

PROTOCOL ON MEMBER/OFFICER RELATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION AND PRINCIPLES

- 1.1 The purpose of this Protocol is to guide Members and Officers of the Council in their relations with one another in such a way as to ensure the smooth running of the Council and to satisfy the ethical standards required.
- 1.2 Given the variety and complexity of such relations this Protocol does not seek to be either prescriptive or comprehensive. It simply offers guidance on some of the issues which most commonly arise. It is hoped, however, that the approach which it adopts to these issues will serve as a guide to dealing with other circumstances.
- 1.3 This Protocol is to a large extent a written statement of current practice and convention. It seeks to promote greater clarity and certainty. If the Protocol is followed, it should ensure that Members receive objective and impartial advice and that Officers are protected from accusations of bias and any undue influence from Members.
- 1.4 It also seeks to reflect the principles underlying the respective Codes of Conduct which now apply to Members and Officers. The shared object of these codes is to enhance and maintain the integrity (real and perceived) of local government and the Codes, therefore, demand very high standards of personal conduct.
- 1.5 This Protocol is a local extension to the Members' Code of Conduct and Employee Code of Conduct. Consequently, a breach of the provisions of this Protocol may also constitute a breach of these Codes.
- 1.6 This Protocol should be read in conjunction with the Codes of Conduct, and any guidance issued by the Standards Committee and/or Monitoring Officer of Sedgefield Borough Council.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP : GENERAL POINTS

- 2.1 Whilst both Councillors and Officers are servants of the public and they are indispensable to one another the responsibilities are distinct. Councillors are responsible to the electorate and serve only so long as their term of office lasts. Councillors are responsible for setting policy. Officers are responsible to the Council. Their job is to give advice to Councillors and the Council, and to carry out the Council's work under the direction and control of the Council and its various bodies.
- 2.2 At the heart of the Codes and this Protocol, is the importance of mutual respect. Member/Officer relationships are to be conducted in a positive and constructive way. Therefore, it is important that any dealings between Members and Officers should observe standards of courtesy and that neither party should seek to take unfair advantage of their position or seek to exert undue influence on the other party.

2.3 Members must respect the impartiality and integrity of all the Council's Officers. Similarly, all Officers must respect the role of Members as elected representatives.

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2.4 Inappropriate relationships can be inferred from language/style. To protect both Members and Officers, Officers should address Members at all formal meetings as Councillor xxx and Mr or Madam Chairman save where circumstances clearly indicate that a level of informality is appropriate. Similarly when addressing Officers at formal meetings of the Council, Members should address Officers by their post title.

2.5 A Member should not raise matters relating to the conduct or capability of an Officer in a manner that is incompatible with the objectives of this Protocol. This is a longstanding tradition in public service. An Officer has no means of responding to criticisms in public. If a Member feels he/she has not been treated with proper respect, courtesy or has any concern about the conduct or capability of an Officer, he/she should raise the matter with the Town Clerk. Any action taken against an Officer in respect of a complaint, will be in accordance with the provisions of the Council's Disciplinary Rules and Procedures.

2.6 An Officer should not raise with a Member matters relating to the conduct or capability of another Officer or to the internal management of a Department in a manner that is incompatible with the overall objectives of this Protocol.

2.7 Where an officer feels that he/she has not been properly treated with respect and courtesy by a Member, he/she should raise the matter with the Town Clerk. In these circumstances the Town Clerk will take appropriate action either by approaching the individual Member and/or Group Leader or by referring the matter to the Monitoring Officer in the context of the Standards Committee considering the complaint.

3. ROLES OF MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

3.1 Members have four main roles :

- Determining the policy of the Council and giving it political leadership
- Monitoring and reviewing the performance of the Council in implementing that policy and delivering services
- Representing the Council externally
- Acting as advocates on behalf of their constituents and the wider community

3.2 Officers have the following main roles:

- Initiating policy proposals
- Implementing agreed policy, managing and providing the services and being accountable for the efficiency and effectiveness of the services provided
- Providing professional advice to the Council, its various bodies and individual members
- Ensuring the Council always acts in a lawful manner

4. THE RELATIONSHIP : OFFICER SUPPORT TO MEMBERS : GENERAL POINTS

4.1 Officers are responsible for day-to-day managerial and operational decisions within the Council and will provide support to all Councillors in their various roles.

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4.2 In giving such advice to Members and in preparing and presenting reports, it is the responsibility of the Officer to express his/her own professional views and make recommendations. Members should not seek to pressure the Officer to make a recommendation contrary to the Officer's professional view because of their wish to express a contrary view.

4.3 The Town Clerk has certain statutory roles which need to be understood and respected by all Members. Members must respect these statutory obligations, must not obstruct the Town Clerk in the discharge of his/her responsibilities and must not victimise him/her for discharging him/her responsibilities.

4.4 The following key principles reflect the way in which Officers generally relate to Members :-

- All Officers are employed by, and accountable to, the authority as a whole
- Support from Officers is needed for all of the authority's functions
- Day to day managerial and operational decisions should remain the responsibility of the Town Clerk and other Officers and
- All Officers will be provided with training and development to help them support the various Member roles effectively.

4.5 Finally, it must be remembered that Officers within the Town Council are accountable to their line manager and ultimately the Town Clerk and that whilst Officers should always seek to assist a Member, they must not, in so doing, go beyond the bounds of whatever authority they have been given by their line manager or Town Clerk.

5. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEMBERS AT COMMITTEES AND OFFICERS AT MEETINGS OF THE AUTHORITY

5.1 Reports should always contain a recommendation unless the issue is clearly one where political judgement is required. They will also always include the name of the contact Officer. Members should raise issues with that Officer prior to the meeting if at all possible.

5.2 The Chairmen and Members shall give Officers the opportunity to present any report and give any advice they wish to give.

5.3 All Members shall seek the advice of the Town Clerk where they consider there is doubt about the vires for a decision or where they consider a decision might be contrary to pre-determined policies of the Council.

5.4 Members and Officers should be mutually supportive in order to minimise any potential embarrassment to the Council. Criticism of officers should be dealt with in private and, by the same token, Officers will never be publicly critical of the Council or its policies.

6. THE RELATIONSHIP : OFFICER SUPPORT : MEMBER AND PARTY GROUPS

- 6.1 It must be recognised by all Officers and Members that in discharging their duties and responsibilities they serve the Council as a whole.

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- 6.2 The only basis on which the Council can lawfully provide support services (eg stationery, typing, printing, photo-copying, transport etc) to Members is to assist them in discharging their role as Members of the Council. Such support services must therefore only be used on Council business. They should never be used in connection with party political or campaigning activity.

7. OFFICER RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARTY GROUPS

- 7.1 There is statutory recognition for political groups and it is common practice for such groups to give preliminary consideration to matters of Council business in advance of consideration by the relevant Council body. Meetings between the Town Clerk and Chairmen and/or group leaders will be held when appropriate albeit that they have no executive powers.
- 7.2 In all dealings with members, in particular when giving advice to political party groups, Officers must demonstrate political impartiality and must not suppress their professional advice in the face of political views.
- 7.3 Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in this area of Officer advice to political party groups should be raised with the Town Clerk who will then discuss them with the relevant group leader(s).

8. MEMBERS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND TO COUNCIL DOCUMENTS

- 8.1 Members have the ability to ask for information pursuant to their legal rights to information. This right extends to such information, explanation and advice as they may reasonably need in order to assist them in discharging their role as a Member of the Council. This can range from a request for general information about some aspect of a Department's activities to a request for specific information on behalf of a constituent. Such approaches should normally be directed to the relevant line manager of the Town Council.
- 8.2 As regards the legal rights of Members to inspect Council documents, these are covered partly by statute and partly by the common law.
- 8.3 Members have a statutory right in inspect any Council document which contains material relating to any business which is to be transacted by the Council. The right applies irrespective of whether the Member is a member of the meeting concerned and extends not only to reports which are to be submitted to the meeting, but also to any relevant background papers.
- 8.4 The common law rights of Members remain intact and are much broader and are based on the principle that any Member has a prima facie right to inspect Council documents so far as his/her access to the document is reasonably necessary to enable the Member

properly to perform his/her duties as a Member of the Council. This principle is commonly referred to as the 'need to know' principle.

- 8.5 The exercise of this common law right depends therefore, upon an individual Member being able to demonstrate that he/she has the necessary 'need to know'. In this respect a Member has no right to 'a roving commission' to go and examine documents of the Council. Mere curiosity is not sufficient. The crucial question is the determination of the 'need to know'. This question must initially be determined by the Town Clerk.

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- 8.6 In some circumstances (eg a meeting of the Council or its bodies and a Member wishing to inspect documents relating to the business of that meeting) a Member's 'need to know' will normally be presumed. In other circumstances (e.g., a Member wishing to inspect documents which contain personal information about third parties) the Member will normally be expected to justify the request in specific terms.
- 8.7 Whilst the term 'Council document' is very broad and includes for example, any document produced with Council resources, it is accepted by 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.
- 8.8 Further and more detailed advice regarding Members rights to inspect Council documents may be obtained from the Town Clerk.
- 8.9 Finally, any Council information provided to a Member must only be used by Members for the purpose for which it was provided, ie in connection with the proper performance of the Member's duties as a Member of the Council. Therefore, for example, early drafts of Committee reports/briefing papers are not suitable for public disclosure and should not be used other than for the purpose for which they were supplied.

9. CORRESPONDENCE

- 9.1 Correspondence between an individual Member and an Officer should not normally be copied (by the Officer) to any other Member. Where exceptionally it is necessary to copy the correspondence to another Member, this should be made clear to the original Member. In other words, a system of 'silent copies' should not be employed.
- 9.2 Official letters on behalf of the Council should normally be sent in the name of the appropriate Officer, rather than in the name of a Member. Letters which, for example, create legal obligations or give instructions on behalf of the Council should never be sent out in the name of a Member.

10. PUBLICITY AND PRESS RELEASES

- 10.1 Local authorities are accountable to their electorate. Accountability requires local understanding. This will be promoted by the Authority by explaining its objectives and policies to the electors and taxpayer. In recent years, all local authorities have increasingly used publicity to keep the public informed and to encourage public participation. Every Council needs to tell the public about the services it provides. Increasingly, local authorities see this task as an essential part of providing services. Good, effective publicity aimed to improve public awareness of a Council's activities is, in the words of the Government, to be welcomed.
- 10.2 Publicity is, however, a sensitive matter in any political environment because of the impact it can have. Expenditure on publicity can be significant. It is essential, therefore, to ensure that local authority decisions on publicity are properly made in

accordance with clear principles of good practice. The government has issued a Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. The purpose of the Code is to set out such principles. The Code develops the conventions that should apply to all publicity at public expense and which traditionally have applied in both central and local government. The Code is issued under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1986 as amended by the Local Government Act 1988 which provides for the Secretary of State to issue Codes of Recommended Practice as

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regards the content, style, distribution and costs of local authority publicity and such other matters as he/she thinks appropriate. That section requires that all local authorities shall have regard to the provisions of any such Code in coming to any decision on publicity.

- 10.3 Officers and Members of the Council will, therefore, in making decisions on publicity, take account of the provisions of this Code. If in doubt, Officers and/or Members should initially seek advice from the Town Clerk. Particular care should be paid to any such publicity used by the Council around the time of an election. Particular advice will be given on this by the Town Clerk.

11. MEMBERS IN THEIR WARD ROLE AND OFFICERS

- 11.1 Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider a local issue, all the Members representing the Ward or Wards affected will as a matter of course, be invited to attend the meeting. Similarly, whenever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise on a local issue, the Ward Members will be notified at the outset of the exercise.
- 11.2 Should Members or local residents convene a local meeting, Officer attendance will be at the discretion of the Town Clerk and will take account of the purpose of the meeting.
- 11.3 In all circumstances, the role of Officers at such meetings is to provide information on the topic under consideration and any decision making process which might be relevant, but not to offer or share judgements. Officers will seek to assist in the effective engagement of the community but will be mindful at all times of the integrity of the formal decision making process.
- 11.4 Members attending local consultation meetings, which may on occasion give rise to heated debate, should be mindful of the restrictions on the responses available to Officers and both Officers and Members should act at all times in accordance with their respective Codes of Conduct.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 Mutual understanding and openness on these sort of sensitive issues and basic respect are the greatest safeguard of the integrity of the Council, its Members and Officers.
- 12.2 Questions of interpretation of this Protocol will be determined by the Town Clerk.
- 12.3 Copies of the Protocol will be issued to all Members, upon election, and all line managers.

