

## Protocol on Member/Officer Relations

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Effective local governance and community leadership depends on good working relationships between Members and Officers.
- 1.2 This Protocol provides guidance for Members, Co-opted Members and Officers in their working relations with each other. The Protocol covers the more common working situations, but is not comprehensive. The principles underlying it may be applicable to other situations.
- 1.3 This Protocol applies only to working relations between Members in their role as Members and Officers in their capacity as Officers.

### 2.0 Working Relations

- 2.1 Members and Officers shall establish sound and effective working relations that engender mutual respect and put aside any personal differences.
- 2.2 Members will comply with the Members' Code of Conduct, applicable to Elected Members set out on pages 118-125.
- 2.3 The National Conditions of Service for Staff in Local Government provide:  
*"The public is entitled to demand, of a local government Officer, conduct of the highest standard".*
- 2.4 Members and Officers must recognise their different roles, needs and objectives. They must be ready to discuss positively how working relations between each other can most effectively be developed. Members and Officers must set aside any personal differences in the interests of maintaining effective working relations.
- 2.5 It is important that Officers develop political awareness of issues that are sensitive to the individual political groups represented on the Council.

### 3.0 Courtesy

- 3.1 Mutual respect between Members and Officers is essential, it is important that any dealings between the parties should observe the highest standards of behaviour and courtesy towards each other and will not take or attempt to take unfair advantage of their position.
- 3.2 Members and Officers should have regard to the formality of the occasion as to the mode of address they choose to adopt. In particular,

in formally convened meetings and/or meetings open to the public a formal mode of address should be adopted . In all other cases Members and Officers will respect preferred modes of address.

#### **4.0 Officers Giving Advice and Information to Political Groups**

- 4.1 There is now statutory recognition for party groups and it is common practice for such groups to give preliminary consideration to matters of Council business in advance of such matters being considered by the relevant Council decision making body. Officers may properly be called upon to support and contribute to such deliberations by party groups.
- 4.2 The support provided by Officers can take many forms, ranging from a briefing meeting with a Chairperson or Spokesperson prior to a Committee meeting to a presentation to a full party group meeting. Whilst in practice such Officer support is likely to be in most demand from whichever party group is for the time being in control of the Council, such support is available to all party groups.
- 4.3 Certain points must, however, be clearly understood by all those participating in this type of process, members and officers alike. In particular:
  - (a) Officer support in these circumstances must not extend beyond providing information and advice in relation to matters of Council business. Officers must not be involved in advising on matters of party business. The observance of this distinction will be assisted if Officers are not expected to be present at meetings, or parts of meetings, when matters of party business are to be discussed;
  - (b) Party group meetings, whilst they form part of the preliminaries to Council decision making, are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Council. Conclusions reached at such meetings do not, therefore, rank as Council decisions and it is essential that they are not interpreted or acted upon as such; and
  - (c) Similarly, where Officers provide information and advice to a party group meeting in relation to a matter of Council business, this cannot act as a substitute for providing all necessary information and advice to the County Council or the relevant Committee or Sub-Committee when the matter in question is considered.
- 4.4 Special care needs to be exercised whenever Officers are involved in providing information and advice to a party group meeting which includes persons who are not members of the Council. Such persons will not be bound by the National Code of Local Government Conduct

(in particular, the provisions concerning the declaration of interests and confidentiality) and for this and other reasons Officers may not be able to provide the same level of information and advice as they would to a Members only meeting.

4.5 Officers must respect the confidentiality of any party group discussions at which they are present in the sense that they should not relay the content of any such discussions to another party group.

4.6 Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in this area of Officer advice to party groups should be raised with the Chief Executive who will discuss them with the relevant group Leader(s).

#### 5.0 **Support Services to Members**

5.1 Members will use support services and resources provided by the Council only for Council business. Support services shall not be used for political or campaigning activity, or for private purposes.

5.2 The Council provides support services to members only in designated areas (including stationery, IT facilities, printing, photo-copying, travel, transport and parking arrangement, etc.) to assist members in discharging their role as Members of the Council.

5.3 Support services are provided to the Political Group Leaders by the Members' Services Section of the Democracy and Governance Manager Department. Individual Directorates may, in addition, provide support services to an Cabinet Member with Portfolio, Lead Members, Chairs of Scrutiny Committees and Panel Chairs.

#### 6.0 **Communications**

6.1 Members and Officers will not, without the agreement of the author, copy a communication, whether physical or electronic, from a member of the public (including MPs, AMs or MEPs) or Member to another Member or to any other third party.

6.2 Most correspondence between officers or from officers to Members will be open and may be copied as a part of the normal arrangements for dealing with the matter within it. Members and Officers may from time to time raise matters confidentially with each other and such confidences shall be respected.

6.3 It may be necessary or appropriate for an Officer to discuss the content of a confidential communication with another Member, particularly where political consultation is required before action is taken under Officer delegated powers. In these circumstances, the communication should not be copied or shown to another Member or the identity of the author revealed without the express permission of that author.

6.4 Official communications on behalf of the Council should normally be sent out over the name of the appropriate Officer, rather than over the name of a Member. It may be appropriate in certain circumstances (e.g. representations to a Government Minister or Assembly Secretary) for a communication to appear over the name of a Member, but this should be the exception rather than the norm. Communications which, for example, create obligations or give instructions on behalf of the Council should never be sent out over the name of a Member.

#### 7.0 **Specific Member/Officer Working Relations**

7.1 Members and Officers will not allow a working relationship to become so close or appear to be so close as to bring into question the Officer's ability to deal impartially with other members, political groups and other Officers.

7.2 Cabinet members with Portfolios, Lead Members and other appropriate members will routinely be consulted by Officers, prior to making decisions under delegated powers.

7.3 The Cabinet Member and/or the Chair and/or the Vice-Chair of the Committee or Panel will be consulted as a part of the agenda preparation for meetings.

7.4 Officers having delegated decision-making Authority are entitled, where considered expedient, to refer a matter to the Cabinet Committee or appropriate Sub-Committee for decision. Officers of Cabinet Management are responsible for the contents of all reports submitted in their name.

7.5 Members must acknowledge that Officers within a department are accountable to their Chief Officer. Officers should always be prepared to assist Members, but they cannot go beyond the bounds of the Authority given to them by their Chief Officer and they must not be asked to do so. Members must also recognise that Officers are bound by professional standards, codes of conduct or professional ethics and they should not be asked to go outside of the bounds set in such codes.

#### 8.0 **Involvement of Ward Councillors**

8.1 Ward Members will be invited to attend any public meeting organised by the Council which relates to issues affecting their ward.

8.2 Ward Members must be appraised of local issues affecting their ward and involved in any public meeting or consultation exercise. They must be notified, at the outset, of any consultation on a local issue affecting their ward.

## 9.0 **Members' Access to Information and to Council Documents**

9.1 Members have legal rights to access to information and to Council documents that go beyond the rights enjoyed by members of the public. The law relating to Member's rights to information is complex and includes common law and statutory rights. The law also changes from time to time with new legislation or new case law. If at any time a Member believes access to information or Council documents is being denied contrary to the Member's legal rights the issue should be raised with a senior Officer of the Chief Officer, Governance's Department.

## 10.0 **Confidentiality of Reports and Correspondence**

10.1 All Chief Officers have a duty to satisfy themselves that Committee reports to which they are signatories are only classified as 'exempt information' when the statutory criteria for confidentiality are met. The Chief Executive and the Chief Officer, Governance have an overriding responsibility to determine this compliance.

10.2 Once a report has been issued within Part II of the agenda for a meeting and until a Committee decides that it should not be discussed in the absence of the press and public, Members and Officers must respect the confidentiality of the report and not disclose it to a third party.

10.3 It does not, however, follow that all the contents of the report must be regarded as secret. It may only be certain items of information or terms of negotiations that justify the inclusion of that report within Part II; other aspects may already be within the public domain or otherwise outside the definition of 'exempt'. A Member may accordingly refer to these aspects in discussions with third parties but must exercise proper care and judgement not to reveal those elements of the paper which are protected but it will always be prudent for that Member to consult the Chief Officer, Governance before doing so.

## 11.0 **Access to Council Premises**

11.1 All Members of the Council shall be entitled to access to the Council Chamber and Committee Rooms for the purposes of attending and/or observing scheduled meetings of the Council, its Committees and Sub-Committees, Fora and the Cabinet (subject to any restrictions set out in the Access to Information Procedure Rules) or any public meeting held in those rooms by any other agency or body.

11.2 Subject to the provisions set out below, Members shall also be entitled to have access to any other part of any Council building or premises open to members of the public between 8.00 am and 6.00 pm.

11.3 In addition, subject to the provisions set out below, Members shall have access to the Chimney Entrance, the Canteen, the Bridge Link and the areas outside the Council Chamber and Committees Rooms between 8.00 am and

6.00 pm.

- 11.4 Members when they are not acting in pursuit of their roles and duties as a Councillor shall have no greater rights of access to Council buildings and premises than members of the public.
- 11.5 All Members shall also be entitled to access and use the facilities provided for in the Members' Services Suite between the hours of 8.00 am and 6.00 pm during weekdays (excluding bank holidays).
- 11.6 There is a general presumption that Members will not require access to Council buildings before 8.00 am or after 6.00 pm except for scheduled or public meetings referred to in 11.1 above. In exceptional circumstances where a Member remains in the building beyond 6.00 pm, he/she must inform security of his/her presence and location and give an indication as to how long he/she intends to stay.
- 11.7 Where individual Groups have been allotted rooms for their sole use Members shall be entitled to have access to the room set aside for the use of the Group to which he or she belongs subject to any reasonable restrictions which that Group may wish to place upon access from time to time.
- 11.8 Any Committee Chair or Cabinet Member who has been allocated a room shall also be entitled to access to the room so allocated for the purposes of the consultation responsibilities arising under the Delegation Scheme or for any other business arising from their roles and responsibilities
- 11.9 All Members who have been invited to attend meetings elsewhere in County Hall shall be entitled to have access to all corridors, stairwells and other reception areas through which it is necessary to pass to enable them to attend. The same limitation shall apply to Committee Chairs and Cabinet Members under 11.8 above.
- 11.10 Members shall not be entitled to enter certain restricted sensitive areas including the central computer suite, unified benefits (including the corridor on that part of the ground floor on Phase 2), payroll, and child protection unless by invitation of the Chief Officer or a duly authorised Officer in exceptional circumstances.
- 11.11 Subject to 11.10 above, there is a presumption that Members will not be entitled to enter other staff only areas except following express authorisation by the relevant Chief Officer or someone duly authorised to give such authorisation. Members will endeavour to make appointments with officers in advance giving them sufficient time to research the matter to be discussed. A suitable venue for the proposed meeting will be arranged at that time. Staff only areas include individual rooms, open plan areas, management suites, internal reception areas not open to the public.
- 11.12 In situations where Members and Officers inadvertently meet in the course of their business there should be no expectation on the part of the Member that the Officer will deal with any issue that the Member wishes to raise, unless both agree that it is an urgent issue which cannot wait for a formal appointment to be arranged.
- 11.13 Any contravention of the above provisions shall be reported to the Council's

Monitoring Officer who will in the first instance attempt to resolve the issue appropriately. If he is unable to resolve the issue he will report the matter to the Standards Committee. He will also make an annual report to the Standards Committee on the operation of this part of the Protocol.

## **12.0 Criticism of Members and Officers**

- 12.1 As employer, the Council has a duty to provide and maintain a working environment which is reasonably tolerable to all employees and to protect them from unacceptable treatment and behaviour and unauthorised interference in work duties. All Members must ensure they discharge their duties as employer fairly and impartially and not do anything to undermine the relationship of mutual trust and confidence which must exist between the Council and its employees.
- 12.2 No public comment will be made on ongoing disciplinary proceedings as it could prejudice their outcome.

## **13.0 Political Group Leaders and the Chief Executive**

- 13.1 The Political Group Leaders and the Chief Executive will develop and conduct appropriate working relations.
- 13.2 Regular Briefing arrangements between the Political Group Leaders and the Chief Executive are an essential part of the democratic machinery of the Council. It is important that the Chief Executive, as Head of the Paid Service, is accessible by all political groups represented on the Council through their respective Leaders.

## **14.0 Issues regarding Working Relations between Members and Officers**

- 14.1 Members and Officers will seek to resolve any issues arising within their working relations.
- 14.2 Chief Officers will, in the first instance, endeavour to resolve any such issue.
- 14.3 The relevant Political Group Leader and the Chief Executive will seek to resolve by mediation and conciliation any unresolved problem or breakdown in working relationships between Members and Officers.

## **15.0 Review**

- 15.1 This Protocol will be reviewed from time to time and/or in the light of subsequent legislation.