

Update

ISSUE 1/09

January – February 2009

CONTENTS

- **A POINT OF PRINCIPAL**
- **TOWN COUNCIL LEADS QUALITY CHARGE**
- **MAKE NO APOLOGIES?**
- **EFFECTIVE WEBSITE COMMUNICATION**
- **LOCAL COUNCILS SPRING CONFERENCE**
- **YOUR PARISH IS ON THE MAP**
- **PARISH EMERGENCY PLANNING**
- **FEMALC – OUR WIDER FAMILY**
- **TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS**
- **SITUATIONS VACANT**
- **CONTACT DETAILS**

A POINT OF PRINCIPAL

By Danny Moody, Principal Officer, Northants CALC

This is my first opportunity in *Update* to wish you all a very happy New Year, although if you're like me the Christmas break already seems like a long, long time ago!

The last two months have been incredibly busy, despite the break, and the Association has made yet more strides forward.

The most exciting news came at the end of November when we found out that our bid for training and development funding from the sub-Regional Improvement & Efficiency Programme (RIEP) had been successful. The Association was awarded £88,000 over 2¼ years, which will enable us to deliver a much fuller training programme to local councils.

As a result of the funding I am delighted to announce the addition to our team of Kate Houlihan as Training & Development Officer starting in March. Kate has a strong background in training but has latterly been Acting Clerk at Wootton & East Hunsbury Parish Council so she brings an exciting blend of training skills and local council knowledge. There will be more on Kate's appointment in the next *Update*.

On 21st November the Association's National Representative, Cllr. Gwen Radcliffe (Oundle Town Council) and I were invited to speak at the "Place Matters Conference" in London organised by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for larger parish and town councils. Our presentation focused on the Northamptonshire Larger Councils Partnership (NLCP), a nominal grouping of the twenty or so largest councils by electorate in the county. The NLCP is seen nationally as an example of good practice and other County Associations are now setting up similar groups.

I continue my quest to share with other County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) and learn from them. On 24th November I attended Hampshire CALC's County Training Partnership Annual Meeting and learnt all sorts of good things that we will put into practice for Northamptonshire. On 6th January we hosted the Bedfordshire Association in Litchborough and were able to share with them some of our experiences of setting up a County Association as a separate and independent organisation. I think it is important for CALCs to share in this way because we'll move forward faster by working together.

On 2nd December I had my first formal meeting with Alex Hopkins, the new Assistant Chief Executive, Policy & Partnerships at Northamptonshire County Council (NCC). Alex has a good understanding of local councils and is keen that all three tiers of local government in Northamptonshire work closely together in co-operation and partnership. For more about the potential future working with NCC see the article below regarding the Local Councils Spring Conference.

For the remainder of December the focus was on the recruitment process for the new Training & Development Officer post and in putting together plans to develop the Litchborough premises to include a new meeting and training room. It is hoped that building work might start before the summer.

January seems to have disappeared already and exciting times lie ahead. I'm looking forward to a year that consolidates our successes in 2008 and lays the groundwork for pushing forward in the future.

We responded to more than 160 member enquires per month last year so thanks for keeping us busy! Please do keep the e-mails and phone calls coming – that's what we're here for!

TOWN COUNCIL LEADS QUALITY CHARGE

Brackley Town Council has achieved Quality status, which takes the county into double figures! The County Accreditation Panel met on 3rd December and, after reviewing their portfolio and hearing representations from Mayor, Cllr Kevin Dixon and Clerk, Mrs Sue Crouch, had no hesitation in recommending that Brackley Town Council be Northamptonshire's tenth Quality council. With this award Brackley has achieved a number of firsts:

- The first council in Northamptonshire, and one of the first in the country, to gain accreditation under the "new rules"



**QUALITY
TOWN
COUNCIL**

- The first Quality town council in South Northants
- The second largest council in Northamptonshire (after Daventry) to achieve Quality status

Congratulations to all the councillors and staff at Brackley Town Council.

MAKE NO APOLOGIES?

It's normally the first item on the agenda – "Apologies", but quite often councils gloss over the item without due care and attention. It goes something like this:

CHAIR: "Right then, item 1, apologies"

CLERK: "Bill and David can't make it"

CHAIR: "OK, fine, otherwise we're all here I think"

CLLR SMITH: "Where's Jenny then?"

CHAIR: "Ah yes, Jenny. Has anyone heard from Jenny?"

[Noises off]

CLLR JONES: "Sorry I'm late chair"

CHAIR: "OK Jenny, come and take a seat. Now, item 2..."

So, what's wrong with that I hear some of you asking nervously?! Well, the Local Government Act 1972 s.85 provides that *"...if a member of a local authority fails throughout a period of six consecutive months from the date of his last attendance to attend any meeting of the authority, he shall, unless the failure was due to some reason approved by the authority before the expiry of that period, cease to be a member of the authority."* Therefore, not only does the council need to know whether or not a member has sent apologies but they also need to know the reason for the apologies and resolve whether or not to approve the reason given.

An agenda item such as "To receive and approve apologies for absence" makes it clearer what the purpose of this agenda item is. Now the meeting would go something like this:

CHAIR: "Good evening everyone, I call the meeting to order. Item 1, to receive and approve apologies for absence"

CLERK: "I have received apologies from Cllr Smith who is unable to attend due to an unavoidable work commitment"

CHAIR: "Thank you"

CLLR JONES "I propose that Cllr Smith's apology be approved"

CHAIR: "Thank you. All in favour?"

[show of hands]

CHAIR: "Thank you. Are there any other apologies for absence?"

CLERK: "Yes, Cllr White. It's darts night again"

CHAIR: "OK, thank you"

CLLR JONES: "I propose that Cllr White's absence is not approved by council"

CHAIR: "Thank you. All in favour?"

[show of hands]

CHAIR: "Thank you. Are there any other apologies for absence?"

CLERK: "No."

CHAIR: "Thank you. OK, Item 2..."

Remember that members of a council are summonsed to be there; in other words they have a legal duty to attend meetings unless they have a valid reason why they can't be there. Work commitments, unavoidable holiday arrangements, attendance on behalf of the council at other meetings and sickness are all good reasons for not being able to attend. Darts matches, forgetting, and Manchester United on the telly that night are not.

Technically the reason for absence need not be approved at every meeting but the reasons should still be known and minuted (e.g. "Apologies were received from Cllr Jones. RESOLVED: To approve Cllr Jones's absence (prior work commitment)").

If a councillor has been absent from all council meetings for six months, and those absences have not been approved by council, then the councillor is automatically disqualified.

Receiving and recording apologies properly and carefully is not an onerous task and need not take much longer than the cursory approach. It is an important part of maintaining good governance and promoting high ethical behaviour.

EFFECTIVE WEBSITE COMMUNICATION

(Submitted article)

You've heard the saying, "If you've got it, flaunt it". But are you shouting about the work that your council does or are you relatively unheard of in your local community?

So, you may wonder, where does a website figure in all this? There are many reasons why a website is important.

Firstly, a website is cost effective, paper free communication. It's available when you're in a meeting, tucked up in bed or lying on the beach sunning yourself. It's easy to update regularly – making it a great tool for communicating and engaging with the local community. However, countless websites are dull and barely communicate important information let alone get repeat visitors.

Basic website requirements

It's vital to make your website interesting, up-to-date, easy to navigate, and full of content that is appropriately worded and nicely displayed (with images used where possible). Also, it shouldn't be created in isolation from other forms of communication; it should embrace other publications such as newsletters, which can be added to the website so that they can be viewed long after the bin men have collected the paper version for recycling.

A few key points about the basic requirements needed for a successful website:

Interesting

It shouldn't just be a place to find copies of paperwork such as minutes; it can be used to reach an objective such as gathering reactions to a proposal (such as building a village hall).

Up-to-date

Although websites are inexpensive to run and keep up-to-date the task of keeping one up-to-date is often neglected. Set dates in your diary to make amendments and stick to them. Keeping your website full of fresh information that's up-to-date will encourage visitors to revisit.

Easy to navigate

Websites need careful planning from the start to ensure that the layout remains simple, effective and a positive experience for visitors.

Content

The content that you put into your website is an important and crucial part of building a successful website. Avoid putting lengthy documents onto the home page and concentrate on using headlines that are interesting. Take a look at many news websites to see how they place a paragraph from an article on one page with a link to the rest of the article elsewhere in the website. This way it's possible to place several items of interest on the homepage of a website.

Content should be interesting and can be light-hearted. For example, the first signs of spring may make an excellent photographic competition to encourage any community member to submit an image of the local area. Everyone that enters will visit your website to view the entries and this in turn may stimulate interest in the community projects that the council is working on.

Good communication

A website should be at the heart of good communication. Your website is an ideal place to advertise all the forms of communication that you utilise, such as radio interviews (mp3 format), newspaper articles (link to newspaper's online article), press releases, video footage (YouTube / Google etc) and newsletters (pdf format). Conversely, all forms of communication should advertise the website.

Availability

Information that is available at any time to anyone is vital for excellent communication. With the advent of websites it is now possible, for example, for people that are, for various reasons, unable to attend meetings but are keen to be involved, to gain access to minutes of meetings from the comfort of their own home.

Anonymity

Removing the stumbling block to someone picking up the 'phone to make enquiries, websites provide information that can be viewed in your own way at your own pace and permit contact in various ways such as email, postal or telephone.

Support

As well as providing key information for the local parish it is a perfect location to place information for Councillors in an attempt to support the work that they do freely and to inspire others to join this worthy group which amount to more than 100,000 throughout England and Wales.

The government is keen to revitalise local democracy and you represent the first tier of local government. If your local parish doesn't know about the services that you provide for the community and how you are representative of their needs you need to address your communication and get communicating.

Author: Jeni Cadman runs a successful business called Electronic Chalk (www.electronic-chalk.co.uk) which specialises in helping communities to communicate more effectively over the Internet. She works with the private, charity and community sectors as a freelance website project manager, editor and writer and enjoys voluntary work in the community as a school governor.

LOCAL COUNCILS SPRING CONFERENCE

I hope that you have all got **Wednesday 18th March 2009** clearly marked in your diaries and calendars for the Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) Local Councils Spring Conference 2009 at Rushden & Diamonds Conference Centre from 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. NCC will send out formal invitations to all parish and town councils with full details in February and I know that many councils have already appointed delegates for what promises to be a very exciting event.

NCC are using the conference to address two main concerns that have been voiced by participants at previous conferences; the lack of a formal partnership agreement between the tiers of local government in Northamptonshire, and the lack of a forum during conference for parishes to put their questions and challenge the other tiers about partnership working or service delivery.

A New Charter

The conference will see the launch of a consultation on a new charter for councils in Northamptonshire. The proposed document sets out what is expected of each tier of local government and how the county, district, borough, parish and town councils will all work together for the good of everyone in the county. I'm sure that die-hard cynics will doubt the value of such documents but I think it is important that parish and town councils embrace the opportunity before them and I hope that all councils will send at least one delegate to the conference to hear all about the proposed charter first hand.

Local Councils Question Time

Feedback from previous conferences at Sywell and Wootton Park suggested that attendees wanted more time to ask questions and put forward their concerns. In response the conference will include a Question Time style debate, chaired by Katherine Kerswell, President of Northants CALC and NCC Chief Executive. The panel will include lead officers from the County Council as well as representatives from the district councils, and other public service bodies. Parish and town councils are requested to submit their questions by **Friday 27th February** at the very latest (a form for doing so will be included in the invitation pack).

I am looking forward to the conference and hope to see many of you there. It's a pivotal time for parish and town councils and I do hope your council will respond to NCC's invitation accordingly.

YOUR PARISH IS ON THE MAP

The Ordnance Survey has launched a new online political mapping service at <http://www.election-maps.co.uk>. The site fosters understanding of the electoral geography of your area by allowing you to overlay a standard OS map with parish, ward, district and county boundaries.

The site is searchable by postcode and then on the "Show layers" tab you choose which governmental boundaries you wish to show. The site gives you an appreciation of where your parish fits into the local government structure and information is available for the whole of the country.

With elections coming up on 4th June you can view your local wards then look up whose standing in those wards on the relevant principal authority web site.



PARISH EMERGENCY PLANNING

The Northamptonshire County Council Emergency Planning Team is once again holding two parish emergency planning seminars in 2009. This year the dates are:

11th May 2009 at the Council Offices in Thrapston at 6.30pm; and the
7th July 2009 at the Council Offices in Daventry at 6.30pm

This year's theme will be **Building Community Resilience**.

The aim of the event is to give parish councils knowledge of flood awareness and severe weather campaigns and to give them valuable information regarding flood safety. The parish emergency plans will also play a prominent part of the evening.

The Northamptonshire County Council Emergency Planning Team will be accompanied by colleagues from the Police, Fire and Rescue, Environment Agency, Welfare and Health organisations.

For more information and to book places for your parish council please contact:

Joanne Maddams on 01604 237450 or e-mail:

jmaddams@northamptonshire.gov.uk

FEMALC – OUR WIDER FAMILY

The Federation of East Midlands Associations of Local Councils (FEMALC) comprises of the five County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs) in Derbyshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire. FEMALC convenes four times per year when the CALCs get together to discuss regional and national issues that affect us all.

As a regional organisation FEMALC represents parish and town councils on regional bodies, such as the East Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) and the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (EMRAF).

The chair and secretariat for FEMALC rotates on an annual basis around the five counties and Northants CALC has it for 2009. This means that Northants CALC chairman, Dryden Phillipson (Middleton Parish Council) and Principal Officer,

Danny Moody are the public face of FEMALC for the next twelve months and will be involved in many meetings throughout the year.

Danny Moody attended the EMRAF form meeting on 28th January representing FEMALC, which was useful both for the region and the county. The 2009 EMRAF Conference will be held on 26th June at Hothorpe Hall, Theddingworth, Leicestershire and parish and town councils in Northamptonshire should consider sending a delegate.

The conference theme is “Rural housing issues”, which is a topical issue for many local councils where housing needs surveys have been carried out recently. Further details will be circulated when available.

If your parish has anything they would like raised at a regional level please contact Danny Moody by e-mail: dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

Northants CALC is developing a full and exciting programme of training events for 2009 and the Spring Programme has already been circulated. Places are already filling up fast, so if you intend to book then please do so as soon as you can by telephoning Anne Millar on 01327 831482 or e-mailing amillar@northantscalc.gov.uk.

The Spring Programme is:

<p>Wednesday 18th February</p>	<p>Off to a Flying Start This is always a popular course; although the election period is behind us, you will probably have some new councillors who are wondering what’s in store for them. Not to worry, send them along to this session for a sound introduction to council life. But this is not just for your new councillors; many of the ‘old hands’ will find this evening a very useful refresher as regulations are continually changing. The trainer is Bill Robinson.</p>	<p>7:00 – 9:00 p.m. Saxon Hall Thorpe Street Raunds (Repeated Wednesday 13th May in Litchborough)</p>
<p>Wednesday 11th March</p>	<p>Freedom of Information All councils should by now have adopted their new Publication Scheme using the recently announced model and produced a Guide to Information. This session covers what should have been included and how to deal with enquiries made under the FOI Act. The session will be given by an officer from the Information Commissioners Office.</p>	<p>7:00 – 9:00 p.m. Saxon Hall Thorpe Street Raunds</p>

Wednesday 18th March	Freedom of Information As above	7:00 – 9:00 p.m. NCALC Offices, Litchborough
Saturday 28th March	The Role of the Clerk and RFO An introductory day for new and recently appointed clerks. It will include topics such as the role of the councillors, employment issues, declarations of interest, powers and duties, Standing Orders and Financial Regulations, preparing agendas and minutes... and much, much more!	10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. NCALC Offices, Litchborough
Wednesday 22nd April	The New Power of Wellbeing On 31st December 2008, new legislation gave the power of the promotion of economic, social and environmental well-being to parish councils. Only eligible parish councils will be able to exercise the power. Find out about this new power, how it can be used, what it means for parish and town councils and how to operate it.	7:00 – 9:00 p.m. Saxon Hall Thorpe Street Raunds (Repeated Thursday 14 th May in Litchborough)
<p>Booking</p> <p>Please book a place via your clerk.</p> <p>The fee for the evening courses is £29 per person and for the clerk's course £75 per person (£50 and £100 respectively from a non-member council)</p>		

The 2009 Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) will commence on Thursday 30th April, consisting of 7 sessions, 1 per month throughout the year. There has been terrific interest in this course already so if you want to register an interest please do so straight away. Places are limited to facilitate group work so it's first come first served.

All courses are booked through the Northants CALC office, so if you would like to put your name down for any of the above courses please contact Anne Millar on 01327 831482 or e-mail amillar@northantscalc.gov.uk.

If your training needs don't appear to be covered, or you would like to hold a bespoke training course just for your council please get in touch to discuss your requirements.

SITUATIONS VACANT

Lampport and Hanging Houghton Parish Council has an immediate vacancy for a parish clerk and responsible finance officer. Applications are invited from suitably qualified and experienced persons. The parish clerk will be responsible for the administration of the business and finances of the Council. The post includes some evening work at meetings. He or she must be computer literate, with good communication skills. Friendly and positive outlooks are essential. £10.00 per hour + 2.45% interim increase. 2 to 3 hours per week (average). Work from home. Please contact:

Mrs. Shirley Mason
Parish Clerk
The Martins,
Draughton Road,
Maidwell,
Northamptonshire
NN6 9JF

Tel: 01604 686490 e-mail: shirley.mason1@tesco.net

NORTHANTS CALC CONTACTS

Danny Moody dmoody@northantscalc.gov.uk

Anne Millar amillar@northantscalc.gov.uk

Terry Waterfield training@northantscalc.gov.uk

Admin/General info@northantscalc.gov.uk

Address:

Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils
6 Litchborough Business Park
Northampton Road
Litchborough
Northamptonshire
NN12 8JB

Telephone:

01327 831482



[Visit Northants CALC On-Line
www.northantscalc.gov.uk](http://www.northantscalc.gov.uk)