



Berkshire Association of Local Councils

Newsletter

MAY 2026

Inside This Issue

- Welcome notice
- Training and Events
- Member Services Information
- Sharing your Story
- Local Council Opportunities

Welcome to the May edition of the BALC Newsletter.

On 24 March a very successful joint Berkshire/Hampshire event was held in Newbury on 24 March in conjunction with the respective Local Resilience Forums on community resilience and emergency planning.

More than fifty delegates attended from local councils across Hampshire and Berkshire. In addition to a presentation assisting attendees in approaches to put together a community plan, the event included a facilitated table-top exercise to encourage participants to consider how they would identify a potential event, and approaches to dealing with it before, during and capturing learning afterwards. The Executive Committee were delighted to hear positive feedback from those attending the event.

*** BALC Executive Committee - Job Opportunity ***

The BALC Committee are looking for a Minutes Secretary to prepare and circulate committee meeting paperwork, attend the meetings and take Minutes. There are approximately 4 evening meetings a year, with an AGM in November. This is a paid role and would be ideal for someone who is already a Clerk (or Councillor), who understands council procedures and looking for a few additional hours' employment. For more details, please email balcexec@balc.org.uk



The BALC Executive Committee

TRAINING AND EVENTS

Please read below for important information with reference to Training Courses currently being offered for BALC members

We are delighted to be providing a new course next month, 'writing grant applications and sourcing funding'. Opportunities for funding can be limited for Town and Parish Councils, so knowing where and how to source grants is crucial. If you are about to undertake a new project and want to ensure you can access all available grant opportunities and have the essential skills needed to write a successful bid, then this course will be invaluable to you. If you want to find out more or book your place, please follow the link to the training page of the [Hampshire ALC website](#). There are still spaces available.



Although training delegate fees in general are no longer covered by your membership, the BALC Committee recognise the importance of Councillor training, and at their recent meeting agreed to fund some Councillor Essentials (Knowledge & Core Skills) training sessions. Check before booking to see if this is a funded course. The Committee have also agreed to cover the costs Clerk and Officer update sessions recognising the value that these sessions offer clerks and other staff members.

Please remember, however, that BALC reserve the right to cancel any course that does not reach the minimum delegate attendance of 8 and all courses are subject to the [BALC Terms and Conditions](#). **No shows and late cancellations will be charged to the Council.**

MAY / JUNE / JULY				
Development for All	Writing Grant Applications and Sourcing Funding	Thursday 21 st May	10.00 – 12.30	ONLINE
Development for All	Intro to Planning	Tuesday 9 th June	18:30 – 21:00	ONLINE
Councillor Development	New Councillor Essentials (Knowledge & Core Skills)	Thursday 18 th June	10:00 – 14:30	Shaw House, Newbury
Officer Development	New Clerk Essentials (What you Need to Know)	Wednesday 24 th June and Wednesday 1 st July	10:00 – 12:30	Weybrook Park Golf Club, Basingstoke
Development for All	Navigating the Procurement Process	Thursday 25 th June	10.00 – 12.30	ONLINE
Development for All	Intro to Planning	Wednesday 1 st July	18:30 – 21:00	ONLINE
Councillor Development	Introduction to Finance for Councillors	Wednesday 8 th July	18:30 – 20:30	ONLINE
Officer Development	Clerks and Officers Update	Wednesday 8 th July tbc	10:00 – 12:00	Weybrook Park Golf Club, Basingstoke
Officer Development	Introduction to Finance for Clerks	Tuesday 14 th July	10:00 – 12:30	ONLINE

Hampshire ALC provide a variety of training courses as our service provider covering all aspects of local governance. For full details of all the courses can be found on the [Hampshire ALC website](#).

Online Short Courses

Hampshire ALC offers a range of online short courses to support councils in meeting their statutory responsibilities and maintaining effective governance. Topics span key areas including introduction to the role of councillor and clerk, health and safety, risk management, workplace compliance and core administrative skills.

These flexible courses are designed to provide practical, accessible training that can be completed remotely at a time convenient to you.

Councils are encouraged to consider these courses as part of their ongoing training and compliance arrangements.

To view the full range of available courses, please visit the Hampshire ALC Online Short Courses page [here](#).

[Online Short Courses](#)

MEMBER SERVICES INFORMATION

FINANCIAL AND INTERNAL CONTROL UPDATES

Year End 2025/2026

Most councils will already have their Internal Audit booked (or completed) in preparation for the council's approval of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR).

There are 3 main changes in this year's AGAR.

- The wording of Assertion 3 has been updated to be consistent with the wording of other assertions.
- Assertion 10 has been added, and
- Box 11 on the Accounting Statements is now a single box to confirm that Trust Funds have been excluded from the account.

External auditors are already receiving queries about Box 11 on the 2025/26 Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) from councils that are not sole managing trustees. If your parish or town council is not a sole managing trustee, you must tick YES at Box 11 on the Accounting Statements (see Paragraph 2.32 of the [Practitioners' Guide 2025](#)). Leaving Box 11 blank may result in a qualified audit opinion. If you have any queries relating to the AGAR, please contact the advice service at HALC in the first instance, and if we can't help we will pass it on to someone who can.

The key document to use during the end of year/audit period is the latest version of the [Practitioners Guide 2025](#), which guides the council through the steps it needs to take to comply with all the audit requirements. All Clerks, RFO's and Councillors should be familiar with this document, to get a full understanding of the audit process. It is also a guide to understanding a council's duties regarding the council's finances and internal controls.

The Berkshire ALC [Year End and Audit 2025/2026](#) key topic note gives more detailed guidance on the year end process.

Year End 2026/2027

We are now in the financial year 2026/2027 and the [Practitioners Guide 2026/2027](#) is now available in the resources section of the member area of the website and will be the guidance to use for next year's audit process. Sections 1 to 3 are mandatory, and Sections 4-6 remain best practice. There is a sub document, [Practitioners Guide 2026/2027 Changes](#) which details all the changes for this year's audit. A summary of which are:

- The format of the year on the front of the document, 2026/2027.
- More guidance on how to restate the previous year's figures.
- The upper threshold, for smaller authorities, gross income has changed from £6.5m to £15m, and this is reflected where appropriate in the updated guide.
- More guidance for Internal Auditors on how to test for Assertion 10 compliance
- Although there are no changes to electors' rights period, the requirements are better explained
- The parish and town council exemption on appointing a Data Protection Officer has been clarified.

Proper Practices

Proper Practices were originally published back in 2002 by the Audit Commission, then passed over to JPAG and more recently SAPP. There is currently a major review and following the feedback from a recent consultation there will be several changes.

One major change is that the Practitioners Guide 2027/2028 will be a split into separate documents, one of which will be mandatory requirements, the second will be best practice.

The consultation highlighted the lack of guidance with reporting fixed assets and joint committees. From an Internal Audit perspective, there will be greater accountability both on the publication and action arising from the written Internal Audit reports, and on the Internal Audit providers, and whether there should be a specific qualification or at least membership of a recognised body.

There will be another consultation in the Summer for feedback on the proposed changes.

Digitalisation of the AGAR

SAAA is progressing a major modernisation of the AGAR process. The move to a fully digital platform aims to strengthen accuracy, improve efficiency and make statutory reporting easier for local councils of all sizes. This digital transformation represents a long term step forward in supporting robust governance across the sector.

SAAA has completed detailed scoping and discovery work and is now well underway in developing a secure, user friendly online portal for AGAR completion and submission. A live trial is scheduled for the 2025/26 AGAR year, with full rollout planned for 2027.

The programme's purpose is to create a single online environment where councils can prepare, complete, and submit their AGARs with greater ease and consistency.

SAAA will provide training ahead of the rollout. Councils are encouraged to participate fully in these sessions to build familiarity with the system. This training will be free of charge and will be on the website.

The move to a digital AGAR marks a significant and positive change for the local government sector. By working collaboratively with councils, auditors, and technical specialists, SAAA is developing a reliable, efficient, and future ready approach to statutory reporting. This modernisation will reduce administrative burden, support consistent practice, and strengthen the overall assurance framework for years to come.

ANNUAL MEETINGS IN MAY

Some councils in Berkshire will be having elections on 7th May this year. Whether the election is contested or uncontested, all current councillors stay in post until 4 days following the date of the election. This also means, in the case of an uncontested election, that new councillors do not take their seat until 4 days after the election date even though they are automatically elected.

If you do have fewer candidates than seats and have an uncontested election, you can start a co-optation after the election date. The Hampshire ALC key topic note on [casual vacancies](#) explains this process.

More detailed guidance on the election process is available in the Hampshire ALC's key topic note on the [Clerks Role in the Election Process](#)

There is a wealth of information available in the resources section of the Member Area of the website for new Councillors and we will be running several new councillor courses throughout the Summer.

- **Annual Meetings following Elections**

The Annual Meeting of the Council must be held within 14 days of the new councillors taking office. As the elections this year are taking place on Thursday 7th May, the new councillors will take office on Monday 11th May. This year the Annual Meeting should therefore take place 14 days from Tuesday 12th May, the latest day being Tuesday 26th May (this calculation includes Sundays but not the Bank Holiday Monday).

The business conducted at the annual meeting is the election of the role of Chairman. **No other business shall precede this item.** Once elected the chairman should sign a declaration of acceptance of office. The role of Chairman is a statutory office, and a Council is not properly constituted without a Chairman.

The current Chairman presides at that meeting until a new Chairman has been elected. If the Chairman is retiring or has not been re-elected, they still preside. If they are not in attendance, then the Vice-chair presides. It is unlawful for the Clerk to preside over the start of the meeting.

- **Annual Meetings where no election has taken place**

For those councils not in a year of elections, the annual meeting may be held on a day of the council's choice during the month of May.

As above, the first business conducted at the annual meeting is the election of the role of chairman. **No other business shall precede this item.** Once elected the chairman should sign a declaration of acceptance of office.

The council's standing orders will set out the business to be discussed at the annual meeting.

There is more detailed guidance in the [Hampshire ALC Annual Meeting of the Council](#) key topic note.

EMPLOYMENT LAW CHANGES – A REMINDER

The Employment Rights Act 2025 brings in several significant changes to employment law. Many of the well-publicised changes, such as the reduction in the waiting time before bringing an employment tribunal claims will not come into force until the next calendar year, however there are some changes relevant to local councils, highlighted below, that were effective from April 2026:

National Living and Minimum Wage

- National Living Wage (21+): Increases from £12.21 to **£12.71** per hour.
- National Minimum Wage (age 18–20): Increases from £10.00 to **£10.85** per hour.
- National Minimum Wage (age 16–17 & Apprentices): Increases from £7.55 to **£8.00** per hour.

Councils should ensure all workers and employees meet these minimum requirements.

Statutory Sick Pay changes

- Payment starts from Day 1 (removal of the 3-day waiting period).
- The Lower Earnings Limit (LEL) has been removed, meaning all workers are now entitled to SSP
- There is also a rate change. The amount payable is either 80% of average earning **OR** £123.25 per week (whichever is lower)

If you use SSP within your council, then you should ensure your payroll system reflects these changes and change any sick pay policies you have.

Further details on these changes can be found on the [government website](#).

Holiday Pay Records

Employers must now keep adequate records of annual leave and pay for **six years**. Most employers would have been doing this as a routine management task anyway, so very little should be required. However, if you do not currently record leave, then this becomes mandatory from 6th April so you need to put a system in place – a spreadsheet or word document will suffice. All councils should also ensure that any document retention policy is changed to reflect these records being kept for 6 years.

[Paternity Leave](#)

The length of service requirement (previously 26 weeks) has been removed meaning paternity leave is now a day 1 right. Please be aware that this is a right to the **statutory paternity leave** (2 weeks) and **statutory paternity pay** which is now £194.32, or 90% of average weekly

earnings (whichever is lower) only. Many councils may have more generous paternity leave and pay policies. Organisations can still have their own waiting periods for enhanced leave or pay but you must pay the statutory amount from day 1. For further information, please see the link in the heading above.

[Unpaid Parental Leave](#)

The length of service requirement has also been removed for this meaning it is also available from day 1 of employment. The original remaining requirements have not changed. For further information please see the link in the heading above.

Any policies you currently have on these should be amended accordingly.

Bereaved Partner's Paternity Leave

This is a new right brought in by the Act. Eligible partners can take up to **52 weeks** of leave if the child's mother or primary adopter dies within the first year.

Given the very small number of employees this will apply to there is probably little point having a policy on this, as the statutory regulations can just be applied if required.

Whistleblowing

Reporting sexual harassment is now explicitly a **protected disclosure**, providing day-one legal safeguards. This was already the case due to case law, however it is now explicit in law. If you have a whistleblowing policy and reporting sexual harassment is not already shown as a protected disclosure the policy should be updated.

There are some other changes around failure to consult around collective Redundancy and Trade Union Recognition agreements, but these are unlikely to apply to local councils given the numbers involved.

SHARING YOUR STORY – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Winnersh Parish Council Annual Litter Pick



On a sunny Sunday morning, 22nd March 2026, Winnersh Parish Council with the support of Wokingham Borough Council organised the annual Litter Pick which is a national event. Residents, councillors and the local Scout Group met at the Rainbow Park Community Centre to be outfitted with high viz vests, litter pickers and waste bags and to be given instructions and their roads to be cleared of litter. An hour and a half later they returned with bags full of a wide variety of litter from the normal sandwich and sweet wrappers and drink cans to a car tyre. Back at the Community Centre they

were treated to refreshments and chocolate biscuits for their efforts. The waste bags were collected on Monday morning by Wokingham Borough Council for disposal.

LOCAL COUNCIL OPPORTUNITIES

A reminder that Members can advertise an employment or voluntary opportunity on the BALC website free of charge. Further information can be found on the following [link](#).



If you have anything you would like included in the July newsletter, please provide copy by Tuesday 30 June.