

1.1 TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Once you have undertaken your training in 'Being a Good Councillor' and 'The Next Step' you will have the general level of information and resources to make a positive impact as a councillor. But this does not mean you have nothing more to learn. A good councillor will actively seek to grow their knowledge and keep up to date with developments in the sector.

WHO TO ASK?

Always start by asking your clerk. It is the clerk's job to receive information from other bodies and keep up-to-date on your behalf. As a council you should monitor the clerk's workload to ensure that there are sufficient hours to carry out the tasks required by the council.

There are a number of publications that your clerk may find useful in their role

- **Arnold-Baker on Local Council Administration** originally written by Charles Arnold-Baker and more recently updated by Paul Clayden; published by LexisNexis (OVW, CALCs and SLCC sell copies at a discounted price)
- **Local Councils Explained** by Meera Tharmarajah of NALC is available for purchase from your CALC or OVW. It contains model standing orders.
- **The Clerk's Manual** is published by the SLCC (see www.slcc.co.uk)
- **Governance and Accountability (England): Practitioners Guide** or **Governance and Accountability (Wales): Practitioners Guide** (latest editions) can be downloaded from the NALC and SLCC websites. Each edition contains statutory proper practices and is essential for all councils.

Clerks also have access to a range of training and qualifications that will help them support the council.



ORGANISATIONS

The first stop for advice will normally be your local county association. It is vital that your council is a member to benefit from its services and keep abreast of changes affecting local councils. Your local county association will also offer a number of training opportunities for you and your clerk so do make sure you keep up to date with all the support available to you.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) provides advice for local councils in membership of the local county association and NALC on legal matters, policy, training and development. It also keeps councils up-to-date with news affecting local councils.

As a councillor you cannot approach NALC directly for legal advice. If your council requires advice, your clerk should first see if the County Association can help. If not, they will refer your council's query to NALC. There is also information available on the NALC website www.nalc.gov.uk.

Your council may also be a member of other organisations, or have access to support and advice from partners, eg your principal council. It is worthwhile to explore all the support that might be available to you.



USEFUL RESOURCES

There are a wide range of publications you may find useful in your role such as:

- The booklet, *The Good Councillors' Guide*, is a useful introduction. There are separate editions for England and Wales. The booklet for England is available to download from the members area (all member councils have password access) of www.nalc.gov.uk or in hard copy from your local county association.
- *Being a Good Employer* a useful booklet available to download from the members area (all member councils have password access) of www.nalc.gov.uk or in hard copy from your local county association.
- For specialist guidance on employment issues the website for ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) is also useful.
- The NALC Communications Toolkit available to download from the members area (all member councils have password access) of www.nalc.gov.uk
- *A Community and Town Councillors Handbook: The land use planning system in Wales* is published by Planning Aid Wales and available from <http://www.planningaidwales.org.uk/about-planning/guidance-publications/>.
- NALC/CPRE (2012) *How to respond to planning applications: an 8-step guide*, is available from www.planninghelp.org.uk or www.cpre.org.uk.

And the list is growing all the time!

2.1 SPECIMEN JOB DESCRIPTION CLERK TO THE COUNCIL

SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES

- To ensure that statutory and other provisions affecting the running of the council are observed.
- To monitor and balance the council's accounts and prepare records for audit purposes and VAT.
- To ensure that the council's obligations for risk assessment and management are properly met.
- To prepare, in consultation with the appropriate members, agendas for meetings of the council and committees. To attend such meetings and prepare minutes for approval.
- To attend all meetings of the council and all meetings of its committees and sub-committees.
- To receive and deal with, in accordance with the council's procedures, any or all correspondence and documents.
- To receive and report on invoices for goods and services for the council and to ensure such accounts are met. To issue invoices on behalf of the council and to ensure payment is received.
- To study reports and other data on activities of the council. Where appropriate, to discuss such matters with specialists and to produce reports for circulation and discussion by the council.
- To draw up reports on his/her own initiative and as a result of suggestions by councillors. To present these reports for consideration by the council. To advise on the practicality and likely effects of specific courses of action.



- To supervise any other members of council staff as their line manager in keeping with the policies of the council. To undertake all necessary activities in connection with the management of salaries, conditions of employment and the work of other staff.
- To monitor the implemented policies of the council to ensure they are achieving the desired results and, where appropriate, suggest changes.
- To act as the representative of the council as required.
- To issue notices and prepare agendas and minutes for the Annual Parish/Town Meeting. To attend the Parish Meeting and to implement the decisions made at the Parish/Town meeting, as agreed by the council.
- To prepare, in consultation with the chairman, press releases about the activities or decisions of, the council.
- To attend training courses or seminars as required by the council. To work towards the achievement of the status of being a CiLCA (or equivalent) qualified clerk as a minimum requirement for effectiveness in the position of clerk to the council.

2.2 EXAMPLE PERSON SPECIFICATION FOR A CLERK

ESSENTIAL

KNOWLEDGE/QUALIFICATIONS

English/Maths	GCSE or equivalent
Must undertake all necessary training	Certificate in Local Council Administration (CILCA)
Financial management experience	Able to manage financial matters/ read and present management accounts

SKILLS

Computer skills	Word processing, spreadsheets, internet
Management skills	Staff management
Communication skills	Oral and in writing (letters/reports)
Good people skills	Dealing with the public/difficult people
Good telephone manner	Deal with enquiries/keep records
Problem-solving skills	Demonstrate initiative to solve problems

ATTITUDES

Can work on own initiative	Carrying out research to provide advice, contribute to ideas and policies
Able to work under pressure	Must be able to meet deadlines
Able to work to flexible hour	Servicing evening meetings/weekend functions

DESIRABLE

KNOWLEDGE/QUALIFICATIONS

Holds Local Policy Qualifications	CertHE or above University of Gloucestershire
Some knowledge of local government	Previous experience at local government level
Some knowledge of the locality	Main issues affecting the area
Some knowledge of relevant Acts of Parliament	Local Government Acts, Data Protection, Freedom of Information, Employment Law

SKILLS

Creative ability	Able to contribute to the design of notices and newsletters
Presentation skills	Able to use equipment and speak in public
Using office machinery	Computer, photocopier and fax
Car driver	Attendance at meetings and courses
Meeting skills	Experience of protocols in meetings and taking minutes

2.3 THE INTERVIEW

Interviewing for a post is arguably the most important and costly action for which an employer is responsible. To get it right will give the council a tremendous asset. To get it wrong can be a disaster. Essential facts about a prospective employee can be obtained from a well-designed application form and if answers need more detail, then these can be teased out during interview.

Some other things to consider before the interview are:

- The job description is up-to-date and appropriate (this should be discussed with the outgoing clerk, to check for relevance)
- A person specification has been prepared
- The interview process will be handled by a staffing or human resources committee, or where there isn't one, by a small number of councillors. Not more than three councillors plus the existing clerk should be involved.
- The room should be private with no interruptions allowed and layout should be carefully considered to put candidates at their ease
- Waiting space is available for candidates
- If tests are to be done there should be a space and computer equipment available for this
- If candidates have been asked to make an oral presentation, equipment should be available, and working, and the room should have appropriate layout
- All interviewers should be trained or experienced in interviewing
- Keep to time slots for interviews
- Councillors should decide which questions they will ask of each candidate in advance and be ready to write down the candidate's responses for reference when choosing the successful candidate
- All questions should be carefully checked to ensure compliance with employment law. For example, no questions about age, marital status, intention to start a family, religion or political party may be asked
- If in doubt about any aspects of the recruitment process, expert advice should be sought

2.4 EXAMPLE ESSENTIAL RECRUITMENT QUESTIONS

EDUCATION

What level of formal education have you reached?

Have you achieved any other qualifications since the — vocational or academic?

COMPUTER SKILLS

What does your experience with computers cover?

For how long have you used a computer? What range of programs have you used?

What level of competence have you reached? Do you have any qualifications?

Do a test before the interview asking candidates to produce a letter and spreadsheet or ask candidates to bring evidence of their work.

GOOD PEOPLE SKILLS

What is the most difficult people situation you have had to deal with in the work place?

Have you had to deal with an angry member of the public? What did you do?

What experience do you have of dealing with complaints/ irate callers?

What sort of people upset you?

GOOD TELEPHONE MANNER

What experience do you have of dealing with people on the telephone?

In what situations?

What has been the most difficult telephone call you have had to handle?

How did you deal with the call?

CAN WORK ON OWN INITIATIVE

What experience have you had of researching details and information as a contribution to your own or the work of other people?

What reports have you written?

What are the most creative things you have done at work? (Or outside work) Give examples.

ABLE TO WORK UNDER PRESSURE

Have you worked on your own for periods of time?

What difficulties does this cause you?

Give examples of how you have been able to meet deadlines?

ABLE TO WORK TO FLEXIBLE HOURS

How do you feel about having to work on some evenings or weekends to cover meetings?

MUST UNDERTAKE TRAINING

Would you be prepared to undertake formal training to become a qualified clerk?

Would you attend appropriate training courses?

2.5 WHY APPRAISALS?

Maintaining the clerk's focus and motivation is essential if they are to make a full contribution to the council. Performance appraisals actively involve clerks in understanding what is expected of them. By setting agreed objectives and later reviewing the results, the clerk is made responsible for his or her own performance.

An appraisal is a regular opportunity to identify and deal with the most important issues facing the clerk. By clarifying the clerk's key objectives, you are able to make it possible for him or her to achieve or exceed them. You use the appraisal to set new objectives with the clerk.

An appraisal is not a pay review, which is a separate issue. It is an opportunity for open and frank discussions and should be seen as a tool for teamwork. It is a chance for both the employee and employer to raise issues and have open and honest conversations about the role and job performance. It helps if the appraisal is seen as developmental rather than judgmental and if the clerk is given an opportunity to suggest changes in the way the council operates.

Appraisals allow you to recognise achievements during the previous period and motivate the clerk to achieve even more. Actually saying 'well done' or 'thank you' may seem unimportant, but acknowledgements like these are extremely important to the clerk.

By identifying and correcting problems you will improve productivity. By asking for feedback and ideas, you find out how to improve. An appraisal gives you an insight into the work being done and the person doing it.

Appraisals show your clerk you care about their problems, their aspirations and their views. Done well, appraisals result in employees being confident and focused on their objectives.

2.6 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR AN APPRAISAL FORM

How well do you think you have performed since your last review?

Have you experienced any problems in achieving your key objectives since your last review?

In what aspects of your work were you really successful?

In which areas do you think you could improve your performance?

How would you rate your own achievements?

How well are you working with others in the team?

How well are you managing to prioritise your workload?

How are you coping with working on your own initiative?

What do you find most or least interesting in your job?

Do you have any interests or abilities which could be better used?

Are your working hours satisfactory?

What help and training do you need to develop your role?

What could the council do to improve your work situation?

What do you think your key objectives for the next six months should be?