

Suggested Terms and Conditions for the Appointment of a Parish Clerk for Drinkstone Parish Council

Supporting paper for item 8 on the agenda for the meeting on the 1st June 2015.

Authorship

This paper has been prepared by a Task And Finish Group set up at the AGM on 14 May to bring options to the full Council for discussion and resolution at the meeting on 1st June 2015. This group consists of Councillors Harbutt and Schofield and Youngs.

Introduction

Drinkstone Parish Council has been without a Clerk for almost a year despite repeated advertisement.

Although councillors have worked hard to keep things going, the lack of a properly appointed Clerk has impacted adversely on the:

- > effective running and recording of council meetings
- > communication with our parishioners
- > communication with other government and statutory bodies to keep abreast of legislation and other initiatives which affect how we operate
- > regular sharing of information among all councillors
- > effective and timely implementation of council decisions

The recommendations for consideration in this paper are based on extensive research by Councillor Harbutt to benchmark what we do against parish councils similar in size and nature to ourselves. We have also consulted SALC to establish current practice in terms of:

- > definition of the Clerk's role
- > definition of current good practice and definition of the role of Responsible Finance Officer (RFO)
- > appropriate pay scales to reflect the scope of the Clerk's role
- > how best the council can exercise appropriate financial oversight

Role of the Clerk

The Clerk's role is highly skilled and is specified in law. It goes far beyond just keeping the minutes of meetings and answering letters. The clerk:

- > ensures the Council operates effectively, efficiently and above all legally
- > carries out, in a timely manner, all the functions required by law of a local authority's Proper Officer
- > is the council's advisor on policy matters, is responsible for all aspects of Health and Safety, manages the provision of council services, buildings, land and resources
- > is an impartial point of contact for parishioners
- > supplies the Council with all the information needed for making effective decisions and implements constructively all decisions made by the Council

Role of the Responsible Finance Officer (RFO)

For many years Drinkstone has appointed an unpaid councillor to carry out duties usually performed by a Responsible Finance Officer (RFO). We are now the only council in Mid Suffolk to operate in this way, and research nationally also indicates that this practice is no longer the norm.

The Local Government Act 1972 states that a council must appoint a Responsible Finance Officer. Only if no other option is available does section 112 of the Local Government Act allow us to appoint a councillor to the role.

In practical terms, it also makes sense to have a 'neutral' officer administering the finances as opposed to a councillor who is also a decision-maker. It is certainly unusual to find a parish council where a councillor is actually willing to undertake the work so Councillor Cousins has done well to do so.

The other issue is that councillors can come and go, often at very short notice, as happened at the recent election. While the Council has benefitted from volunteer effort to manage its finances, this also introduces an element of uncertainty, as volunteers do not have a contract of employment, and are thus not bound, for example, by an agreed notice period. Clerks leave too, but a handover from one clerk to another tends to provide for greater consistency and can be planned for ahead of time.

For the revised job description for Parish Clerk, and the additional responsibilities of the RFO role, see the attached paper. "Drinkstone Parish Council. Job Description. Clerk to the Council"

This job description is based on the template recommended by SALC, with minor adjustments. The clauses removed all deal with the line manager responsibilities of the Clerk where a council has more than one employee.

Recommendation: That the Council redefines the role of Clerk to include the role of RFO using the Job Description attached

Recommendation: We advertise the position, on the understanding that the successful applicant will be expected to take the RFO responsibilities at the end this financial year

Salary

Our advertisements over the last 12 months have not succeeded in attracting suitable candidates. A clear message has emerged from conversations both with SALC and other parish clerks, and the lack of response to our advertisements - the salary we have been offering for the past year, £8.43 per hour, is uncompetitive.

It is even below the starting point of the local government salary scales recommended for clerks, which begin at £8.61 per hour (SPC 15). Ideally we would wish to recruit a qualified or experienced clerk who can pick up the reins quickly and not incur upfront training costs to get started. To attract an experienced candidate we would need to offer between £9.20 and £9.90 per hour (SPC 18-20)

We will also need to increase the number of hours the Clerk is contracted to work from just over 2 per week to 4 per week to reflect the extra workload generated by the RFO role. This is the minimum number of hours recommended by SALC.

The following calculations are based on these assumptions.

Affordability this year

We would aim to appoint a clerk to begin work at the end of August in time for the September meeting. The revised fees detailed below are pro rata to reflect a 31 week period from the beginning of September 2015 to the end of March 2016 rounded to the nearest whole number.

Current budgeted fees for 2015-2016	1012
estimated clerks fees to end July	240
remaining budget available	872

The following table shows the costs if the new Clerk assumes the role of RFO upon appointment.

We have suggested that the new Clerk takes on the RFO role at the end of this financial year. If we appoint a Clerk to work the currently contracted 10 hours per month, the additional costs associated with appointing at the pay grades shown below are within budget. Thus in this financial year there will not be any additional unbudgeted cost to the Council.

If the Clerk assumes the role of RFO immediately on appointment, the table below shows how this compares to the existing budget.

	Current remaining budget £	Revised fees pro rata Sept-March £	Shortfall this year clerk with RFO £
SPC 17	872	1120	248
SPC 18	872	1140	268
SPC 19	872	1184	312
SPC 20	872	1228	356

Future affordability

The council will continue to need to budget for increased Clerk's fees in future.

	Current annual budget £	New annual fee rate £	Increase required for 2016-17 £
SPC 17	1012	1878	866
SPC 18	1012	1913	901
SPC 19	1012	1986	974
SPC 20	1012	2059	1047

Since the increase in Clerk's fees for 2016-17 will be significant, we will need to conduct an in-depth review of the council's finances, before presenting a revised budget in December. In order to pay the Clerk/RFO an appropriate rate for the job, we would envisage using some of the Council's reserves to reduce any impact on the precept.

Recommendation: That the clerks salary be raised to SCP 18-20 depending on experience and form the basis of advertising the post of Parish Clerk

Role of financial oversight

The role of a Parish Clerk and RFO is to advise and inform the council and provide accurate financial information to enable the Council to make decisions about priorities, budgets and expenditure. The RFO does not make these decisions him- or herself.

Just as we have appointed councillors to have oversight of, for example, the playing fields or the allotments, we would propose that the Council appoints one among us to have financial oversight. This councillor would work closely with the Clerk/RFO to produce financial reports and budgets which keep the council informed on our progress against budget during the year and provide the council with timely information to support decision making.

The councillor with financial oversight would not be the Clerk's line manager. The Clerk's line of reporting is still ultimately to the Chair.

We would envisage this post being created when the transfer of RFO responsibilities has been completed.

Recommendation: That, once the RFO responsibilities have been transferred to the Clerk, the Council appoints a councillor to exercise financial oversight