



Role of a Parish Councillor

The role of councillor is a voluntary position. The duties and responsibilities of being a councillor are many and varied and requires a willingness to have contact with local people in their own community and to get involved with concerns, issues and local authority regulations.

Councillors must always carry out their duties considering the interests of the community which they represent despite their political or religious persuasion. A councillor signs a Declaration of Acceptance of Office and thereby undertakes to observe an ethical Code of Conduct when dealing with matters on behalf of the community.

Elections

Parish councillors are elected for a term of four years. The right to vote at any local government election is dependent upon the person's name having been entered in the current register of local government electors which is published annually. In all cases, the ordinary election of local councillors is conducted by means of nomination of candidates by two electors and, if necessary, a poll. A person (unless disqualified) is qualified to be elected to be a councillor if he/she is a British subject, a Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Irish Republic if on the relevant day he/she is 18 years of age or over and (1) is and continues to be a local elector for the parish, (2) has during the whole of the 12 months preceding that day occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the parish, (3) his/her principal or only place of work during those 12 months has been in the parish, or he/she has during the whole of those 12 months resided in the parish or within three miles of it.

Should all vacancies not be filled during the election process then the co-option process could be implemented to fill the vacancies. If a vacancy arises due to any other reason such as a resignation of an elected councillor, then a mid-term election should then take place to fill the vacancy if required; otherwise the vacancy can be filled by co-option..

Meetings

A Parish Councillor is summoned to attend meetings of the council; this is a legal summons. In a smaller council this may only require one meeting of full council a month (there are however a few small councils that still only meet once every two months). In medium and larger councils however, along with full council meetings, there are further committee meetings or working groups. Most meetings are held in the evening but some committees and group representation may be during the day. Some of these committees may include planning, finance and HR Committee. Where committees are used however the council usually consists of a larger number of councillors and therefore each councillor is only expected to serve on one or two committees.

Parish meetings are not meetings of the local councils; the parish meeting is a meeting for all of the electors in the parish.

External Representation

Local councils also need representation at other local government meetings or on local bodies/organisations and councillors may be asked to serve on certain groups or attend functions on behalf of the parish council. Councillors act as ambassadors for their community keeping everyone aware of local needs and concerns and reporting back to the local council. Councillors represent the voice of their community as a whole, whilst being aware of and considerate to, specific minority needs.

Ceremonial Duties

Some councillors may be asked to attend civic functions as part of their duty to the community, for example Remembrance Day.

Councillor skills

A council will draw on the skills and experiences of its councillors to ensure that as a whole it is a strong team so the more varied skills brought to the council by its representative the stronger it will be.

Councillors working as a team will need to deal with employment issues, budgeting, asset management, staff management, project management or grant funding and probably lots more if they are creative, forward thinking and involved. A council must be aware that it is an employer and therefore has a duty to manage staff considerately, whether it is employing one parish clerk or a whole host of office and grounds' maintenance staff. Accounts must be kept and whilst the clerk (or Responsible Financial Officer) will be employed to carry out this duty, it is the corporate body that is the council that is responsible for the financial decisions made and implemented. A clerk is employed to advise and seek advice on behalf of the council to help ensure that councillors make informed decisions. Councillors are there to consider the information gathered and to then make a group decision on all matters. No individual councillor is responsible for any single decision.

Training and support

Training is available from Lancashire Association of Local Councils to any council, large or small. Legislation allows for councils to pay for training and ongoing training for councillors is sound business management. Councils are advised to adopt a training policy for both councillors and council employees and to ensure that there is an annual budget to support this.

Responsibility

Councillors are expected to abide by their council's Code of Conduct. The responsibilities detailed in the Code are designed to protect councillors as well as the people they serve and give clear guidance so that councillors may undertake their duties with confidence and integrity.

About the Parish Council Clerk?

The clerk is the council's chief officer, working for a local council serving a local community. The health and wellbeing of the local community is at the heart of everything a clerk does and the clerk is a vital asset to the council.

The clerk:

- Advises the council on legal matters
- Administers the council's finances
- Organises the council's procedures
- Gathers information to help the council make decisions
- Raises the profile of the council in the local community
- Guides the council as it engages with its residents
- Negotiates with other organisations
- Implements the council's decisions
- Manages the council's projects

It is a professional role requiring specialist knowledge and a range of skills. The clerk is employed by the council to manage its activities and provide administrative assistance and sound advice.

The clerk is normally the 'proper officer' – a legal term meaning the appropriate officer for a specific function. The council must appoint the officers it needs to do its work. The council must also appoint a Responsible Financial Officer (RFO) to manage its finances. The clerk and RFO are often the same person – but not always. Even if the clerk is not the RFO, the clerk will still need to understand the council's finances.