

Part 5C – Protocol on Member Officer Relations

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Protocol on Member Officer Relations

1. Status of this Protocol

- 1.1 This Protocol seeks to offer guidance on some of the issues which most commonly arise in relation to the relationships between Members and Officers.
- 1.2 The Protocol is partly a statement of current practice and convention. In some respects, however, it seeks to promote greater clarity and certainty. In particular, it covers the behaviour that is expected between Members and Officers.
- 1.3 The Protocol gives guidance only but it may be taken into account if there is a complaint about a Member or an Officer. Members must observe the Members' Code of Conduct. Any complaints received in relation to alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct will be considered initially by the Monitoring Officer. Officers are also obliged to comply with the Code of Conduct for Employees. Any complaints received about Officers behaviour or conduct will be considered by the relevant managers.

2. Roles of Members and Officers

Officers and Members both serve the public but they have different roles. Officers are employees of the Council and are politically neutral. Their role is to advise Members and implement the policies of the Council to the best of their abilities. Members are office holders and will often belong to a political party. They are obliged to exercise their own judgement in respect of matters before them but may also legitimately pursue party political objectives. Employees are answerable to the Chief Executive, not to individual Members (whatever office they hold), but there should be good communication between senior officers and Members with special responsibility for their area of work.

3. Expectations

- 3.1 What Members can expect from Officers:
 - (a) A commitment to the authority as a whole, not to any political group;
 - (b) A working partnership;
 - (c) An understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads and pressures;
 - (d) Timely responses to enquiries and complaints;

- (e) Professional advice, not influenced by political views or preference;
- (f) Regular up-to-date information on matters that can be reasonably considered appropriate and relevant to the Member's needs, having regard to any individual responsibilities that they have and positions that they hold;
- (g) Awareness and sensitivity to the political environment;
- (h) Respect and courtesy;
- (i) Training and development in order to carry out their roles effectively;
- (j) Not to have personal issues raised with them by Officers outside the agreed procedure
- (k) Officers should not try to persuade individual Members to make a decision in their personal favour or raise things to do with their employment with individual Members. Nor should they approach individual Members with allegations about other Officers. They should use the Council's grievance, confidential reporting and disciplinary procedures instead; and
- (l) Compliance with the Employee Code of Conduct.

3.2 What Officers can expect from Members:

- (a) A working partnership;
- (b) An understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads and pressures;
- (c) Political policy direction and leadership;
- (d) Respect and courtesy;
- (e) Members should generally restrict their discussion on strategic or significant issues to more senior officers (that is the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors, Director or Heads of Service); Members should raise all queries on operational matters initially with Corporate Directors, Director or Heads of Service who will ensure that Members receive a timely response.
- (f) Members are encouraged to use regular briefings and / or normally make appointments before visiting Officers in order to try to avoid frequent unscheduled interruptions;

- (g) Members should not pressure Officers to work outside their normal hours or to do anything they are not allowed to do or that is not part of their normal work;
- (h) Not to be subject to bullying, harassment or intimidation. Members should have regard to the seniority and experience of Officers in determining what constitutes a reasonable request. Members with special responsibilities should be particularly aware of this;
- (i) Members should not use their position or relationship with Officers to advance their personal interests or those of others or to influence decisions improperly;
- (j) Members should not make detrimental remarks about individual Officers during meetings, in public or to the media; and
- (k) Members should at all times comply with the Member Code of Conduct.

4. Limitations on behaviour

The distinct roles of Members and Officers necessarily impose limitations upon behaviour. By way of illustration and not as an exclusive list:

- (a) Personal relationships between individual Members and Officers can confuse the separate roles and get in the way of the proper discharge of the authority's functions. In this situation, others may feel that a particular Member or Officer may be treated more favourably.
- (b) Personal relationships should be avoided. Where they do exist the officer concerned must notify their manager.
- (c) The need to maintain the separate roles means that there are limits to the matters on which Members may seek the advice of Officers, both in relation to personal matters and party political issues;
- (d) Relationships with particular individuals or party groups should not be such as to create public suspicion that an employee favours that Member or group above others.

5. Politeness and respect

- 5.1 Members and Officers should show each other politeness and respect. Members have the right to challenge Officers' reports or actions, but they

should avoid personal and / or public attacks; and ensure their criticism is fair and constructive.

- 5.2 Officers should not publicly criticise Council decisions even if they do not personally agree with those decisions.

6. Complaints about Members or Officers

- 6.1 If an Officer feels a Member is not treating them with politeness and respect, they should consider talking to the Member directly. If they do not feel able to do this, or talking to the Member does not help, they should talk to their Head of Service, Director or Corporate Director immediately. The Head of Service, Director or Corporate Director will talk to the Member or the Leader of their political group and / or other senior officers as appropriate. The Officer will be told the outcome. Officers may also make a complaint alleging a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct.
- 6.2 If a Member feels an Officer is not treating them with politeness and respect, they should consider talking to the Officer directly. If they do not feel able to do this or talking to the Officer does not help, they should talk to the Officer's Head of Service, Director or Corporate Director immediately. If the problem continues the Head of Service, Director or Corporate Director will consider whether to use the Council's disciplinary procedures.

7. Members' enquiries

- 7.1 Officers should answer Members' enquiries, in whatever form, within five working days. If that is not possible, they should send a holding reply. Where a Senior Officer considers that the enquiry received is inappropriate, the Member should be advised of this and the reason or reasons why the enquiry is considered to be inappropriate. Members should contact a more senior officer in the event that a response is not received within this time. The Chief Executive may be asked to resolve any issues arising from unreasonable delays in responding to Members' enquiries.

Casework

- 7.2 Where a Member is making an enquiry of Officers as part of their ward casework, Officers will normally assume that they have the implicit consent of an individual to disclose personal information about them to the Member but only where:
- (a) the Member represents the ward in which the individual lives;

- (b) the Member makes it clear that they are representing the individual in any request for their personal information to the local authority; and
- (c) the information is necessary to respond to the individual's complaint.

In all other cases Officers may need to seek the explicit consent of the individual to share their personal data with the Member in order to comply with the data protection requirements.

- 7.3 Personal information about third parties (i.e. individuals who have not sought the Member's assistance) may only be shared with a Member where the law permits this. See also paragraphs 8 a) iii) and 8 a) iv) below.

8. Information and advice

8.1 Requests for written information

- (a) Members should be provided with adequate information about services or functions on which they may be called upon to make decisions or to scrutinise the decisions of others, or which affect their constituents. This information will normally be made routinely available by Officers in the form of reports, departmental plans etc. Members are encouraged to make use of existing sources of information wherever possible.
- (b) Written information supplied to a Member regarding the implications of current Council policies or containing statistical information about Council services may be copied to the relevant Cabinet Member.
- (c) The Leader of the Council or Leader of any other political group may request the Chief Executive or the relevant Corporate Director or Director, or other designated Officer, to prepare reports on matters relating to the authority for consideration by the group. Such requests must be reasonable and should not seek confidential information in relation for instance to casework or personal details of applicants for services.
- (d) Wherever possible, such requests will be met. However, if the Officer considers that the cost of providing the information, or the nature of the request is unreasonable or inappropriate, the request will be referred to the Chief Executive for determination, where necessary in consultation with the Leaders of the political groups.

Requests will also only be met where they comply with data protection or other legal requirements.

- (e) Officer reports to political groups should be limited to a statement of relevant facts, identification of options and the merits and demerits of such options for the authority. Reports should not deal with any political implications of the matter.

8.2 Briefings

- (a) In order for them to discharge their responsibilities Cabinet Members will be briefed by senior officers (Corporate Directors, Director or Heads of Service) on service issues, proposals and policy development either on an ad hoc or a regular basis, in accordance with the requirements of the Member involved.
- (b) The other political party groups may also have nominated Shadow Portfolio Holders and, if those leads so request, the relevant senior officers will make themselves available to meet with them to brief them on service issues. The other political party groups should be aware that at times the amount of information that officers can share with them may be limited due to issues of confidentiality.
- (c) The content of these informal briefing sessions shall remain confidential as between Officers and the political group concerned.

8.3 News items

When an event or development occurs in the city which has or will have a significant impact on the Council or city residents, the Chief Executive will ensure that the Leaders of all political groups are informed as soon as possible.

8.4 Ward Members

- (a) Senior officers should ensure that Ward Members are given information relevant to their ward where appropriate. As well as Ward Members know when there has been a significant incident in their ward, Ward Members should be notified about the following types of issue:
 - i) Public consultation events affecting their wards;
 - ii) Proposed changes to services sited within their wards;

- iii) Applications and proposals in their wards
- (b) Ward Members should be invited by Officers to public events, such as openings, festivals etc, in their wards regardless of political affiliation.
- (c) If Officers organise a public meeting about a specific ward issue, all the Ward Members should be invited and given as much notice as possible.
- (d) If Officers undertake consultation about specific ward issues they should consult the Members for that ward at the start of the consultation.
- (e) Ward Members should be told in advance about anything which particularly affects their ward and which is potentially controversial.
- (f) Potentially significant or controversial issues may include but are not limited to:
 - i) road closures whether planned or unplanned in an emergency (e.g. flooding);
 - ii) removal of bus stops (temporarily or permanently);
 - iii) removal of electric vehicle charging points;
 - iv) issues affecting the community raised by MPs;
 - v) matters which have an impact on a local community.

8.5 Local Service Information

- (a) Information regarding local services is contained with the Members Handbook, which is provided to all Members during Induction / at the start of a new municipal year.
- (b) Information relating to specific Council services is published on the Council's website. If Members have queries in respect of services provided, these should be raised with Member Support / or the relevant Corporate Director in the first instance.

8.6 Petitions

- (a) Details of any petitions received, which relate to matters in a particular Electoral Division will be sent to the Local Members(s).

Local Members will be kept informed on the progress / outcomes of such petitions.

- (b) Copies of all petitions and outcomes of petitions will also be provided to the Leader of the Council.

8.7 Officer attendance at Group Meetings

- (a) The Leader of the Council or Leader of any other political group may ask the Chief Executive, Corporate Director or Director to give or arrange a private briefing for the party group on a matter of relevance to the Council.
- (b) Any briefings offered to or requested by a party group will be offered to the other party groups.
- (c) While Officers may attend political group meetings at which individuals who are not elected Members may be present, Members need to understand that those Officers' ability to share confidential information with the Group may be limited. In particular Officers will not be able to share personal information with third parties present if to do so would cause the Council to breach the data protection requirements.
- (d) Officers must not attend regional and / or constituency party political meetings.
- (e) Decisions at group meetings are not Council or Cabinet decisions and party groups do not have any delegated authority to make formally binding decisions.

8.8 Advice for Members with special responsibilities

- (a) The Chair, Cabinet Members and Committee Chairs can ask the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors, Director and Heads of Service for extra background information and advice on different courses of action.
- (b) Although these Members have additional responsibilities and different relationships because of their more frequent contact with Officers, these Members must still respect the impartiality of Officers. This includes not asking them to undertake work of a party political nature, or to do anything which would prejudice that impartiality.

- (c) The Leaders of minority political groups can ask the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors, Director or Heads of Service for background information or more details about items coming to the next meeting of a Committee or Cabinet. The appropriate Chair or Cabinet Member will be entitled to receive the same information.
- (d) Party group Leaders can ask for advice on presenting their budget in a correct and accurate form. This will be given in confidence.

8.9 Correspondence received by Members and Officers

- (a) where correspondence is sent to both Members and Officers, Officers will agree a single response with the relevant Members to ensure consistency of approach.

9. Members' briefings on agendas and reports

9.1 Briefings on agendas

The Chief Executive, Corporate Directors, Director and Heads of Service will give briefings on full Council, Cabinet and Committee agendas to the Leader and Deputy Leader and Committee Chairs as appropriate.

9.2 Consultation on agendas

The Leader will be consulted on agendas for the Cabinet. Committee Chairs will be consulted on agendas for their Committees.

9.3 Requests for reports

- (a) Instructions for reports to come to Cabinet or Committees can only come from the Leader, Cabinet, a Cabinet Member in respect of the Cabinet and a Committee or a Committee Chair in respect of Committees. Cabinet Members may ask for reports to come to their Cabinet Member meetings.
- (b) Whilst Cabinet Members have political responsibility for drawing up proposals for consideration or for the agenda for a forthcoming meeting, it must be recognised that in some situations an Officer will be under a professional duty to submit a report. Similarly, senior officers will always be fully responsible for the contents of any report submitted in their name. This means that any such report will be amended only where the amendment reflects the professional judgement of the author of the report. Any issues arising between a Cabinet Member and a senior officer in this respect should be

referred to the Chief Executive for resolution in conjunction with the Leader of the Council.

10. Support services to Members and Political Groups

Support services should only be used for Council business. They should never be used for private purposes, for party political or campaigning activity.

11. Correspondence

11.1 Between Members and Officers

If emails or letters between Officers and Members are copied to someone else, they should say so. Blind copies should not be sent. Members should not forward information received from an Officer to a constituent or member of the public if that information is expressed to be private or confidential.

11.2 Letters on behalf of the Council

Letters on behalf of the Council will normally be sent by Officers rather than Members. The Leader or Committee Chairs may write some letters on behalf of the Council, for example representations to government ministers. Members must never send letters that create obligations or give instructions on behalf of the Council.

12. The Council as an Employer

The Council as a whole employs its Officers. The appointment and dismissal of Officers and any disciplinary or grievance proceedings will be carried out in accordance with the Officer Employment Procedure Rules and any other agreed policies and procedures.

13. Responsibility for this Code

The Monitoring Officer has overall responsibility for this Protocol and will periodically review its operation.