

SECTION D1

PROTOCOL ON MEMBER/OFFICER RELATIONS

1. GENERAL

1.1 Rationale

The purpose of this Protocol is to enhance working relationships between Members and Officers of the Council. Whilst the Protocol cannot be comprehensive, it sets out guidance on some of the key issues that arise in those relationships. The Protocol also seeks to reflect both the principles underlying the respective Codes of Conduct for Members and for Officers and the seven General Principles of Conduct in Public Life.

1.2 Remit

For the purposes of this Protocol, and unless stated otherwise, the term “Member” includes both elected members (i.e.- councillors) and added members (i.e.- non elected appointed or co-opted, voting or non-voting).

1.3 Fundamental Principles

- Members and Officers of the Council are obliged to act within the law and in compliance with relevant standards and codes of conduct.
- The role of a Member is defined in Statute. In law all Members are equal and have the responsibilities of trustees.
- The over-riding duty of a Member is to the whole community, with a special duty (if a councillor) to their constituents.
- Officers serve the whole Council ~~as a single statutory corporate body and all~~ Councillors.
- Officers advise the Executive, the Council and its Committees and are responsible for ensuring that the decisions of the Council are effectively implemented.
- Officers are required to be politically neutral and, for some employees, this is enforced through the political restrictions imposed by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.
- The interests of the Council are best served where there is mutual confidence and trust between all Members and Officers.
- Both Members and Officers have responsibility for decision making within the schemes of delegation for both Council and Executive functions as set out in the Council’s Constitution
- Members should understand and respect the roles of the Council’s main statutory officers (namely the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer).
- The Chief Executive and Chief Officers (and Senior Officers working to them) should work closely with members of the ruling group to ensure effective policy development and efficient executive decision making
- Officers will provide adequate support to all Members in their local or representational role

1.4 **Provision of Advice**

- (a) Members should recognise that Officers have the duty and right to provide appropriate professional advice, and the right to have that advice recorded, so that all Members are fully aware of the implications of their decisions.
- (b) Officers should recognise that it is the right of the Members to take the final decisions in the light of their advice.
- (c) The provision of that advice is the principal means by which Members can gain assurance that their decisions comply with the law and relevant standards or codes of conduct and are in accordance with Council policies and procedures.
- (d) The advice provided by the Officers should be factual, honest, objective and politically neutral and based on professional experience and expertise.
- (e) The advice should be sensitive to the political aspirations and constraints of Members but should not reflect, or be influenced by, those aspirations and constraints.
- (f) The advice given by Officers will have the ultimate aim of serving the interests of the Council as a whole, irrespective of whether the current emphasis of an Officer's role is Executive, Overview & Scrutiny or Regulatory.
- (g) It is improper for any Member to seek to influence Officer advice and /or recommendations by subjecting any Officer to undue pressure (see Paragraph 1.5 below). Such advice and recommendations must be those of the officer only.

1.5 **Respect and Courtesy**

- (a) For the effective conduct of Council business there must be mutual respect and courtesy in all meetings and contacts, both formal and informal, between Members and Officers. It is very important that both Members and Officers remember their respective obligations to enhance the Council's reputation and to do what they can to avoid criticism of Members or Officers.
- (b) If an officer is in breach of this requirement, some form of disciplinary action may result as a consequence of investigation by the Chief Officer.
- (c) If a Member is in breach, then the matter will be discussed, if appropriate, with the Head of Paid Service and/or Monitoring Officer, and will then be dealt with within their political group.

1.6 **Undue pressure**

- (a) In their dealings with Chief Officers and, more particularly, other Officers, Members must remain aware at all times that Officers have no discretion to act outside Council policies.

- (b) A Member should not apply undue pressure on an officer either to do anything that they are not empowered to do, or to undertake work outside normal duties, or outside normal hours. A Member should not seek to instruct, or direct the work of, individual employees, nor create a situation that places, or could place, any Officer in conflict with his or her Line Manager.
- (c) Similarly, an Officer must neither seek to use undue influence on an individual Member to make a decision in that Officer's favour or to his or her advantage, nor raise with a Member personal matters to do with their work. No Officer shall make claims or allegations to a Member about another Member or Officer except for a Chief Officer raising issues through proper channels as set out in the Constitution.

1.7 **Familiarity**

Close familiarity between Members and Officers must be avoided. It can damage the principle of mutual respect and could lead to passing of confidential information, or information which should not properly be passed between them. Such familiarity could also cause embarrassment to other Members and/or Officers or could give rise to a suspicion or perception of favouritism.

2. INFORMATION AND THE POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

- 2.1 All information will be open and accessible, subject to legislative requirements on exempt and confidential information and relevant Data Protection law. ~~the Data Protection Act.~~
- 2.2 For the proper functioning of the County Council as a whole, Officers will normally be permitted to share information freely between themselves.
- 2.3 Where the information has been supplied/received subject to a request for party political confidentiality, an Officer will be permitted to share that information with other Officers if he/she believes that to be necessary - for example for the purpose of verifying the legality, financial probity or procedural regularity of any proposed course of action disclosed by that information. However, the request for party political confidentiality will be confirmed to, and honoured by, any Officers with whom the information is shared.
- 2.4 Appropriate and regular liaison between Members and Officers connected with the Executive and Overview & Scrutiny aspects of the County Council should avoid the relationship between Overview & Scrutiny and the Executive becoming adversarial and polarised. This liaison, combined with the politically balanced nature of Overview & Scrutiny, should reduce the number of occasions on which it is necessary for information to be supplied by Councillors to Officers on a party political confidential basis at the Executive/Overview & Scrutiny levels.
- 2.5 Officers can share with the appropriate Executive Member any factual information supplied to any other Member.
- 2.6 Where information is supplied to Officers on a party political confidential basis, the Officers will respect that confidentiality unless the Officers believe that the proposed course of action appears to be in conflict with the law, or any relevant

standards or codes of conduct, or would amount to an abuse of the processes of the County Council.

- 2.7 Where party political confidentiality would be maintained in accordance with the preceding sub-paragraph, the Officers may, nonetheless, seek to persuade the Members requesting the confidentiality to agree to that information being shared with the other political groups on the grounds that it would assist the more effective functioning of the County Council; however, in the absence of any such agreement to waive the confidentiality, the Officers would continue to respect it.
- 2.8 Where there is a change in Political Administration, the Officers will act in relation to the new Administration and Opposition party or parties in the same way as they did for the old; and will continue to respect any continuing party political confidentiality.

3. SUPPORT SERVICES TO MEMBERS

- 3.1 All Councillors have a right to receive information from the County Council that they need to carry out their role as a County Councillor.

4. OFFICERS AND WHOLE COUNCIL

- 4.1 The Constitution includes provision for a single party Executive, delegation of decisions to individual Executive Members and a clear division between the Executive, Overview & Scrutiny and Regulatory roles of Members.
- 4.2 However, Officers are required at all times to serve the whole Council and will need to exercise judgement in fulfilling this obligation, whilst maintaining the distinction between the Executive, Overview & Scrutiny and Regulatory functions.
- 4.3 Members must recognise this obligation on Officers.

5. OFFICERS AND THE EXECUTIVE

- 5.1 Any decision by an individual Executive Member or a collective decision by the Executive must be supported by written advice from the appropriate Officer.
- 5.2 An Officer's obligation to the whole Council requires that such advice is independent and Executive Members must not seek to suppress or amend any aspect of such professional advice.
- 5.3 Reports to the Executive will normally be produced by Officers but there may be occasions when an Executive Member produces such a report. In either situation, the appropriate Officer shall record his or her professional advice to the Executive and ensure that that advice is considered when a decision is taken.
- 5.4 When Officers have to carry out decisions of an individual Executive Member, Non-Executive members should recognise that these are still legitimate executive decisions of the Council

6. THE EXECUTIVE AND OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

- 6.1 Given the nature and purpose of the County Council and the respective roles of Members and Officers, it is accepted that the Officers, while remaining politically neutral, will inevitably give advice on a wider range of issues and on a more regular basis to the Executive. For their part, the Executive will continue to respect the political neutrality of the Officers and accept that Officers are obliged to respond positively to any requests from Overview & Scrutiny for appropriate information and advice relevant to the issue being considered by Overview & Scrutiny.
- 6.2 When an Officer requests it, the Executive will provide an appropriate Lead Member to attend an Overview & Scrutiny meeting to explain an Executive decision and the reasons for it.

7. OFFICERS AND INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS

- 7.1 Any Group Leader, Executive Member, Group Spokesman, Committee Chairman or Chief Whip/Group Whip or their nominated representative may request a private and confidential briefing from a Chief Officer on matters of policy which have already been or may be discussed by the Council or which are within its decision-making or advisory process. Briefings shall remain strictly confidential and are not to be shared with other Members without the express permission of the relevant Member(s).
- 7.2 Except for the confidential policy advice referred to above, where possible information will be shared among political group representatives. In particular, scrutiny is a cross party process involving all political groups represented on the Council. Information supplied to Scrutiny Chairmen will therefore be shared as a matter of course with each of the political groups.
- 7.3 Individual Members may request any Chief Officer (or another senior Officer of the Directorate concerned) to provide them with information. Where the Member has a right to information and can demonstrate his/her duties as a Member, such requests must be reasonable, and must recognise the need for Officers to maintain the distinction between Executive, Overview & Scrutiny and Regulatory processes.
- 7.4 If a Chief Officer considers the cost of providing the information requested - or the nature of the request - to be unreasonable, he/she shall seek guidance from the Head of Paid Service as to whether the information should be provided.
- 7.5 Confidential information relating, for example, to casework, should not normally be sought by a Member from an Officer. If, in exceptional circumstances, a Member wishes to discuss confidential aspects of an individual case, they should seek advice from the appropriate Chief Officer and follow any relevant guidance.
- 7.6 Any Council information provided to a Member must only be used by the Member for the purpose for which it was provided (i.e.- the proper performance of the Member's duties).
- 7.7 There will be quarterly informal meetings of all Group Leaders and the ruling group's Deputy Leaders with the Head of Paid Service. These meetings will be

confidential and minuted. Their objective is to help ensure the political management of the Council and build effective relationships.

- 7.8 Any Group Leader can request additional meetings to discuss urgent matters.

8. LOCAL MEMBERS

- 8.1 It is essential for the proper running of the Council that Local Members (i.e. - councillors) should be fully informed about matters on which they may be required to make decisions or which affect their electoral divisions.
- 8.2 It is the duty of each Chief Officer and Executive Member to ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the need to keep Local Members informed and that the timing of such information allows Local Members to contribute to those decisions.
- 8.3 Local Members shall also be kept informed about matters affecting their divisions during the formative stages of policy development and discussion.
- 8.4 Issues may affect a single electoral division but others may have a wider - even sub-regional - impact, in which case numerous Local Members will need to be kept informed.
- 8.5 Local Members have an important role to play in representing the County Council in their constituencies; responding to the concerns of their constituents; in meetings with partners and serving on outside organisations.
- 8.6 Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider a local issue, all the Local Members representing the electoral division(s) affected should as a matter of course be invited to attend the meeting.
- 8.7 Similarly, whenever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise, the Local Member(s) should be notified at the outset of the exercise.

9. OFFICERS AND NON-COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

- 9.1 Officers may be requested to meet with councillors or elected representatives from other Councils or organisations to provide briefings and/or policy advice.
- 9.2 Any Officer requested to attend such a meeting which is not held on a cross political party basis must obtain the prior authorisation of the Head of Paid Service who shall inform all Group Leaders of the arrangements.

10. MEDIA RELATIONS

- 10.1 Advice to the Executive and Executive Members in relation to the media will be provided on a confidential basis if requested.
- 10.2 Executive Members will (through the Communications Team) be able to publicise issues prior to decisions being taken.

- 10.3 Overview & Scrutiny and Regulatory Chairmen shall ensure that all media statements relating to the scrutiny and regulatory functions have the support of the relevant Committee. Any such statements must be consistent with the Council's intent that the scrutiny and regulatory functions shall help to achieve a culture of continuous improvement and good governance throughout the Council.
- 10.4 The Communications Team and other Officers will also assist non-Executive Members (particularly Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen) in their media relations (on a confidential basis if requested).
- 10.5 Any Officer assisting a Member with media relations must act at all times in the interests of the whole Council and in a politically impartial manner. Other than factual statements, Members should not seek assistance from an Officer with the preparation or issue of any media statement that will adversely affect the reputation of the Council.

11. REDRESS

- 11.1 If a Member considers that they have not been treated properly by an Officer, they should first try to resolve the matter through direct discussion with that Officer.
- 11.2 The Member may raise the matter with the officer's Line Manager or Chief Officer if the matter cannot be resolved through such discussion. A Member may raise the issue with the Head of Paid Service if it remains unresolved. Where appropriate, disciplinary action may be taken against an Officer
- 11.3 Similarly, if an Officer feels that they have not been treated properly by a Member and they feel unable to resolve the matter directly with that Member, the Officer should raise the issue with the appropriate Chief Officer. In such circumstances the Chief Officer will take such action as is appropriate, including, if necessary, raising the matter with the relevant Group Leader.
- 11.4 The Chief Officer will inform the Head of Paid Service if the Group Leader becomes involved, and, in other cases, where appropriate.
- 11.5 If any matter covered by 11.3 above involves an actual or potential breach of the Code of Conduct for Members, it should be referred to the Monitoring Officer.

12. ARBITRATION

- 12.1 When necessary or appropriate, the Head of Paid Service will arbitrate on the interpretation of this Protocol.

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