# Rushbury Parish Council
## Education and Training Strategy

## Introduction

Training may be seen as providing individuals and organisations with new and updated essential knowledge and skills. This should be broadened to include the wider concept of education concerned with acquiring both knowledge and skills and understanding and modifying attitudes. Parish councils have been seen traditionally as an enthusiastic group of willing amateurs engaged in reactive decision making based on uncertain knowledge but a Quality Parish Council should be proactive and decision making should be evidence based with access to the best possible information including the opinions of the electors. To achieve and sustain this requires the continuing education of clerks and members. A qualified clerk has a sound knowledge of procedures but new legislation is enacted, organisations change and technology progresses requiring a constant updating of knowledge and skills. Members come from different backgrounds with a wide variety of attitudes, knowledge and skills but these too will require updating and they will need to acquire new knowledge of the workings of the council and of their general and particular responsibilities. If a parish council is to discharge its duties and responsibilities with due diligence then it must ensure the continuing education of staff and members.

## Educational Methods

Education should be viewed in its broadest sense; it is not just going to training events. The following should all be considered:

- **private study**, this includes not only reading books, but also internet articles, newspapers and radio and television programmes

- **self help**, a group session which may take various forms such as one member with expertise passing this on to others or a journal club approach where members research a topic and then lead a group discussion or a review session where a decision is discussed and better practice identified; these sessions will often benefit from an external facilitator

- a **training session** or series of sessions provided by an outside agency on a particular topic or related topics, attended by individuals or the whole group

- an **extended comprehensive course**, often delivered by distance learning, typically with assessment and leading to a qualification .

## Identifying Need

How do we know what we don't know and can't do?  Some needs are obvious such as those of new members with no previous experience on parish councils.  Individuals will experience problems associated with lack of skills for example in the area of information technology.  A comprehensive identification of need requires a more structured approach.  Individuals should be encouraged to consider honestly their strengths and weaknesses, this must include attitudes as well as knowledge and skills.  Attitudes may be difficult to change but if recognized then due allowance may be made.  An external facilitator will assist this process and formal professional psychometric testing may be helpful.  In some circumstances formal assessment of knowledge and skills may be required.

The group should also consider its collective knowledge base; are there any black holes that should be filled?  It may be useful to consider group dynamics and the roles played by the members at various times.  The insight provided  might enlighten the decision making processes.  Again external facilitation is useful or perhaps essential in this work.

## Training Resources

There is a cost to training.  This may fall principally on the individual in the form of time and materials for private study and self help.  However access to external courses and facilitation will be required and this must be identified in the council budget.  It is also important to consider the pooling of resources by councils which can reduce overall cost.  Clearly they may come together for a training event.  However it is possible to share knowledge and good practice through publication, including the internet, and by a 'buddy' system whereby councils will join together for activities such as audit and mentoring.  SALC is in a good position to facilitate this.  In this way it should be possible to keep the training budget element of the precept at a level acceptable to the electorate.

## Monitoring

There are two questions that may be asked.  Has training happened?  What effect has it had?  Monitoring the process of training is relatively easy to do by the use of attendance certificates, notes of audit meetings and personal log books.  Monitoring the outcome is much more difficult, the principal difficulties being the determination of reliable end points and the correct attribution of observed change to the intervention.  Changes in attitude may be measured by before and after studies and factual knowledge and skills tested by the traditional assessment methods.  However these may be regarded as extreme and unnecessary in the context of a parish council.  What matters most is that the council is doing its job better, by accurately assessing local needs,

formulating good policies, delivering cost effective services and taking informed decisions. This is probably best monitored by auditing, internal and external, and ultimately at the ballot box.

---

**Example 2 Audit with External Facilitator**

A parish council that aspires to Quality Status has formed links with a nearby council in a similar situation. It decides to audit its budget setting and invites a member of its partner council to attend its meeting to facilitate this. Two projects by local groups are both requesting funding from the parish council. Representatives from the groups are invited to the meeting to make presentations. The merits of each case are duly discussed during the budget setting item and decisions are made. The facilitator views the meeting from the point of view of an experienced observer and notes points of good practice and areas for improvement that may be raised in discussion later.

A week later an audit meeting is held with council members, the clerk and facilitator. The facilitator is not there as a judge but as an equal although 'disinterested' observer to point out problems, particularly of process, that the council members themselves may not have noticed while concentrating on the issues for decision. They attempt to look at all aspects of the meeting for example, do the draft minutes accurately and completely reflect the discussion, did the Chairman manage the meeting well by making sure that everyone was able to contribute, that contributions were relevant and that clear decisions were taken. It was noted that one group presentation was much more professional than the other and it was felt this could have influenced the funding decision unduly in relation to the underlying benefit to the community of the proposals. It was decided that it would have been helpful in overcoming this problem if a council member had worked with each of the groups so as to become fully familiar with their proposals. The members considered their prior attitudes to the subjects of the projects and considered if they clouded their judgement of the evidence presented to them. It was also decided that decisions would have been easier and better had the council set a program budget, allocating amounts to particular policy areas, prior to considering individual projects. As a result of the audit two members decided that they required additional formal training in budget setting and arranged to attend a local training session.

---

### Implementation

This must follow the cycle of identifying need, planning then enacting an intervention, monitoring the outcome leading to the identification of a modified need. This strategy should provide the basis for a series of operational plans. They cannot be inflexible annual plans, since there is uncertainty about events that will occur and require a response. However a first step must be to assess needs, formulate initial plans and set a budget to resource these allowing for inevitable contingencies.

### What We Will Do

Rushbury Parish Council will seek to implement its Education and Training Strategy by the following:

- allocating a comprehensive range of responsibilities to members who will the lead the education and training of the council in that area

- establishing initially and continuing to monitor the training needs of members and staff

- setting an annual budget for training according to need

- requiring members and staff to keep a log book of their education and training, noting time spent in private study

- forming links with other parish councils to provide facilitators and arrange joint training and audit meetings

- holding training meetings in the form of seminars and audits

- being alert to the training requirements of new legislation, powers, responsibilities and technology

- ensuring adequate training support for new staff and members

- taking advantage of local training sessions and courses as appropriate to need

- monitoring the process and outcome of education and training thereby identifying changes to future provision.

V1.080805