

THE LOCAL COUNCIL AWARD SCHEME

The Local Council Award Scheme exists to celebrate the successes of the very best local councils, and to provide a framework to support all local councils to meet their full potential. All local councils want to serve their local communities and make a real difference to the lives of the people that live there. This scheme offers councils the opportunity to show that they meet the standards set by the sector, assessed by their peers, and to put in place the conditions for continued improvement.

The Local Council Award Scheme has been designed to both provide the tools and encouragement to those councils at the beginning of their improvement journeys, as well as promoting and recognising councils that are at the cutting edge of the sector. It is only through the sector working together to share best practice, drive up standards and supporting those who are committed to improving their offer to their communities that individual councils and the sector as a whole will reach its full potential.

The scheme was created in 2014 and is managed on behalf of local councils by the Improvement and Development Board (IDB).

Councils can apply for an award at one of three levels.

- The **Foundation Award** demonstrates that a council meets requirements for operating lawfully and according to standard practice.
- The **Quality Award** demonstrates that a council achieves good practice in governance, community engagement and council improvement.
- The **Quality Gold Award** demonstrates that a council is at the forefront of best practice and achieves excellence in governance, community leadership and council development.

The scheme sets out criteria to meet at each level covering selected aspects of the council's work. Councils can seek to progress through the tiers over time thereby raising standards. Councils of any size can aspire to an award appropriate for their budget and level of activity.

To support transparency, every award level has a requirement for certain information to be published online (plus some information that does not need to be published). In all instances the council confirms that the required documents, information and conditions are in place (whether published or not) by resolution in public at a full council meeting. For **Quality Gold**, councils also provide statements for submission to the panel demonstrating excellence in their activities. The panel may ask for additional information to check the accuracy of claims.

Sacriston Parish Council hopes to achieve the Foundation Award in the summer of 2017.

The Foundation Award

To achieve a Foundation Award a council demonstrates that it has the documentation and information in place for operating lawfully and according to standard practice. The council also has policies for training for its councillors and officers and building a foundation for improvement and development.

The council confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it publishes online:

- 1 Its standing orders and financial regulations
- 2 Its Code of Conduct and a link to councillors' registers of interests
- 3 Its publication scheme
- 4 Its last annual return
- 5 Transparent information about council payments
- 6 A calendar of all meetings including the annual meeting of electors
- 7 Minutes for at least one year of full council meetings and (if relevant) all committee and sub-committee meetings
- 8 Current agendas
- 9 The budget and precept information for the current or next financial year
- 10 Its complaints procedure
- 11 Council contact details and councillor information in line with the Transparency Code
- 12 Its action plan for the current year
- 13 Evidence of consulting the community
- 14 Publicity advertising council activities
- 15 Evidence of participating in town and country planning

The council also confirms by resolution at a full council meeting that it has:

- 16 A risk management policy
- 17 A register of assets
- 18 Contracts for all members of staff
- 19 Up-to-date insurance policies that mitigate risks to public money
- 20 Disciplinary and grievance procedures
- 21 A policy for training new staff and councillors
- 22 A record of all training undertaken by staff and councillors in the last year
- 23 A clerk who has achieved 12 CPD points in the last year

If this evidence is not posted online, the panel may ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

The council notifies the accreditation panel co-ordinator when the resolution has been agreed and provides a completed application form, including webpage addresses to where the information can be found online.

What is the accreditation panel looking for?

The panel seeks assurance that a council acts lawfully and according to standard practice. Unless it is a matter of law, the panel is not making a judgement on the quality of the evidence at this level; it simply confirms that the documentation and information is in place, up-to-date and complies with the guidance below. For those documents that are not posted up online, the panel may ask to see the evidence if it is considered necessary.

- All policies should comply with current legislation and guidance and note the date of the next review.
- **Standing orders, financial regulations, the Code of Conduct, publication scheme and complaints procedure** are public documents tailored to the specific council. Standing orders or financial regulations explain procedures for contracts and internal controls. There should be evidence of all policies and procedures demonstrating compliance with [The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014](#) including an open media policy which does not restrict engagement with the press. For councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 they also demonstrate compliance with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities..
- The council does not need to publish the councillors' **registers of interests** on their own website provided that there is a working link to the complete register of all councillors' interests on the principal authority's website.
- The council's website should include the name of the clerk and **contact details** (address, phone, e-mail) for the council as a corporate body. It should also publish the names of councillors and councillors' responsibilities in compliance with the [Local Government Transparency Code](#).
- The council posts up a scanned copy of the last **annual return**. The panel checks that the council has a limited assurance (unqualified) opinion from the external auditor; the opinion may contain recommendations for consideration as long as a qualified opinion is not given. The panel checks the arrangements for internal audit and internal controls. From 2017, councils with an annual turnover of less than £25,000 will not be required to submit their annual return for audit. Panels check that these councils comply with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities.
- **Information on all payments** must be transparent and in accordance with financial regulations and statutory proper practices. The panel will check the minutes of meetings, financial regulations, the annual return (if relevant) and compliance with the Local Government Transparency Code.
- The **calendar** (in any format) includes the Annual Meeting of the Council and the Annual Parish/Town Meeting and both meetings must be held during the correct statutory period. The calendar also shows that the council has at least four full council meetings a year.
- Similarly the **minutes** for full council meetings over the last year include the Annual Meeting of the Council. If relevant, the council also posts up the minutes of its Finance Committee to demonstrate transparency according to statutory regulations and of its Planning Committee showing that procedures for reviewing planning applications are correct. The panel checks that minutes and **agendas** demonstrate the lawful convening of meetings and decision making and that all meetings allow the public to make representations to the council.

- The council can post up the current or next year's **budget** (or both). Budget documents would normally show columns comparing the year in question with the two previous years; they include information on income and expenditure (or receipts and payments) and show how the precept was calculated.
- The council must publish an **action plan**; as a minimum this is a one-page document listing the council's objectives for the current year. It is not a parish plan which is a plan for the future of the community; the council can extract objectives for action from the parish plan depending on its areas of responsibility.
- The panel seeks at least one piece of evidence from council publicity that it consults and actively serves its community. Publicity might include an annual report, web material or news bulletins. The information gives a flavour of any council **activity** such as lobbying principal authorities, giving grants to community groups, the provision of a service or helping with community events. For guidance, councils can refer to [The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#). Similarly any form of **consultation** is suitable including surveys, online polls, focus groups or public meetings.
- Council documents demonstrate that the council participates in the **planning system** by, for example, commenting on planning applications or working on a neighbourhood plan. Decisions on planning matters must be made in properly convened meetings and, if required, by delegation to a committee. Some decisions may be delegated to an officer.
- The panel may wish to check that insurance policies have been reviewed and are up-to-date and that the council recognises insurance as a way of mitigating risks to public money. The panel does not seek to judge the appropriateness of the insurance policies themselves
- **Contracts, disciplinary/grievance procedures, a risk management policy and register of assets** can be based on a model but tailored to the specific council. They are not published.
- A **training policy** for new staff and councillors can be a short statement of intent while a **training record** gives dates, titles and providers of development activities undertaken by named individuals in the last year, including, for example, updating events, online courses, CPD activity and qualifications. Councillors should note that they should undertake training on financial management for which they are all responsible. In particular, the **clerk's** training record includes evidence of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) such as training, conference attendance, mentoring and studying for qualifications. CPD points are allocated according to a system published by the IDB.

A guide to the accreditation process

The Local Council Award Scheme is a form of peer review. Councils are reviewed by experienced peers through the work of a local accreditation panel. The aim of this accreditation process is to be as simple, efficient and flexible as possible. It also seeks to ensure that every council that wishes to take part in the scheme is able to, and is assessed in a reasonably consistent way.

Registration

The council registers its intention to apply for a specified award online at <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/improvement-and-development/local-council-award-scheme> . The contact at NALC for this stage is the Improvement and Development Manager, Charlotte Eisenhart, who can also be contacted at charlotte.eisenhart@nalc.gov.uk or 020 7290 0319.

The council pays a registration fee to NALC to cover the costs of managing the national scheme, including: administration, national online resources, quality assurance and review processes. NALC provides the applicant with a template application form and the contact details of the co-ordinator of the appropriate accreditation panel. NALC provides the panel co-ordinator with information of the council's application.

When a council is ready to make its application to the accreditation panel, it notifies the panel co-ordinator that the council has passed a resolution confirming that all the documentation and information is in place for a specified award and submits the application form, including supporting documentation where relevant, via email.. The council also pays the accreditation fee which covers the costs administering the local service. The local panel co-ordinator keeps a record of all applications and monitors their progress.

When the accreditation panel makes its decision it informs the council. It also completes an online form to allow NALC to update national records.

Online connectivity

The Award Scheme requires councils to publish certain information and documents online. In exceptional circumstances a council may not be able to put documents online because of poor digital connectivity in the local area. In this case, the council applies to the panel co-ordinator for permission to submit evidence for an award in an alternative format. The co-ordinator must be confident that poor digital connectivity is the problem rather than an unwillingness to use an online service for publishing council documents.

The accreditation panel

The accreditation panel is set up a County Association or a regional group of County Associations. The aim of any panel arrangement is to facilitate training, promote consistency and help manage the workload. Where an individual County Association is unable to support the scheme, a council will be able to submit their application to an appropriate neighbouring or regional panel. County Associations may adapt the accreditation process to fit local need. They are able to discuss this with the Improvement and Development Manager at the National Association of Local Councils, for support and guidance.

The panel co-ordinator manages a pool of up to ten potential panel members, in the expectation that between three and five members are required to review each application. The panel includes experienced councillors and clerks as well as someone independent of the sector with an understanding of local government. Panel membership should be reviewed by the panel coordinator every two years.

At the beginning of the accreditation process a panel is drawn together from the pool of potential members. The panel could choose a lead panellist or chair if needed to facilitate decision making. All panel members are expected to use email or an online service to read a council's documents and also act in the spirit of a Code of Conduct; for example, they do not assess an award for their own or a neighbouring council.

The accreditation panel determines how often an accreditation process occurs, or an appropriate trigger for this to take place. For example, a panel may decide to convene every two months or may wait until the receipt of 10 applications (as long as this is no later than two months after an application has been received). Panels should note that all costs of administering the panels must be met from application fees. So, to minimise costs, the panel can convene and conduct its business remotely rather than face-to-face. The resources provided by NALC will support this way of working. The local panels have discretion over the detail of how they organise the accreditation process.

In consultation with the panel coordinators, NALC will provide regularly updated guidance and support for accreditation panels.

The accreditation process

The emphasis of the scheme is on encouraging and supporting the improvement of councils. The aim of the panel is therefore to help councils to achieve awards and panels are urged to be constructive.

The panel checks that the criteria for the relevant award have been met in published and/or requested information. Most documents and information will be posted on a website. Where it is not appropriate for a document or information to be on a website, the panel is permitted to ask to see electronic versions.

As all information and documents are available online or in electronic format, the panel's work can be done without meeting. Each member of the panel completes a form showing their responses to the co-ordinator. The co-ordinator reviews the completed forms from the panel who decide whether additional information or documents are required. Panel members do not need to examine every document in detail but are advised to carry out spot checks enabling them to make recommendations.

For Quality Gold, the panel may wish to discuss the council's activities with councillors, or staff or visit the parish but the cost of doing so must be covered by the fee.

The outcome

When the panel is satisfied that it has seen sufficient information, the findings are presented in a report agreed by the panel. The panel makes one of three recommendations to the council:

- The Award is achieved.
- The Award is achieved but the council is advised to make some small changes.
- The Award is not achieved until specified improvements have been made

If a council has applied for a higher award but has not achieved all the criteria, the panel can award a lower award if appropriate.

The aim of the scheme is to be supportive and help councils achieve the status they have applied for and so it is expected that achieving a lower (or no) award would be an exceptional circumstance. The panel should let the council know as soon as possible if it appears that they have omitted necessary evidence or it appears likely that they will not achieved the award, and the council should be given some time to respond to that feedback.

The co-ordinator informs the council of the outcome within two months of being notified of the application. They also inform NALC of the outcome and successful councils are included in a published list. NALC issues a certificate and provides resources to help the council celebrate and promote their achievement which is sent to the council and panel co-ordinator

Councils and accreditation panels will be contacted by NALC for feedback on the process and the benefits of receiving the awards.

A council may appeal to the IDB (with an additional fee) if it feels that the panel's decision is unjustified. The IDB will appoint two representatives to review the appeal and the IDB's decision is final.

Upgrading accreditation, re-accreditation and removal of accreditation

Accreditation lasts for four years.

Applying for a higher award

- If a council wishes to apply for a higher award, it makes a fresh registration and application.
- A council can make a fresh application for a higher award at any time. If this is within one year of the previously successful accreditation, the panel does not need to revisit evidence that was previously approved.

Re-accreditation

- The council may seek re-accreditation at the same level after four years. If it does not achieve a new accreditation or re-accreditation before the four-year end-date, it loses its award.

Removal of accreditation

- The council is expected to maintain its reputation by meeting the criteria throughout the four years.
- Although some circumstances may change, the council will not lose its award unless a significant event such as an audit, employment tribunal, court case or police investigation demonstrates the council's poor performance. In this case, a panel co-ordinator asks the IDB to appoint two representatives to review the situation. The IDB assesses the severity of the case before deciding whether to impose a sanction which may include the removal of all awards or returning the council to a lower award.
- The council can appeal to the IDB if the decision to remove an award is taken in which case two different IDB representatives review the case and their decision is final.

Fees

There are two fees:

- A **registration fee** paid to the National Association of Local Councils
- An **accreditation fee** paid to the organisation responsible for administering the local or regional accreditation process.

The **registration fee** paid to NALC is £50 paid by all councils for each level regardless of size.¹

The **accreditation fee**² varies according to

- the award applied for
- the income of the council
- the council's accreditation history

	annual income under £25,000	annual income over £25,000
Foundation Standard:	£50	£80
Quality Standard:	£80	£100
Quality Gold:	£100	£200

The accreditation fee covers the cost of the accreditation panel decision making process only. County Associations may charge additional costs for advice, training or support of applications. Those services and fees will be determined locally.

The IDB will review fee levels annually.

The fee is reduced by 20% if the council sought accreditation at a lower level within the previous 12 months as the checking process covering criteria for the previous standard requires less work.

¹ All figures quoted are excluding VAT.

² The figures quoted are the discounted rates for members of NALC. Both the registration fee and accreditation fee are reduced by 50% for member councils. Non-member councils must pay the full fee ie double the figures quoted in this grid.

Evaluation and Improvement

The aim of the evaluation and improvement process is to allow councils to feel ownership of the scheme, and to see the scheme changing to meet the feedback and needs expressed by the sector. It should also allow the scheme to be dynamic and able to respond over time to changes in the sector, national policy and other relevant issues.

Quality assurance

Twice a year, representatives of the IDB will check at random a small sample of awards by carrying out spot checks of documents and information posted on a council's website. The findings will not affect a council's award but will be used to improve the training for accreditation panels and to inform regular reviews of the scheme.

Evaluation

At the end of each accreditation process the council and the panel will be sent a short evaluation questionnaire. This will aim to gather feedback on the process, the criteria, the resources provided by NALC and how they could be improved.

One year after accreditation the council will be contacted again. The council will be encouraged to apply for the next level of award, to make use of the fee discount. The council will also be asked to describe the benefits they have felt from being accredited by the scheme and their feedback on the scheme as a whole.

Improvement

The feedback collected will be used to inform improvements to the scheme. The whole scheme, including the content and accreditation process, will be reviewed every year. These reviews will alternate between.

- A light touch approach only making urgent required changes where these are considered critical to the scheme.
- A wider ranging review aiming to best address collected feedback from all parties.

The Improvement and Development Board will oversee all changes to the scheme