

PROTOCOL ON MEMBER/OFFICER RELATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The aim is to guide Members and Officers of St Helens Borough Council in their relations. It is hoped the protocol will help build good working relationships between Officers and Members as they work together. A strong, constructive and trusting relationship between Members and Officers is essential to the modern, effective and efficient working of the Council. The protocol forms a key part of the Council approach to corporate governance and its commitment to uphold standards in public life.
- 1.2 The relationship between Councillors (including co-opted members) and Officers is an essential ingredient that goes into the successful working of the organisation. This relationship within St Helens Borough Council is characterised by mutual respect, informality and trust. Nothing in this Protocol is intended to change this relationship. The purpose of this Protocol is to help Councillors and Officers to perform effectively by giving guidance on their respective roles and expectations and on their relationship with each other. The Protocol also gives guidance on what to do on the rare occasions when things go wrong. Responsibility for the operation of this Protocol lies with the Head of the Paid Service and the Monitoring Officer.
- 1.3 Both Councillors and Officers are required to observe the Nolan Principles – the ‘Seven Principles of Public Life’ in their dealings with each other, namely:
- selflessness
 - integrity
 - objectivity
 - accountability
 - openness
 - honesty
 - leadership
- 1.4 The Protocol must be read and operated in the context of any relevant legislation and local codes of conduct.
- 1.5 Officer for the purposes of this Protocol includes all employees of the Council except Teachers in Schools and employees of School Governing Bodies.

2 ROLES OF MEMBERS AND OFFICERS

- 2.1 Members are accountable to the electorate who determine the people they wish to represent them on the authority. Therefore, this protocol recognises

that Members are elected to serve the people of St Helens.

- 2.2 Members as politicians, may express the values and aspirations of their party-political groups but they must recognise that in their role as Members they have a duty to act in the public interest.
- 2.3 The respective roles of Members and Officers can be summarised as follows:

Members and Officers are servants of the public and they are indispensable to one another, but their responsibilities are distinct. Councillors are responsible to the electorate and serve only so long as their term of office lasts. Officers are responsible to the Council. Their job is to give advice to Councillors and to the Authority, and to carry out the Authority's work under the direction and control of the Council, the Cabinet and relevant Committees, Boards, etc.

Mutual respect between Councillors and Officers is essential to good local government.

2.4 Members

2.4.1 Members are mainly responsible for:

- the political direction and leadership of the Authority;
- the determination of policies, plans and strategies;
- performing the Council's regulatory functions;
- monitoring and reviewing, primarily through the Executive and Scrutiny functions, the Council's performance in implementing its policies, plans and strategies and in delivering services;
- participation in partnership working;
- representing the Council on national, regional and local bodies and organisations;
- representing the views of their communities and individual constituents

2.4.2 It is not the role of Members to involve themselves in the day-to-day management of the Authority's services.

2.5 Members of the Cabinet, Chairs and Members with Special Responsibility Allowances

2.5.1 Members of the Cabinet, Chairs of Committees and those Members with a Special Responsibility Allowance have additional responsibilities. Because of those responsibilities, their relationships with Officers may be different from, and be more complex than, those of Members without those responsibilities.

2.5.2 However, it must be remembered that officers within a service are accountable to their Director, and whilst Officers should always seek to assist a Chair (or indeed any Member) they must not go beyond the bounds of whatever authority they have been given by their Director.

2.5.3 Members of the Cabinet, Chairs and Members with Special Responsibility Allowances must respect the impartiality of Officers and must not ask them to undertake work of a party-political nature.

2.6 Opposition Members

2.6.1 As individual Members, all Members have the same rights and obligations in their relationship with Officers and should be treated equally.

2.6.2 However, where a political group forms an administration it is recognised that the interactions between Officers, particularly those at a senior level in the organisation, and the administration will be differentiated.

2.7 Officers

- The primary role of Officers is to advise, inform and support all Members and to implement the lawfully agreed policies of the Council.
- Officers are responsible for day-to-day managerial and operational decisions of the Council. Members should avoid inappropriate involvement in such matters.
- In performing their role Officers will act professionally, impartially and with political neutrality. Whilst Officers will report a Members view on an issue, the Officer should not be influenced or pressured to make comments, or recommendations which are contrary to his/her professional judgement or views.
- The role of Officers is to give advice and information to Members and to implement the policies determined by the Authority.
- 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 recommendations. No Member should seek to pressure an Officer to make a recommendation contrary to the Officer's professional view.

2.7.1 Statutory Officers have responsibilities in law over and above their obligations to the Authority and to individual Members. Members must respect these obligations, must not obstruct Officers in the discharge of these responsibilities and must not victimise Officers for discharging their

responsibilities.

- 2.7.2 There may be occasions when a Statutory Officer's responsibilities may conflict or not wholly correspond with a strategy, policy, decision or course of action proposed or taken by the Council or a Member. In those circumstances, Members should acknowledge the primacy of the statutory responsibilities and treat the Statutory Officer with the same courtesy and respect shown to them and to other Officers in all other dealings.

3 EXPECTATIONS

a. What Members can expect from Officers:

- i. A commitment to the Authority as a whole, and not to any political group;
- ii. A working partnership;
- iii. An understanding of, and support for, respective roles, workloads and pressures;
- iv. Timely response to enquiries and complaints;
- v. Professional advice, not influenced by political views or preference, which does not compromise the political neutrality of Officers;
- vi. Regular, up-to-date information on matters that can reasonably be considered appropriate and relevant to their role, having regard to any individual responsibilities that they have and positions that they hold;
- vii. Awareness of, and sensitivity to, the political environment;
- viii. Respect, dignity and courtesy;
- ix. Training and development in order to carry out their role effectively;
- x. Integrity, mutual support and appropriate confidentiality;
- xi. Not to have personal issues raised with them by Officers;
- xii. That Officers will not use their interactions with Members to advance their personal interests or to influence decisions improperly;
- xiii. That Officers will not try to persuade individual Members to make a decision in their personal favour or raise issues relating to their employment. Nor should they approach individual Members with allegations about other Officers. They should discuss such issues with their line manager and where



appropriate, use the Council's grievance, whistle blowing and disciplinary procedures.

xiv. That Officers will at all times comply with the relevant Code of Conduct for Employees; and

xv. Support for the role of Members as the local representatives of the Authority.

b. What Officers can expect from Members:

- i. To act within the policies, practices, processes and conventions established by the Council;
- ii. To work constructively in partnership with Officers acknowledging their separate and distinct roles and responsibilities;
- iii. To understand and support the respective roles and responsibilities of Officers and their associated workloads, pressures and reporting line to recognise that Officers work to the instructions of their Senior Officers and not to individual Members;
- iv. Members will have regard to the seniority of Officers in determining what are reasonable requests, having regard to the potential vulnerability of Officers, particularly at junior levels;
- v. A working partnership;
- vi. An understanding of, and support for, respective roles, workloads and pressures;
- vii. Political policy direction and leadership;
- viii. Respect, dignity and courtesy;
- ix. Integrity, mutual support and appropriate confidentiality;
- x. Not to be subject to bullying, harassment, discrimination, victimisation or intimidation or to be put under undue pressure;
- xi. Members should have regard to the seniority of Officers in determining what are reasonable requests, having regard to the power relationship between Members and Officers, and the potential vulnerability of Officers, particularly at junior levels;
- xii. That Members will not use their position or relationship with Officers to



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advance their personal interests or those of others, or to influence decisions improperly;

- xiii. That Members should generally restrict their discussion on strategic or significant issues to senior officers (Chief Executive, Strategic Directors or Directors);
- xiv. That Members will use regular briefings and/or normally make appointments before visiting Officers in order to try to avoid frequent unscheduled interruptions;
- xv. Members should not pressure Officers to work excessive hours or to do anything they are not authorised to do or that is not part of their normal work;
- xvi. Members should not make detrimental remarks about individual Officers during meetings, in public, on social media or to the media; and
- xvii. That Members will at all times comply with the relevant Code of Conduct.

c. Limitations upon Behaviour

The distinct roles of Members and Officers necessarily impose limitations upon behaviour. By way of illustration, and not as an exclusive list:

- i. Close personal relationships between Members and Officers can confuse these separate roles and get in the way of the proper discharge of the Authority's functions;
- ii. The need to maintain the separate roles means that there are limits to the matters on which Members may seek the advice of Officers, both in relation to personal matters and party-political issues;
- iii. Personal friendships or relationships should be avoided. Where they do exist the Officer concerned must notify his or her manager;
- iv. Relationships with particular individuals or party groups should not be such as to create public suspicion that an Officer favours that Member or group above others. The issue of Officer attendance and advice to political groups is specifically covered below;
- v. When attending official civic events, members and officers should dress and behave in a manner in keeping with the occasion and their position.

4. DECISIONS UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

- i. The Scheme of Delegation in Part 3 of the Constitution sets out those functions which have been delegated to Senior Officers to carry out. Members should not seek to improperly influence decisions taken by Officers under delegated powers and should not ask them to exercise discretion which involves acting outside the Council's policies and procedures.

5. POLITENESS AND RESPECT

- i. Members and Officers should show each other politeness and respect. Members have the right to challenge Officers' reports or actions, but they should avoid personal and/or public attacks; and ensure their criticism is fair and constructive.
- ii. Officers should not publicly criticise Council decisions even if they do not personally agree with those decisions.

6. APPOINTMENT OF OFFICERS BY MEMBERS

Members must not take any part in the appointment of anyone to whom they are:

- i. Married/ a partner;
- ii. otherwise related;
- iii. a friend;
- iv. a business associate.

Members must ensure that Officers are appointed only on merit in line the Council's recruitment policies, with a view to appointing those who will best serve the whole Council.

7. SUPPORTING MEMBERS IN THEIR WARD ROLE

- i. In order to fulfil their community leadership role, Members should be provided with support and access to information and reports affecting matters in their wards. (see Ward and Member Protocol)
- ii. Members representing an area where a meeting is being organised on behalf of the Council in respect of a local issue should be made aware of it and invited to attend whenever reasonably possible. They should also be given details of any consultation on a local matter.
- iii. Members should copy appropriate Directors into all requests so that the workload of individual staff can be managed effectively. Officers should answer Members' enquiries, in whatever form, as soon as reasonably practicable, or within 10 working days as a maximum, send a holding reply to advise of any delay in providing a response. Where a Senior Officer



considers that the enquiry received is inappropriate, the Member should be advised of this and the reason or reasons why the enquiry is considered to be inappropriate.

- iv. Members should contact the Director in the event that a response is not received within 10 days. The Executive Director may be asked to resolve any issues arising from exceptionally unreasonable delays in responding to Members' enquiries.

8. VISITS BY MEMBERS TO PREMISES AND LAND

- i. Members have the right to visit premises and land owned by the Council but should note that in the case of occupied Council premises and other leased or tenanted premises the permission of the lessee or tenant will be required in advance. They should also make suitable arrangements with the relevant Director who will pay particular regard to health and safety issues and to the sensitivity and timing of the proposed visit;
- ii. It should be noted that this right is only available to the extent that a Member needs to visit premises or land to enable him or her to better fulfil his or her duties as a Member; and
- iii. that these arrangements are not intended to restrict a Member's rights as a member of the public.

9. POLITICAL GROUPS

The operation of political groups is an integral feature of local government, and such political groups have an important part to play in the development of policy and the political management of the Authority. It is in the interests of the Authority to support the effective operation of political groups, but their operation can pose particular dangers in terms of the impartiality of Officers.

a. Briefing Notes

- i. Political groups may request the Chief Executive or an Executive Director to prepare written Briefing Notes on matters relating to the Authority for consideration by the group.
- ii. Officer Briefing Notes to political groups will be limited to a statement of material facts and identification of options and the merits and demerits of such options for the Authority. Such Briefing Notes will not deal with any political implications of the matter or any option, and Officers will not make any recommendation to a political group.



b. Officer Attendance

- i. Any political group may request the Chief Executive or an Executive Director to attend a meeting of the group to advise on any particular matter relating to the Authority.
- ii. The Chief Executive or Executive Director may arrange for the attendance of a representative in his/her stead, or may decline to attend or to provide a representative where he/she is of the opinion that the particular issue is of such a political nature that it would be inappropriate to attend.
- iii. Officers' advice to political groups will be limited to a statement of material facts and identification of options and the merits and demerits of such options for the Authority. Advice will not deal with any political implications of the matter or any option, and Officers will not make any recommendation to a political group.
- iv. Officers will respect the confidentiality of any matter which they hear in the course of attending a political group meeting.

10. WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

a. Public Criticism

Members and Officers should not criticise or undermine respect for the other at Council Meetings, or at any other meeting they attend in their Council capacity, or on social media.

b. Procedure for Officers

From time to time the relationship between Members and Officers may break down or become strained. Whilst it will always be preferable to resolve matters informally, through conciliation by an appropriate Senior Manager or Members, Officers will have recourse to the Grievance Procedure or to the Council's Monitoring Officer, as appropriate to the circumstances.

In the event of a grievance or complaint being upheld, the matter will be referred to the Chief Executive, who, having advised the Leader of the Council and the appropriate Group Leader, will decide on the course of action to be taken, following consultation with the Chairman of the Standards Committee.



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c. Procedure for Members

In the event that a Member is dissatisfied with the conduct, behaviour or performance of an Officer, the matter should not be raised at any meeting held in public, instead the matter should be raised with the appropriate Executive Director. Where the Officer concerned is an Executive Director, the matter should be raised with the Chief Executive.

Where the employee concerned is the Chief Executive, the matter should be raised with the Monitoring Officer and the Head of People Management. If the matter cannot be resolved informally, it may be necessary to invoke the relevant Council's Disciplinary Procedure.