

A councillor's workbook on effective councillor/ officer relationships



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There are a number of complementary workbooks and elearning modules to reinforce and develop your skills in this area. Topics include facilitation and conflict resolution, influencing skills, and being an effective ward councillor. To access the elearning modules please go to

<https://lms.learningnexus.co.uk/LGA/>

The councillor workbooks can be found at

www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/community-leadership/councillor-workbooks

Introduction

This workbook has been designed as a distance learning aid for local councillors. It forms part of the suite of Local Government Association (LGA) resources intended to provide councillors with insight and assistance into key skills and knowledge. This is designed to provide a foundation for effective working as you progress in your councillor career, from the ward level to holding a leading councillor position. This workbook has been updated to contain information and examples obtained from the LGA's work on the ground in councils and through the Corporate Peer Challenge programme, and to reflect the changing nature of the councillor and officer relationship.

Some of the content may be of most use to more newly elected councillors, but nonetheless, if you have been a councillor for some time, the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of some of the key skills, approaches and tactics that make for effective councillor/officer relationships. It may even challenge you to reconsider how you have approached aspects of the role to date and how you may wish to adapt and evolve in the light of the changing public sector landscape which brings new challenges as well as new opportunities.

Building a constructive and collaborative relationship between councillors and officers is an essential ingredient in any successful council and takes understanding and work on both sides. This workbook illustrates why and how this is complex, and provides you with some pointers on how to develop a style and approach that you are comfortable with, and that enables you to be most effective in your day-to-day duties.

This workbook is an introduction to the respective roles, explains how the roles have changed, and how and why tensions can arise.

It also provides tips and techniques on how to deal with difficult situations. Most councils will have a protocol within the Constitution, as well as values and behaviours frameworks, so you may wish to refer to these when working through this booklet.

You do not need to complete this workbook all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about your own approach and how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent. In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the councillor role. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance – this is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Case studies – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by councils elsewhere.



Hints and tips – a selection of good practices that you may find useful.



Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information that may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches.

Introduction

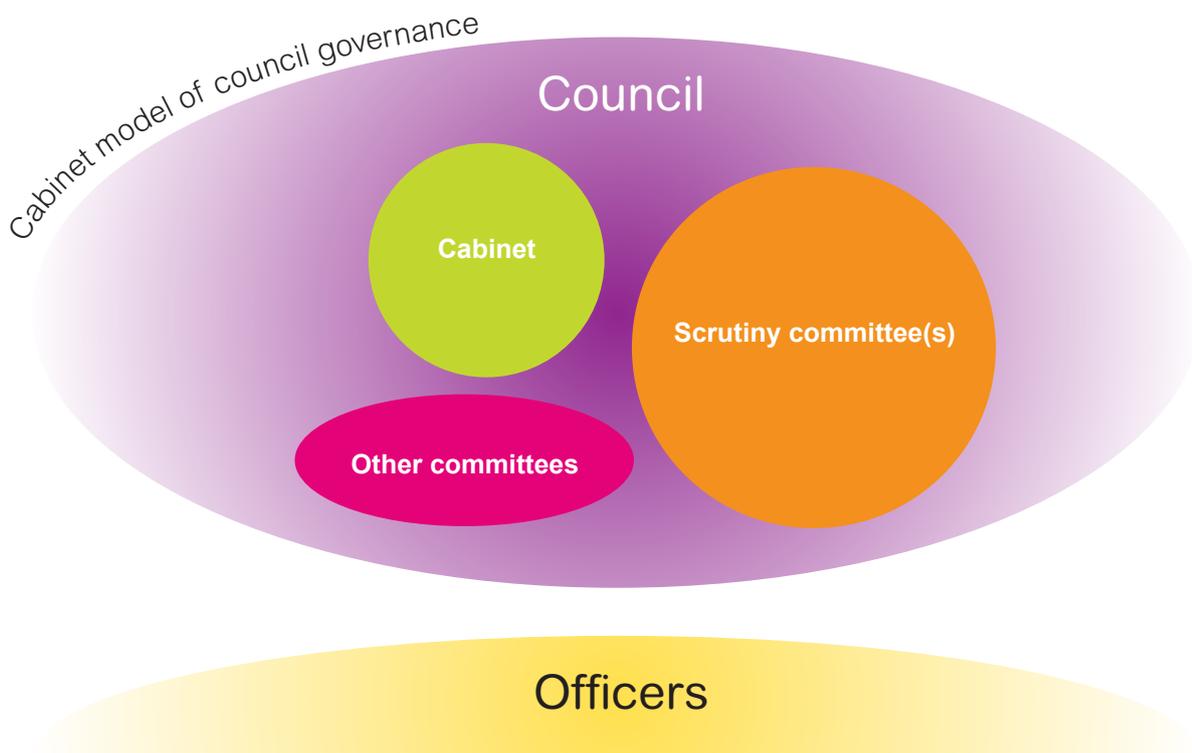
Basic principles

Councillors and officers are indispensable to one another and mutual respect and communication between both is essential for good local government. Together, they bring the critical skills, experience and knowledge required to manage an effective council. Councillors provide a democratic mandate to the council, whereas officers contribute the professional and managerial expertise needed to deliver the policy framework agreed by councillors. The roles are very different but need to work in a complementary way.

It is a unique relationship not replicated in any other type of business or organisation. Although the roles are clearly defined on paper, in practice there are blurred boundaries and sometimes overlapping issues which can create problems. If councillors and the officers and management do not fully understand each other's roles, this can lead to misunderstandings. Although many of these can be considered in advance, there will always be issues to be worked through and building good relationships from the start will ease those discussions.

The very best councils review councillor/officer relationships on a regular basis to ensure they take account any issues or developments, leading to continued good governance within the council.

Reminder: how do councils work?



Roles and responsibilities

The Local Government Act 2000 sets out the governance models that must be operated by local authorities. These are:

- a mayor and cabinet executive
- a leader and cabinet executive
- the committee system
- other arrangements approved by the Secretary of State.

However, whatever these arrangements are in your council, in simple terms:

Councillors provide the democratic leadership of the council. They:

- represent members of the public
- provide leadership and direction to the council
- scrutinise service delivery.

Officers are employees of the council. They:

- implement the policies agreed by councillors
- organise and deliver services
- provide unbiased, professional advice and support to councillors.

problems down the line. My golden rule with officers is no surprises, in either direction.”

**Mayor Dave Hodgson,
Elected Mayor of Bedford**

Councillors and officers have a collective corporate responsibility. But aspects of their roles are distinctly different. Research has shown that the greater the degree of openness and understanding about this, the better the working relationship. Most councils attempt to provide this clarity through joint working protocols, anchored in the Constitution.

The most effective councillors gain a good appreciation of:

- the distinct contribution that councillors and officers make in the running of the council and the boundaries between them, eg officers must act with political impartiality, serving the whole council rather than particular groups or councillors
- the areas in which roles and responsibilities overlap and councillors and officers must act together to provide democratic governance.



Guidance

“Effective councillor/officer relations depend upon trust and clear and honest communication in both directions. You certainly don’t need to be friends. What you do need is to respect and understand your distinct roles. Consider officers’ positions and their competing priorities and restrictions. This can avoid potential frustration or confusion about what might otherwise be perceived as obstructiveness. If officers don’t appreciate your role as a councillor, then it’s better to address it than to try to work around it because it will cause



Quick guide

Councillors

Accountable to the electorate

Community leader for a ward

Add a political dimension

Set high level policy/strategy

Involved in senior appointments

Officers

Accountable to the council

Serve the whole council

Politically impartial

Ensure operational delivery

Day to day staff management

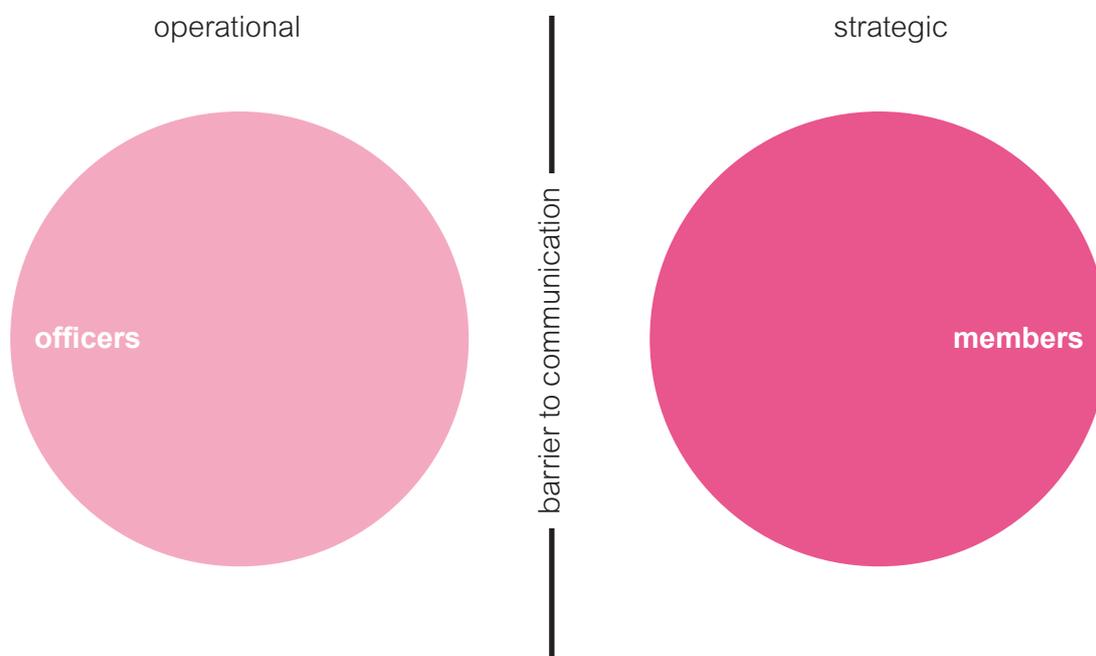
In reality, there are few truly distinct roles and it is increasingly common for the leadership of local authorities to be defined by the close pairing of politicians and officers, who come together in tackling the challenges presented by the communities they both serve. This is not about a separation of duties but an understanding of the skills, knowledge and experience that both bring to the leadership role.

Councillors provide strategic direction and officers are responsible for the management of the council and ensuring the implementation of agreed policies. But the evolving relationship between councillors and officers, and the ways in which they can intersect can be summarised in the diagrams below.

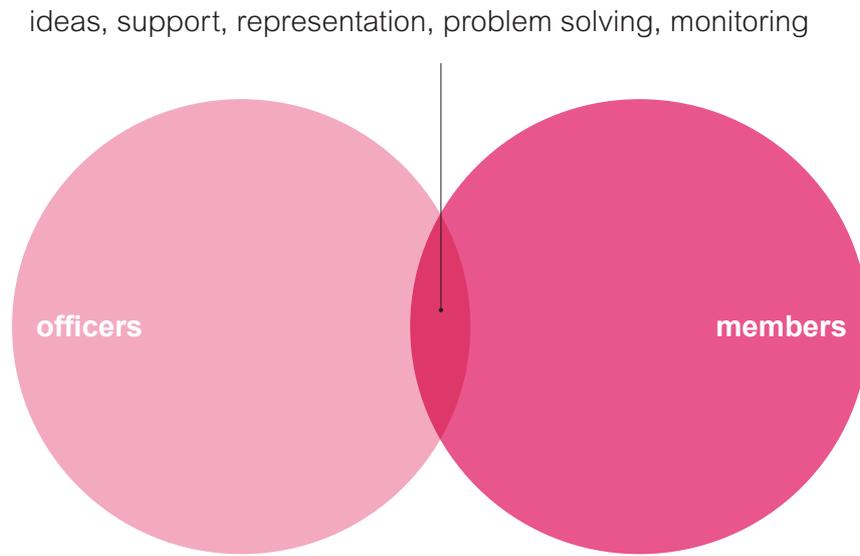
If councillors and officers work in isolation, and there is little or no communication between them, it is easy to see how strategic direction and delivery become disconnected. This would have a detrimental effect on services and make it difficult to provide the community with clear communication about priorities.

Where these two spheres come together and overlap, there is effective dialogue in a shared space and the opportunity for ideas, support, problem solving and monitoring of progress can take place effectively. This join up between councillors and officers enables communities to understand the political decisions made and how they will be implemented. While councillors and officers may have their own specific roles and responsibilities, there are some grey areas in which both groups have a shared responsibility, eg agreeing workable policies and monitoring performance.

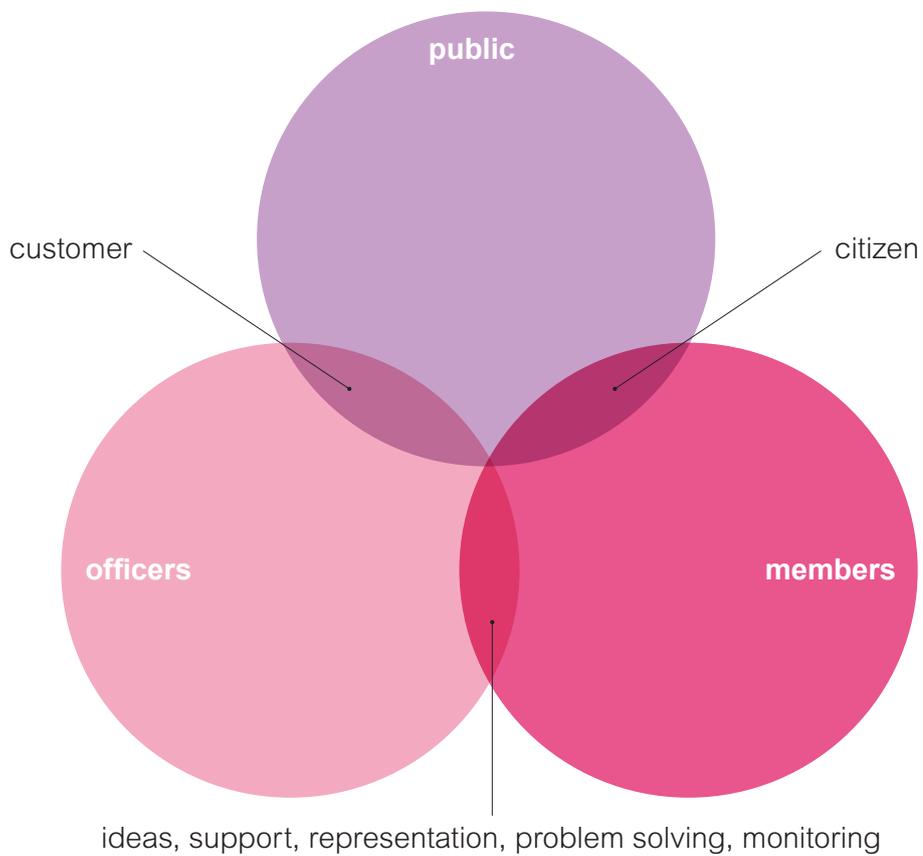
One dimensional political management



Two dimensional political management



Three dimensional political management



However effective relationships between officers and councillors also involve a vital third dimension – that of the local community. Members of your local community are both citizens with rights and responsibilities and customers of the council. Where these three roles intersect in the centre of this diagram is where consultation and discussions take place about the way forward, and although not everyone will be happy with the outcome, they will understand the political, professional and public perspectives on the issue.

If we take the example of relocating a fire station, we may consider that this is an officer decision as it will be based on evidence about number of incidents and using resources effectively. However, councillors will have a very clear view on the issue as it will directly affect political priorities and their reputation in the community. We may also recognise that the public will have a view on this as they may perceive this presents a new level of risk. Starting these discussions within the officer space, moving them into the shared space with councillors and overlaying the public dimension illustrates how these boundaries are fluid and issues can move in and out of different spaces.

You will notice from these diagrams that the roles of both councillors and officers are changing over time. The 21st century councillor report uses new descriptors to convey their work. Although community advocate remains at the heart of the work, new words such as catalyst, entrepreneur, broker and sense maker are also used to describe the multiplicity of roles of the modern councillor.

You may wish to have a look at the publication to see which roles resonate with you.

www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/21st-century-councillor

There is a companion publication which discusses the role of the 21st century public servant. www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Walk%20Tall%20-%20final%20ebook%20for%20download%20080716.pdf

Like any business relationship, mutual trust and respect are essential in setting the right tone for effective working relationships between councillors and officers.

Key issues to consider are:

- Knowing how to debate, decide and act in a joint way, taking into account both the political and managerial priorities and realities. In order for this to work appropriately, politicians and managers need to sit down as equals and act jointly as a result.
- The challenges that this working arrangement can bring and where tensions may arise. Particularly where there are other political relationships such as overview and scrutiny; and in councils where there is no overall majority. These situations make it even more important to establish strong and productive working relationships.



Challenge 1 – jointly tackling the challenges of your community

Imagine your council has a new, high profile, project to increase community awareness and involvement in a campaign to tackle anti-social behaviour. This is in response to an increase in complaints from residents about noise late at night, groups of young people congregating and drinking, cars being driven erratically and other visible damage, eg vandalism, litter dropping and spray graffiti on walls. Other partners, most notably local schools and the local chief constable, have also reported their concerns, asking the council to collaborate in identifying what action can be taken.

(1) Identify a list of ten key steps the council may wish to consider in addressing the situation described, including those which could be undertaken on a collaborative basis with other agencies.

(2) Having identified the ten key steps, consider whether each should be tackled by councillors (C), officers (O), or jointly by councillors and officers (J).

Reflect on your answers. It should be clear that most of the steps you have identified could be undertaken by either councillors or officers, although it is likely that there is more to be gained from using the skills, knowledge and experience of both.

Expectations

In forging an effective working relationship, councillors and officers will have certain basic expectations of each other. Much of this is about ensuring high standards of behaviour and acting within a clear framework of ethical governance.



Guidance

What councillors can expect from officers:

- a commitment to the authority as a whole, and not to an individual political group
- a working partnership
- a timely response to enquiries and complaints
- professional advice, not influenced by political views or preference
- integrity, mutual support and appropriate confidentiality.

What officers can expect from councillors:

- political leadership and direction
- a working partnership
- compliance with ethical standards and probity requirements
- non-involvement in the day to day management
- no special considerations.

As with any workplace, there will be a mix of knowledge and experience about working with councillors. Some officers will have worked extensively with councillors and some will have much less contact. You may wish to find out what training officers are given in order to develop their political nous skills.

Different perspectives

Councillors and officers approach their work in the council in different ways. One is not more important than another, but they are different. Understanding what motivates and drives councillors and officers in their decision making can really help when thinking about building strong and positive relationships.

As local politicians, you will have political and party values whereas officers will have professional and managerial values. Your conversation and language may also be more of a story-telling style, about real people in their wards; officers will report on data and information. Your political career is influenced by the choices you make whereas officers can rely on their position in the council.

Understanding this will help you plan your influencing strategy.



Guidance

“The relationship between the leader of a council and their chief executive is a key one in a council, when it is going well there is very little a council can’t achieve, if there are issues that remain unresolved the opposite is the case. Like any relationship it takes time and effort to get the most out of it, it is a complex multifaceted relationship which is neither static nor ever shifting in nature.

As councillors we not only have a relationship with the officers that we work with but also help mediate that relationship between them and the communities we serve. Sometimes challenging always respectful, never forgetting that our role is a unique one to enable and affect change both within the council and beyond the walls of the council offices.”

**Councillor Peter Fleming OBE,
Sevenoaks District Council**



Challenge 2 – your experience of working with officers

Think about the nature of your working relationship with officers. Jot down a few thoughts on:

(1) What currently works well?

(2) What could be improved?

Look again at what you have written. Have you ever discussed these with other councillors or officers? Can you think of any ways in which you could work with others to tackle the improvements you have identified?

Forging good relationships

In order for the business of a council to be conducted effectively, it is necessary for there to be a close working relationship between the councillors and the officers of the council. It is important not to create a culture of 'us' and 'them'.

Mutual respect, trust and good communication are key to establishing good councillor and officer relations. Close personal familiarity should be avoided – such relationships should never be allowed to become so close, or appear to be so close, that the officer's ability to deal impartially with other councillors and party groups is brought into question. In simple terms, 'be friendly, but don't be friends'.

This is often made easier if:

- both parties discuss and agree the values and behaviours they expect from each other in a relationship of mutual trust
- councillors set out their vision and identify their priorities, assisted by officers
- officers provide clear advice and offer alternative courses of action where they exist
- councillors and officers communicate clearly and openly, avoiding ambiguity and the risk of misunderstanding
- everyone works in a spirit of partnership, to turn the council's core values and priorities into practical policies for implementation.

Dealings between councillors and officers observe normal standards of courtesy and neither party should seek to take unfair advantage of their position.

There will inevitably be times when you disagree with officers. The best advice here is to keep people and problems separate as real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

Other tips and techniques which may be helpful:

- describe what you see rather than being judgemental, eg "on the basis of what you've said, you don't look to be supportive..." and try to show you understand people's situation, needs and feelings
- explore options together, as this may present a new idea that meets everyone's concerns.

Of course the way that you approach officers and the particular style you adopt in trying to influence people can take a variety of forms, depending on your personal preferences and the situation you find yourself in. Being a good communicator will require you to adapt your approach depending on the audience, subject and forum. This is about skill and judgement on your part.



Guidance

"The key to productive relationships is on the basis of mutual trust. It's important that officers and councillors are open with each other about priorities and how they can be achieved. We provide the challenge, they provide the expertise."

**Councillor Amanda Serjeant,
Chesterfield**

"The key to effective councillor/officer relations is mutual respect and an understanding of how our roles are different. Officers need to recognise that councillors have a democratic mandate and that councillors set the strategic direction and policy for the council. Councillors need to take on board the professional advice given and allow officers to carry out their operational duties. Officers are employed because of their ability to carry out a particular role. When these different roles are understood and councillors and officers work with one another for the benefit of their communities, we get great outcomes and high performing authorities."

**Councillor Julian German,
Deputy Leader of the Council,
Cornwall Council**



Challenge 3 – working together more effectively

Imagine your council has a history of poor working relations between councillors and officers. This could be because councillors are too bullish, vocal and quick to blame in their dealings with officers.

What ideas could you suggest for improving the working relationships?

Look again at your ideas. It is likely that some open and honest discussions between both groups would be useful to identify the best way forward. Alongside some formal systems for improving the relationship (eg revised protocols or guidelines for councillors), there may also be merit in providing some training for councillors on joint working or ethical governance. In some cases, you may consider it useful for group leaders to talk to individual councillors about the strengths and weaknesses of their personal approach to joint working with officers.

Although there are the formal interactions between councillors and officers, usually in committee meetings, you may wish to consider a number of informal ways in which you can build relationships. It may be that working informally with officers to test parameters of a policy will avoid difficult public meetings; or that work shadowing (a day in the life of) will provide an opportunity to experience officers' work at first hand, and vice versa. This will provide a good foundation for building trust and respect, should disagreements occur later.



Challenge 4 – councillor/officer relations

What tactics might you employ in the following scenarios?

(1) A joint councillor and officer working party has been set up to investigate more efficient ways of delivering council services for disabled people. The officer representative on the group is resistant to the idea of spending time and money consulting with the plethora of groups representing disabled people in the area to understand what local needs exist, preferring instead to use published statistics on levels of disability. You understand her concerns, but believe that two or three advocates could be co-opted onto the working party to provide some useful challenge and independent views.

(2) A proposed rationalisation of library services has identified the library in your ward for closure. Your constituents are opposed to closure and you are concerned about the loss of this service in your community.

Codes of conduct

The Relevant Authorities (General Principles) Order 2001 set out the general principles, which by law governed the conduct of councillors. These included the requirement that councillors should serve only the public interest, should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned, should not behave improperly and should on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

It also governed the need for councillors to take decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits and for them to be transparent and accountable to the public for their action and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office.

Also that they should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority, and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions and to take account of the views of others, including their political groups. But that they should reach their own conclusions on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.

A principal obligation is that they should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place on them and to do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authorities use their resources prudently and in accordance with the law.

Many councils produce formal written protocols to determine what is regarded as acceptable in working relationship terms. These protocols reflect the principles underlying the respective Codes of Conduct which apply in a council and the 'seven principles of public life'. (Also known as **Nolan Principles**. These are detailed on page 16.)

The original 2001 Order lapsed as a result of the coming into force of the Localism Act 2011 which repealed Section 49 (1) of the Local Government Act 2000.

However the principles and intentions of this earlier piece of legislation are now reflected in Section 28 (1) of the Localism Act 2011 where the principles are referred to.

Section 28 (1) of the Localism Act 2011 states: 'A relevant authority must secure that a code adopted by it under section 27 (2) (a "code of conduct") is, when viewed as a whole, consistent with the following principles:

- (a) selflessness;
- (b) integrity;
- (c) objectivity;
- (d) accountability;
- (e) openness;
- (f) honesty;
- (g) leadership'.

Officer conduct

Officers are responsible for the management of the council and ensuring the implementation of agreed policies. Where councillors give strategic direction in the exercise of their delegated authority, the relevant officer(s) directed is/are responsible for ensuring the prompt enacting of those instructions and should keep the councillor updated as to progress in the carrying out of the necessary work.

The role of officers is to seek to assist councillors, within the restrictions of their levels of authority and in regard to the rules governing access to information. They also have a role to ensure that councillors are properly informed about information to which they have a right of access

and that officers should not use professional expertise to discourage or intimidate councillors from pursuing lines of inquiry.

There may well be service level agreements set out regarding the timescales for responding to particular queries or referrals from individual councillors. These may well vary dependent on the 'level' of a councillor or the topic in question. For example responses to the leader of the council or the leader of the opposition group may well need to be given more speedily than say a referral from a backbench councillor. Or responses to matters around the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults might require a prompter response due to the immediacy of the issue and the need to take action within a short timeframe.

Officers are required to comply with the formal policies of their council and must not allow their own personal or political opinions to interfere with their work.

Such protocols also allow for the situation where if an officer is concerned about the conduct of a councillor or other officer that they have a line of reporting under the policy of a council.

In defining any such joint working protocol, there are a number of practical implications that need to be considered. These include:

- **Who does what?**
Distinguishing between leadership and management, ie not the usual political/managerial split.
- **Who is coming from where?**
Understanding and responding to very different cultures and career routes.
- **How do the two teams work together?**
Building effective groupings of councillors and officers.
- **How are individual leaders to develop?**
Arrangements to strengthen the skills, knowledge and experience of both councillors and senior officers (eg training and development).

Councillors and officers have a collective corporate responsibility. But aspects of their roles are distinctly different.

Councillors set the strategic direction and agree the policy framework of the council

Seven principles of public life – The Nolan Principles

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for doing so.

Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to change poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Officers are responsible for delivering the council's policies and for the day-to-day operation of the organisation.

All standards matters are the responsibility of individual councils, which are required to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by councillors. The monitoring officer has the specific duty to ensure that the council, its officers and elected councillors maintain the highest standards of conduct in all they do. The monitoring officer will be able to advise and support on conflict of interest issues, support in difficult circumstances and investigate any formal complaints. The monitoring officer will also have the right skills to mediate, counsel and in addition to the formal grievance processes, can intervene on an informal basis which can have a positive impact on the culture of the council.

If you are concerned about access to information, or any aspect of the conduct of an officer, speak to the Leader of your political group and ask them to raise this with the chief executive. Such protocols also allow for the situation where if an officer is concerned about the conduct of a councillor or other officer that they have a line of reporting under the policy of a council.



Challenge 5 – ethical behaviour

Think about the nature of councillor/officer relations in the scenario below. What issues (if any) does it raise?

(1) During the regular chairman's briefing before papers are issued for committee, the vice-chair asks the officer present if she could amend a recommendation in one of the reports. He explains that this is because he has had years of experience in this field and does not feel the recommendation would be workable. He states that he tried to come in and see her the week before but, because she was on holiday, he took the file from her desk and read it. The contents confirmed his opinion. He also feels that her recommendation would not be politically acceptable to his fellow councillors.

Once you have considered your response, please turn to Appendix A. This provides some advice on the ethical considerations involved.

Statutory officers

In reaching their decisions, councillors must have regard to the advice given by officers and, in particular, that offered by statutory officers:

- **Head of Paid Service, or Chief Executive**
- **Chief Financial Officer**, whose duties are prescribed under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 (these are more commonly referred to as Section 151 Officers which refers to the reference in the Local Government Act 1972)
- **Monitoring Officer**, whose duties are set out under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, and amended by schedule 5, paragraph 24 of the Local Government Act 2000, often combined with Head of Legal Services
- **Director of Adult Social Services**, established in the Children Act 2004
- **Director of Children's Services**, established in the Children's Act 2004
- **Director of Public Health** (Health and Care Act 2012).

Councils have to appoint such officers for the proper discharge of its functions. These are the most senior council staff and have added personal responsibilities but also additional employment protection since their role can mean having to advise councillors against decisions, which may not always be welcome.

The ability of these officers to discharge their duties depends not only on effective working relations with their councillor colleagues, but also on the flow of information and access to the debating processes of politicians. As such, it is crucial that you have a good working relationship with your statutory officers and get to know their roles and responsibilities.



Challenge 6 – the role of statutory officers

Imagine there have been a range of issues facing your council about councillor behaviour and councillor and officer relations. The issues have been focused around one councillor. Although it is clear that all is not well, the problems are ‘low level’ but recurrent. The chief executive is reluctant to get involved, so the issues have been left to the political party to sort out. What could the chief executive do?

Reflect on your response. There is probably a fair amount that the chief executive could do. In fact, a chief executive could be proactive in:

- (a) Setting and demonstrating high standards of ethical behaviour, openness and honesty, and
- (b) Resolving issues around poor councillor behaviour, if they have not been addressed and resolved by the political parties. This could take the form of talking to leaders of political parties and individuals about behaviour, ensuring training is provided to councillors, ensuring that any guidelines on appropriate/inappropriate behaviour are circulated to councillors and invoking locally agreed standards procedures.

Constructive challenge

You may feel that when you read papers that you're not getting the whole picture. Or you may be in a committee meeting where it is not clear how much the policy will cost. You may also be part of an overview and scrutiny committee and you wish to challenge a decision or policy. The questions that you ask can often be the most valuable way to solicit further information.

There are different types of questions, and it is worth considering which you may wish to deploy in different situations.

Closed questions – short factual answer, often resulting in a yes/no answer;

Open – deliberately seeks longer answers;

Probing – seeks further information in an investigative way;

Clarifying – seeks to clarify an opinion;

Opinion finding – asks for an opinion.

Consider what might enable constructive challenge, and what might inhibit it.



Top tips

- repeat key words to encourage a response
- allow the respondent thinking time
- use plain language
- use open-ended questions as much as possible
- avoid jargon.



Challenge 7 – constructive challenge

You wish to ask some questions at a meeting discussing next year's budget. The savings targets are extremely challenging and you are not clear whether they will be delivered. Furthermore you are unhappy with some of the proposals which you feel renege on a manifesto commitment.

Formulate your questioning strategy. You may wish to consider questions starting with:

Who?

When?

What?

Where?

Why?

How?

Tackling poor behaviour

Although it does not happen very often, it is important to tackle the signs of poor behaviour early as a prompt intervention can often resolve the issue. We all have a role in this. It is a subjective measure and what offends or upsets one person, may be considered acceptable by another and it is worth remembering that everyone's tolerance level is different. We all experience frustrations, often when people say 'no', but before launching into a verbal attack on an officer, or colleague, it is worth thinking about the outcome you are looking to achieve.

Stories of poor behaviour or negative interactions with councillors cascade through an organisation and can do disproportionate damage to ways of working, and confidence levels.

If there is an incident of poor behaviour, it will be important to tackle it promptly, robustly and consistently. It is not always possible to demonstrate that action has been taken within political groups, but over time, positive signals can emerge that certain behaviours will not be tolerated.

Rather than dwelling on poor behaviour, an emphasis on building strong and productive working relationships, underpinned by relevant protocols, will help.

Never forget the value of apologies: having the confidence to say to someone that you felt uncomfortable, or offended, usually results in a fulsome apology, meaning that the situation is defused.



Challenge 8 – tackling poor behaviour

Leading a local authority and representing the aspirations of communities as an elected councillor is a high stakes activity and arguably becoming more so all the time. Councillors have a right to expect reasonable standards of dedication and diligence from officers and that councils have processes and procedures in place to help this happen. Nevertheless, councillors may find themselves under pressure to deliver and may seek to cajole and encourage officers to deliver key outcomes. **Is this an appropriate role for councillors?**

What would be considered unacceptable or even bullying behaviour?

Imagine you are at a committee meeting which is being recorded to be posted on the council website. The officer has presented the report and the chair invited discussion. A colleague of yours criticises the content of the report and says that this is typical of the officer present as their work is often shoddy and picks out some statistics which appear not to match. The officer is clearly upset by this, particularly since you know he/she has gone to great efforts to discuss the issues with each committee member beforehand and the figures look fine to you.

How would you tackle this?

Final word

The working relationship between councillors and officers is integral to the successful operation of an effective local authority. Politicians and managers have vital roles to play in providing a form of joint leadership which is based on shared knowledge, skills and experience. And at the heart of this relationship should be a common vision, shared values and mutual respect.



Challenge 9 – where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

(a) What key action points can you identify to improve the way you work with your officer colleagues, ie what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

(b) Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, eg further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, and mentoring, work shadowing.

If your council has recently had a Corporate Peer Challenge, have a look at the report's finding around the core component of governance to see what the strengths and areas for improvement are.

Appendix A

Ethical considerations in challenge 5

Scenario

During the regular chairman's briefing before papers are issued for committee, the vice chair asks the officer present if she could amend a recommendation in one of the reports. He explains that this is because he has had years of experience in this field and does not feel the recommendation would be workable. He states that he tried to come in and see her the week before but, because she was on holiday, he took the file from her desk and read it. The contents confirmed his opinion. He also feels that her recommendation would not be politically acceptable to his fellow councillors.

Ethical considerations

In acting in this way, it appears that the chairman is directing the officer to change her recommendation, which is likely to compromise her impartiality. These actions may be in breach of the locally agreed code of conduct. On the other hand the chairman may be raising legitimate concerns about the recommendations, in an appropriate manner, to an officer who is at a level of seniority where such challenges are appropriate. In these circumstances the action is unlikely to constitute a breach.

Removing the file from the officer's desk and reading it may raise concerns in relation to treating others with respect, but this is not likely to be serious enough to justify further action.

Officers' reports are based on their professional opinions, although they must have regard to political realities within the council. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for a councillor to direct an officer in this manner. It is for the officer to determine whether to amend the report or

to leave it as it is (in which case councillors must not bring pressure on the officer or direct change). Councillors can overturn the recommendation at committee, and this occurs where good reasons can be shown at planning committees.

Councillors' access to information must be channelled through the proper officer and in line with agreed protocols and statutory requirements. It should be pointed out that taking the file from the officer's desk without permission is not the proper way to get access to the file. The taking of files by unauthorised persons may be in breach of data protection laws.

The scenario also raises concerns about councillors' involvement in day to day operations rather than strategic decision making. An appropriate response would be to use the officer and councillor briefing mechanism to exchange advance information and to explore political sensitivities prior to drafting of reports and recommendations.

Sources of further information

Publications

The Councillors' Guide:
Local Government Association
www.local.gov.uk

LGA, Solace, PPMA: 21st Century Councillor, published by the University of Birmingham
<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/21st-century-councillor>

Companion Guide 21st Century Public Servant,
Walk Tall
[www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/
Walk%20Tall%20-%20final%20ebook%20for%20
download%20080716.pdf](http://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Walk%20Tall%20-%20final%20ebook%20for%20download%20080716.pdf)

Highlighting Political Leadership

The LGA's range of political leadership development programmes helps to support and develop councillors ensuring our local politicians are confident and capable; well-equipped and well supported to make a difference, deliver and be trusted.

Useful websites

The LGA website is a valuable source of help and advice for all those in local government.
www.local.gov.uk

If you would like to discuss this, or other aspect of councillor work, please contact your LGA regional contact:

[www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-
advisers](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers)

The LGA website has many pages discussing community leadership and a number of publications, a series of case studies, and development programmes for councillors and council officers.

For more information please go to
[www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-
political-leadership](http://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership)



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