

A NATIONAL TRAINING STRATEGY FOR PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

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CONTENTS

TITLE	PAGE
Introduction	3
Context	6
Strengthening the development and learning culture in town and parish councils	8
Developing the training framework	9
Building on existing training provision and accreditation	10
Enabling training delivery	11
Appendix 1 – Members of the National Training Strategy Steering Group	12
Appendix 2 – Development charter	13
Core Topics and Skills	15

INTRODUCTION

The Rural White Paper (November 2000) recognised the important role of the first tier of local government and proposed a number of initiatives which mean a major new role for parish and town councils.

The Countryside Agency and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) were tasked with developing a National Training Strategy to provide training and support for parish and town councils. The purpose of the Strategy is to enable councils to make the most of their role and to be able to carry out their duties more easily.

A National Steering Group was set up with representatives from a wide range of organisations with an interest to help develop this Strategy. This Strategy seeks to identify the key skills required to be an effective parish clerk building on the good work of existing training providers.

The Strategy will determine new ways in which parish clerks and councillors work including:

- An emphasis on measurable performance and quality initiatives
- A continued focus on competence and lifelong learning.
- A need for a flexible approach towards continuing professional development.

Training presents a myriad of benefits. Finance training, for example, will help clerks and councillors deal with the new audit regulations and implementation of the new 'lighter touch' audit regime. This new regime will have major cost implications on councils that fail to meet the required audit standards.

Another benefit of training will be that the status of clerk will be elevated considerably. Clerks who are empowered with up to date knowledge and new skills will help their council to make a measurable contribution to their community.

Yet another benefit of having a trained clerk is the quality parish status initiative. The Rural White Paper indicated that an important criterion for quality status will be the employment of a competent clerk with the necessary skills to effectively support their town or parish council. Quality parish status will provide a benchmark of minimum standards for an effective town or parish council. The recently published consultation paper on quality town and parish councils sets out detailed proposals for putting the quality parish concept into practice.

Quality parishes will play an enhanced role working in partnership with principal authorities on the management and delivery of services, in providing access to information and as part of consultation arrangements. Quality status will be available to all town and parish councils and the government is looking to most, if not all, town and parish councils to achieve quality status over the next few years.

Although they will not be officially assessed, competent and active councillors will be equally vital in ensuring that their councils meet the test for quality status.

It is important to make the most of existing training provision. As we implement this Strategy we will be seeking to build on existing skills and knowledge and particularly to ensure training is available where currently it is patchy.

There is already extensive training provision in this sector through the Society of Local Council Clerks, county associations of town and parish councils, the University of Gloucestershire (formerly Cheltenham and Gloucester College) and other further and higher education establishments, rural community councils, the Local Government Employers' Organisation and some principal authorities. The National Training Strategy will build on these existing strengths and will develop current best practice to provide an integrated training structure for all parish and town councils, their members and their staff. The National Training Strategy must address the emerging needs of town and parish councils as new demands are placed upon them.

This Strategy seeks to set out a core level of skills and point to a series of additional or advanced skills which may be useful (please see the 'Topics and Skills' section beginning on page 15.)

The Strategy will only succeed if it enjoys the full support of clerks and elected members at local level and that of county associations and other training providers. Full information about the strategy and the development of training initiatives will be shared with all town and parish councils and their county associations.

Clerks and councillors have a key role as agents of change in the training context. It is vital that all councils, large or small, rise to the challenge posed by the Rural White Paper. To have a competent clerk and to achieve quality parish status empowers local councils to provide services at the local level to meet the needs of the community.

Although the formal training requirement is for parish clerks, it is expected that councillors too will undertake relevant training to enable them to make the most of the opportunities they have.

This Strategy seeks to:

- **Establish the context in which to develop local councils' expertise and a supporting National Training Strategy.**
- **Enable parish and town councils to rise to the challenge of the Rural White Paper by strengthening the development and learning culture in town and parish councils and encouraging investment in training.**
- **Develop the training framework building on existing training provision and accreditation**
- **Enable high quality training delivery throughout England.**

The National Training Strategy will provide:

- **A basic core package for new clerks.**
- **Additional and advanced training for clerks and other staff.**
- **Training for councillors.**
- **Training for trainers and assessors.**
- **National standards.**
- **The establishment of an accrediting body.**
- **Links to qualification frameworks.**

To give recognition to the training provided to parish clerks and councillors, and to ensure consistent high quality training; we propose that all training in the sector will in future need to be accredited to attract funding. Existing training provision may need to be modified to meet the new skills and new training provision must meet the skills requirements.

Systems will need to be set in place to provide for approval and accreditation.

Resources

The Government has set aside £2m for development and implementation of this Strategy over three years. This will supplement the resources already being utilised by parish and town councils for their training.

The funds will be used to develop and implement the Strategy, to develop training packages and to support the development of new and more extensive training provision. A development grants scheme will be devised so that training providers working in partnership at the county level can bid for funds to further develop training at the local level.

Next steps

We are developing an implementation plan following this Strategy. Early in 2002 we will pilot the core training package and the county level partnership development grants. Further information and application forms will be made available in April 2002.

We will continue to work with a range of partners in the development of course materials and aim to have Core learning materials widely available by June 2002. The development of Additional training and the associated learning materials will follow as soon as possible thereafter.

We will also fully develop an accreditation structure which will tie in with established qualification frameworks.

CONTEXT

Between 1996 and 1999 the then Rural Development Commission commissioned a study by Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education (now the University of Gloucestershire) to carry out an assessment of the level of local council training provision in England.

The report found that the provision of training was patchy, ranging from virtually non-existent in a few counties to excellent in many others. Constraints on training were not so much a lack of trainers, but rather a severe lack of resources to organise, support, manage and market courses, particularly as part of a comprehensive and planned local programme and a lack of appreciation of the importance of training.

The report concluded that ...'those familiar with the work of local councils identified training as essential if parish councils are to play their full part in local community life. There is a clear demand for the provision of enhanced parish council training on the part of many active parish councils and those active local bodies working closely with them.....There is an urgent need to increase the demand for training by winning over the 'hearts and minds' of the majority of councillors and clerks who fail to see the benefits of training....'

These findings were supported by a survey of Clerks undertaken in 2000 by the SLCC. The survey focussed on the perception of training provision across the country, the varied activity levels, identification of demand through the topics most requested and preferred means of training delivery.

Over 50% of those surveyed confirmed a need for appropriate training provision. Whilst this is very encouraging, there is still a clear need to reach the 40%+ that did not express an interest in training and to instil a positive approach to continuous professional development.

A geographical study of existing training provision was started by NALC in early July 2001 with the aim of being able to compile a directory of training provision. District councils, County councils and County Associations were contacted and asked to provide information on all training in their area for Parish/Town members and staff. They were also asked to list other training providers that they were aware of providing regular training to the Parish/Town Council sector. (Employers Organisation, Colleges of further education, the SLCC etc)

The District level response was quite encouraging. Even if not providing courses directly, many knew of the local branches of the SLCC, Employers' Organisation and County associations as providers of training. There seemed to be a real enthusiasm for more joined-up working and to develop training for the parish and town councils at the District level.

Response from the County Councils was less encouraging, many of those who did reply did not provide training or know of any training providers to the parish and town councils sector.

Most county secretaries replied, many submitting training schedules for 2001/2. The majority of respondents said they provided regular and well attended training events, or had good links with other training providers in their county. A recent training day in Staffordshire prompted one clerk to comment: "I learnt more in one day than in one year's work as a clerk". To have such a positive reaction to training is a credit to the trainers involved.

A small percentage of county secretaries replied saying that they had little or no training in their area. They in particular are looking forward to reaping the benefits of a National Training Strategy. One of the primary aims of this Strategy will be to target those areas with least training provision.

The directory of training provision is being compiled from the continuing response to the survey and will be held at the NALC offices. This will provide a source of information for those trainers wishing to establish county level training partnerships.

From this research it is clear that training is needed in diverse forms including delivery at local level in one day, evening or occasional weekend sessions. The recommendations and suggestions gleaned from these reports have been taken on board in the design of this strategy. A principal aim of the Steering Group is therefore to ensure that this message reaches the targets for which it is intended.

STRENGTHENING THE DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING CULTURE IN TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

It is fully recognised that many clerks work on a part time basis, sometimes for more than one council. The majority of clerks work longer hours than they are paid for and we are all too aware of the mountains of paperwork that clerks have to deal with. It is not the aim of the National Training Strategy to add to these existing burdens.

To support parish and town councils, especially those who wish to respond effectively to the quality parish initiative and the developed role set out in the Rural White Paper, the National Training Strategy needs to help strengthen the culture of development and learning in this sector. Many councils and their various advisory bodies already strongly reflect this culture, but there is much to be done to ensure that all councils share that commitment to development and learning.

All town and parish councils therefore need to be fully informed about and committed to the need to strengthen training and development at the local level.

There is the all-too-common feeling that because people have worked as a clerk or a councillor for years that they 'don't need training' or 'know all they need to know'. The reality is that councils must take responsibility for the continuous professional development of their staff and members. Being up to date with changes in policy and legislation and advances in technology is essential if councils are to work more efficiently.

We will:

- **Engender a culture of training for members and clerks by developing a national model development charter. This will act as a framework for the implementation of councillor and officer training at local level. (See Appendix 2, page 13).**
- **Actively promote training and development opportunities through nationally agreed promotional materials and effective use of IT.**
- **Involve parish and town councils fully in the continuing development of the National Training Strategy through their input at local, regional and national level.**
- **Establish effective and recognised lines of communication for access to information.**

DEVELOPING THE TRAINING FRAMEWORK

It is recognised that councils range from populations of one hundred and fifty to over fifty thousand, with budgets of a few hundred pounds to over three million pounds. Therefore, any new training provision must meet the needs of councils and be responsive to particular features of the sector such as the current high turnover of clerks. It must be emphasised that while it is hoped that all councils will seek to achieve the core qualification for their clerk, it will not be compulsory.

To achieve constant availability of the right training across the country, there needs to be nationally determined standards and targets for training. The steering group will compile these in consultation with councils and providers.

Areas of skills and knowledge will be defined for the range of occupational tasks undertaken in the sector. Current and future training provision must comply with these areas of skills and knowledge. These will build on a common core but will become more complex according to the needs of each town or parish council. Needs will be dependent on a number of factors including size of population and the council's level of activity, but one of the primary indicators of need will be budget size.

Systems of assessment will need to be designed to cater for all staff, including those who are already formally qualified (e.g. from Cheltenham and Gloucester college, now the University of Gloucestershire) and those who are 'qualified by experience' (i.e. already have the necessary skill set to do the job)

We have:

- **Identified national standards (groupings of skills and areas of knowledge).**
- **Identified the skills and knowledge framework for a Core training programme. Our proposals for this are attached in the 'Topics and Skills' document.**

We will:

- **Develop a Core training package using the SLCC induction course as a basis for piloting in early 2002.**
- **Develop a guide to producing the portfolio of evidence by April 2002**
- **Develop additional training to implement by June 2003 to enable clerks and councillors to undertake specialist modules, covering a range of further and advanced training to reflect the needs of different councils.**
- **Investigate links to fit these Core and Additional areas of skills and understanding into a national qualifications framework.**

BUILDING ON EXISTING TRAINING PROVISION AND ACCREDITATION

There is no point in re-inventing the wheel. There is extensive good practice in current training and development within the sector. This needs to be identified and used as a key component of the Strategy and future training provision.

It is recognised that some modifications to existing provision may be needed to ensure consistency of standards and provision, especially in relation to any qualification framework. It is also recognised that existing qualifications (such as the course run by the University of Gloucestershire) will need to fit into any overall qualification framework.

Some counties have well organised training that is accredited through colleges of further or higher education or other providers. Other training is not officially accredited.

In many areas training provision is already well established, although there will nevertheless be a need for monitoring, co-ordination and accreditation. In areas of weaker provision these functions will need to be supplemented by direct intervention to bring training provision up to the required standard.

There will also need to be an accrediting body for training. We are considering how best to meet this need. The Steering Group could take on this function or links could be formed with a national awarding body such as The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

We will:

- **Produce a directory of existing training provision by December 2001.**
- **Develop proposals for the extension of existing training provision to cover areas with little or no training.**
- **Work with existing training providers to modify existing training provision to meet the new areas of skills and knowledge.**
- **Develop proposals for accreditation.**
- **Set up a system to approve and accredit all training. This system will ensure that training meets national standards, attracting funding where available.**

ENABLING TRAINING DELIVERY

A significant proportion of the budget will be devoted to training delivery. In many contexts training will be based on existing provision, but a new training framework, including new trainers and support materials will be required.

The National Training Strategy Steering Group will consult with existing training providers and will generate the development of training initiatives.

Flexibility and partnership are the key to the success of the implementation of this strategy at national, regional and local levels. Training needs will only be met with the provision of flexible training methodologies.

Effective communication and full participation is central to the success of this initiative.

We will:

- **Devise a development grants scheme so all training providers at county level can work in partnership to apply for funds (by April 2002)**
- **Produce guidance for trainers on how to modify their courses for accreditation. (early 2002)**
- **Devise a mechanism for intervention in areas of little or no training.**
- **Work with existing providers for ideas on case studies, video scenarios, role plays and other teaching and learning methodologies.**
- **Use existing training material where appropriate and design new materials using print, CD ROM and web-based formats.**
- **Offer materials in Braille and various translations on request.**

APPENDIX 1

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL TRAINING STRATEGY STEERING GROUP

Steering Group Member:	Organisation represented:
Margaret Clark (chair)	Countryside Agency
Mike Beresford	Bishops Cleeve Parish Council
Margaret Bernard	Society of Local Council Clerks
Martin Cox	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
John Findlay	National Association of Local Councils
Roger Greenwood	Heptonstall Parish Council
Philip Hughes	Local Government Employers Organisation
Mary Mitson-Woods	Suffolk Association of Local Councils
Crispin Moor	Local Government Agency
Brian Nash	Department of Transport, Local government and the Regions
Nick Randle	Society of Local Council Clerks
Elisabeth Skinner	Cheltenham and Gloucester College
Stephen Wright	Gloucestershire Rural Community Council
Officers to the Group:	
Annabelle Middlemass	National Association of Local Councils
Sandy Shattock	Countryside Agency
Claire Spink	Countryside Agency
Sarah Thomas	National Association of Local Councils

APPENDIX 2 EXAMPLE DEVELOPMENT CHARTER

Message from the Chairman of Stoneyton Town Council:

This Development Charter is intended to give a very clear message about the high level of commitment we have to the personal development of our members and staff, and the commitment we want them to have in their own learning.

It is only by developing our members and staff and equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need, that we will be able to meet the challenges of the National Training Strategy.

It is the Council's aim to create a culture of learning and, to ensure that we make progress, we are setting our staff and members the target of, at the very least, achieving the CORE competencies as set out in the Strategy.

We will be evaluating the Development Charter and its impact and look forward to the progress that our 'trained' members and staff have been able to make.

**Mrs Anne Thirsk
Chairman, Stoneyton Town Council.**

The Development Charter:

As an employee (or member) of Stoneyton Town Council, I will be working in an organisation in which learning is valued. I will be supported to undertake the training and development which I need to help me achieve and maintain a high standard of performance and will be given encouragement and support to achieve my full potential.

I am entitled to:

- Equality of opportunity in all aspects of my development
- An induction programme into my own job as well as to the workings of Stoneyton Town Council.
- An understanding of the direction and objectives of the council
- An understanding of the contribution that is expected of me
- Clear and measurable objectives for my performance at work
- An annual review of my performance, role and training needs
- A personal development plan which addresses my development needs
- A chairman who is committed to staff development.
- Paid release (clerks) from work commitments in order to undertake training.

I will be encouraged to undertake:

- Continuous learning and development throughout my employment
- Development to enhance my career prospects

I recognise that learning is a personal responsibility and I will therefore:

- Share responsibility with my employer for identifying my development needs
- Take advantage of development opportunities
- Take the initiative when I recognise opportunities for learning
- Share my knowledge with others.