

Protocol for Relationships between Members and Officers of a Local Authority

“Every local authority should have its own written statement or protocol governing relations between members and officers.”

(Third report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life – The Nolan Committee)

Preamble

1. Mutual trust and respect between members and officers is at the heart of a Council’s good governance. They are essential if the partnership necessary for the effective running of a local authority is to succeed.
2. This may seem obvious. But what happens when relationships go awry? Where can members and officers turn for guidance? What mechanisms exist for addressing concerns? How can matters be improved?
3. Such questions point to the need for a written guide to the basic elements of the relationship between members and officers – a protocol:
 - to promote trust, openness, fairness and honesty by establishing some ground rules;
 - to define roles so as:
 - to clarify responsibilities (i.e. who does what),
 - to avoid conflict, and
 - to prevent duplication or omission;
 - to secure compliance with the law, codes of conduct and a Council’s own practices; and
 - to lay down procedures for dealing with concerns by members and officers.
4. A protocol should be recognised both as a central element of a Council’s corporate governance, and as a commitment to upholding standards of conduct in public life. It’s one way of demonstrating to the public at large that local government is serious about protecting and enhancing its integrity and reputation. It should also be noted that his protocol applies to all forms of electronic communications including e-mails etc.

Definitions

5. Unless the context indicates otherwise, references to the term Council include the Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny committees, and other committees and sub-committees.
6. For the purposes of this protocol, the term Cabinet refers to the Leader and Cabinet Members.
7. Unless the context indicates otherwise, the terms member and members include non-elected (i.e. co-opted) members as well as elected Councillors.

8. Officers and staff mean all persons employed by the Council.
9. Senior officer has the meaning of an officer of the Council appointed to a post on a PM salary grade.
10. Designated Finance Officer means the officer exercising the duties prescribed by law for the financial administration of the Council.

Principles

11. Members and officers must at all times observe this protocol.
12. The protocol has been approved by the Full Council.
13. The protocol seeks to maintain and enhance the integrity (real and perceived) of local government which demands the highest standards of personal conduct.
14. Members and officers must always respect the roles and duties of each other. They must show respect in all their dealings by observing reasonable standards of courtesy, and by not seeking to take unfair advantage by virtue of their position.
15. Whilst members and officers are indispensable to one another, their responsibilities are distinct. Members are accountable to the electorate and serve only as long as their term of office lasts. Officers are accountable to the Council as a whole. Their job is to give advice to members (individually and collectively) and to carry out the Council's work under the direction of the Council.
16. The Council has adopted codes of conduct for both members and officers. Both represent best practice. The members' code follows the national code which in turn is based on the general principles governing members' conduct enshrined in law, viz:
 - Selflessness – serving only the public interest.
 - Integrity – not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organizations which might seek to influence them in performing their official duties.
 - Objectivity – taking decisions on merit.
 - Accountability – to the public; being open to scrutiny.
 - Openness – giving reasons for decisions.
 - Honesty – declare any private interests relating to their public duties and take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.
 - Leadership – promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

17. These principals underpin this protocol. They will also be reflected in a new national code of conduct for employees due in the near future and on which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister began a three months' consultation period in August 2004.
18. Until such time as a new national code appears, officers are bound by the Council's own code of conduct for staff and, in some cases, by the codes of their professional associations.
19. Breaches of this protocol by a member may result in a complaint to the Monitoring Officer if it appears the members' code has also been breached. Breaches by an officer may lead to disciplinary action.

The role of members

20. Members have a number of roles and need to be alert to the potential for conflicts of interest which may arise between the roles. Where such conflicts are likely, members may wish to seek the advice of senior colleagues, the relevant senior officer(s), and/or the Monitoring Officer.
21. Collectively, members are the ultimate policy-makers determining the core values of the Council and approving the authority's policy framework, strategic plans and budget.
22. Members represent the community, act as community leaders and promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the community often in partnership with other agencies.
23. Every elected-member represents the interests of, and is an advocate for, his/her ward [division] and individual constituents. He/she represents the Council in the ward, responds to the concerns of constituents, meets with partner agencies, and often serves on local bodies.
24. Some members have roles relating to their position as members of the Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Committees or other committees and sub-committees of the Council.
25. Members of the Cabinet can have individual delegated powers. They may determine matters within their portfolios but implementation of their decisions is the responsibility of officers.
26. Members serving on the Overview and Scrutiny Committees monitor the effectiveness of the Council's policies and services, develop policy proposals and examine community issues. They also monitor local health service provision.
27. Members who serve on other committees and sub-committees collectively have delegated responsibilities, e.g. deciding quasi-judicial matters which by law are excluded from the remit of the Cabinet.

28. Some members may be appointed to represent the Council on local, regional or national bodies.
29. As politicians, members may express the values and aspirations of the party political groups to which they belong, recognizing that in their role as members they have a duty always to act in the public interest.
30. Members are not authorised to instruct officers other than:
 - through the formal decision-making process;
 - to request the provision of consumable resources provided by the Council for members' use;
 - where staff have been specifically allocated to give support to a member or group of member; and
 - in the case of political assistants.
31. Members are not authorised to initiate or certify financial transactions, or to enter into a contract on behalf of the Council except in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations and Standing Orders as it applies to members who are Cabinet Members.
32. Members must avoid taking actions which are unlawful, financially improper or likely to amount to maladministration. Members have an obligation under their code of conduct to have regard, when reaching decisions, to any advice provided by the Monitoring Officer or the designated Finance Officer.
33. Members must respect the impartiality of officers and do nothing to compromise it, e.g. by insisting that an officer change his/her professional advice.
34. Members have a duty under their code of conduct:
 - to promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and
 - to treat others with respect.
35. Under the code, a member must not when acting as a member or in any other capacity:
 - bring the Council or his/her position as a member into disrepute, or
 - use his/her position as a member improperly to gain an advantage or disadvantage for his/herself or any other person.

The role of officers

36. Officers are responsible for giving advice to members to enable them to fulfil their roles. In doing so, officers will take into account all available relevant factors.

37. Under the direction and control of the Council (including, as appropriate, the Cabinet, committees, sub-committees or panels), officers manage and provide the Council's services within the framework of responsibilities delegated to them. This includes the effective management of employees and operational issues.
38. Officers have a duty to implement decisions of the Council, the Cabinet, committees and sub-committees which are lawful, and which have been properly approved in accordance with the requirements of the law and the Council's Constitution, and duly minuted.
39. Officers have a contractual and legal duty to be impartial. They must not allow their professional judgement and advice to be influenced by their own personal views.
40. Officers must assist and advise all parts of the Council. They must always act to the best of their abilities in the best interests of the authority as expressed in the Council's formal decisions.
41. Officers must be alert to issues which are, or are likely to be, contentious or politically sensitive and be aware of the implications for members, the media or other sections of the public.
42. Officers have the right not to support members in any role other than that of member, and not to engage in actions incompatible with this protocol. In particular, there is a statutory limitation on officers' involvement in political activities.

The relationship between members and officers: general

43. The conduct of members and officers should be such as to instill mutual confidence and trust.
44. The key elements are recognition of and a respect for each other's roles and responsibilities. These should be reflected in the behaviour and attitude of each to the other, both publicly and privately.
45. Informal and collaborative two-way contact between members and officers is encouraged. But personal familiarity can damage the relationship, as might a family or business connection.
46. It is not enough to avoid actual impropriety. Members and officers should always be open about their relationships to avoid any reason for suspicion and any appearance of improper conduct. Where a personal relationship has been disclosed, those concerned should avoid a situation where conflict could be perceived. Specifically, a member should not sit on a body or participate in any decision which directly affects the officer on a personal basis.
47. Officers serve the Council as a whole. They have a duty to implement the properly authorised decisions of the Council.

48. With the exception of political assistants, officers work to the instructions of their senior officers, not individual members. It follows that, whilst such officers will always seek to assist a member, they must not be asked to exceed the bounds of authority they have been given by their managers. Except when the purpose of an enquiry is purely to seek factual information, members should normally direct their requests and concerns to a senior officer, at least in the first instance.
49. Officers will do their best to give timely responses to members' enquiries. However, officers should not have unreasonable requests placed on them. Their work priorities are set and managed by senior managers. Members should avoid disrupting officers' work by imposing their own priorities.
50. Members will endeavor to give timely responses to enquiries from officers.
51. An officer shall not discuss with a member personal matters concerning him/herself or another individual employee. This does not prevent an officer raising on a personal basis, and in his/her own time, a matter with his/her ward [division] member.
52. Members and officers should respect each other's free (i.e. non-Council) time.

The Council as employer

53. Officers are employed by the Council as a whole.
54. Members' roles are limited to:
 - the appointment of specified senior posts,
 - determining human resources policies
 - hearing and determining appeals.
55. Members shall not act outside these roles.
56. If participating in the appointment of officers, members should:
 - remember that the sole criterion is merit (other than in the case of political consideration may apply),
 - never canvass support for a particular candidate,
 - not take part where one of the candidates is a close friend or relative,
 - not be influenced by personal preferences, and
 - not favor a candidate by giving him/her information not available to the other candidates.
57. A member should not sit on an appeal hearing if the appellant is a friend, a relative, or an officer with whom the member has had a working relationship.

Chairman and officers

58. Officers will respect the position of Chairman of the Council and provide appropriate support.

Cabinet members and officers

59. Cabinet members will take decisions in accordance with the Constitution and will not otherwise direct staff. Senior officers will be responsible for instructing staff to implement the Cabinet's decisions.
60. In addition to individual members of the Cabinet, senior officers (including the Monitoring Officer and the designated Finance Officer) have the right to submit papers to the Cabinet as a whole or to individual Cabinet members for consideration.
61. Senior officers and Cabinet members shall agree mutually convenient methods of regular contact. Before taking any formal decisions, the Cabinet will seek appropriate professional advice including, without exception, the Monitoring Officer and designated Finance Officer, and will not require officers to undertake actions which adversely affect their reputation for impartiality. Officers have a duty to prepare reports on request of senior members and these reports will normally include recommendations. These recommendations must accord with their own impartial and professional judgment. Members must not instruct, or exert undue influence, on officers with regard to the content of recommendations
62. Before any formal decisions with a financial implication are taken by the Cabinet, the Finance Officer and the senior officer(s) for the service(s) concerned must be consulted. This is to ensure that those officers who are budget holders:
 - are aware of the proposed decision,
 - have the opportunity to offer advice, and
 - are subsequently able properly to authorise the financial transactions needed to implement decisions.
63. An individual Cabinet member who is minded to write or commission a report or to make a decision about a matter within his/her portfolio should use their best endeavours to ensure that those other members and officers who need to know of the matter are so informed. There is a particular requirement to involve other Executive members on cross-cutting issues.
64. Cabinet members when making decisions (whether collectively or individually) must state the reasons for those decisions. The written record of the decisions must include the reasons.
65. Officers taking decisions under their delegated powers must consider the advisability of informing the relevant Cabinet member(s) and Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of their intentions in advance when the

matter to which the decisions relates is likely to be sensitive or contentious, or has wider policy implications.

Scrutiny, Policy Development and officers

66. The Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees shall maintain regular contact with the officer(s) providing the principal support to the scrutiny and policy development function. In consultation with the relevant Chairmen, it shall be the responsibility of the latter to ensure that those who need to know of matters being considered or for possible future consideration are so informed.
67. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee or their chairman acting on their behalf may require officers to attend Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Members should not normally expect junior officers to give evidence. All requests should be made to senior officers in the first instance.
68. When making requests for officer attendance, Overview and Scrutiny Committees shall have regard to the workload of officers.
69. It is recognized that officers required to appear before the Overview and Scrutiny Committees may often be those who have advised the Cabinet or another part of the Council on the matter under investigation. In these circumstances, an officer may have a conflict of interest. Both members and officers need to consider the severity of the conflict. If deemed appropriate, research and advice may be sought elsewhere – from the Council’s dedicated overview and scrutiny support unit or externally.
70. Subject to 72 below, officers should be prepared to justify advice given to the Council, the Cabinet, or other committees and sub-committees even when the advice was not accepted.
71. Officers must also be prepared to justify decisions they have taken under delegated powers.
72. In giving evidence, officers must not be asked to give political views.
73. Officers should respect members in the way they respond to members’ questions.
74. Members should not question officers in a way which could be interpreted as harassment. Neither should they ask about matters of a disciplinary nature.
75. Overview and Scrutiny Committee proceedings must not be used to question the capability or competence of officers. Chairmen and members need to make a distinction between reviewing the policies and performance of the Council and its services, and appraising the personal performance of staff. The latter is not a function of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. In exercising the right to call-in a decision of the Cabinet, members must seek officer advice if

they consider the decision is contrary to the Council's approved plans, policies or frameworks, or is unlawful.

Members of other committees or sub-committees and officers

77. The appropriate senior officers will offer to arrange regular informal meetings with chairmen, vice-chairmen, and spokesmen of committees and sub-committees.
78. Senior officers (including the Monitoring Officer and the designated Finance Officer) have the right to present reports and give advice to committees and sub-committees.
79. Members of a committee or sub-committee shall take decisions within the remit of that committee or sub-committee, and will not otherwise instruct officers to act.
80. At some committee or sub-committee meetings, a resolution may be passed which authorises a named officer to take action between meetings in consultation with the chairman. In these circumstances it is the officer, not the chairman, who takes the action and is responsible for it. A chairman has no legal power to take decisions on behalf of a committee or sub-committee; neither should he/she apply inappropriate pressure on the officer.

Party groups and officers

81. Senior officers may properly be asked to contribute to deliberations of matters concerning Council business by party groups.
82. Officers have the right to refuse such requests, and will normally not attend a meeting of a party group where some of those attending are not members of the Council.
83. Officer support will not extend beyond providing factual information or professional advice in relation to matters of Council business. Officers must not be involved in advising on matters of party business, and therefore should not be expected to be present at meetings or parts of meetings when such matters are to be discussed.
84. Party group meetings are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Council, and conclusions reached at such meetings do not rank as formal decisions. The presence of an officer confers no formal status on such meetings in terms of Council business and must not be interpreted as doing so.
85. Where officers provide factual information and advice to a party group in relation to a matter of Council business, this is not a substitute for providing all the necessary information and advice when the matter in question is formally considered by the relevant part of the Council.

86. It must not be assumed that an officer is supportive of a particular policy or view considered at a party group meeting simply because he/she has attended or provided information to the meeting.
87. Officers will respect the confidentiality of any party group discussions at which they are present and, unless requested to do so by that party group, will not relay the content of such discussions to another party group or to any other members. This shall not prevent an officer providing feedback to other senior officers on a need-to-know basis.
88. In their dealings with party groups, officers must treat each group in a fair and even-handed manner.
89. Members must not do anything which compromises or is likely to compromise officers' impartiality.
90. The duration of an officer's attendance at a party group meeting will be at the discretion of the group, but an officer may leave at any time if he/she feels it is no longer appropriate to be there.
91. An officer accepting an invitation to the meeting of one party group shall not decline an invitation to advise another group about the same matter. He/she must give substantially the same advice to each.
92. An officer who is not a senior officer shall not be invited to attend a party group meeting, but a senior officer may nominate another officer to attend on his/her behalf.
93. An officer should be given the opportunity of verifying comments and advice attributed to him/her in any written record of a party group meeting.
94. No member will refer in public or at meetings of the Council to advice or information given by officers to a party group meeting.
95. At party group meetings where some of those present are not members of the Council, care must be taken not to divulge confidential information relating to Council business. Persons who are not members are not bound by the members' code of conduct. They do not have the same rights to Council information as members.
96. Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in relation to this part of the protocol should be raised with the Chief Executive and the relevant party group leader.
97. Where an officer prepares a report for a political group, the Chief Executive will advise all other groups that the report has been prepared and will provide a copy of that report to any group upon request. Also the Chief Executive will advise all other groups that an officer has attended a political group meeting and the subject upon which he or she did advise.

Local members and officers

98. To enable them to carry out their ward role effectively, members need to be fully informed about matters affecting their ward. Senior officers must ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the requirement to keep local members informed, thus allowing members to contribute to the decision-making process and develop their representative role.
99. This requirement is particularly important:
 - during the formative stages of policy development, where practicable,
 - in relation to significant or sensitive operational matters,
 - whenever any form of public consultation exercise is undertaken, and
 - during a scrutiny or policy development investigation.
100. Issues may affect a single ward. Where they have a wider impact, a number of local members will need to be kept informed.
102. Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider a local issue, all the members representing the wards affected should be invited to attend the meeting as a matter of course.
103. If a local member intends to arrange a public meeting on a matter concerning some aspect of the Council's work, he/she should inform the relevant officer. Provided the meeting has not been arranged on a party political basis:
 - an officer may attend but is not obliged to do so, and the meeting may be held in Council- owned premises.
104. No such meetings should be arranged or held in the immediate run-up to Council elections (i.e. after the issue of the notice of election).
105. Whilst support for members' ward work is legitimate, care should be taken if staff are asked to accompany members to ward surgeries. In such circumstances:
 - the surgeries must be open to the general public, and
 - officers should not be requested to accompany members to surgeries held in the offices or premises or political parties.
106. Officers must never be asked to attend ward or constituency political party meetings.
107. It is acknowledged that some Council staff (e.g. those providing dedicated support to Cabinet members) may receive and handle messages for members on topics unrelated to the Council. Whilst these will often concern diary management, care should be taken to avoid Council resources being used for private or party political purposes.

108. In seeking to deal with constituents' queries or concerns, members should not seek to jump the queue but should respect the Council's procedures. Officers have many pressures on their time. They may not be able to carry out the work required by members in the requested timescale, and may need to seek instructions from their managers.

Members' access to documents and information

109. This part of the protocol should be read in conjunction with the Access to Information Rules in the Council's Constitution.

110. Members may request senior officers to provide them with such information, explanation and advice as they may reasonably need to assist them to discharge their roles as members. This may range from general information about some aspect of the Council's services to specific information on behalf of a constituent. Where information is requested on behalf of a third party, it will only be provided if:

- it is in the public domain, and
- it is not barred by the Data Protection Act from being given.
- it relates to the member's role as a ward Councillor or to any role the member has been appointed to by the Council.

111. Every member of the Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and/or any other committee or sub-committee has a right to inspect documents about the business of that group, committee or sub-committee or the Cabinet.

112. A member who is not a member of a specific Overview and Scrutiny Committee, other committee or sub-committee, or the Cabinet may have access to any document of that specific part of the Council provided:

- he/she can demonstrate a reasonable need to see the documents in order to carry out his/her roles as a member (the "need to know" principle), and the documents do not contain "confidential" or "exempt" information as defined by the law.

113. Disputes as to the validity of a member's request to see a document on a need to know basis will be determined by the Monitoring Officer. Officers should seek his/her advice if in any doubt about the reasonableness of a member's request.

114. A member should obtain advice from the Monitoring Officer in circumstances where he/she wishes to have access to documents or information:

- where to do so is likely to be in breach of the Data Protection Act, or
- where the subject matter is one in which he/she has a personal or prejudicial interest as defined in the members' code of conduct.

115. Information given to a member must only be used for the purposes for which it was requested

116. It is an accepted convention that a member of one party group will not have a need to know and therefore a right to inspect a document which forms part of the internal workings of another party group.
117. Members and officers must not disclose information given to them in confidence without the consent of a person authorised to give it, or unless required by law to do so.
118. When requested to do so, officers will keep confidential from other members advice requested by a member.
119. Members and officers must not prevent another person from gaining access to information to which that person is entitled by law.

Media relations

120. All formal relations with the media must be conducted in accordance with the Council's agreed procedures and the law on local authority publicity.
121. Press releases or statements made by officers must promote or give information on Council policy or services. They will be factual and consistent with Council policy. They cannot be used to promote a party group.
122. Officers will keep relevant members informed of media interest in the Council's activities, especially regarding strategic or contentious matters.
123. Before responding to enquiries from the media, officers shall ensure they are authorised to do so.
124. Likewise, officers will inform the Council's public relations office of issues likely to be of media interest, since that unit is often the media's first point of contact.
125. If a member is contacted by, or contacts, the media on an issue, he/she should:
 - indicate in what capacity he/she is speaking (e.g. as ward member, in a personal capacity, as an Cabinet member, on behalf of the Council, or on behalf of a party group);
 - be sure of what he/she wants to say or not to say
 - if necessary, and always when he/she would like a press release to be issued, seek assistance from the Council's press office [or similar] and/or relevant senior officer, except in relation to a statement which is party political in nature;
 - consider the likely consequences for the Council of his/her statement (e.g. commitment to a particular course of action, image, allegations of jumping to conclusions);
 - never give a commitment in relation to matters which may be subject to claims from third parties and/or are likely to be an insurance matter;
 - consider whether to consult other relevant members; and

- take particular care in what he/she says in the run-up to local or national elections to avoid giving the impression of electioneering, unless he/she has been contacted as an election candidate or political party activist.

Correspondence

126. Correspondence between an individual member and an officer should not be copied to another member unless the author expressly intends and states that this is the case or consents. Where correspondence is copied, this should always be made explicit, i.e. there should be no “blind” copies.
127. Official letters written on behalf of the Council should normally be in the name of the relevant officer. It may be appropriate in some circumstances (e.g. representations to a Government Minister) for letters to appear in the name of a Cabinet member or the chairman of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
128. The Chairman may initiate correspondence in his/her own name.
129. Letters which create legally enforceable obligations or which give instructions on behalf of the Council should never be sent in the name of a member.
130. When writing in an individual capacity as a ward member, a member must make clear that fact.

Use of Council resources

131. The Council provides all members with services such as typing, printing and photocopying, and goods such as stationery and computer equipment, to assist them in discharging their roles as members of the Council. These goods and services are paid for from the public purse. They should not be used for private purposes or in connection with party political or campaigning activities.
132. Members should ensure they understand and comply with the Council’s own rules about the use of such resources, particularly:
- where facilities are provided in members’ homes at the Council’s expense;
 - in relation to any locally-agreed arrangements e.g. payment for private photocopying; and
 - regarding ICT security.
133. Members should not put pressure on staff to provide resources or support which officers are not permitted to give. Examples are:
- business which is solely to do with a political party;
 - work in connection with a ward or constituency party political meeting;
 - electioneering
 - work associated with an event attended by a member in a capacity other than as a member of the Council;
 - private personal correspondence;

- work in connection with another body or organization where a member's involvement is other than as a member of the Council; and
- support to a member in his/her capacity as a Councillor of another local authority.

Interpretation, complaints and allegations of breaches

134. This part of the protocol should be read in conjunction with any "whistle blowing" policy the Council may have.
135. Members of officers with questions about the implementation of interpretation of any part of this protocol should seek the guidance of the Monitoring Officer.
136. A member who is unhappy about the actions taken by, or conduct of, an officer should:
- avoid personal attacks on, or abuse of, the officer at all times,
 - ensure that any criticism is well founded and constructive,
 - should speak to the Chief Executive in the first instance,
 - should not make public comments on the matter before it has been investigated by the Chief Executive.
 - Complaints concerning the Chief Executive should be referred to the Assistant Director, Transformation and Change (responsible for Human Resources) and/or the Monitoring Officer.
 - Formal complaints (i.e. those made in writing) concerning the Chief Executive should be referred to the Monitoring Officer and the Chair of the Employment Committee to determine the most appropriate procedure for their consideration.
137. If direct discussion with the officer is inappropriate (e.g. because of the seriousness of the concern) or fails to resolve the matter, the member should raise the issue with the officer's manager or the relevant senior officer.
138. A serious breach of this protocol by an officer may lead to an investigation under the Council's disciplinary procedure.
139. An officer who believes a member may have acted other than in accordance with this protocol should raise his/her concern with the Monitoring Officer. He/she will, consider how the complaint or allegation should be dealt with. At a minor level, this may be no more than informally referring the matter to the leader of the relevant party group. More serious complaints may involve alleged breaches of the members' code of conduct, and may be referred to the Review Board.