensitivity. It was particularly used when the council was voting on co-options. To be absolutely clear, there are **NO** circumstances where a secret vote is desirable or warranted.

3. **Information on websites** – All councils must have a website and display certain information on it. There are different transparency codes depending on the size of council, but essentially all councils must publish by 1 July following the end of year to which the documents relate:
 - 3.1. Their statement of accounts (Section 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR). The statement of accounts must be approved and signed by the Responsible Financial Officer and the Chair of the meeting approving the statement of accounts.
 - 3.2. A copy of the bank reconciliation for the relevant financial year.
 - 3.3. An explanation of any significant variances (e.g. more than 10-15 percent, in line with proper practices) in the statement of accounts for the relevant year and previous year, and an explanation of any differences between 'balances carried forward' and 'total cash and short-term investments'.

- 3.4. The Annual Governance Statement (Section 1 of the AGAR). The annual governance statement should be signed by the Chairman and Clerk. Where the governance statement contains any negative responses, these should be explained fully, including how any weaknesses will be addressed.
- 3.5. The Internal audit report according to the format included in the AGAR, which should be signed by the person who carried out the internal audit. Any covering letter or report from the internal auditor should also be published. Where the internal audit report contains any negative response to the internal controls objectives, these should be explained fully, including how any weaknesses will be addressed. Where the response to any internal controls objectives is 'not covered', an explanation of when the most recent internal audit work was completed in this area and when it is next planned should be provided. If coverage is not required, an explanation stating why coverage is not needed should be provided.
4. **Arithmetic** – Several AGARs simply didn't add up. There were some where there were rounding issues, but others that were just plain wrong. It's not the internal auditor's job to correct the figures or to even give the Clerk/RFO the opportunity to correct them (although kindly auditors might, within limits). It's a bit like putting a car in for MOT, if the headlights don't work when the car is presented the garage won't put new bulbs in for you and pass it!
5. **Incorrect powers** – Another old chestnut this one. All councils must cite the legal power being used to incur expenditure. It should be recorded in the minutes and/or the cash book. A common misconception is that when a council makes a small grant to a group or organisation in the area it is done under Section 137. Usually, the correct power is the one that the council would have used had it been carrying out the activity itself.

Governance and accountability for parish and town councils is obviously a specialist area and the end of year processes are complex. It is particularly challenging when a clerk is new in post, and it is the first time they have encountered it. Help is available! From the detailed guidance issued by the external auditor to the *Practitioner's Guide* publication and the training courses provided by Northants CALC, there is always help available if you ask!

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID – WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

To put it simply, and obviously, it’s first aid for mental health! If you had a person injured lying on the floor, you would administer “traditional” first aid... put them in the recovery position, make sure they are safe and call for help. Mental health first aid is the same really. If you had a person who seems to be struggling with their mental health, you make sure they are okay, and you may need to refer them to support or may need to seek immediate professional help.



Mental health affects all of us, some are lucky and generally have really good, positive mental health, whilst others do struggle and can have poor mental health. And it’s something that can change from day to day, month to month. At any given time, 1 in 6 working age adults have symptoms associated with poor mental health. This means that 72 million working days have been lost costing UK employers £45 billion each year.

Being a Mental Health First Aider (MHFA) does not qualify you to be a therapist or counsellor but allows you to take a holistic approach to mental health. Northants CALC Deputy Chief Executive, Lesley Sambrook Smith, qualified as a MHFA in March 2024 and it’s a qualification that lasts 3 years, much in the way a physical First Aid qualification does. The training included how to actively listen, how to identify poor mental health and mental health crises, how to encourage a person to seek help and support, and how to look after yourself too!

Lesley said “It was probably the most mentally draining course I’ve attended if I’m honest, as it covered all aspects of mental health from depression, to panic attacks, to eating disorders, to self-harm, to substance abuse and suicide. It really made me stop and think and be thankful that I enjoy good mental health (most days!).”

Reflecting on the course content, Lesley said: *“The self-care module is one of the most important areas we covered, as if you aren’t looking after yourself, you can’t help others (like the air supply in an aeroplane, put your own mask on first). Taking a little time to do something for yourself to maintain positive mental health*

is important and sometimes we are so focussed on getting the job done or looking after loved ones, we forget about ourselves.”

So, give yourself a challenge, do at least one thing just for yourself over the next few days. Give yourself permission to be selfish and take time out of your day for you. As long as you give yourself permission, you won't feel guilty, and you'll have spent time recharging your batteries and protecting your mental health!

THANKS A MILLION

In 2020 Northants CALC partnered with Weedon-based Clear Utility Solutions (CUS) to provide a solution for member councils in Northamptonshire who wished to save money on electricity costs and reduce their carbon footprint. As a broker with access to green energy suppliers, CUS offered a solution for both. CUS has taken the time and trouble to understand the parish and town council market and the customer service ethos that CUS has fits very well with the parish sector.

Good news travels fast and Northants CALC has been pleased to introduce CUS to other County Associations across England and CUS is now working with almost half of the CALCs nationally. Recognising the need to have a dedicated brand for the council sector, CUS introduced the “Clear Councils” branding earlier this year and has employed three new, experienced staff members to deal with council renewals along with any further new business.

Since its beginnings in Northamptonshire, the scheme has saved councils over £1 million and has prevented nearly 1 million kg CO2 emissions by using green energy suppliers.

If your council hasn't yet explored how much cash and carbon it could save on energy, please visit <https://www.clearutilitysolutions.com/ncalc-partnership>.



FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPENSATION SCHEME

Update from Steve Parkinson at The Parkinson Partnership

At least one bank has written to parish councils saying that it believes that they are no longer covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS). This seems to be a mistake, as the FSCS standard conditions have not changed and still say: “*FSCS does not protect deposits made by a public authority (including a parish council), unless it is a small local authority with an annual budget of up to EUR500,000*” (about £430,950 using the required 3 July 2023 exchange rate).” [Approximately 87% of all parish and town councils in Northamptonshire are below this threshold].

Not all deposits are covered by the FSCS. For example, Gilts are backed by the UK government, while money market funds spread their risk by placing deposits with many different banks to minimise the impact of one bank failing. Non-UK bank deposits are generally covered under a reciprocal agreement with their own country.

The Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) Rulebook says: “A firm, must at least annually, take reasonable steps to confirm that a depositor that it has classified as a small local authority continues to be a small local authority, using the exchange rate prevailing on the 3 July immediately preceding the date on which any confirmation is undertaken”. (See <https://www.prarulebook.co.uk/prarules/depositor-protection/>).

The PRA has also advised that “*it is acceptable for firms to rely upon a reasonable estimate provided by the local authority of its annual budget, which could for example be based on the previous year’s budget. The PRA expects a firm to take reasonable steps to ascertain a local authority’s budget, but where a firm has been unable to determine if a local authority is eligible, it should be treated as a public authority*” i.e. no FSCS cover.

The scheme doesn’t define “annual budget” but if a council is receiving and spending sizeable Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) receipts for example, we would expect to see that included. Councils should ensure that they publish their budget online (in accordance with their publication scheme).

Disclaimer This guidance is issued to assist councils in understanding the legislation and guidance. It is not a statement of law, nor does it account for individual circumstances. Councils should seek professional advice if they are uncertain. The Parkinson Partnership LLP accepts no liability for any loss arising from situations where councils have not followed the relevant law and guidance.

GUIDANCE ON COUNCIL EMAIL

Almost all formal correspondence in the council world is by email, which means that all clerks and councillors should be aware of, and follow, best practice email use and management. This article describes the importance of using official, council email accounts and offers practical guidance on email security.



The importance of using official email addresses

Northants CALC strongly advises using official email addresses for council work and further, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), the Cabinet Office, and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) all recommend using an official .gov.uk email address.

In the ICO factsheet for councils, it states that “*councils must process data securely - which may be more difficult to achieve if it is being processed through personal email accounts.*” There are some very important reasons for using official, rather than personal, email addresses:

- Official correspondence should reflect the professionalism of the council. An official email address enhances the credibility of the sender and the council itself. Using official and, ideally, government branding creates trust and makes it easier for residents to identify official communications.
- If official communications are always sent through council-sanctioned channels then council staff can be sure that records are kept, and decisions are documented for public scrutiny.
- Council email accounts facilitate the creation and maintenance of official records. This is crucial for the proper functioning of the council, for auditing purposes, transparency, and accountability. It helps track decisions, discussions, and other important communications.

- By separating your personal life from your professional life, you ensure members of the public, partners and suppliers understand you are emailing them in your role as a clerk or councillor. Recipients will be clear about who the email is from and the capacity it is being sent.
- An official email address ensures there is no confusion about the legitimacy of communications. They are less likely to be sent to spam or blocked, and more likely to be read and responded to quickly.
- If a subject access or freedom of information request is made, then all emails to and from that account pertaining to that request may need to be reviewed and/ or released. If using a personal email account, this can be a complex and invasive process. Using an official account both protects your personal information and makes managing such a request straightforward.
- Changes in council staff are easier to manage with an official email address. Compliance with the council's legal obligations around data control are more straightforward; information can be retained or archived appropriately. The clerk can complete administrative tasks, such as accessing historic emails/ data, before closure. There will be no confusion for residents and ex-staff members will not receive council related emails accidentally.

Good practice password management and email security

To comply with privacy and data protection rules, council staff must operate their email account in a secure way. Here is some key advice on keeping your email account secure:

- Do not share your password with anyone else or write it down where other people can find it.
- Use the National Cyber Security Centre's guidance to help you choose a secure password.
- Use multi-factor authentication (MFA). This means providing additional information on an occasional basis but provides the best security.

- Make sure your computer is password protected and that it automatically locks if you are away from it for more than 5-10 minutes. You can also lock it manually: usually this is by pressing CTRL +ALT+ DELETE at the same time on Windows devices.
- Do not routinely redirect council emails automatically from one account to another.
- Educate yourself - there are several online courses via Nimble eLearning, such as basic cyber security, password management and phishing. Register through Northants CALC.
- Make sure any other council staff, or the chair, know the process and who to contact in an emergency, such as a sudden absence. This is best achieved by using an out-of-office, with alternative contact details to be added to the inaccessible account, or by forwarding emails to someone else for a very limited period. As a precaution, you should not store crucial information that colleagues may need within your email system.

Councillors are sometimes resistant to using the official council email system, perhaps because they don't want to bother having separate systems for different purposes, or simply because they don't want to ask for help setting up their computer or other devices. Whatever the case, we are fast moving towards a situation where use of private email systems for council business is simply no longer acceptable.

MAKING UNDERSTANDING CYBERCRIME CHILD'S PLAY

An interactive game designed by the Office of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) aims to empower the residents of Northamptonshire with the tools and knowledge needed to safely navigate the complexities of the digital age. Through engaging gameplay and real-life scenarios, the game offers a unique and educational experience that is both fun and informative. You can build awareness of the various forms of fraud and cybercrime that can impact your life, learn practical steps to protect your personal information and secure your digital presence and cultivate habits that minimise your risk of falling victim to fraud and cyber threats. The game is suitable for all ages. To start playing, head over to <https://northantspfcc.org.uk/our-work/fraud-and-cybercrime-changing-the-story/>.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

It's quite difficult – almost impossible - for a parish or town council to go bankrupt. With councils able to set the precept at any level, financial recovery is only a matter of time and patience, so it is cash flow and liquidity that are the more likely issues to vex councillors and Responsible Finance Officers.

In recent years there have been several parish and town councils that have run out of money in-year. It started during the Covid pandemic when some seaside town councils found that their (sometimes very significant) income from tourist activities dried up overnight at the start of the first lockdown.

Other cases have been down to poor financial management, or a lack of prudent financial planning, or a dogmatic attachment to keeping the precept down, even when reserves needed to be replenished following some unforeseen and unplanned need for expenditure.

With parish and town councils being encouraged to get involved in new, bigger, and more expensive activities, sound financial management is more important than ever. And when parish and town councils “inherit” assets or services from their principal council cousins the need to make proper financial plans is paramount. Even a smallish parish or town council could eagerly but unwittingly take over a dilapidated community building from a principal council and then discover that the roof needs mending, or the asbestos needs removing, or the foundations need underpinning. Clearly the time to discover those things, and agree responsibility for reparations, is before the asset is transferred, not just afterwards.

All parish and town councils should hold general reserves (the rainy-day money) ranging from three to twelve month's expenditure depending on the council's activities and services. Obviously then, when a council is considering taking on a new asset or service, one of the considerations should be what the impact on the reserves policy is. It might be that funds need to be found for the asset itself, but also to bolster the general reserves in the expectation that rainy days may become more frequent in the future.

For advice and guidance on cash flow issues, reserves levels or any other financial concern, please contact Northants CALC.

SITUATIONS VACANT

Burton Latimer is a town with 7,481 electors just south of the A14, three miles southeast of Kettering. **Burton Latimer Town Council** has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working full time on a fixed term contract to September 2025. The council is open to considering job shares and other flexibilities to ensure that the right person is engaged. The precept for 2024/25 is £187,740. There are 12 councillors. This is an exciting opportunity to help make a real difference. The deadline for applications is **6 August 2024**.



Blakesley Parish Council has a vacancy for a Clerk/RFO working 10 hours per week. Blakesley is a small but active village in South Northamptonshire approximately 5 miles northwest of Towcester. There are 390 electors and a seven-seat council. The precept for 2024/25 is £35,822. The deadline for applications is **9 August 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 during August and September to bring to your attention:

- Managing difficult people and conversations, 7 August 2024 - 09:30
- Social media for councils Part 1, 8 August 2024 - 09:30
- Data Protection and GDPR: Part 2, 12 August 2024 - 09:30
- Communicating with Your Community Part 2, 13 August 2024 - 09:30
- Engaging with Young People, 27 August 2024 - 09:30
- New Clerks 2024 Autumn Day 1, 7 September 2024 - 10:00

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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