

Getting the Best From Locums: a Balanced Guide for City, Town, Parish and Community Councils

How temporary clerks, RFOs and officer support can maintain continuity, strengthen legal compliance and provide real added value whilst maintaining local control.

Most city, town, parish and community councils will need temporary professional support at some point. A Clerk may leave unexpectedly, an officer may be absent through illness or family leave, recruitment may take longer than planned, or a major project may demand more capacity than the permanent team can provide. In any of these situations, a capable locum or interim officer can make the difference between a council continuing to operate confidently and one struggling to keep pace with its statutory duties.

The locum's role has also changed. Temporary officers are no longer viewed simply as emergency cover. Councils increasingly bring in experienced professionals to guide periods of change, resolve governance concerns, support complex projects and mentor newly appointed staff. Specialist providers such as LGRC have helped professionalise this market by offering access to people who understand the sector and can step in quickly.

Although demand for temporary Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer cover remains strong, councils now seek a much wider range of expertise. Recent enquiries to LGRC have included deputy and committee clerks, venue and general managers, event organisers, trainers, coaches, forensic accountants, communications specialists, project managers, feasibility advisers, devolution support and HR services such as job evaluation, recruitment and investigations. Whatever the requirement, success depends on appointing the right person for a clearly understood purpose and managing the arrangement well.

One principle must remain clear: responsibility for the council stays with elected members. A locum advises, administers and supports; councillors continue to make the decisions.

Every council's circumstances are different

No two appointments are quite alike. Sometimes the need is simple: a Clerk is taking maternity leave, recovering from an operation or temporarily unavailable, and the council needs an experienced person to keep routine business moving. At other times, the picture is more complicated. A resignation may follow a difficult period, financial records may be behind, an external audit deadline may be approaching, or confidence may need rebuilding before permanent recruitment begins.

It is worth pausing to define what the council genuinely needs. A request for "someone to clerk meetings" can quickly expand into agenda preparation, minute-taking, financial administration, staff supervision, planning consultations, residents' enquiries and recruitment support. A clear brief helps the provider identify the right experience, gives the locum realistic priorities and allows members to judge progress fairly. It should set out the duties, expected hours, likely duration, reporting arrangements and any urgent deadlines.

Choose carefully and set sensible priorities

It is tempting to expect a locum to resolve every issue that has built up over several years. That is rarely realistic. A carefully selected professional should be able to contribute well beyond routine clerking, but the council and locum should agree what must be achieved during the assignment and what would simply be useful if time permits.

The essentials come first. Statutory meetings must continue, agendas and minutes must be produced, payments processed correctly, financial controls maintained and audit deadlines met. Once those foundations are secure, the council can consider wider improvements - reviewing policies, updating Standing Orders, introducing new financial software, reorganising records or simplifying working practices. A good locum will help members establish that order of priorities from the outset and revisit it as circumstances change.

Experience brings perspective

Someone who has worked across several councils arrives with a broad understanding of how different authorities operate. They may already have encountered the challenges facing your council and can often recognise governance risks, gaps in procedures or simple improvements before minor concerns become serious problems.

That does not mean every council should work in the same way. Each community has its own history, culture, resources and priorities. The value lies in combining proven practice with respect for local circumstances. Specialist local government providers see good ideas emerging across the country and can share approaches that have worked elsewhere, while leaving elected members to decide what is right locally. Many councils find this fresh perspective almost as valuable as the temporary cover itself.

Remember too that most locums are very well connected in the sector and are perfectly placed to support recruitment if this is a requirement, as well as advising Council of any legal considerations regarding their plans.

Governance and employment still matter

Temporary appointments should never mean temporary standards. Even when a council needs help urgently, it should formally approve the appointment, record the decision in the minutes and confirm the available budget. If the absent officer normally serves as Proper Officer or Responsible Financial Officer, members should also resolve who will undertake those statutory functions during the interim period. Clear authority protects the council and ensures legal compliance.

Employment status also deserves careful thought. HMRC guidance states that parish and town council clerks are office holders and that payments for those duties are generally subject to PAYE. An arrangement that initially appears inexpensive can become costly if tax, employment or insurance obligations have been overlooked. Established providers may manage payroll, contracts, insurance and compliance as part of the service, as LGRC does. Councils appointing independently should understand their responsibilities before work begins; early advice is usually far easier than correcting matters later.

Consider too whether you require a locum in person or one who works remotely. Locums will generally charge travelling expenses, so engaging a remote locum will not only reduce expenses significantly but also make it much more cost effective to engage the required locum with all the specialist expertise required to solve the Council's issues.

Help your locum get started

Even the most experienced officer cannot work effectively without information and access. A simple induction pack can transform the first few days. Include current Standing Orders and Financial Regulations, recent minutes, the budget, contracts, insurance details, banking arrangements, key contacts, passwords and important dates. Explain any sensitive or urgent matters rather than leaving the locum to discover them by accident.

It also helps to nominate a main contact for routine questions and practical decisions. Small delays—waiting for access to banking systems, email accounts or the website—can quickly waste paid time and frustrate everyone.

Look at value, not just the hourly rate

Comparing a locum's hourly rate with the cost of a permanent employee rarely tells the whole story. A locum is expected to bring substantial experience, need little supervision and contribute almost immediately. The council is paying for flexibility, availability and specialist knowledge as well as time.

The more useful question is whether the appointment delivers value. If a locum prevents missed statutory deadlines, supports a successful audit, restores financial controls or enables a sound recruitment process, the benefit may far outweigh the higher short-term rate. And is the locum qualified for the work to be undertaken? Do they hold CiLCA, and / or CiPFA, AAT, CiPD, etc. according to the assignment – using a qualified as well as experienced locum reduces risk to the council as well as any potential legal pitfalls.

Budgets still matter, of course. Agree priorities and spending constraints, monitor progress and review the arrangements regularly, to ensure support remains proportionate. Remember too, that a very well-resourced locum, supported by their locum agency as well as the council and largely free of office politics, can work incredibly efficiently. As a result, a five day a week locum assignment is rare. One to four days a week is much more common. A helpful agency should also be able to offer flexibility in hours to support the council as the work ebbs and flows.

Look beyond keeping the lights on

The strongest assignments do more than maintain day-to-day administration. Because they are independent, experienced locums can spot opportunities that people close to the organisation may no longer notice. They might recommend clearer financial procedures, simpler committee administration, better communication with councillors or early action on a governance concern.

Members do not have to accept every suggestion, and not every solution used elsewhere will suit the council. However, thoughtful advice based on practical experience can provide lasting benefit. The best locums leave records clearer, systems stronger and the permanent team better placed to succeed.

Plan the finish as carefully as the start

Every temporary appointment needs an exit plan. Whether a permanent officer is being recruited or the substantive postholder is returning, arrange a structured handover. The locum should leave updated records, a list of outstanding actions, forthcoming deadlines and a concise summary of ongoing work. Where possible, even a short overlap with the incoming officer can preserve continuity and reassure members.

A practical checklist

Before appointing a locum, ask:

- Why do we need temporary support, and what outcome are we seeking?
- Have we agreed the duties, hours, duration, priorities and budget?
- Can we review and adjust locum hours from time to time?
- Has the council formally approved the appointment?
- Are Proper Officer and Responsible Financial Officer duties clearly allocated and minuted?
- Have employment status, PAYE, insurance and contractual issues been considered?
- Is the induction information ready, including system access?
- Has the need for temporary banking arrangements been considered and necessary actions taken and payroll continuity considered?
- Who will be the locum's main council contact?
- How will progress, expenditure and changing priorities be reviewed?
- Have we begun planning permanent recruitment or the incumbent's return?
- Is there a clear handover and exit plan?
- What locum contract notice period applies?

Final thoughts

For many councils, a locum appointment begins with an immediate problem. Handled thoughtfully, it can become an opportunity to strengthen governance, improve systems and provide stability during a difficult period. Councils gain the most when they know what they want the locum to achieve, give them the information and authority needed to work effectively, and keep communication open throughout the assignment.

Temporary support is not simply about filling a vacancy. It protects the council's ability to serve its community, meet legal obligations and make informed decisions while planning confidently for the future. As demand grows, specialist providers can offer reassurance by matching proven local government expertise to the council's actual circumstances. That matching process matters, because the needs of a small parish council are not the same as those of a large town council managing staff, venues and major projects. Taking time to understand the client's situation leads to better recommendations, clearer expectations and greater value.

When the right person is appointed for the right reasons, a locum can provide far more than short-term cover. They can steady the council, support members through change and leave behind better systems, stronger governance and a smoother path for the permanent team that follows.

That is why LGRC always takes time to understand a council's circumstances before recommending a way forward. Matching the right skills and experience to the council's needs is the best way to support legal compliance, provide genuine value and give councillors confidence in the arrangement.

Introducing LGRC

LGRC is a specialist locum provider and consultancy supporting city, town, parish and community councils across England and Wales. For more than twelve years, it has delivered locum staffing, consultancy, training and shared services tailored to councils' statutory, operational and community responsibilities.

Founded by experienced local government professionals, LGRC provides practical, proportionate support for governance, finance, staffing and organisational challenges.

Its consultative approach matches appropriate expertise to each council's priorities while preserving local ownership of decisions. Services include locum cover, interim management, reviews, HR support, recruitment, training, mentoring and specialist project support. LGRC aims to deliver immediate capacity while strengthening governance, systems, resilience and sustainable service delivery.



David McKnight
Chief Executive, LGRC
david.mcknight@lgrc.uk
01404 45973