

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

Practice and Guidance Note: 1

**Title: PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS RECORDS:
HOW TO MANAGE AND LOOK AFTER THEM**

INTRODUCTION

Parish and town clerks in the course of their work are responsible for a wide range of records. Many of these are of limited importance and can be disposed of after a number of years; others, however, are of potential historical significance and need to be preserved permanently. In this Practice and Guidance Note advice is given on how to look after local council records, and how to decide which ones should be preserved permanently and which ones can be disposed of safely in the parish.

STORAGE and CARE of RECORDS

Since many of the records kept by parish and town clerks will eventually be transferred to a record office for permanent preservation, it is desirable that good quality 'archival' materials are used in their creation and storage and that they are kept, while still in the town or parish, in the right sort of condition. A few basic guidelines on how to look after records are given below. Further advice can be obtained from the County Record Office.

Many modern papers are made from wood pulp; they are acidic, and become brittle and darken to a yellow-brown colour when exposed to air pollution. Non-acidic archival quality papers are however becoming more and more widely available and, if possible, these should be used for records which will be preserved permanently such as council minutes.

Council minutes can be kept in a number of ways. Paragraph 41 of Schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 requires the minutes to be entered in a book kept for the purpose. Looseleaf minute books are lawful provided that the pages are consecutively numbered and initialled by the person signing the minutes at the time of signature. Although minutes may be produced and/or stored on a computer/wordprocessor hard and/or floppy disk, the minute book remains the **ONLY** lawful and authentic record. If kept looseleaf the minutes can be bound, or placed in card folders of files either loose or secured with some non-rusting material such as tape. Alternatively, they can be kept for day-to-day use in ring binders. They should not however be stuck into volumes using adhesive tape or glue as the adhesive can deteriorate and discolour; also the volumes tend to become too fat and their binding can break.

Files, ideally, should be of archival quality card but commercial card files and folders may also be used. If they are stored in box files, they should preferably be kept flat; it is also important to remove any metal clamps and springs from files and box files as these can rust. Plastic bags should not be used for the storage of records; rubber bands and string should also be avoided.

Records can be harmed by being stored in the wrong conditions. They should be kept in a cool, clean and dry environment, out of direct sunlight. Good ventilation is also desirable.

RETENTION and DISPOSAL of RECORDS

The schedule to this Practice and Guidance Note lists the main types of parish and town council records and gives recommendations for their retention and disposal. The following notes provide an explanation of the terms used in the schedule and give additional guidance to clerks on how to assess the records in their care.

Records to be preserved permanently (P)

Records in this category when no longer regularly consulted in the parish or town should be deposited in the appropriate record office. They are generally easy to identify; the obvious examples are the main series of signed council and committee minutes and the receipts and payments books. Other records, however, may be less easy to select; in particular correspondence files on important local issues and planning applications and papers for major or controversial developments. Here individual clerks should be best placed to judge which documents relate to significant or contentious local issues about which more detailed information needs to be preserved. The following points, however, may assist clerks:

1. Minutes:

Where full and detailed minutes are kept there should be less need to preserve large amounts of correspondence.

2. Filing System:

A filing system arranged by subject can ease considerably the process of selecting material on important issues. It is essential that parish and town councils have an effective filing system for correspondence, documents and other records. Councillors as well as the clerk should know where papers received and sent are filed and stored and how they can be accessed. Filing is time consuming but necessary. A file index is recommended with a file reference on all correspondence sent. The file reference should start with the name of the council (in full or abbreviated) and then refer to the file on which the copy of the letter is stored. If files are arranged by subject then the reference could read, for example: Stretham/Highways. If a numbered filing system is used then the file reference could read, for example: Stretham/100 (ie: highways). Some filing systems categorise subjects and then allocate numbers, for example: organisation (100-199); administration (200-299); finance (300-399); welfare (400-499); general (500-599). The file reference could then read, as in the above example: Stretham/100/Org. (ie: highway matters) or Stretham/200/Admin. (ie: playing field maintenance).

3. Planning Papers:

- a) Where planning permission is granted, the planning application, any plans and the decision letter should normally be retained together until the development has been completed so that, if required, the council can check that the development proceeds in accordance with the terms and conditions of the permission. Where planning permission is granted on appeal, a copy of the appeal decision should also be retained likewise. It may sometimes be sensible to retain an appeal decision indefinitely because of wider implications (eg: the decision may set a precedent for other developments in the locality).
- b) Where planning permission is refused, the file should be retained until the period within which an appeal can be made has expired. If an appeal is made, and dismissed, the decision letter may, as in (a) above, be worth retaining against further applications relating to the same site.
- c) Where a substantial number of planning applications come before the council, it may well be advisable to keep a card index, or similar system of record. The Model Standing Orders for Local Councils issued by NALC require the clerk to enter in a book kept for the purpose the following particulars of every planning application notified to the council:

- i. The date on which it was received
- ii. The name of the applicant
- iii. The place to which it relates
- iv. A summary of the nature of the application

It is recommended that the reference number for the planning application and decisions of the parish/town council, district council and, if an appeal, the planning inspector also be entered in the book.

- d) Copies of Structure Plans, Local Plans and similar documents should be retained as long as they are in force.

4. 'File 13 Material' (Wastebin):

Important files can often become overloaded with material of an ephemeral nature; it is a good idea, therefore, to remove such papers from files at regular intervals.

5. Photographic Copies:

Any requirement imposed by statute upon a local authority to keep a document is satisfied by keeping a photographic copy, except that where colour is relevant to the interpretation of the document, for example in a plan, a photograph will suffice only if it distinguishes between the colours so as to enable the document to be interpreted.

Records to be reviewed by the County Archivist for possible permanent preservation (R)

Records in this category should be passed to the County Archivist for review, either when the prescribed minimum retention period is over, or when they are no longer required in the parish or town for administrative purposes.

Records which may be destroyed by the parish or town clerk (D)

A large number of parish and town records, mainly financial, may be safely disposed of by the parish or town clerk, usually after a minimum retention period prescribed for audit or other statutory purposes. Where no minimum retention period is given records in this category may be destroyed when they are no longer required in the parish or town for administrative purposes.

CONCLUSION

It is good practice, and probably essential for larger councils, to review the council's documentation at least annually. Anything that is no longer of use or value can be destroyed, but if a council is in doubt on this point it should seek advice from CALC and retain the document(s) until that advice has been received. Documents of historical importance, if not retained by the council, should be offered first to the County Record Office. The County Archivist there will always be willing to advise on which records should be permanently preserved.

*The majority of information in this document has been copied with
kind permission from a Hampshire County Record Office document*

Record:	Action:	Minimum retention period (where applicable)	Reason
Administration			
Minutes of council meeting (signed series)	P	Indefinite	Archives
Reports and other documents circulated with agendas	R (but if copies are with included with signed Minutes D)		
Agendas	D (but if minutes do not survive P)		
Councillors' declarations of office	D (but if minutes do not survive P)		
Nominations forms for parish council elections	D (but if minutes do not survive P)		
Byelaws and orders	P (one copy of each)	Indefinite	Audit, Management
- Title deeds	P	Indefinite	Audit, Management
Property registers and terriers, including register and plans of allotments.	P	Indefinite	Audit, Management
Maps, plans and surveys of property owned by the council or meeting.	P	Indefinite	Archives
Correspondence and papers on important local issues or activities.	P	Indefinite	Archives
Correspondence	D	See Finance	Audit
Planning applications and related papers for major controversial developments; also planning appeal decisions.	P	Indefinite	
Leases, agreements, contracts and wayleaves	P	Indefinite	Audit, Management
Quotations and tenders for major works	R	12 years/Indefinite	Statute of Limitation
*Quotations and tenders for minor works	D	12 year	Statute of Limitation
Unsuccessful tenders	D	3 years	
Routine correspondence and papers	D	Retain as long as useful and relevant	

Record:	Action:	Minimum retention period (where applicable)	Reason
Wages books	D	12 years	Superannuation Statute of Limitations
Members allowances register	D	6 years	TAX: Statute of Limitations
Records relating to parish halls, centres and recreation grounds; applications to hire, lettings diaries, copies of bills to hirers and records of tickets issued.	D	6 years	VAT
Precept books and contribution orders	D	Retain as long as of value	
Miscellaneous			
Maps created under the provision of the Rights of Way Act 1992	P	Indefinite	Archives
Community magazines/newsletters Local Council Review	D (one copy of each issue)	5 years	
Press cuttings books	P	Indefinite	
Photographs	P	Indefinite	
Any records dating from before 1894 now held by the town or parish council or parish meeting (e.g: poor law and surveyor's records, enclosure awards etc).	P	Indefinite	
Records of other bodies such as burial boards, charities, fire brigades, Home Guard units, local societies and <i>ad hoc</i> committees	P (but ephemeral records R/D (see Administration & Finance))		
ALL Burial ground records (registers, plans, applications for interments and memorials and copy certificate of grant of exclusive right of burial)	P	Indefinite	Archives Cemeteries Orders and Regulations
Reports, guides, handbooks etc received by the parish council from other bodies including circulars and 'Bulletin' from CALC.	R/D	Retain as long as useful	

Record:	Action:	Minimum retention period (where applicable)	Reason
Planning applications and related papers for minor works where permission is granted	D	Retain until development has been completed.	
Planning applications and related papers for minor works where permission is refused.	D	Retain until period within which an appeal can be made has expired.	
Scales of fees and charges	D	5 years	Management
Insurance policies	D	Retain while valid.	Management
Finance			
Receipt and payment books	P	Indefinite	Archives
Vouchers before 1950	R	Indefinite	Archives
Investments	P	Indefinite	Audit, Management
Financial returns to district auditors	D (but if general accounts do not survive P)		Audit
Cash and petty cash books, and rent books	D (but if general accounts do not survive R)	6 years	TAX, VAT Statute of Limitations.
Receipt books of all kinds	D	6 years	VAT
Postage and telephone books	D	6 years	TAX, VAT Statute of Limitations
Bank statements, including deposit/savings accounts	D	Last completed audit year	Audit
Bank paying-in books and cheque book stubs	D	Last completed audit year	Audit
Paid invoices	D	6 years	VAT
Paid cheques	D	6 years	Statute of Limitations
VAT records	D	6 years	VAT
Time sheets	D	Last completed audit year	Audit