

QUALITY PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

Report By: County Secretary and Solicitor

Wards Affected

County wide

Purpose

1. To consider the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in Herefordshire.

Background

2. The Rural White Paper "Our Countryside: The Future. A Fair Deal for Rural England", published in November 2000, set out a number of measures to give local people the opportunity to become more involved in the development of their communities. It viewed parish and town councils as the democratic bodies with the closest direct links to their communities, and as such, ideally placed to contribute to the community in the long-term. The White Paper proposed a number of initiatives designed to enhance the role of parish and town councils, one of which is the introduction of the concept of a "Quality Parish or Town Council".
3. Quality Status is part of the Government's drive to modernise local government, and aims to equip parish and town councils to take on a stronger community role and be more in touch with the people they serve, and should be achievable by any parish or town council regardless of size or location. Achieving quality status demonstrates that a council has met certain minimum standards expected from an effective, representative and active council. The scheme is voluntary. Hereafter in this report, any reference to parish councils also includes town councils.

Achieving Quality Status

4. To obtain Quality Status, a parish council must demonstrate that it:
 - Is representative of, and actively engages with, all parts of the community, providing vision, identity, and a sense of belonging;
 - Is effectively and properly managed;
 - Has the ability and capacity to take on the enhanced role and responsibility that Quality Status is likely to bring.
5. The following tests have been devised to measure the above criteria, and a parish council must pass each one (and provide the required evidence) to be awarded Quality Status. As a general rule, the tests exceed the statutory duties with which parish councils must comply, and they represent standards which a well-run parish council that works for its community should be meeting:
 - **Electoral Mandate:** For first accreditation, at least 80% of all council seats must be filled at the beginning of the four-year term by members who have been nominated and stood for election (this does not mean that there *must* be an election, however, because in parishes where there are more seats than

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nominees, the Returning Officer automatically declares the nominees "elected" without the need for a ballot). For reaccreditation, this figure must be 100%.

- **Qualifications of the Clerk:** The Clerk must hold either:
 - i. Certificate in Local Council Administration awarded by the Assessment and Qualification Alliance (AQA); or
 - ii. Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy of Local Council Administration awarded by the University of Gloucestershire.
- **Council Meetings:** The Quality scheme goes beyond the minimum requirements of one annual meeting and at least three others during the year, to stipulate:
 - i. Six meetings per year. The annual meeting can count as one of the six.
 - ii. Notices of the meeting must be publicly displayed at least three clear days before each meeting;
 - iii. The Minutes of the meeting must be published within two months of the meeting and available for inspection by any elector in the parish;
 - iv. Each meeting must allow time for public participation;
 - v. All councillors must attend the meeting unless there is a good reason for absence.
- **Communication:** There are mandatory and discretionary elements to this test. The mandatory requirements are:
 - i. The parish council must produce a newsletter to local people at least four times a year, and it must be readily available at public sites across the parish;
 - ii. The newsletter must include information on the names of councillors and the clerk and how they can be contacted;
 - iii. A synopsis of the annual report should be provided to all local people.

The discretionary elements relate to other appropriate communications activities (for example, maintaining a parish council website, email facilities, councillor surgeries), and parish councils must meet at least nine of these requirements.
- **Annual Reports:** Parish councils must produce an annual report, updating the community on its achievements.
- **Accounts:** Parish councils must maintain accurate and transparent financial arrangements, and allow electors adequate and timely access to information, in compliance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 (SI 2003/533 refers).
- **Ethical Framework:** This is based on the requirements of the Local Government Act 2000, and all parish councils have had to adopt a new Code of Conduct from May 2002. All councillors must sign up to the Code and register their interests (the Parish Councils (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2001, SI 2001/3576 refers).

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The Benefits

6. The primary aim of Quality Status is to provide considerable benefits to the community which the parish council serves. Quality parish councils play an enhanced role in the community:
 - As an integral part of all consultation and co-ordination arrangements set up by local authorities and other service providers;
 - In the discussion, management and delivery of services;
 - In the provision of access points to information on services of local authorities and other service providers.

Quality Status In Herefordshire

7. At present, some fifteen parish councils in Herefordshire are working towards Quality Status, with one (Pembridge) having a qualified clerk. The Council and Herefordshire parish and town councils adopted the "Charter for Herefordshire Councils" in November 2002 (available on the Council's website). It is a working document which will be reviewed regularly, and sets out how the authorities will work together in partnership. Part 2 of the Charter details the ways in which Herefordshire Council will work with parish councils, summarised briefly as:
 - **Community Strategies:** Where a quality council has prepared a Parish Plan, Herefordshire Council will take account of proposals and priorities in developing the local community strategy;
 - **Information Points:** Herefordshire Council will help quality councils to become local information points by providing all the necessary information and application forms for its services, and by providing adequate training;
 - **Land Use and Development Planning:** Herefordshire Council will adopt as Supplementary Planning Guidance, any village or town plans prepared by parish councils. In addition, it will consider and discuss any proposed changes to the current development plan for the area;
 - **Delegation of Functions and Service Provision:** Quality councils are able to take on a variety of services and functions usually provided by Herefordshire Council. Examples include street cleaning, Tree Preservation Orders, issue of bus and rails passes, and some aspects of leisure and tourism (a full list of functions is appended to the Charter document).
8. In addition, Herefordshire Council assists the attainment of Quality Status by supporting the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils through a Service Level Agreement (SLA). Some of the SLA funding (£10,500.00 per annum at present) goes towards providing a training programme for clerks. The Council's Parish Liaison Officer facilitates the Quality Status process through his role as the central point of contact between the Councils and parish councils, and through his presence on the County Training Partnership and the County Parish Plan Steering Group.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the report be noted.

BACKGROUND PAPERS: ODPM Publication: "The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme Explained" Charter for Herefordshire Councils (published November 2002)

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