

Iwerne Minster Parish Council

General Power of Competence

[Adopted by resolutions July 2019]

Background

Local councils in England were given a ‘general power of competence’ (GPC) in the Localism Act 2011, sections 1 to 8. This report explains the freedom granted by the general power, the criteria to be met before a local council can use it and some restrictions on using the power.

Explanation about the General Power of Competence

Councils no longer need to ask whether they have a specific power to act. The GPC (LA 2011 s1(1)) gives local authorities, including eligible local councils, “the power to do anything that individuals generally may do” as long as they don’t break other laws. It is a ‘power of first resort’; this means that when searching for a power to act, the first question you ask is whether you can use the GPC.

To find the answer, you ask whether an individual is normally permitted to act in the same way. For example:

- An individual can’t put someone in prison – and neither can a local council (although, like an individual, the council can press for a prosecution).
- An individual can’t impose taxes on other people – so a local council can’t use the GPC to raise taxes.

On the other hand, an individual:

- Could run a community shop or post office (provided they abide by relevant rules) – so a local council can do likewise.
- Can set up a company to provide a service. The GPC clearly permits a local council to engage in commercial activity as long as it sets up a company or co-operative society (s4) for this purpose.

Sometimes a council can do things that an individual can’t do – such as creating byelaws, raising a precept or issuing fixed penalty notices – but it must do so using the specific original legislation.

The GPC does not mean that the council can delegate decisions to individual councillors – this is a procedural matter that remains enshrined in law.

The Government hopes that the GPC gives local councils confidence in their legal capacity to act for their communities. It encourages councils to use this power to work with others in providing cost effective services and facilities in innovative ways to meet the needs of local people. The council can lend or invest money; it can trade; it can even sell energy to the National Grid.

If another authority has a statutory duty, then it remains their duty to provide that service (e.g. education, waste collection, social services) but local councils can still help out. For example, a local council can support a school in many ways, just as an individual might. It could even help a community trust to run a local school.

The council can undertake activities using the GPC anywhere – not just in the parish (s1(4a)). It isn't necessary to worry whether the activity is for the benefit of the council, the area or the community (s1(4c)) although, in practice, parishioners might object if they can't see the benefit! And unlike the Local Government Act 1972, s137, it doesn't matter whether there are any other specific powers permitting the council to take action (s1(5)). So, for example, a council can use the GPC to build a sports facility even though there is another power enabling it to do the same thing (Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 s19).

As always, the council is expected to act in accordance with the general principle of 'reasonableness' established by the Wednesbury court case in 1948. The judgement made it clear that a council can exercise reasonable discretion when interpreting legislation provided it justifies its decision in terms of relevant, rather than irrelevant, matters.

It is important that the council pays attention to the advice of its trained and qualified clerk when taking decisions to ensure that it acts lawfully.

Notes:

- Since the GPC can be used for most of the activities of the council rather than for unusual one-off projects, the council cannot employ a clerk on a short-term contract specifically for using the power.
- If the council loses its qualified clerk or has insufficient elected councillors, then it must record its ineligibility at the next 'relevant' annual meeting of the council (after the ordinary election).
- If it has already started an activity under the GPC for which there is no other specific power, it remains eligible for the purpose of completing that activity, but it can't start anything new under the power until it is in a position to make the formal decision that it meets the criteria. The council must go back to identifying whether it has a specific power to act and use the restricted s137 if there is no appropriate specific power.
- When entering into a contract under the GPC, a council should be cautious if the contract lasts beyond the next annual meeting when the council might no longer be eligible to use the GPC. There is a risk of legal action if the council ends the contract unexpectedly.

Risks and restrictions limiting the GPC

There are some risks associated with using the GPC. Inadequate community support or insufficient funding are significant risks while there are several statutory or legal restrictions that a local council should consider before using the power. Clerks and councillors should be aware of the following restrictions that potentially could limit the use of the GPC.

- If a council is already subject to a statutory duty, then that duty remains in place. So, for example, a local council that is eligible to use the GPC must continue to abide by its duties.
- The council must comply with employment law, Health and Safety legislation, equality legislation and duties related to data protection and freedom of information for example.
- The council must set up a company or co-operative society if it wishes to trade. If the council sets up a company or co-operative society it must abide by company law. Councils are advised to refer to more detailed Government guidance on trading and on charging (see links below). The council can charge for services provided under the GPC.

- If the council wants to invest in a local business to support the local economy, it should follow Government advice on investment (see links below). If it wishes to support a community enterprise, an economic development grant might be a sensible option.
- If the action the council wishes to take is also covered by a specific power then any restrictions that apply to the overlapping power are still in force. So if existing legislation requires the council to ask permission before acting, then it must do so. For example, the council asks permission from the Highways Authority before doing work on roadside verges.

The GPC is a power and not a source of money. It cannot be used to raise the precept and if loans are needed then normal procedures apply. The council can seek other sources of finance such as the Community Infrastructure Levy, grant funding, sponsorship, commercial activity and agreements with other authorities. As always, the council should ensure support from local taxpayers.

So councils cannot use the GPC primarily to raise money but they can receive income as a consequence of using the power for a different primary purpose. For example, a council could give financial assistance to a struggling local enterprise by purchasing share capital just as any individual could. Similarly the council could lend money to support a local activity and earn interest on the loan and it can raise sponsorship for a community project.

Although councils are encouraged to be innovative, they should be aware of the risks involved in using the power in addition to a lack of money or community support.

For example:

- There is a risk of being challenged.
- Trading activities could damage competing local activities.
- The council risks its reputation and public money if a project goes wrong.

S137 and the power of well-being (PWB).

How do these two powers relate to the GPC?

The money that can be spent under the Local Government Act 1972 s137 (grant money) is limited while the power is restricted by regulations for use and scope; for example, councils must keep specific accounts for s137, they cannot use the power to give money to individuals and spending must be commensurate with the benefit gained. In addition a council can't use s137 if another specific power exists. A council that is eligible to use the GPC can no longer use s137 as a power for taking action for the benefit of the area or its community (Sch. 1(1)).

The PWB (Local Government Act 2000 s2) offered councils more opportunity to improve and promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of an area and its community with no restrictions on spending. However, in England it has now been replaced by the general power of competence which offers even more freedom to act. Transitional arrangements allow councils to complete projects started under the PWB.

Further changes affecting the GPC

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has the power to change the enacted legislation (s5) so it is important to keep up to date with legal advice. Changes will not be made without consultation and should therefore come as no surprise. The Government is keen to know whether there are any additional restrictions affecting the use of the GPC so that it can consider removing them.

Councils are advised to Contact the Society of Local Council Clerks or the National Association of Local Councils (via BMKALC) if you wish to draw attention to any legislative constraints affecting the use of the power.

Way Forward

This General Power of Competence must be revisited and a new resolution made at every annual meeting following an ordinary election.