

Hawkhurst Parish Council

Co-option Policy

Introduction

1. This policy is based on the guidance in NALC's Legal Briefing L15-08 (Original date of issue: 23 July 2008, reissued 7 May 2015) and the NALC resource 'How do I co-opt a councillor?'
2. It is of paramount importance that the co-option process is open, fair and transparent. This policy sets out the process that Hawkhurst Parish Council (HPC) will follow when considering co-option.
3. "Local councils can only be as connected and helpful as the people elected to run them, so we need councillors capable, enthusiastic and engaged to reflect their communities." NALC 2021.
4. Co-option provides an opportunity for councils to address shortfalls and imbalances in their membership. Therefore, whenever the need for co-option arises, HPC will identify these gaps and will recruit specifically to address them. The most important attribute is to care about the community and to be willing to take an active role.
5. Councillors and parishioners can legally approach individuals to suggest that they might wish to consider putting their names forward for co-option and encourage them to register their interest.
6. HPC is not obliged to fill any vacancy. Even if the Council invites applications for co-option, it is **not** obliged to select anyone from the candidates who apply.
7. It does not contribute to the effective and efficient working of the Parish Council if there are insufficient councillors to share the workload equitably, provide a broad cross-section of skills and interests, or to achieve meeting quorums without difficulty. However, this must not be used as an excuse to co-opt, and the vacancy will remain an agenda item until filled.
8. Councillors elected by co-option are full members of the Parish Council.

Advertising the Vacancy

9. In the event of a vacancy occurring due to the resignation, death or ineligibility of a Councillor, the Clerk will immediately inform the Monitoring Officer of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC), and supply them with a copy of the requisite Notice of Vacancy.
10. Should the requisite 10 electors of the Parish not have called for a by-election within the legally specified time (currently 14 days), HPC may fill the vacancy by co-option.
11. On receipt of written notification from the Monitoring Officer at TWBC that a casual vacancy can be filled by means of co-option, the Clerk will produce a person specification to address the required experience, skills, knowledge and abilities for agreement by the Parish Council.
12. The Clerk will place a notice announcing that the vacancy(ies) can be filled by co-option and invite expressions of interest. The notice will be placed on the Parish Council's noticeboards and website. The vacancy will also be advertised on social media, in newsletters and local shops etc. Local community groups will also be asked to advertise the vacant role.
13. The notice will include:
 - a. the date by which expressions of interest must be received (at least four weeks after the notice is first displayed)
 - b. contact details for further information

- c. details of how to submit expressions of interest.

Applications

14. Candidates for co-option are required to certify in writing that they meet the criteria for eligibility, as set out in s.79 of the 1972 Act, to be a member of the council and are not disqualified, pursuant to s.80 of the 1972 Act, to be a member of the Council.
15. When expressions of interest are received, the Clerk will check that all applicants are eligible to be a Councillor.
16. Eligible candidates will be asked to submit a personal statement outlining how they meet the person specification and their reasons for wanting to become a Parish Councillor. Copies will be circulated to all Parish Councillors at least 3 clear days prior to the meeting of the Full Council where the co-option is to be considered. All such documents will be treated by the Clerk and Councillors as strictly private and confidential.
17. The Council will interview all eligible candidates before deciding who to co-opt.
18. Co-option candidates will be informed of the date of the meeting at which the Parish Council will consider co-option. The Clerk will ensure that all candidates are fully aware of the interview process.

Co-option Meeting

19. At the Council meeting considering the co-option, the Chairman will adjourn the meeting for the co-option interviews. Candidates will be asked to wait outside and each applicant will be interviewed separately.
20. If a candidate is a relative of a Councillor or has connections to a Councillor which may be perceived as prejudicial, that Councillor should declare an interest and withdraw from the meeting.
21. Applicants will each be given a maximum of five minutes to introduce themselves to the Members, give information on their background/experience and explain why they wish to become a Member of the Parish Council.
22. Interview questions will be agreed in advance of the meeting, although Members will be able to ask further questions to seek clarification on answers during the interview.
23. Once each candidate has been interviewed, the Chairman shall reconvene the meeting.
24. The Council will discuss the merits of each applicant and the extent to which they fulfil the competencies identified in the person specification. The Council will then proceed to vote on each candidate with a show of hands, unless it has been agreed in advance that specific circumstances warrant a written ballot.
25. In order for a candidate to be co-opted to Hawkhurst Parish Council, it will be necessary for them to obtain an absolute majority of votes cast (50% + 1 of the votes available at the meeting).
26. If there are more than two candidates for a vacancy and there is no candidate with an overall majority in the first round of voting, the candidate with the least number of votes will drop out of the process. Further rounds of voting will then take place with the process repeated until a candidate has an absolute majority. In the case of an equality of votes, the Chairman of the meeting has a casting vote.

27. If the Council has decided that none of the candidates are suitable, the Council does not have to appoint them and will continue to advertise the vacancy.
28. After the decision has been made, the Clerk will advise the candidates of the result and invite the successful candidate(s) to sign their declaration of acceptance of office and take their seat immediately.
29. Any candidates that are not present at the meeting will be notified of the results by the Clerk as soon as is reasonably possible (usually within 24 hours).

After Co-option

30. The Clerk will provide successful candidates with a Declaration of Interests form, which must be completed and submitted to TWBC's Monitoring Officer within 28 days.
31. The Clerk will arrange an initial induction meeting within a week of co-option at which point new Councillors will receive
 - a. schedule of council meeting dates
 - b. standing orders
 - c. financial regulations
 - d. code of conduct
 - e. contact details for the Clerk and other councillors
 - f. budget and assets register for the Council
 - g. minutes from recent meetings
 - h. other relevant documentation
 - i. office key
 - j. appropriate IT equipment, set up for the Councillor, in line with HPC policy and practice
32. The Clerk will identify and deliver an appropriate programme of induction for each new councillor.

Date of Policy	June 2022
Approved by:	Full Council
Date for next review	June 2025

Appendix A - Person Specification

This should form the basis of the agreed person specification for each instance of co-option taking into account the needs of HPC at that time.

Competency	Essential	Desirable
Personal Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sound knowledge and understanding of local affairs and the local community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can bring a new skill, expertise or key local knowledge to the Council.
Experience, Skills, Knowledge and Ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solid interest in local matters. • Ability and willingness to represent the Council and their community. • Good interpersonal skills. • Ability and willingness to work closely with other Members and to maintain good working relationships with all Members and staff. • Ability to communicate clearly and succinctly, including by email. • Ability and willingness to work with the Council's partners (e.g. voluntary groups, other parish councils, borough council, charities). • Ability and willingness to undertake induction training and other relevant training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
Other Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability and willingness to attend meetings of the Council in the evening and events in the evening and at weekends. • Flexibility. • Enthusiastic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •