

CLERK'S REPORT

THE SAMPFORDS PARISH COUNCIL MEETING 20TH AUGUST 2024

Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC) ran a Clerk's training course duly attended on 31st July 2024, where each council (12) participating used practical examples of parish management, processes, policies and procedures. The following summaries the issues identified with The Sampfords review, the council will be aware of many of the comments, but this is a summary of the EALC findings rather than personal views of the Clerk.

N.B. *The Sampfords parish council was not alone in terms of the volume of issues identified.*

Website

The website was considered non-compliant and should be considered as a high priority to rectify and ensure ongoing maintenance and support is provided.

- Generally, information was not kept up to date
 - Headings misleading
 - Agendas considerably out of date
 - Minutes are a mix of draft and adopted
 - Audit documents only up to 2022/23 and AGAR reports missing
 - Policies section headed 2022 – misleading. Policy review dates are out of date and / or not signed off. Missing policies; GDPR, Data Protection, Document Management,
 - Financial and Risk Assessment missing
 - Events section is 2 years out of date
 - Calendar was suggested to be uninformative both in terms of instructions and lacked details regarding appointments.
 - It's not possible to know if the Village Hall section includes up to date information as nothing is dated
 - It is not clear if Sampfords PC has sub-committees, other than the indication of the heading Financial Committee Minutes. The website should include sub-committee details, particularly terms of reference.
 - The website is not compliant from an Accessibility Requirements for People with Low Vision. This is now a legal requirement within the Disabilities Regulations.
 - It was felt that we were not allocating enough budgetary funds to the provision and maintenance of the website. Based on the PC attendees, there was an average 15% allocation to Hosting / website / email / data storage. Sampfords is 5.79%.
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- Unrelated to the website, but it was pointed out that councillors and the clerk should not use personal email addresses.

Agenda & Minutes

- Must be signed off and initialled on each page.
- Agenda & Minutes templates will need to be rebuilt to comply with the Disabilities Act to support accessibility for people with low vision.

Training

- It was highlighted by EALC that there was no recent (5 years) record of The Sampfords councillor training.
- All councillors should attend basic training or refresher courses.
- All councillors should read and sign that they have read the Good Councillor Guide as a good practise.
- Training allocation within budget was deemed too low. Based on the PC attendees, there was an average 10% allocation to Training, Sampfords is 1.78%.

Assets

- No clear indication that this is reviewed on an annualised basis as a minimum
- Assets register should be sent to the Insurers
- Asset register should be on the website

Financial Management

It was explained that this area was undergoing a detailed review and update.

- Current excel reporting was considered inefficient and open to errors.
- Not clear if there was a regular sign off.
- Councillors, particularly the Chairman, Treasurer and the Clerk should be encouraged to read the Joint Panel on Accountability Governance (JPAG).
- Barclays were voted by the PC members of EALC to be the worst bank closely, followed by Santander. EALC and many of the other PC's use Unity Trust Bank.
- The tutor advised that it would be acceptable for a parish of The Sampford's size to hold x2 Precept value in bank accounts. (This needs to be confirmed within the appropriate Financial Regulations).
- No indication of an Annual Finance diary.

Data Security and Protection

- It was advised that The Sampfords should urgently seek external hosting for the parish data. A memory stick invalidates our agreement with the ICO. As does not having a document management and GDPR policies. This may become an exception during the next external audit.

Society of Local Council Clerks

- It was recommended we join as a member, where we can get access to many templates to address a lot of the above issues
- Current membership for the Clerk, which is based on current salary, is £8.00 joining fee, plus £122.00 annual subscription.

The Clerk's position

- Training is essential, both basic and refresher courses, particularly with frequent changes in law and financial control. EALC advised that they have been warned that basic training will become a formal requirement for Clerks in the future.
- Based on the PC attendees (there was a wide range of precepts; from Sampfords, the smallest at 16k, to c500k for Basildon), the salaried time per week ranged widely. Based on the salary allocation percentage of the annual budget represented as hours, Sampfords was the lowest at 6 hours per week, followed by Belchamp St Paul / Great Leighs on 8- and 9-hours p/w respectively. EALC felt Sampfords and Belchamp were too low to enable the Clerk to operate effectively, regardless of parish size, every Clerk / Clerk's Office must cover all the required subject matter and ensure the position maintains current understanding of regulations.

Other Business

- All financials (Payments, Cashbook, Budget, Bank Account) are now up to date and fully reconciled.
- Annual Financial Diary is in the process of being created.
- Agenda and Minutes templates are in the process of being recreated to meet disability act requirements. Estimated completion October.
- Policies and Procedures list with review dates and actions is in the process of being created.