

## **OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS (OS) FOR THE CHIEF OFFICERS OF LOCAL COUNCILS**

The proper officer referred to in legislation is normally the chief officer to a local (parish, community, neighbourhood, town) council and is sometimes referred to as the clerk. Many clerks are also the council's Responsible Financial Officer (RFO). The role of chief officer or clerk to a local council is a recognised profession. The range of work undertaken in this role is diverse but all local councils operate within the same legal, financial and procedural framework and share the same purpose of democratically representing a local community. Differences depend on the size of the community served by the council and its level of its activity. The OS provide a framework for the profession across the range of councils, levels of responsibility and functions.

“Occupational Standards describe what a person needs to do, know and understand in their job in order to carry out their role in a consistent and competent way” (UK Standards 2009). They suggest best practice and values associated with the job.

The first version of this paper was written following a workshop involving a sample of stakeholders representing the SLCC, NALC and CALCs<sup>1</sup> at an event in Northampton (June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011) where personal attributes, values and areas of work were discussed. It was modelled on the Occupational Standards for Community Development 2009. The second version of the paper was written following focus group discussions with another sample of similar stakeholders in York (December 12<sup>th</sup> 2011) and London (December 15<sup>th</sup> 2011). The final version was written following additional feedback from focus group attendees. The standards were approved by the Monitoring & Verification Board on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

This document explains the values of resourcefulness, objectivity and integrity that provide the foundation for the work of a clerk and which a local council should take into account when employing a clerk. Twenty two standards are then listed providing a framework for the role of clerk (excluding detailed reference to the work of the RFO). Each standard involves skills, knowledge and understanding required to perform the activity.

There are three levels of competence: basic, intermediate and advanced. These levels are equivalent to Levels Two, Three and Four of the National Qualifications Framework. The standards are organised into five themes:

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| 1. The core role      | Standards 1 to 5 relate to the general knowledge, activities and skills upon which the remaining standards depend   |
| 2. Law and procedures | Standards 6 to 9 relate to the legal and procedural framework underpinning the council's statutory role   |
| 3. Finance            | Standards 10 and 11 refer to the financial management of the council. The standards apply to the chief officer, whether or not that person is also the Responsible Financial Officer (RFO). |
| 4. Management         | Standards 12 to 15 refer to the management of projects, services, assets, facilities and people enabling the council to fulfil its role whatever that may be.                               |

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of Local Councils, County Associations of Local Councils, Society of Local Council Clerks

5. Community Standards 16 to 22 relate to the council's role in the community including town and country planning, community engagement, community planning and partnership working.

## **Values**

A clerk is a valuable investment for the local council, especially where that officer is trained and qualified specifically to undertake the work of the council. However, the clerk is valued for many attributes in addition to qualifications. Three overarching values are resourcefulness, objectivity and integrity.

### **1 Resourcefulness**

Clerks respond to questions and problems with a dynamic, 'can-do' attitude. They readily take the initiative and approach their work with enthusiasm, common sense and a vision for the future of the council and its community. Clerks are both resilient and flexible in the face of difficulty and are willing to adapt to changing circumstances. When presented with a question to address or a problem to solve, they are keen investigators who know where to go for advice, information and ideas.

### **2 Objectivity**

Clerks maintain a professional detachment from specific views expressed by individual members of the council or in the community. They respect the legal framework and democratic processes within which councils operate and advise the council accordingly. The council can rely on a clerk's discretion and neutral, independent assessments of problems and solutions and on their professional, objective advice.

### **3 Integrity**

Many characteristics contribute to the integrity and inherent strength of clerks. They are reliable, committed and consistent in their work; they are honest, open and worthy of trust; they support their employer (the council as a corporate body). They are approachable, diplomatic and sensitive to the needs of others; they treat people fairly, equally and with respect for diversity. They are committed to their own and the council's excellence and are willing to pursue personal and professional development to underpin confidence in their actions. They take responsibility for their work and are accountable for their advice and the decisions they take.

## **The standards**

The standards represent what an experienced qualified clerk should be able to do in performing their role. In order to be qualified all clerks should reach all these standards at each of the three specified levels although it is appreciated that some clerks will not perform all these activities in the course of their work. Many of these standards involve giving advice, ensuring compliance with the law, managing a variety of tasks and supporting the council. In each case, the standard implies the knowledge, understanding and skills which the clerk develops over time gradually building up their qualifications, their continuing professional development (CPD) and their experience of the workplace. The standards are followed by suggestions for testing the competence of clerks at Level 2 (basic), Level 3 (intermediate) and Level 4 (advanced) of the NQF showing how a clerk provides evidence of developing competence over time.

### **The core role**

- S 1** Understand the roles, responsibilities and duties of the council and of the individuals involved in the work of the council
- S 2** Carry out research so that the council is well-informed for making decisions
- S 3** Manage the implementing of decisions for which the council is responsible
- S 4** Organise and maintain effective administrative systems, processes, policies and records
- S 5** Employ a variety of written and oral communication skills including the use of information and communications technology (ICT)

### **Law and procedures**

- S 6** Advise the council on its duties and powers
- S 7** Ensure that all statutory requirements are observed including employment law, Health and Safety, Freedom of Information, Data Protection and Equality
- S 8** Establish appropriate and lawful procedures for managing the meetings of the council and its committees
- S 9** Advise the council on statutory requirements and other procedures for maintaining public confidence in the council

### **Finance**

- S 10** Advise the council on financial planning and reporting including the preparation and review of budgets, the management of risks to public money and funding applications
- S 11** Ensure compliance with proper financial practices including accounts, financial regulations, audit processes, VAT and procurement

### **Management**

- S 12** Support the council in the planning, management, funding and review of projects, services, assets and facilities
- S 13** Manage the employment, performance and development of council staff
- S 14** Manage effective relationships with contractors and service users
- S 15** Advise the council on its performance as a corporate body ensuring councillors have opportunities for training and development

### **Community**

- S 16** Advise and support the council as it identifies and implements plans for the future of the community it represents
- S 17** Manage and administer the council's participation in the planning system according to current planning law, policies and procedures
- S 18** Demonstrate an awareness of all aspects of the community served by the council, recognising and respecting different interests and enabling cohesion
- S 19** Help provide all members of the community with opportunities for influencing decisions that affect their lives
- S 20** Facilitate the council's engagement with the community, managing public relations and ensuring that the council is transparent in all its actions
- S 21** Manage effective partnership working
- S 22** Advise and support the council as it facilitates community activity