



HOLYWELL TOWN COUNCIL

PROTOCOL ON MEMBER/ OFFICER RELATIONS

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1. Introduction

Effective local governance and community leadership depends on good working relationships between Members and Officers.

This Protocol provides guidance for Members which includes 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.

This Protocol applies only to working relations between Members in their role as Members and Officers in their capacity as Officers.

2. Working Relations

Members and Officers shall establish sound and effective working relations that engender mutual respect and put aside any personal differences.

Members will comply with the Members' Code of Conduct. 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".

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.

It is important that Officers develop political awareness of issues that are sensitive to the individual political groups represented on the Council.

3. Roles of Members and Officers

The respective roles of Members and officers can be summarised as follows:

Members and officers are servants to the public and they are indispensable to one another. Their responsibilities are distinct. Members are responsible to the electorate and set policy and direction. Officers are responsible to the Council. An officer's job is to give advice to the Council and to carry out the Council's work under the direction and control of the Council and its relevant committees.

Members have four main areas of responsibility:

- Contributing to determining the policy of the Council and giving it leadership.
- Monitoring and reviewing the performance of the Council in implementing that policy and delivering services.
- Representing the Council in their local areas and externally.
- Acting as advocates on behalf of their constituents.

An officer's role is:

- To give advice and information to all Members on an impartial basis.
- To implement policies determined by the authority, provided the policies are within the law.
- In all advice, including reports, it is the responsibility of the officer to express his/her own objective advice in a professional manner and make recommendations based on this.

Through performance appraisal, target setting and day to day management officers receive their instructions from the Clerk. 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 the use of Members.
- Where staff have been specifically allocated to give support to a Member, a group of Members, or all Members.

4. Expectations

Members can expect from officers:

- A commitment to the Council as a whole and not to any political group.
- A working partnership.
- An understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads, and the differing pressures.
- Timely response to enquiries and complaints.
- Objective advice, not influenced by political views or preference, which does not compromise the political neutrality of officers.
- Regular, up-to-date information on matters that can reasonably be considered appropriate and relevant to their needs, having regard to any individual responsibilities that they have and positions that they hold.
- Awareness of and sensitivity to the political environment.
- Respect, courtesy, and dignified behaviour appropriate to the occasion.
- Training and development in order to carry out their role effectively.
- A high level of integrity and confidentiality, appropriate to the situation.
- Not to have officers' personal issues raised with them outside the agreed procedures.
- That they will not attempt to influence improperly any Member to advance officers' personal interests or influence improperly a decision.
- Support for the role of Members as the local representatives of the Council, within any scheme of support for Members, which may be approved by the authority.

Officers can expect from Members:

- A working partnership.
- An understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads, and differing pressures.
- Leadership and direction.
- Respect, courtesy, and dignified behaviour appropriate to the occasion.
- A high level of integrity and confidentiality appropriate to the situation.
- Not to be subject to bullying or to be put under undue pressure to accord with a Member's wishes.

- Not to use their position or relationship with officers improperly to advance their personal interests, or those of others, or to improperly influence decisions.
- That Members will at all times comply with the Council's Code of Conduct.

5. Courtesy

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.

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.

6. Officers Giving Advice and Information to Political Groups

There is now 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 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 political groups.

The support provided by Officers can take many forms, ranging from a briefing meeting with a Chair prior to a Committee meeting to a presentation to a full political group meeting.

Certain points must, however, be clearly understood by all those participating in this type of process, members, and officers alike. In particular:

- 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 political group 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 political group business are to be discussed.
- Political 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
- Similarly, where Officers provide information and advice to a political 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 Town Council or the relevant Committee or Sub-Committee when the matter in question is considered.

Special care needs to be exercised whenever Officers are involved in providing information and advice to a political 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.

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

Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in this area of Officer advice to political groups should be raised with the Clerk who will discuss them with the relevant groups.

7. Support Services to Members

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.

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

8. Communications

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.

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.

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.

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.

9. Specific Member/Officer Working Relations

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.

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

The Clerk having delegated decision-making Authority is entitled, where considered expedient, to refer a matter to the Committee or appropriate Sub-Committee for a decision.

Members must acknowledge that Officers are accountable to the Clerk. Officers should always be prepared to assist Members, but they cannot go beyond the bounds of the Authority given to them by the Clerk 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.

10. Involvement of Ward Councillors

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

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.

11. Members' Access to Information and to Council Documents

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 the Clerk.

12. Confidentiality of Reports and Correspondence

Once a report has been issued within 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.

It does not, however, follow that all the contents of the report must be regarded as secret. 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 Clerk before doing so.

13. Access to Council Premises

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

Members when they are not acting in pursuit of their roles and duties as a Member shall have no greater rights of access to Council buildings and premises than members of the public.

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.

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.

Any contravention of the above provisions shall be reported to the County 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.

14. Criticism of Members and Officers

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.

No public comment will be made on ongoing disciplinary proceedings as it could prejudice their outcome.

15. Issues regarding Working Relations between Members and Officers

Members and Officers will seek to resolve any issues arising within their working relations.

The Clerk will, in the first instance, endeavour to resolve any such issue.

The Chair and Clerk will seek to resolve by mediation and conciliation any unresolved problem or breakdown in working relationships between Members and Officers.

16. Review

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

All Holywell Town Council Policies are approved by full council and subject to an annual review.

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Town Mayor & Chairman of the Council