

## 1. Introduction

This report sets out a detailed account of the issues and developments affecting the Rural South Ward between May 2025 and April 2026. The Rural South Ward spans a large number of rural settlements across South Northamptonshire, each with its own character, priorities and pressures. Most casework this year has been handled through direct communication by email, telephone and site visits, which remains the most effective way to resolve matters promptly. This report reflects the themes that have dominated the year and the work undertaken on behalf of residents and parish councils.

## 2. Council budget and financial landscape

### 2.1 The 2026 to 27 budget

West Northamptonshire Council set its 2026 to 27 budget in February 2026. The main Council Tax element increased by 4.95 percent, as confirmed in the council's published Council Tax information. This increase formed part of a wider strategy to close a significant funding gap driven by rising demand for statutory services and inflationary pressures.

### 2.2 Growth in high pressure services

The previous year's budget required substantial additional investment in high pressure services. This pattern has continued, with the majority of growth absorbed by children's social care, adult social care, SEND and home to school transport, and temporary accommodation. This growth reflects the cost of maintaining statutory services under increasing strain rather than expanding them.

### 2.3 Efficiencies and savings

In recent years the council has had to identify a significant level of efficiencies across its services in order to balance the budget. These have come from service redesign, contract reviews, changes to working practices and the use of technology to streamline processes. For 2026 to 27, further efficiencies were required alongside the Council Tax rise and adjustments to fees and charges. While these measures have helped protect essential services, they have also placed pressure on staff capacity and response times.

### 2.4 Rural implications

Rural areas face higher service delivery costs due to distance, transport requirements and the scale of the road network. The budget protects essential services, but the underlying pressures remain significant and will continue to shape decisions affecting the Rural South.

## 3. Key decisions affecting rural residents

### 3.1 Proposed parking charges

During the budget consultation the council put forward a proposal to introduce parking charges in Towcester, Daventry and Brackley. This raised immediate concern across

rural communities, where residents rely heavily on car travel and have limited access to public transport. Local businesses also expressed strong views about the potential impact on footfall and trade.

Throughout the consultation period the three ward councillors worked hard to challenge the proposal, setting out the disproportionate effect it would have on rural residents and the wider local economy. We made repeated representations to officers and cabinet members, submitted detailed feedback, and supported the case being made by residents and business groups.

Following the consultation the proposal was withdrawn and free parking remains in place.

#### 4. Highways, transport and HS2 impacts

Highways issues have dominated casework across the ward. From 2021 to 2025 we were part of the administration responsible for overseeing the highways service during a period of significant pressure. Weather, heavy agricultural traffic, construction vehicles and long standing underinvestment all contributed to the condition of the rural road network. Many of the challenges seen this year reflect issues that have built up over a long period and continue to require sustained attention.

##### 4.1 Current condition

Many rural routes have experienced accelerated deterioration. The freeze and thaw cycle, prolonged rainfall and increased HGV movements have contributed to surface failures, edge breakdown and drainage problems. Rising costs of materials and labour have further constrained the pace of repairs.

##### 4.2 Maintenance activity

Over the year, the council carried out targeted resurfacing on priority routes, reactive pothole repairs, drainage clearance and verge cutting. These works have addressed immediate safety concerns, but many roads will require more substantial intervention in future years, subject to funding and prioritisation.

##### 4.3 HS2 and its ongoing local impact

HS2 construction continues to affect several communities within and around the ward. Residents have reported increased HGV traffic, road damage, diversions, noise, dust and concerns about drainage changes.

Although HS2 is a national project, the council maintains regular contact with HS2 Limited and its contractors. A dedicated officer resource, often described informally as an HS2 marshal type role, has been put in place to support communities across West Northamptonshire. This role helps monitor construction activity and respond to issues as they arise. This support has been used where HS2 works have affected local roads or village environments.

##### 4.4 Structural challenges

Maintaining a large rural road network requires strict prioritisation. Reactive repairs are often necessary to address urgent defects, while full resurfacing schemes must be planned years in advance. These constraints mean not all issues can be resolved as quickly as residents would wish.

#### 4.5 Looking ahead

The council is reviewing its highways strategy, with a focus on improving drainage, prioritising high risk routes and coordinating works more effectively. Rural needs will continue to be raised in these discussions.

### 5. Planning and development

#### 5.1 Local Plan

Work on the new West Northamptonshire Local Plan continued throughout the year. The Regulation 18 consultation has now closed, and parish councils, residents and community groups across the Rural South submitted detailed responses.

#### 5.2 Planning themes in the ward

The consultation generated strong engagement from rural communities, particularly around the scale and distribution of proposed housing allocations, the cumulative impact of development on rural road networks, the protection of village character and heritage assets, and the adequacy of supporting infrastructure such as schools, health provision and utilities.

With the consultation phase now complete, the council will analyse the responses and prepare the next iteration of the plan. Rural South councillors will continue to monitor this process closely to ensure that the concerns raised by villages across the ward are fully considered as the plan moves toward its Regulation 19 stage.

Alongside the Local Plan work, day to day planning activity in the ward has continued at pace. Applications this year have included infill housing, agricultural building conversions, extensions within conservation areas and renewable energy proposals. Each has required careful assessment to balance the need for sustainable development with the preservation of rural character and the capacity of local infrastructure.

#### 5.3 Enforcement

Several enforcement cases were raised, including unauthorised development, breaches of conditions and environmental concerns. Some required escalation due to complexity or delays.

### 6. Environment, waste and flooding

#### 6.1 Waste and recycling

Core waste services remained stable, with isolated missed collections resolved promptly. Fly tipping remains a persistent issue on rural lanes and laybys.

#### 6.2 Flooding and drainage

Heavy rainfall caused localised flooding, blocked gullies and overflowing ditches. These issues were reported and escalated where necessary. Improving drainage remains essential to protecting the road network.

### 7. Policing and community safety

Rural crime remains a concern, including vehicle theft, outbuilding break ins, fly tipping and speeding. The geographic spread of the ward presents challenges for policing visibility.

Ward councillors have worked with neighbourhood policing teams, Police Liaison Representatives and Speedwatch groups to address concerns and support local initiatives such as Vehicle Activated Signs.

#### 8. Casework and community engagement

The majority of casework this year has been handled through direct communication by email, telephone, site visits and liaison with officers. As ward councillors we are accessible and available to residents, and we encourage people to contact us directly with ward based issues so that matters can be picked up quickly and directed to the right place.

We also need to make full use of the resources and technology available to us to speed up casework, improve communication and push for a solutions based approach wherever possible. This is essential in a large rural area where issues are varied and often require coordination across several services.

Common themes included highways defects, planning applications and enforcement, waste and recycling, flooding and drainage, speeding, street lighting, environmental concerns and public transport gaps. Many cases required sustained follow up and escalation to ensure progress.

#### 9. Priorities for 2026/27

Key priorities for the coming year include:

Advocating for fair investment in rural highways and improved drainage. Ensuring rural voices are fully reflected in the next stage of the Local Plan. Monitoring the impact of SEND and school transport arrangements on families. Continuing to raise HS2 related concerns with contractors and seeking timely responses. Working with police and communities to address rural crime and speeding. Strengthening communication with parish councils and residents, and encouraging direct contact with ward councillors on local issues.

#### 10. Closing thoughts

The past year has been challenging for rural communities, with financial pressures, infrastructure demands and major construction projects all shaping local experience. Despite these pressures, the Rural South continues to demonstrate resilience, strong community spirit and a commitment to protecting the character of its villages.

As ward councillors, we remain committed to representing rural interests, providing honest and timely communication, and working constructively with officers, partners and parish councils to achieve the best outcomes possible.

Signed

Cllr Alison Eastwood Cllr Charles Manners Cllr David Smith

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