**Clerk report – February 2024**

**Key Updates**

* Budget and Precept - The 2024/25 budget has been set with a 7.5% precept increase, equalling a 6.54% increase for the average ratepayer. Further detailed allocation of the Community Development budget will be done alongside the Strategic Plan adoption. Communications are being drafted that will explain the budget decisions and how funds will serve residents.
* Strategic Plan - Team ideas compiled and draft plan in development for Council review. Graphics and images will be added to create an engaging document.
* Highways - We are following up with Devon Highways and National Grid regarding unfinished paving repairs on The Plains. Enforcement has checked the site and construction quality issues have been flagged.
* Christmas Lights – Quotes being obtained for installing the existing lights in 2024. The 'Welcome to Totnes' sign will be refurbished for next year, subject to budget. Lights were removed by January 11. We are reimbursing businesses who aided the electrical connections on The Plains.
* OSSR Review - Users of Borough Park facilities are engaged in the open spaces review. We are connecting with community stakeholders like the church, allotments, and ramblers association.
  + Borough Park Users Group – met on 19 January (Cllrs Auletta, Cumming and Robert attended with Governance and Projects Manager. First time this group has met since Covid, and was well attended with representatives from Bowls, Tennis, Rugby, Hockey, Skate Park, TADPOOL and Fusion. The OSSRW review was explained and groups are happy to engage in the review process.
  + Churchyards – email send to St John’s Church warden inviting inputs about the churchyard for inclusion.
  + Smithfields Allotments – text received from SHDC, the landowner.
  + Greenways – meeting with Cllrs, Traffic and Transport Forum chair and a representative from the Ramblers Association (and briefly an officer) to go through the aims of the review.
* The Lamb Garden - Incredible Edibles will potentially maintain the garden, pending discussions with SHDC.
* Skate Park - Certificate of Lawful Development application was supported at the SHDC Development Management Committee.
* Coronation Road – Totnes Gardens emailed to confirm the area for regular maintenance (grass cutting) along by the pavement.
* Eastgate - Lease nearing finalization after legal review.
* Bins - We have reported persistent bin issues at Priory Road/Church Close to SHDC. Support from District Councillors is welcomed.
* Town Maintenance Officer – Public realm improvements and tidying is increasing as the weather improved. So far there has been graffiti coverage and repainting in and outside the Civic Hall. Coming up is refresh of the planters, new gates on the bin store, cleaning up of signage.
* Funding opportunity to share – While local councils cannot directly apply for the newly launched fund, they should be aware of its existence. There could be opportunities for collaboration with local voluntary agencies when bids are made. On 7 December 2023, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport launched [**a £25.5 million funding package to support voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in England in enhancing their energy efficiency .**](https://nalc.us12.list-manage.com/track/click?u=16886b5d6c31eade2f9a50027&id=6cc4e7afac&e=e45f5ee842) Local councils are also encouraged to share details of this scheme with VCSE organisations in their areas.

**NALC updates**

Update on Martyn’s Law - Cllr Keith Stevens, NALC’s chair, sets out in his recent [**open letter**](https://nalc.us12.list-manage.com/track/click?u=16886b5d6c31eade2f9a50027&id=aeb703eaa6&e=e45f5ee842) how our growing range of partnerships and work with representative bodies such as the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) are among his priorities for the next two years. One important issue we are working together on is the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Draft Bill – also known as Martyn’s Law – where we have so far set up a steering group to inform and shape our work, held a joint online event to explain what the proposed legislation means for our councils, and engagement with government and other organisations. Last year, [**NALC made representations to Parliament’s Home Affairs Committee**](https://nalc.us12.list-manage.com/track/click?u=16886b5d6c31eade2f9a50027&id=3318a0ca05&e=e45f5ee842), which conducted pre-legislative of the bill and whose final report reflected many concerns we and SLCC highlighted. The government has not yet responded to the Committee's report – which was expected by the end of September – however, there is a planned further consultation on the standard tier part of the bill. I wanted to provide advance notice of this, as many councils may wish to respond, in addition to submissions by NALC and SLCC. We met with Home Officials last week, who briefed us on the upcoming consultation. Although they indicated that the consultation is imminent, the exact timing is unclear on whether it will be in the coming days or weeks! The consultation is anticipated to last for six weeks and will involve answering around 10 questions online. At this stage, both NALC are SLCC are suggesting councils consider setting an agenda item at upcoming meetings in preparation. We are keeping in touch with the Home Office and will let you know as soon as the consultation is published.

Special **meeting of NALC Policy Committee**

We convened a special online meeting of our Policy Committee on 26 January to shape our response to the Government’s street vote development order consultation. Headlines include:

* It should be a statutory requirement for local councils to be consulted on a street development order proposal.
* NALC is not in favour of the street votes concept, which is also supported by the Society of Local Council Clerks. However, we acknowledge that it is proceeding as an outcome of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act. If it is to proceed, we suggest that the option, ideally with funding, should be given to local councils to act as micro-councils, covering 50 properties or less, for a street vote development order.
* We also consider that if this concept is to proceed, it should, where possible, reflect the democratic planning process for both the local and neighbourhood plan.
* We believe that this concept is perceived as urban, not rural, which will be a disbenefit to most local councils, and that the Policy Exchange and the government should have engaged more with the sector at the concept’s inception stages.
* We further believe that since this concept is largely urban it is an oblique attempt to ensure that, in certain circumstances, developers do not have to pay for affordable housing through specific developer contributions. We also expressed concern that the street vote concept is likely open to abuse in rural areas.

**Debates in Parliament**  
Last week, NALC briefed members of the House of Lords on two debates in Parliament. We were keen to highlight the key messages from our response to a Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) consultation on the protection of hedgerows and the challenges our councils have had with banking.

Regarding hedgerow protection:

* Calling for updating Schedule 1 of the Hedgerows Regulations 1997 with a clear, transparent, and more widely understood definition of a ‘protected hedgerow’ and ‘important hedgerow’
* Ensuring there is a greater understanding of land covered by the 1997 Hedgerow Regulations.
* Asking DEFRA to record 'important' hedgerows on subsidised agricultural holdings and clarify the definition of state-owned land.
* Calling for local councils to be consulted on the removal of protected hedgerows and have a recognised role in the future mapping/overseeing of important hedgerow
* Calling for the simplification of the system and removal of inconsistencies in hedgerow protection and enhancement.

 On banking, this included:

* Highlighting challenges faced by our councils, such as an inability to complete mandate drawdowns for bank accounts, change of signatory problems, account closure threats, councillors being asked to go into bank branches 50 miles away to open accounts, and clerks being asked to produce financial evidence to confirm that their councillors had not been bankrupt
* Calling for improvements in the banking system for local councils, including a personal point of contact, a simpler and more responsive system recognition system for mandate changes, user-friendly online forms, and single, dual, or triple authorisation options.
* Advocating for clear passwords for telephone banking, real-time communication options, and a better understanding of local councils by banks.
* NALC has also developed a new banking webpage containing a range of resources for both local councils and banks.

DALC Update - Devolution Deal proposals announced

On 25 January, Government announced proposals for a Devolution Deal for Devon, which would transfer powers and funding from Government to a Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority. A Devolution Deal is significant as it will enable greater local autonomy over local issues such as housing, skills and transport.

Before proposals can be confirmed, they need to be supported by the cabinets of both Devon County Council and Torbay Council, followed by a six-week public consultation. We encourage parish and town councils to familiarise themselves with the proposals and to respond to the consultation in due course. We will provide updates over the coming weeks.

Useful information:

* Devolution Deal Proposal. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/devon-and-torbay-devolution-deal/devon-and-torbay-devolution-deal#:~:text=The%20local%20authorities%20of%20Devon,greater%20contribution%20to%20the%20UK>
* Read DCC’s special bulletin on the Devolution Deal, or view the dedicated website. <https://www.devontorbaydeal.org.uk/>
* View the DCC Cabinet Papers (meeting will be held on 2 February)
* A Public Consultation is due to begin 12 February (tbc), for 6 weeks.

**Key Meetings and Learning**

* I attended the annual SLCC Practitioners Conference and gained valuable insights on local government reform, service devolution, community energy, council governance, and staff wellbeing. More detail in Appendix A.

**Training opportunities**

NALC

* Social Media in the Local Council Sector - 28 Feb
* Reconnecting Communities – Community Transport - 27 Mar
* Unleashing the Power of Local Councils to tackle the Climate Emergency – 26 June
* Decoding the future of AI – 24 July
* The future of Neighbourhood Plans - 25 Sept

DALC

• Communicating with your community | 8 Feb @ 09:30

• Engage more effectively with young people | 14 Feb, 11:00

• Emotional intelligence and resilience | 15 Feb, 13:00

• Councillors: data protection for councillors | 26 Feb, 18:30

• Councillors: social media skills | 29 Feb, 18:30

**Recent Correspondence**

* MP letters calling for a ceasefire in Gaza
* Incredible Edibles interest in The Lamb Garden
* Graffiti reports and actions
* Coronation Road maintenance discussions
* Objections to Castle Street vehicle restrictions

**Venues Update**

* Civic Hall now has upgraded, app-controlled heating and initial fire door to improve accessibility and capacity. Decorating continues.
* TAODS panto utilising the new green room and extra toilet. Sea Change festival postponed until 2025. Promoted acts Sharon Shannon and Brian Bilston booked.
* Guildhall has strong wedding bookings, including affordable weekday slots. However, anti-social behaviour under the loggia disrupted a recent wedding viewing. Monitoring and patrols should increase.
* Guildhall reopening with volunteer coffee morning in April.

**Visit Totnes**

A screenshot of a social media account

Description automatically generated

A map of a city

Description automatically generatedOur Discover the Dart campaign is gaining great traction.  Our Discover the Dart blog has had 2,800 views since 26 December and our two most popular campaign social media posts have already had over half a million impressions (half of these were organic)

A screenshot of a social media post

Description automatically generated

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

Guide to Devon for Groups: turn to page 18 and 26 for Totnes mentions: <https://issuu.com/ctouring/docs/devon_combined_c89a70734c14ea?fbclid=IwAR2HD7YoxdIN4lYbkq8zspuXCKrBJaDCKw-7-yogj-HGIZMcPxjJCz9IVrM>

Visit South Devon digital guide:

Totnes Market gets a feature on the food and drink page 🙂

A close up of food

Description automatically generated

Totnes page in the Visit South Devon digital guide

A brochure with a city street and people

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

**APPENDIX A**

**SLCC Practitioners conference, 30th January – 1st February**

Shared concerns discussed with colleagues about the varying amount of engagement from Principal Authorities with our sector, particularly at a time when budgets are at breaking point and the devolution of work/services/assets/liabilities seems almost certain. Alternatively, the problems of centralisation as the alternative were discussed a lot. There are some positive examples of partnership working between tiers of government such as this one: <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/your-council/parish-charter>

Also frustration expressed about government funding not coming directly to Town and Parish Councils.

There is an Exeter University report on how quickly change can and has to happen in the case of a governance restructure – using Cornwall as an example. Budgets and workforces can double and triple in a few years. I will try and find a copy and circulate

**Recruit of younger people as Cllrs and into the workforce.**

A really good session from an ex secondary school head teacher. Discussed the statistics around the ‘Gen Z’ becoming an increasing part of the workforce as the older generations retire. Presentation on the particular benefits and challenges of employing younger people and some suggested solutions. Some interesting points to consider (obviously based on some generalisations:

1. Gen Z are much more likely to vote than previous generations – so it is all the more important to involve then in local democracy.
2. Gen Z are impacted by the economic recession, increasing house prices and the climate change – and are therefore generally unhappier and have a higher level of mental health problems. On the other hand they are much more likely to want to engage and involve themselves in the community by volunteering/fundraising.
3. This generation have, by far, the best education results, but on the flip side less work experience. They may need more personal and professional development, particularly around soft skills.
4. It is extremely important to be very clear (and honest) at the point of advertising a vacancy around – training, progression potential, culture, values, benefits, hours of work.
5. Encourage feedback and collaboration.
6. Lean on the community benefit/services when recruiting – this generation are more willing to engage with an organisation they find aligns with their own values and ethics, and provide actual improvements to the community/their local area.
7. There is a reluctance around progression to middle management tier – view being it is a lot more work for not enough increase in money. Maybe consider how staffing structures could be flexed to accommodate as required.
8. Quality of life and flexibility are considered more important than working long hours and minimal increases in salary. Suggested solutions such as flexible working, mental health day provision, team building sessions, personal as well as professional development.
9. Be targeted in recruitment. Use videos to show an interview with a team member/Cllr about what a ‘week in the life of’ looks like. Do not be afraid to have less applicants, you need to be willing to employ the right person rather than the best of a large number.

**Devolution in the Dock**

A good session around the pros/cons of devolution of ‘assets and services’ (or liabilities!). There was a clear feeling in the room that devolution is going to happen, either in a planned way (best case) or in an emergency situation where a County or District Council collapses.

Some conversation about what a statutory service is as opposed to a discretionary service. I am hoping that some clarification on that will be circulated to all Clerks in due course. With that said – if there is no money to provide a service or hold an asset, it would be very difficult to challenge the authority ‘disposing’ of it.

Some of the benefits of devolution outlined as:

* Town Councils know their own areas better than anyone. The alternative to devolution is centralisation, which could mean decisions taken bear no resemblance to the local needs/wants.
* Local ownership tends to create energy such as increases in volunteers/sponsorship.
* It protects services and assets that would otherwise be lost
* The Council is seen to act in the best interests of the community, which is great for reputation and improving links and partnerships.

Some of the potential pitfalls:

* The more you take on the more everything costs in terms of time and things like insurance. Some insurance companies have refused to cover additional assets such as leisure centres. Premiums on insurance are already extremely high.
* While Town/Parish Councils are not currently capped in terms of precept increases – this could happen in the future. What happens if you take something on, the costs spiral year on year and then a cap is introduced?
* Be VERY careful about the condition of what you take on:
  + Falmouth were asked to take on a seaside car park. They very almost did so but had concerns about the condition of. Now it appears the car park is leaking chemicals into the sea and the clean-up is 4.75 million.
  + Another smaller scale example. Toilet block with the District authority survey saying the building all sound. After transfer £60k bill for a new roof.
* Make sure not to take on anything just for the sake of it – spend your money on what the community wants and needs not what the principal authority wants to offload.

**Community Energy in your Parish**

A presentation from Community Energy South. Totnes is ahead of the curve on some of the content of this session, such as a Community Energy Club.

There was mention of volunteers training up as ‘Community Energy Champions’ which might be useful to help uptake of existing grants available to residents and businesses.

An interesting video about the development of a Community Development Society who installed PV and batteries into village halls.

An upcoming webinar (22nd Feb) is something I will ask a couple of officers to attend but Councillors may find it of interest – Eco retrofit for listed buildings and conservation areas: <https://www.tickettailor.com/events/communityenergysouth/1107896>

Other sources:

<https://communityenergysouth.org/pathways/>

<https://nicre.co.uk/>

**How to recruit and retain volunteers**

There is a general decline in volunteering year on year. With that said younger people are taking more of an interesting in volunteering in their local communities.

What not to do:

* Cling too tightly
* Guilt trip them into staying.

What to do:

* Be flexible about time off, and don’t apply pressure
* Do not make it onerous, make it easy and not just like a ‘paid’ job. Keep the induction and paperwork ‘light touch’.
* Make it comfortable, warm drinks, seating, checking in.
* Show appreciation. Thank you, cards, thank you event.
* Be welcoming and well organised. Don’t make them feel like a burden.
* Ask them what they want to get out of it, what is important to them.
* Volunteer sharing with other organisations
* Keep reiterating that they are making a tangible difference and give real examples.

**Civility and Respect work**

This is a joint project between DALC, NALC and SLCC in response to growing concerns about the standards of behaviour in our sector.

They are developing tools for good governance, training programmes, support for struggling councils and lobbying the government to strengthen the standards regime.

Sir Julian Lewis (MP for New Forest South East) is advocating for this issue to be reconsidered by Parliament due to widespread bullying of Clerks and Cllr colleagues in local councils nationally.

A mediation service is being trialled in a currently failing Council that is experiencing toxic behaviours and the outcome will be fed back.

The Jo Cox Civility Commission re this type of behaviour – ‘No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation – a call to action’.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-64324922>

<https://nottstv.com/bingham-town-council-seeing-progress-after-damaging-and-expensive-saga/>

**Lawyers, Law and Local Government**

Presented by the Director of Law, Local Government Association, who are working with partners on a report: preventing Failure in Local Government.

Discussion about Council owned companies’ and the risk involved. Financial and commercial advice needed before action is taken. The bigger the project the more of an optimism bias there tends to be. Conversations must be taken in the public domain as much as possible, transparency is key.

Chief Financial Officer and Monitoring Officers are essential, and they should function as independent, as statutory officers. The governance and delegation arrangements of the top structure in principal authorities is essential to ensure scrutiny and due diligence. The current recruitment issues in the sector means that turnover of staff can have a negative impact, lack of corporate memory.

Internal audit processes must be robust and the stronger the relationship between officers and members the better.

What is important:

* Effectiveness – acting in a timely manner
* Independent decision making
* Positive and appropriate behaviours and strong values/culture
* Openness and transparency
* Understanding of the role and remit and all members must have access to documents such as the Code of Conduct
* Integrity – the Nolan principles should be adhered to at all times
* Clarity of purpose – clear on the priorities and the long term objectives
* Strong community partnerships
* Ensuring staff and members have access to training and do not be afraid to buy in specialist support
* Communications – careful interaction on Social Media and the press by officers and members, even outside of purdah period.
* The constitution (Standing Orders) must be followed.

The national and global issues have started making a significant negative impact on the health and wellbeing of communities and individuals. Looking after yourselves and the team (officers and members) is extremely important, in order to continue to be resilient/work to deliver services.

**Use AI to do Council Tasks faster**

Examples of how AI can help draft reports, letter responses etc. You do need to be prescriptive in terms of how you ‘prompt’ the output.

It is important to be careful about relying on web-based sources. You can attach your own documents to pull information from. The example was a response to a complaint, with the code of conduct, standing orders and Nolan Principles attached as background.

Another example re producing an analysis and report on survey results – and then a draft press release n the results. They went a step further where they were asked how they could have improved the original survey. It was very impressive.

The point that you must also check and edit anything produced was made. What it kicks out is generally a good starting point.

Other uses include translations or reformatting documents or correspondence in a different language or even into a different style of writing that is more accessible or more academic or has references to legislation/law.

Really good at creating bespoke images which can be used in other Canva projects.

**Avoiding burn out and developing a powerful mindset**

Discussed symptoms of burn out and how to get ahead of it early. Explanation around cortisol and dopamine. Some things to watch out for:

* Emotional exhaustion
* Empathy void
* Lacking a sense of accomplishment

What it can cause:

* Reduced productivity
* Bad decision making
* Management style can worsen – impacting the wider team
* Absence from work/physical ill health
* Feeling like you are unable to continue in the role ‘feeling like a failure’ – why the resignation rate is very high in the sector.

What we need:

* Purposeful work
* Sense of community
* Completing tasks
* Acknowledgement – ‘job well done’
* Work/life balance
* Make sure that you don’t just serve others, also serve yourself

Other techniques:

* Time in nature
* Breathing techniques
* Watching or reading comedy – laughing creates dopamine
* Time spent with positive friends and family
* Reducing time on devices, especially social media
* Hobbies, especially those that are outside or involve exercise
* Volunteering or community work can give that sense of acknowledgement
* Singing out loud – again the release, breathing.

The role of hormones and the changes around pre and post-natal and menopause was discussed and the impact that can have in the workplace.

**Stop Knife crime!**

Presentation from the Ben Kinsella Trust.

Talking about the importance of educating our young people to stop the increase in knife crime nationally.

Our young people are carrying knives because they feel unsafe, which is in term making it inherently more widespread and dangerous.

Immersive art exhibitions were one example of something they have delivered which is very effective.

Investment in young people in terms of facilities, housing and employment is essential to avoid them turning to crime.

Free online resources on the website - <https://benkinsella.org.uk/>

The ideal age to start these conversations is 10/11 years old.