



## The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme

### Frequently Asked Questions

- **General**

Q: Where does the concept of Quality Parish & Town Councils come from?

A: The Rural White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future, a Fair Deal for Rural England, published in November 2000, recognised the important role of the first tier of local government and proposed a number of initiatives designed to enhance the role of parish and town councils. Subsequently, in June 2003 the Quality Town and Parish Council Scheme was launched.

Q: What is the purpose of the Scheme?

A: The purpose of the Scheme is to provide councils with benchmark minimum standards. It is designed to allow councils to test themselves against good practice benchmarks. Accreditation shows that councils meet these benchmarks and demonstrates to the local community and partners that they are able to deliver efficient services.

- **Electoral mandate**

Q: What does the term 'elected' specifically mean in relation to the test?

A: Elected means that a member has been nominated and stood for election. Sometimes an election will be uncontested and a member will be elected unopposed. As they have been nominated and stood they will still count towards the two-thirds required for this test.

Q: In order to calculate that two-thirds of members of the council have been elected should I round up or round down.

A: You should round up when calculating the two-thirds figure. There is a table in the guidance (P11) that illustrates the number of elected councillors that are required, across a number of different council sizes, to meet the test.

Q: Can bye-elections be used to help a council meet the two-thirds electoral mandate test?

A: Yes members elected at a bye-election count towards the two-thirds figure.

- **Qualified clerk**

Q: Is the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration awarded by the University of Gloucestershire still valid as a means of passing the test?

A: Yes the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration continue to be accepted and are supported by the National Stakeholders.

Q: A clerk has been in post for 20 years and is a qualified Solicitor, does this pass the test, as, whilst the Certificate in Local Council Administration demonstrates a minimum standard of competence for clerks, many clerks to larger councils will hold professional or other qualifications well above this level?

A: No. There are no other exemptions to this test. Whilst the Government and all stakeholders understand and recognise the skills that many individuals have as being above and beyond the level of the Certificate in Local Council Administration, the purpose of this certificate is to establish a baseline of competencies that are sector specific. This is no way denigrates the time and energy invested by clerks in achieving higher professional qualifications. The requirements under the Certificate in Local Council Administration should not be particularly onerous for a competent clerk to complete.

Q: A clerk holds the Gloscat Certificate awarded by the Cheltenham and Gloucester College prior to it being granted University status, does this pass the test?

A: The Gloscat Certificate is a predecessor of the Local Policy course and is an equivalent qualification. This Certificate is acceptable although the clerk concerned should also give evidence as to the extent to which they have kept their training and professional development up to date, given the long period of time since the qualification was awarded.

Q: What happens if a clerk leaves the council mid-term and the council employs a replacement clerk who does not hold the qualifications required to meet the Qualified clerk test? Will this affect their Quality status?

A: No, the council's Quality status is not affected. As long as the new Clerk holds the relevant qualification when the council seeks re-accreditation, then the Council will again be able to retain its status as a Quality council.

Q: Our Cilca qualified clerk has recently left us and we are due to reaccredit. Our new clerk does not have the Cilca qualification and will not be able to undertake and complete the qualification in time to meet the test. Does this mean that we will lose Quality status?

A: Not necessarily. Where a new clerk has been appointed they will have 12 months to achieve the Cilca qualification. However, this 12 month period is not from the date of the council's reaccreditation, it is 12 months from the appointment of the clerk.

So, for example, X Parish Council is due to reaccredit by 1 May 2010 but appointed a new clerk without the Cilca qualification on 1 January 2010. The council will be required to submit a portfolio before the 1 May 2010 and will need to meet all the tests except the Qualified Clerk test. However, the council will be required to show that their current clerk has registered for the Cilca qualification (copy of confirmation of registration sent to candidate). Should the council meet the tests and provide evidence that their clerk has registered for Cilca they will be reaccredited, although this is a provisional award subject to evidence (copy of Cilca certificate) being provided by 1 January 2011 (one year after the clerks appointment) that the clerk has successfully achieved the qualification. Further guidance on this issue can be found on the NALC website.

- **Council meetings**

Q: Do you have to publish draft minutes of full council meetings within two months of a meeting taking place or can you publish the agreed minutes?

A: You can publish agreed or draft minutes in order to satisfy the requirements of the test. The test was amended as some councils meet only six times a year which makes publishing agreed minutes more difficult.

Q: How does the requirement to publish draft minutes sit with the exemption to publish draft minutes under Freedom of Information?

A: The test was amended to help councils who only meet six times a year. Good practice would be to publish agreed minutes where possible. If a council are unwilling to publish draft minutes they will be required to publish agreed minutes within two months of a meeting in order to pass this part of the test.

Q: In addition to holding 4 meetings of the Council each year, a council also has numerous Committees established to discharge the work of the Council, can this count towards the minimum 6 meetings per year?

A: No, in order to be awarded Quality status, the full council must meet on at least 6 occasions every year.

- **Communication and community engagement**

Q: Do publicly available email addresses need to be available for each councillor?

A: No, a general email address for the council is sufficient. In stating how members can be contacted the council may wish to publish individual contact details for each councillor or they may wish to route enquiries through the clerk in the first instance and pass them on this way.

Q: What is a weblog?

A: Also referred to as a blog, a weblog is an online journal and could be used in a local council context to inform the local community about what is going on at the council or perhaps it could highlight the activities of members or lead members such as a mayor. A typical weblog is updated regularly.

Q: Is it permissible to set up web pages on the principal authority website as long as all the required information is included?

A: Yes, it is permissible to use pages hosted by your principal authority as long as the pages include a list of council members and officers, together with how they can be contacted and provides access to your annual report, as a minimum. It is also permissible to include a weblog as part of the hosted site.

Q: Part of the test relating to the provision of a website refers to providing a list of councillors and officers, together with how they can be contacted. Does this mean that contact details for all officers of the council should be provided?

A: Not necessarily, as a minimum you should provide contact details for the clerk and deputy clerk. It is these officers that will usually co-ordinate work undertaken by the council. For example, if a member of the public identified a roadside verge that needed attention the first point of contact would likely be the council clerk not the councils maintenance team. Some larger councils may have officers who are directly responsible for taking queries and co-ordinating action for certain services. In these cases it may make sense for a council to list the officer and contact details. Councils should include additional officer contact details in addition to those of clerk and deputy clerk where it is considers them reasonable and beneficial to the local community.

- **Annual report**

Q: Part of the test includes a requirement to provide a list of councillors and officers, together with how they can be contacted. Does this mean that contact details for all officers of the council should be provided?

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- **Accountability**

Q: The test states that the statement of accounts must receive an unqualified opinion from the external auditor. Does this mean that any comments on the statement mean that a council would fail the test?

A: No, not unless the auditor has made a comment in box 1. Comments in the first box of the auditors report denote a qualification and would mean that a council would fail the test. A comment in the second box is not a qualification but an emphasis of matter.

- **Code of Conduct**

- **Promoting local democracy and citizenship**

- **Terms and Conditions**

Q: With regard to that part of the test whereby the council has adopted (as a minimum) the NALC/SLCC Terms and Conditions agreement I assume that the agreement adopted must be the most current available.

A: The relevant contract is the one agreed at the start of employment, which must be, at a minimum, the NALC:SLCC Model Contract in existence at the time. Any changes to that contract need the agreement of the council and the clerk.

- **Training**

Q: We initially accredited on the old version of the Scheme where we were not required to produce a Training Statement of Intent. The updated criteria states that we will need to show that we have acted upon one at reaccreditation. Is this the case?

A: No, councils accrediting for the first time on the new criteria will be required to provide a Statement of Intent, not to show that they have acted upon one. For example, a council accredits for the first time in 2005 on the old criteria. In 2009 they decide to apply for reaccreditation which would be based on the new criteria. At this stage they should provide a

Statement of Intent on Training. Should they apply for reaccreditation again in 2013 they will at this point be required to show how they acted upon this Statement of intent.

Q: How do we provide evidence that we have acted upon our training statement of intent?

A: You should be able to show a list of training activities/courses that have been undertaken and provide any further evidence that you feel shows that you have acted proactively on training.

## • The accreditation and re-accreditation process

Q: At re-accreditation will we be required to submit a full portfolio as per the initial accreditation?

A: Yes, a full portfolio will be required. However, you will not be required to provide evidence to cover the previous four years of accreditation. The process will be the same as that at first accreditation with regard to evidence.

## • Miscellaneous

Q: Given the variety of detail provided by different councils in submitting applications, has a grading system for the Quality Scheme been considered?

A: No, as the Scheme stands councils are just required to show that they have met the tests. However, upgrade Schemes, perhaps a Quality Plus Scheme, will be considered whereby a council could be tested against further more detailed criteria should they wish. Initial thoughts are that councils could gain Quality status and then, should they wish, test themselves further to gain a further award. This would not affect the Quality Scheme as it stands and would be optional for Quality councils. The National Stakeholders will keep the idea of a further upgrade award under review.

Q: If a council fails in its application for Quality status is there a mechanism for appeal?

A: Not at this time but we will keep this under review.

*This document will be updated on a regular basis to reflect questions put to us and to continue to provide up-to-date information*

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