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(K Pyke, Bleadon Parish Council –2007)



Does Quality Council Status produce Quality Councils?

APRIL 2010

DECLARATION

This dissertation is the product of my own work. I agree that it may be made available for reference and photocopy at the discretion of the University

**Bruce Poole
15th April 2010**



(NALC - 2004)

Does Quality Council Status produce Quality Councils?

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Quality is not new to those working in the town and parish council sector, described by government as a tier of government closest to the local community. Many practitioners hold the view that they have been delivering quality service and good practice to their locality for years. When the Quality Parish scheme was launched in 2003, the aim of the scheme was to equip town and parish councils to take on a stronger role for the benefit of the community. Government was of the view that local councils were vital in re-invigorating local democracy. Initiatives were introduced setting down both mandatory and discretionary tests, designed to show that the council had met a recognised level of competency and quality through its practices, procedures and service delivery. A review of the scheme commissioned by Defra in 2006 was undertaken by the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Discussions about quality are not new and it is generally accepted by academics that it is also not an easy concept to define. Quality Parish Status (QPS) however, was designed by the major stakeholders, to provide benchmark minimum standards for parish and town councils, through an independent accreditation process undertaken by way of a peer assessment, renewable every four years.

The author professes to a personal interest in the Quality Parish scheme having secured the status for two of the three parish councils that he manages. Of those councils Bleadon was re-accredited in 2009.

The aim of this dissertation through research was to investigate if in fact the concept of quality has been achieved by the participating councils. Has it raised standards, does it enhance performance, was the process sufficiently robust to reflect improvement in the management and administration of the council? Other equally important concepts such as community engagement, citizenship, performance management, peer review and service delivery was also critically analysed.

Questionnaires, Case Studies and Interviews with the major stakeholders together with a representative sample of town and parish councils was undertaken. In each case they have provided sufficient objective comparisons and constructive information on which to base valid, robust conclusions and recommendations. The research has shown that whilst both town and parish councils through their clerks, show a great deal of commonality in relation to the quality scheme. Clerks from the smaller councils had generally, a distinctly different view in respect to the aspirations to the achievement of gaining “the badge” than did the clerks of larger councils.

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Glossary

AON	AON Insurance
BA (Hons)	Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Degree
CALC	County Association of Local Councils
CEG	Community Engagement and Governance
Cert HE	Certificate in Higher Education
CHEA	The Council for Higher Education Accreditation
CiLCA	Certificate in Local Council Administration
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personal Development
CRC	Council for Rural Communities
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
Defra	Department of the Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs
Dip HE	Diploma in Higher Education
DTLR	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
LGA	Local Government Association
LGIU	Local Government Information Unit
LP	Local Policy
IDEA	Improvement and Development Agency
ISO	The International Organisation of Standardisation
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NTS	National Training Strategy
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
PC	Parish Council
PwP	Power of Well Being
TC	Town Council
QPIF	Quality Parishes Investment Fund
QPS	Quality Parish Scheme
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks
WWYC	Working with your Council

Introduction

A commitment to the excellence for your community....

“Local Councils are vital to re-invigorating local democracy. The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme has played an important role in improving the quality of management and administration of parish and town councils. The Government.....encourages local councils to consider seeking accreditation.”

Hazel Blears, *Secretary of State, Communities and Local Government* ([NALC](#) [online] 2008).

In this statement Hazel Blears reinforces the idea that the process of management and administration is the key to improving the quality of town and parish councils. This dissertation seeks to establish whether this is in fact the case and that Local Councils are indeed re-invigorating local democracy.

On the 28th November 2000 the Government published the rural white paper entitled “Our Countryside: The Future. A Fair Deal for Rural England”. A number of measures were set out to provide an opportunity for local people to become more involved in the development of their communities. The Government believed that parish councils, as a tier of government that is closest to local communities, has a central role to play in improving local quality of life. (2000, p.147)

Decoster (2002, p.85) sociologist and lecturer of the Free University of Brussels and co-director of the Unit for Regional Development commenting on the rural white paper said

It may come to be seen as one of the more radical government statements on the nature of modern English local government. It is radical because it appears to offer an opportunity to reverse the centralising trend which has so dominated UK local and central government relations since 1945.

Most parish councils were established in 1894 by an Act of Parliament. This created the civil parish, separating it from the church, after a long history of delivering local services such as care for the poor, maintenance of roads and collecting taxes. Councils were further strengthened by the Local Government Act 1972, Local Government and Rating Act 1997 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The latter Act granting the Power of Well Being (PwB) to parish councils by amending LGA 2000 s2 that originally gave the power to principal authorities only.

The Department of Communities and Local Government states that there are 10,000 parishes in England, around 8,700 of which have councils, the others being known as parish meetings. They are served by some 70,000 town and parish councillors. (DCLG [online] 2009). Their number per council is “fixed by the district council” and will range between five and thirty-one (Arnold-Baker, 2006, p.42). Local councils are run by democratically-elected councillors who are responsible for making decisions on behalf of the local community (DirectGov [online] 2010).

Parish and town councils vary enormously in size, activities and circumstances. Local councils have traditionally been associated with rural areas and small towns (*Bevan, 2003, p.9*). They represent populations ranging from less than 100 to up to 70,000, but the majority of them are small; around 80 per cent represent populations of less than 2,500, with budgets of £1000 to over £3 million (*Derounian & Skinner, 2006*). It is said that they represent 30% of the population (*DCLG [online] 2009*). The Countryside Agency defines a parish with a population of less than 10,000 as rural, and a parish with a population over 10,000 as urban (*CRC, 2005, p.25*). The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, implemented one of the provisions contained in the Government's white paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* that allowed parishes to be established in what was previously unparished urban areas, more especially in the London boroughs. 200 new parish councils have been created since 1997 (*Moor & Griggs, 2005, p.4*)

The 2000 rural white paper proposed a number of initiatives that were designed to enhance the role of the parish councils; to equip them to take on a stronger role for the benefit of the community and to develop a framework for partnership working. A central proposal was the introduction of the new concept of - **Quality Parish Council**. Quality status said government should be achievable by any parish council, regardless of its size, location or current activities. (*2000, p.147*).

A quality parish council will be expected to:

- be representative of, and actively engage, all parts of its community;
- be effectively and properly managed;
- articulates the needs and wishes of its community;

- upholds high standards of conduct;
- be committed to working in partnership with principal local authorities;
- in proportion to size and skills, deliver local services for principal authorities.
- work closely with voluntary groups in the town or village.
- lead work by the community on the Town or Village Plan.
- work with its partners, acting as an information point for local services.

(2000, p.6)

In November 2001, a consultation paper on quality parishes was published by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), in conjunction with the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), the Countryside Agency, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the National Association for Local Councils (NALC). As a result of the consultation paper, the minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life, Alun Michael launched in 2003, The Quality Parish and Town Council scheme. It was designed to provide benchmark minimum standards for parish and town councils through an independent accreditation process renewable every four years.

This process of peer review by a local accreditation panel is to provide reassurance that the council seeking Quality status has been independently assessed, is therefore capable of working together with the principal authority to deliver local services. (NALC [online] Jan10). Finally it gives proof through the accreditation (peer review) process that the Quality council was willing and able to be fully involved in local issues, to enable them to better represent the communities they serve.

Why such an initiative? Government believed that parish and town councils as the closest tier to local communities has a central role in improving local quality of life. Achieving quality parish status would they say demonstrate that a council has met certain minimum standards expected from an effective, representative and active parish council (*ODPM, 2003, p.5*).

To date (31/03/10) (*NALC [online] 2010*) 695 councils (*See Appendix A*) currently hold Quality Council Status out of approximately 8,700 (7.98%). Of these 169 councils has successfully achieved re-accreditation. The initial accreditation status is required to be renewed within a three month window after a four year period has elapsed. From the available figures it has been deduced that 63 councils have chosen (31/03/10), for some reason or another, not to re-accredit (*NALC [online] 2010*).

This dissertation using a number of set objectives, aims to establish whether or the extent to which the process involved in achieving Quality Council Status by town and parish councils in England, does produce quality councils.

A number of varying methods was adopted, both quantitative and qualitative, in the research for the dissertation such as Questionnaires, Case Studies and Interviews. All of which were undertaken with representatives of participating Town and Parish Councils, key organisations and the original stakeholder to the QP scheme.

The objectives being:

- (i) To conduct a critical analysis of the concept of QPS as a process for achieving quality and the raising of standards.
- (ii) To ascertain whether or not the process for achieving quality as originally envisaged by the major stakeholders has indeed raised standards through QPS.
- (iii) To establish the theory, and to investigate the theory and practice of performance management where a process of performance management is designed to enhance performance.
- (iv) To establish if the process is sufficiently robust in improving the quality of town and parish councils in terms of their management and administration.
- (v) To seek the views of relevant town and parish councils as to why they have chosen not to seek re-accreditation.

:

The quality parish scheme does not extend to parish meetings or community councils in Wales.

The Scheme

Government in its document “The Quality Scheme Explained” ([CLG \[online\] 2009](#)) stated that the laid down tests exceed the statutory duties of parish and town councils and represent the standards that an efficient, well run parish council should achieve. The tests both mandatory and discretionary, as set out hereunder, were designed to show that the council had met a recognised level of competency and quality through its practices, procedures and service delivery. ([NALC \[online\] 2009](#)).

- electoral mandate
- qualifications of the clerk
- council meetings
- communications
- annual report
- accounts
- and Code of Conduct (*Appendix B*)

Through the scheme Government wished to encourage all parish councils to reach the standards set out within the Quality process and, in doing so, to demonstrate their status and quality as the local representatives of their communities. To support this initiative in 2004/05, £450,000 was made available through the Quality Parishes Investment Fund (QPIF). The intention was to help Quality Parishes ‘kick start’ initiatives they wanted to implement in order to achieve some of the ambitions in becoming Quality councils. (*Moor and Griggs, 2005, p.6*). Some eighty QPS councils received grants of up to £10,000 to fund a range of schemes, from new computer equipment to better street lighting.

Defra in 2006 commissioned the University of Wales to review the scheme for both accreditation and re-accreditation. Their research helped the six national stakeholders; to the scheme agree amendments to some of the existing tests, as well as creating three new tests highlighted below. The revised scheme was launched in June 2008.

The new tests were:

- Promoting Local Democracy and Citizen
- Terms and Conditions
- Training (Appendix C)

At the launch of the revised scheme Ken Cleary, chairman of the National Association of Local Councils (02/07/08), indicated that the revised scheme would better reflect the increased professionalism of councils.



(Puriton Parish Council – 2009)

Literature Review

The aim of the literature review is not just to investigate the Government's concept and benchmarking of the QPS scheme, but also to explore other concepts of quality. Concepts such as community engagement, citizenship, performance review, peer review and service delivery. Do they produce criteria which can be judged as to whether or not the process is fit for purpose? The purpose is to improve and produce quality.

This review will also identify reliable and relevant research to develop a detailed picture of the scheme and its process in order to decide, whether or not, 'it is a robust process' and 'that it is fit for purpose'. It will endeavour to establish how Government and the national stakeholders to the scheme linked the purpose of improving and producing quality.

John Prescott Deputy Prime Minister in his joint foreword with Nick Brown, Minister for Agriculture Fisheries and Food to The Labour Government Rural White Paper (2000)

"Our Countryside the future. A fair deal for Rural England" said:

In future we want decisions to be taken with the active participation of local people, and to develop new partnerships in delivering change.

Chapter 12 'local power for country towns and villages' is the critical section for local councils. It sets out how it was envisaged a Quality Parish would work. This was to be achieved by publishing guidance in draft for consultation, what tests it should meet, how principal councils and town and parish councils can work together in partnership to better meet the needs of their communities.

The proposed process would include a range of strategies to help modernise councils, raise the quality of local governance and allow them to have a larger role in the delivery of local services (2000, p.137). Government admitted that in their consultation with the public in preparing the white paper, some clear messages came through; government often appears not to 'think rural' and that the need for 'joined up' government was particularly important for rural areas (2000, p.158). It was hoped that the QPS would improve the credibility of the council, in the eyes of its community and make it more representative to its electorate. It was envisaged that this would be achieved by developing parish plans, distributing a newsletter and having a well trained clerk (2000, p.7).

November 2001 saw the publication of two documents '*Quality Parish and Town Councils – A Consultation Paper*' from Defra and '*A National Training Strategy for Parish and Town Councils*'. The former document set out a proposal (p.7) for a model charter to cover relationships between all parish and town councils and their principal authorities as to how partnerships could work. The Rural White Paper also announced various new funds and assistance schemes not however specifically linked to the QPS.

- £15 million – Parish Transport Fund – to provide grants £10,000 towards the cost of local transport projects;
- £15 million for Community Service Grants – offering help to re-establish or strengthen local services;
- £5 million to help around 1000 rural communities prepare their own Parish Plan;

- £2 million to help establish a national training and support strategy for local councils. (2001, p.13)

The aim was to issue guidance in the Spring of 2002 and to open the QUALITY scheme to applications thereafter.

The 2001 consultation proposed to set down three distinct levels of competency in order that a clerk could demonstrate that they possessed the necessary skills to carry out their duties. These were set down to suit different sizes/categories of council:

1. annual budgeted income less than £50,000
2. annual budgeted income of £50,000 more and less than £500,000
3. annual budgeted income of £500,000 or more; and (2001, p.30)
that clerks refresh their skills/competencies every four years.

This categorising of competency for the clerk appears not to have been included in any of the subsequent proposals favoured by the then steering group for the final scheme. This categorising was however subsequently used to dictate the levels of costs that were to be charged to councils when applying for accreditation.

The consultation also proposed that QUALITY accreditation should last for a period of four years (2001, p.36) and the cost of the assessment process would be met by the applying parish and town councils at the rate set down for each of the three categories.

The second document '*A National Training Strategy for Parish and Town Councils*' was jointly produced by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and The

Countryside Agency who were tasked with developing a National Training Strategy to provide training and support for parish and town councils. Cognisance was given to the fact that an already extensive training provision in this sector was given by the SLCC, county associations of town and parish councils and the University of Gloucestershire (formerly Cheltenham and Gloucester College). (2001, p.4)

As stated previously Government had set aside £2m for development and implementation of this Strategy over three years. 2002 saw the piloting of a core training package. It emphasised the need to employ a competent and well trained clerk with the necessary skills to effectively support their town or parish council. From a survey undertaken by SLCC in 2000 over 50% confirmed the need for appropriate training provision and to instil a positive approach to continuous professional development (NTS 2001, p.6).

Between 1996 and 1999 Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education (now the University of Gloucestershire) in a study commissioned by the then Rural Development Commission found that the provision of training was patchy. (*National Training Strategy*, p.6). The report concluded that those familiar with the work of local councils identified training as essential if parish councils are to play their full part in local community life.....

There is an urgent need to increase the demand for training by winning over the 'hearts and minds' of the majority of councillors and clerks who fail to see the benefits of training. (NTS, p.6)

It was also noted that was an all-too-common feeling that because people have worked as a clerkfor years that they '*don't need training*' or '*know all they need to know*'. In reality the study took the view that councils must take responsibility for continuous professional development of their staff....be up to date with changes in policy, legislation and technology if they were to work more efficiently (NTS, p.8)

On 18 March 2003 Alun Michael Minister for Rural Affairs and Urban Quality of Life made the following written statement:

I am pleased to announce the details of the quality parish initiative which the Government has been developed jointly Defra and ODPM with the collaboration of key stakeholders such as the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councils and the Countryside Agency. (Sear 2003,1)

QPS had arrived.....and could be applied for from 1st July 2003. (Appendix B)

In 2006 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. The Report entitled *Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme* (2006) was co-written by Dr Michael Woods with Dr Graham Gardner and Dr Kate Gannon. The report assessed the impact of the Quality scheme to date, considered the appropriateness of the criteria which the Quality benchmark was awarded, and recommended changes to the scheme prior to existing Quality councils seeking re-accreditation from September 2007. Additionally it provided

information on good practice that might be replicated or emulated, identified practices that did not work or were otherwise problematic and should be avoided. (2006, p.7)

At the time of their research, 332 local councils had obtained Quality status, (2006, p.3) representing just under 4% of all parish and town councils in England. Woods et al., (2006) found however that the take up had been higher among councils with larger populations, that there had been geographical variations, with participation highest in West Midlands, the South East and the North West. Their research involved interviews with a sample of local authorities, associations of local councils, county association panels and national stakeholders. Some six case studies were undertaken and written submissions were received from 34 town and parish councils following the receipt of a postal questionnaire.

As a result of their deliberations a number of recommendations were submitted to Defra and subsequently the Government, of which the majority eventually formed the basis of the revised scheme,

Dr Graham Gardner (2009) Lecturer of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth who co wrote – *‘Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme’* (2006) in an interview made it quite clear that in his view, except for the above research study, there was next to no literature in Local Government Studies that could be reviewed on the concept of Quality Councils. However he conceded that further study into concepts such as ‘quality’ ‘process’ ‘benchmarking’ ‘peer review’ and ‘performance management’ would help the author to develop a deeper understanding of the QPS. He suggested

how they might be achieved in QPS by way of an effective service delivery, community engagement and citizenship and their relevance to the overall process.

Gibson (1986) a leading authority on standards in education stated that

Quality is notoriously elusive of prescription and no easier to describe and discuss than deliver in practice.

In 1990 an international standard for the quality of service (ISO 9004-2) was approved, where quality was defined as:

The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs

Government when launching QPS in 2003 emphasised their aim was to provide a benchmark for all parish councils. Mullins (2005, p.976) stated “*benchmarking was an increasingly popular management technique.*”

Also quoting *Modena*, he indicates:

Benchmarking is one of the key tools for learning and enables forward-looking organisations to measure their performance against the best in business. It should cover a balanced portfolio of practices and capabilities to bring about both short and long term success.

The objective of benchmarking is to **understand and evaluate the current position** of a business or organisation in relation to *"best practice"* and to identify areas and means of performance improvement. (*tutor2u [online] Jan10*).

It is a way of finding and adopting best practices. (*Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2007*). A good example of 'benchmarking' and 'good practice' that emanated from this dissertation research was an initiative produced by the Essex Association of Local Councils. In September 2009 it published an illustrative book entitled '*Celebrating the success of the 1st Tier of Local Councils in Essex*'. In its 44 plus pages it shows in great detail how each of the 47 councils had been accredited, what they had been able to achieve individually in the QPS process, and how they measured their success against other neighbouring communities. This example by the Essex CALC truly demonstrated an improvement in 'quality' of the councils involved as set out in the original three aims of the scheme which was:

- to provide a benchmark of standards for parish and town councils
- working more closely with partners in the delivery of services, and
- more effectively representing their communities

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) 2001 defines quality as

fitness for purpose' meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an accrediting or quality assurance body.

The QPS standards were originally set and reviewed by the six national stakeholders and were designed to be assessed through the process of a peer review. Peer review in

the case of QPS was deemed to be the process carried out at the local level by an accreditation panel, (2006, p.61) which readily provided an opportunity to review the practices and procedures, by an understanding team of sector practitioners. A County Accreditation Panel consists of between three and five people with experience of local government and local councils.

The process says the Improvement and Development Agency (*IDEA [online] 2010*)

allows a constructive discussion of a council's strengths and weaknesses and provides recommendations of how improvements can be made.

Mullins (2005, p87) suggested that “*the concept of process is necessary to account for the manner in which organisations exhibit changes in structure*”. He further explained “*they may be formal and explicitly defined and documented, or informal and routines or ways of working that evolve over time*”. This theory could well explain the formal accreditation process in the first instance and in the second instance how a council through standards of quality, standards of benchmarking, peer review and process might progress towards meeting the accreditation requirements by managing change and improvement.

The Improvement Foundation quotes Berwick (1998) then President of the Health Foundation, as saying all too often in the public services benchmarking seems to lack the learning element and so become performance management. It suggests that it should lead to the effective management of individuals and performance, not be just going through a tick box exercise Two major elements of QPS is that of learning and training, which might suggest that the need for a sector trained town and parish clerk should be mandatory.

The Chartered Institute of Personal Development quotes Armstrong and Baron (2004) who define performance management as:

a process which contributes to the effective management individuals and teams in order to achieve high levels of organisational performance

They go on to say that performance management is a process, not an event. It operates as a continuous cycle, a **plan-do-review-revise-cycle**. In other words it should be both strategic and integrated where individuals and groups take responsibility for the continuous improvement of the processes, of their own skills, behaviour and contributions. It is imperative that QPS be seen as a cyclical process, which reflects true improvement in a council's procedures and practices and not just a four yearly event.

Derounian & Skinner (2006) rightly questioned the success of the scheme by indicating that after nearly three years, quoting LGIU (2005) only 2.5% of English parish councils had achieved QPS. This analysis was further endorsed in the executive summary of a Research Study undertaken by Woods et al of the University of Wales, commissioned by Defra in 2006, which confirmed that by the end of September 2006, 332 local councils had obtained Quality status, just under 4% of all parish and town councils in England. The purpose of the report was to present the findings from a research study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme.

It reassess the impact of the Quality scheme to date, considered the appropriateness of the criteria against which the Quality benchmark is awarded, and recommended changes to the scheme prior to the existing Quality councils seeking re-accreditation from September 2007.

Why has the take-up been so low, is it because of the process of learning, for example a Quality council must have a qualified clerk, or is it because of a lack of belief in the value of the scheme. Some councils firmly believe they are already a quality council and do not need “the badge” to prove it.

Derounian & Skinner (2006) reported on a view in “*Clerks and Council Direct*”, an independent magazine that had consistently reported in 2004 and 2005, in their letter pages, where the contributors were of the view that they were doing a good job and resented having to jump through hoops to prove it. Despite this apparent reticence from town and parish councils to “join up” the national stakeholders for QPS in September 2007 reaffirmed their continued support and endorsement for the Scheme, its aims and objectives. It was explained that they saw the Scheme as providing a vital development tool for the first tier of local government and a benchmark of best practice.

Claydon (2009) in “The Parish Councillor’s Guide” points out;

that a parish council must demonstrate that it has the attributes expected of a quality council and has the ability and capacity to take on the enhanced role and responsibility that quality status will bring.

This was the opinion of Ray Smythe, the NALC/AON Clerk of the year (2007) of Heath Hayes and Wimblebury Parish Council, Staffordshire. who stated that:

QPS has been a major change for us. The work towards it, achieving it and now trying to excel in all our work, QPS has brought major improvements to our performance and the benefit that we bring to our community.”

The Literature Review highlighted a number of questions on which the primary research will be based.

- 1. Is a benchmark a minimum standard or a best practice standard?**
- 2. Has the process made the council more representative of the people?**
- 3. Has QPS increased the capacity of councillors and clerks?**
- 4. Is it a cyclical process or is it an event?**
- 5. Is the process of peer review robust in terms of management and administration?**
- 6. Has the process produced quality councils?**

Methodology

Research can be split into two defined areas:

- (a) **Secondary research** identifies and extracts relevant information that has already been put together by someone else. It is sometimes described as being “second-hand” information. (*tutor2u* [online] 2010*). This research has been examined in great detail throughout the previous chapter by way of the literature review on the subject of quality councils.
- (b) **Primary research** is the process of unearthing original data whereby an original plan must be devised. It should encompass data collection, data input then the production and analysis of the subsequent results. (*Market Research World [online] 2010*). There are two types of primary research **Quantitative** and **Qualitative** each of which provides different insights into the subject matter being researched.

Quantitative research is numerically oriented and involves statistical analysis. The main rule in this process is that it is structured, involves a large number of people, and that every respondent is asked the same set of questions. There are various ways in which this research has been carried out, by way of “face to face” and “telephone” interviews and “on-line” and “postal” surveys. Research results are more beneficial if both methods – quantitative and qualitative – are employed. (*Market Research World [online] 2010*)

Qualitative research provides on the other hand an understanding of how and why things are as they are. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (*Denzin & Lincoln 2004*).

It is intended to penetrate to the deeper significance that the subject of the research ascribes to the topic being researched. It involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter and gives priority to what the data contributes to the important research questions or existing information.

The quantitative consultation was carried out in two stages by using a variant of e-mailed questionnaires. The pilot questionnaire, (*Appendix D*) was kept to a single page and sent to twenty selected correspondents (*Table 1*).

CALC	REF	REC'D	Type	Re/Acc
Avon	TC1	10/07/09	Town	Yes
Avon	PC1	10/07/09	Parish	Yes
Bedfordshire	TC2	29/06/09	Town	Yes
Bedfordshire	PC2	01/07/09	Parish	Yes
Berkshire	TC3	14/07/09	Town	Yes
Buckinghamshire	PC3	17/07/09	Parish	Yes
Cambridgeshire	PC4	23/06/09	Parish	Yes
Cambridgeshire	TC4	24/06/09	Town	
Cheshire	PC5	08/07/09	Parish	Yes
Cornwall	TC5		Town	Yes
Devon	PC6		Parish	Yes
Devon	TC6	23/07/09	Town	Yes
Leicester	PC7	26/07/09	Parish	Yes
ERNLLCA	TC7	13/10/09	Town	Yes
Hampshire	PC8	24/07/09	Parish	Yes
Isle of Wight	TC8	14/07/09	Town	
Shropshire	PC9	22/06/09	Parish	Yes
Shropshire	TC9	20/07/09	Town	Yes
Sussex	PC10	14/07/09	Parish	Yes
Sussex	TC10	24/08/09	Town	Yes

They were selected on the basis that they had gained QS in the first eighteen months of the scheme (2003/04).

A 90% response rate to the pilot was achieved. Just two councils did not respond to the initial questionnaire and two councils subsequently have not sought re-accreditation. It was explained by one of those the councils, that at the time it was heavily involved in a major project and did not have the resources to seek re-accreditation. Another comment was made that it did not expect to 'tick box' the application for re-accreditation in the same manner as the original application. It ought to have reflected tangible improvements from one accreditation period to another.

The respondents to the pilot were asked amongst other specific questions, if they had to phrase just one question that would underline the reliability and validity of the process, what would it be. One such response was *"how do your electors see the Parish Council, effective, moribund, biased, impartial, active?"*.

A valuable outcome of the pilot questionnaire was how to frame and design the second questionnaire. This was set out over three pages (*Appendix E*), and e-mailed by NALC at the beginning of February 2010, to every council that at that time held the accreditation (694), including the 169 re-accredited councils. It was structured to establish answers to the research questions for this dissertation as set out on Page 28.

A not so high percentage of 21.67% was achieved for the second survey, although it was clear that many of the respondents had strong views on the Quality parish scheme.

Questionnaires are viewed as quick and easy to do. It has however important to be clear about the aim of the questionnaire and how the responses will assist the research. The execution of such a format can prove to be a time consuming exercise. They do however generate a low response rate and relies on the respondent having an interest in the subject matter (May: 2001).

Walliman (2004) points out that it was necessary to consider whether the answers are valid (is the respondent telling the truth) and reliable (is there a level of consistency to the answers). As to the first, validity was strengthened by the knowledge that the responses came from fellow colleagues, many of whom were well known through the SLCC clerk network. Certainly from the responses received, 150 representing some 21.67%, there was sufficient evidence to confirm great consistency in the answers submitted. Bell's questionnaire checklist (1993:131-133) was employed in order to ensure relevant, unbiased and answerable questions.

The objectives of the qualitative research study were to examine the stakeholders' perceptions of the quality parish scheme after the 2006 University of Wales Review. It was designed to ask whether they as the original stakeholders, still viewed QPS as being relevant. Of the six major stakeholders, five responded did so either by way of an e-mail or through face to face interviews.

A further six, in depth interviews were undertaken with clerks of both accredited and non accredited councils. The aim was to establish how they viewed the QPS process, its success or otherwise, and the reasons why they did or did not seek accreditation. Interviews that were undertaken in a face to face environment generated a high

response rate. They allowed for a more personal interaction and provided a good opportunity to explore the questions and the answers in greater depth. Bell (1993) quoting Moser and Kalton (1971, p.271) describes the survey interview as:

a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent

There are problems in as much they are time consuming and in some cases relatively expensive because of the respondent's physical location. Due to their subjectivity and the necessary small group interviewed there is always the danger of bias. This is mitigated to some extent by the additional background information and experience that is gained from such an undertaking. It is recognised that because of the small number, interviewed, restricted by time and cost, the response might not be totally representative. Bell (1993)

Wiseman and Aron (1972) liken interviewing to a fishing expedition and, pursuing this analogy, Cohen (1976) adds that;

like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful preparation, much patience, and considerable practice if the eventual reward is to be a worthwhile catch.

Everyone who agreed to take part in the project whether it was by interview, telephone conversation or e-mail was thanked by return for participating in the research. At the outset each respondent was assured that any comments that were made would be anonymised and not be attributed to named individuals. The stakeholder interviews were

conducted between August and November 2009. The pilot questionnaire June to August 2009 with the major questionnaire circulated by NALC in February 2010. In this latter case the respondents were respectfully asked to submit their replies by the end of February. To encourage a response, a magnum bottle of champagne was offered, whereby the replies would be numerically tabulated, and a raffle planned to be held in Nottingham at the SLCC Larger Councils Conference scheduled to take place on 22nd/23rd April 2010. It would be organised in such a way that it would be independently adjudicated to select the successful respondent.

It could be reasonably argued that the research could have been improved if more than 150 replies had been received. However as the responses received generally followed a set pattern such as, too time consuming, costs did not equate to benefits gained, a good opportunity to check out procedures and practices, it could be equally suggested that any additional replies would simply have mirrored those received. This will be seen when the results of the questionnaire are examined in the next chapter.



2004-2009

(Bleadon Parish Council – 2009)

Questionnaire Results

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the responses to the structured questionnaire, to quantify the comments of those councils who have not re-accredited, and to examine in some detail the case study response and finally the stakeholder responses.

As indicated elsewhere copies of the questionnaire were e-mailed directly by NALC. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire (*Appendix E*) and return it electronically to bruce.poole2@btopenworld.com. The number that responded equated to 21.67% (150 responses from a potential of 694 – with 2 bounce backs). In addition some 55 (less 2 bounce backs) councils whose accreditation had lapsed for whatever reason were e-mailed separately to ascertain as to why they had not reaccredited. The response equated to 43% (23 responses).

Observation 1

Number of Respondents	Large Councils	Medium Councils	Small Councils
150	26	66	58

Table 2 – Council Size Breakdown

Table 2 shows the breakdown of responses from large, medium and small councils. These categories matched those defined elsewhere in this research (page 16). The responses represented 1837 councillors and 1018 staff with a total annual budgeted income in 2009/2010 ranging from £1,250 for Westborough and Dry Doddington Parish Council to £1.5 million for Lichfield City Council.

Woods et al (2006, p.16) emphasised that the Quality scheme did not exclude the smaller councils as shown in research, column headed 2006, a finding which correlates with this research. They quoted that Twemlow Parish Council in Cheshire, who has re-accredited since that report, as having the lowest population of 168. This research notes that Ashmanhaugh Parish Council in Norfolk which gained QPS in January 2010 records an even lower population of just 150. This is also reflected in the following table.

Parish Population	2006	2010	%
< 500	16	16	10.67%
500-999	31	21	14.00%
1000-2499	55	27	18.00%
2500-4999	49	26	17.33%
5000-9999	72	29	19.33%
10,000-19,999	67	24	16.00%
>20000	42	7	4.67%
	332	150	100.00%

Table 3 – Populations of Councils recorded

The 150 responding councils represent an electorate of 897,848, a total precept of £31.3million and a total budget of £37.82 million.

Observation 2

Large Councils		Medium Councils		Small Councils	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
16	10	16	49	18	38

Table 4 – Gender

More women than men manage the medium to small councils whereas it is the opposite in regards to the management of larger councils.

The difference in the numbers of recorded clerks, 147 as opposed to an overall total of 150, is due to the fact that three of the clerks recorded manage more than one quality parish council.

QPS requires that the clerk to the council must hold either the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA), or the Certificate of Higher Education in Local Policy (LP), or Local Council Administration awarded by the University of Gloucestershire. The University of Gloucestershire supports a BA (Hons) Degree in Local Policy now renamed (July 09) Community Engagement and Governance (CEG) Foundation Degree.

Observation 3

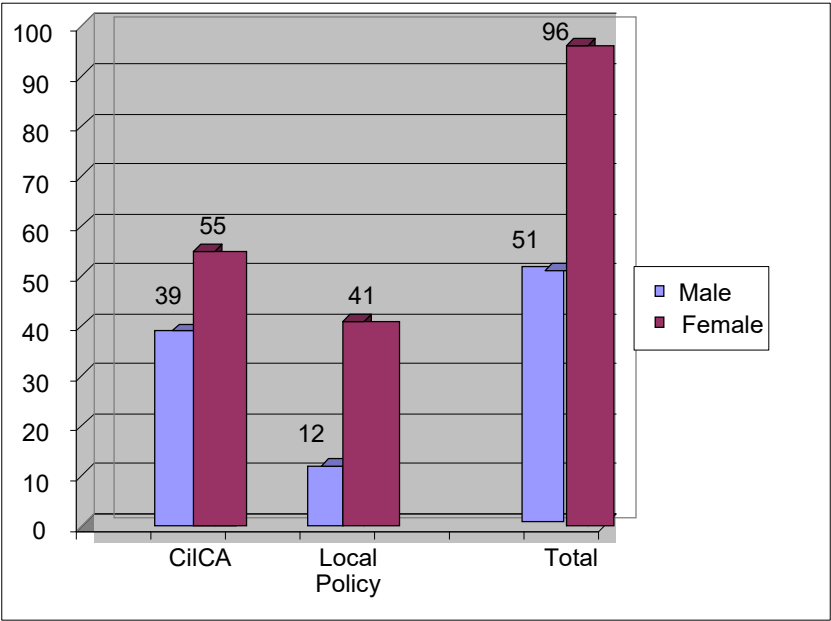


Table 5 - Qualifications

A Local Policy qualification embraces one of three levels of competency, Cert HE, Dip HE or BA (Hons) Degree. The mandatory requirement for a clerk to gain one of the two recognised qualifications sets down an important 'benchmark' for QPS. In the words of one clerk surveyed *"the process of gaining QS created a better qualified, educated and informed clerk"* whilst another stated *"gaining a pass in CiLCA was a lifetime personal experience"*.

Observation 4

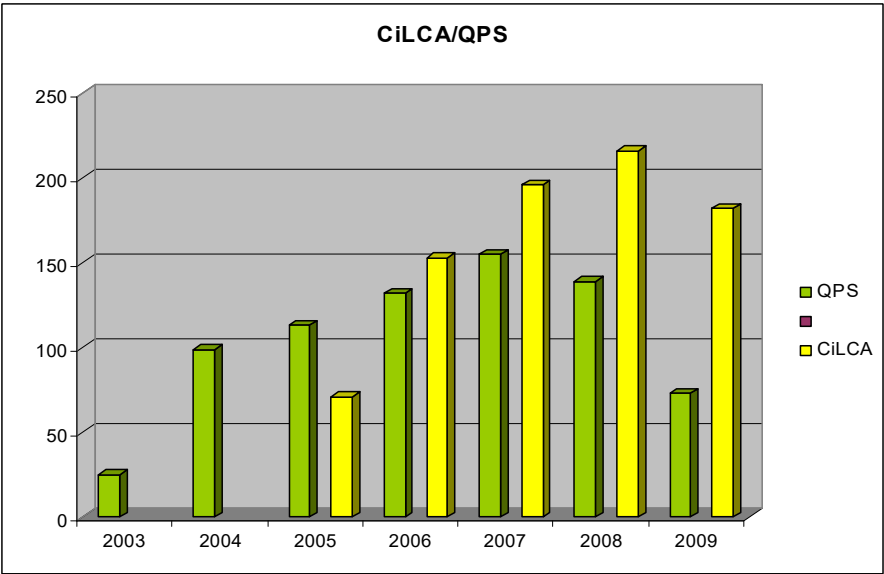


Table 6

Table 6 shows the relationship of CiLCA passes each year to that of councils securing QS. CiLCA reflects a year on year increase in CiLCA passes for 2004 through to 2008.

The number of Councils seeking accreditation for the first time significantly reduced in 2009 (73). A contributory factor for this may be the result of the additional benchmark tests that were introduced in the revised scheme (June 2008). There are two other factors that just may have an impact on the Quality parish scheme in the next two years, one being that town and parish council elections due in both 2010 and 2011. Will it assist the electoral mandate of the council, 80% elected members or will it hamper? The second factor is if the number of CiLCA passes continues to rise. The overall number of successful passes stands at 1200. (*SLCC, April 2010*). Will this increase ultimately reflect in greater numbers of accredited councils? One could be persuaded to suggest that the gaining of the qualification is a major quality benchmark indicator for the scheme, capacity building, which shows a council is working with a qualified manager.

Of the 23 responding Councils who did not seek reaccreditation (55 in total), two of the major reasons cited for not re-accrediting, was that the electoral mandate was unachievable (3) and that the clerk was not qualified to CiLCA or LP standard (6). Of those six, four were due to a change of clerk who did not have the appropriate qualification. This situation has been addressed to some degree by NALC who with the agreement of the stakeholders introduced in 2008 some flexibility in regard to this test.

It was decided that, where a council loses its qualified clerk prior to reaccreditation it can still retain Quality status if it meets the remainder of the tests. However, the council will be required to provide evidence at reaccreditation that their clerk has registered for the relevant qualification and provide further evidence within a year of the appointment of the clerk, (not within a year of the reaccreditation date) that the clerk has achieved the qualification.

In the initial accreditation period 6 respondents advised that they had been granted services by their principal authority and 9 had received as a result a form of benefit, 5 as an asset and 4 as cash ranging from £4,500 to £73,500.

Observation 5

When asked who had been responsible in completing the submission the answers given was as shown in the following table.

Clerk	Chairman	Both	Combination	Unanswered
78	3	26	8	35

Table 7

Some 86 of the 109 councils due to reaccredit in the future confirmed that they would seek re-accreditation, whereas 17 were unsure and 6 adamant that they would not. The reasons given for stating that they would not, was made entirely by the smaller category councils, who based it simply on the fact that they could not justify the costs, in time and money, of re-accreditation against the perceived benefits. Two additionally commented that they were disappointed that the “badge” did not come with benefits. This point regarding benefits was commented upon by Woods et al in their review report. (p,28 ref 3.21).

The main thrust of the questionnaire was to ask the respondents what they believed to be (a) the three major benefits of the process and (b) the three major problems, and finally (c) what if any of the application processes improved its own council's quality processes.

Table 8 outlines the answers given in regards to the important benefits of the process

Observation Six

Most Important Benefits of the Process	%
Professionalism of the clerk through training	11.00%
Recognition of training by councillors	8.50%
Review of procedures and practices	27.35%
Engagement with the electorate	24.35%
Pride in the award that recognises quality	11.25%
Other Reasons	10.55%
Nil Response	7.00%
Total	100.00%

Table 8

On examining the nil benefit responses it was clear that a number of councils, mainly of the larger council group, reinforced the view that they were already a quality council. They mitigated this view in their written response by explaining that as a larger council they would be expected by their peers to have aspired to this status. Table 9 sets out the percentages attributed to the responses which highlighted the problems experienced in the process.

Significant problems of the Process	%
Time Consuming	40.00%
Costs	7.55%
Attitude of Principal Councils	4.88%
Convincing Councillors to change	8.44%
No perceived benefits	8.22%
Other Reasons	10.88%
Nil Response	20.03%
Total	100.00%

Table 9

Almost half of the respondents quoted time and costs as a major problem undergoing the process of gaining Quality status. Frustration was expressed at the apparent lack of recognition by principal councils to the scheme, that there were no perceived benefits, and the promise of specific Charters for quality councils, in many cases was not forthcoming.

At one stage following the scheme review there was a general view expressed by those working in the sector that the Power of Well Being should only be undertaken by Quality Councils. This view was not accepted by Government on the basis that QPS was not a legislative requirement and therefore PwB should not be prescriptive.

Observation Seven

Do you consider that your council has through the process improved its quality	Yes	No
1. Increased professionalism of council procedures	68.66%	27.33%
2. Increased interest by local electorate in council affairs	29.99%	42.67%
3. Increased sense of capacity to act amongst councillors	34.67%	23.34%
4. Stronger local leadership exercised by council	39.99%	18.67%
5. Increased success with grant applications	24.67%	26.67%
6. Increased public participation at council meetings	14.00%	33.34%
7. Increased engagement with other bodies	29.34%	24.66%
8. Increased consultation over service delivery by principal local authority	18.00%	28.67%
9. Increased nominations for election/co-option	12.00%	38.67%
10. Increased consultation over planning by principal local authority	6.68%	37.33%
11. Increased delegation of funding by principal local authority	3.99%	38.67%
12. Additional responsibilities for service delivery delegated by principal local authority	1.34%	29.37%

Table 10

Despite the all too often quote from practitioners ***‘that the scheme does not bring tangible benefits’***, the research indicates the opposite. Observe for instance the response to question number one where the overall indication states there was an increase in the professionalism of council procedures. Endorsing this view is question number four, which emphasised stronger local leadership is being exercised by councils. It should be noted that a significant proportion of the questions were left unanswered as reflected in the quoted percentages.

Another emphasised benefit was that training is a vital component of the scheme for both clerk and councillor, a greater capacity to act, and enhanced community engagement. Increased public interest has not always translated into increased participation at council meetings (*Woods et al., 2006*). Increased community engagement may be the direct result of a requirement to the scheme to have increased communication with the electorate by way of Newsletters, Annual Reports and Village Web Sites. There are clear indicators in the research that the process does produce quality, performance management is an integral part of the process, and that council practices and procedures are enhanced. What is not so clear from the research undertaken is whether or not accredited councils regard the process as cyclical or merely an event that has to be undertaken as a necessity every four years.

All three of the foregoing tables indicate that the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme do bring benefits to the majority of accredited local councils. Woods et al (p.30) held a similar view when it said “*two thirds (66 percent) of councils with quality status report that they have benefited from Quality status*”. There is strong argument that the scheme should in the future build on the positives that are clearly evident from the research rather than dwell on the negatives. Stakeholders should communicate these reported benefits of Quality status to non-accredited councils in a more effective manner. It would seem that promotion of the scheme is as inadequate now as it was at time Woods et al compiled their 2006 report, otherwise surely there would be a higher number of accredited councils in the six years of the scheme than currently (694 net).

NALC when launching the original scheme in 2003 had aspirations of having 500 quality councils by 2005.

Stakeholders

Each of the stakeholders was asked amongst other questions how they individually measured the concept of quality as it related to QPS.

Crispin Moore, Executive Director, Commission for Rural Communities described what a standard does by way of an e-mailed exchange:

It provides an external, independent and verified badge of a quality standard that a council can use to show its residents and external partners

Nick Randle, Chief Executive Officer, SLCC described the same question in an e-mailed exchange:

I do believe the QP programme has given an emphasis which has improved levels of quality generally. Quality Councils have to define what they are doing to meet quality criteria that builds quality into their thinking.

Kathleen Kelliher, Team Leader, Rural Policy, Defra through an e-mailed exchange:

It ensures that they have correct management procedures, focus on consultation and promoting their community

Justin Griggs. Head of Policy & Development, NALC by way of a personal interview:

The requirements are essentially tests to show whether the Council is following best practice which should be the aspiration of every council irrespective of size.

Case Studies

The aim of this section is to investigate the views of the practitioner on how Quality status was achieved by their council, in particular to ascertain any specific views they had in respect to the process, and the views where mentioned of their councillors. As anonymity was guaranteed personal details of the contributors has been omitted. In each case six questions were asked as shown in Appendix D.

In those six case studies the response to the research questions has been set out in a composite format in order to reflect the overall views and thoughts of the correspondents

CASE STUDY 1

Parish Council Population 6556 Councillors 21 Precept £88,000

1. *I might be a cynic but I would say the council and councillors have gained very little apart from the fact that NALC now contacts us direct for our view on issues.*
2. *No, it did not improve its quality because it was just recognition of what work we had already put.*
3. *Yes it was robust enough*
4. *There haven't been any opportunities as yet to put to practical use*
5. *It would be an insult if all the hard work of the clerk was not recognised.*
6. *In 2004 I championed the quest for seeking Quality status.*

CASE STUDY 2

Parish Council Population 13,331 Councillors 9 Precept £84,850

1. *I don't think that the council and councillors have gained very much at all.*
2. *I feel we always maintain a quality standard and are recognised by neighbouring councils as an 'achieving council'.*
3. *No it was not robust enough*
4. *We purchased new IT equipment*
5. *To maintain our position as only one of two QS councils in the District.*
6. *Mainly me as the clerk with the help of two keen councillors.*

CASE STUDY 3

Parish Council Population 2640 Councillors 12 Precept £97,000

1. *The realisation that they are a 'quality' council, engagement and communications has improved as a result.*
2. *QS did improve the quality. The Annual Report was circulated for the first time.*
3. *The tests are robust enough to prove quality. The Accreditation Panels is an issue, they are not trained enough to provide consistency throughout England.*
4. *The use of the logo. Principal Authority slow to recognise the achievement.*
5. *We wished to continue to maintain standards and have them re-assessed.*
6. *Me as the clerk*

CASE STUDY 4

Town Council Population 37,000 Councillors 21 Precept £1,515,111

1. *We were successful in getting a grant to set up an Information Centre*
2. *Yes, particularly in the area of publicity.*
3. *The personal abilities of the staff and the councillors to commitment are paramount – however many checks are imposed things can slip through the net.*
4. *None. Tried to secure devolved powers but without success.*
5. *Publicity, staff morale and public participation.*
6. *The Councillors did first time round with the re-accreditation was officer driven.*

CASE STUDY 5

Town Council Population 16,660 Councillors 18 Precept £313,000

1. *The process highlighted the need to keep records and information and it was a team focus activity.*
2. *No. A kite mark does not improve quality. The recognition just recorded factual evidence that the work had been carried out.*
3. *The process is a tick box exercise. Quality should be awarded through audit and scrutiny and not just a panel of local representatives. CiLCA as a component does not indicate quality.*

4. *None – not even NALC recognises it by offering benefits such as cheaper conferences to Quality councils.*
5. *Keeping up with the Jones's. It was about raising the profile with no commensurate benefit.*
6. *Me as the clerk*

CASE STUDY 6

Town Council Population 21,500 Councillors 24 Precept £549,265

1. *It has given us an opportunity to reflect and review. Immediately we gained recognition we introduced a 'Beyond Quality Status' initiative to use QS as a platform for even better things.*
2. *No, we always liked to think we were ahead of the game in terms of quality of service but QS gave us the confidence to tell people that we were recognised as a good service provider and the residents identify with the achievement.*
3. *I do not believe that just because a Council has QS then they are deemed to provide any better service. Town and Parish Councils are so diverse in size and nature that each community will decide whether they are happy with their Councils performance with or without QS.*
4. *Through press and community celebration and that our Principal Authority recognises that we have QS*
5. *We are always looking to improve our performance, QS opens more doors than it closes*

Conclusion & Recommendations

The last section brings together the primary and secondary research that has been used to test the subject heading “**Does Quality Council Status produce Quality councils**”.

Almost all of the opinions are those of town and parish clerks. Due to the anonymity guaranteed by the author, it is strongly believed that the views expressed are a genuine reflection of the current views relating to the concept of the Quality council scheme.

The research reveals that some councils do very little, whilst others do so much more by using their various powers and duties. What is clearly evident is how much councils are driven forward by a qualified clerk through their enthusiasm, inspiration, innovation, leadership and on occasion's patient determination. Equally so it has to be recognised that this would not always be easily achieved without the necessary support of both proactive councillors and councils.

The literature review (Page 28) highlighted some six major questions on which the research was based, the answers to which are now set out in the following pages.

1. **Is a benchmark a minimum standard or a best practice standard?**

Many of the larger councils would point out that they considered the benchmark as a minimum standard which they have regularly exceeded in practice, especially if they were part of the now disbanded 'best value group'. A proportion of the larger councils accepted that the process had given them an opportunity to check that their procedures

and practices were in fact 'fit for purpose'. The smaller councils and to some extent the medium sized councils have used the process to increase their professionalism in the application of their procedures. To this extent it could be accepted that they viewed the process as an aspiration to achieve a best practice standard.

2. Has the process made the council more representative of the people?

The research indicates that councils are more representative of the people but not particularly reflecting directly as an increase in public participation at their meetings. It has been more noticeable through other factors such as the circulation of a regular newsletter, annual report, web sites and other interactive electronic methods. Almost all of the councils surveyed have websites of varying qualities. National networking events organised by the NALC and SLCC regularly have in attendance at their conferences a number of commercial companies offering such advice on e-communication. These facilities have not come without some considerable cost as was demonstrated in responses received which indicated that cost and time had been a problem in the process.

3. Has QPS increased the capacity of councillors and clerks?

QPS mandatorily requires clerks to be qualified in order to achieve the status for their councils. Tables 5 and 6 gives details of the number of clerks qualified with CiLCA and the Certificate of Local Policy (now known as CEG) or the higher levels such as the Diploma or Degree. From the year on year increase in CiLCA passes shown in Table 6 the requirement for many councils to have a qualified clerk is not seen as a deterrent to seek accreditation or indeed re-accreditation.

Many responses to the survey indicate greater awareness of their responsibilities by councillors again this is amply shown in the percentages in Table 10. Many councillors are accepting the need for training and are participating in the many courses organised by County CALCS, NALC and SLCC. The author has personal experience where nine of his councillors, from two of his three parish councils, recently completed a SLCC training programme entitled Working with your Council (WWYC), which is seen as a useful precursor programme before undertaking CiLCA.

Training is a 'wake up call' for the sector but it will never move forward with substance and belief, if it is not supported and encouraged. Firstly by councils undertaking the payment for clerk training, and secondly by government legislating that all clerks should, within a set period of time, say two years, be trained at least to a minimum of the CiLCA standard. Equally controversial is the view held by the author, that all councils irrespective of size, should aspire to Quality parish status within a five year period. This initiative would need greater commitment by government, both financial and otherwise, which unfortunately is not likely to be instigated in the present financial climate.

Improved conditions and pay for clerks was recommended by Wood et al revised report, suggestions which were actually introduced by NALC & SLCC and implemented in 2007. Is it now time to recommend that all contracts of employment should stipulate that the attaining of the required minimum qualification (s) should be mandatory within two years of a clerk being appointed? Membership by all clerks of the sector's professional organisation namely the SLCC, should also be an aspiration that is fully supported by councils

Stakeholders to the scheme should continue to jointly lobby government, if for no other reason than it would show an even stronger commitment to the process of enhancing quality through learning in our communities.

4. Is it a cyclical process or is it an event?

This question appeared to be more difficult to discern from the responses received. The research had to rely strongly on one very comprehensive response received from a highly respected practitioner that represents a large council on the South coast. Firstly it was stated there are a number of Quality councils who have formal accreditation, who are nothing of the sort. He went on to say "It is not ultimately whether a council has Q against its name, but rather what it does for its community and the extent to which the community recognises what we is done on their behalf. Future applicants to the scheme should ensure that they undertake public satisfaction surveys amongst their communities to assess the extent to which the public are satisfied with the quality of the services provided." This would, it was suggested help underline reliability and validity of the process.

The respondent finally stated that as an SLCC nominated member of a local accreditation panel, he was impressed with some of the very smallest councils who do have performance management systems in place, although they may not know them under such a title, and the extent to which they do actively engage with their public.

The conclusion therefore is that councils should have in place a regular **plan-do-revise programme**, rather than place reliance on the four yearly review in order not to be seen as just “tick-boxing” through the re-accreditation criterion.

5. Is the process of peer review robust in terms of management and administration?

Doubts were expressed by a number of respondents as to the consistency of local accreditation panels and whether or not they received training. In a number of cases the local accreditation panel did not have on its panel a practising clerk. Time taken to assess applications was another factor, where in one instance a council waited six months before being advised of the result. These concerns were also echoed by Woods et al in Chapter Six of the review report.

When asked what processes were in place to randomly check submitted portfolios, NALC reported that a panel had been set up for this very purpose. (E-Mail Mar 10) Sample portfolios were considered by National Stakeholders at two meetings in 2009, five were considered at each meeting and comments fed back to Panels, although it was reported that the standards were largely consistent.

Reassurances were sought as to what checks were made to ensure that where councils lost their accreditation all vestiges of the scheme were removed from the council's publicity material. NALC's representative pointed out that they were written too jointly by the Chairman of NALC and the Chairman of SLCC reminding them of their responsibilities to remove such material. Of the then 55 councils who had lost their

accreditation research indicated that at least three councils still sported the Q symbol on their websites.

One recommendation would be to highlight beneath the symbol the year(s) that the council achieved accreditation or re-accreditation. The other would be to strongly urge NALC to carry its checks at least four times year every year.



6. Has the process produced quality councils?

Whilst both medium and larger councils would contend that they have been delivering quality for many years irrespective of the need of a scheme to prove it, they have nevertheless still signed up for the scheme. In many cases it has been conceded that the application process provided a valuable opportunity to check that the procedures and practices were 'fit for purpose'. Equally they did not wish to be seen by their peers to be without the recognition.

The research shows that for the smaller councils the experience has been a giant leap forward, despite quoting problems that the process has been costly and time consuming. Many clerks who have undertaken the required qualifications have described the opportunity for self improvement as being a life changing experience. It

has better equipped them to undertake the roles and responsibilities required of them as managers of their communities with renewed confidence and self-belief. If this was the only benchmark of quality, it could be said that the scheme has been successful.

The various outcomes of the research indicate that stronger leadership is also being exercised by the 'quality' town and parish councils. Equally important is the knowledge that the councillors, as a result of the process, now have an increased sense of capacity to act in the best interests of their electorate. So despite the purveyors of 'doom and gloom' and the occasional pessimistic view that is promulgated, the author is firmly of the view that the findings of this dissertation can with conviction answer the central question which is "Does the Quality Parish Scheme produce Quality Councils?"

Yes it most certainly does

Appendix A

Geographical spread of Quality Councils



(NALC – 2010)

South West - 103

Avon 12, Cornwall 15, Devon 30, Dorset 8, Gloucestershire 12, Somerset 12, Wiltshire 14

South East - 150

Berkshire 2, Buckinghamshire 17, Hampshire 29, Isle of Wight 14, Kent 22, Oxfordshire 5, Surrey & Sussex 61

East of England - 173

Bedfordshire 15, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough 40, Essex 43, Hertfordshire 12, Norfolk 45, Suffolk 18

West Midlands - 79

Herefordshire 8, Shropshire 18, Staffordshire 14, Warwickshire 24, Worcestershire 15

East Midlands - 81

Derbyshire 22, Leicestershire & Rutland 12, Lincolnshire 24, Northamptonshire 12, Nottinghamshire 11

Yorkshire & the Humber – 44

East Riding and North Lincolnshire 9, Yorkshire 35

North West - 49

Cheshire 19, Cumbria 9, Lancashire 21

North East - 16

Cleveland 0, County Durham 12, Northumberland 4

Appendix B

QUALITY STATUS CRITERIA

In order for a local council to be awarded Quality Status it must pass the Quality Tests that demonstrate the following: -

TEST 1

ELECTORAL MANDATE

At least 80% of all council seats must be filled by Members who have stood for election.

TEST 2

QUALIFICATIONS OF THE CLERK

The clerk must hold a Certificate in either Local Council Administration awarded by (CiLCA) or a Certificate of Higher Education or higher in Local Policy awarded by the University of Gloucestershire.

TEST 3

COUNCIL MEETINGS

A parish council must:

- hold at least 6 meetings each year
- publicly display appropriate notices of all meetings at least 3 days before each meeting
- minutes of all meetings must be published within 2 months of the meeting and available to be inspected by any elector in the parish
- there must be a public session at each full council meeting
- unless there is a good reason for absence all councillors must attend each meeting.

TEST 4

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

A parish council must demonstrate that it effectively communicates its activities to and actively engages with the community that it represents. It will do this by producing and publishing at least 4 regular newsletters each year to local people. The newsletter must include clerk and councillor contact details and one newsletter will include an Annual Report. Newsletters must be readily available at public sites throughout the parish

In addition, the parish council must meet at least 9 of the 17 discretionary requirements that demonstrate effective communication of council activities to the public.

TEST 5

ANNUAL REPORT

The parish council must publish an Annual Report within a prescribed timescale and it must be publicly available throughout the parish.

TEST 6

ACCOUNTABILITY

Parish council accounts must be prepared in accordance with Accounts and Audit Regulations.

TEST 7

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The Parish Council must prove that it has adopted a local Code of Conduct.

Appendix C

- Electoral mandate test - Councils will be required to show that at least two-thirds of councillors were elected. 'Elected' can mean either at a contested or uncontested election. However, they must have stood.
- Council meetings test - Councils will be required to publish draft minutes of meetings within two months of it taking place and make them available for inspection by any elector in the parish, as a minimum
- Communications and Community Engagement test (Mandatory):
 - Councils will be required to have a website which provides a list of council members and officers, details of how they can be contacted and which also provides access to the annual report.
 - Councils will also be required to have an email address that is publicly available.
 - Councils now have the option of either producing their own newsletter or contributing to a community newsletter. The information that is required to be included in the newsletter has not changed nor has the requirement that the newsletter is made readily available at public sites.
- Communications and Community Engagement test (Discretionary) - Two new options have been added;
 - A Community Engagement strategy has been formulated; and
 - Councils provide a regular weblog on their website about council activity or encourage the community to talk to them through an online forum or through surveys on the website.
- Code of Conduct test - Councils will be required to have formally adopted Section 12 (2) of the Code of Conduct which concerns the prejudicial interests of councillors and public participation.
- **New test** - Promoting Local Democracy and Citizenship test - Councils will be required to demonstrate that they work proactively to support local democracy and citizenship. A specific guidance note is available showing the kinds of activities you may wish to consider. However, the note is intended to be illustrative only and we would encourage councils to be innovative.
- **New test** - Terms and Conditions - Councils with a paid clerk will be required to provide evidence that they have adopted (as a minimum) the NALC/SLCC Terms and Conditions agreement and provide evidence in the form of a statement that they have issued all paid members of staff with a contract of employment.
- **New test** - Training - Councils will be required to provide a training 'Statement of Intent' which shows that the council has identified key areas of training need for both staff and members. A specific guidance note is available to help you with this test.

BLEADON PARISH COUNCIL

www.bleadonparishcouncil.gov.uk



Clerk to the Parish

Bruce Poole

Dip. HE Local Policy; Fellow ILCM

20th June 2009

Ref: Quality Parish Status

I am just setting out to undertake some preparatory work in respect to my Local Policy Dissertation. The subject proposed will be "Does Quality Council Status produce Quality Councils"? Hence my letter to you in the hope that you will be able to find time in the next two weeks to answer the following questions:

From your personal experience and that of your council and as one of the early Councils to have obtained Quality Council Status what would you say:-

1. The Council and Councillors have gained from the process of applying?
2. Did the recognition of Quality Council Status by your council improve its quality?
3. In your view was the process involved robust enough to prove quality, if not what would you recommend that would improve the process?
4. What practical use has your Council put the recognition of QS
5. What were the reasons for seeking re-accreditation? If you have not sought re-accreditation as yet can I ask why?
6. Who championed the quest for seeking QS in the first place and why

Finally if you had to phrase one question to future applicants to the scheme that would underline the reliability and validity of the process what would you ask?

To explain further I am intending in using your responses as a pilot to a questionnaire I intend to prepare which will subsequently be sent to Town & Parish Councils who have achieved QS to date. If you wish to have your answers treated with anonymity and in confidence then do please mark them as such. Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely



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Office Hours 10.00 am – 1.00 pm Monday to Friday

Appendix E

QUESTIONNAIRE

“Does Quality Parish Council Status produce Quality Councils

IMPORTANT: PLEASE SAVE AS A FILE, COMPLETE AND RETURN VIA E-MAIL

TO: bruce.poole2@btopenworld.com

Home 01278-787687 Mobile 07887802922

Name:

Address:

Council Name:

Holder of: Please delete as appropriate - CiLCA – University of Gloucestershire qualification

Quality Council Registration Number: (if known)

Gender:

Male	Female
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Please indicate the number of elected members on council

--

Please indicate the number of staff employed by your Council

--

Please provide details of the following:-

Precept		Total Budgeted Income		Number of electors	
---------	--	-----------------------	--	--------------------	--

Can you please confirm when you first received QPS.....

1.	<p>As a result of QPS have any services been devolved to you?</p> <p>If yes what were they?</p> <p>Did they come with funding?</p> <p>If yes at what figure?</p>	<p>Yes/No</p> <p>Yes/No</p>
2.	<p>Who spearheaded the process?</p> <p>Clerk / Councillor(s) / combination / Other</p>	
3.	<p>Please answer (a) or (b)</p> <p>(a) Does your council intend to re-accredit?</p> <p>If so why?</p> <p>If not, why not?</p> <p>Please give main reason...</p> <p>(b) Did your council re-accredit when required</p> <p>If so why?</p> <p>If not, why not?</p> <p>Please give main reason...</p>	
4.	<p>What was the main learning element that your council gained from the qualification process?</p>	

5.	<p>Can you provide the three most important benefits of the process:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. <p>and the three most significant problems with the process :</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
6.	<p>Do you consider that your council has through the application process proved its quality?</p> <p>If yes please indicate which of these under mentioned are appropriate:</p> <p>Increased professionalism of council procedures</p> <p>Increased interest by local electorate in council affairs</p> <p>Increased sense of capacity to act amongst councillors</p> <p>Stronger local leadership exercised by council</p> <p>Increased success with grant applications</p> <p>Increased public participation at council meetings</p> <p>Increased engagement with other bodies</p> <p>Increased consultation over service delivery by principal local authority</p> <p>Increased nominations for election/co-option</p> <p>Increased consultation over planning by principal local authority</p> <p>Increased delegation of funding by principal local authority</p> <p>Additional responsibilities for service delivery delegated by principal local authority</p> <p>Other</p>

Commented [BP1]: Proved

	NO BENEFITS?
Any other comments:	

Thank you for your patience and time.
Do please let me know if you wish for your answers to be treated with anonymity and or in confidence.



Bruce Poole

Appendix F

Questions Posed to the following Stakeholders

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
Society of Local Councils (SLCC)
Commission for Rural Communities
Local Government Association (LGA)
National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (defra)

1. Do you consider the number of Councils who have achieved the status 675/118 since the commencement of the scheme is indicative of a successful initiative?
2. Why do you think some Councils have not applied for reaccreditation
3. The consultation carried out in 2002 by Defra paid great emphasis to the word "Quality". In your opinion has quality been achieved by those Councils with the status
4. How does NALC measure Quality
5. I have carried out a sample test of 10 Town Councils and 10 Parish Councils to which currently I have received an 80% response. All of whom indicate that they were in their view a Quality Council before this badging exercise was undertaken
How do you see/read/view this comment
6. Where do you see the scheme going in the next 5 years
7. It is evident from the responses received that the Councils value having the badge on their letterheads. Was this all it was meant to be?
8. Could the process/achievement be improved?
9. Is the process of obtaining the status robust enough?
10. What with hindsight would you change to improve

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