

# CORE TOPICS & SKILLS

November 2001

## TOPICS & SKILLS FOR CLERKS

The table on the next few pages shows the subject areas, skills and knowledge that are necessary for all clerks of parish or town councils who wish to attain certification of their competence and hence to contribute to achieving quality parish status. It also details items that must be submitted in a portfolio of evidence for assessment. Assistant clerks, aspiring clerks and administrative staff in councils may wish to take courses and submit a portfolio in order to further their careers.

If clerks / aspiring clerks etc take an accredited training course, the submission of a portfolio will be required as part of accredited courses.

Councillors are advised to ensure they have a sound level of knowledge in these areas but they do not have to provide evidence of their knowledge through the submission of a portfolio.

The main subject areas that clerks and councillors need to cover are referred to as the **TOPICS**. The **CORE** topics are those most basic skills and areas of knowledge that ALL clerks must evidence to qualify as 'competent', proving they can do their job effectively and take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

All trainers must include these CORE topics in their training in order to achieve accreditation.

Clerks must submit work in the portfolio of evidence that they themselves have produced. Where this is not possible clerks must annotate/amend documents produced by a previous clerk or another officer to show that they have a basic understanding of the skills and areas of knowledge that are detailed.

The **TOPIC** is the main subject area to be covered. The **SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE** are the actual skills or areas of awareness/knowledge that must be covered in an accredited training course. The **EVIDENCE** is the item to be submitted in the portfolio to demonstrate that the clerk understands what is required at the core level.

Holders of the complete ten module Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy from the Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education (now the University of Gloucestershire) will be exempt from producing the portfolio. Holders of other higher or further education qualifications may also qualify for exemptions but these will be taken on a case by case basis. Course organisers will need to prove they provide all the CORE level topics and skills to gain accreditation.

TOPIC		
COUNCIL ADMINISTRATION:	SKILLS / KNOWLEDGE	EVIDENCE: Please submit:
Local government context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure of local principal authorities</li> </ul>	<p>A list of useful contacts in your local principal authorities detailing their name, contact numbers and the level at which they sit (district/county/parish)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Returning Officer</li> <li>Highways Officer</li> <li>Rights of Way Officer</li> <li>Waste Disposal Officer</li> <li>Street Lighting Officer</li> <li>Planning Officer</li> <li>Housing Officer</li> <li>Development Control Officer</li> <li>Public conveniences Officer</li> <li>Development Plan Officer</li> <li>Emergency Planning Officer</li> <li>Education Officer</li> <li>Environmental Health Officer</li> <li>Transport Officer</li> <li>Footpaths Officer</li> </ul>
Meeting procedures and record keeping:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agenda setting</li>   <li>Procedures/ conduct of meetings:</li> </ul>	<p>An example of a legal agenda with clear reference to the items to be discussed in order to inform both councillors and members of the public.</p> <p>A calendar of council meetings for a one year period.</p> <p>A maximum of 6 agendas and minutes, including</p>

	<p>(notice of meetings, frequency of meetings, convening meetings, the quorum, election of the chair/vice chair, declaration of acceptance of office, appointment of committees / sub-committees, appointment of officers, minutes, failure of a councillor to attend meetings, rights of public to attend meetings, declaration of interests, resolutions and amendments to resolutions.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standing orders</li> <li>• The election procedure and conditions of office (including ethical framework and register of interests)</li> </ul>	<p>the Annual Meeting of Council, demonstrating working knowledge of the items listed opposite.</p> <p>A copy of your council's standing orders and if relevant, your recommendations for review.</p> <p>A recorded declaration that the signed code of conduct has been lodged with the Standards Board for England.</p> <p>A recent extract from the Interest book.</p>
Powers and functions in law:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The powers and functions of local councils including section 137</li> <li>• New and developing legislation, sources of advice and information on legal and procedural issues.</li> <li>• The duties and responsibilities of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. the chairman</li> <li>2. the councillor</li> <li>3. the clerk</li> <li>4. the council as a corporate body</li> </ol> </li> <li>• The delegation of functions</li> </ul>	<p>An explanation of the statutory powers of local councils including section 137 (approx. 200 words)</p> <p>Details of two publications and two contacts who can offer sound legal advice.</p> <p>An explanation of the different duties and responsibilities of each role. (approx. 200 words each)</p> <p>A copy of the relevant standing order relating to the delegation of functions in your council.</p>
<b>FINANCE:</b>	<b>SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>EVIDENCE: Please submit:</b>
Accounting/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Account keeping and compliance with current financial</li> </ul>	End of Year Statement, Balance Sheet and

<p>budgeting</p>	<p>regulations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budgeting and precept</li> <li>• Internal and external audit processes</li> <li>• The importance of insurance</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sources of advice on financial matters</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sources of income, including grants, loans and charges</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best Value (the law or spirit of, as relevant to your council)</li> </ul>	<p>supporting notes as you would present to the council for adoption.</p> <p>A budget document as you would present to the council for adoption.</p> <p>A copy of your council's financial regulations.</p> <p>A copy of your council's valid insurance documents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. employer's liability</li> <li>2. public liability</li> <li>3. contractor's insurance</li> <li>4. clerk's fidelity</li> </ol> <p>Details of two publications and two contacts who can offer your council sound financial advice</p> <p>Any evidence of sourcing extra income for your councils (in addition to the precept)</p> <p>An explanation of the way in which Best Value might apply to your council (approx. 200 words)</p>
<p><b>COMMUNICATION:</b></p>	<p><b>SKILLS/ KNOWLEDGE</b></p>	<p><b>EVIDENCE: please submit:</b></p>

Report/ letter writing, production of publicity material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Raising the profile of the Parish Council within the community through the use of IT</li> <li>Handling complaints from members of the public</li> </ul>	<p>Two from the following list: press release, leaflets, newsletter, local magazine, council's website home page printout, letter to another authority, a report for public consumption.</p> <p>A copy of the council's complaints procedure OR an example of how you handled a complaint positively.</p>
<b>PLANNING:</b>	<b>SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>EVIDENCE: please submit</b>
The town and country planning process:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The planning framework – including planning law, government guidance, development control, development plan policies (local &amp; structure) and planning obligation.</li> <li>Effective observations on planning applications</li> </ul>	<p>A list of planning documents that apply to your area</p> <p>Evidence from minutes of how planning decisions have been made (one in support, one objecting.)</p>
<b>TRAINING:</b>	<b>SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>EVIDENCE: Please submit</b>
Continuing professional development:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessing and meeting personal training needs</li> </ul>	An explanation of your perceived training needs (areas you feel you need to work on) to present to your council for consideration. (approx. 200 words)
<b>EMPLOYMENT ISSUES:</b>	<b>SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>EVIDENCE: Please submit</b>
Correct procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contracts, person specifications and job descriptions – good practice.</li> </ul>	<p>A copy of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your contract of employment</li> <li>A person specification for your role</li> <li>A job description for your role</li> </ol> <p>(If you don't have any of the above, then submit what you would present to council for approval.)</p>
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>SKILLS/ KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>EVIDENCE: Please submit:</b>

<b>ACTIVITY:</b>		
Issues affecting the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sources of funding, information and advice to support community activity</li> <li>Awareness of other active groups within your community</li> </ul>	<p>A list of 3 people/organisations contacted in your area re: fund raising or grant applications for specific projects.</p> <p>Contact details of local groups e.g.: Church, Girl Guides, Scouts, Credit Union, Neighbourhood Watch.</p>

**ADDITIONAL** skills and areas of knowledge may be necessary for the running of a larger parish or town council or for clerk dealing with responsibilities particular to his or her council. Additional skills and areas of knowledge also relate to developing an advanced level of understanding. The Aim of an ADDITIONAL table (to be developed in 2002-2003) will be to highlight specialist areas of council work and the importance of keeping up to date.

Clerks (etc) will be invited to participate in courses on topics relevant to their council and to their individual training needs and should demonstrate participation as a minimum requirement for a Continuing Professional Development Portfolio. If, however, the clerk wishes to demonstrate that s/he has acquired a deeper level of understanding, a greater confidence in working in the sector, a broader knowledge of a subject and/or a higher level of skill, s/he will need to take an accredited course with assessment. This assessment may take the form of :

- Assignments that demonstrate an advanced level of understanding and skill
- Submission of an ADDITIONAL portfolio of evidence.

Please find below an example of how the CORE table and the proposed ADDITIONAL table may be used for specific town/parish clerks

Little Dabley is a very small council with a budget of £3000 per annum. It has one closed graveyard and the clerk is employed to work 3 hours per week. In this instance the clerk would only have to meet the CORE skills requirements and would not be required to take any ADDITIONAL electives, unless of course, the clerk wished to advance his or her career prospects.

Stoneyton is a medium sized council with a budget of £30,000 per annum. The clerk is employed for three days a week. The council is responsible for the Village Hall and for organising the annual fete. There is a particular problem with youth crime in the area. In addition to the CORE requirements, the clerk of Stoneyton might wish to take an ADDITIONAL elective in Community Activity (covering how to deal with rural crime and vandalism) and possibly an ADDITIONAL elective in Communication to help the promotion of the fundraising event.

On the other end of the scale, Townsville is a larger council with several staff supporting the town clerk and a budget of £350,000 per annum. In particular the council manages the local swimming pool with 30 space car park, the local late night bus service, a 200 space town centre car park, a skate park and a sportsfield. In the near future, Townsville is due to have at least 300 new houses and some substantial commercial development as set out in the Local Plan.

The town clerk of Townsville would have to meet all the CORE topics. In this case the postholder is likely to already have met the standard required, but this would have to be evidenced either by qualification (e.g. From Cheltenham and Gloucester College) or by assessment of skills.

The clerk of Townsville would be well advised to also do ADDITIONAL electives:

- 'ADDITIONAL Employment issues' (to deal with the recruitment and selection of staff, grievance and disciplinary procedures etc)
- 'ADDITIONAL Finance' (to deal with Best Value budgeting, business planning and project management)
- 'ADDITIONAL Planning' (to deal with planning enquiries and contentious planning issues)
- 'ADDITIONAL Service Management' (to deal with the management of the car park, the bus service, the swimming pool and leisure facilities)

Quite clearly the onus is on the council to ensure that their clerk is confident in dealing with the demands of their post. If a gap in knowledge can be met by taking any of the ADDITIONAL electives, that clerk will be better placed to deal competently with any situation that arises. With the introduction of such standards, the profession of a 'clerk' will now have more status than it has ever had before.