



WYLAM PARISH COUNCIL

Induction Guide for New Parish Councillors

October 2023

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Approved.....

Next Review.....

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on being elected or co-opted as a Parish Councillor and welcome to Wylam Parish Council.

This document is to help you understand your role and obligations as a Councillor and to explain the rules and procedures for Council business.

If you have any queries during your term of office, your first point of contact is the Parish Clerk:

Tracey Wood, Parish Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer
Wylam Institute,
Church Road
WYLAM
NE41 8AP

Tel: 07507 356714

Email: clerkwylamparishcouncil@gmail.com

1. GETTING STARTED

1.1 Declaration of Acceptance of Office

Once elected/co-opted and before being able to participate in Council business, you must sign a Declaration of Acceptance of Office which validates your appointment and confirms that you agree to fulfil your duties of office. These include maintaining a level of behaviour whenever you are on Council business: a Code of Conduct. (See Annex 1). The relevant form will be available immediately prior to the next Parish Council meeting for you to sign in the presence of the Clerk.

1.2 Registering Financial and Other Interests

As a Councillor, within 28 days of becoming a Member, you are required to complete a Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests for you and your spouse/civil partner. The register is held by the Monitoring Officer at Northumberland County Council (NCC) and locally by the Clerk. It is available for public inspection and is published on the NCC website.

Councillors are responsible for keeping their Register entries up to date and must register any change to the interests within 28 days of becoming aware of such a change. In this case, please inform the Clerk who will arrange for NCC to forward the appropriate form for completion. Further information on making disclosures of interest at meetings is given at 1.3 below.

1.3 Code of Conduct and Declaration of Interests

The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct for its members, which reflects the model code prescribed by the Government. **A copy of the Parish Council's Code of Conduct and the Principles of Public Life underpinning the Code are found in Annex 1.** It is essential that you read this and become familiar with its contents before you begin to act as a Councillor.

During your term as a Councillor, you will from time to time have close links to items being discussed. The Council's Code of Conduct requires you to consider these links and if necessary, declare a level of interest in the matter as follows:

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

On becoming a Councillor, you are required to complete a Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests, declaring interests held by yourself and your spouse/civil partner (see 1.2 above) under the following headings:

- Employment
- Sponsorship
- Contracts held with the Council
- Land held in the Parish (owned, rented or leased)
- Licenses with the Council
- Tenancy
- Securities and Capital held in bodies which have a place of business in the Parish.

You will have a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest whenever the Council is discussing something which affects anything on this register and you must declare the interest and must leave the room during the discussion. Your withdrawal from the meeting will be recorded in the Minutes.

Non-registerable Interests

During your time in office, the Council will also discuss many things which may have an impact or relevance to yourself, a family member, a close personal acquaintance, or an outside body on which you serve. If this interest is financial, i.e. would have a financial impact on you, a family member, close personal acquaintance or outside body, you have a Non Registerable Interest.

If you decide that you do have a Non Registerable Interest, you must leave the room when the item is being discussed. Again, your withdrawal from the meeting will be recorded in the Minutes.

This is a complex area, so if you have any queries, you should seek advice from the Clerk who may refer you to the Monitoring Officer.

1.4 Important Documents

The following are important documents that Councillors should be able to reference in the decision-making process:

- Standing Orders {Attached}
- Financial Regulations (Attached)
- Budget for the current year (This is presented for review at each meeting)
- Parish map
- Minutes of previous meetings (see WPC website)

Also available for Councillors to view upon application to the Clerk:

- Assets Register
- Insurance Policy
- Council Policies

2. ATTENDING YOUR FIRST MEETING

The first meeting you will be able to attend is the second Monday of next month. This takes place in the Centenary Room at Wylam Institute, beginning at 7.00 p.m. An Agenda and papers will be sent to you by email at least 3 clear days before the meeting. If you have any queries regarding any item, please do not hesitate to contact the Clerk.

If it is an election year, your first meeting will take place within 14 days of the election.

3. HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS FOR MEETINGS

Agendas and Reports

- On receipt, read through the agenda and associated reports.
- Make sure you understand what actions are being proposed.
- Think about what the result will be if those actions are taken.
- Are the costs involved justified?
- Think about whether there are any alternatives that could be explored.
- If you have any questions, please contact the Clerk or the Chair or the author of the report before you attend the meeting.

In the Meeting

- Prepare for the meeting as set out above.
- Identify areas where you feel you have a contribution to make.

- Check facts and background, asking for explanation from the Clerk or fellow Councillors.
- Remember **your duty to declare an interest** if necessary (see 1.3 above).

4. GENERAL INFORMATION

4.1 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL AND THE ANNUAL PARISH (VILLAGE) MEETING

The **Annual Meeting of the Council** is the first meeting of the Council year at which the Chair for the coming year is elected. This is held on the second Monday in May and begins at 7.00 p.m. In an election year, this meeting will take place on a Monday within 14 days of the election.

The **Annual Parish (Village) Meeting** is not a Council meeting. It is a meeting of the Parish electors, convened by the Chair of the Parish Council with Parish Council members in attendance. Electors can suggest items for the Agenda and in practice, these meetings often celebrate local activities and debate current issues in the community. The meeting is usually held in May.

4.2 MORE ABOUT MEETINGS

Calendar of Meetings

The calendar of Parish Council meeting dates is agreed at the Annual Meeting of the Parish Council. These are held on the second Monday of each month, except in August when there is no meeting.

Organisation of Meetings

Meetings always take place in the Centenary Room at Wylam Institute beginning at 7.00 p.m. An Agenda is produced by the Parish Clerk for each meeting. Copies of the Agenda and supporting papers are emailed to Members with the statutory 3 clear days' notice.

If you wish to have an item on the Agenda, please contact the Parish Clerk.

Apologies for Absence

If you cannot attend a meeting, you should submit your apologies to the Clerk as soon as possible, specifying the reason for your absence. This will be reported to the Council at the meeting. **If you miss 6 consecutive meetings without prior agreement from the Council, you will be disqualified.**

Rules about the way meetings must be run, some of which are set by legislation, are contained within the Council's Standing Orders. (Attached).

Public Participation

The Council has a public session at the beginning of every meeting in which members of the public can question the Parish Council or express their views on matters relevant to the agenda or the parish in general. Once this session is closed, members of the public may only speak with the permission of the Chair.

Agenda, Reports and Confidentiality

When you receive the Agenda and reports for meetings, you will sometimes find a report marked "Confidential". Any information in this report is to be treated as confidential and should not be divulged to anyone who is not an Elected Member of the Council.

Council Minutes

After each meeting, Minutes are prepared by the Clerk, as a legal record of the Council's decisions. The Minutes are confirmed by the Council and signed by the Chair at the next Ordinary Meeting of the Council. All Councillors should read the draft Minutes as soon as they are circulated and report any discrepancies back to the Clerk as soon as possible. At the meeting, there can be no discussion on the Minutes, save as to their accuracy. Minutes are not verbatim records but Councillors can request that their comments are recorded and may also call for a recorded vote to be taken (see attached Standing Orders).

Advisory/Working Group Meetings

The Parish Council has less formal groups called Advisory or Working Groups to aid the process of information gathering and free discussion in order to support its governance decisions. They set their own timetable of meetings. These Groups are formally constituted with Terms of Reference (reviewed from time to time) and can have residents as well as councillors as members. Current Working Groups are:

- Road Safety Group
- Wylam Haughs Nature Reserve Management Group
- Climate Action Group
- Heritage Group
- Wylam Litter Group
- Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

5. ROLES OF COUNCILLORS AND THE CLERK

5.1 Introduction

This short note has been prepared with the intention of giving newly elected/co-opted Members of the Council some guidance as to the respective roles of both Members and the Clerk in helping the Council to function, and on how these roles work in practice.

5.2 The Role of Councillors

Members are collectively responsible for making Council policy, for which they are accountable to the electorate. Their role is to:

- To fix the Council's Budget and set the Precept.
- Develop policy and make policy decisions.
- Represent the community.
- Protect and promote community interests.
- Act as custodian to the public purse.
- Abide by the Council's Code of Conduct.
- Act collectively as employer.

Beware of what a Councillor cannot do!

- Councillors cannot make a decision on behalf of the Council.
- Councillors cannot instruct the Clerk or staff in their duties.
- Councillors cannot write to the press on council matters.
- Councillors cannot represent the Council as and wherever they wish.
- Councillors cannot resign by walking out of a meeting.

5.3 The Role of the Chair

The Council must have a Chair, responsible for ensuring that proper decisions are taken in Council meetings, that meetings run smoothly and on time. The Chair ensures that all councillors have the opportunity to speak at meetings and that procedure is followed in accordance with Standing Orders. The Chair is often the public face of the Council, representing the Council in a civic capacity and sometimes speaks on behalf of the Council.

5.4 The Role of the Council as a whole

The Council is a corporate body, a legal entity, separate from that of its members. Its decisions are the responsibility of the whole Council. The Parish Council has been granted powers by Parliament, including the authority to raise money through

taxation (the Precept) and a range of powers to spend public money. All Parish Council activities must be linked to a legal 'duty' (something they are obliged to do) or 'power' (something they choose to do). In all cases, both Councillors and officers must act within the law. The Clerk will act as advisor to the Council to ensure that it always acts legally.

More detail on the duties and powers of Parish Councils can be found in *The Good Councillor's Guide* available on the National Association of Local Councils website (see 10.2 below).

5.5 The Role of the Clerk

The Clerk is the Officer employed by the Council as a whole to provide objective, professional advice and to ensure that the Council is operating within the law. The Clerk is the executor of Council decisions and policies. The Clerk is also the Council's Responsible Financial Officer (RFO), ensuring that the Council's financial records and activities comply with the "Proper Practices" referred to in the Accounts and Audit Regulations. The Clerk:

- Arranges meetings, prepares agendas, supporting information, reports and Minutes.
- Implements Council decisions.
- Protects the Council as a Corporate Body, providing legal advice where appropriate.

5.6 How these Roles Work in Practice

Members take decisions on matters of major policy at meetings of the Council, after having considered any advice given by the Clerk or recommendations from the Council's Advisory/Working Groups. Within the framework of policies decided by members, the Clerk, often in consultation with the Chair, will take many decisions every working day. Most of these decisions will be concerned with the day-to-day management of services to the public.

6. THE COUNCIL AS EMPLOYER

The Clerk is employed by the Council and answers to the Council as a whole. The Clerk manages the Village Handyman who is also employed by the Council. No single Councillor can act as the line manager of the Clerk or any other employee. These rules and principles should build on **mutual respect and consideration between the Clerk and the Council**. The Parish Council has a range of clear employment policies and procedures.

7. PLANNING MATTERS

7.1 Commenting on Planning Applications

The Parish Council is a consultee on planning applications within the Parish. Currently, its comments are given the same weight as residents' comments (but see below for a Council with a Neighbourhood Plan) when decisions on applications are made by NCC. In responding to planning applications, Councillors should ensure that they understand material and non-material considerations. (Training on Planning is available from time to time through the Northumberland Association of Local Councils and NCC).

7.2 Neighbourhood Plan

The Localism Act of 2011 gives communities more say in planning by encouraging local councils to prepare Neighbourhood Plans to establish general planning policies for the development and use of land in their neighbourhood (in this case, Wylam Parish). Wylam Parish Council, with assistance from the Neighbourhood Planning Team at NCC, is currently embarking on preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan for Wylam Parish.

8. DEALING WITH PUBLIC MONEY

8.1 The Clerk/RFO administers the finances of the Council and Councillors collectively are responsible for ensuring the proper management of the Council's finances to avoid risk of fraud, loss or bad debts. The Council must operate a sound system of internal control in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003.

8.2 Annual Return

The Council has a duty to complete the Audit Commission's Annual Return (its statement of accounts and governance arrangements) at its Year End on 31st March.

8.3 Control of Council Finances

The Council's finances are controlled by checking spending against Budget plans regularly at Council meetings. The Council's own Financial Regulations (attached) set out how the Council must manage its finances and its overall system of internal control. As part of this, the Council appoints an independent auditor to conduct an internal audit (twice yearly) which is reported with the Accounts to the Council and to the External Auditor.

8.4 Budget and Precept

The Council is empowered to incur expenditure in the execution of its statutory powers. It obtains its funds (the Precept) from NCC for the expenses it is expecting to incur in the Financial Year ahead, so it is important that an accurate Budget is set for the proper carrying out of the Council's functions. The budgeting process normally starts around October each year and the demand for the Precept is usually sent to NCC in mid-February.

9. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI)

9.1 The Council is obliged by law to make information on its activities available to the public on request. It maintains a Publication Scheme, available to the public, which identifies classes of information which are routinely in the public domain. All information held by the Council is available to the public, although in certain areas an exemption may apply which may permit the Council to refuse to supply information (confidential or sensitive information).

9.2 Information held by Councillors is also covered by FOI and therefore Members may be approached to produce their records if a specific enquiry warrants it. This includes answering machine messages, recorded telephone conversations, social media posts etc. In the unlikely event of this happening, you should seek advice from the Clerk.

10. TRAINING

10.1 The Council recognises and recommends that Members and the Clerk should attend regular training sessions to update and improve their understanding of matters affecting local government. The Council will fund Members' and the Clerk's expenses related to attending training events, conferences and seminars provided by organisations including the Northumberland Association of Local Councils, the National Association of Local Councils, the Society of Local Council Clerks, Northumberland County Council and other relevant organisations.

Examples of training available include:

- Code of Conduct
- Councillor training
- Chairmanship
- Planning
- Finance

10.2 As a Councillor you can access publications by the National Association of Local Councils (www.nalc.gov.uk). On the NALC website you can find downloadable PDFs of useful publications on local council matters such as:

- The Good Councillor's Guide
- Guides on Finance, Neighbourhood Planning, Transport planning, community business and Employment.
- A series of Legal Topic Notes.

Access the site via:

- Username: northumbmember
- Password: jifek12

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Annex 1

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC LIFE

The following is a list of principles, which the Secretary of State has ordered should govern the conduct of Members. The Code of Conduct is consistent with these principles.

Selflessness

Members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.

Honesty and Integrity

Members should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned, should not behave improperly and should on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

Objectivity

Members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits.

Accountability

Members should be accountable to the public for their actions and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office.

Openness

Members should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions.

Personal Judgement

Members may take account of the views of others, including their own political groups, but should reach their own conclusions on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.

Respect for Others

Members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees.

Duty to Uphold the Law

Members should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them.

Stewardship

Members should do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authorities use their resources prudently and in accordance with the law.

Leadership

Members should promote and support these principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence.

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