Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme

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Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme

Dr Michael Woods
Dr Graham Gardner
Dr Kate Gannon

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

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Disclaimer

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RESEARCH STUDY OF THE QUALITY PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL SCHEME

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme aims to equip local councils to take on a stronger role in their communities. This stronger role involves local councils being representative of their communities and working more closely with partners, particularly principal local authorities, in the delivery of local services. All parish and town councils can attain Quality status, whatever their size.

To attain Quality status, local councils must meet a number of criteria, relating to: (i) Electoral mandate; (ii) A qualified clerk; (iii) Regular council meetings; (iv) Effective communication; (v) Publication of an annual report; (vi) Accountability; and (vii) Ethical framework. The scheme is administered through a local structure of County Accreditation Panels, and accreditation is for four years. The scheme was launched in 2003 and the first councils to have obtained Quality Status will require re-accreditation in 2007.

The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, was commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to undertake a research study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in 2006 as part of its review of the scheme. The study was led by Dr Michael Woods with Dr Graham Gardner and Dr Kate Gannon, and draw on information generated through a range of research methods. These included: a postal questionnaire survey of Quality and non-accredited councils; interviews with delivery agents; interviews with national stakeholders; written submissions from local councils; case studies; and a review of previous research on the local council sector.

This summary presents the key findings of the study.

Take-up of the Quality Scheme

By the end of September 2006, 332 local councils had obtained Quality status, representing just under 4% of all parish and town councils in England. However, take-up of the Quality scheme has been higher among councils with larger populations, such that Quality councils collectively serve approximately 17% of the population living in parished areas, or some 2.9 million people. There are also geographical variations in the take-up of the scheme, with participation highest in the West Midlands, the South-East and the North-West. Councils serving urban and suburban areas and small towns are more likely to have Quality status than councils in dispersed rural areas.

Characteristics of Quality councils

Quality councils tend to have greater financial resources and a more extensively trained membership than equivalent-sized non-accredited councils. Only 25% of Quality councils set precepts of less than £25,000, compared to 75% of all local councils, and almost half set precepts of more than £100,000. Expenditure by Quality councils is also significantly higher than by equivalent non-accredited councils, although the pattern of areas of expenditure is similar. Members of Quality councils are more likely to have participated in training than members of equivalent non-accredited councils, but the take-up of training is still below 50%.

Reasons for participation and non-participation in the scheme
Most frequently, councils apply for Quality status in order increase their standards and raise their profile in the local community. The majority of councils also apply in order to encourage their principal local authority to offer greater opportunities for consultation and delegation of functions. Reasons for non-participation in the Quality scheme include lack of a qualified clerk and inability to meet the electoral mandate. For many non-accredited councils, Quality status is simply not a priority.

Benefits and costs of the Quality Scheme
Almost two-thirds of Quality councils report that they have benefited from Quality status, although a substantial minority report no benefits. The main reported benefits of Quality status are enhanced professionalism, improved leadership, greater capacity to act, increased community engagement and greater success attracting funding from external agencies. Non-accredited councils are less certain of any benefits of the Quality scheme than accredited councils. Smaller councils are less likely to expect benefits.

The cost of reaching Quality status varies considerably between local councils. Two thirds of councils spent less than £1,000 on the process. The criteria that most frequently create additional costs are, in rank order, the annual report, the qualified clerk and communication with the electorate. The most significant cost appears to be the production and distribution of a council newsletter. Whilst the absolute cost of applying for Quality status broadly increases with the size of the council, the relative cost is greatest for smaller councils.

Benefits to principal local authorities
Awareness of the Quality Scheme and its benefits among principal local authorities is variable. Some principal authorities reported that they had only a vague knowledge of the scheme. A very small number have adopted a more proactive stance in encouraging town and parish councils to participate. These authorities are more likely to identify benefits, particularly the value of Quality status as independent benchmark. However, many authorities expressed concern at the robustness of Quality status as an indicator of capacity to take on additional functions, and some authorities reported that the low number of Quality councils in their area made it difficult to offer any form of enhanced relationship.

Appropriateness of the test criteria
There is broad consensus among local councils and other stakeholders that the criteria employed in the Quality test are appropriate. However, some participants in the research expressed concerns about elements of the criteria relating to the clerks' qualifications, the electoral mandate, and the distribution of a newsletter.

Some clerks query the emphasis placed on the CiLCA or previous University of Gloucestershire Certificate of Higher Education as the test of a clerk's competence, and argue for a wider range of qualifications and experience to be recognized. However, we conclude that there is considerable value to maintaining a single benchmark of a clerk's competence which guarantees that key areas are covered.

The wording of the electoral mandate criteria has caused some confusion for councils and for accreditation panels and led to some variation in interpretation. Additionally, some councils have argued that the emphasis on elected councillors penalises councils for situations beyond their control and disregards the value of co-opted members. However, we have concluded that the 80% threshold represents a fair measure of electoral accountability whilst acknowledging that some co-options may be necessary, and is within the reach of most local councils.

There is some concern that the requirement for councils to produce and distribute their own newsletter has led to the duplication of information provided through existing community

newsletters and incurring unnecessary expense. There is a strong argument that the principle behind this test could be adequately met by councils contributing appropriate information through such publications, and we recommend that the criteria should be clarified to enable this.

Ability of non-accredited councils to meet the Quality criteria
The majority of Quality criteria are readily attainable by the majority of non-accredited councils. However, a substantial proportion of non-accredited councils face one or more significant barriers to Quality status.

The most significant barrier to non-accredited councils reaching Quality status is the requirement for a qualified clerk. Over three quarters (77%) employ a clerk who holds neither of the appropriate qualifications. Many of these are currently registered for CiLCA or intending to register, but in some cases councils are prevented from applying for Quality status by clerks who are unwilling to take the CiLCA qualification.

The electoral mandate is also perceived to be a barrier by many non-accredited councils, with many expressing concerns about the costs of contested elections. However, only 16% of the non-accredited councils responding to the survey failed to meet the current electoral mandate criteria.

Additional Quality criteria
A number of suggestions for additional criteria were examined in the study, of which three are proposed for further consideration. First, there is a strong argument for requiring Quality councils to implement the SLCC/NALC agreement on pay and conditions for clerks. This would be consistent with the principle of professionalism inherent to the Quality scheme, and nine in ten Quality councils currently follow the agreement. Second, Quality councils could be required to demonstrate that they have engaged with the training needs of their members, as a means of enhancing council capacity. Third, Quality councils could be required to show evidence of active engagement with their community, including minority and 'hard-to-reach' groups. Both of these last two proposals would need to be implemented through criteria that were flexible enough to recognize the differing resources and circumstances of different local councils.

The accreditation process
The principle of peer-assessment has widespread support across local and national stakeholders. The composition and operation of County Accreditation Panels is largely consistent across the country, but it was noted that some panels do not include a clerk holding the CiLCA qualification. Some concerns were expressed about the degree of transparency of the appointment process for panel members. It is also apparent that there is some variation between panels in the interpretation of the electoral mandate and communications criteria, and the type of evidence required. Clearer guidance and opportunities for the sharing of good practice between panels would help consistency.

The majority of applications for Quality status are processed within 2 months, but the procedure can take up to 6 months. Few applications are rejected outright, but there is variation in practice between panels in how unsuccessful applications are dealt with. Again, clearer guidance would aid consistency.

Support for Quality councils
There is a significant gap between expectations of support for Quality councils and the actual support Quality councils have received. This gap is largest in terms of additional delegated functions, additional funding, and consultation over planning. The most evident support has been in terms of additional consultation over service delivery by principal local authorities. Fewer than a quarter of Quality councils are covered by Charters with principal authorities that include additional provisions for councils with Quality status.

The majority of Quality councils would like a financial incentive to be attached to Quality status, with support for the re-establishment of the Quality Parish Investment Fund. However, this was intended only as a limited-life initiative and there is currently no budgetary provision for its re-introduction. Most Quality councils also support the award of additional powers to promote local well-being.

National stakeholders have emphasized the value of the capacity-building benefits of the Quality scheme. However, local councils are more likely to put an emphasis on tangible benefits such as additional funds or powers and the perceived absence of these benefits is acting as a disincentive to participation.

Re-accreditation of Quality councils
The first Quality councils will require re-acceditation in 2007. Most Quality councils will seek re-accreditation, with only 4 out of 196 indicating that they would not. The majority of accredited councils have continued to meet most of the Quality criteria in the post-accreditation period. However, at least three quarters no longer meet all the criteria in one or more test areas of the Quality benchmark. The test areas in which standards have been least-well maintained are communications (Test 4), the annual report (Test 5) and the qualified clerk (Test 1).

The Quality Scheme currently requires that councils have 100% of seats filled through election in order to be reaccredited. At present around 15% of Quality Councils would not meet this increased electoral mandate threshold. The benefits that follow from the increased threshold are unclear and there is a strong argument for retaining the 80% electoral mandate at reaccreditation.

There is a need to ensure that when Quality councils fail to gain re-accreditation or do not seek re-accreditation, there are clear procedures in place to ensure that the loss of Quality status is evident and transparent. Otherwise, there is a danger that the benchmark could be undermined.

Promotion of the Quality scheme
On the whole, promotion of the Quality scheme has been fairly effective and well-received. It is, however, evident that promotion of the scheme varies between counties and good practice might be identified and disseminated. There is also a need to target areas with lower rates of take-up, and to further promote the scheme to principal local authorities. This might include bespoke materials that set out in detail the benefits of the Quality scheme for principal local authorities, and the ways in which authorities could engage more proactively with the scheme.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this report

1.1   This report presents the findings from a research study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme, undertaken to inform a review of the scheme being led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in conjunction with stakeholders in the Parish and Town Council Development Group. The research was commissioned by Defra and undertaken by Dr Michael Woods, Dr Graham Gardner and Dr Kate Gannon, based in the New Political Geographies Group of the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

1.2   Defra chairs the Parish and Town Council Development Group, which advises Government on the development, investment and capacity needs of the local council sector. The Development Group recognised a need for independent research to inform an internal review of the Quality scheme in preparation for the re-accreditation of the first councils to achieve Quality status.

1.3   This report assesses the impact of the Quality scheme to date, considers the appropriateness of the criteria against which the Quality benchmark is awarded, and recommends changes to the scheme prior to existing Quality councils seeking re-accreditation from September 2007. In line with the research specification provided by Defra, the report also provides information on good practice that might be replicated or emulated, identifies practices that have not worked or are otherwise problematic and should be avoided, and assesses the potential of the Quality scheme to help deliver the Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda.

1.4   As specified by Defra, the report challenges the content, objectives, delivery and outputs of the Quality scheme, highlights benefits of the scheme, and includes evidence-based recommendations supported by arguments that are sound, justifiable and defensible.

Methodology

1.5   The report is based on analysis of the content of the Quality scheme, the acceptability and take-up of the scheme amongst local councils, and the mechanisms through which the scheme has been delivered. Research involved a mixed-method strategy that employed both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis. The strategy had six elements:

First Element – Postal questionnaire survey

1.6   The main method used to collect data from local councils was a questionnaire survey, distributed by post, for completion by council clerks. There were two variants of the questionnaire: one for councils with Quality status; the other for non-accredited councils.

1.7   The first variant of the questionnaire went to all 303 councils that had been awarded Quality status up to 31 May 2006. The second variant of the questionnaire went to a stratified sample of 600 non-participating councils. This sample was structured by region, population size and urban / rural setting to reflect the profile of the councils with Quality status, and covered twice the number of Quality councils to compensate for what we correctly anticipated would be a significantly lower response rate from non-accredited councils. In addition, questionnaires were sent to a booster sample of 100 non-accredited councils in counties with low take-up of

the scheme (below 1 per cent). Sixty-seven percent of all Quality councils and forty-three percent of the sample of non-accredited councils completed and returned their questionnaire. The samples of Quality councils and non-accredited councils are closely matched in profile.

1.8   The majority of the statistical analysis in this report is based on data from the questionnaires. In some cases, returned questionnaires were only partially completed or contained some data that was unusable. Consequently, some of the analysis is based on data from only some of the councils that returned questionnaires and hence the 'n' varies between questions. The appropriate 'n' value is indicated on all tables.

Second Element – Interviews with delivery bodies

1.9   The second element of the research involved three sets of semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of bodies involved with the delivery of the Quality scheme at a local level.

1.10   The first set of interviews covered 12 county associations of local councils (CALCs). The interviews explored take-up of the Quality Scheme, the perceptions and concerns of non-participating councils, re-accreditation, and the involvement of CALCs in promoting and delivering the Quality Scheme.

1.11   The second set of interviews covered 11 County Accreditation Panels (CAPs). These interviews explored the background of panel members, the application process, refusals of applications for Quality status, and the views of Panel members on the accreditation process.

1.12   The third set of interviews covered 14 principal local authorities, including county councils, district councils and unitary authorities. These interviews explored the engagement of principal local authorities with the Quality scheme, relationships between principal authorities and Quality Parish and Town Councils, and the views of principal authorities on the potential of Quality councils regarding the delivery of the *Neighbourhoods* agenda.

1.13   CALCs and CAPs selected for interview covered counties with high, low and average take-up of the Quality scheme. All principal local authorities selected for interview represented counties or districts with some take-up of the Quality scheme. The counties and districts selected also represent a range of rural and urban areas as defined by the 2005 rural-urban classification for England and Wales produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Defra, ODPM, the Countryside Agency and the National Assembly for Wales.

Third Element – Interviews with national stakeholders

1.14   Research also included two sets of semi-structured interviews with national bodies representing interests in and around the local council sector. One set of interviews covered the partner organisations in the Quality scheme. The second set of interviews covered other national stakeholders with interests in local councils, local government, community governance / development, and the *Neighbourhoods* agenda. These interviews explored the engagement of national stakeholders with the QPTC scheme and their views on its benefits, future development, and potential to deliver the *Neighbourhoods* agenda.

1.15   A full list of the bodies interviewed is provided in Annex A.

Fourth Element – Case studies

1.16   The questionnaire survey and interviews were supplemented by seven small-scale case studies. These provided examples of good practice as well as helping to highlight and illustrate specific issues that became apparent through data collected from the questionnaire and interview surveys. Five of the case studies involved telephone interviews with council clerks and local authority officers. Two involved face-to-face interviews and group discussions with principal local authority officers, local council clerks and local councillors. A summary of the case studies is provided in Annex B.

Fifth Element – Written comments

1.17   The letter accompanying the postal survey of local councils invited councils to submit written comments as well as complete and return the questionnaire. Thirty-four councils submitted comments. These have supplemented information generated through the questionnaire and interview surveys and the case studies. Comments cover the value and appropriateness of the Quality scheme and suggestions for modifications of the scheme. A list of the councils that submitted written comments is provided in Annex C.

Sixth Element – Previous research

1.18   The review takes account of recent findings and recommendations regarding the role and potential of the local council sector to support neighbourhood governance, formation of local council charters, and the value of local council clustering. This includes the following reports produced by the Young Foundation (YF), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU): *The Potential of Parish and Town Councils to Support Neighbourhood Arrangements* (LGIU, November 2005); *Local Democracy and Neighbourhood Governance* (YF, May 2006); *Parish and Town Councils and Neighbourhood Governance* (JRF, March 2005); *Charters for Parish and Town Councils and Principal Local Authorities: A Good Practice Guide* (LGIU, April 2005); and *Parish and Town Council Clustering* (LGIU, June 2006). The review also takes account of responses to a consultation of Quality councils undertaken by NALC prior to this research study of the Quality scheme.

Report Structure

1.19   The remainder of this report is divided into eight further chapters:

*   Chapter 2 provides a brief outline of the Quality scheme and the background to the launch of the scheme.
*   Chapter 3 discusses take-up of the Quality scheme, the profile of Quality councils and reasons for participation and non-participation in the scheme.
*   Chapter 4 discusses the reported benefits and costs of Quality status for Quality councils and principal local authorities.
*   Chapter 5 discusses the appropriateness of the current accreditation criteria for the Quality scheme and potential additional criteria.
*   Chapter 6 discusses the effectiveness and appropriateness of the accreditation process.
*   Chapter 7 discusses the adequacy of support for Quality councils, including support from principal local authorities.
*   Chapter 8 discusses the potential of the Quality scheme to support delivery of the Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda.
*   Chapter 9 discusses the maintenance of Quality standards post-accreditation, re-accreditation of Quality councils, expanding participation in the Quality scheme, and promoting the scheme.

Notes on presentation

1.20   Where this review makes recommendations, they are separated from the main text by a line space on either side and highlighted in **BOLD**. Examples of good practice are highlighted in boxes within the main text.

Chapter 2: The Quality scheme

Introduction

2.1   This chapter outlines the objectives and content of the Quality scheme, including the scheme criteria, and the background to the development and launch of the scheme.

Outline of the Quality scheme

2.2   The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme aims to equip local councils to take on a stronger role in their communities. This stronger role involves local councils being representative of their communities and working more closely with partners, particularly principal local authorities, in the delivery of local services.

2.3   All parish and town councils in England have the opportunity to gain Quality status, whatever their size, location and current levels of activity. The scheme does not cover parish meetings or community and town councils in Wales.

2.4   The Quality scheme sets out the characteristics of a Quality council, the means through which local councils can gain Quality status and the routes through which Quality councils can develop a stronger role within their communities.

2.5   A Quality council meets a range of standards. It is representative of and actively engages all parts of its community; effectively and properly managed; articulates the needs and wishes of its community; upholds high standards of conduct; is committed to working in partnership with principal local authorities and other public agencies; in proportion to its capacities, delivers local services on behalf of principal local authorities when this represents best value for the local community; works closely with local community and voluntary groups; provides community leadership; and acts as an information and access point for services provided by principal local authorities and other partners.

2.6   To attain Quality status, local councils must meet a number of criteria:

i.   *Electoral mandate.* On first accreditation of the council, 80 per cent of council members must have stood or been willing to stand for election. On subsequent re-accreditations, 100 per cent of members must have stood or been willing to stand for election.

ii.   *A qualified clerk.* The clerk to the council must hold either the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) or the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration awarded by the University of Gloucestershire.

iii.   *Regular council meetings.* Councils must meet at least six times a year, all meetings must allow time for public participation, and all councillors must attend meetings unless good reasons are given for absence and apologies are recorded.

iv.   *Effective communication.* Councils must publish a newsletter at least four times a year, publish and make available to electors a synopsis of the annual report, and meet at least nine out of seventeen other criteria.

v. *Annual report*. Councils must publish and make available to electors a formal annual report which includes a summary of council accounts, details and contact information for the clerk and councillors, and an overview of council achievements.

vi. *Accountability*. The council must maintain accurate and transparent financial arrangements in accordance with the requirement of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003.

vii. *Ethical framework*. The council must have formally adopted the Code of Conduct set down by the Local Government Act 2000.

2.7   At first accreditation, Quality status lasts for four years. This is followed by a three month period of grace in which a council can apply for re-accreditation. If a council is not re-accredited within this three month period, it will lose Quality status.

2.8   Quality status is a voluntary, peer-assessed benchmark. Promotion of the scheme is driven by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks, (SLCC) and county and district associations of local councils. Defra provides support for the scheme by funding NALC and SLCC to deliver the National Training Strategy for local councils and by funding Regional Development Officers. Assessments of applications for Quality status are made by County Accreditation Panels.

Background to the Quality scheme

2.9   The Quality scheme was proposed in the 2000 Rural White Paper, as one of a number of measures to improve support for rural communities and provide local people with more opportunities to become involved in community development and regeneration.[1] Government envisaged the Quality scheme as a tool that would enable local councils to take on a stronger role within their communities relative to their size, recognising that local councils "inevitably carry out their duties and communicate with their electorate in different ways depending on size, resources and circumstances."[2] The Quality scheme is part of its agenda to modernize local government in order to ensure that all tiers of local authorities are in touch with the communities they serve.

2.10   Criteria for the Quality scheme were developed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in partnership with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), NALC, SLCC, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Countryside Agency (CA). In November 2001, following formal discussions with the LGA, NALC and the CA, Defra and the then Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DLTR) published a consultation document on the content of the Quality scheme.

2.11   Government launched the Quality scheme in 2003. Councils began to gain Quality status from May of that year. Existing Quality councils will have the opportunity to seek re-accreditation from September 2007..

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[1] *Our Countryside: The Future. A Fair Deal for Rural England*, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2000.
[2] *The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, June 2003, page 10

Chapter 3: Take-up of the Quality scheme

Introduction

3.1   This chapter discusses take-up of the Quality scheme, the profile of Quality councils and reasons for participation and non-participation in the scheme. There are three areas of discussion:

- Take-up of the Quality scheme, including geographical variations
- The comparative characteristics of Quality and non-Quality councils
- Reasons for participation and non-participation in the Quality scheme

Take-up of the QPTC scheme

Level of take-up

3.2   By the end of September 2006, 332 local councils had achieved Quality Status, constituting 3.7 per cent of the 8,966 parish and town councils in England.[3] Quality local councils represent at least 17 per cent of the total population living in parished areas. This is due to the uneven take-up of the scheme amongst councils of different size (see below). Approximately 2.9 million people live in areas served by Quality councils.[4]

Geographical variations in take-up

3.3   Quality councils can be found in all regions of England with the exception of London, where the tier of parish and town councils does not currently exist. Close to two thirds (62 per cent) of all Quality councils are in the three most southerly regions – the East of England (24 per cent), the South East (22 per cent) and the South West (16 per cent). The West Midlands also contains a relatively high number of Quality councils. The more northerly regions have far lower numbers of Quality councils.

3.4   There is considerable inter-regional variation in the relative take-up of the Quality scheme (table 3.1). Take-up is highest in the West Midlands and the South East, where just over 5 per cent of all local councils have been awarded Quality status. The East of England and the North West are also characterised by relatively high rates of take-up. The lowest take-up of the Quality scheme is in Yorkshire and the Humber, where well under 3 per cent of local councils have been awarded Quality status.

3.5   Quality councils are also unevenly distributed between local authorities within regions, in both absolute and relative terms. Two counties, Devon and Essex, account for one in seven councils that have gained Quality status to date, and there are a further nine counties or unitary authority areas with more than ten Quality councils (table 3.2). Whilst this pattern to some extent reflects the geographical distribution of town and parish councils as a whole, there are notable variations in the proportion of local councils holding Quality status between counties (see Appendix C). Whilst over a fifth of local councils in the Isle of Wight have obtained Quality

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[3] There is no precise record of the number of local councils in England. The figure quoted here is that provided by *Political Science Resources* at Keele University (www.psr.keele.ac.uk, accessed 25 September 2006) for 30 June 2006. This is a slightly higher total than some other calculations.
[4] Calculations based on parish headcounts at 2001 census (ONS), population estimates provided by ODPM (Local Government Financial Statistics, Bulletin 16, 2005) and data on the number of local councils provided by *Political Science Resources* at Keele University (www.psr.keele.ac.uk, accessed 25 September 2006). All figures are indicative rather than definitive.

status, and nearly one in ten in Essex and Sussex, fewer than one per cent of local councils in Gloucestershire and Northamptonshire are currently Quality councils (table 3.3).

Table 3.1: Distribution of Quality Parish Councils by Region

Region	# Parish and Town Councils	# of Quality Councils	% of all Quality councils	% Take-up of Quality scheme
North East	293	9	2.7	3.1
North West	678	27	8.1	4.0
Yorkshire and The Humber	958	20	6.0	2.1
East Midlands	924	28	8.4	3.0
West Midlands	826	44	13.3	5.3
East of England	1893	79	23.8	4.2
South East	1407	73	22.0	5.2
South West	1652	52	15.7	3.1
TOTAL	8631	332	100	

Source: NALC; Aberystwyth Survey [5]

Table 3.2: Distribution of Quality Parish Councils by county or unitary authority area

> 20 Quality councils	11-20 Quality councils	6-10 Quality councils	2-5 Quality councils	1 Quality council
Essex Devon	Cheshire Shropshire Hampshire Kent Warwickshire West Sussex Lincolnshire Derbyshire East Sussex	Cambridgeshire Staffordshire Suffolk Worcestershire Bedfordshire Buckinghamshire Cornwall Cumbria West Yorkshire Leicestershire Nottinghamshire Norfolk Somerset Wiltshire	Durham Isle of Wight Lancashire Surrey North Yorkshire North Somerset Northumberland Oxfordshire South Gloucestershire South Yorkshire East Riding Gloucestershire Herefordshire Hertfordshire Peterborough	West Midlands Bath & North East Somerset Dorset Northamptonshire West Berkshire Greater Manchester Merseyside Tyne and Wear North East Lincolnshire

Source: NALC

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[5] Regional distribution of local councils is based on amalgamation of data on number of local councils in local authorities in 1991, the latest date for which figures are available. Percentages are indicative rather than definitive.

Table 3.3: Counties and unitary authorities with highest and lowest take-up of the Quality scheme[6]

>10% take-up of Quality scheme	<1% take-up of Quality scheme	0% take-up of Quality scheme
Telford & the Wrekin (26.9%) Isle of Wight (20.7%) Bradford (17.6%) Peterborough (11.5%) S Gloucestershire (11.4%)	Dorset (0.6%) Northamptonshire (0.5%) Gloucestershire (0.4%)	Medway, N Lincolnshire, Rutland, Sefton, Stockton on Tees, Swindon, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham + 20 UAs with <10 local councils

Source: NALC

3.6   There are Quality councils in all county council areas that are also served by district councils, but in only a fifth of unitary council areas that contain parish or town councils. Twenty-eight unitary authorities that have local councils do not contain any Quality councils, the majority are these are authorities with fewer than ten local councils but they do include some more significantly parished areas including North Lincolnshire and Rutland. There are no Quality councils in the areas of seventy-five district councils. There are no obvious common characteristics – such as location or degree of rurality – that distinguish local authority areas with either a relatively high or relatively low take-up of the Quality scheme, although many of the local authority areas with low take-up rates are characterised by a large number of small local councils.

Rural – urban distribution of Quality councils

3.7   The majority of Quality councils are located in predominantly rural local authority areas, but a fifth of Quality councils are located in urban authorities, and Quality councils can be found in all geographical contexts from inner-city neighbourhoods to dispersed rural communities. There is a broad correlation between the distribution of Quality councils between rural and urban authorities and the distribution of all parish and town councils, except that there is a modest over-representation of councils from urban authorities (20 per cent of Quality councils compared to 11 per cent of all local councils), and an under-representation of councils from the most rural local authorities (34 per cent of Quality councils compared to 43 of all local councils in local authorities that are more than 80 per cent rural).

3.8   Quality councils in rural local authority areas are however frequently located in the more urbanised parts of these districts. Overall, when analysed at the local authority ward level, two-fifths of Quality councils cover territories classified as urban, two in seven are in town and fringe areas, and a quarter are in more rural wards classified as 'village, hamlet and isolated dwellings' in the 2005 rural-urban classification. Nearly a third of Quality councils use the title 'Town Council', compared to only around six per cent of all local councils in England. Possible reasons for the relatively low take-up of the Quality scheme in rural areas are discussed in chapter 9.

Population Size of Quality councils

3.9   Take-up of the Quality scheme is strongly correlated with the size of the population served by local councils, with councils with larger populations significantly more likely to have obtained Quality status than councils with smaller populations (table 3.4). Over two-fifths of local councils with populations of more than 20,000 residents are Quality councils, as are nearly a quarter of councils with populations of between 10,000 and 19,999 people. In contrast

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[6] This analysis excludes unitary authority areas with fewer than 10 local councils.

the participation rate of the 3,800 councils serving populations of fewer than 500 people is under one per cent.

3.10   However, this is not to suggest that the Quality scheme excludes smaller councils. The smallest council to have achieved Quality status, Twemlow in Cheshire, had a population of 168 at the 2001 Census. Sixteen other Quality councils had populations below 500 at the 2001 Census, including Swallow, Lincolnshire (200), Withington, Shropshire (208), Ufton, Warwickshire (239), Carlton Scroop and Normanton-on-Cliffe, Lincolnshire (299), Westborough and Dry Doddington, Lincolnshire (335), Somerford, Cheshire (343), Belchford and Fulletby, Lincolnshire (351), Stowe by Chartley, Staffordshire (356), Maltby-le-Marsh, Lincolnshire (364), Birdbrook, Essex (369), Idridgehay, Alton and Ashleyhay, Derbyshire (370), Compton, West Sussex (378), Pertenhall and Swineshead, Bedfordshire (381), Pailton, Warwickshire (482) and Lower Withington, Cheshire (492). The largest Quality council, Weston-super-Mare, by comparison had a population of 71,758 at the time of the 2001 Census.

Table 3.4: Distribution of Quality councils

Parish Population 2001	# Quality local councils, Sept. 2006	% Quality councils, Sept. 2006	% of all Local Councils	% Take-up of Quality scheme
< 500	16	4.8	42.4	0.4
500-999	31	9.3	19.7	1.8
1000-2499	55	16.8	18.2	3.3
2500-4999	49	14.8	9.1	6.0
5000-9999	72	21.7	6.0	13.3
10,000-19,999	67	20.2	3.2	23.7
>20,000	42	12.7	1.2	39.3
	332	100	100	3.7

Source: NALC; ONS

Comparative characteristics of Quality and non-Quality Councils

Summary of key comparative characteristics

3.11   Quality councils differ from non-accredited councils in a number of key areas, notably levels of councillor training, the qualifications and training of clerks, employment of staff in addition to the clerk, levels of income and expenditure, ownership of assets and the extent to which they have taken on functions delegated by principal local authorities. In many other ways, however, Quality councils have similar characteristics to non-accredited councils. Table 3.5 summarizes the key comparative characteristics of Quality councils. A more detailed analysis of these characteristics is provided in the remainder of the section.

Profile of council membership

3.12   The age and gender profiles of Quality councils and non-accredited councils are almost identical (table 3.6). Council membership in both cases is dominated by the middle- and late-aged, with men outnumbering women by a ratio of 2:1. In both cases nearly two-thirds of councillors had been members of the council prior to the most recent election.

Table 3.5: Key characteristics of Quality councils

Characteristic	
Council membership	Age and gender profiles identical to non-accredited councils
Councillor training	Higher levels of induction training and training on planning issues than non-accredited councils
Clerks	More likely to employ a paid clerk on full-time contract and to have adopted 2005 SLCC/NALC agreement on pay and conditions. Clerks more likely to have CiLCA or Cert. HE from UoG and other qualifications and training
Other staff	More human resources than non-accredited councils; more likely to employ full-time paid staff in addition to the clerk, most commonly council administrators
Council finances	Tend to have significantly greater financial resources and to set significantly higher precepts than non-accredited councils. Rank amongst the highest spending councils, with average expenditure significantly higher than non-accredited councils
Use of power to promote wellbeing	Tend to make more use of power to promote well-being than non-accredited councils.
Council assets	Relatively rich in land and buildings compared to non-accredited councils
Delegation of services	More likely to have taken on functions delegated by local authority, in particular advice and information services, crime prevention and public services

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.6: Membership of Quality and non-accredited councils

Council membership	Quality councils %	Non-Accredited Councils %
% Male	67.5	65.7
% Female	32.5	34.3
% <25	0.6	0.4
% 25 – 44	13.1	13.0
% 45 – 59	43.8	39.6
% 60+	42.9	47.1
First term of office	36	39

Source: Questionnaire.
Gender: Data for 196 Quality councils and 274 Non-accredited councils
Age: Data for 179 Quality councils and 228 Non-accredited councils

3.13   Members of Quality councils are significantly more likely to have received formal training than members of non-accredited councils. Over three-quarters of Quality councils reported that at least some councillors had participated in training compared with slightly more than half of non-accredited councils (table 3.7). In particular, Quality councils are significantly more likely to have provided induction training for members (77 per cent compared to 64 per cent) and members of Quality councils are also notably more likely to have received training in areas such as planning, finance, legal affairs, human resources and health and safety issues (table 3.8). In addition to the types of training listed in table 3.8, eight per cent of Quality councils reported that

the Chair had received formal training for the role, compared with five per cent on non-accredited councils.

Table 3.7: Councillor training

Councillors received formal training	Quality councils % (N=176)	Non-Accredited councils % (N=222)
Yes	77.0	57.8
No	12.8	25.0
Not known	10.2	17.2

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.8 Type of councillor training

Type of training	Quality councils % (N=176)	Non-Accredited councils % (N=222)
Induction	77.3	63.5
Planning	63.6	50.9
Finance	27.8	19.8
Health & Safety	25.0	17.6
Legal	24.4	10.8
Human Resources	10.2	6.3
Other	15.3	15.8

Source: Questionnaire

Profile of council clerks

3.14   Almost all Quality councils employ a paid clerk. On average, clerks working for Quality councils are contracted to work longer hours than their counterparts in non-accredited councils, with Quality councils significantly more likely to employ a paid clerk on a full-time contract, and significantly less likely to employ a paid clerk for less than five hours per week. The figures given in table 3.9 are not necessarily representative of the actual number of hours worked by clerks, as many paid clerks indicate that they regularly work in excess of contracted hours for no additional pay. Sixteen percent of Quality councils employ a clerk who also works for at least one other council, compared to 13 per cent of non-accredited councils.

Table 3.8 Contracted hours of paid clerks across Quality and non-accredited councils

Hours contracted	Clerks to Quality councils (N=192)	Clerks to non-accredited councils (N=252)
F/T (>35 hrs / week)	44%	30%
15 – 34 hrs / week	31%	35%
10 – 14 hrs / week	7%	8%
5 – 9 hrs / week	14%	15%
< 5 hrs / week	4%	12%

Source: Questionnaire

3.15   Adoption of the terms of pay and conditions of employment for clerks agreed between NALC and SLCC in 2005 appears to be consistent across both Quality and non-accredited councils. Responses to the questionnaire survey indicate that 93 per cent of paid clerks working for Quality councils and 85 per cent of paid clerks working for non-accredited councils receive pay in line with the agreement.

3.16   Both Quality and non-accredited councils are dominated by clerks with long experience of working for their current council (table 3.9). On average, clerks working for Quality councils have worked longer for their current council than clerks working for non-accredited councils. The median length of service for clerks for Quality councils is seven years, compared with five years and three months for clerks to non-accredited councils. Clerks working for Quality councils are also more likely than clerks working for non-accredited councils to have been employed in local government prior to their employment by their current council (table 3.10)

Table 3.9: Years of service to current council as of July - August 2006 across clerks to Quality and non-accredited councils

Years of service	Quality councils (N=195)	Non-accredited councils (N=256)
> 20 years	13%	9%
10 – 20 years	20%	17%
5 – 10 years	34%	25%
1 – 5 years	28%	38%
1 year or less	5%	10%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.10: Background of clerks, Quality and non-accredited councils

	Quality councils (N=193)	Non-accredited councils (N=259)
Employed as Clerk to other parish council	25%	19%
Employed as deputy Clerk by this parish council	7%	4%
Employed as deputy Clerk to other parish council	2%	1%
Otherwise employed by this or other parish council	6%	6%
Employed in local authority	31%	24%
Not employed in local government	38%	56%

Source: Questionnaire

3.17   The length of service and previous experience of clerks has an indirect influence on the ability of a council to successfully apply for Quality status insofar as they may affect the council's ability to pass the qualified clerk test (see chapter 2). Recently appointed clerks, and particularly clerks appointed from outside the local council sector, are less likely to have taken and passed the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) or the University of Gloucestershire Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration (CertHE) as required by the test. Over three-quarters of clerks to non-accredited councils currently hold neither of these qualifications (table 3.11). A small number of clerks to Quality councils also indicated that they do not currently hold CiLCA or the CertHE. These are all clerks appointed since the council obtained Quality status. Clerks to Quality councils are also more likely than clerks to non-accredited councils to have other relevant qualifications. The other qualifications most commonly held are Degrees and Diplomas of Higher Education in Local Policy. Also held by a small number of clerks are Masters Degrees, BA degrees, Diplomas and Certificates in the fields of Business Studies, Management, Finance and Municipal

Administration, including qualifications accredited by the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA).

Table 3.11: Qualifications of clerks to Quality and non-accredited councils

Qualification	Clerks to Quality councils (N=194)	Clerks to non-Quality councils (N=258)
CiLCA	68%	16%
UoG CertHE. in Local Policy or Local Council Admin.	31%	7%
NEITHER CiLCA nor CertHE	**5%**	**77%**
Dip. HE in Local Policy	7 %	1%
Degree in Local Policy	8%	3%
Other relevant qualification	40%	33%

Source: Questionnaire

3.18   Additionally, clerks to Quality councils are more likely to have participated in formal training courses during the last five years (table 3.12). Particularly notable are differences in the uptake of training from County Training Partnerships and in the completion of modules from the Local Policy Course offered by the University of Gloucestershire. Only 12 per cent of clerks to Quality councils have not undertaken any formal training in the last five years, compared with 27 per cent of clerks to non-accredited councils. These findings are likely if anything to underestimate the disparities between Quality and non-accredited councils, as responses to the questionnaire were almost entirely from paid clerks. It is likely that levels of qualification and uptake of training amongst unpaid clerks are significantly lower.

Table 3.12: Training undertaken by clerks across Quality and non-accredited councils

	Quality councils (N=196)	Non-accredited councils (N=270)
Training provided by County Training Partnership	49%	28%
Induction training from Society of Local Council Clerks	32%	27%
Induction training from county association of local councils	25%	20%
Module(s) from the University of Gloucester Local Policy course	22%	10%
Other training	30%	27%
No training undertaken / No answer	12%	27%

Source: Questionnaire

3.19   Responses to the questionnaire suggest that clerks working for Quality councils have access to resources similar to clerks working for non-accredited councils (table 3.13). All clerks to Quality councils have access to office space and a computer, email and photocopying facilities, as do almost all clerks to non-accredited councils. However, access to secretarial support is significantly higher amongst clerks to Quality councils. It is likely that these findings overstate the level of resource access to clerks working for non-accredited councils, as they are based on responses almost entirely from paid clerks. The majority of these resources are provided by the council, although clerks to non-accredited councils are more likely than those to

Quality councils to provide their own office space, computing and photocopying facilities (table 3.14).

Table 3.13: Resources available to clerks across Quality and non-accredited councils

	Quality councils (N=194)	Non-Quality councils (N=266)
Office space	100%	99%
Computer	100%	99%
Access to e-mail	100%	95%
Access to photocopying facilities	97%	95%
Fax machine	81%	71%
Secretarial support	66%	53%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.14: Provision of resources to clerk

	Quality councils (N=194)			Non-Quality councils (N=266)		
	Provided by council	Provided by Clerk	Provided by PLA	Provided by council	Provided by Clerk	Provided by PLA
Office space	63%	38%	0%	53%	45%	2%
Computer	80%	22%	<1%	66%	33%	2%
Access to e-mail	73%	28%	1%	61%	35%	1%
Fax machine	64%	15%	2%	56%	15%	2%
Photocopying	79%	14%	4%	67%	24%	7%
Secretarial support	52%	13%	2%	42%	11%	<1%

Source: Questionnaire. PLA = Principal local authority.

Profile of other staff employed by councils

3.20   Quality councils have more human resources than non-accredited councils. Almost three quarters (72 per cent) of Quality councils employ, in addition to the clerk, at least one member of staff, either paid or voluntary, compared to three fifths (60 per cent) of non-accredited councils.

3.21   Quality councils are significantly more likely to employ full-time paid staff than non-accredited councils (table 3.15). In part, this reflects the size profile of Quality councils. However, comparison of Quality councils with the matched sample of non-accredited councils provided by responses to the Questionnaire survey suggests that the difference is not entirely due to size. In particular, Quality councils are more likely to employ paid full-time administrators and ground staff. Similarly, Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to employ paid staff on a part-time basis, although here the difference is far less pronounced (table 3.16). Most commonly, Quality councils employ a paid part-time administrator. Only a handful of local councils engage voluntary staff, mostly in roles outside of administration, grounds maintenance and caretaking.

Table 3.15: Employment of paid full-time staff

	Councils employing paid full-time staff			
	Admin	**Ground**	**Caretaker**	**Other**
Quality councils (N=196)	29%	33%	11%	11%
Non-accredited councils (N=264)	18%	24%	9%	6%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.16: Employment of paid part-time staff

	Paid part-time staff, 15-34 hrs week				Paid part-time staff, <15 hrs week			
	Admin	Ground	Caretaker	Other	Admin	Ground	Caretaker	Other
Quality councils (N=196)	41%	13%	19%	17%	18%	15%	20%	20%
Non-accredited councils (N=264)	31%	11%	16%	9%	16%	10%	19%	22%

Source: Questionnaire

Council finances

3.22   In proportion to their current size profile, Quality councils have significantly greater financial resources at their disposal than non-accredited councils. The mean income of the 184 Quality councils providing financial information in the survey was £249,658 and the median income was £117,404. This compares with a mean income of £158,626 and a median income of £75,076 for the 252 non-accredited councils providing financial information in the survey. Although sampling means that these figures are only indicative, they do suggest that type-for-type Quality councils are better resourced than non-accredited councils, and that Quality councils include some of the best resourced local councils in the country.

3.23   Quality councils also set considerably higher precepts than average. According to the Audit Commission, 75 per cent of all local councils set precepts of less than £25,000. In comparison, only a quarter of the Quality councils responding to the survey set precepts of less than £25,000 in 2005-6, and almost half set precepts of more than £100,000 (table 3.17). This contrast reflects the larger average size of Quality councils, but a distinction is also apparent when Quality councils are compared to the stratified sample of non-accredited councils that corresponds to the size profile of Quality councils. Thirty-eight per cent of the non-accredited councils responding to the survey set a precept of less than £25,000, and 38 per cent set a precept of £100,000 or more. The mean precept set by responding Quality councils was at £163,719 more than £45,000 higher than the mean precept of non-accredited councils, whilst the median precept was also significantly higher for Quality councils at £85,584 compared to £54,000 for non-accredited councils (table 3.18).

Table 3.16: Precept set by Quality and non-accredited councils

Precept 2005-6	Quality councils (N=185)	Non-accredited councils (N=252)
£1,000,000+	2%	0%
£500,000 - £999,999	9%	5%
£250,000 - £499,999	12%	9%
£100,000 – £249,000	25%	23%
£50,000 - £99,999	13%	14%
£25,000 – £49,999	12%	11%
< £25,000	26%	38%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 3.17: Mean and median revenue income from various sources for councils.

Source of funding	Mean income £		Median income £	
	Quality councils	Non-Quality councils	Quality councils	Non-Quality councils
Precept	163,719	117,946	85,584	54,000
Trading fees	23,854	6,361	22,284	10,163
Charges for recreation facilities	7,321	3,925	3,828	1,786
Other charges and fees	3,132	2,968	4,221	2,000
Letting of village / community hall	8,850	6,139	18,000	15,595
Other rents and lettings	5,022	2,385	2,095	3,000
Investment income	5,599	3,884	2,453	2,385
Income from LA	11,550	7,034	6,000	3,000
Other revenue income	20,613	7,365	5,280	4,331
Total	249,658	157,999	117,404	74,847

Source: Questionnaire

NB: Figures are calculated only for those councils receiving income from source, based on data provided by 183 Quality councils and 252 non-accredited councils.

3.23   The precept provides nearly two-thirds of the total aggregated income for Quality councils as a whole, and nearly three-quarters of the total aggregated income for the non-accredited councils in the survey (table 3.18). Thus, whilst the overall profile of income sources is broadly similar for Quality councils and non-accredited councils, Quality councils are slightly more likely to receive income from a range of sources, and smaller sources of income are likely to be more significant to the councils' finances. In particular, Quality councils are more likely to receive income from trading fees and charges for the use of facilities than non-accredited councils, and from devolved funding for delegated functions from principal local authorities (table 3.18). Furthermore, the income received from these sources tends to be significantly greater for Quality councils than for non-accredited councils (see also table 3.17).

3.24   There is little difference in the proportion of Quality councils and non-accredited councils receiving capital income and loan income. Seventeen per cent of both Quality councils and non-accredited councils reported that they received capital income during 2005-6, whilst three per cent of Quality councils and four per cent of non-accredited councils reported receiving loan income. However, the value of both capital income and loan income was significantly higher for Quality councils than non-accredited councils. The median capital income reported by Quality councils was £36,000 compared to £9,676 for non-accredited councils. Only seven Quality councils reported loan income, ranging from £3294 to £1.7 million; ten non-accredited councils reported loan income, ranging from £400 to £170,000.

Table 3.18: Proportion of aggregate revenue income derived from various sources

Source of funding	Income from source as % of total aggregate revenue income		% of councils receiving income from source	
	Quality councils	*Non-Quality councils*	*Quality councils*	*Non-Quality councils*
Precept	65.6	74.6	100	100
Trading fees	9.6	4.0	26	20
Charges for recreation facilities	2.9	2.5	41	36
Other charges and fees	1.3	1.9	38	32
Letting of village / community hall	3.5	3.9	34	26
Other rents and lettings	2.0	1.5	31	28
Investment income	2.2	2.5	85	82
Income from principal local authority	4.6	4.5	64	55
Other revenue income	8.3	4.7	57	43

Source: Questionnaire
Based on data from 183 Quality councils and 252 non-accredited councils.

3.25   Changes in the level of precepts over the last two financial years follow a similar pattern for both Quality councils and non-accredited councils (table 3.19). The majority of both Quality and non-accredited councils have increased the precept over this period, and more than a fifth of councils in both categories have introduced increases of 25 per cent or more over two years. The median increase for Quality councils is 10.1 per cent over two years, whilst the median increase for non-accredited councils is 10.0 per cent over two years. These figures suggest that there are no significant costs arising from applying for Quality status that have been passed on to local council taxpayers through the precept.

Table 3.19: Changes in precept between 2004-5 and 2006-7

	Quality councils (N=174)	Non-accredited councils (N=219)
Increase >50%	6%	9%
Increase 26 – 50%	16%	12%
Increase 11 – 25%	29%	30%
Increase <10%	33%	32%
No change	10%	10%
Decrease	6%	7%

Source: Questionnaire

3.26   Expenditure by Quality councils is significantly higher than typical for local councils in England as a whole. Figures provided by the Audit Commission suggest that the mean annual

expenditure for the highest spending 10 per cent of local councils in England is £153,000. Over a third of Quality councils providing financial data in the survey reported total annual expenditure in excess of this figure, and the overall mean expenditure reported by Quality councils was £263,000. This figure is inflated by a small number of councils spending well in excess of £500,000 per annum (table 3.20), but the median expenditure of the Quality councils surveyed (£85,382) is also significantly higher than the median expenditure of the non-accredited councils responding to the survey (£57,335).

Table 3.20: Reported expenditure by Quality councils and non-accredited councils

Total expenditure 2005-6	Quality councils (N=171)	Non-accredited councils (N=235)
Over £1 million	6%	1%
£500,000 - £999,999	9%	7%
£100,000 - £499,999	32%	28%
£50,000 - £99,999	17%	15%
£25,000 - £49,999	11%	11%
£10,000 - £24,999	11%	14%
£5,000 - £9,999	6%	11%
Under £5,000	8%	13%
Mean expenditure	£263,095	£140,629
Median expenditure	£85,382	£57,335

Source: Questionnaire

3.26　As detailed in Annex E, patterns of expenditure by purpose appear to be broadly similar between Quality and non-Quality councils. The main areas of difference are salaries and administrative costs, and recreational facilities. Although a similar proportion of Quality councils and non-accredited councils incur expenditure on salaries and office costs, both mean and median expenditure on these items is significantly greater for Quality councils than for non-accredited councils responding to the survey. The mean and median expenditure figures for parks and for outdoor recreation facilities are also significantly higher for Quality councils than for non-accredited councils, and Quality councils are twice as likely as non-accredited councils to support indoor recreation facilities.

Section 137 expenditure

3.27　Under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972, all local councils have the power to spend on activities and items that are not covered by their statutory powers but that councils consider "will bring direct benefit to the area, or part of it, or some of its inhabitants". The majority of Quality councils make use of this power. However, few councils exploit this power to anything approaching its maximum extent. Quality councils make slightly more use of their power to promote well-being than non-Quality councils. Section 137 enables councils to spend up to a statutory threshold. Permitted expenditure under S137 is in proportion to the size of the electorate, and since April 2004 (following the Local Government Act 2003, S118) has risen in line with the retail price index. The current limit of S137 expenditure is £5.44 per elector per year. This potentially permits expenditure nearly three in ten Quality councils to spend in excess of £50,000 on items of general benefit to the community (table 3.21).

Table 3.21: Maximum permitted spend of Quality councils under S137

Limit on spending	% Quality councils (N=187)
>£100,000	10%
£50,000 - £100,000	19%
£25,000 - £49,999	23%
£10,000 - £24,999	18%
£5,000 - £9,999	14%
£1,000 - £4,999	15%
<£1,000	1%

Source: Questionnaire survey

3.27   During the last financial year (2005-6), 85 per cent of Quality councils incurred expenditure under Section 137 (table 3.22). Mean expenditure under S137 amounted to £7,527, well below the limit for most councils. On average, Quality councils spent 16.5 per cent of their permitted maximum, or £0.90 per elector. Very few Quality councils incurred expenditure under S137 that remotely approached the permitted limit, and more than half spent less than ten per cent of permitted expenditure. These expenditure patterns did not differ significantly from those of non-accredited councils surveyed. Seventy-nine per cent of non-accredited councils responding to the survey incurred expenditure under Section 137 in the same period, with a mean expenditure of £7,056 representing on average 16.9 per cent of the permitted maximum.

Table 3.22: Use of permitted expenditure under S137, 2005-6

S137 spending as % of limit	Quality councils (N=167)	Non-accredited councils (N=222)
100%	0%	0%
90-99%	2%	<1%
75-89%	0%	1%
50-74%	3%	4%
25-49%	15%	12%
10-24%	19%	24%
1-10%	37%	31%
Under 1%	8%	6%
None	15%	21%

Source: Questionnaire

3.28   The majority of S137 expenditure by Quality councils in the last financial year went on grants to local community groups and other organisations (table 3.23). Grants to local groups and organisations were also the most common item of expenditure under S137. Of the S137 expenditure by Quality councils that did not go to local groups and organisations, the majority was targeted at improving economic, social and environmental well-being. Within this broad field of expenditure, there was a strong focus on economic development activities, planning and environmental issues and community initiatives undertaken by the council. Compared to non-accredited councils, Quality councils directed S137 expenditure less at grants to local organisations and more towards activities undertaken by the council itself. Expenditure on planning and environmental issues is significantly greater amongst Quality councils than it is amongst non-accredited councils.

Table 3.23: Patterns of expenditure under S137, 2005-6

S137 expenditure 2005-6	Quality councils (N=174)		Non-Quality councils (N=233)	
	% spending on item	Mean expenditure	% spending on item	Mean expenditure
Grants to local organisations	67%	£5392	65%	£5727
Economic development	3%	NA	2%	NA
Planning and environmental issues	7%	£5579	3%	£3764
Community safety, inc. crime prevention	7%	NA	9%	NA
Community initiatives	21%	£3288	15%	£3618
Other	20%	£2387	13%	£8231

Source: Questionnaire

NA - No reliable figures available

Assets held by Quality councils

3.28   Assets in the form of land or building are owned by the same proportion (93 per cent) of both Quality councils and non-accredited councils in the survey. However, Quality councils tend to own more assets than non-accredited councils, and a notably greater proportion of Quality councils own assets such as community halls, playgrounds and recreation areas, council offices and war memorials (table 3.24). The majority of assets are freehold.

Table 3.24: Land and buildings owned by Quality and non-accredited councils

	Quality councils (N=189)		Non-Quality councils (N=244)	
	Leasehold	Freehold	Leasehold	Freehold
Community hall	10%	45%	6%	33%
Council offices	12%	39%	9%	33%
Village green	4%	32%	<1%	24%
Playground	14%	60%	10%	49%
Other recreation area	11%	53%	10%	43%
Other open space	9%	50%	7%	39%
Allotments	12%	45%	9%	39%
Burial ground	2%	38%	2%	35%
Bus shelter(s)	4%	58%	5%	51%
War memorial	2%	51%	1%	37%
Other	3%	12%	2%	12%

Source: Questionnaire

Reasons for participation and non-participation in the Quality scheme

Why Councils have taken-up the scheme

3.29   Local councils take-up the Quality scheme for a range of different reasons (table 3.25). An almost universal reason is that the council wishes to raise its profile within the local community. Almost as important is that the council wishes to raise its own standards. This

reason is particularly common amongst councils that have not yet achieved Quality status but are either in the process of applying or preparing to supply, suggesting that the benefits of Quality status reported by accredited councils (see next chapter) are serving as a significant positive influence on take-up of the scheme.

3.30   Almost two thirds of accredited councils and three quarters of councils working towards accreditation took up the scheme with the anticipation that Quality status would encourage greater consultation by the principal local authority. For over half of accredited councils, wishing to encourage delegation of functions and delegation of funding by the principal local authority was a reason for taking up the scheme. These expectations of delegated functions and funding is far higher amongst councils preparing for accreditation than it was amongst councils who are now accredited, as are expectations that Quality status leading to councils exercising greater leadership and becoming more accessible to the community. These figures suggest either that to some degree expectations of the scheme have risen since it was launched in 2003, or that non-accredited councils engaging with the scheme are starting from a lower base.

Table 3.25: Reasons for take-up of the Quality scheme

Reason for take-up	Quality councils (N=192)	Non-accredited councils preparing to apply (N=124)
To increase status of council in community	94%	86%
To increase professionalism of council	77%	83%
To encourage greater consultation by principal local authority	67%	67%
To encourage delegation of funding by local authority	64%	72%
To encourage delegation of services by principal local authority	62%	73%
To increase leadership exercised by council	35%	47%
To improve accessibility of council to community	35%	48%
Other	13%	6%

Source: Questionnaire

Why Councils have not taken up the scheme

3.31   Councils choosing not to take up the Quality scheme do so for a variety of reasons (table 3.26). For the majority of councils not taking up the scheme, the scheme is simply not a priority for the council. This suggests that the decision of many councils not to apply for Quality status is not irrevocable, so that changes in circumstances and interests might lead to councils considering applying for Quality status. The reason why the scheme is not a priority for many councils is likely to be closely linked to the majority of councils being unclear as to how the scheme would benefit either their council or the community it serves. This suggests that if such councils were able to identify such benefits, it would increase take-up of the scheme.

3.32   However, many councils have chosen not to take-up the scheme because there are significant barriers to them doing so. Lack of a clerk with one of the qualifications recognised by

the Quality scheme is a barrier for well over half of councils choosing not to take-up the scheme. Over a third of councils will not apply because either their members or the clerk, or both, are not prepared to meet the demands made by the scheme. The expected cost of engaging with the scheme is a barrier to almost a third of councils. Close to a third of councils cite inability to meet the electoral mandate at first accreditation as a barrier, but this may reflect misinterpretation of the electoral mandate on the part of some councils, as more than eight in ten (82 per cent) of the non-accredited councils responding to the questionnaire survey currently meet the mandate (see next chapter). These responses to the questionnaire survey suggest the importance of both practical and attitudinal barriers, and their inter-relation, in decisions not to take-up the Quality scheme.

Table 3.26: Reasons for councils not taking up the Quality scheme

Reason for not taking up the scheme	Councils (N=115)
Quality scheme not a council priority	72%
Unclear how scheme would benefit council	63%
Unclear how scheme would benefit community	61%
Clerk does not have necessary qualification	51%
Clerk unable / unwilling to meet demands of Quality scheme	33%
Councillors unable / unwilling to meet demands of scheme	27%
Costs of meeting Quality criteria too high	30%
Council unable to meet electoral mandate at first accreditation	24%
Unsure how council would meet Quality scheme criteria	12%
Council unlikely to meet electoral mandate at re-accreditation	11%
Lack of support for scheme from local electorate	10%
Other	9%
Planned staff changes	5%
Don't know enough about Quality scheme	5%
Lack of co-operation from local authority	4%

Source: Questionnaire

Chapter 4: Benefits and costs of the Quality scheme

Introduction

4.1   This chapter discusses the reported benefits and costs of participation in the Quality scheme. It covers two main topics: the benefits and costs of the Quality scheme for participating councils; and the benefits and disadvantages of the Quality scheme for principal local authorities.

Benefits of the Quality scheme for participating councils

Benefits reported by Quality councils

4.2   The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme has brought benefits to the majority of accredited local councils. Two thirds (66 per cent) of councils with Quality status report that that they have benefited from Quality status, although a substantial minority (25 per cent) report that that Quality status has not brought them any benefits. A small proportion of councils are unsure whether or not they have benefited from having Quality status, largely because they have been awarded Quality status within the last year and feel that they have not yet had time to fully evaluate its impact.

4.3   The reported benefits of Quality status vary between different councils (table 4.1). The most consistent benefit is in terms of the effective management of the council, with 41per cent of councils reporting that Quality status has brought about increased professionalism within the council. Feedback from local councils to county and district associations indicates that some councillors and clerks have treated the process of applying for Quality status as a 'health check' of council procedures enabling them to ensure that their council is following correct procedures and has appropriate management arrangements in place.

4.4   Other prominent benefits are a sense of greater capacity to act, increased vision, and enhanced community engagement. Over a third of Quality councils report that Quality status has led to the council having a stronger sense of vision, with more than a quarter feeling that the council now has an increased capacity to act. Over a quarter of councils have seen increased public interest in the council since becoming a Quality council, although this has not always translated to either increased public participation at council meetings or increased nominations for election or co-option. To some extent increased community engagement may result directly from increased communication with the electorate as the process of applying for Quality status required a significant proportion of councils to introduce new mechanisms for community engagement, including public participation at meetings and production of annual reports and regular newsletters.

4.5   Financial benefits are also evident, although they have been experienced by only a minority of councils. Slightly over a fifth report that Quality status has brought them increased success with applications for grant-funding, largely because it has increased their credibility in the eyes of funding bodies. Other material benefits, in the form of awards from the Quality Parish Investment Fund (now discontinued) and the increased delegation of funding from principal local authorities, have accrued to only a small minority of councils.

4.6   Less widespread benefits include improved relationships with principal local authorities and other bodies. Close to a fifth of councils report that Quality status has resulted in increased consultation by their principal local authority over service delivery, but a very small minority

reported improved relationships with local authorities over other issues. Just over one in six councils also report that Quality status has resulted in increased engagement with other bodies.

Table 4.1: Benefits of Quality scheme reported by Quality councils

Type of benefit resulting from Quality status	% of councils
Increased professionalism of council procedures	44%
Stronger vision from council	40%
Increased interest by local electorate in council affairs	29%
Increased sense of capacity to act amongst councillors	26%
Stronger local leadership exercised by council	26%
Increased success with grant applications	21%
Increased public participation at council meetings	21%
Increased engagement with other bodies	19%
Increased consultation over service delivery by principal local authority	18%
Increased nominations for election / co-option	7%
Increased consultation over planning by principal local authority	7%
Increased delegation of funding by principal local authority	5%
Additional responsibilities for service delivery delegated by principal local authority	5%
Other	6%
No benefits reported	33%

Source: Questionnaire. N=187.

Benefits of the Quality scheme perceived by non-accredited councils

4.7   Overall, non-accredited councils are less certain of the benefits of the Quality scheme than accredited councils. Although half believe that the Quality scheme would benefit their council, over a third do not believe that the scheme would benefit them and a significant number are unsure. Larger councils and councils in the process of applying for Quality status or anticipating applying are the most likely to perceive that Quality would benefit their council. To some degree, expectations of benefits are in direct proportion to the size of councils. Councils with an electorate of below 1,000 are the least likely to perceive that Quality status would bring them benefits (table 4.2).

4.8   These figures reveal a significant gap between the reported benefits of Quality status and the expected benefits of Quality status. There is thus clearly a need for stakeholders to communicate the reported benefits of Quality status to non-accredited councils more effectively; current promotion of the Quality scheme is inadequate in this respect. In the last chapter of the report, we recommend that the key benefits of Quality status reported by Quality councils are emphasised in future promotion of the Quality scheme.

4.9   As with the actual benefits reported by Quality councils, the perceived benefits of Quality status vary between non-accredited councils (table 4.3). However, the degree of consistency is higher than amongst Quality councils, suggesting that across those non-accredited councils that do expect benefits to result from Quality status, expectations of benefits substantially exceed the actual benefits of Quality status reported by accredited councils.

Table 4.2: Non-accredited councils' perceptions of benefit of the Quality scheme

Size of electorate	Perceiving benefits of QS	Perceiving no benefits of QS	Unsure of benefits of QS
20,000+	57%	14%	29%
10,000 – 19,999	61%	22%	17%
5,000 – 9,999	65%	23%	12%
2,500 – 4,999	41%	31%	28%
1,000 – 2,499	63%	25%	12%
500 – 999	28%	52%	20%
<500	8%	73%	19%
ALL	53%	31%	16%

Source: Questionnaire

4.10   Over quarter of non-accredited expect that Quality status would benefit them in terms of increased delegation of funding from their principal local authority. A similar proportion expects that Quality status would enable them to take on a greater role in service delivery. Neither of these expectations is born out by the experiences of accredited councils. Over a fifth of non-accredited councils expect that Quality status would result in them playing a greater role in planning and development control, but this benefit is reported by only 5 per cent of Quality councils.

4.11   The closest degrees of correspondence between expected and reported benefits are in terms of increased engagement with other bodies and the local community, and a greater capacity to act. Twenty-seven per cent of non-accredited councils expect that Quality status will bring increased interest by local electorate in council affairs, a benefit reported by 29 per cent of Quality councils. Similarly, 21 per cent of non-accredited councils expect that Quality status will lead to an enhanced sense of capacity to act, a benefit reported by 26 per cent of Quality councils. Twenty-two per cent of non-accredited councils expect that Quality status would bring increased engagement with other bodies, a benefit reported by 19 per cent of Quality councils.

Table 4.3 Perceived benefits of Quality status, non-accredited councils

Perceived benefit resulting from Quality status	% Councils
Increased success with grant applications	32%
Increased professionalism of council procedures	31%
Stronger local leadership exercised by council	29%
Stronger vision from council	29%
Increased delegation of funding by principal local authority	27%
Increased interest by local electorate in council affairs	27%
Additional responsibilities for service delivery delegated by principal local authority	26%
Increased consultation over service delivery by principal local authority	24%
Increased engagement with other bodies	22%
Increased consultation over planning by principal local authority	21%
Increased sense of capacity to act amongst councillors	21%
Increased nominations for election / co-option	12%
Increased public participation at council meetings	11%
Other	1%
None or none indicated	47%

Source: Questionnaire. N=262.

Views of stakeholders on benefits to councils resulting from Quality status

4.12   Interviews with county and district associations of local councils largely confirm the findings of the questionnaire survey on the actual and perceived benefits of Quality status for local councils. In particular, some associations are concerned that in many cases Quality status has had little impact on the relationship between local councils and their principal local authorities. We discuss further findings on this relationship in chapter seven.

4.13   In addition, interviews and discussions with local and national stakeholders, including county and district Associations, Defra, NALC and the SLCC, suggest that few local councils, whether accredited or not, are aware of the potential financial benefits for Quality councils resulting from the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. The Act empowers Quality councils to utilise receipts from the issue of fixed penalty notices for the discharge of any council functions; non-accredited councils can use such receipts only for the discharge of certain functions specified in the Act. In order to be eligible, councils must employ an enforcement officer who has successfully completed a course of training from a training provider approved by the Secretary of State.[7]

4.14   When questioned, local stakeholders were doubtful that the Act would benefit the majority of local councils, largely because of the cost of employing and training an enforcement officer, the lack of opportunities for issuing fixed penalty notices (particularly for smaller councils in rural areas), and lack of resources for pursing unpaid penalties. However the Clean Neighbourhoods Act has set an important precedent for future legislation by differentiating Quality local councils in providing for additional powers.

Costs of participation in the Quality scheme

Reported costs of preparing and applying for Quality status

4.15   The reported cost of applying for Quality status varies substantially between different councils. The mean cost was £1,461, and the median cost for the 162 councils providing information was £500. Two thirds of councils spent less than £1,000 on the process, with only a small proportion reported costs in excess of £5,000 and only two councils reporting costs of more than £10,000. However, these figures should be treated with some caution as they may reflect variations in the interpretation of the question rather than necessarily variations in the actual costs incurred. Some variation should nonetheless be expected as different councils had to make different changes in order to meet the qualification criteria, and absolute costs also reflect council size (table 4.4).

4.16   However, although the absolute cost of applying for Quality status broadly increases with the size of the council, the relative cost is greatest for smaller councils. Councils with an electorate size of less than 1,000 typically spent around 5 per cent of their total annual expenditure on obtaining Quality status, compared to less than 1 per cent of total annual expenditure typically spent by councils with electorates over 5,000. Across all Quality councils, the proportion of annual expenditure incurred in applying for Quality status was reported to vary between 0.05 per cent and 27.2 per cent. Two-thirds of Quality councils spent less than 1 per cent of annual expenditure on the process of applying, and for only one in twenty councils did

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[7] Environmental Offences (Fixed Penalties) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2006, Regulation 6. For more details, see *Guidance on the Fixed Penalty Notice Provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 and other legislation*, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2006.

the process cost more than 10 per cent of annual expenditure. Two in five councils reported no additional costs resulting from changes necessary to meet the Quality criteria.

Table 4.4: Reported cost of applying for Quality status

Electorate	Average cost (£)	Lowest cost (£)	Highest cost (£)
20,000+	3,715	100	15,000
10,000 – 19,999	2,806	5	40,000
5,000 – 9,999	1,222	40	6,000
2,500 – 4,999	663	50	2,000
1,000 – 2,499	869	25	5,000
500 – 999	793	25	4,500
<500	295	25	600
All councils	1,461	25	40,000

Source: Questionnaire. N=154.

4.17   The cost of preparing for Quality status reflects the changes that councils have needed to make into order to meet the Quality criteria (table 4.5). Additional costs have most frequently been incurred by support for clerks undertaking training towards the CiLCA qualification and by the production of a regular newsletter.

Table 4.5: Councils incurring costs to meet Quality criteria

Quality scheme requirement	% councils incurring additional costs to meet criteria
Existing clerk gaining CiLCA qualification	39
Producing regular council newsletter (at least 4 a year)	37
Producing and making available to local people annual report of the council by 30th June	19
Providing synopsis of annual report to local people	15
Including contact details of councillors and clerk in newsletter	5
Ensuring that all councillors have registered their interests	4
Encouraging all councillors to attend council meetings or to give reasons for absence	4
Appointing clerk with CiLCA qualification	3
Increasing % of councillors who had stood for election	3
Allowing local people access to financial information regarding council throughout the year	2
Increasing number of council meetings to 6 or more per year	2
Ensuring that all councillors have signed up to Code of Conduct	1
Displaying notification of council meetings at least 3 days in advance	1
Making minutes of meetings available to electors within 2 months	1
Enabling public participation at council meetings	<1
No additional costs reported	41

Source: Questionnaire. N=167.

4.18   Training for the clerk is also the most frequently reported specific *item* of expenditure associated with applying for Quality status, excluding the application fee (table 4.6). Other significant items of expenditure included setting up a council newsletter, publishing and distributing an annual report, improving communications with the electorate and setting up an maintaining a council website. Nearly half of Quality councils incurred additional office expenses as a result of applying for Quality status, and a quarter incurred additional expenditure on salaries, including employing new staff and paying overtime to the clerk. However, increased expenditure on salaries was less commonplace for larger councils with a larger number of staff already in place, and several clerks indicated that applying for Quality status formed part of their ordinary work and resulted in no extra remuneration.

Table 4.6: Items of expenditure resulting from applications for Quality status

Item of expenditure	% Councils
Application fee	100
Training / qualifications for Clerk	54
Office expenses	46
Setting up council newsletter	42
Publication and distribution of Annual Report	42
Communication with electorate	28
Setting up and maintaining council website	26
Salaries (e.g. new staff, overtime for Clerk)	25
Councillor training	14
Engagement with other bodies	11
Public consultation	10
Council meetings	8
Preparation of accounts	6
Audit of accounts	5
Holding and advertising by-elections	4
Holding and advertising full council elections	3
Maintenance of amenities and facilities	2
Insurance (e.g. of buildings and other assets)	1
Grant-aid to other bodies	1
Provision of services	<1
Other	2

Source: Questionnaire. N=186.

4.19   In cases where costs are incurred, the level of cost is contingent on the existing practices of the council and the size of the council. Figures provided by clerks suggest that the following items of expenditure are likely to incur costs within the ranges indicated:
- producing regular council newsletter: £50 - £14,000
- existing clerk gaining CiLCA qualification: £20 - £3,000
- increasing % of councillors standing for election: £68 - £2,700
- increasing number of council meetings to 6 or more per year: £50 - £2,000
- producing and making available the annual report: £25 - £500
- producing and distributing synopsis of the annual report: £50 - £200

4.20   The most significant cost appears to be the production and distribution of a council newsletter. Fifteen councils indicated that this generated additional costs of at least £1,000, and discussion with council clerks and local stakeholders suggest that the costs of newsletters are a frequent cause of complaint within many councils.

4.21   Applications for Quality status also frequently incur indirect or non-monetary costs. Most commonly, these costs are in the form of time spent by clerks and councillors on preparing applications. In the majority of cases, it is only the clerk who spends additional time. The time spent by the clerk ranges from less than five hours to well above 100 hours (table 4.7). The majority of clerks had spent more than 20 hours, and several clerks reported that they had spent over 200 hours, although this may include the time spent compiling their CiLCA portfolio. At least some of this work will be paid, but many clerks indicate that applications for Quality status have resulted in them working significant voluntary unpaid overtime. In almost half of cases (46 per cent), council members also spend time on the application, all of which is unpaid.

Table 4.7: Time spent by clerks on applications for Quality status

	Time spent by clerks				
	Under 5hrs	**5 – 19 hrs**	**20 – 49 hrs**	**50 – 99 hrs**	**>100 hrs**
% clerks	3%	17%	44%	22%	14%

Source: Questionnaire. N=167.

Perceived costs of preparing and applying for Quality status by non-participating councils

4.22   Non-accredited councils anticipate that if they were to apply for Quality status, meeting Quality criteria would require expenditure on a wide range of items (table 4.8). The items of expenditure most commonly anticipated by non-accredited councils are the application fee and training for the clerk. Close to half expect to have additional expenditure on staff salaries, including overtime for the clerk, and councillor training. Also highly prominent are items of expenditure associated with increasing communication with the electorate, including setting up a council newsletter, the publication and distribution of the annual report, the setting up of a council website and public consultation.

4.23   A significant minority (25 per cent or more) of non-accredited councils expect that achieving Quality status would require them to incur expenditure on engagement with public bodies, public consultation, services, elections, and the audit of accounts. In comparison, only a small minority (in most cases, under 5 per cent) of accredited councils have actually incurred costs in these areas. This might suggest that the majority of non-accredited councils would have to make more changes to their structure, procedures and activities than existing Quality councils have had to make. However, it might also suggest that many non-accredited councils over-estimate the necessity of expenditure on certain items. Feedback from county associations suggests that the latter is often the case. There is thus clearly a need to increase awareness of the actual expenses incurred by councils that have achieved Quality status and dispel any popular misconceptions regarding the financial costs of the Quality scheme for participating councils. NALC operates a bursary fund providing £200 to cover 75 per cent of training costs for councils with incomes of less than £25,000 per annum, yet uptake of this scheme has been disappointing and there is a need to promote greater awareness of the fund.

Table 4.8: Anticipated costs of achieving Quality status

Item of expenditure	% Councils
Application fee	65
Training / qualifications for Clerk	63
Salaries (e.g. new staff, overtime for Clerk)	53
Councillor training	52
Communication with electorate	46
Setting up council newsletter	44
Publication and distribution of Annual Report	43
Office expenses	36
Setting up and maintaining council website	31
Public consultation	29
Engagement with other bodies	28
Provision of services	25
Holding and advertising full council elections	15
Maintenance of amenities and facilities	17
Audit of accounts	13
Holding and advertising by-elections	11
Insurance (e.g. of buildings and other assets)	7
Council meetings	5
Preparation of accounts	4
Grant-aid to other bodies	4
Other	1

Source: Questionnaire survey of non-accredited councils. N = 236.

Increases in costs following award of Quality status

4.24   Eight in ten Quality councils report some increase in expenditure since achieving Quality status. However, this statement must be accompanied by two caveats. Firstly, changes in expenditure have been measured over different periods of time by different councils depending on when they obtained Quality status. Nearly two-thirds of the councils reporting no increase in expenditure only obtained Quality status in the previous twelve months. Secondly, the reported increases are not necessarily a consequence of achieving Quality status. As one clerk commented, expenditure has increased, "but not essentially because of Quality status, but because of the council wanting to be more active in the community." Other clerks indicated that costs had risen due to internal benchmarking reviews and the requirements of the Best Value regime. Significantly, 97 per cent of non-accredited councils also reported that expenditure had increased over the period since 2003 when the Quality scheme was introduced, with clerks' salaries and working hours, office expenses and insurance identified as common areas of rising costs.

4.25   Where costs have increased, these have most frequently been associated with pay rises for clerks and additional hours worked by clerks, along with the production and distribution of an annual report and other forms of communication with the local community (table 4.9). Increases in expenditure on clerks' salaries are more widely reported by councils which obtained Quality status earlier in the scheme, suggesting that they are not necessarily a direct result of Quality status, whereas councils that have more recently been awarded Quality status are more likely to report increased expenditure on annual reports and communications. This may indicate that these councils have had to make greater changes in order to qualify for Quality status.

Table 4.9: Increased expenditure by Quality councils since accreditation

Item of expenditure	All Quality councils (N=196)	Qualified before Jan 2004 (N=40)	Qualified since July 2005 (N=80)
Clerk's salary	48%	58%	35%
Cost of annual report	34%	30%	37%
Hours worked by clerk	32%	43%	26%
Other communication with electorate	33%	25%	37%
Office expenses	27%	23%	30%
Cost of public consultation	15%	10%	18%
Cost of training for clerk	14%	13%	13%
Salaries of other staff	12%	5%	8%
Costs of councillor training	13%	13%	14%
Hours worked by councillors	9%	8%	9%
Maintaining amenities and facilities	9%	10%	5%
Insurance	9%	15%	8%
Capital expenditure	8%	18%	2%
Cost of providing services	8%	10%	6%
Costs of engagement with other bodies	6%	5%	5%
External / internal audit costs	8%	15%	6%
Cost of by-elections	6%	3%	4%
Cost of preparing accounts	6%	10%	2%
Cost of full council elections	4%	3%	3%
Cost of council meetings	3%	0%	4%
Grant-aid to other bodies	3%	3%	4%
Other costs	4%	3%	4%
No increased expenditure reported	16%	15%	31%

Source: Questionnaire

4.26   Increased expenditure by both Quality and non-accredited councils has most frequently been financed through increases in the precept. Other common means of financing additional expenditure are the redistribution of council budgets through efficiency savings, drawing on council fund balances and obtaining additional grant-funding, although these measures have been undertaken by less than a fifth of councils.

Good practice: raising additional revenue

For many Quality councils, applying and being awarded Quality status has been the stimulus for seeking to raise additional finance from sources other than the precept. In particular, many councils have become more active in identifying potential sources of grant-funding. A number of councils have established written strategies for identifying and engaging with funding streams open to the voluntary and community sector. County associations and the National Association of Local Councils are able to provide advice.

Benefits and disadvantages of the Quality scheme for principal local authorities

Expectations of benefits to principal local authorities

4.27   The guidance accompanying the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme suggests that whilst the scheme is intended to bring benefits to the local community at large, it should also benefit principal local authorities.

4.28   The envisaged benefit of the Quality scheme for Principal local authorities is that it provides an independent assessment of Local Councils. Quality status demonstrates that a council is "representative, competent, well managed, and able to take on an enhanced role".[8] The requirement for Quality councils to be re-assessed at regular intervals if they wish to retain Quality status should provide evidence to principal local authorities that standards of representativeness, competence, good management and ability to take on an enhanced role are being maintained, although some concerns have been raised about this (see chapter 9).

4.29   According to the guidance accompanying the Quality scheme, Principal local authorities can be "confident" that Quality Local Councils "within their areas are worthy partners, which in turn should instil faith in those councils' capacity to undertake an enhanced role for the benefit of their communities".

Benefits of the Quality scheme reported by principal local authorities

4.30   In practice, the extent to which principal local authorities view Quality status as evidence that a council is "representative, competent, well managed, and able to take on an enhanced role", and are confident that Quality councils within their areas "are worthy partners is highly varied, as is the extent to which principal local authorities feel that they have benefited from the Quality Scheme.

4.31   Some principal local authorities have enthusiastically embraced the notion that the Quality scheme provides an independent assessment of local councils. Approximately a third of the county and district councils contacted for this research recognised Quality status as evidence of potential for enhanced working in partnership between the two tiers, and a number had confirmed and codified this principle in local council charters (see chapter 6). Two other principal local authorities suggested that in the near future they would assess requests by local councils for delegation of functions on the basis of whether or not a local council had achieved Quality status. From the perspectives of these authorities, the Quality scheme is a useful benchmarking exercise.

4.32   However, the majority of principal local authorities are considerably more uncertain of how the Quality scheme might benefit them. Some feel that the scheme is good in principal, particularly in terms of its potential to make local councils more accountable and responsive to the communities they represent, but are unconvinced that any merits it has are relevant to principal local authorities. In particular, there is doubt that Quality status is a sufficiently robust indicator of the capacity of a local council to take on additional functions. Several principal local authorities feel that the size and budget of a local council is more indicative of its capacity than whether or not it has Quality status.

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[8] *The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, June 2003

4.33   There are concerns over the extent to which the Quality scheme is effectively administered, with some principal local authorities yet to be satisfied that it is subject to adequate regulation and regular audit. In particular, there is concern that the four-year accreditation period without interim audits means that principal local authorities have no means of knowing whether or not accredited councils in practice maintain the standards they demonstrate at first accreditation across the accreditation period (see chapter 9).

4.34   There is a widespread feeling amongst principal local authorities that more actual or potential benefits of the Quality scheme will become apparent if the proportion of local councils with Quality status substantially increases.

Chapter 5: The Quality criteria

Introduction

5.1   This section of the report discusses the appropriateness of the current criteria for Quality status and potential additional criteria for first accreditation. Discussion of each existing criterion is structured around five themes:
- The criterion
- Ability of non-accredited councils to meet criterion
- Views on the appropriateness of the criterion
- Potential modifications to accreditation criteria and their likely impact on take-up of the Quality scheme
- Recommendations on retention, modification or change of criterion

Discussion of potential additional criteria is at the end of the chapter.

The appropriateness of current accreditation criteria

Test 1 - Electoral mandate

5.2   **Criterion.** To be awarded Quality status, a council must have filled at least 80 per cent of all council seats by members who stood for election at the beginning of the current four year term. "Stood for election" means that members must have been nominated for election and prepared to stand for election whether or not a contested ballot actually took place. As such, the criteria may be met by councils where the number of candidates nominated at the last election equalled the number of vacancies, or where the number of vacancies remaining after an election and requiring co-option constituted less than 20 per cent of the council membership.

5.3   **Ability to meet criterion.** The majority of existing Quality councils passed this criterion with considerable ease, with around 85 per cent reporting that all seats had been filled by councillors who had stood or been prepared to stand for election.[9] There is, however, some variation in the interpretation of this criterion between County Accreditation Panels (see chapter 6). Some Panels require that at least 80% of council seats to have been filled by election at the last full election to the council. Other Panels have followed a more lenient interpretation that at least 80 per cent of council seats must have been filled by election at the start of the term of the relevant individual councillor. This latter interpretation enables councillors elected in re-run ballots and by-elections to be counted. The survey returns suggest that at least five councils qualified for Quality status only through this second, more lenient interpretation of the electoral mandate criteria.

5.4   For non-accredited councils wishing to obtain Quality status, meeting the requirements of the electoral mandate is likely to be the second largest challenge, after meeting the requirements of a qualified clerk. Nonetheless, more than eight in ten (84 per cent) of the non-accredited councils responding to the questionnaire survey currently meet the 80 per cent electoral mandate threshold. Misinterpretation of the electoral mandate may be leading some non-accredited councils that currently meet the mandate to believe that they do not; thirty percent of the non-accredited councils that responded to the questionnaire survey indicated that not meeting the electoral mandate prevented them from achieving Quality status, whereas in fact only 16 per cent do not meet the mandate. Almost all these councils have met the 80 per

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[9] Full statistical data are provided in Annex E.

cent threshold over the last two electoral cycles. Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) would be able to meet a 100 per cent electoral mandate threshold.

5.5 Data from the questionnaire put the number of wards with fewer candidates than seats much lower than the nationwide Aberystwyth Survey of the 1998-2000 local council election cycle, based on data for 78 per cent of all local councils.[10] This probably reflects the deliberate bias of the sample towards larger councils (in order to reflect the profile of Quality councils). The number of councils unable to meet the 80 per cent electoral mandate threshold is likely to be larger than responses to the questionnaire suggest. Smaller councils are likely to face the greatest challenge. Of those councils indicating in the questionnaire survey that they do not currently meet the 80 per cent electoral mandate, almost half have an electorate of less than 2000.

5.6 Many councils find it difficult to attract community members willing to stand for election. The Aberystwyth Survey found that fewer candidates were nominated than available vacancies in more than a third (36.2 per cent) of local council wards (table 5.1). NALC, the Electoral Commission and the Department for Constitutional Affairs are currently discussing the possibility of a national promotional campaign prior to the May 2007 local council elections. The campaign would aim to increase the number of people both standing and voting in local council elections, broaden age and socio-economic profile of parish councillors, and encourage councils to meet the electoral mandates test for Quality status.

5.7 The difficulty of attracting potential candidates may be exacerbated by the low ratio of members to electors in some parishes and towns. This is a particular problem for warded parishes. In the 1998-2000 election cycle, 75 per cent of wards with more than 2000 electors filled all seats by election (including uncontested ballots) compared to 53 per cent of wards with between 200 and 500 electors (table 5.1). Most wards with fewer than 500 electors are either sub-divisions of parishes or small parishes that have been incorporated into grouped arrangements.

Table 5.1: Elections of Parish, Town and Welsh Community Councils 1998-2000

	Electorate size					
	<200 (n=1625)	**200-499** (n=2274)	**500-999** (n=1470)	**1000-1999** (n=1493)	**2000+** (n=1711)	**ALL** (n=8573)
More candidates than seats	10.0%	19.9%	24.3%	34.5%	54.1%	28.2%
Uncontested (Same number of candidates and seats)	53.5%	32.8%	26.7%	26.2%	19.3%	31.8%
Uncontested (Fewer candidates than seats)	32.5%	43.5%	43.3%	35.0%	24.9%	36.2%
Uncontested (other details not known)	4.0%	3.8%	5.6%	4.3%	1.6%	3.8%

Source: Aberystwyth Survey

5.8 Whilst in some areas the ratio of electors to members may have been historically low, in other areas councils have become 'over large' for their electorate as a result of recent boundary changes. Several councils responding to the questionnaire survey noted that they had become temporarily overlarge as a result of the Boundary Commission creating additional council seats, often in anticipation of future population increases generated by scheduled housing

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[10] Woods, M., Edwards, B., Anderson, J., Fahmy, E., Gardner, G. Database of Elections to Town, Parish and Community Councils in England and Wales, 1998-2000. Deposited at the UK Data Archive.

development in the parish or town. Some local councils in urban areas are seeking to reduce their complement of seats, in many cases so that they can more easily meet the electoral mandate required for Quality status (see box). Reducing the complement of seats may be appropriate in cases where councils have a disproportionately high number of seats resulting in a particularly low ratio of electors to councillors. However, any plans for reduction should take into account the likely impact on the capacity of the council to take on responsibilities commensurate with Quality status.

Good practice: reviewing allocations of local council seats

Four local councils in Bromsgrove district have requested a review a review of the number of seats allocated to their councils. All of the councils have experienced difficulties in attracting candidates willing to stand for election and currently have vacant seats that they have been unable to fill for at least 3 years. Two of the councils are planning to apply for Quality status and cited this as a reason for seeking change. All of the councils are confident that they can operate effectively with fewer councillors than their current allocation.

Reviews of the seat allocation for each council are being undertaken by Bromsgrove District Council. In each case, the review process includes:
- initial consideration by this Committee and the formulation of a proposal in each case,
- a period of public consultation on any changes which are proposed,
- further consideration of the proposal, in the light of responses received, and
- a decision on the proposal which
In the case of any Parish which has been subject to any review in the last five years, a decision is also subject to approval by the Electoral Commission. This applies to two out of the four reviews.

5.9 A shortfall of candidates may also in part reflect council practice regarding the recruitment of new members. The extent to which council elections are advertised varies considerably, with a significant number of councils doing no more than the legal minimum (see table 5.2). Feedback from clerks and local stakeholders suggests that many councils, particularly smaller councils in more rural areas, actively prefer to co-opt rather than elect new members, in order to have influence over the composition of the council. Some county and district associations are actively working to encourage councils to attract candidates willing to stand for election, but in many areas more could be done. Significantly, Quality councils are more likely than councils outside the scheme to have been proactive in advertising elections and encouraging candidates, indicating that the Quality scheme may work as an incentive for increasing participation.

5.10 Innovative practices in promoting elections adopted by Quality councils and included in the 'other' category in table 5.2 include distributing flyers in local shops and post offices, holding an information evening for prospective candidates, and sending a letter to every household publicising the elections and inviting nominations of candidates.

Table 5.2: Advertisement of most recent full local council elections

Method of advertisement	% Quality councils (N=194)	% Non-Accredited councils (N=254)
At council offices	65%	62%
On other noticeboard	90%	91%
On council website	37%	18%
On community website	41%	5%
In council newsletter	16%	18%
In community newsletter	5%	18%
In local press	61%	56%
In local library	49%	36%
Available on request only	2%	1%
Other	4%	4%
Did not advertise elections	1%	1%

Source: Questionnaire

Good practice: encouraging elections

Suffolk Association of Local Councils has created "election packs", which it has distributed at training events and at the annual Suffolk Show. The Election Packs show councillors the benefits of elections and give advice on how councillors can encourage people to stand. The intention is to "get councillors to see elections as a positive force".

SALC is also directly encouraging members of the public to vote and stand for election by advertising the work of local councils at the Suffolk show and other venues and by putting up prominent notices in public places including libraries and shops.

5.11   The potential cost of a contested election often discourages smaller councils with relatively low financial resources from actively seeking to attract candidates for election. The majority of district and unitary councils charge local councils for contested elections, even though they have the option of not doing so. Concerns are most evident amongst smaller councils, for which the cost of a contested election often constitutes a significant proportion of their annual budget. In particular, councils tend to favour filling casual vacancies through co-option rather than incurring the costs of a by-election, The scope for reducing costs through better co-ordination of different tiers of local government is limited as the normal convention is currently for local council elections to be held on the same day as elections to the relevant principal authority ward. However, additional costs can be generated when local council wards are not concurrent with principal authority wards, and some savings might be made by reviewing warding arrangements.

5.12   It should nonetheless be remembered that the electoral mandate criteria does not necessarily require councillors to be elected through contested ballots and as such the potential costs of such ballots should not be a disincentive for councils aiming to apply for Quality status.

Good practice: meeting election costs

The legal responsibility for the costs of elections to parish and town councils rests with the principal authority administering the election, but principal authorities have the right to pass on some or all of the costs incurred. In practice most principal authorities charge local councils for elections.

In the interests of increasing participation in local council elections some principal authorities will cover all or most of the costs such elections may incur. This has long been the practice of Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council; the Isle of Wight County Council introduced the policy in 2005, prompted in part by its wish to encourage councils to attain Quality status. Guaranteeing to meet the cost of elections lifts the potential financial burden from small local councils, removing a significant disincentive for the proactive promotion of elections.

Making a formal recommendation on this issue is beyond the remit of this report. However, we endorse the policy of meeting the costs of local council elections as a model of good practice for all principal local authorities.

5.13   **Appropriateness of the electoral mandate.** There is widespread support for the current electoral mandate. However, it has generated a number of criticisms from some clerks and local stakeholders.

5.14   First, the requirement for 80 per cent of councillors to have been elected at the start of the latest term means that councils that do not meet the electoral mandate must delay their application for Quality status until after the next full election cycle. Second, the emphasis on election overlooks or even disparages the valuable work of many co-opted councillors. Third, it discourages members of the community who are uncomfortable with the idea of standing for election from putting themselves forward for membership of the council, which restricts the socio-economic and cultural diversity of councils. Fourth, the electoral mandate unfairly penalizes councils who cannot meet it because of circumstances beyond their control, such as lack of community members willing to stand for election and low ratios of electors to council seats. Fifth, it favours the minority of councils with principal authorities prepared to subsidise the cost of any contested elections. Sixth, the low turn out at many elections – particularly amongst councils with fewer than 2000 electors – means that the requirement for 80 per cent of members to have stood for election does not necessarily indicate that a council has a mandate to serve its community. Seventh, interest in elections may be as much a sign of community conflict as of representative democracy.

5.15   There is also considerable confusion regarding the electoral mandate. Although the guidance to the Quality scheme states otherwise, some local councils are under the impression that 'stood for election' implies that there must have been a contested ballot. It is evident that for many councils, the term' election' is virtually synonymous with 'contested ballot'. Consequently, some councils that currently meet the mandate do not realise that they do, whilst others are put off from attempting to meet the mandate.

5.16   **Potential modifications to electoral mandate.** Local and national stakeholders have suggested four potential modifications to the electoral mandate:

•   Replacement of electoral mandate with test of 'councillor competency'. There are no suggestions as to what criteria this test should involve, but resistance that it should only take into account formal training and qualifications. This modification would not serve the purpose of the current electoral mandate, which is intended to test whether or not a council is representative of, and has a mandate to serve, its community.

- Replacement of current mandate with more flexible test of representativeness. This would involve giving councils the option of co-opting members on a quota basis, co-opting 'experts' and 'community leaders', and selection by lot. All of these options would raise the challenge of ensuring transparency and public accountability. They would also require changes to the constitution of local councils, necessitating new primary legislation. Furthermore, neither appointed members nor councillors selected by lot would have a mandate from the local electorate, which is the principle underlying this criterion.

- Less emphasis on the percentage of elected members coupled with improved co-option procedures. Councils would have the option of having to pass a less stringent electoral mandate but would have to demonstrate that their co-option processes were consistent, fair and transparent through production of a written protocol. This would provide councils with greater flexibility to deal with local contingencies beyond their control, but reducing the electoral mandate threshold below 80 per cent would not significantly increase the number of councils able to qualify for the scheme.

5.17   **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the electoral mandate test is appropriate. Although some local councils experience difficulty in finding candidates for elections, the test criteria are such that they enable a significant majority of councils to qualify. There are practical steps that can be taken to help more councils meet the threshold, including examining the size and warding arrangements of councils, and removing disincentives for smaller councils to proactively encourage nominations through principal local authorities covering the costs of contested ballots. There is, need, however for clarification of the interpretation of this criterion by County Accreditation Panels. The more lenient interpretation that 80 per cent of council seats must have been filled by election at the start of the relevant individual councillor's term of office remains true to the principles behind the test and increases the number of councils able to qualify. It is also clear that reference to 'election' in the phrasing of the criterion is itself a source of confusion, with election erroneously being associated by some with contested ballots. Re-phrasing the criterion to refer instead to no more than 20 per cent of council seats being vacant or filled by co-opted members would make the requirement considerably clearer and remove some of the ambiguity. We would, though, also favour a flexible interpretation of this criterion, permitting councils to be assessed either on the council membership at the start of the current electoral term, or on the council membership at the time of application, whichever is most favourable.

WE RECOMMEND that the electoral mandate criterion is rephrased to state that no more than 20 per cent of council seats should be vacant or filled by co-opted members.

WE RECOMMEND that County Accreditation Panels should be encouraged to adopt a flexible interpretation of the re-worded criterion such that councils may pass the electoral mandate test if vacant seats and co-opted members constituted no more than 20 per cent of council seats either at the start of the current electoral term, or at the time of application.

WE RECOMMEND that Local Councils and Principal Local Authorities should be encouraged to review the size of councils, warding arrangements and arrangements for covering the cost of elections, in order to reduce persistent shortfalls of candidates for election.

Test 2 - Qualified clerk

5.18   **Criterion.** For accreditation as a Quality local council, the clerk to the council must hold at least one of two qualifications: the Certificate in Local Council Administration accredited by the National Training Strategy (formerly the Assessment and Qualification Alliance (AQA)), or the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration awarded by the University of Gloucestershire. The guidance to the Quality scheme published by ODPM suggests that from 2008, Certificates of Higher Education awarded after the end of 2007 will no longer be accepted as evidence of a Qualified clerk.

5.19   **Ability to meet criterion.** Meeting the requirements of an appropriately qualified clerk is the most significant challenge for non-accredited councils wishing to obtain Quality status. More than three quarters (77 per cent) employ a clerk who holds neither of the appropriate qualifications. In comparison, less than half of all existing Quality councils had to make changes in order to meet this criterion.

5.20   Feedback to County Associations suggests that a significant minority of clerks who hold neither of the appropriate qualifications are reluctant to register for the CiLCA qualification. Responses to the questionnaire survey indicate that in close to a fifth (17 per cent) of cases, non-accredited councils would have to appoint a new clerk if they wished to meet the qualified clerk mandate. In comparison, just over two per cent of Quality councils had to appoint a new clerk in order to pass this test. In the remainder of cases, responses to the questionnaire suggest that the clerk has either already registered for the qualification or may be prepared to do so. Information held by NALC suggests that there are currently around 900 clerks registered for training leading to the CiLCA qualification.

5.21   The career stage of clerks is a major influence on their willingness to register for CiLCA. According to feedback from County Associations, much of the resistance to CiLCA is from clerks close to retirement who feel that the qualification will be of little use to them or the council. Some less-experienced clerks feel that they are too early on in their career to consider working for a professional qualification.

5.22   There are concerns that many clerks lack the necessary time and resources to gain the CiLCA qualification. This complaint is most frequent amongst clerks from smaller councils, part-time clerks and voluntary clerks. Although some councils allow their clerk to prepare CiLCA portfolios in paid time, others do not.

5.23   There are ongoing efforts to reduce barriers to clerks gaining the CiLCA qualification. The National Training Strategy offers a bursary scheme for smaller councils with an annual income of less than £25,000, although take-up of the scheme amongst the smallest councils has been "disappointing". Some county associations offer to reimburse some or all of the cost (up to a given maximum) incurred by councils who allow clerks paid time to prepare their portfolio. However, as has been the case the NTS bursary, the take-up of such schemes has been lower than hoped. More successful have been the group training and one-to-one mentoring schemes for the CiLCA qualification run by many county associations. These have all been developed along similar lines to the Essex Equals initiative (see box), and in some cases have been directly modelled on it.

Good practice: supporting training for clerks

- The "Essex Equals" initiative guided a group of clerks through training for CiLCA, completion of portfolios, and applications for Quality status.
- Training was divided into five sessions over five months, with each session dedicated to a particular element of the CiLCA portfolio. Following the submission of portfolios and award of the CiLCA, clerks again met with the tutor to discuss the criteria for Quality status.
- Clerks were given advice and information set tasks and deadlines, raised queries, and debated issues. Feedback from trainers and clerks indicates that group training enabled clerks to provide one another with help and support
- Courses were held at the offices of EALC, meaning that there were no charges for the training venue. The courses used materials from the existing stock held by EALC. Over the course of the pilot project, further materials were developed for use in future training courses.
- Clerks who successfully completed the course had the opportunity to act as tutors and mentors in future training sessions.
- Essex Equals was developed by the Essex Training Partnership and the Countryside Agency. The model is now being used in several other counties.

5.24   **Appropriateness of criterion.** The local council sector is divided on the appropriateness of the current criterion on qualified clerks. There is widespread support for the principle of clerks to councils wishing to obtain Quality status having to demonstrate that they are competent to take on the enhanced role that Quality status should bring. However, there is considerable disagreement over how this competence should be demonstrated.

5.25   Feedback from the National Training Strategy and County Associations indicates that the majority of clerks who have taken CiLCA feel that it is a useful and appropriate test of their competence. In particular, many clerks have found that preparing the CiLCA portfolio has improved their knowledge of correct financial procedures and the powers given to local councils under section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972. Key national stakeholders, including NALC, SLCC and CA are adamant that only the CiLCA qualification and the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration are sufficient evidence of competence. They want the criterion to remain unchanged, and encourage all clerks to register for CiLCA.

5.26   Some national stakeholders feel that the use of the CiLCA qualification as a test of core competence has been widely accepted across the local council sector. However, interviews with county associations, responses to questionnaires and additional written responses from clerks show that some clerks feel strongly that the existing specified qualifications are not the only appropriate measures of competence. Some clerks who hold neither of the qualifications feel that the current criterion of a qualified clerk takes no account of or even denigrates existing professional qualifications or experience that might already adequately testify to their competence to perform the role of clerk. It has not been possible to quantify the number of clerks who feel this way, but response to the questionnaire survey and written comments from clerks suggests that it is a substantial minority.

5.27   There appears to be no good reason why Certificates of Higher Education in Local Policy awarded after the end of 2007 should no longer be accepted as evidence of a qualified clerk. The Certificate covers the same issues as the CiLCA qualification, and in greater depth. Defra and DCLG have written to the University of Gloucestershire expressing their support for the

qualification. If the Certificates of Higher Education were no longer recognised, a substantial proportion of existing Quality councils will be unable to gain re-accreditation.

5.28 **Potential modifications to the criterion.** Local and national stakeholders have suggested three potential modifications to this criterion:

- The test should take account of qualifications other than the two qualifications currently specified, including qualifications in local government, accountancy and law. There would be a register of agreed qualifications, and / or County Accreditation Panels might be empowered to exercise discretion. However, whilst alternative qualifications may be an asset to clerks and councils, they do not adequately demonstrate competence in local council administration. The CiLCA qualification was designed specifically to meet the Quality Schemes' requirement for councils to demonstrate that they were served by an adequately qualified clerk, and covers core topics and skills in six fields. The Certificates in Higher Education cover the same core topics and skills but in greater depths. Although other qualifications may be of higher status than the CiLCA and the Certificates of Higher Education, they do not measure the same things and cannot be seen as substitutes.

- The test should take account of experience as well as formal qualifications. This would include both experience as a local councils clerk and experience in other fields, including local government, accountancy and law. County Accreditation Panels would be empowered to exercise discretion. However, experience of working in particular fields is not necessarily evidence of competence to perform the role of clerk to a Quality council, and cannot be seen as a substitute for the CiLCA qualification and the Certificates of Higher Education in Local Policy and Local Council Administration.

- The test should be relaxed to include assistant clerks, other administrative staff and councillors with the CiLCA qualification. This might demonstrate that to some extent a local council is properly managed and able to take on the enhanced role that Quality status might bring. However, there can be no substitute for a properly qualified clerk.

5.29 **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the clerk's qualification test is appropriate. The emphasis on the CiLCA qualification has the advantage of clarity and consistency and should become more widely accepted as more clerks gain the qualification, whilst acceptance of the Certificates of Higher Education in Local Council Administration or Local Policy from the University of Gloucestershire recognises the competences demonstrated by these advanced training courses. There are some genuine concerns from clerks about the requirements of the CiLCA qualification and about the lack of recognition of other qualifications and experience. However, it remains the case that other qualifications and experience are in no way equivalent to the demonstrations of competence provided by the qualifications currently specified by the Quality scheme. The concerns of some clerks over recognition of alternative qualifications in their current position have been recognised and are being addressed by the National Training Strategy through its national training needs analysis. The NTS is supporting the development of a professional institute of local council clerks which will explicitly recognise and give due weight to other qualifications and experience by offering different levels of membership.

5.30 There are also some concerns that clerks who are unwilling to enter for the CiLCA qualification are in effect able to veto a council's intention to apply for Quality status, and that this may be a particular issue for smaller councils with part-time or voluntary clerks. In such cases there are good grounds for rewarding councils who demonstrate good intent by council members gaining the CiLCA qualification and working towards the employment of a qualified clerk.

WE RECOMMEND that the CiLCA qualification and the Certificate in Higher Education in Local Council Administration or Local Policy remain the only accepted evidence that a council meets this criterion, and that Certificates of Higher Education awarded after the end of 2007 should continue to be accepted as evidence of a Qualified clerk. However, on first accreditation, councils with an electorate of under 1,000 that do not employ a clerk with either of these qualifications may pass the Quality test if two or more members of the council or council staff have the CiLCA qualification. This would not apply for re-accreditation.

Test 3 – Council meetings

5.31   **Criterion.** To be eligible for Quality status, all councils must have held at least six meetings of the council during the preceding year. All of these meetings must have included scheduled time for public participation. The council must have displayed public notice of the meetings at least three clear days before each meeting and published and made available for inspection minutes of each meeting within two months of the meeting. All councillors must have attended every meeting or provided good reasons for absence. The six meetings can include the annual meeting of the council.

5.32   **Ability to meet criterion.** Responses to the questionnaire survey indicate that the majority of these criteria present few challenges to the majority of non-accredited councils (tables 5.3 and 5.4). All but two per cent already hold meetings with sufficient frequency, and the vast majority (87 per cent) hold meetings more frequently than required. Only five per cent do not schedule time for public participation at council meetings, although 15 per cent require that electors notify questions in advance of meetings. All but six councils responding to the survey gave public notice of council meetings at least three days in advance. Ninety-five percent of councils publish and make available minutes within two months of a council meeting.

Table 5.3: Non-accredited councils meeting criteria for council meetings

Criteria for meetings	% councils meeting criteria
At least six meetings per year	98%
Time for public participation	94%
At least 3 days public notice of meetings	98%
Minute available within 2 months	95%

Source: Questionnaire. N=259-265 depending on question.

Table 5.4: Frequency of meetings, non-accredited councils

Frequency of meetings	% Councils
Meetings every month	50%
Meetings 7 – 11 times / year	37%
Meetings 6 times / year	11%
Meetings 4 – 5 times / year	2%
Meetings < 4 times / year	<1%

Source: Questionnaire. N = 259.

5.33   However, responses to the survey may understate the challenge for a significant proportion of non-accredited councils. Feedback from county and district associations suggests that many smaller councils, particularly those with unpaid clerks, hold fewer than six meetings per year and do not necessarily schedule time for public participation.

5.34   The requirement for full attendance at council meetings would present a significant challenge for the majority of non-accredited councils (table 5.5). Responses to the questionnaire

suggest that over the last two meetings of non-accredited councils, attendance of councillors was usually below 100 per cent, although in the majority of cases attendance was at least 75 per cent. It may be that in some cases there were good reasons for non-attendance, such as illness and unavoidable commitments, but these would have to satisfy County Accreditation Panels in order for councils to be eligible for Quality status. Notably, the proportion of Quality councils currently meeting the attendance mandate is not substantially different than the proportion of non-accredited councils, suggesting that the Quality scheme has had only marginal impact on attendance (table 5.6).

Table 5.5: Councillor attendance at meetings.

Attendance at meetings	Quality councils		Non-accredited councils	
	Last meeting (n=193)	Last but one meeting (n=189)	Last meeting (n=254)	Last but one meeting (n=254)
All attended	18%	23%	14%	20%
Not all, but at least 75%	75%	72%	73%	69%
Between 50% and 75%	8%	5%	13%	10%
Less than 50%	0%	1%	<1%	1%

Source: Questionnaire.

5.35 **Appropriateness of criterion**. There is widespread support for this mandate and few calls for the criteria to be modified. However, local and national stakeholders have raised some objections. First, it has been argued that it unfairly penalizes some councils in more rural areas. Such councils can find it difficult to hold meetings and ensure that all councillors attend meetings during the summer months, due to the high number of farmer on councils and the demands of hay-making and harvest. Second, it has been pointed out that what constitutes a 'good reason' for non-attendance of a council meeting is open to interpretation, and that what one County Accreditation Panel might accept as a good reason another might not. Third, it has been argued that the requirement for attendance or good reasons for absence is more onerous than the requirements on attendance for district, county and unitary authority councillors, and as such represents an unfair burden on Quality councils.

5.36 **Potential modifications to criterion.** Local stakeholders suggested one potential modification to the criteria:

- The requirement to hold at least six meetings of the council per year and for 100 per cent councillor attendance at all meetings should be relaxed for councils in rural areas, which should be required to meet a lower requirement of five meetings per year with at least 75 per cent attendance of councillors. However, such councils have the opportunity to meet the current requirement by scheduling more meetings at other times of the year. Since the majority of local councils are in areas defined as 'rural', it would be difficult to determine to which councils this provision should or should not apply.

5.37 **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the council meetings test is appropriate. The majority of non-accredited councils would be able to meet the requirements of this criterion without significant difficulty. Whilst concern has been raised over specific difficulties faced by some small rural councils, the criterion is sufficiently flexible to allow such difficulties to be overcome by modifying a council's schedule of meetings. To some extent, the question of what constitutes a 'good reason' for non-attendance at meetings has to remain open, as no definitive list could accommodate all the potential good reasons that might arise. However, there is scope for more guidance on this issue. National stakeholders have suggested that illustrative examples should include personal illness, bereavement, family emergency, and other accident or emergency, but also suggest that there is a need to identify what other reasons are

commonly accepted. It is the case that the requirement is more rigorous than the rules governing the attendance of local authority councillors, but this is not a good reason for changing it; the Quality scheme is not about making the rules consistent between different tiers of government. Moreover, the rigour of this requirement is in line with the aim of the scheme to ensure that Quality councils reach the standards of the best.

WE RECOMMEND that the current requirements for council meetings remain without modification.

WE RECOMMEND that future guidance on the Quality scheme should include information provided by NALC on what might constitute good reasons for non-attendance at meetings and should highlight the potential for councils to avoid scheduling meetings at times of year when there are particularly high demands on the time of members.

Test 4 – Communication with the electorate

5.38   **Criterion.** To be eligible for Quality status, a local council must be able to demonstrate that it is effectively communicating with and actively engaging the community it represents. The criteria for this test include both mandatory and discretionary elements.

5.39   The first mandatory requirement is that the council should provide a synopsis of the annual report to local people. The second mandatory requirement is that the council should produce and publish a newsletter for local people at least four times a year, including information on and contact details for the clerk and councillors, which is readily available at public sites across the parish. In addition to fulfilling these mandatory requirements, councils must also fulfil at least nine out of a possible 17 discretionary requirements.

5.40   **Ability to meet criterion.** The majority of non-accredited councils would have to make significant changes to meet the mandatory communications criteria. Just under half of non-accredited councils in the survey (48 per cent) do not publish a newsletter, and many of the council newsletters that are produced do not have a regular frequency of four or more times a year. Distribution and availability of published newsletters is variable, and insufficient to meet the criteria in most cases (table 5.6). More than two-thirds of non-accredited councils surveyed produce an annual report (68 per cent), but fewer than one in four produce a synopsis of the annual report, and fewer than one in ten distribute a synopsis to households in the parish (table 5.7). As such, the availability of published synopses is highly variable and insufficient to meet the criteria in most cases.

5.41   The majority of non-accredited councils would also have to make significant changes in order to meet at least nine of the 17 discretionary items of the communications mandate (see table in Annex F).

Table 5.6: Distribution of council newsletter, non-accredited councils

	% of councils producing a newsletter. N=132	% of all non-accredited councils. N=254
Delivered to households	84	44
Available on website	44	23
Available at council offices	49	25
Available at local library	42	22
Available elsewhere	32	17

Source: Questionnaire

Table 5.7: Publication and distribution of synopsis of annual report, non-accredited councils

	% non-accredited councils
Delivered to households	8%
Available at council offices	3%
Available on website	5%
Published in council newsletter	11%
Published in community newsletter	6%
Available in local library	4%
Available elsewhere	2%
Available on request only	1%
No synopsis produced	**78%**

Source: Questionnaire. N=260.

5.42 **Appropriateness of criteria.** There is widespread support from local and national stakeholders for the majority of the communications criteria. However there is widespread criticism from council clerks of the requirement for councils to produce and distribute their own newsletter.

5.43 Many non-accredited councils already publish council news and contact details for councillors and council staff through community newsletters available at public sites and / or delivered to all local households. Many Quality councils were doing likewise prior to their application for Quality status. In such cases, duplicating this procedure through the production and distribution of a dedicated council newsletter increases the financial costs and administrative burden of the council without improving communication with the local community. Newsletters frequently represent a substantial financial burden on councils, particularly smaller councils with relatively few resources.

5.44 **Potential modifications to criteria.** Clerks to accredited and non-accredited councils suggested one modification to the communications criteria:

- Councils should not have to demonstrate evidence that they produce and distribute their own newsletter if they are able to demonstrate that they already publish and distribute information on the council clerk, council members and council news through other community newsletters. This would retain the principle reflected in this component of the communications mandate whilst reducing the financial burden on many councils and ensuring that the criterion is proportional to its intended function.

5.45 **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the communication test is broadly appropriate. Given that the Quality scheme emphasises the importance of engagement between local councils and their communities, the fact that many councils do not currently meet the criteria is not a good reason for making the communications criteria less stringent. The criteria for the test can be met by the majority of local councils with relatively straightforward changes to current practice, and there is no structural bias against any particular type of council. However, some concerns have been expressed that the requirement for councils to publish their own newsletter has led to duplication in communities where there were existing community newsletters published independently of the council. There is a strong argument that the principle behind this test could be adequately met by councils contributing appropriate information through such publications. In order to promote inclusiveness, avoid conflicts of interests and ensure adequate prominence of information provided by the council.

WE RECOMMEND that the requirement for a Quality council to produce and distribute its own newsletter should be modified. Councils should be required to either produce and distribute their own newsletter or publish council news, information on councillors and contact details for the clerk and council members in a community newsletter that is made readily available at public sites across the parish and / or delivered to every local household free of charge at least four times a year. Councils would retain the option of doing both.

Test 5 – Annual report

5.46   **Criterion.** To be eligible for Quality status, councils must publish an annual report. The report must be completed and published by 30 June of the following financial year; be available for inspection by any elector in the local council area; be available for public inspection at the offices of principal local authorities and at local libraries; and include a list of council members and officers with their contact details, a summary of the council accounts and an account of council achievements prepared by the council chair.

5.47   **Ability to meet criterion.** The vast majority of non-accredited councils would have to make changes in order to meet this requirement (table 5.8). Close to a third (32 per cent) of respondents to the questionnaire survey indicated that their council did not currently publish an annual report. Of the annual reports published at the end of the last financial year, two-thirds did not include a list of council members with contact details whilst a quarter did not include an overview of council achievements prepared by the council chair and a fifth did not include a summary of council finances. Availability of the reports for public inspection is highly varied, and insufficient to meet the criteria in most cases.

5.48   **Appropriateness of criterion.** There is widespread support for this test and we have not received any suggestions for modifications to the criteria from councils or other stakeholders.

5.49   **Recommendations.** We conclude that the annual report test is appropriate and does not need to be changed.

WE RECOMMEND that the mandate for the preparation, publication and distribution of an annual report should remain without modification.

Table 5.8: Characteristics of annual reports published by non-accredited councils

Criteria for annual reports	% all non-accredited councils meeting criteria
Published by 30th June	56%
Available for public inspection at council offices	41%
Available at offices of principal authorities and local libraries	20%
Included list of council members with contact details	24%
Included summary of council accounts	55%
Included chairperson's overview of council achievements	51%

Source: Questionnaire. N = 260.

Test 6 – Accountability

5.50   **Criterion.** To be eligible for Quality status, councils must have prepared their latest statement of accounts in accordance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit

Regulations 2003; received an unqualified report from the external auditor; provided proper opportunity for electors to exercise their rights of access to financial information in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003; published the latest statement of accounts within nine months of the latest accounting period; maintained an adequate system of internal control; and implemented and maintained an adequate system of internal audit in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003.

5.51   **Ability to meet criterion.** Almost all non-accredited councils responding to the questionnaire survey for this report indicated that they provided proper opportunity for electors to access financial information. However, feedback from national stakeholders suggests that the financial arrangements of many unaccredited councils are currently insufficiently robust to meet the remainder of the criteria for this test. Smaller councils face a particular challenge.

Good practice: compliance with audit requirements

Guidance on how to comply with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 is published alongside the regulations and in *Governance and accountability in England and Wales: A practitioners' guide*, issued by NALC and SLCC.

To ensure compliance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations, a small minority of local councils, including Blakelaw and North Fenham Parish Council in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, have instituted a 3-tier auditing system. All policies and procedures regarding council finances are reviewed on a bi-annual cycle by independent inspectors, ensuring ongoing compliance with requirements for good governance and accountability.

5.52   **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the annual report test is appropriate. There is widespread support for this test and we have not received any suggestions for modifications to the criteria from councils or other stakeholders.

WE RECOMMEND that the mandate for maintenance of accurate and transparent financial arrangements should remain without modification.

Test 7 – Conduct

5.53   **Criterion.** To be eligible for Quality status, all councils must have resolved to adopt the Code of Conduct set out in the Local Government Act 2000. The Code of Conduct includes the requirement that councillors must register any interests relating to council business and should not participate in associated decision-making. It is not sufficient for the council to have adopted the Code without passing a resolution.

5.54   **Ability to meet criterion.** Meeting this requirement should provide little or no challenge for the majority of councils. However, a quarter of non-accredited councils responding to the questionnaire survey did not indicate that members had resolved to adopt the Code of Conduct. It is not clear whether this reflects the absence of a resolution, although it may well, given that almost all councils completed the remainder of the questions on the Code of Conduct. Previous research and reports in the national media suggest that there has been considerable resistance to the Code of Conduct, particularly amongst smaller councils, in some areas.

5.55   **Appropriateness of criterion.** Some councillors have raised concerns about specific elements in the Code of Conduct and their implications, particularly for smaller local councils. It may be appropriate for the relevance of the specific requirements of the Code of Conduct for small local councils to be reviewed. The Standards Board for England, in consultation with

NALC, is exploring potential means of helping local councils meet their obligations under the Code. However, this should not detract from the principle that the business of Quality councils should operate within the framework of a Code of Conduct.

5.56 **Conclusions and recommendations.** We conclude that the Code of Conduct test is appropriate and necessary in ensuring that Quality councils conduct their business in a professional and accountable manner.

WE RECOMMEND that the requirement for Quality councils to have formally adopted the Code of Conduct remain without modification.

Potential additional criteria for first accreditation

5.57 Local and national stakeholders have suggested a range of additional criteria for councils to meet at first accreditation and subsequent re-accreditations. In considering the appropriateness of these proposed additional criteria, we have born in mind the range of topics and issues covered by current Quality criteria, concerns raised by stakeholders over apparent gaps and inconsistencies in the Quality scheme, and the likely impact of any additional criteria on both take-up of the Quality scheme amongst non-accredited councils and rates of re-accreditation.

5.58 *Suggested criterion (1).* Councils seeking accreditation must provide evidence that all councillors have received minimum levels of training on topics including local council constitutions, planning and local council finances.

5.59 *Ability to meet criterion.* The majority of councils would not be able to meet this criterion. As discussed in Chapter 3 (paragraph 3.13), uptake of training across the local council sector is highly varied. Over two-thirds of non-accredited councils have no members with induction training and around half have no members trained in planning issues. Whilst members of Quality councils are more likely than members of non-accredited councils to have undertaken training, levels of training within Quality councils are still low; nearly a quarter have no members with induction training and more than a third have no members trained in planning issues. A requirement for councils to demonstrate evidence of minimum standards of training would make it significantly more difficult for non-accredited councils to gain Quality status and for existing Quality councils to gain re-accreditation.

5.60 *Appropriateness of criterion.* A requirement for Quality councils seeking re-accreditation to demonstrate evidence of minimal standards of councillor training would be inappropriate. Uptake of training is too varied and too low to make minimum standards of training a viable element of the Quality scheme. In particular, it would be difficult for such a requirement to take account of variations in length of membership; as discussed in Chapter 3, the membership of local councils is dynamic, with a high turnover both between and within election cycles. In particular, it would be difficult for councils with new members to meet the requirement. However, it would be appropriate for councils seeking accreditation and re-accreditation to demonstrate <u>evidence of engagement with the training needs of councillors</u>.

5.61 The training needs analysis carried out by the former Rural Development Commission prior to the establishment of the National Training strategy drew attention to the lack of training and knowledge amongst many council members. Low levels of training are a cause of concern amongst some principal local authorities, who feel that many councillors do not understand the relationship between the different tiers of local government and lack knowledge on important issues such as development control. National stakeholders have emphasised the importance of councillors developing and consolidating skills in chairpersonship, information technology,

communication, negotiation and interpretation of documents Developing the capacity of councillors and clerks would make Quality councils more able to develop greater partnership working and build the capacity of councillors to cope with the demands of engaging with the public, other tiers of local government, information on local issues and with local government policy and strategy.

5.62   The call for more training should be set against recognition that any requirements for training would make additional demands on the time and energy of councillors. Excessive demands would have a negative impact both on existing membership and on interest in membership amongst members of local communities. The potential for training to generate additional financial burdens for Quality councils is also a significant consideration.

5.63   Any requirement for engagement with training must also take into account the level of training opportunities for councillors. All County Training Partnerships (CTPs) offer training on core skills for councillors (induction training) and courses on chairpersonship. A number of principal local authorities, in conjunction with CTPs, offer free or subsidised training for local councillors on a range of issues, including induction, knowledge of local government, planning and development control and council finance. The CiLCA qualification is open to councillors as well as clerks, and was developed with both in mind. Similarly, the six-part course *Working with your council*, provided by SLCC, was written for both clerks and councillors. NTS is now focusing more on the training needs of councillors, and is developing a range of opportunities and materials.

Good practice: training opportunities for councillors

- Essex Training Partnership (ETP) and Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) have developed a multi-faceted programme of training to address the needs of councillors.
- "Being a good councillor" is a four module training package covering core skills and knowledge for all councillors, including the roles and responsibilities of councillors, the powers and financing of local councils, council procedures and community engagement.
- A training package containing six module has been developed for council chairs, covering basic and advanced skills, including leadership and community engagement. Several modules are also relevant to ordinary councillors.
- The programme of conferences organised by EALC covers planning / development control, financial risk assessment, management of burial grounds and a "master class" for councillors.
- The programme of training organised by ETP includes training for partnership members in conjunction with Essex County Council, the University of Gloucestershire and the voluntary sector

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5.64   ***Conclusions and recommendations.*** In light of these issues, we are *not* minded to recommend that at first accreditation Quality councils should demonstrate evidence that all councillors have received training. Rather, we are minded to recommend that the Quality scheme should be used as a means of encouraging councils to identify and address the training needs of their members according to local circumstances. Currently, the Quality scheme does not cover councillor training. Requiring councils seeking accreditation and re-accreditation to demonstrate evidence engagement with the training needs of members would supplement the requirement for a qualified clerk, demonstrating that Quality status was evidence of a qualified council, not just a Quality clerk. Any criterion would need to recognise

the diversity of circumstances and needs amongst local councils, differences in opportunities for training, and the practicalities of engagement with training needs in time for re-accreditation.

WE RECOMMEND that <u>at first accreditation</u>, all Quality councils should be required to demonstrate that they have developed or are in the process of developing a training strategy for members. The content of the strategy would be largely at the discretion of individual councils, but should reflect a skills inventory, an analysis of training needs, the resources for training available to the council, and include induction training for all new councillors.

WE RECOMMEND that at <u>first and subsequent re-accreditations,</u> Quality councils should be required to demonstrate evidence that they have delivered their training strategy and updated it for the next post-accreditation period. It may be necessary to modify or waive this requirement for existing Quality councils seeking re-accreditation during 2007.

5.65   *Suggested criterion (2).* A Quality council should demonstrate evidence of active engagement with the local community. Evidence might include activities undertaken to assist production of a Parish Plan, Village Design Statement or similar, establishment of or engagement with a youth forum, liaison with local schools, and identification and engagement with hard-to-reach groups.

5.66   *Ability to meet criterion.* Providing evidence of community engagement should be little challenge for most Quality councils. As discussed further in chapter 8, 85 per cent of Quality councils have undertaken some form of community survey since 2000, and more than three quarters have specifically sought to engage with minority and marginalised groups such as young people and the elderly. Providing evidence of community engagement would be more of a problem for non-accredited councils, but the challenge should not be insurmountable for most. Responses to the questionnaire survey indicated that since 2000, nearly two-thirds of non-accredited councils have undertaken some form of community survey, although the bias towards larger councils in the questionnaire survey may mean that this figure cannot be taken as representative of the local council sector as a whole.

5.67   *Appropriateness of criterion.* Inclusion of this criterion would reinforce and supplement the electoral mandate, demonstrating that a council is seeking to address the needs and interests of its electors. Parish Plans are presently included amongst the discretionary elements of the communications criteria at first accreditation, but at present the Quality scheme does not require all councils to provide evidence of active engagement with the community beyond the dissemination of information. At the same time, it is important to recognise the variety of circumstances within which different local councils operate. Any criterion should recognise and take account of this diversity and the practicalities of engagement of this type in time for re-accreditation. Inflexible requirements might have a negative impact on take-up of the Quality scheme and result in the disengagement of existing Quality councils.

5.68   *Conclusions and recommendations.* We conclude that it would be appropriate for Quality councils to demonstrate that they are actively seeking out the needs and views of their communities.

WE RECOMMEND that that on first accreditation Quality councils must demonstrate evidence that they are seeking to actively engage with their communities. Evidence should include the existence or development of strategies for identifying and engaging with community needs and interests, including those of vulnerable and 'hard to reach' groups over the last 2 years.

WE RECOMMEND that on <u>first and subsequent</u> <u>re-accreditations</u>, Quality councils must demonstrate that they have undertaken at least two out of five discretionary activities in the period between re-accreditations:

- **assisted in the preparation of a Parish Plan, Village Design Statement or Market Town Action Plan;**
- **helped to establish, support, or otherwise engaged with a youth council, youth forum or local secondary school**
- **identified and engaged with other hard-to-reach groups such as the elderly, travellers, young mothers and ethnic minorities**
- **undertaken a survey of the whole community**
- **engaged in partnership working with the voluntary and community sector**

It may be necessary to modify or waive this requirement for existing Quality councils seeking re-accreditation in 2007.

5.69   *Suggested criterion (3).* To be eligible for Quality status, councils with paid staff should have issued all staff with a written contract stating their terms and conditions.

5.70   *Ability to meet criterion.* We have collected no data on this issue. To what extent local councils issue all paid staff with a written contract is therefore not clear. However, issuing paid staff with a written contract should not present a major obstacle for any council.

5.71   *Appropriateness of criterion.* Requiring Quality councils to have issued all paid staff with written contracts would demonstrate their commitment to employing professional staff rewarded with modern terms and conditions and identify Quality councils as meeting the standards of the best in terms of employment. If this requirement were to be included in the scheme, it would in effect create a new category of criteria, recognising the council as a 'Quality employer'.

5.72   *Conclusions and recommendations.* We conclude that it would be appropriate for Quality councils to demonstrate their commitment to employing professional staff rewarded with modern terms and conditions and to be recognised as a 'Quality employer'.

WE RECOMMEND that all Quality councils must demonstrate evidence that they have issued all paid staff with a written contract of employment.

5.73   *Suggested criterion (4).* To be eligible for Quality status, councils with paid clerks should have adopted as a minimum, the national agreement between NALC and SLCC on terms and conditions of employment for clerks to local councils. The agreement comprises a new basis for calculating the salary of clerks, a new model contract, guidance on good employment practice and provision for the assimilation of existing agreements into the new structure.

5.74   *Ability to meet criterion.* Meeting this criterion should pose little or no challenge for the majority of councils, but might present a significant challenge for a substantial minority. As discussed in chapter 3, nine out of ten existing Quality councils already meet the criterion. Data provided by SLCC indicate that more than two-thirds of non-accredited councils have adopted the national framework agreement, although as yet analysis of the data has not proceeded far enough to show rates of adoption broken-down by size of councils. Data from the questionnaire survey carried out for this study indicate that adoption of the agreement is considerably higher – up to 90% - amongst councils actively considering applying for Quality status. Inclusion of the criterion at first accreditation and subsequent re-accreditations is thus likely to have relatively little negative impact on either take-up of the Quality scheme or the re-accreditation of existing Quality councils (although see below).

5.75   *Appropriateness of criterion.* There is support for the inclusion of this criterion from national stakeholders. As with the proposed requirement for written contracts of employment, requiring all Quality councils to have adopted the national framework would demonstrate their commitment to employing professional staff rewarded with modern terms and conditions and identify Quality councils as meeting the standards of the best in terms of employment.

5.76   Prior to the signing of the agreement and implementation, there had been concern from some clerks that the diversity of the local council sector would preclude widespread adoption of an effective national agreement governing pay and conditions for clerks. Widespread adoption of the agreement suggests that this has not proved to be the case. However, there is evidence that some county associations are resistant to the national framework and that linking the framework with the Quality scheme could generate resistance to the scheme itself. It should also be born in mind that whilst clerks affiliated to SLCC are largely in favour of the agreement, SLCC is most representative of clerks to councils with budgeted incomes of more than £20,000. It may be that there is less enthusiasm for and take-up of the agreement amongst councils with lower incomes.

5.77   *Conclusions and recommendations.* We conclude that it would be appropriate for Quality councils to demonstrate their commitment to employing professional clerks rewarded with modern terms and conditions, and that adoption of the national agreement between SLCC and NALC would be the obvious means through which this could be demonstrated.

WE RECOMMEND that all Quality councils <u>with a paid clerk</u> should demonstrate that they have adopted the national framework on pay and conditions agreed by SLCC and NALC as a minimum.

5.78   Concerns were expressed by one County Accreditation Panel that is it in theory possible for a local council to meet the Quality criteria whilst not fulfilling all of their statutory duties and requirements. Whilst it would be inappropriate for statutory requirements to be included as test criteria – as they should in theory be met by all local councils – potential problems in the accreditation process could be avoided by clearly stating that it is a condition of participation in the Quality scheme that a council fulfils all of its statutory requirements in relation to the functioning of the council.

WE RECOMMEND that the guidelines for the Quality scheme should state that local councils should fulfil all statutory requirements in relation to the functioning of the council as a condition of participation.

Chapter 6: The accreditation process

Introduction

6.1   This chapter discusses the effectiveness and appropriateness of the accreditation process for the delivery of the Quality scheme. There are three main areas of discussion:
- The appropriateness of peer-accreditation for the Quality scheme
- The appointment and composition of County Accreditation Panels
- The effectiveness and efficiency of the accreditation process
- Consistency of standards across County Accreditation Panels

In each case, the discussion includes potential modifications to the accreditation criteria, the likely impact of modifications, and recommendations on the retention or modification of particular aspects of the accreditation process.

The principle of peer accreditation

6.2   The accreditation process for the Quality scheme operates on the principle of peer review. Applications for Quality status made by local councils are received by county associations and scrutinized and assessed by County Accreditation Panels consisting of between three and five members with experience of local government and local councils. The accreditation process is overseen by NALC. County associations are required to inform NALC of applications and decisions on applications. NALC receives a copy of every application for Quality status following the decision of Panels.

6.3   There is widespread support amongst local and national stakeholders for the principle of peer accreditation in the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme. We are therefore minded to recommend that the system of peer accreditation remain. However, as we discuss in this section of the review, there are concerns amongst council clerks over the appointment and composition of County Accreditation Panels and over various aspects of the accreditation process, and there is evidence of some inconsistencies between different County Accreditation Panels. Consequently, the following discussion includes a series of recommendations for slight changes and modifications to the current system of accreditation.

WE RECOMMEND that the system of peer assessment through County Accreditation Panels is retained.

Appointment and composition of County Accreditation Panels

Appointment of Panel members
6.4   County Accreditation Panels have been established by county associations and NALC in consultation with the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Council Clerks, following guidance developed with ODPM (now DCLG). Potential members are identified and contacted by County Association secretaries. The ten county association secretaries spoken to for this report indicated that in constituting Panels they sought to identify Panel members with widespread and longstanding experience of the local council and local government sector, taking account of their own knowledge, advice from executive members of the county association and the guidelines on Panel composition produced by ODPM. Members are approved DCLG (previously ODPM) and Defra.

6.5   Although there is no evidence to suggest that the current appointment process is inherently problematic, it has created concerns within the local council sector. Some clerks and councillors are critical of the process through which members are appointed to the Panel, arguing that it lacks transparency and sufficient input from local councils. There are calls for local councils to have a role in the nomination and selection of Panel members. A more open and transparent appointment process would reduce concerns within the local council sector.

6.6   National stakeholders are sensitive to such concerns and in principle support a more open recruitment process. However, there are concerns over how such a process might be funded.

WE RECOMMEND that NALC, in conjunction with DCLG and Defra, work to increase the openness and transparency of appointments to County Accreditation Panels by publicising the criteria for Panel members and replacing the current nomination process by open advertisement for nominations.

Composition of Panels

6.7   The composition of different County Accreditation Panels is largely consistent across the country. All Panels include either a serving or retired council clerk, along with either a serving or retired officer or elected member of local government. Some Panels include both serving and retired members. The majority of Panels include either the secretary or an executive member of the appropriate county association. Many Panels, although by no means all, also include members of local councils, the majority of whom are council chairs or town mayors.

6.8   Panel members usually have considerable experience in their field and are generally confident of their ability to assess applications for Quality status (although see below). Of the Panel members contacted for this report, the majority had spent at least 10 years in local government, either as elected councillors or as council officers, or in Local Council affairs. Over half have more than 15 years experience and a quarter had more than 20 years experience. Approximately half of the Panels studied for this report included a clerk holding one of the qualifications recognised by the Quality scheme. A quarter of the Panels contacted for this report included members who had retired from their field.

6.9   To a large extent, the composition of County Accreditation Panels reflects the human resources available at the time the Panels were constituted. Several county association secretaries commented on the difficulty of finding people both with appropriate qualifications – including clerks with the CiLCA qualification – and sufficient time to take on the duties required of them. Retired Panel members commented that they would not have been able to take on the role if they were still in full-time paid employment.

6.10   There are concerns amongst some local council clerks that Panel members in some counties lack appropriate qualifications for assessing applications for Quality status. In particular, clerks are critical of Panels that do not include a clerk holding one of the qualifications recognised by the Quality scheme. There are also concerns that Panel members who have retired from their field may have little knowledge of the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme, and that this may have a negative impact on their ability to interpret and assess applications. There are suggestions that all Panels should be required to include a qualified clerk, and that all Panel members should receive training for their role.

6.11   To a considerable extent, concerns over the qualifications of Panel members reflect misunderstanding of how Panels assess applications for Quality status. Much of the scrutiny process involves simply checking whether or not an application includes evidence that criteria

have been met. There is no evidence that Panel members are insufficiently qualified to competently scrutinise applications. However, the appointment of clerks with either of the qualifications recognised by the Quality scheme would help to reduce the concerns of councillors and clerks. The number of clerks that now hold CiLCA or the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy or Local Council Administration should now make it possible for all County Accreditation Panels to include one, as long as qualified clerks are willing and able to participate. All counties now include at least one clerk with the appropriate qualification.

WE RECOMMEND that new guidance is issued to County Accreditation Panels stating that where possible, Panels should include a clerk with one of the qualifications recognised by the Quality scheme.

Conflicts of interest

6.12   The composition of County Accreditation Panels generates the potential for conflicts of interest. Clerks and councillors serving on the panel may be faced with applications for Quality status from their own councils.

6.13   It would appear that such conflicts are rare and easily dealt with (see box). All Panel members are informed of the name(s) of the Council(s) making the application(s) prior to a full meeting of the Panel. This enables them to identify and register any potential conflicts of interest. There is therefore no need for a recommendation on this issue.

> ## Good practice: conflicts of interest
>
> Across the Panels contacted for this report, there had been only one reported conflict of interest. In this case, a council submitting an application for Quality status included a councillor who served on the Accreditation Panel. The Panel member registered his interest to the Chair of the Panel and took no part in consideration of the application.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the accreditation process

6.14   The time taken by County Accreditation Panels to assess applications for Quality status can range between a few weeks and six months. Three in five councils reported that there was a period of two months or more between submitting the application and being awarded Quality status (table 6.1), and in very small number of cases the period between application and decision was six months or more.

6.15   To some extent, variations in the time waited by councils may reflect variations in the policies of different Panels. Some Panels arrange to meet as soon as they are notified of an application. Others meet on a pre-determined cycle – either quarterly or three times a year – irrespective of when applications are received. However, the policy of the Panel does not necessarily determine the length of time taken to consider an application. Responses to the questionnaire survey indicate that the same Panel may take less than one month or more than three months to consider an application, depending on how soon panel members can meet.

Table 6.1: Time taken to assess applications for Quality status

	Months taken to assess application				
	<1	1	2	3	>3
% councils	9%	30%	23%	18%	19%

Source: Questionnaire. N = 175.

6.16   The majority of accredited councils have been satisfied with the length of time taken to assess their application. However, there have been a small number of complaints from councils that have had to wait over two months. Feedback to County Associations suggests that lengthy delays in the assessment of applications cause significant stress to clerks and councillors. Moreover, lengthy delays mean that Panels are effectively scrutinising applications that are out of date.

6.17   It may be that in some cases pressure of other commitments makes it difficult for Panel members to meet quickly once an application has been received. For this reason, we are not minded to recommend that there should be an absolute and binding time-limit on the time limit for scrutiny of applications; such a limit would, anyway, be difficult to enforce and impracticable given the limited resources of Panels and county associations. However, we are of the view that unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise, councils should not have to wait more than two months for a decision on their application, and have made a recommendation in accordance with this view.

WE RECOMMEND that new guidance is issued to County Accreditation Panels stating that Panels should assess applications for Quality status within two months of their receipt unless exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise. In cases where Panels are unable to assess applications within two months, Panels should inform the council making the application of the delay, the reason for the delay and the date on which the application will be considered.

6.18   In some Panels there is scope for potentially speeding up the accreditation process through the introduction of more efficient scrutiny procedures. According to NALC, all county associations should have been advised on procedures for avoiding 'double handling' of applications (see box). However, not all county associations currently adhere to this guidance. Adherence to the guidance would also help to minimise the workload of Panels.

6.19   It should also be noted that for most councils, the time taken to process the application represented only a small fraction of the total time involved in preparing for Quality status. Over a quarter of councils reported that it had taken them more than a year to change practices and prepare the application after taking the decision to apply for Quality status, with the longest reported preparatory period being three years. As such, for more than a third of councils the period between formally deciding to apply for Quality status and being awarded Quality status was at least one year, with the longest reported period being 35 months.

Good practice: efficiency of the accreditation process

According to NALC, county associations have been advised that all applications should be examined by an executive officer of the county association prior to the full meeting of the County Accreditation Panel. This scrutiny should determine whether or not an application will be seen by the Panel.

The Executive Officer should check to see if an application includes all the evidence necessary for the Panel to assess the application and that the necessary paperwork is present and correct. When this is not the case, the officer will inform the council and advise them of necessary amendments. The council making the application can either rectify the application or withdraw the application until such time that they are able to make the necessary amendments. The Panel will scrutinise only those applications which include all required evidence and in which the council has completed the application form without error. This ensures that a Panel does not have to meet twice to consider an application for Quality status.

Consistency of standards across County Accreditation Panels

Dissemination of guidance

6.20   The dissemination of guidance to Panels has been limited and geographically varied. Some Panel members report that they have received no guidance on their role. Responsibility for providing advice lies with the secretariats of county associations, but many secretariats are themselves unclear as to what guidance they should have provided. There is no written guidance produced specifically for Panels. Whilst written guidance and information on the Quality criteria has been produced by ODPM and the Countryside Agency, this is targeted at local councils and does not cover in detail how Panels should operate. Consequently, many Panels are unclear how their practices, interpretations and decisions compare to those of other Panels, and there is evidence of inconsistency between Panels in the way in which the scheme has been delivered (see below).

6.21   Many Panel members would welcome written guidance on the Quality scheme produced specifically for County Accreditation Panels, and it is evident that this would be of substantial benefit, leaving less room for errors of interpretation by Panels and helping to ensure greater geographical uniformity of the accreditation process. National stakeholders support the principal of bespoke written guidance for Panels but are concerned over how such guidance would be funded.

WE RECOMMEND that all Panels should receive written bespoke guidance on appropriate scrutiny procedures, the Quality criteria, types of evidence required by the Panel and any other issues that are relevant to the workings of the Panel. This should be funded by central Government. Further recommendations regarding the content of this guidance are made below.

WE RECOMMEND that County Accreditation Panels facilitate communication and the dissemination of good practice by holding an annual conference for Panel members and establishing and maintaining a network for sharing good practice through electronic for and other forms of lateral exchange.

Interpretation of criteria

6.22   Overall, the interpretation of accreditation criteria is consistent across the County Accreditation Panels. However, Panels differ in how they interpret the criteria for the electoral mandate (Test 1).

6.23   Around half of the Panels contacted for this study interpret the requirement as that at least 80 per cent of council seats must be filled by election in the last full elections to the council. The remaining Panels follow the alternative, more lenient interpretation, that at least 80 per cent of council seats must be filled by election at the start of the individual councillor's term of office. This permits councillors elected in re-run elections (where there had been insufficient nominations at the normal election time) or by-elections to be counted towards the electoral mandate. At least five accredited councils would not have attained Quality status had they been required to meet the stricter electoral mandate.

6.24   Many Panel members are unsure as to whether or not their interpretation of the electoral mandate criterion is correct and consistent with other Panels. Guidance to the Quality scheme

published by Countryside Agency differs from the guidance published by ODPM.[11] A large number of Panels have sought guidance from the National Association of Local Councils, but want written confirmation of the correct mandate.

WE RECOMMEND that clarification be issued to County Accreditation Panels on the interpretation of the electoral mandate test. The guidance should be worded to the effect that no more than 20 per cent of council seats should be vacant or filled by co-opted members. Further, as recommended in the previous chapter, County Accreditation Panels should be encouraged to adopt a flexible interpretation of the re-worded criterion such that councils may pass the electoral mandate test if no more than 20 per cent of seats are either vacant or filled by co-opted members either at the start of the current electoral term, or at the time of application.

Requirements for evidence

6.25   Overall, different County Accreditation Panels require identical or similar standards of evidence for the various Quality tests. However, there are inconsistencies regarding the evidence required for one of the mandatory criteria and at least four of the discretionary criteria for test 4 – Communication.

6.26   All of the criteria in question relate to the distribution of publicity items. They include:
- publication and distribution of a council newsletter (mandatory)
- distribution of the annual report to every household (discretionary 1)
- distribution of information about local government services and parish council activities to every household (discretionary 6)
- publicising parish council activities in public places (discretionary 13)
- providing information leaflets on the work of the council (discretionary 17)

6.27   In each of these cases, the types and standards of evidence required by different Panels differ considerably. Some Panels require only copies of the relevant publications as evidence of such activities, as specified in the guidance accompanying the Quality scheme. However, other Panels require Councils to provide written details of the date(s) and methods of distribution and the names of the people involved in the distribution. In what appears to be an extreme case, one Panel required that the Council confirm that it had undertaken particular activities by providing affidavits signed by the council clerk.

6.28   Such inconsistencies have to a very limited extent undermined confidence in the Quality scheme. Some Panel members and Council Clerks have become aware that the forms and standards of evidence required by different County Accreditation Panels are inconsistent. This has led to concern amongst some Clerks and Panel members that the accreditation process is less rigorous in some counties than in others.

6.29   Some Panel members and Clerks argue that there should be clearer written guidance on the forms and standards of evidence required for Councils to demonstrate that they meet particular criteria. There are also calls for greater communication between different Panels, and suggestions that Panels should be subject to external audit, in order to make standards more uniform.

WE RECOMMEND that County Accreditation Panels receive written guidance setting out more clearly the appropriate forms and standards of evidence required for mandatory criterion 5 and discretionary criteria 1, 6, 13 and 17. The requirement should be for

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[11] *Becoming a Quality Council*, The Countryside Agency, 2004

councils to provide copies of the relevant publications as evidence of such activities, along with, as appropriate, written details of the date(s) and methods of distribution to households or a list of the public places in which items were placed.

6.30   At least two County Accreditation Panels interview the clerks of applicant councils as a matter of course. These examinations cover criteria that are not specified in the national Quality scheme, including detailed scrutiny of council finances. In effect, these interviews constitute an additional layer in the accreditation process that is inconsistent with the normal practices of the majority of Panels.

WE RECOMMEND that guidance should be issued to County Accreditation Panels that interviews should not be used in the assessment of applications, expect in exceptional cases to clarify information provided in written applications.

Resubmission of applications

6.31   Procedures in cases when a County Accreditation Panel does not award Quality status are generally consistent across the different Panels. However, there is some inconsistency between Panels regarding procedures for the resubmission of applications.

6.32   In cases where a Panel does not award Quality status, all Panels inform the Councils of the reason(s) for their decision and advise them on what they must do in order for the Panel to award Quality status at a later date. The decision and advice are communicated first by telephone and then by letter. The majority of Panels then require Councils to resubmit their entire application and pay the appropriate fee.

6.33   In cases where councils meet all but a small minority of accreditation criteria, a minority of Panels "defer judgement" on applications and allow councils time to amend their practices and provide evidence of amendments. If a Council provides evidence of amendments within the timescale agreed by the Panel, the Panel requires them only to resubmit the relevant components of the application and will not charge a fee for resubmission.

6.34   We are minded to recommend that all Panels adopt the policy of 'deferring judgement' on applications that meet all but a small minority of accreditation criteria. Such a policy might reduce both the workload of some Panels and the financial burden on councils whilst still ensuring adequate scrutiny of all applications. However, there do need to be safeguards to ensure that Panels make a decision on all applications in good time. In some cases, Panels have deferred applications for lengthy periods; in at least two cases, for more than a year. There is also a need to ensure that any costs to the Panel incurred due to deferment are met by the councils making the application rather than being passed on to county associations.

WE RECOMMEND that in cases where councils meet all but a small minority of accreditation criteria County Accreditation Panels defer judgement on applications and allow councils <u>1 calendar month from the date on which the application is deferred</u> in which to make amendments and resubmit the relevant parts of their application. When this happens, the Panel should <u>not</u> charge a full second fee, but <u>may</u> require the council to subsidise any additional costs incurred by the Panel. If a council does not provide information within 1 month, it must make a new application for Quality status and the Panel should charge a full second fee.

Appeals against decisions by County Accreditation Panels

6.35   The Quality scheme guidance published by ODPM states that the decision of a County Accreditation Panel is final and incontestable. However, a small number of councils have appealed against decisions on the grounds that the Panel has given inappropriate reasons for refusing the application. In at least one case, the Panel reversed their original decision. This has led to some council clerks calling for formal auditing of Panels and policing of decisions made by Panels through spot checks and referrals by local councils.

6.36   Whilst it would be inappropriate for this report to comment on or invoke particular cases, it is evident that there should be a right of appeal and that in cases of appeals both County Accreditation Panels and local councils should have access to independent advice and arbitration. National stakeholders have declined to offer such a service, on the grounds that this would be inconsistent with the principle and practice of peer accreditation. National stakeholders have also raised concerns over how such a service might be funded.

6.37   However, there is scope for an independent national panel to provide advice and arbitration in cases where councils have appealed against the decision of a County Accreditation Panel. In order to maintain the principle and practice of peer accreditation, the national panel should be constituted from experienced members of County Accreditation Panels. The costs of the Panel would be met by a small fee charged to the council making the appeal. In addition to considering appeals against the decision of County Accreditation Panels, such a Panel might also have the capacity to provide advice and guidance to County Accreditation Panels on a more routine basis, although this would depend on the availability of funding for the Panel and the commitments of Panel members.

WE RECOMMEND that the key stakeholders in the Quality scheme set up a national Advice and Arbitration Panel, constituted of experienced members of County Accreditation Panels, to which County Accreditation Panels and local councils can appeal in cases of disagreement.

Chapter 7: Support for Quality councils

Introduction

7.1   This chapter discusses support for Quality councils, including support from principal local authorities and the potential for Quality councils to be given additional powers and resources. There are four areas of discussion:
- Overview of expectations and experiences of support for Quality councils
- The role of local councils charters in supporting Quality councils
- The influence of relationships between local councils and principal local authorities on support for Quality councils
- Suggested additional powers and resources for local councils

In each area of discussion, the review makes recommendations on potential modifications of and changes to the Quality scheme.

Overview of expectations and experiences of support for Quality councils

Expectations of support for Quality Councils

7.2   At the launch of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in 2003, national stakeholders envisaged that Quality councils would receive a range of support. This support would come in two forms: additional opportunities for Quality councils to take on responsibilities commensurate with their capacities and aspirations, and additional resources to enable Quality councils to develop their roles.

7.3   National stakeholders envisaged that support would come largely from principal local authorities. Principal local authorities would provide opportunities for Quality councils to take on an enhanced role in the delivery, management and co-ordination of local services, including funding for any delegated roles, and consult or otherwise involve local councils in decision-making over all matters that affected local communities.

7.4   The Quality scheme has led to similar expectations of support amongst local councils applying for Quality status (see table 7.1). Close to two thirds of all accredited councils applied in order to encourage greater consultation by their principal local authority. Over half applied in order to encourage delegation of services by their principal local authority, along with delegated funding for any additional roles they might take on. Amongst councils that are interested in applying for Quality status, expectations of support are even higher.

Table 7.1: Expectations of support for Quality councils

Expectations of support	% of Quality councils (N=192)	% of councils intending to apply (N=124)
Delegation of functions	61	73
Increased consultation	67	67
Delegation of funding	64	72

Source: Questionnaire

7.2.2 Experiences of support for Quality councils

7.5   There is a substantial gap between expectations of support for Quality councils and the actual support Quality councils have received (see table 7.2). Only a small minority of

accredited councils have taken on additional delegated functions as a result of Quality status. Although Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to have had services delegated to them (see Chapter 3), in most cases this delegation occurred prior to councils obtaining Quality status.

7.6   Quality councils have received few additional material resources since accreditation. Just over 5% indicate that Quality status has resulted in increased funding for delegated services, which in large part reflects the minimal impact of the Quality scheme on service delegation. Seventy-nine councils benefited from grants awarded by the limited-life Quality Parish Investment Fund established by Defra. These ranged from £2,500 to £10,000. Out of the 109 councils that applied for grants, did not receive any support.[12] The majority of any additional financial support has resulted from Quality councils applying for grant-funding from a range of bodies and initiatives, most of which are also open to councils outside the scheme.

7.7   The most evident support from principal local authorities has been in terms of additional consultation. Close to a fifth of Quality councils report that consultation on the management and delivery of local services has increased as a result of them gaining Quality status. However, only one in twenty has benefited from increased consultation over planning, despite this often being a priority objective of councils applying for the scheme.

Table 7.2: Support resulting from Quality status

Support received	% Quality councils
Increased consultation over service delivery	18
Increased consultation over planning	7
Delegation of funding	5
Delegation of services	5

Source: Questionnaire. N=187.

7.8   The limited support provided by principal authorities results from a range of factors. As discussed in Chapter 4 of this report, some principal local authorities are only vaguely aware of the Quality scheme and its functions and purposes. A small minority appear to be entirely aware of the scheme. In addition, the small proportion of local councils with Quality status and the varying capacities and aspirations of different Quality councils means that some principal authorities find it difficult to support them on a consistent, efficient and effective basis. Some also feel that the low proportion of Quality councils does not justify the expenditure of additional time, money and other resources on support. Perceptions that the scheme has limited benefits and relevance to principal authorities are also inhibiting the development of support.

7.9   As such, it might be anticipated that the involvement of principal local authorities will increase as the number of Quality councils grows. Indeed, this scenario has been suggested by several principal local authorities. However, there is a danger that the scheme suffer from the conundrum that Principal Local Authorities may be unwilling to offer significant additional benefits to Quality councils until more councils participate in the scheme, but councils may be unwilling to apply for Quality status unless they see a clear benefit in terms of dedicated support from Principal Local Authorities.

WE RECOMMEND that new guidance should be issued to principal local authorities on working with Quality Parish and Town Councils, including the potential benefits of increased partnership working, routes to increased partnership working and examples of

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[12] Report on the decision panel of the Quality Parish Investment Fund, available at www.nalc.gov.uk.

good practice. This guidance should be prepared by all the partner organisations in the Quality scheme, and include clear endorsement by LGA and DCLG.

Suggestions for additional support

7.10   In both their responses to the questionnaire and in their written submissions for this research, the majority of Quality councils called for principal local authorities to offer them more support. Close to two-thirds of councils (64 per cent) want principal local authorities to receive greater encouragement to work in partnership with Quality councils. Seven in ten councils want not just encouragement but a mandatory duty on principal local authorities to engage with Quality councils, which would include mandatory representation of Quality councils on Local Area Committees and Local Strategic Partnerships**.** County and district associations emphasise the importance of developing and nurturing partnership working on the basis of negotiation and mutual agreement, and are doubtful of the benefits of any legal duty.

Recommendations on additional support for Quality councils

7.11   There is an evident need for greater engagement between principal local authorities and Quality councils in some areas. The lack of support in many areas means that some Quality councils with aspirations to do more on behalf of their principal local authorities are deterred from exploring opportunities for doing so. Further participation by the majority of principal authorities is essential if the scheme is to meet the expectations it has generated and the potential it offers for greater partnership between the tiers. The development of the Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda should bring further pressure on local authorities to engage with bodies that can deliver services in accordance with principles of best value and that represent the needs and aspirations of their communities. Quality councils are obvious vehicles for meeting many of the requirements of the Neighbourhoods agenda (see Chapter 8). However, there is also a need to recognise the concerns of principal authorities regarding the Quality scheme, and the real challenges that greater partnership working can bring. In light of this, the introduction of a stand-alone legal requirement for principal authorities to engage with Quality councils might well be counter-productive, causing friction between the tiers. Further, it would be inconsistent with the voluntary nature of the Quality scheme.

WE RECOMMEND that the LGA in consultation with NALC and DCLG encourage principal local authorities to consider and explore opportunities for supporting Quality councils wishing to engage in greater partnership working, with reference to the principles of the Neighbourhoods agenda.

Support for Quality councils through local council charters

Expectations of local council charters

7.12   According to the guidance accompanying the Quality scheme, support for Quality councils should come principally through the negotiation of local council charters with principal local authorities. Charters set out and formally codify the relationship between local councils and principal local authorities, including any additional benefits and responsibilities that local councils can expect from Quality status.

7.13   The Quality scheme guidance issued by ODPM, drawn up following consultation with national stakeholders, suggests that charters can best support Quality local councils when they incorporate specific provisions for Quality councils. The guidance includes a model charter

which can serve as a guide to good practice. The second part of the model charter sets out the enhanced role that Quality Local Councils in the area can expect in terms of community strategies, access to and information on local services provided by the principal local authority, and land use and development planning, and indicates where it would be appropriate for the actual Charter to include more detailed provisions that reflect local circumstances.

Progress in charter formation

7.14   Data from the questionnaire survey suggest that the majority of Quality councils have either agreed and published a charter or are in the process of agreeing a charter (see table 7.3). Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to have agreed a charter or to be in the process of agreeing a charter and to have discussed the possibility of developing a charter. However, more than a quarter of Quality councils report that they do not have a charter agreement with a principal local authority and have had no discussions concerning the development of a charter.

Table 7.3: Progress in Charter formation, Quality and non-accredited councils

Progress in formation	Quality councils (N=175)	Non-Accredited councils (N=224)
Published	34%	27%
Being agreed	29%	11%
Not discussed	27%	42%
Don't know	10%	20%

Source: Questionnaire

7.15   Most commonly, charters are agreed between county or district associations of local councils and principal local authorities. They may also be agreed between individual local councils and principal local authorities. As far as it has been possible to ascertain, only one Quality council has agreed a separate charter. Another has submitted a charter for consideration and is waiting for the principal local authority to respond.

Provisions of charters for Quality councils

7.16   A survey of charter formation carried out by LGIU suggests that there is considerable variation in the provisions of different charters. Almost all charters make reference to consultation with the principal authority and support for partnership working from the principal authority. The majority of current charters contain references to the delegation of services, although a significant proportion do not, and less than a third of current charters include reference to financial arrangements accompanying delegation; such provisions are more common in charters currently being agreed. Only a minority of charters refer to relationships with other neighbourhood or community governance arrangements and to relationships with Local Strategic Partnerships. Many charters are more than five years old and have not been updated to take account of more recent developments in policy and practice that might impact on the relationship between local councils and principal local authorities.[13]

7.17   Responses to the questionnaire survey suggest that little more than a quarter (28 per cent) of all Quality councils are covered by charters that include additional benefits and responsibilities for councils with Quality status. However, of the Quality councils that are covered by a charter, close to half have signed up to a charter with specific provisions for

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[13] *Best practice in charter formation*, Local Government Information Unit, November 2005

Quality councils (table 7.4). Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to be covered by a two-part charter of this type.

Table 7.4: Provisions of charters for Quality and non-Quality councils

	Quality councils in charter agreements (N=95)	Non-accredited councils in charter agreements. (N=94)
Includes provision for Quality councils	52%	38%
Does not include provision for Quality councils	28%	37%
Unsure of provisions	20%	25%

Source: Questionnaire

7.18   The LGIU survey of charter formation suggests that the proportion of Quality councils covered by two-part charters is increasing. Of those Quality councils in the process of agreeing a charter with their principal local authority– as opposed to merely 'planning' to develop a charter – up to three-quarters were agreeing charters with specific provisions for Quality councils. In addition, some local councils and principal local authorities are reviewing charters agreed before the launch of the Quality Parish and Town Council scheme, which may result in some charters being modified to include specific provision for Quality councils. Some of the single-part charters published following the launch of the Quality scheme include a commitment from principal local authorities to consider modification of the charter should the number of Quality councils in the area increase. Bi-partite charters agreed with district councils are the most likely to incorporate specific provisions for Quality councils. Tri-partite agreements covering both district councils and county councils are the least likely to incorporate specific provisions.

7.19   Specific provisions for Quality councils vary considerably between different charters. A study of twelve Quality charters carried out for this review indicates that at minimum, existing charters with specific provisions for Quality councils include a commitment that the different tiers will recognise the concept of Quality local councils. However, not all charters specify how this will occur. Some charters include a commitment that when considering requests for delegation of functions, the principal local authority will take into account whether or not a local council has Quality status. Some charters offer Quality councils the opportunity to negotiate their own charters with the principal local authority based on their capacities and ambitions.

7.20   A minority of charters with specific provisions for Quality councils include a commitment that the principal local authority will offer Quality councils the opportunity to take on one or more specific named functions. Most frequently, this includes the opportunity for Quality councils to act as information and access points for services provided by the local authority. Other named functions include responsibilities for minor maintenance of highways, verges, signage, public spaces and rights of way. At least one charter offers Quality councils the opportunity to take on responsibilities for aspects of noise and nuisance abatement, management of civic facilities, and aspects of development control (see box over page).

7.21   The least common feature of two-part charters appears to be additional rights of consultation for Quality councils. Most common is a commitment that principal local authorities will explore opportunities for increased involvement of Quality councils in decision-making where possible and appropriate. A minority of charters with specific provisions for Quality councils include commitments that principal local authorities will take full account of Parish Plans produced by councils with Quality status when preparing and updating community

strategies and local development plans. This is also a feature of some charters without specific provision for Quality councils.

7.22   The influence of the ODPM model charter on actual charter formation may be increasing. The LGIU survey indicated that half of all councils in the process of agreeing a charter and up to three quarters of Quality councils in the process of agreeing a charter were working to the ODPM model.

The Cheshire charter

The tri-partite charter agreed in October 2004 between Cheshire County Council, the five district councils in Cheshire and Cheshire Association of Local Councils includes a commitment that the principal local authorities "will offer Quality Local Councils (or groups of Quality Local Councils) the opportunity to take on one or more of the services and functions listed in Appendix 5, or parts of them, in accordance with mutually agreed practical and financial arrangements."

Appendix 5 refers to:
- Noise and nuisance abatement
- Some aspects of Development Control *(to be agreed through Memoranda of Understanding)*
- Some aspects of Libraries and Museums operations
- Minor Highway Maintenance – pot-hole filling, grass cutting/hedge trimming,
- minor repairs/erection of signs, litter picking
- Gritting
- Information Access Point provision

Barriers to the formation of two-part charters

7.23   There are a number of significant barriers to the formation of charters that incorporate specific provisions for Quality councils. Some principal local authorities feel that negotiating specific provisions is not worthwhile give the small number of Quality councils in their area and the additional investment of resources such negotiation would involve. In other areas, the formation of two-part charters has been resisted by local councils, including both Quality and non-accredited councils, on the basis that a two-part charter would unfairly restrict opportunities for non-accredited councils to develop closer partnerships with principal local authorities. In some cases, this has led to the creation of charters explicitly stating that Quality status will have no influence on partnership working between local councils and principal local authorities.

7.24   The LGIU report on charter formation identified a number of more general barriers to charter formation. The most common barriers are lack of agreement between different tiers on opportunities for the delegation of services and other functions and the financial arrangements that would accompany any delegation of functions. The large number and diversity of local councils can also make it difficult to negotiate a charter. Other barriers, according to the study, are lack of interest from both local councils and principal local authorities in developing a charter, misunderstanding of the role and purpose of charters, and scepticism that a charter would bring benefits for either principal local authorities or local councils. Both the formation of charters and support for charters agreed by county and district associations have been inhibited by confusion over the link between charters and the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme, with some local councils under the impression that they can only sign up to a charter if they are a Quality council.

7.25   The LGIU has recommended that, in order to help reduce confusion over the relationship between charters and the Quality scheme, future guidance on charter formation should place less emphasis on the relationship between charters and Quality status,. Similarly, one national stakeholder has expressed doubt over the appropriateness of the Quality scheme seeking to guide relationships between the tiers at the local level, and suggested that the structure and content of charters should be entirely at the discretion of the parties involved in its formation.

Conclusions and recommendations on local council charters

7.26   We are not minded to recommend that future guidance on charters and charter formation should place less emphasis on the link between charters and the Quality scheme. Reducing the current emphasis on the link between charters and Quality status would raise the challenge of how principal local authorities might otherwise formally recognise the Quality scheme as a benchmarking exercise for local councils. Neither council clerks nor stakeholders have been able to suggest an alternative mechanism. Although it is clearly evident that there are significant barriers to the development of two-part charters in some areas, it is also evident that these barriers in large part reflect a more general resistance on the part of some local councils to the principle of additional opportunities and support being made available for Quality councils. Less emphasis on the link between charters and Quality status would do little or nothing to address this, and, in the absence of an alternative mechanism, would run the danger of undermining the Quality scheme. The model two-part charter published by ODPM incorporates the general principle that principal authorities should recognise the potential of Quality councils in terms of greater partnership working whilst being sufficiently flexible to accommodate variety regarding practical arrangements.

WE RECOMMEND that NALC, the LGA, Defra and DCLG explore opportunities for promoting the benefits of two-part charters to county and district associations and the local authority sector. This promotion should emphasise the importance of tailoring two-part charters to meet local circumstances, but should also cite the two-part model charter produced by ODPM as a guide to good practice.

Relationships with principal local authorities

Overview of issues regarding relationships with principal local authorities

7.27   To a great extent, the degree to which principal local authorities support Quality local councils is contingent on overall relationships between the tiers. In the main, any material support available to Quality councils is also available to non-accredited councils, and reflects the extent to which principal local authorities are concerned with supporting and building the capacity of the entire local council sector in their area.

Variations in relationships between the tiers

7.28   Relationships between local councils and principal local authorities are often positive and productive. Many principal local authorities offer a range of opportunities and support for partnership working between the tiers. Typically, these include dedicated staff with responsibility for liaison with local councils, promoting understanding of the roles and value of local councils to departments within the authority, and more general development of the local council sector. County associations frequently have a close working relationship with local authority officers, facilitated by officers with dedicated time and resources for local council issues. Sometimes these arrangements are long-standing; in other cases they have developed more recently.

7.29   A small number of authorities offer in-house training on the roles and powers of local councils for local council staff; some also offer opportunities for local councillors to observe the work of the council. All such activities can aid mutual understanding between local councillors and officers of the principal local authority. Examples of good practice include the Isle of Wight County Council and Bradford Metropolitan District Council (see box).

7.30   Some principal local authorities have incorporated partnership working with local councils into corporate and / or strategic policy. In a few cases, such as Essex County Council, Isle of Wight County Council and Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council, council leaders or portfolio holders are championing increased partnership working with local councils. Such practices, often building on historical relationships that have not always been so positive, are helping to create a step-change in engagement between the two tiers.

7.31   Elsewhere, the relationship between the tiers is far less positive and constructive. Some principal authorities offer little or nothing in the way of material support for local council development, and have found it difficult to engage with local councils. There is sometimes active resistance to local councils on the part of the principal local authority; at least one local authority has recently been reprimanded by the local government ombudsman for seeking to dissuade local residents from supporting a petition for the creation of a parish council in the area. However, such active conflict appears to be rare. More common is an apparent relationship of mutual indifference between the principal local authority and the majority of local councils in the area.

Good practice: relationships between the tiers

Isle of Wight County Council
- The Parish Community Development Team of the Isle of Wight County Council runs induction days for new local councillors which include information and question and answer sessions on the relationship between local councils and the principal local authority
- The County Council is also establishing a Parish Empowerment Group, led by officers from the Council, the local Health Trust and the Primary Care Trust, to promote the role of local councils across the County Council and its partners, including identifying opportunities for the devolution of services

Bradford Metropolitan District Council
- The Human Resources department of Bradford MDC has run training courses for Borough Council staff on "Working with Parish and Town Councils". The courses are intended to promote the role of local councils across the Borough Council
- The 2hr sessions provide an overview of the powers and responsibilities of local councils, an introduction to all the local councils in the district, their relationship with the Borough Councils, and information on the Quality scheme
- Courses have been oversubscribed by 100%, and the Council plans to run more when staff and resources allow

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The challenge of community engagement for local authorities

7.32   Relationships between the tiers can be complicated by the variety of other vehicles and mechanisms through which principal local authorities engage with local communities. For the majority of principal local authorities, local councils are not the only means of consulting local people and delegating service delivery and other functions.

7.33   Many areas have a long history of engagement and experimentation with Area Committees and Area Forums, based on ward clusters or school catchment areas, some dating back to the 1970s or earlier. More recently, ward- or neighbourhood based regeneration initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities has led to the creation of new bodies to facilitate local partnership working, community engagement and social inclusion. Such vehicles and mechanisms are particularly prominent in local authorities with both parished and un-parished areas. In some cases, their areas may co-exist with those of local councils.

7.34   Working with a variety of local arrangements presents local authorities with a number of challenges, not least of which is the challenge of ensuring that all communities and neighbourhoods within the local authority area receive equal treatment in terms of consultation and opportunities for delegated service delivery. Addressing this challenge has made some local authorities hesitant to single out Quality councils for additional opportunities and support in partnership working.

Changing relationships between the tiers

7.35   The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme offers considerable potential for partnership working between the tiers. It also raises a series of challenges to local councils and principal local authorities, including over the demarcation of rights and responsibilities, requirements for adequate delegation of funding to accompany delegation of functions, and greater consultation and communication. Where the overall relationship between the tiers is good, principal authorities and local councils are more likely to engage with these opportunities and demands. When the overall relationship is less than positive, or where there is mutual indifference between the tiers, this engagement is likely to constitute a greater challenge.

7.36   Poor historical relationships do not have to determine future practice by constituting an insoluble barrier to the development of greater partnership working. In some areas, crises in the relationship between the tiers have been the stimulus for discussions between the tiers that have resulted in the emergence of far more positive and constructive relationships. In turn, this has led to the principal local authority engaging with the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme. The example of Bradford is a case in point (see box).

Good practice: relationships between the tiers

A history of problematic relations between Bradford Metropolitan District Council and local councils in the district came to a head after the District Council decided to alter funding arrangements for local councils. Discussion and negotiation led to the establishment of a Parish Council Liaison Group chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, supported by a Parish Council link officer and attended by the chairs of all local councils

Bradford MDC, in conjunction with Yorkshire Association of Local Councils, now provides training, advice and other support free of charge to all local councils. This support includes advice from officers to communities wishing to establish a local councils, grant-funding the administrative costs of all new councils in their first year and subsequently advising on precepts and budgets. The District Council also offers advice and training on finances, parish planning, development control and local area management, and local councillors have the opportunity to attend in-house training on IT, leadership and member recruitment.

The Parish Liaison Group has agreed a charter outlining the relationship between the tiers, the support available to local councils and commitments on consultation. Local councils are a prominent feature of Bradford MBC's Rural Strategy and featured prominently in its

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successful bid for Beacon Status, The arrangements have been used as a model of good practice for 'rural proofing' by the Countryside Agency, Defra, and the LGA.

Additional powers and resources for Quality councils

Additional power to promote local well-being

7.37   The majority of Quality councils would like additional powers to help them develop their role in promoting local well-being (table 7.5). Most popular would be the extension to local councils of the general power of well-being granted to local authorities under the Local Government Act 2000. Less popular would be increased spending limits under existing S137 powers, perhaps reflecting the limited scope of expenditure under this provision and the fact that most local councils are well within their S137 spending limit (see Chapter 3). The second most popular suggestion is power over selected aspects of development control.

7.38   Higher spending Quality councils are more likely to favour an additional power of well-being, as are councils making the most use of existing powers under S137. Aspirations for a general power of well-being are significantly more evident amongst Quality councils than amongst non-Quality councils, although the majority of non-Quality councils favour increased powers of some sort.
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Table 7.5: Additional powers to promote well-being suggested by local councils

Suggested powers	Quality councils (N=179)	Non-Accredited councils (N=233)
Increased powers of some sort	81%	59%
Extension of general power of well-being	70%	43%
Increased spending limit under S137 powers	20%	13%
Unlimited expenditure under S137 powers	18%	11%
Statutory powers over specified areas of planning and development control	49%	41%
Other powers	8%	5%

Source: Questionnaire survey

7.39   All local councils currently have power to promote well-being under Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972. Section 137 enables a local council to spend up to a statutory threshold, during a financial year on any activities for which it has no specific power, but which the council considers "will bring direct benefit to the area, or any part of it or all or some of its inhabitants". The 1989 Local Government and Housing Act stipulates that any benefit must be in proportion to the expenditure incurred. Permitted expenditure under S137 is in proportion to the size of the electorate, and since April 2004 (following the Local Government Act 2003, S118) has risen in line with the retail price index. The current limit is £5.44 per elector per year. The Quality scheme does not give Quality councils any additional power to promote well-being.

7.40   A general power of well-being would give Quality councils significantly greater freedom than existing legislation permits. This freedom would include no limits to levels of expenditure on items outside the statutory powers of local councils. It would also include fewer restrictions on targeting expenditure at individuals. S137 requires that any expenditure on individuals <u>directly</u> benefits all or some of the area or community, whilst the power of wellbeing allows any

benefit arising from expenditure on individuals to be <u>indirect.</u> A general power of wellbeing might also reduce the administrative burden on Quality councils, enabling them to target time and resources more efficiently. Under S137, decisions over whether or not proposed items of expenditure are authorised can consume time and administrative resources out of proportion with the levels of expenditure being discussed.

7.41   From evidence on current spending, it is not clear that a general power of wellbeing would have a significant impact on the capacity of Quality councils to carry out the roles envisaged for them under the Quality scheme. As chapter 3 discussed, few Quality councils exploit their existing power to anything approaching its maximum extent, with the majority spending less than 10 per cent of their maximum permitted spend. However, national stakeholders have suggested that current spending reflects a lack of confidence amongst many clerks and councillors regarding the provisions and restrictions of S137. If this is the case, a general power of well-being would give Quality councils greater confidence to develop their role.

7.42   There is evidence that some local councils limit their use of expenditure under S137 because the legislation is confusing and they are wary of being censured for interpreting it wrongly. The Chief Verifier for the Certificate in Local Council Administration has reported that many of the clerks submitting portfolios fail to demonstrate an accurate understanding of the concepts underpinning S137 and the terms of its amendments. National stakeholders report that some local councils have been reprimanded by auditors for inappropriate expenditure under S137. There is also evidence that some larger councils seeking to undertake substantial capital and revenue projects have found themselves frustrated by the restrictions of S137. This has included attempts to provide community facilities such as libraries. These councils would certainly spend more if they were permitted.

7.43   There are concerns that Quality councils might misuse a power of wellbeing. In particular, the greater freedom to target individuals without evidence of direct benefit to some or all of the community would increase opportunities for cronyism and other forms of corruption, although the same argument holds equally for local authorities. Whilst Quality status does ensure that councils meet certain standards of competence with regard to the exercise of their powers, it includes no specific safeguards regarding misuse of any potential power of well-being. Again, however, the same argument can be applied to local authorities. Prior to the Local Government Act 2000, both local authorities and local councils were governed by S137. The 2000 Act in effect discriminates against local councils for no evident good reason.

7.44   In conclusion, there are strong arguments in favour of extending a general power of wellbeing to Quality councils but the evidence collected as part of this research is insufficient to clearly predict how many councils might use such a power and for what purpose. There are numerous examples of the difference that councils can make for their communities through innovate and proactive policies, yet there is also some evidence that the current Section 137 rules are regarded as confusing and restrictive. Extending a power of wellbeing would help to clarify the powers of local councils. If Government is minded to move in this direction, the Quality scheme would provide an appropriate platform for delivery.

WE RECOMMEND that consideration should be given to extending a general power of wellbeing to councils that have passed the Quality test.

Statutory powers over aspects of development and planning

7.45   At present, the statutory powers of local councils over planning and development control extend only to the right of consultation over planning and development issues impacting on their areas. Planning and development authorities are under no requirement to abide by any

recommendations a local council might make. Across local authorities there is reluctance to delegate planning decisions to local councils, although a handful of local authorities are in various stages of experimentation with some delegation. Some local authorities encourage local councils to assist planning enforcement, and there is potential for local charters to incorporate such a role for Quality councils.

7.46   If Quality councils were to receive greater statutory powers over planning and development control, it would have to be accompanied by statutory training for council members. As discussed in chapter 3, although levels of training on planning issues are higher amongst Quality councils than amongst non-accredited councils, only a minority of councillors on Quality councils have undertaken any sort of planning training. There would also need to be far more engagement between Quality councils and principal authorities at the strategic level than has so far occurred, in order that both tiers can properly identify and respect their respective roles. The challenges this would entail make us reluctant to recommend any additional powers at the present time. However, we do wish to encourage thinking on this issue.

WE RECOMMEND that NALC, the LGA and DCLG explore opportunities for Quality councils to take on statutory powers over certain aspects of planning and development control.

7.47   The 2000 Rural White Paper opened up a discussion over the potential for increasing the role of local councils in aspects of planning through a variety of mechanisms, including Parish Plans and Market Town Plans. Guidance from ODPM on local council charters encourages principal local authorities to consider adopting Parish Plans and other proposals for from local councils regarding development and land use as Supplementary Planning Guidance, since replaced by Supplementary Planning Documents. However, the extent to which this has occurred has so far been limited, in large part because of the complexities involved. The necessity for Parish and Market Town Plans to be dismembered and passed through a sustainability appraisal and various stages of consultation means that most planning authorities are unwilling to go through this process.

7.48   In some areas Parish Plans and similar documents have been adopted as 'material considerations' in Local Development Frameworks. Whilst this makes Parish Plans less binding on planning authorities, the route to their adoption is much less complex than the route to adoption in the form of Supplementary Planning Documents, and is consequently more popular amongst local authorities. A report commissioned by the Market and Coastal Towns Association (MCTA) and the South West ACRE Network of Community Councils (SWAN) indicates that there is potential for different elements of Parish Plans and similar documents to be incorporated, as appropriate, into different strategies, such Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Transport Plans. Feedback from local authorities and Defra, along with the MCTA/SWAN report, suggests that Local Strategic Plans, which are more holistic than SPDs, are likely to be the most appropriate vehicles through which local authorities can take account of Parish Plans and similar documents.[14]

WE RECOMMEND that principal local authorities explore opportunities for responding to the local planning priorities expressed through Parish Plans, Village Design Statements, Landscape Plans and similar items prepared by Quality councils, whether by formal adoption as supplementary planning documents or material considerations within the Local Development Framework, or as evidence of local need for community strategies. Any arrangements should be set out in local council charters.

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[14] *An exciting future for community plans*, MCTA and SWAN, July 2006.

Additional financial support for Quality councils

7.49   There is considerable demand for Quality councils to have greater access to financial resources other than those they can generate themselves. The majority of councils want to see the re-establishment of the Quality Parish Investment Fund. The Quality Parish Investment Fund (QPIF), sponsored by Defra, distributed a total of £450,000 between 77 of the 109 Quality councils that applied to the fund between 12 November and 1 December 2004. The aim of the fund was to enable and encouraging Quality councils to invest in greater partnership working, improving services to local people, improving community engagement and addressing social exclusion and disadvantage. Requests for funding considerably outstripped the money available through the fund. However, the fund was only intended as a limited-life initiative to encourage early applications to the Quality scheme and there is currently no budgetary provision for its resurrection. At least one county association has developed a local variation of the Fund (see box).

7.50   Another popular suggestion from both Quality and non-accredited councils is that councils with Quality status should have access to a dedicated revenue stream derived from the revenue support grant provided to local authorities. This would reduce the reliance of local councils on support provided directly by principal local authorities. Because the revenue support grant is calculated according to the relative resources of local authorities, the level of funding available to local councils from such a revenue stream would differ between local authority areas.

Good practice: local funding for Quality councils

Staffordshire Parish Councils Association has established a Quality Parish Development Fund. The Fund is intended to serve as a local replacement for the Quality Parish Investment Fund, and utilises money from Defra's Rural Social and Community Fund.

The Fund makes available £50,000 over two years (2005-7) for small pilot projects that can demonstrate they will be sustainable beyond the lifetime of the Fund. Councils must provide 50% match-funding, from either their own resources or other sources. In particular, the Fund is directed at supporting websites, community IT infrastructure and staff for delegated functions.

7.51   The majority of Quality councils also favour reduced rates for attendance at events and conferences organised by national stakeholders in the local council sector. A small minority suggest that Quality councils should be given priority in decisions over applications for grant-funding from principal local authorities.

Table 7.6: Additional financial resources for Quality councils supported by accredited and non-accredited councils

	Quality councils (N=193)	Non-accredited councils (N=250)
Renewal of Quality Parish Investment Fund	79%	37%
Top-slicing of revenue support grant	60%	50%
Reduced rates for events and conferences	51%	34%

Source: Questionnaire

7.52   According to local stakeholders, access to additional financial resources is needed to enable many Quality councils to develop the roles envisaged for them by the Quality scheme. The limited administrative capacity of many Quality councils severely limits the extent to which they can take on delegated services or operate agency agreements. Unsustainable demands on clerks and other administrative staff have led some Quality councils to abandon experiments with service delegation. Others have been deterred from requesting or even considering additional delegation of functions because of perceived demands on administrative resources. There are a number of complex issues surrounding the finances of delegation to local councils. These are discussed in reports by the LGIU and Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the relationships between local councils and neighbourhood governance.[15]

7.53   There are also arguments from national stakeholders that a dedicated funding stream for Quality councils would serve as a significant incentive for non-accredited councils to apply for Quality status and for existing Quality councils to seek re-accreditation. Feedback from councils suggests that the absence of dedicated funding for Quality councils acts as a significant disincentive to both accreditation and re-accreditation. However, any new funding stream would require additional budgetary provision from central and / or local government. There are also concerns from some national stakeholders that a direct financial incentive would detract from the intended incentives of greater professionalism, community engagement and partnership working.

7.54   In principle, we endorse the idea of a dedicated revenue stream for Quality councils. This might be derived from the revenue support grant to local authorities, and could require match-funding. However, specifying the appropriate form of funding arrangements is beyond the remit of this report, and requires discussion and collaboration between the various partner organisations of the Quality scheme, particularly NALC, DCLG and LGA.

WE RECOMMEND that the partner organisations of the Quality scheme discuss the potential for creating a dedicated revenue stream for Quality councils.

7.55   As discussed in chapter 5, the Clean Neighbourhoods Act has set an important precedent for future legislation by differentiating Quality local councils in providing for additional powers. It would be appropriate for any new legislation on local councils to follow this precedent by making specific provision for Quality councils where this would be appropriate and practicable.

WE RECOMMEND that future Government legislation for local councils should, where appropriate and practicable, provide additional powers for Quality councils.

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[15] Jones, A., Burnley, J., Cox, E, Newman, I., *The potential of parish and town councils to support neighbourhood arrangements*, Local Government Information Unit, November 2005; Newman, I., *Parish and town councils and neighbourhood governance*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, March 2005

Chapter 8: The Quality scheme and the *Neighbourhoods* agenda

Introduction

8.1   This section of the review discusses the potential of the Quality scheme to support delivery of the Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda. There are four areas of discussion:
- The compatibility of the Quality scheme with the *Neighbourhoods* Agenda
- Involvement of Quality councils in roles consistent with the *Neighbourhoods* agenda
- Capacity and aspirations of Quality Councils to take on more responsibilities compared to non-accredited Councils
- The principle of proportionality in devolution to neighbourhood bodies

Compatibility of the Quality scheme with the *Neighbourhoods* agenda

Outline of the Neighbourhoods agenda

8.2   The Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda aims to create new opportunities for neighbourhoods across England. It forms part of a wider Government agenda to empower local people to help shape local services and become more involved in their communities. The agenda addresses two challenges identified by Government: securing sustainable improvements in public services and re-engaging citizens with the institutions of Government. The principles of the *Neighbourhoods* agenda are set out in the consultation document *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter.* [16]

8.3   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* proposes the establishment of a national framework for neighbourhoods, consisting of a statement setting out the principles for neighbourhood arrangements and commitments by Government, local authorities and other stakeholders to support and develop arrangements. Central to the proposed framework are a set of five key principles for guiding the establishment and operation of local neighbourhood arrangements.
- Arrangements must be supported by principal local authorities
- Arrangements must be capable of making a difference to the everyday lives of citizens.
- Arrangements must be appropriate to circumstances and responsive to local needs.
- Arrangements must be consistent with local representative democracy, including a leading role for principal authority councillors
- Neighbourhood arrangements must be balanced between the demands of efficiency and proportionality.

Compatibility of aims and principles

8.4   In broad terms, the aims and principles of the Government's *Neighbourhoods* agenda are compatible with the aims of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme. The Quality scheme aims to equip new local councils to take a stronger role in their communities by making local services more responsive to local needs and by promoting representative and inclusive community leadership. At the launch of the scheme, Government and other national stakeholders envisaged that Quality councils would articulate the needs and wishes of local people, help to deliver local services, and be an integral part of consultation on service delivery.

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[16] *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*, ODPM / Home Office, January 2005

The scheme emphasises the importance of Quality councils working in partnership with principal local authorities to give communities 'the best deal'.

8.5   In addition to broad compatibility with the Neighbourhoods agenda in terms of aims and principles, the Quality scheme has the potential to assist delivery of the Neighbourhoods agenda in two specific ways. First, the standards that Quality councils must meet in order to attain accreditation are consistent with, and may even exceed, the standards for neighbourhood bodies suggested under the proposed national framework for neighbourhoods. Second, the high proportion of Quality councils whose members have a dual mandate covering both the local council and the principal local authority is to some degree consistent with the requirement for ward councillors to be at the heart of any neighbourhood arrangements.

Anticipated standards of neighbourhood bodies

8.6   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* emphasises the importance of neighbourhood bodies being inclusive, representative and accountable. Decisions on local services and other issues must be transparent, and those who take decisions must be visible and accountable to the local community. Bodies must accommodate the diversity of interests, including those of minority and marginalised groups, that characterises communities. The proposed national framework for neighbourhood arrangements is likely to cover four key issues:
- Access to all, including individual residents and community groups
- Representation for all, either through policies or electoral arrangements
- Provision for the inclusion of minority and excluded groups
- Activities consistent with valuing diversity and promoting equal opportunity
- Agreed standards of conduct

8.7   Quality councils already meet high standards on the majority of these issues, through both the requirements for accreditation and the activities undertaken by councils. In terms of openness and transparency, all accredited councils must meet a strict electoral mandate and must hold regular meetings at which local electors have an opportunity to speak.

8.8   Accountability is promoted through the requirement for Quality councils to produce and make available an annual report including an overview of council activities, contact details of councillors and a summary of council accounts. Council finances must be open to scrutiny by local electors, under the terms of the Account and Audit Regulations 2003, whilst the minutes of council meetings must be published and made available to local electors within two months of a meeting.

8.9   All Quality councils are governed by a clear ethical framework. Test 7 of the accreditation process requires all councils to have formally adopted the Code of Conduct set down in the Local Government Act 2000. The Code of Conduct requires councillors to promote equality and register any interests.

The role of the ward councillor in local neighbourhood arrangements

8.10   The *Neighbourhoods* agenda emphasises the importance of ward councillors in any sort of neighbourhood arrangements. *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* envisions ward councillors both "stimulating the local voice" and representing it at the principal authority level, and sees them as vital in establishing links between strategic authorities and communities, including the development of new neighbourhood arrangements.

8.11   Whilst a requirement to engage with ward councillors is not part of the Quality scheme, it is a fairly consistent feature of accredited councils (table 8.1). Over two thirds of Quality councils already have at least one member who also serves on a principal local authority. This proportion rises to over 90 per cent on larger Quality councils representing an electorate of at least 10,000. Dual membership of councillors is significantly more common amongst Quality councils than it is amongst non-Quality councils. Although dual membership does not necessarily indicate the presence of strong linkages between local councils and principal local authorities, it is a strong basis from which such linkages can be established and developed.

8.12   Most commonly, dual members serve on district councils, although well over a third of Quality councils have members who serve on a county council or unitary authority. In three-tier areas, a small number of councillors serve on both district and county councils. Just over one tenth (11 per cent) of Quality councils have more than one county councillor or unitary authority councillor amongst their members, and four in ten Quality councils have two or more district councillors who are members. In all cases, councillors with a dual mandate are more common on Quality councils than on non-accredited councils.

8.13   In total, around 17 per cent of parish councillors on the Quality councils responding to the survey were also members of a district council, and around five per cent were also members of a county council or unitary authority. These proportions are not significantly different to the non-accredited councils responding to the survey, where 14 per cent of parish councillors were also members of a district council, and 5 per cent were also members of a county council or unitary authority.

Table 8.1: Quality and non-accredited local councils with district or county councillors as members

	District Councillors	County / Unitary Councillors	All Principal Councillors
Quality councils (N=194)	61%	39%	69%
Non-Accredited councils (N=266)	48%	30%	58%

Source: Questionnaire

Involvement of Quality councils in activities consistent with the *Neighbourhoods* agenda

Overview of council activities consistent with the *Neighbourhoods* agenda

8.14   To some extent, the Quality scheme is already helping to deliver the Neighbourhoods agenda. The majority of Quality councils are already engaged in activities consistent with the roles envisaged for neighbourhood bodies under the proposed national framework for neighbourhoods. In particular, these roles include involvement in the delivery of local services, community engagement, and partnership working with community and voluntary groups. A substantial proportion of Quality councils are also actively promoting inclusiveness. Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to be engaged in activities consistent with the Neighbourhoods agenda, although the difference is not particularly extensive.

Involvement of Quality councils in service delivery

8.15   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* emphasises the importance of local people helping to shape local services. Depending on circumstances, neighbourhood arrangements might provide

a range of opportunities through which local people could become involved. The suggested 'spectrum of responsibilities' includes:

- communication between service providers and local communities
- more formal consultation on standards and problems
- mechanisms to which service providers must respond
- power to commission certain types of service
- responsibility for the direct delivery of certain services.

8.16   Quality councils are already playing a significant role in the delivery and management of many frontline services (for full details, see table in Annex G). At a minimum, almost all Quality councils are responsible for signs, noticeboards, public seating, playing fields and playgrounds. Usually they directly provide these amenities; less commonly they provide grant-aid to another body. More than two thirds are responsible for open spaces other than playing fields and playgrounds, war memorials, village and community halls, churchyards and cemeteries, litter bins and skips. More than half of all Quality councils help to maintain rights of way. A significant minority provide or support the promotion of tourism, lighting, crime prevention, verge maintenance, rights of way, indoor recreation and community transport.

8.17   As the table in Annex G shows, many of the services provided by Quality councils are also directly provided or grant-aided by non-accredited councils. Overall, however, Quality councils are more likely to provide key frontline services and to provide a greater range of services.

8.18   Additionally, a greater proportion of Quality councils have taken on functions delegated to them by principal local authorities than equivalent non-accredited councils. Nearly half of the Quality councils responding to the survey had responsibility for delivering some delegated functions, compared with a third of responding non-accredited councils. As detailed in Annex G, the most commonly delegated functions include responsibility for the maintenance of rights of way, playing fields and playgrounds, roadside verges, seats and shelters, and open spaces.

8.19   Quality councils are also more likely to be engaged in arrangements set up by principal local authorities for consultation on service delivery and co-ordination of delivery arrangements. One of the most consistent benefits of the Quality scheme reported by local councils is increased consultation over service delivery by principal local authorities. Almost two thirds of Quality councils provide local electors with advice and information on local services (see table in Annex G). Support for councils to act as access and information points for principal local authorities is one of the most consistent features of local council charters that include specific prevision for Quality councils.

The involvement of Quality councils in promoting inclusiveness

8.20   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* emphasises the need for neighbourhood bodies to accommodate the needs and interest of the entire community, including the needs and interests of minority, marginalised and socially-excluded groups.

8.21   Eighty-five percent of Quality councils have undertaken a community survey since 2000 (table 8.2). Most common are Parish Plans or Village Design Statement, undertaken by over three quarters of all Quality councils. Also common are surveys of issues regarding traffic, highways and planning. Far less common are surveys of service provision and the needs of local service users, although close to a fifth of Quality councils have carried out a survey of housing needs. The most common styles of consultation are questionnaire surveys and public meetings (table 8.3).

8.22   Responses to the questionnaire survey suggest that Quality councils are more likely than non-accredited councils to have undertaken a community survey. In particular, they are more likely to have helped prepare a Parish Plan or Village Design Statement. Moreover, the actual differences between Quality councils and the majority of non-accredited councils may be greater than suggested by the figures in the table below. The questionnaire survey on which this table is based received few responses from councils served by unpaid clerks. It was also biased towards larger councils. Smaller councils with a volunteer clerk are less likely to have the resources to undertake such surveys.

Table 8.2: Community surveys undertaken by Quality and non-accredited councils

Type of community survey	% Quality councils (N=190)	% non-accredited councils (N=247)
Parish Plan	61%	41%
Village Design Statement	21%	8%
Village Appraisal	13%	9%
Housing needs	24%	16%
Traffic / Highways	38%	26%
Planning	32%	19%
Service provision / needs	19%	16%
User survey	23%	10%
Local environment	16%	8%
Council meetings	6%	2%
Other	25%	10%
No surveys undertaken	11%	24%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 8.3: Forms of community survey

Form of community surveys	Quality councils % (N=190)	Non-Accredited councils % (N=268)
Questionnaire survey	85%	62%
Invited written submissions	60%	39%
Invited spoken comments	57%	36%
Held public meeting	75%	55%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 8.4: Engagement with groups within community

Group	Quality councils % (N=196)	Non-Quality councils % (N=268)
Young people	74%	59%
The elderly	39%	22%
People with disabilities	24%	17%
Gypsies or other travellers	6%	2%
Migrant workers	2%	1%
Ethnic minorities	6%	2%
Other	5%	4%
No engagement reported	22%	39%

Source: Questionnaire

Involvement of Quality councils in partnership working

8.23   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* emphasises that any neighbourhood arrangements must recognise and work in partnership with existing voluntary and community organisations in their area. Such engagement is a prominent characteristic of many Quality councils (table 8.5).

8.24   The majority of Quality councils are formally represented on a wide range of bodies either based within or with a remit that includes the local community. These bodies include organisations and committees to which councils provide financial support, as well as primary school governing bodies to which all local councils have a statutory right of appointment. The majority of Quality councils are represented on school governing bodies, village and community hall committees and crime prevention committees. There is also a high degree of engagement with youth groups, local transport groups and community associations. In general, formal representation on local community and voluntary bodies is more extensive and more common amongst Quality local councils than amongst non-accredited councils, particularly with respect to community associations, local trusts and youth groups.

Table 8.5: Formal representation on local bodies

	Quality councils % (N=187)	Non-Accredited councils % (N=254)
School governing body	62%	57%
Village / community hall committee	59%	68%
Playing field committee	30%	26%
Crime prevention committee	64%	60%
Local transport group	46%	37%
Road safety committee	18%	16%
CAB board	34%	28%
Sports facilities committee	18%	17%
Youth group committee	52%	40%
Local cultural events committee	40%	33%
Local trust	36%	26%
Community association	44%	30%
Other	16%	14%

Source: Questionnaire

8.25   Eighty-percent of all Quality councils are working in partnership with voluntary organisations on specific projects and initiatives within the local community (table 8.6). The most common partners in the voluntary and community sector are residents' associations, sports clubs, other community groups and other voluntary sector bodies. Also common is partnership working with statutory bodies, particularly district councils and the police, is also common. A significant minority of Quality councils are working in partnership with local regeneration groups and chambers of commerce, although there is less scope for this in more rural areas.

8.26   Partnership working is significantly more common amongst Quality councils than it is amongst non-accredited councils. In particular, Quality councils are more likely to be engaged in partnership working with principal local authorities, other local councils, the police, residents associations, community groups and other voluntary sector organisations. The gap between Quality and non-accredited councils in this respect is likely to be understated by the figures in table 8.6, given the lack of response to the questionnaire survey from smaller councils with

unpaid clerks. Such councils are likely to have less capacity to engage in partnership working than councils with paid administrative staff.

Table 8.6: Partnership working across Quality and non-accredited councils

Partner organisations	Quality councils (N=186)	Non-accredited councils (N=247)
County council / unitary authority	31%	22%
District council	42%	29%
Other local council	23%	15%
National Park authority	2%	<1%
Local regeneration group	15%	15%
Regional Development Agency	4%	2%
Environment Agency	9%	5%
Tourist Board	9%	6%
Police	40%	27%
Chamber of trade or commerce	20%	14%
Residents association	24%	10%
Local sports club	24%	12%
Other community group	38%	21%
Other voluntary sector organisation	21%	13%
Private company	10%	4%
Other	13%	10%
No partnership working reported	18%	36%

Source: Questionnaire

Aspirations of Quality council consistent with the Neighbourhoods agenda

8.27   The aspirations of many Quality councils are consistent with the roles envisaged for neighbourhood bodies in *Why Neighbourhoods Matter*. As discussed in Chapter 3 (see paragraph 3.30), most accredited councils applied for Quality status in order to take on more responsibilities in terms of service delivery and to develop their role in terms of community leadership. These aspirations are if anything even more in evidence amongst non-accredited councils currently either preparing to apply for Quality status or intending to apply for Quality status.

The principle of ensuring proportionality in devolution to neighbourhood bodies

8.28   *Why Neighbourhoods Matter* emphasises the importance of any neighbourhood arrangements being balanced between the demands of efficiency and proportionality. Whatever form neighbourhood arrangements make, they should complement and dovetail with – rather than duplicate and conflict with – the arrangements and activities of principal local authorities, other service providers. Where neighbourhood arrangements involve decision-making over local priorities and the use of resources, the arrangements should not be out of proportion to the activities being undertaken.

8.29   For many of the activities envisioned by *Why Neighbourhoods Matter,* existing Quality councils have the potential to provide this balance. As statutory bodies, they are an established

tier through which principal local authorities can consult their communities. The requirements of the accreditation process can provide assurance to principal local authorities that Quality councils in their area are to some degree representative of their community, are open and accountable to local electors, and have robust and transparent financial systems. The extent to which he majority of Quality councils seek out the views and interests of their communities, including those of minority and marginalised groups, are involved in partnership working, and engage in front-line service delivery, is indicative of aspirations consistent with those of the neighbourhoods agenda.

8.30   For this reason, there are calls from both local and national stakeholders for central and local Government to give Quality councils priority status in the delivery of the Neighbourhoods agenda. Priority status would entail principal local authorities being required to grant Quality councils in their area first refusal on opportunities for service devolution.

WE RECOMMEND that Quality local councils should be given priority status in the delivery of the *Neighbourhoods* agenda. When a Quality council exists it should have first refusal on any devolution of functions or authority and any transfer of assets to the community, unless the principal local authority can demonstrate good reason why this should not occur.

WE FURTHER RECOMMEND that ward councillors and principal local authorities should, as part of their efforts to deliver the *Neighbourhoods* agenda, explore ways of encouraging and supporting local councils to seek Quality status.

Chapter 9: Taking the scheme forward

Introduction

9.1   This section of the report discusses the potential for developing the Quality scheme, including potential barriers to its development. There are six areas of discussion:
- Maintenance of Quality standards in the post-accreditation period
- Re-accreditation of existing Quality councils
- Appropriateness of the re-accreditation process
- Procedures for councils losing Quality status
- Expanding participation in the Quality scheme
- Promoting the Quality scheme

In each area of discussion, the review makes recommendations on potential modifications of and changes to the Quality scheme.

Maintenance of Quality standards post-accreditation

Trends and patterns

9.2   The majority of accredited councils have continued to meet most of the Quality criteria in the post-accreditation period. However, at least three quarters (78 per cent) of Quality councils have not maintained criteria in one or more test areas of the Quality benchmark. At least one third have not maintained criteria in two or more of test areas of the Quality benchmark. A small number have not maintained criteria in three test areas of the Quality benchmark. The test areas in which standards have been least-well maintained are communications (Test 4), the annual report (Test 5) and the qualified clerk (Test 1) (see table 9.1).

Table 9.1: Maintenance of Quality Standards

Test Criteria	% Quality councils not meeting criteria
Communication (Test 4)	
Newsletter does not include council details	23%
No newsletter published	4%
Annual report (Test 5)	
Annual report not published by 30 June	16%
Annual report does not include chair's overview	15%
Annual report does not include summary of accounts	7%
No annual report published	0.5%
Qualified clerk (Test 1)	
Clerk does not hold CiLCA or Cert. HE	5%

Source: Questionnaire

9.3   Most commonly, accredited councils have not maintained Quality standards in terms of the requirements for communication (Test 4). Almost all Quality councils publish a regular newsletter, but a significant minority have not maintained at least four issues per year, and nearly a quarter do not include council contact details. Second most commonly, accredited councils have not maintained Quality standards in terms of the requirements for the annual report (Test 5). Only 51 per cent meet all the requirements. One in six councils failed to publish an annual report before the end of June 2006. Of those reports published before the end of

June 2006, 28 per cent did not include all the items specified by the Quality scheme, with a significant minority lacking an overview of council activities prepared by the council chair or a summary of council accounts, or in a couple of cases, both of these items.

9.4   A significant proportion of Quality councils may also have failed to maintain Quality standards in terms of one of the requirements for council meetings (see chapter 5, section 5.2.3). The requirement is for 100 per cent of councillors to attend all ordinary meetings of the council unless there is good reason for absence, in which case apologies must be given and recorded. Responses to the survey suggest that the majority of Quality councils do not regularly have full attendance at meetings, and whilst some absences will be for good reason and therefore permissible in terms of the Quality test, it is likely that a significant minority of Quality councils do not currently meet the criteria

Impact of failure to maintain standards

9.5   Overall, the maintenance of Quality standards following accreditation should inspire a high degree of confidence in the Quality benchmark. Across the majority of the seven Tests, all but a very few Quality councils continue to met the standards they were required to meet at accreditation. All but one Quality council meets the requirement to hold at least six ordinary meetings a year. The majority hold more than six a year. All Quality councils responding to the questionnaire indicated that members had formally adopted the Code of Conduct.

9.6   However, the failure of many councils to maintain standards in terms of communication and the annual report, and the failure of a small number of councils to meet the requirement for a qualified clerk, mar a broadly positive picture and are causes of concern. Although the Quality scheme places no onus on Quality councils to maintain Quality standards post-accreditation, the expectation of key stakeholders is – or at least has been – that standards at accreditation will be maintained throughout the accreditation period. To a limited degree, the concerns of principal local authorities over the four year accreditation cycle and the lack of monitoring arrangements for Quality councils have some grounds.

9.7   The failure of many Quality councils to maintain all Quality standards in the post-accreditation period may also have a detrimental impact on their ability to gain re-accreditation and therefore on rates of re-accreditation.

Barriers to the maintenance of Quality standards

9.8   There may be good reasons for the fall in standards amongst some Quality councils. Given the financial burden of the newsletter element of the communications test, it is likely that the failure of many Quality councils to continue producing a regular newsletter is linked to the high cost of newsletters and the fact that many council newsletters duplicated information already circulated through existing community newsletters (see previous chapter). Shortcomings regarding the annual report are less easy to explain; local and national stakeholders have few suggestions. The lack of qualified clerks in a minority of councils to a large extent reflects the retirement of qualified clerks and the inability of councils to find a replacement clerk with appropriate qualifications.

Potential strategies for assisting maintenance of Quality standards

9.9   Local and national stakeholders, including principal local authorities, have made a number of suggestions regarding strategies for maintaining Quality standards in the period

following accreditation. However, there is considerable disagreement on the practicality and potential impact of such strategies.

- Re-accreditation every year or every two years. This might ensure the maintenance of Quality standards across those councils still participating in the scheme, but it is likely that the majority of councils would refuse to participate in the face of such a requirement. Many County Accreditation Panels would not be able to cope with the workload.
- Yearly or bi-yearly monitoring of all Quality councils across a range of indicators linked to the seven Quality tests. This might be less onerous than yearly or bi-yearly re-accreditation, but would still be too onerous for many councils. Again, it is likely that participation in the scheme would be severely reduced, and it is unclear what form monitoring arrangements might take and what bodies would be responsible for evaluation.
- Spot checks of Quality councils across the country on a random or quota basis for each county, with warnings to those not maintaining standards and re-checking at a later date. This might be carried out by County Accreditation Panels, but it would significantly raise the cost of the Quality scheme and runs the danger of alienating clerks and councillors.
- Councils should be required to commit to the maintenance of Quality standards at first accreditation and all subsequent re-accreditations. This would have the advantage of being consistent with the voluntary ethos of the scheme and involving minimal additional bureaucracy, but would require stakeholders to accept the commitment councils and clerks on grounds of trust alone, which some principal authorities would find hard to accept.
- Relax the requirement for a newsletter. This has been discussed in a previous chapter, and we have made a recommendation that the requirement should be relaxed.

9.10   In considering possible recommendations on this issue, we have sought to reconcile the need for ensuring maintenance of Quality standards in the post-accreditation period with the desirability of avoiding significant additions to the workload of County Accreditation Panels and county associations, whilst also taking into account the voluntary nature of the Quality scheme and the principal of peer-accreditation that is firmly supported by both national and local stakeholders. At the same time, it is clear that principal local authorities and any other partners with which Quality councils might engage must be able to have confidence that Quality status represents a genuine benchmark on minimum standards of professionalism, local democracy and accountability across the whole accreditation period rather than just at the time of accreditation.

WE RECOMMEND that at first accreditation and all subsequent re-accreditations Quality councils agree in writing to maintain Quality standards across each four year accreditation period.

WE FURTHER RECOMMEND that at first and subsequent re-accreditations, councils are required to provide evidence that they have maintained Quality standards in terms of the annual report, the newsletter and council meetings across the preceding accreditation period.

9.11   The appointment of qualified clerks to fill vacancies left by the retirement or resignation of a clerk can present considerable problems for some Quality councils. The shortage of clerks with appropriate qualifications has been noted by the National Training Strategy. There are concerns that the inability to immediately replace a qualified clerk with another qualified clerk could in effect nullify and void the efforts and good intent of councillors who have worked to attain Quality status for their council and wish to maintain it. In the light of this difficulty, it has been suggested that such councils should be granted a period of grace in which to appoint a new qualified clerk without prejudice to their re-attainment of Quality status. It has also been suggested, however, that this period of grace should be accompanied by safeguards. Any recommendation on this issue must balance the requirement to promote confidence in the

Quality benchmark with recognition of the need for a degree of flexibility in exceptional circumstances.

WE RECOMMEND that, assuming all other Quality criteria are met, Quality councils should be re-accredited when a clerk appointed during the last 12 months does not hold CiLCA or the appropriate Certificate of Higher Education if, (a) the previous clerk held either CiLCA or the appropriate Certificate of Higher Education, and, (b) the new clerk is registered for CiLCA or the appropriate Certificate of Higher Education. In such cases, the council would be given 1 year to provide evidence that the clerk has obtained the relevant qualification. If no evidence was provided, the council would lose Quality status.

Re-accreditation of existing Quality councils

Electoral mandate at re-accreditation

9.12   **Proposed criterion.** The Quality scheme proposes that in order to retain Quality status at first and subsequent re-accreditations, a Quality council must have 100 per cent of its seats filled by members who stood for election at the beginning of the current four year term. In line with the electoral mandate at first accreditation, "stood for election" means that members must have been nominated for election and prepared to stand for election whether or not a contested ballot actually took place.

9.13   **Ability of councils to meet criterion.** On current standing, around 85 per cent of the Quality councils that responded to the questionnaire survey would meet the proposed 100 per cent threshold for the electoral mandate at re-accreditation. However, at least 28 of 177 Quality councils for which appropriate data is available would not meet the 100 per cent threshold as their electoral mandates stand at the present time. Given that more than a third of Quality councils did not respond to the questionnaire survey on which this analysis is based, it is highly probable that a further 10, and quite possible that a further 15 or more councils do not currently meet the higher threshold. Furthermore, as table 9.3 indicates, only around three-quarters of Quality councils have completely filled their seats through election at the last two elections. This suggests that a significant minority of Quality councils do not have a consistent record in attracting candidates and would be vulnerable to failing to meet a 100 per cent threshold. However, at least nine in ten Quality councils appear to be able to consistently meet an 80 per cent threshold for elected members.

Table 9.3: Proportion of council seats filled by election for Quality councils over two electoral cycles.

% of council seats filled through election	Number of councils	
100% in both elections	124	77.0%
100% in one election, more than 80% in other election	19	11.8%
More than 80% but less than 100% in both elections	5	3.1%
Total at least 80% in both elections	**148**	**91.9%**
100% in one election, less than 80% in other election	10	6.2%
More than 80% in one election, less than 80% in other	1	0.6%
Less than 80% in both elections	2	1.2%

Source: Questionnaire. NB: Data is for 161 councils (85 warded, 76 unwarded).

9.14   Quality councils face the same barriers to meeting the 100 per cent electoral mandate as non-accredited councils face in terms of the 80 per cent electoral mandate (see Chapter 3). In summary, these are lack of interest from the local electorate, exacerbated by local

contingencies such as 'over large' councils and the practices and attitudes of councils regarding the value and cost of elections. Councils might address shortfalls through the strategies outlined in Chapter 5.

9.15   **Appropriateness of proposed criterion.** There is significant opposition from local councils and local stakeholders to the 100 per cent electoral mandate at first and subsequent re-accreditations, on the grounds that it would be hard to maintain and would also discourage take-up of the scheme. Councils confident of meeting the 80 per cent mandate are not necessarily confident of meeting the 100 per cent mandate, and would not want the expense and embarrassment of attaining Quality status only to lose it at first re-accreditation. Of those councils who indicated that they are definitely not intending to apply for Quality status, 14 per cent indicated that one reason was the unlikelihood of the council meeting the electoral mandate at re-accreditation.

9.16   Analysis of the last two sets of elections suggests that no more than three-quarters of current Quality Councils consistently fill 100 per cent of seats through election and therefore could be confident of consistently meeting a 100 per cent electoral mandate threshold. In comparison, over 90 per cent of current Quality Councils have filled more than 80 per cent of seats through election on the last two occasions and could therefore be confident of consistently meeting an 80 per cent electoral mandate threshold.

9.17   **Conclusions and recommendations.** It is evident that a high proportion of Quality councils could meet a higher electoral mandate at re-accreditation. However, a substantial minority could not, and there are barriers to them doing so. There is strong opposition to the higher mandate, and it is likely that a higher mandate would impact negatively on both accreditation and re-accreditation. Consequently, we are not minded to recommend that the electoral mandate at re-accreditation should be any more of a hurdle than the electoral mandate at first accreditation.

WE RECOMMEND that the electoral mandate at re-accreditation remain the same as the electoral mandate at first accreditation, with the criteria being that at the time the council applies for accreditation no more than 20 per cent of council seats are either vacant or occupied by co-opted members.

Projected rates of re-accreditation

9.18   On current evidence, stakeholders can be confident of high rates of applications for re-accreditation from existing Quality councils. The majority of Quality councils responding to the questionnaire survey indicated that they would be seeking re-accreditation for Quality status. Only four indicated that they would not be seeking re-accreditation. Reasons for disengagement from Quality scheme included lack of support from the principal local authority, unwillingness of the clerk to meet the demands of the scheme, and a perception that the scheme was irrelevant to the council.

9.19   Of those who are unsure, almost three quarters have had Quality status for less than 18 months, and one fifth for less than a year. There are no strong patterns and trends regarding size, location, or other relevant variables, although the majority – all but four – represent electorates of fewer than 10,000.

9.20   As noted above, the failure of many Quality councils to maintain all Quality standards in the post-accreditation period may have a detrimental impact on their ability to gain re-accreditation.

Appropriateness of initial accreditation criteria for re-accreditation

9.21   The majority of local and national stakeholders feel that the majority of the initial accreditation criteria should be included as criteria at first and subsequent re-accreditations, but with the qualifications and modifications discussed in Chapter 5.

WE RECOMMEND that the initial accreditation criteria should be included with as criteria at first and subsequent re-accreditations, but with the qualifications and modifications discussed in Chapter 5.

Potential revisions of the Quality scheme

9.22   One national stakeholder and some principal authorities have suggested wholesale revisions of the Quality scheme, on the basis that these would enable the Quality scheme to take more account of the diversity of capacities and aspirations within the local council sector. In particular, it has been argued that the Quality scheme should be revised in order to recognise those councils that exceed the current requirements of Quality status and challenge other councils to do more than reach a minimum benchmark of performance.

- The Young Foundation has suggested that the Quality scheme should differentiate between Quality Democracy Status, Quality Administration Status and Community Power Status.[17] Quality Democracy Status would give councils democratic standing in respect to local government and other partners; Quality Administration Status would be a minimum basis for the delegation of significant service responsibilities; Community Power Status would confer power to demand greater involvement in service delivery. Councils could apply for one or more of the awards.
- A small number of principal local authorities have suggested that the Quality scheme should offer a 'Quality plus' award or similar that councils could gain at any point during first or subsequent re-accreditation periods for outstanding performance in particular spheres.

9.23 In considering these radical proposals, we have born in mind the embryonic nature of the Quality scheme, and, in particular, the views expressed by NALC and other key stakeholders regarding the potential impact of major changes to the scheme this soon after its launch. Key stakeholders take the view that the Quality scheme needs more time to develop before any major changes are made. Fundamental changes run the danger of undermining the benchmark achieved by existing Quality councils and deterring councils from applying for first accreditation or re-accreditation. NALC has pointed out that the scheme in its current form sets a realistic benchmark standard that all councils have the potential to achieve, irrespective of size, location or other circumstances. Responses to the questionnaire survey, and to the consultation on the Quality scheme undertaken by NALC prior to this current review, suggests that the majority of Quality councils, although not all, endorse this view.

9.24 At present, the Quality scheme reflects the principle of Quality status serving as a single benchmark for all councils that has the potential to send a clear message to principal local authorities and other partner bodies that a local council meets certain minimum standards across a range of criteria. The introduction of tiered Quality criteria would represent a significant departure from this principle. There is certainly potential for the differentiation of Quality Democracy Status, Quality Administration Status and Community Power Status, and / or the introduction of a 'Quality Plus' benchmark, to generate more interest in the Quality scheme, at least in the short term. However, it would create a further burden of interpretation

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[17] *Local Democracy and Neighbourhood Governance*, The Young Foundation, May 2006

both for local councils and for principal authorities and other potential partners. It would also create a very real risk of undermining the existing Quality benchmark in the eyes of accredited councils, non-accredited councils considering participation in the Quality scheme, and principal local authorities. For these reasons, we are not minded to recommend that there should be any substantial revisions to the Quality scheme at this time.

WE RECOMMEND that the Quality scheme remains as it was originally envisaged, with a single benchmark of "Quality status" attainable by all parish and town councils.

Appropriateness of the re-accreditation process

9.25   Applications for re-accreditation can be made in the three months following the end of the first accreditation period and each subsequent re-accreditation period. Councils can not apply for re-accreditation before the four-year period expires. If an accredited council does not seek re-accreditation within the three months following the four-year accreditation period, it will lose Quality status. If a council is not re-accredited during this three-month period, it will lose Quality status from the date of notification. Applications for re-accreditation will be assessed by County Accreditation Panels, as at first accreditation.

9.26   There is widespread support from both local and national stakeholders for councils to be re-accredited by County Accreditation Panels in the same manner that they were first accredited. This would ensure that Quality status remained as a peer-reviewed benchmark embedded within the sector. However, stakeholders also feel that the scrutiny and procedures of different County Accreditation Panels needs to be made more consistent, in line with the issues discussed in Chapter 6. In particular, there are concerns that Panels might take longer than three months to scrutinize applications, resulting in councils failing to gain re-accreditation through no fault of their own and being required to go through an additional four-year 'first accreditation' period. This would be a particular problem if councils were required to re-submit applications for re-accreditation.

WE RECOMMEND that first and subsequent re-accreditations should be undertaken by County Accreditation Panels in line with the recommendations made previously.

WE FURTHER RECOMMEND that Panels should endeavour to scrutinise applications for re-accreditation within two months of receipt, and that if failure to re-accredit results from a Panel being unable to do this, Quality status should be extended accordingly until the Panel has scrutinised the application .

Procedures for councils losing Quality status

9.27   It is likely that some existing Quality councils will lose Quality status, either because they decide not to seek re-accreditation or because their application for re-accreditation is refused. Loss of Quality status has implications for any arrangements the council may have made with partner organisations, including principal local authorities, based on the council demonstrating that it reached the Quality benchmark. Partner organisations may wish to review these arrangements with a view to changing them. At present, the extent to which losing Quality status will have a detrimental impact on the ability to continue with arrangements for devolved service delivery or representation on LSPs is at the discretion of the principal local authority.

9.28   We suggest that it is appropriate for the impact of losing Quality status to be at the discretion of partner bodies. However, there is a need to ensure that when Quality councils fail to gain re-accreditation or do not seek re-accreditation, there are clear procedures in place to

ensure that the loss of Quality status is evident and transparent. Otherwise, there is a danger that the benchmark could be undermined. Principal authorities suggest that councils that lose Quality status should be required to inform any partner organisation with which they have an agreement based on the council having Quality status. There are suggestions from stakeholders that the loss of Quality status should generate action by County Accreditation Panels. This action would comprise a letter to councils that confirmed loss of Quality status advised them that they were no longer entitled to display the Quality logo, and instructed them to inform any partner bodies with whom arrangements were based on the council having Quality status.

WE RECOMMEND that councils that lose Quality status should be required to inform any partner organisation with which they have an agreement based on the council having Quality status.

WE FURTHER RECOMMEND that on loss of Quality status, County Accreditation Panels should write to councils confirming loss of Quality status and instructing them to, (a) no longer display the Quality logo, and, (b) inform any partner bodies with whom arrangements were based on the council having Quality status.

9.29   National and local stakeholders made a number of suggestions regarding incentives to encourage Quality councils to seek re-accreditation. All of these suggested incentives have been equally applicable to councils not yet accredited by the Quality scheme. For this reason, they have been discussed at appropriate junctures throughout the course of this report.

Expanding participation in the Quality scheme

Future take-up of the Quality scheme by non-accredited councils

9.30   Future take-up of the Quality scheme by non-accredited councils is as yet unclear. The National Association of Local Councils has calculated that up to 900 non-accredited councils are currently preparing to apply for Quality status. This calculation is based on the 900 current registrations for the CiLCA qualification. However, registrations for CiLCA are not necessarily evidence of interest in Quality status; the National Training Strategy markets CiLCA both as a requirement for councils wishing to attain Quality status and as a stand-alone qualification which will benefit both clerks and their council irrespective of whether or not they hold Quality status.

9.31   The questionnaire survey suggests an even higher rate of future take-up, with close to half of responding non-accredited councils indicating that they are intending to apply for Quality status. Extrapolation of this figure to the 8966+ local councils in England would suggest that up to 4,200 councils are intending to apply. However, it may well be that the questionnaire has generated responses largely from councils with some interest in the Quality scheme, in which case the data are likely to significantly over-estimate future take-up of the scheme. This interpretation of the profile of councils responding to the questionnaire is confirmed by the number of questionnaires returned uncompleted but with comments to the effect that councils are uninterested in the Quality scheme.

9.32   Predictions of future take-up vary significantly between different counties. Approximately half of the twelve county associations contacted for this review suggested that take-up of the Quality scheme in their area had already peaked and was now falling. The other half suggested that take-up had been slow in the early years of the scheme but was now increasing.

9.33   Future take-up will be influenced by both the ability of non-accredited councils to meet the various Quality criteria and their interest in gaining Quality status. As Chapter five

discussed, there are significant barriers to many non-accredited councils gaining Quality status. The majority of non-accredited councils would have to make changes to meet all the Quality criteria (see table 9.4). In many cases these changes are relatively minor. In other cases they are more major and present a significant challenge.

Table 9.4: Most common changes required for non-Quality councils to gain Quality status

Change required	% councils
Existing clerk gaining CiLCA qualification	77
Ensuring that 80% of councillors have stood for election	16
Producing council newsletter at least 4 times per year	53
Providing synopsis of annual report to local people	33
Producing and making available to local people annual report of the council by 30 June	31
Appointing clerk with CiLCA qualification	20
Encouraging all councillors to attend council meetings or to give reasons for absence	12
Including contact details of councillors and clerk in newsletter	12

Source: Questionnaire. N=233.

9.34   As discussed earlier in this report, perhaps the most significant challenges are the qualified clerk and the electoral mandate. Of those non-accredited councils that responded to the questionnaire, 77 per cent employ a clerk who holds neither of the qualifications necessary for their council to gain Quality status. Although there are currently 900 registrations for CiLCA, a significant minority of clerks who hold neither of the appropriate qualifications are reluctant to work towards further qualifications. Responses to the questionnaire survey indicate that for nearly one in ten non-accredited councils, the qualified clerk criterion could only be met by appointing a new clerk. Although only 16 per cent of non-accredited councils responding to the survey would have to make changes in order to meet the 80 per cent electoral mandate, it is likely that this figure significantly underestimates the actual number of councils who do not meet the mandate as smaller councils are under-represented in our survey. Data on the 1998-2000 electoral cycle suggests that across the country the proportion is significantly higher (see chapter 5). Addressing these issues presents a long-term challenge for both local councils and stakeholders.

9.35   Feedback from clerks and local stakeholders suggests that the attitude of clerks and councillors, as well as any absolute determinants of ability to meet Quality criteria, have a key influence on both interest in Quality status and anticipation of the challenges it might bring. Given this, it is likely that future take-up will be highly contingent on the extent to which non-accredited councils feel that the scheme offers sufficient incentives to make it worthwhile gaining Quality status. As discussed in chapter 3, a significant number of non-accredited councils do not feel that Quality status would bring them any tangible benefits. Consequently, they are not minded to consider participation in the Quality scheme. This includes not only councils for whom achieving Quality status would be a significant challenge, but also councils that already meet all of most of the Quality criteria, including some of those currently subject to the Best Value regime. Emphasising the reported benefits of Quality status and increasing the likely benefits of Quality status are vital if such attitudes are to change.

Adequacy of incentives for participation in QPTC scheme

9.36   At present, many non-accredited councils perceive few obvious incentives for participation in the Quality scheme. Almost one third (32%) of unaccredited councils feel that

the Quality scheme would not benefit their council. Perceived lack of benefits and incentives is particularly common amongst smaller councils (see table 9.5), but not restricted to them. The frequency of these perceptions amongst non-accredited councils will undoubtedly significantly inhibit future take-up of the Quality scheme.

Table 9.5: Non-accredited councils indicating that Quality status would be of no benefit to their council

Council electorate	% Councils
20,000+	14%
15,000 – 19,999	17%
10,000 – 14,999	34%
5,000 – 9,999	23%
1,000 – 4,999	28%
<1,000	63%
TOTAL	32%

Source: Questionnaire. N=233.

9.37   Two thirds of non-accredited councils would like the Quality scheme to offer additional incentives for participation. Of those non-accredited councils currently not intending to participate in the Quality scheme, 15 per cent suggest that additional incentives would make them more likely to consider applying for Quality status.

9.38   Recommendations on suggested additional incentives for participation have been made throughout this report. Recommendations on further promotion of the Quality scheme are made in the last section of this chapter.

Encouraging and supporting participation by smaller councils

9.39   Some stakeholders suggest that participation in the Quality scheme might be encouraged if Quality status could be awarded to grouped or clustered councils. Smaller councils could combine resources, including a shared clerk, to meet standards that they would not be able to meet individually. However, the principle of a single Quality award for multiple councils is inconsistent with the aim of the Quality scheme to develop the capacity of all councils. Moreover, feedback from other stakeholders suggests that it would create insoluble practical difficulties regarding demarcation of responsibilities for capacity building.

9.40   A report on local council clustering produced by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) indicates that resource-sharing amongst smaller councils is likely to increase their likelihood of gaining Quality status.[18] The report makes a number of recommendations regarding resource sharing, including increased promotion of training for clerks, increased promotion of the benefits of shared clerks, the development of bespoke training for clerks employed by more than one council, the development of training on Grouping Orders, and the creation of incentives for inter-council co-operation within rural regeneration programmes.

We endorse the recommendations of the LGIU report. WE FURTHER RECOMMEND that future guidance on the Quality scheme highlights the potential value of clustering for councils interested in gaining Quality status.

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[18] Jones, A., Newman, I., *Parish and town council clustering*, Local Government Information Unit, June 2006

Future promotion of the Quality scheme

Existing promotion of the Quality scheme

9.41   There has been extensive promotion of the Quality scheme by both national and local stakeholders. This has largely focused on promotion to the local council sector, but to a limited degree has included a focus on local authorities. Marketing and promotion have been driven by NALC and SLCC, with support from Defra. The promotion has been very successful in raising awareness of the scheme, with only 1 per cent of the non-accredited councils contacted for this research indicating that they were not aware of the Quality scheme.

9.42   The Quality scheme was launched by the Minister for Rural Affairs in March 2003 at a national seminar organised by NALC. A press release from ODPM outlined the scheme and featured positive comments from the Minister for Local Government and representatives of NALC and the LGA. ODPM sent letters announcing the launch of the scheme along with two leaflets outlining the aims of the scheme and the seven Quality criteria to the chief executives of all county and district councils in England. The letter encouraged local authorities to examine their arrangements with parish and town councils in the light of the Quality scheme. Letters also went out to a selection of local councils. Since the launch of the scheme, Defra have been involved with direct marketing through the provision of an exhibition stand, staff and marketing brochures at national and regional conferences of SLCC and NALC.

9.43   National stakeholders have produced detailed written information and guidance on the Quality scheme for local councils. In June 2003, following consultation with NALC, SLCC, the LGA, Defra and the Countryside Agency, ODPM launched a document outlining the aims and context of the scheme, details of Quality criteria and advice on charters and financial arrangements for partnership working. Subsequently, the Countryside Agency, again in consultation with key stakeholders, produced updated guidance on the Quality scheme and the route to accreditation. This publication duplicated much of the original guidance from ODPM, but also included more detailed guidance on the accreditation process, advice on how to meet the different criteria, and case studies of several councils that had obtained Quality status.

9.44   Web-based information and guidance on the Quality scheme is offered by NALC, Defra and the Countryside Agency. The most comprehensive web-based resources are provided by NALC, with the NALC website featuring a dedicated area for the Quality scheme. This area includes details of the scheme, answers to frequently asked questions, and a section on the benefits of the scheme to councils, communities and local authorities. The latter includes positive comments from Quality councils. The area also contains links to the National Training Strategy and information and guidance on the CiLCA qualification. The websites of both Defra and the Countryside Agency offer access to publications on the Quality scheme.

9.45   Promotion of the Quality scheme at a regional level has recently been facilitated and enhanced through the deployment of part-time NALC Regional Development Officers. Officers work with the relevant county associations in their region to support the promotion and implementation of the Quality scheme, and where necessary and appropriate provide liaison with statutory and representative bodies including Regional Development Agencies and offices of the Commission for Rural Communities and the Local Government Association. The work of Regional Development Offices has been widely welcomed by county associations as providing a further tier of support for delivery of the Quality scheme. Regional Development Officers have been funded by Defra through its Rural Social and Community Programme.

9.46   Promotion of the Quality scheme at the local level varies between counties. The majority of county associations feature information about the Quality scheme on their websites. Many

also feature links to further information and guidance either within the CALC site or on other sites. Some county associations also promote the scheme through a range of initiatives intended to raise awareness of the scheme, challenge inaccurate perceptions of the scheme, and encourage councils to consider applying for Quality status (see box). A number of CALCs are currently trialling a range of pilot projects funded by Defra via NALC. These promotional projects, which are currently in the process of final reporting to NALC, focus on innovation and potential for emulation, and are likely to present models of practice that national stakeholders could promote. Initiatives include promotional events based in centres of population and outreach activities directed towards councils in more remote locations.

Good practice: promoting the quality scheme

Many county associations and county accreditation panels promote the Quality scheme by organising local events celebrating councils that have achieved Quality status. If possible, certificates for new Quality councils are awarded at ceremonies attended by other local councils, members of the principal local authority and other civic dignitaries. Ceremonies are reported in the local press.

The events help to promote the scheme to local councils, principal local authorities and the wider public. Such events also give non-accredited councils the opportunity to ask Quality councils about their experience of applying for Quality status.

9.47   In addition to the work of county associations, there is also some indirect promotion of the scheme by individual councils, councillors and clerks. Initiatives often entail clerks and councillors from accredited councils offering advice and information to non-accredited councils, either on a group or one-to-one basis. In some cases, clerks to Quality councils are acting as paid or unpaid consultants to non-accredited councils wishing to gain Quality status.

Adequacy and appropriateness of promotional activities and material

9.48   There is significant variation in the relative impact of different promotional activities (table 9.6). In terms of the routes through which councils first become aware of the Quality scheme, the most effective promotional body is NALC. Defra and the SLCC have also had a significant impact on raising awareness, largely through formal publications. Oral presentations at training or briefing events are also important. CALCs play a minor but significant role. The impact of the letter sent out by the Minister for Rural Affairs at the launch of the Quality scheme and a further letter sent out in March 2005 has been considerable. The impact of web-based resources on awareness is minimal. Councils also emphasise the importance of becoming aware of the Quality scheme as a result of contact with other councillors and clerks with knowledge of the scheme.

9.49   When councils have required further information and guidance on the Quality scheme, they are most likely to have contacted their county association, although only a minority indicate that they have done so (table 9.7). At this secondary stage of more active interest and information-gathering, councils also turn to the websites of national and local stakeholder, with NALC being the most popular.

Table 9.6: Routes through which councils have become aware of the Quality scheme

	Quality councils (N=190)	Non-accredited councils (N=250)
Written communication from NALC	61%	66%
Letter from Minister	58%	55%
Defra publication	43%	39%
Written communication from SLCC	41%	38%
Oral presentation at training or briefing event	34%	36%
Written communication from CALC	26%	19%
Exhibition at conference of SLCC or NALC	13%	10%
SLCC website	9%	10%
Defra website	7%	6%
NALC website	7%	9%
CALC website	4%	3%
Other	9%	8%

Source: Questionnaire

Table 9.7: Routes to further information and guidance on the Quality scheme

	% Quality councils (N=193)	% Non-accredited councils (N=256)
Contacted CALC	27%	29%
Looked at NALC website	23%	13%
Looked on SLCC website	18%	9%
Looked on CALC website	17%	10%
Looked on Defra website	15%	9%
Contacted NALC	12%	10%
Contacted SLCC	11%	8%
Contacted Defra	2%	2%
Other	5%	7%
No further information sought	51%	48%

Source: Questionnaire

9.50   On the whole, the materials used to promote the Quality scheme have been well-received by their end-users. Nine out of ten clerks responding to the questionnaire survey indicated that the information and guidance received by their council was adequate. However, a large proportion of councils suggest that the information and guidance on the Quality scheme could be improved through the inclusion of more details of the scheme (table 9.8). In particular, councils want more details of the objectives, benefits and requirements of the scheme. Many councils also want information and guidance to be made clearer. There is particular emphasis on the need for better information regarding the benefits of the scheme.

Table 9.8: Suggested improvements to information and guidance on the Quality scheme, Quality and non-accredited councils

Suggested improvements	Quality councils (N=182)	Non-Quality councils (N=244)
More information on:		
Objectives of the scheme	29%	28%
Benefits of the scheme	61%	52%
Requirements of the scheme	15%	20%
Clearer information on:		
Objectives of the scheme	23%	30%
Benefits of the scheme	53%	44%
Requirements of the scheme	20%	22%

Source: Questionnaire

WE RECOMMEND that any new information and guidance on the Quality scheme should emphasise the key reported benefits of Quality status indicated in chapter three of this report, and that stakeholders should consider modifying existing information and guidance to incorporate reference to these benefits.

9.51   Feedback from local stakeholders suggests that many councillors and council clerks find the information and guidance included in *A guide to becoming a Quality council*, published by the Countryside Agency in 2004, more user-friendly than the original guidance published by ODPM in 2003.[19] In particular, councils value the colour format, the 'sign-posting' of particular issues throughout the document, and the use of case studies from councils of varying size. In contrast, some councils find the mono-colour of the ODPM publication unattractive, whilst the lack of signposting has led to confusion.

WE RECOMMEND that *A guide to becoming a Quality council* should serve as a model for the publication of any new guidance on the Quality scheme.

Suggested improvements to information and guidance on the scheme

9.52   Clerks and other local stakeholders have made several suggestions for improvements to information and guidance on the Quality scheme.

9.53   Local and national stakeholders suggest that promotional strategies need to pay more attention to councils in remote areas. More rural councils are likely to find promotional events based in urban centres unattractive because of the requirement to travel and incur significant expense in terms of both time and money. Web-based promotion may be a means of reaching out to some more remote councils, but in many cases is not an appropriate means of promotion. Many smaller councils and councils in remote rural localities lack access to broadband internet and may have no access to internet at all. Further, printing out web-based material can generate significant expense in terms of stationery and IT consumables. This is a particular problem for voluntary clerks and clerks who provide their own computer.

9.54   Local and national stakeholders suggest that promotion to more remote councils should focus on encouraging outreach activities and bi-lateral exchange. Such bottom-up dissemination of information and guidance on the Quality scheme would also help to more firmly embed the scheme within the local council sector. The box below features an example of good

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[19] *The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme: The Quality Scheme Explained,* Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, June 2003

practice from a county association serving many small rural councils that other county associations in similar circumstances might emulate.

Good practice: local promotion of the Quality scheme

Suffolk Association of Local Councils has initiated a programme of regular "Quality lunches" to help promote the Quality scheme. SALC provides a free lunch in conjunction with an advisory session for clerks from councils initially considering or in the first stages of preparing for Quality status. Sessions last for half a day and are organised on an out-reach basis to reduce costs for participating councils

Feedback indicates that following lunches 75% of participating clerks feel that their council is now "in a better position to go for Quality status". Over the last year there have been 11 Quality Lunches attracting a total of 70 councils, many of them small councils in relatively remote locations.

9.55   Reliance on NALC and county associations to promote the scheme means that local councils without membership of a county association are not reached by promotional activities. County Training Partnerships tend to rely on lists of councils supplied by county association secretaries, which means that such lists frequently do no included non-affiliated councils. There has been criticism from some non-affiliated councils of the prominent role given to county associations in the delivery of the Quality scheme at the local level. However, research undertaken by the University of Gloucestershire indicates that the majority of councils are members of a county association.[20] In most counties, membership is likely to be between 85 per cent and 95 per cent; the lowest membership is likely to be 75 per cent. It is therefore our view that county associations, in partnership with Regional Development Officers, remain appropriate and effective bodies for promotion of the scheme at the local scale.

9.56   However, it is clear that county associations vary enormously in their ability to promote the Quality scheme to local councils, reflecting differences in the uptake of funding for promotional activities provided by Defra and the Countryside Agency. Some county associations employ dedicated staff, either full- or part-time, to promote the scheme. However, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. For the majority, any promotional activity is undertaken by ordinary staff. Some of the county associations contacted for this report indicated that promoting the Quality scheme had led to considerable increases in workload, which in some cases had generated tension within the organisation. Several associations have increased membership fees in order to support promotion of the Quality scheme. In some cases, this has drawn strong criticism from non-accredited local councils who feel that it is an inappropriate and partisan use of resources generated through membership fees.

9.57   In large part this variation is a function of differences in staffing and financial resources. It is also a reflection on overall levels of activity and performance relative to resources. Some associations rely almost entirely on membership fees, whilst others draw down substantial funding from their principal local authorities, and, to a lesser extent, from Government Offices for the Regions. There is also considerable variation in the types and levels of practical support given to county associations from principal local authorities.[21] Consequently, whist we highlight the use of dedicated staff or staff with dedicated time for promotion of the Quality scheme as

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[20] Howes, L., 'What makes a successful CALC?' Preliminary report on survey data collected for the Commission for Rural Communities, *Mimeo*, University of Gloucestershire, August 2006.

[21] Ibid; Howes, L. and Skinner, E., *The needs of county associations of parish and town councils in their support of the New Ethical Framework (NEF): A report to the Standards Board for England*, September 2004

good practice (see box), it is clear that not all county associations will have the resources to follow this practice.

Good practice: promoting the Quality scheme

Staffordshire Parish Councils Association is in the process of recruiting a full-time Quality Training Officer. The Officer will promote the Quality scheme and offer advice and training through the County Training Partnership. This post replaces an earlier part-time training officer supported by grants from the County Training Partnership. Funding for the scheme has come from Defra's Social and Community Fund via the Government Office for the West Midlands.

9.58   As previous chapters have indicated, there is a clear need for further promotion of the Quality scheme to local authorities. At the strategic level, the appropriate bodies for promotional activities are NALC and the LGA. At a local level, the appropriate bodies are county associations. County associations can build on existing linkages with local authority officers. In many areas, there is significant potential for greater convergence between capacity building across the local council sector being undertaken in partnership with principal authorities and the mainstreaming of the Quality scheme within principal authorities (an example of where such convergence has occurred is given in the box below).

Good practice : mainstreaming the Quality scheme in local authorities

The Isle of Wight County Council has committed itself to what it terms "an ambitious mandate" for double devolution. Integral to this agenda is active endorsement of and support for Quality councils; the county council views the Quality scheme as a "key mechanism" for the devolution of services to local councils.

In order to facilitate service devolution, the county council has appointed a Cabinet Member for Parish and Town Council Empowerment, created a Parish and Community Development Team and a Parish Task Group, organised surveys and workshops to improve working relationships between the tiers, and developed a number of initiatives to enable and encourage enhanced partnerships working. Several of these initiatives have been specifically engineered to support the Quality scheme.

The council subsidises the cost of councils whose clerks are working towards CiLCA and will meet the costs of all contested elections. Whilst councils do not have to be working towards Quality status to be eligible for this support, the support is aimed at removing barriers to Quality status.

The county council has sought to make Quality status financially attractive to local councils through its Parish Award Scheme, which offers monetary awards for innovative community projects that "contribute to the targets of the Local Area Agreement, Local Public Service Agreements and/or the priorities of the IW council." Quality councils automatically qualify for grant-funding of up to £5,000. Non-accredited councils are eligible for funding only if they can demonstrate that they are actively seeking Quality status. The level of funding is contingent on to what extent a councils meets the Quality scheme criteria.

9.59   Some local stakeholders have called for the creation of promotional material aimed specifically at principal local authorities. Although the guidance published by ODPM and the Countryside Agency emphasises the importance of local authorities participating in the Quality

scheme, it is generally geared towards the needs of local councillors and council clerks. A substantial number of local authorities exhibit low awareness of the Quality scheme, indicating the need for further promotion. Some principal authorities indicate that they would welcome bespoke material that set out in more detail the benefits of the Quality scheme for local authorities, and ways in which local authorities could engage more proactively with the scheme. Such material should highlight examples of good practice on which principal authorities and county associations could build.

WE RECOMMEND that the LGA and NALC, in consultation with DCLG, should produce a bespoke publication on the Quality scheme for distribution to local authorities. The document should emphasise the value of the scheme as a benchmarking exercise, and include examples of good practice that could be emulated.

Annex A: List of interviews

Interviews were conducted with the following bodies:

Local authorities
Cumbria County Council
Devon County Council
Essex County Council
Hampshire County Council
Isle of Wight County Council
North Yorkshire County Council
Staffordshire County Council
Derbyshire High Peak District Council
East Devon District Council
Eden District Council
Essex Braintree District Council
New Forest District Council
Bradford Metropolitan District Council
East Riding of Yorkshire Council

Associations of local councils
Cumbria Association of Local Councils
Devon Association of Parish Councils
East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire Local Councils Association Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils
Norfolk County Association of Parish and Town Councils
Staffordshire Parish Councils Association
Isle of Wight Association of Parish and Town Councils
Suffolk Association of Local Councils
Essex Association of Local Councils
Redcar and Cleveland Association of Local Councils
Northamptonshire Association of Local Councils
Yorkshire Association of Local Councils

County Accreditation Panels
Cheshire County Accreditation Panel
Cumbria County Accreditation Panel
Derbyshire County Accreditation Panel
Devon County Accreditation Panel
Essex County Accreditation Panel
Hampshire County Accreditation Panel
Isle of Wight County Accreditation Panel
Lincolnshire County Accreditation Panel
Suffolk County Accreditation Panel
Shropshire County Accreditation Panel
Staffordshire County Accreditation Panel

National stakeholders
Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)
Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)

Local Government Association (LGA)
Countryside Agency (CA)
Action for Rural Communities in England (ACRE)

Annex B: Case studies

Summary of case studies:

Isle of Wight
The Isle of Wight is a unitary authority with county status serving a population of 132,863. Eighty-six percent of the population live in areas classified as rural. Three quarters of the island is parished. Of the five areas that are not parished, three have petitioned for the creation of a parish council and the remaining two are in the process of raising petitions. There are currently twenty-seven parish and town councils, of which 6 have achieved Quality status. Take-up of the Quality scheme (22.2%) is higher than in any other local authority. It is widely acknowledged that until recently the relationship between the county council and local councils was poor. Since 2005, when leadership of the county council switched from Liberal Democrat to Conservative, the relationship has rapidly improved. The county council is actively supporting the complete emparishment of the island, wants all councils to have attained Quality status by 2010, and views the Quality scheme as a key mechanism for the devolution of services.

Bradford Metropolitan District Council
Bradford Metropolitan District Council is a unitary authority serving a metropolitan district which includes the city of Bradford, urban fringe, large market towns, accessible urban areas and some remote settlements. The total population is 467,306, of which close to 13% lives in areas classified as rural. The majority of the area is not parished. There are currently thirteen parish and town councils, five more than in 2000, and ten communities are petitioning for the creation of parish councils. The majority of the councils are in rural areas, but the five newest are urban. One council has attained Quality status and three are in various stages of preparing to apply. Historically, the relationship between Bradford MDC and local councils was poor. However, since 2002, following a crisis precipitated by a dispute over funding, the relationship has improved. The MBC has developed support and liaison mechanisms for parish and town councils and included parish and town councils in its rural regeneration strategy and its bid for Beacon status. It is the only urban authority to have been granted Beacon status for its approach to rural services, and the arrangements have been used as a model of good practice for 'rural proofing' by the Countryside Agency, Defra, and the LGA.

Essex Association of Local Councils
Essex Association of Local Councils covers 97% of the 270 local councils in the county of Essex. Essex has 29 Quality councils, representing just over 10% of the total number of local councils. In 2005, the Association appointed a part-time employee to work solely on promoting and supporting the Quality scheme. Essex Association of Local Councils has as annual budget of £134,000, funded largely through membership fees but also through an annual grant from Essex County Council. It has also received funding from the Rural Renaissance investment programme run by the East of England Development Agency, including £2,000 for supporting the Quality scheme, and from the Awards for All fund of the National Lottery. The Association is part of the Essex Training Partnership and represented on a range of other county and regional partnerships.

Blakelaw & North Fenham Parish Council
Blakelaw and North Fenham Parish Council is situated on the north-west edge of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne and serves a population of 6,468. It covers approximately four-fifths of Blakelaw ward and the northern quarter of Fenham ward. Blakelaw has been classified as being amongst the 10% most deprived wards in England according to the 2006 Index of Multiple Deprivation, and is a Health Action Zone. Blakelaw and North Fenham Parish Council was created in April 2001, in the face of opposition from the city council, following a petition raised

by local residents. Of the six parish councils in Newcastle upon Tyne, it is the only council not to have been established outside the city boundaries, the only council not to have a clerk provided by the city council and the only council to have attained Quality status. The council achieved Quality status in January 2006. It is also the only local council in England to currently hold a Charter Mark for service delivery. The council is actively represented on other local bodies, and has won an award for Community Empowerment from the Commission for Rural Communities. There are ten members, which will rise to twelve in 2007. The budget for 2006-7 is £52,026.

Marchwood Parish Council

Marchwood Parish Council is situated in the New Forest District of Hampshire. It serves a population of 5667 and covers an area defined as largely 'town and fringe – less sparse' according to the revised rural-urban classification. The council has eleven seats and employs a full-time clerk. It is responsible for the maintenance of extensive open spaces, and has recently taken on additional responsibilities delegated by New Forest District Council. Marchwood council is represented on more than twenty local organisations, and has a particular focus on engagement with young people through local youth groups and schools. Its website won first prize in its category at the 2005 Hants Web Awards. The precept for 2006-7 is £182,473.

Stoke Gifford Parish Council

Stoke Gifford Parish Council is situated in South Gloucestershire (a unitary authority) and serves a population of 10,951 in an area defined as 'urban – less sparse' according to the revised rural-urban classification. The council has ten members serving three wards. The council applied for Quality status in 2004. When the application was turned down, the council appealed against the decision of the Panel, but the decision remained unchanged. The council has decided not to re-apply for Quality status.

Annex C: Written submissions

Written submissions were received from the following councils:

Blakelaw & North Fenham Parish Council, Newcastle-upon-Tyne
Boxley Parish Council, Kent
Brading Town Council, Isle of Wight
Brampton Parish Council, Cambridgeshire
Braunstone Town Council, Leicestershire
Brerton and Ravenhill Parish Council, Staffordshire
Cawthorne Parish Council, Sheffield
Crowborough Town Council, East Sussex
Danebury Parish Council, Essex
Dodington Parish Council, South Gloucestershire
Gnosall Parish Council, Stafford
Hatfield Town Council, Hertfordshire
Hexham Town Council, Northumberland
Hockley Parish Council, Essex
Honiton Town Council, Devon
Lamplugh Parish council, Cumbria
Leek Wootton & Guy's Cliffe Parish Council, Warwickshire
Littlehampton Town Council, West Sussex
Lockwood Parish Council, Redcar & Cleveland
Madron Parish Council, Cornwall
Newton Abbot Town Council, Devon
Old Catton Parish Council, Norfolk
Orton Parish Council, Cumbria
Rookley, Chale and Shalfleet (grouped councils), Isle of Wight
Saffron Walden Town Council, Essex
Settle Town Council, Yorkshire
South Warnborough Parish Council, Hampshire
Stanwix Rural Parish Council, Carlisle
Totton & Eling Town Council, Hampshire
Warndon Parish Council, Worcestershire
West Dean Parish Council, Gloucestershire
Wingham Parish Council, Kent
Witham Town Council, Essex
Wivenhoe Town Council, Essex

Annex D: Quality councils by county and local authority area

County (County Association area) and Local Authority	Number of Quality Councils	% of all Parish and Town Councils in area
Avon	**9**	**7%**
Bath and North East Somerset*	1	
North Somerset*	3	
South Gloucestershire*	5	
Bedfordshire	**7**	**6%**
Bedford	1	
Mid Bedfordshire	3	
South Bedfordshire	3	
Berkshire	**2**	**2%**
Bracknell Forest*	1	
West Berkshire*	1	
Buckinghamshire	**6**	**3%**
Aylesbury Vale	1	
Chiltern	1	
Milton Keynes*	1	
South Buckinghamshire	1	
Wycombe	2	
Cambridgeshire	**14**	**6%**
East Cambridgeshire	1	
Huntingdonshire	5	
South Cambridgeshire	5	
Peterborough*	3	
Cheshire	**13**	**4%**
Chester	3	
Congleton	4	
Crewe and Nantwich	1	
Macclesfield	2	
Vale Royal	3	
Cornwall	**6**	**3%**
Caradon	1	
Carrick	1	
Kerrier	2	
North Cornwall	1	
Restormel	1	
Cumbria	**7**	**3%**
Allerdale	1	
Carlisle	1	
Copeland	1	

Eden	2	
South Lakeland	2	
Derbyshire	**13**	**6%**
Amber Valley	3	
Bolsover	1	
Derbyshire Dales	1	
Erewash	2	
High Peak	1	
North East Derbyshire	3	
South Derbyshire	2	
Devon	**21**	**6%**
East Devon	4	
Mid Devon	1	
North Devon	5	
South Hams	4	
Teignbridge	5	
West Devon	2	
Dorset	**1**	**1%**
East Dorset	1	
Durham	**5**	**5%**
Easington	3	
Sedgefield	2	
East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire	**3**	**1%**
East Riding of Yorkshire*	2	
North East Lincolnshire*	1	
Essex	**29**	**9%**
Basildon	2	
Braintree	7	
Chelmsford	5	
Colchester	1	
Epping Forest	7	
Maldon	1	
Rochford	2	
Tendring	1	
Uttlesford	3	
Gloucestershire	**1**	**< 1%**
Stroud	1	
Hampshire	**18**	**8%**
Basingstoke and Deane	2	
East Hampshire	3	
Eastleigh	3	
Hart	2	
New Forest	4	
Portsmouth*	1	
Test Valley	1	

Winchester	2	
Herefordshire*	**2**	**2%**
Hertfordshire	**2**	**2%**
Dacorum	1	
St Albans	1	
Isle of Wight*	**6**	**21%**
Kent	**12**	**4%**
Canterbury	1	
Dover	2	
Maidstone	2	
Sevenoaks	5	
Tonbridge and Malling	1	
Tunbridge Wells	1	
Lancashire	**7**	**3%**
Chorley	1	
Knowsley*	1	
Lancaster	1	
Oldham*	1	
South Ribble	1	
St Helens*	1	
West Lancashire	1	
Leicestershire and Rutland	**6**	**3%**
Blaby	2	
Harborough	1	
Melton	2	
North West Leicestershire	1	
Lincolnshire	**13**	**4%**
East Lindsey	5	
North Kesteven	2	
South Kesteven	4	
West Lindsey	2	
North Yorkshire	**5**	**1%**
Craven	1	
Scarborough	1	
Selby	1	
York*	2	
Norfolk	**7**	**2%**
Breckland	1	
Broadland	2	
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk	1	
North Norfolk	2	
South Norfolk	1	
Northamptonshire	**1**	**< 1%**

Daventry	1	
Northumberland	**4**	**3%**
Castle Morpeth	3	
Newcastle upon Tyne*	1	
Nottinghamshire	**8**	**5%**
Bassetlaw	3	
Broxtowe	1	
Rushcliffe	4	
Oxfordshire	**3**	**1%**
Cherwell	1	
South Oxfordshire	1	
West Oxfordshire	1	
South Yorkshire	**4**	**5%**
Barnsley*	1	
Doncaster*	2	
Rotherham*	1	
Shropshire	**13**	**7%**
Bridgnorth	2	
North Shropshire	1	
Oswestry	2	
Shrewsbury and Atcham	1	
Telford and the Wrekin*	7	
Somerset	**6**	**2%**
Mendip	2	
South Somerset	3	
West Somerset	1	
Staffordshire	**10**	**5%**
East Staffordshire	1	
Lichfield	3	
Newcastle under Lyme	1	
South Staffordshire	2	
Stafford	3	
Suffolk	**7**	**2%**
Babergh	1	
Forest Heath	1	
Mid Suffolk	1	
St Edmondsbury	1	
Suffolk Coastal	3	
Surrey	**5**	**6%**
Elmbridge	1	
Guildford	1	
Reigate and Banstead	1	
Waverley	2	
Sussex	**22**	**9%**

Adur	1	
Arun	3	
Chichester	3	
Horsham	1	
Lewes	2	
Mid Sussex	5	
Rother	2	
Wealden	6	
West Yorkshire	**8**	**9%**
Bradford*	3	
Kirklees*	2	
Leeds*	2	
Wakefield*	1	
Warwickshire and West Midlands	**12**	**7%**
North Warwickshire	2	
Rugby	1	
Solihull*	1	
Stratford on Avon	6	
Warwick	2	
Wiltshire	**6**	**2%**
Kennet	1	
North Wiltshire	2	
Salisbury	1	
West Wiltshire	2	
Worcestershire	**7**	**4%**
Bromsgrove	3	
Malvern	3	
Wychavon	1	

* Unitary authority
Quality councils as at end September 2006
Counties relate to the areas covered by county associations of local councils.

ANNEX E: Comparative characteristics

Comparative characteristics of Quality and non-accredited councils regarding expenditure and delegation of services:

Table E1: Mean and median expenditure by purpose in 2005-6 for 169 Quality councils and 216 non-accredited councils

Purpose	Mean expenditure £		Median expenditure £	
	Quality councils	*Non-Accredited councils*	*Quality councils*	*Non-Accredited councils*
Total expenditure	263,095	140,629	85,382	57,335
Other salaries	55,332	36,904	44,000	19,439
Clerk's salary	27,591	18,044	22,020	11,139
Community halls	23,074	14,758	11,840	10,800
Parks and open spaces	22,197	12,995	11,144	6,368
Indoor recreation facilities	20,202	3,282	10,000	17,100
Other office costs	20,089	9,934	6,129	3,343
Outdoor recreation facilities	11,886	6,468	8,043	4,775
Burial grounds / crematoria	6,967	4,179	6,300	2,639
Grants to voluntary bodies and community organisations	6,587	6,329	3,075	2,250
Community events	6,183	2,455	3,000	2,348
Insurance	6,182	4,600	3,000	1,886
Other public amenities	5,314	2,339	4,290	4,112
Tourism promotion	3,490	1,140	3,316	3,000
Crime Prevention schemes	2,362	2,074	3,000	4,000
Communication (e.g. publicity)	2,226	830	1,417	1,158
Lighting	2,137	1,648	3,494	2,515
Allotments	2,081	967	952	1,023
Audit fees	1,903	1,080	793	545
Community Transport	881	518	2,000	1,200
Footpaths	865	501	813	614
Public parking	616	922	2,142	6,000
Twinning arrangements	592	183	1,500	690
Litter bins	559	334	800	630
Research (e.g. polls or surveys)	223	125	1,000	600
Entering competitions	156	18	100	45
Other	20,494	9,529	10,373	7,482

Source: Questionnaire

Table E2: Significance of expenditure by purpose in 2005-6 for 169 Quality councils and 216 non-accredited councils

Purpose	% of total aggregate expenditure		% of councils incurring expenditure on item	
	Quality councils	*Non-Quality councils*	*Quality councils*	*Non-Quality councils*
Clerk's salary	11	13	100	99
Other salaries	24	26	62	57
Audit fees	1	1	98	95
Other office costs	8	7	87	89
Insurance	2	3	97	94
Parks and open spaces	9	9	65	62
Community halls	9	10	58	41
Indoor recreation facilities	8	2	12	6
Outdoor recreation facilities	5	5	44	39
Burial grounds / crematoria	3	3	44	48
Tourism promotion	1	1	25	15
Lighting	1	1	36	31
Footpaths	<1	<1	33	22
Public parking	<1	<1	11	6
Allotments	1	1	44	37
Litter bins	<1	<1	30	27
Community Transport	<1	<1	17	16
Crime Prevention schemes	1	1	27	17
Other public amenities	2	2	30	23
Communication (e.g. publicity)	1	1	61	49
Research (e.g. polls or surveys)	<1	<1	11	9
Entering competitions	<1	<1	12	6
Twinning arrangements	<1	<1	21	13
Grants to voluntary bodies and community organisations	3	4	77	81
Community events	2	2	42	31
Other	2	7	42	36

Source: Questionnaire

Annex F: Councils meeting accreditation criteria

Council seats filled by election and non-accredited councils meeting discretionary communications criteria:

Table F1: Proportion of council seats on non-accredited councils filled by election at last full election

	Unwarded councils (N=86)		Warded Councils (N=114)		All non-accredited councils (N=200)	
100%	49	57.0%	96	84.2%	145	72.5%
80-99%	15	17.4%	8	7.0%	23	11.5%
50-79%	18	20.9%	10	8.8%	28	14.0%
Under 50%	4	4.7%	0	0%	4	2.0%

Source: Questionnaire. NB: Data is for 200 councils (113 warded, 86 unwarded). Inadequate data was available for 36 warded and 25 unwarded councils.

Table F2: Proportion of council seats filled by election for non-accredited councils over two electoral cycles.

% of council seats filled through election	All non-accredited councils	
100% in both elections	103	60.6%
100% in one election, more than 80% in other election	25	14.7%
More than 80% but less than 100% in both elections	7	4.1%
Total at least 80% in both elections	**135**	**79.4%**
100% in one election, less than 80% in other election	13	7.6%
More than 80% in one election, less than 80% in other	11	6.5%
Less than 80% in both elections	11	6.5%

Source: Questionnaire. NB: Data is for 170 councils.

Table F3: Proportion of non-accredited councils meeting electoral mandate at the last full election, by size of electorate

Electorate	% of councillors elected					
	100%		**80-99%**		**Under 80%**	
Over 20000	9	6.3%	1	4.3%	0	0%
15000-19999	13	9.1%	1	4.3%	1	3.0%
10000-14999	20	13.9%	0	0%	1	3.0%
5000-9999	31	21.5%	4	17.4%	4	12.1%
2000-4999	22	15.3%	6	26.1%	8	24.2%
1000-1999	11	7.6%	5	21.7%	4	12.1%
500-999	21	14.6%	2	8.7%	7	21.2%
Under 500	5	3.5%	4	17.4%	5	15.2%
Not known	12	8.3%	0	0%	3	9.1%

Source: Questionnaire. Data is for 200 councils.

Table F4: Non-accredited councils meeting discretionary communications criteria

Annual report sent to every household	14%
Annual report includes summary of council activities	62%
Council contributed to Parish Plan or similar	41%
Council has established links with local community / voluntary bodies	94%
Council has publicly available email address	97%
Council has website with list of members, contact details and access to annual report	25%
Councillors hold surgeries at least 6 times per year	31%
Council consults residents on planning matters	19%
Council publicises activities in public places including libraries	97%
Council publicises activities in local press	39%
Council ensures coverage of activities in district council publications	34%
Council consults electorate on local issues	44%

Source: Questionnaire. N varies by question.

Annex G: Provision of services

Direct provision and grant-aid of services by Quality and non-accredited councils:

Table G1: Services provided and grant-aided by Quality and non-accredited councils

Type of service	Quality councils % (N=195)			Non-Quality councils % (N= 261)		
	Provide	Grant-aid	TOTAL	Provide	Grant-aid	TOTAL
Signs and noticeboards	96	2	97	91	3	93
Seats and shelters	90	4	93	78	4	82
Playing fields and playgrounds	71	14	84	63	13	75
Litter bins, skips	68	5	72	52	5	57
Open spaces	66	12	75	60	5	64
War memorials, clocks, etc.	67	12	77	51	5	56
Advice and information	56	12	66	34	9	43
Allotments	54	3	57	44	4	48
Churchyards, cemeteries, etc.	47	26	70	42	20	61
Village hall / community centre	44	34	75	33	31	61
Rights of way	40	12	52	30	7	37
Lighting	39	5	45	31	5	37
Tourism promotion	30	11	39	17	9	25
Crime prevention	29	22	47	20	17	36
Verge maintenance	25	6	30	18	3	21
Car and cycle parks	21	4	25	13	1	14
Indoor recreation	19	13	31	11	7	18
Public conveniences	19	5	24	13	4	17
Recycling facilities	11	7	17	7	3	10
Street naming	10	5	14	13	2	15
Community transport	12	16	27	5	15	20
Traffic calming	8	10	18	5	5	9
Postal and telephone facilities	5	1	6	3	2	5
Travel permits	6	3	8	3	3	5
Water, drainage and sewerage	3	3	6	4	2	5
Other	5	2	7	7	3	8

Source: Questionnaire

Table G2: Services delegated to Quality and non-Quality councils

Type of service	Quality councils % (N=192)	Non-accredited councils % (N=260)
Rights of way	16%	8%
Playing fields and playgrounds	15%	8%
Verge maintenance	13%	12%
Seats and shelters	10%	8%
Open spaces	10%	6%
War memorials, clocks, etc.	9%	4%
Public conveniences	9%	3%
Churchyards, cemeteries, etc.	8%	6%
Signs and noticeboards	8%	5%
Litter bins, skips	8%	5%
Allotments	8%	6%
Tourism promotion	6%	2%
Lighting	7%	3%
Crime prevention	7%	2%
Advice and information	6%	2%
Village hall / community centre	5%	4%
Street naming	5%	5%
Recycling facilities	4%	2%
Community transport	3%	<1%
Travel permits	3%	1%
Water, drainage and sewerage	2%	<1%
Indoor recreation	2%	<1%
Car and cycle parks	2%	2%
Traffic calming	2%	1%
Postal and telephone facilities	0%	<1%
Other	11%	7%
No delegated services	**53%**	**67%**

Source: Questionnaire