

## **GOING FOR GOLD – OUR JOURNEY TO A QUALITY AWARD**

Jennie Thomas, chief officer and parish clerk at Stone Parish Council

Award schemes are generally used to support the credibility of a sector, help people feel their work is valued, improve morale, boost the profile, and solidify an organisation's reputation through third-party endorsement.

Councils may also have their aims for seeking an award. There may be a desire to reassure the community about standards, receive recognition following a period of achievement or growth, or add gravitas to aid negotiations with other bodies.

Our first award was in 2008, when we were accredited with Quality Parish Status. Following my appointment in 2007, the council embarked on a period of transformation, most significantly in its approach to digital communications. We became early adopters of social media, email marketing and survey software and implemented a regular and robust community engagement strategy which ensured we met award criteria.

A huge benefit of receiving third-party endorsement at that time was council reassurance that recent changes were commendable, which helped establish an effective relationship between me, a new clerk, and council members who saw we were on the right path to improvement. Subsequently, we won NALC's Digital Communications of the Year award in 2015.

When the Quality Parish Scheme was relaunched as the Local Council Award Scheme (LCAS), the Council automatically attained Foundation level, which expired in 2019 during workforce restructure. The emergence of Covid in 2020 required our focus on community support, meaning we only started undertaking the re-accreditation process in 2021.

However, this proved yet another beneficial process which engaged long-standing and newer members of the workforce in a joint activity, with the internal review required to complete the application of an adequate developmental tool embedding comprehension of standards across the workforce and council.

When compiling our recent submission, the benefit of the engagement processes implemented in 2007 was clear and continued to support the council's ability to meet the criteria. Effective communication has enabled meaningful dialogue between the council and the community on local needs, receipt of feedback about our performance and support for strategic objectives.

Our annual budget is set around these priorities, and ongoing conversation ensures the community is informed about delivery. Communication about precepts is much easier when the community is seen to be directly influencing it.

However, applying for an award can take you out of your comfort zone - you must be prepared to self-examine practice and culture, which may not be usual and could uncover some uncomfortable truths.

Being honest if the council needs to meet specific standards to identify root causes is critical. Resolution of these will stand the council in good stead moving forward.

Fundamentally, LCAS forces consideration of performance against elector expectations and should be regarded as an excellent benchmarking exercise.

If scale, budget, or time restrict the ability to meet criteria at quality or gold, this should encourage councils to seek foundation level. Feedback from the panel and the pathway to the next level provides a practical blueprint for a development strategy.

With local elections coming up in some areas, it is an ideal time to consider using the scheme as a post-election health check for the council. The framework provides invaluable support for the clerk and councillors to establish rapport and achieve consensus on direction against nationally agreed standards.

The confidence boost to an organisation achieving an award should also not be underestimated.

There is an investment of time and a small amount of money, but the benefits of undertaking the LCAS submission process were worth their weight in 'quality' gold.

### **Tips for councils considering applying**

Learn from others. Research councils that have attained the level you are applying for to see how they achieved it. What have best practices been adopted? How are good leadership and governance demonstrated? What impact has this had on their community?

Coordinate the work. If resources allow, nominate one person to oversee the application and compile the required evidence. This will still require input and support from others, and the whole team should be invested in achieving the best outcome.

Allow plenty of time. Collating evidence takes longer than expected and is easier to break down into chunks. More than one council meeting may be needed to adopt policies, review evidence, and confirm that all is in place.

Study NALC's LCAS application guide to ensure the council meets relevant criteria. Consider attending NALC's training event, Preparing an Award-Winning Application, which supplied helpful tips and information about preparing the application.

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