

Guide for
**Labour
Group
Whips**

Thanks to all the Group Whips, Councillors and Party Staff who have contributed to this booklet and a special thanks to the author Hannah Lazell, Political Advisor LGA Labour Group.

INTRODUCTION

This guide for Labour Group Whips has been pulled together following years of discussion and feedback about how Labour Groups work, how to ensure that Labour Groups and local parties function better for a more diverse range of councillors, and the need for better training and support given to Labour Group Whips. The role of a Labour Group Whip is complex and often unpaid, and Whips will have other Council duties as well as a job and personal commitments, so the amount of time that Whips have to devote to learning the role will be limited. Whilst this resource is not exhaustive, we hope that the information in this guide will help Labour Group Whips to better understand the role and carry out their job more effectively. In turn, we hope that this will create a better culture in Labour Groups, which makes councillors from all backgrounds feel valued and as though they can progress into leadership roles within the Labour Group and the Council.

As councillors are elected, they are not council employees and are therefore not eligible for employment rights or support from their trade union. Because of this, it is even more important that Labour Groups work for all their members, in the absence of other support out there.

This guide is primarily for Labour Group Whips/Chief Whips and Assistant or Deputy Whips, but we recommend that all Labour Group officers also take the time to read it. This guide is being launched in conjunction with training webinars for Whips as well as an in-person training and networking training session, and we plan to hold more of these sessions in the future.

ROLE OF A WHIP

Frequently, we're asked what the role of a Whip is. Although there is a model job description provided by the Labour Party (*which can be found in Appendix 1*), this should be used as a starting point and not a definitive list of the breadth of duties.

The official Labour Party job description covers three key areas – group unity and cohesiveness, maintaining the integrity and standards of behaviour and utilising the talents of the Labour Group. In addition to this, we'd add two more areas of responsibility for Whips – pastoral care and managing Group, and if in power, Council business. These two additional areas are discussed below – please see Appendix 1 for the Labour Party model job description for Labour Group Whips.

Pastoral care:

Councillors do not have any statutory employment rights such as sick leave, parental leave or bereavement leave (to name a few). As such, when councillors experience these significant life events alongside day-to-day commitments and pressures, there are no protocols in place to support them. Often, decisions are made on a case-by-case basis and are left to the discretion of the Whip and the Leader of the Group. There isn't one single way to provide support for councillors, even if they face a similar

issue. Circumstances of the individual, their commitments to the council and the nature of the Labour Group will all need to be factored in. All Labour Groups must be as reasonably supportive as possible when it is needed.

For pastoral care, we recommend:

- Checking in regularly with Labour Group members to identify any support or flexibility they may need in carrying out their duties due to other things going on in their lives.
- Agreeing in advance with other Labour Group Officers what protocols to follow when a councillor suffers a bereavement, sickness or other life event that would ordinarily see an employee of an organisation take time off. Be mindful that there is no "one size fits all" approach to this.
- Ensure that any Group and Council policies are up to date, such as parental leave passed by the full council, parental leave passed by the Labour Group and policies to support carers. Policies passed by Council for staff may not be applicable to councillors. Links to suitable policies can be found in Appendix 2.
- Dealing with complaints arising from social media quickly and with the full due process. Online

abuse and intimidation have a detrimental impact on mental health and the ability to carry out councillor duties effectively, particularly if the abuse and intimidation includes threats to personal safety. Similarly, fights between councillors that take place on social media will also have a detrimental impact on mental health and on inter-group relations. It may be that complaints have to be referred to the Labour Party complaints process, but it is important that the Whip acts swiftly and takes it as seriously as other complaints. Being publicly unsupportive of the Group on social media can spill over into formal business and should be addressed swiftly. Some Labour Groups have a social media code of conduct, which is something to consider if you think it will be useful for your group.

- ▶ Working with Local Campaign Fora (LCFs) or Local Government Committees (LGCs) on campaigning protocols and support. This is important as it means candidates and sitting councillors have the support in place if their circumstances mean they can't carry out campaigning requirements either on a short or longer-term basis. These circumstances can include, but

are not limited to, pregnancy, miscarriage, bereavement, mental ill health, long-term illness and caring commitments. This can include arrangements that would allow the candidate or councillor support the Labour Group in other ways if they aren't able to physically campaign.

- ▶ Considering that you still have a duty of care towards councillors who are suspended – this may be difficult to manage depending on the circumstances of their suspension, but there is still a responsibility towards their welfare that must be upheld by the Whip.
- ▶ Contact the Labour Party's Safeguarding Unit if you think that they should be aware of an issue involving someone vulnerable or under 18.

Managing group and council business:

Ensuring that the necessary Group and Council business is passed is an important part of the role of a Whip. For managing group and council business, we recommend:

- ▶ That, where possible, Whips are paid a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) in recognition of the work that they do to manage group and council business. Some councils pay this already.

In councils where no SRA is paid Whips sometimes take a role with an SRA. This is up to individual Councils and Labour Groups to decide but it is important that any other positions the Whips hold do not conflict with their work as the Whip.

- Facilitating communication between the Leadership and Cabinet and backbenchers, and vice versa.
- Ensuring that there is good representation from the Labour Group at local Labour Party meetings to understand the views of the local Labour Party membership and manage this accordingly in relation to Council business.
- If you're a Whip in a Group that is in power, working with Council officers to ensure that business is timetabled that aligns with political and corporate priorities. If you're a Whip in a Group in Opposition, then working with the Whip of the ruling Group to try and get Labour Group priorities tabled.
- When Labour councillors are absent and can't attend committee and other meetings, you will need to make sure that other Labour councillors can attend in their place so that you've got the numbers to get business passed – this is particularly important if you're a Labour Group in power.

Interpersonal skills for Whips:

Interpersonal skills are important in any role that you do, whether that be in your political or professional life. Some councillors we've spoken to have said that some of the best Whips they've worked with have had a background in teaching or psychotherapy, which has given them strong skills in diplomacy, being a good listener and patience, alongside having good emotional intelligence. Not every Labour Group has a trained teacher or psychotherapist in their ranks, but these are all good skills to have if you are a Whip, even if you're not an expert in this area.

Having the following interpersonal skills will be helpful if you're a Whip:

- Being a positive role model and being able to lead by an example – as you're in a leadership role with particular responsibility for how the group works and discipline, you'll need to uphold the high standards that you expect your Labour Group members to behave so they, and other Labour Group officers, can look up to you as a positive role model.
- Being a good communicator – as a Whip you'll have to know how to communicate effectively, whether that be listening to Group members share their thoughts on a contentious issue that is due to be voted on, talking to the Leadership and Cabinet with feedback from

the Group, or knowing how to best communicate in a crisis and in difficult situations.

- ▶ Diplomacy skills/conflict management and resolution – there will inevitably be disagreements and tensions between councillors at all levels in the Labour Group. Some of these disagreements will resolve themselves, whereas others will require mediation and work by the Whip to resolve them.
- ▶ Being a problem solver – there is no right answer to most of the problems that you will face, and there's no one size fits all model as every Labour Group is unique. Being a good problem solver is an important skill if you're a Whip as you'll need to approach each problem differently.
- ▶ Having a lot of personal resilience – you'll have to juggle a lot happening at once, play the role of a diplomat, counsellor and good listener, all whilst managing your own councillor duties, professional role and personal life. You will also potentially have to call out bad behaviours which will make you unpopular.
- ▶ Emotional intelligence – possessing good emotional intelligence will help you to work with a wide range of people and in a wide range of situations.

In larger Labour Groups, it is worth considering whether there is a need for a Deputy Whip to support the work of the Whip – but this will depend entirely on the size and needs of your Labour Group. If you do decide that a Deputy Whip will be a useful position for your Labour Group to have, in order for it to work effectively it will be useful to decide how the role will support the Whip, and what skills it will be useful to have. This will often depend on who gets the role of the Whip, as it will be useful for the Whip and Deputy Whip to have skills and attributes that complement and support one another. It can also often be useful to balance out diversity between the Whip and Deputy Whip, as well as different personality types to enable the Whip and Deputy Whip to play to their strengths.

Please see Appendix 1 for the Group Whip Job Description provided by the Labour Party

YOUR FIRST FOUR WEEKS AS A WHIP

If you've just been elected as a Whip, you'll probably be wondering what the very first things that you should do are.

Some experienced Whips have shared some helpful tips for what to do in your first four weeks as a Whip.

- 1. Get the contact details of everyone in your Labour Group** – this will probably be the preferred phone numbers and email addresses of the Group members.
- 2. Set up one-to-one meetings with Group Officers** to establish a working relationship and discuss initial priorities and issues.
- 3. Set up one-to-one meetings with Labour Group members.** This will be tricky and time consuming where you have a larger Labour Group, but it will be worth it to establish relationships with councillors and to understand any personal or professional circumstances that may impact their role as a councillor.
- 4. Familiarise yourself with any group procedures and policies** that are in place – particularly the complaints policy.

- 5. Introduce yourself to your Regional Office,** as the relationship you have with them will be important for getting advice and support. They may also be able to put you in contact with other Whips for Labour Groups in your region.
- 6. Speak to other Whips** to get any tips you can from them and build networks in case you need some support.
- 7. Familiarise yourself with the Labour Party Rulebook,** your Labour Group Standing Orders and the Member's Code of Conduct as they will be useful resources for the duration of your time in the role.
- 8. Set up a regular meeting with the Labour Group Leader and Deputy Leader** to ensure you've got a private meeting to discuss emerging issues, concerns or challenges for the group.

USEFUL THINGS TO DO AS A WHIP

- **Listen to people** - Labour councillors will appreciate being listened to when they have problems or concerns, and the simple act of being listened to will keep a lot of problems at bay.
- **Deal with life events**, such as miscarriage and bereavement sensitively, recognising the needs of the councillor as an individual. Support should be given on a case-by-case basis, based on the understanding that the councillor will need some special dispensation at some point.
- **Take care of councillors and activists** – recognise that they are human and don't place unrealistic expectations on them. Don't schedule canvassing sessions or meetings around religious holidays or popular festivals for example, as people's priorities will be elsewhere at this time.
- **Maintain regular contact** with all Labour Group councillors, so that you're aware of any potential issues or disagreements.
- **If you're a Whip for a Labour Group in control**, then reaching out to your opposite number in the Opposition Group, and if appropriate, other Opposition Councillors, will help gain their trust and make dealing with contentious council business easier. And if you're a Whip in a Labour Group in Opposition, then there's no harm in reaching out to the Whip in the ruling group to establish a formal (and informal) working relationship.
- **Advocate for wider skills development for councillors.** Labour Groups benefit from having councillors with a wide range of skills, so identifying opportunities for this is important. If you're able to, carry out a skills audit so you know what skills councillors in your Labour Group have, and also what skills that you're missing. It also helps with succession planning for key roles.
- **Keep a network of Whips** (or former Whips) and other experienced Labour councillors who are on hand when you need advice or to simply have a chat about situations that you're currently dealing with.
- **Know the Labour Party rule book**, your Labour Group standing orders and the Member's Code of Conduct well and understand how they intersect with one another. Understand how your role as a Whip relates to Labour Party processes – for example, that when the Labour Party complaints process takes over there's little that you can do.

TIPS

Take any training that is available to you! The Labour Party provides a range of training courses that you should consider doing. The ALC holds specific training for Whips (both online and in person) as well as more specific training for Labour Party members. Consider applying for training schemes run by networks within the Labour Party such as Labour Women's Network and LGBT Labour if you are eligible to apply. Also consider any training that your council provides (or that you can ask them to provide!) or that the LGA provides. Communicating well is really important if you're a Whip, so see if you can get any communications training, and crisis communications training will be useful for when your Labour Group or Council has an issue that needs resolving quickly and (or) receives a lot of high-profile media attention.

Attend conferences such as Labour Party conference and Labour Local Government Conference (usually held in February) – there will be good opportunities for networking with Whips and other councillors as well as being a good chance to attend training and development sessions.

Some Councils allow their councillors to access their **Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP)**. If your Council does do this, please do encourage your councillors to make the most of this resource for any support they need (this often includes counselling as well as legal and financial advice).

Knowing what to do with information you've got, and when to act – this isn't a straightforward tip as there will be a different course of action in each situation. If you get information about a councillor or something that's going on that you haven't been directly told about, it is important to make the right call about whether to do something or not. This could be important in future group management and building trust with group members.

Be honest with people – it is important not to build up unrealistic expectations or give false hope.

Maintain your independence – you need to speak truth to power and call out behaviour that falls short. This is difficult to do if you are seen to have favourites in the group and treat people differently.

Make sure you have a robust code of conduct for all types of meetings – meetings are now being held in many different ways to how they were a few years ago – some meetings are all online, others are in person, and many are hybrid. Make sure that your Labour Group has a code of conduct for these meetings that covers the different dynamics that are in play in all the different modes of meeting, that all group members are aware of this, and that any breaches of the code of conduct are dealt with swiftly and appropriately.

Nothing is ever as urgent as you think it is, and you can't control everything – whilst it is helpful to deal with issues and business efficiently, give yourself time to think and reflect on the best course of action. You can't control everything that is happening either, so pick what needs your oversight and control so you can manage your time and efforts effectively.

Consider holding exit interviews when councillors stand down

– this is fairly common practice in workplaces, but rarely happens in councils and Labour Groups. Holding exit interviews with outgoing councillors will help identify barriers and issues that can then be addressed to make Labour Groups and the role of a councillor more inclusive. Exit interviews must be conducted by someone who is neutral and who can present the information to Labour Group officers in an unbiased and informative way.

Understand the relationship you have with your Group Leader

the relationship you have with your Group Leader will arguably be the most important relationship you have, and it's important that this relationship is a good one! When you're dealing with difficult situations and complaints, your Group Leader should back you up, but they will often be pulled in different directions depending on the nature of the issue and complaint. It is important to understand this and to keep communicating regularly and clearly with one another.

WHEN THINGS DON'T GO TO PLAN

Sometimes things don't go to plan and a high-profile issue happens in your Labour Group and Council. In this situation, it's helpful to reach out to your network of Whips and talk to your regional office to get advice and share any information that will be useful to them. It may be useful to contact the ALC and the LGA Labour Group Whip (contact details are below) as well.

Unless the complaint is a criminal offence or involves a protected characteristic then it should be dealt with by the Whip – the most common complaints are about breaches of the Labour Group Standing Orders, which can be dealt with by the Whip, with advice - if needed - from Regional Office or other Whips. When the complaint does have a criminal element to it, or relates to a protected characteristic, then it should be escalated to the Regional Office or the Governance and Legal Unit at Labour Party HQ.

Below we've provided a timeline of what you might want to consider doing in the event of a crisis or high-profile issue arising.

Sample timeline

An issue arose relating to previous social media posts by a councillor that were not in line with the values of the Labour Group or the Council. If they were not acted on, they would have brought the Labour Group and Council into disrepute. The first thing that the Whip did was to speak to the councillor about the posts and to make the councillor aware of the fact that they had been unearthed. The councillor and the social media posts were then reported to the Regional Office as it fitted the criteria to do so, and at this point this was investigated as a Labour Party complaint rather than a Labour Group complaint, but a disciplinary through the Labour Group was also explored at this point. It was also important to ask Labour Group members who already knew about the issue to be discreet about it and to allow the Whip and other officers to communicate the issue to other councillors in a formal way. It was also felt that there was still a duty of care towards the councillor who had made the social media posts, so regular welfare checks were made by the Whip and other trusted people.

At this point, the Whip and Group Officers communicated formally

with the Group to share what had happened and the action being taken. This was important to make the group feel as though they were being communicated with, but also to quash any rumours or gossip which would be unhelpful overall.

The LCF/LGC also reinterviewed the councillor in question as they had already been reselected as a candidate for the local elections. Before the LCF/LGC was able to make their decision, the councillor announced that they would stand down as a councillor and not seek re-election in the upcoming local elections. This decision was communicated formally to the Labour Group so they heard it officially as soon as possible, rather than through the rumour mill or on social media.

CONTACT DETAILS

Association of Labour Councils (ALC)

councillors@labour.org.uk

The ALC is a Labour Party affiliated organisation which represents Labour councillors in England, Wales and Scotland within the Labour Party. The work of the ALC is governed by an executive who are directly elected by councillors from each region.

Governance and Legal Unit (GLU)

legal_enquiries@labour.org.uk

Safeguarding Unit

safeguarding@labour.org.uk

LGA Labour Group

The LGA Labour Group is part of the Local Government Association (LGA) and exists to provide a strong voice for Labour in local government. The LGA Labour Group has a Whip, which is currently (as of April 2022) Cllr Oliver Ryan, Tameside Council – *oliver.ryan@tameside.gov.uk*

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Group Whip – this is the model Job Description provided by the Labour Party

1. Contributing to group unity and cohesiveness

- To ensure that group members are aware of group policy and whether the whip is to be applied on decisions to be taken.
- To ensure that group members vote in accordance with group policy when required.
- Jointly with the other group officers, to monitor progress with implementing the Labour manifesto, and to ensure the fullest possible discussion is held in group where necessary to ensure joint ownership of policy proposals and scrutiny work.
- To liaise between the group leadership and group members, ensuring that comments and information are fed back from the group to the leadership, particularly when Labour is in control of the council.

2. Maintaining the Labour group's integrity and standards of behaviour

- To ensure that group members sign (within the statutory timescale) and adhere to any codes of conduct adopted by the council and to the Labour Party code of conduct.
- To maintain the register of members' interests in the form prescribed by the National Executive Committee, detailing for each member and group observer his/her employment, financial interests in companies, membership of trade unions, societies and organisations etc.
- To advise members that they should not vote when they are barred from doing so by reason of a declared interest or council tax or rent arrears (S.108 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992).
- To ensure members engaged in scrutiny sign and abide by any protocols governing their behaviour and conduct agreed by the group.
- To ensure members of the cabinet sign and abide by any protocols governing their behaviour and conduct agreed by the group.

- To initiate such disciplinary measures as are necessary and in accordance with the procedure laid down in Clause 13.XIII of the Labour party's rules for Labour groups (following the advice and procedures provided by the party).
- To monitor the attendance of Labour members at council or committee meetings and their activities in the community, and to maintain a record of this, to be made available to the local government panel assessment panel and to each member on request (a form is provided for this purpose).

3. Drawing fully on all the talents of the Labour group

- To ascertain what skills and experience are available in the group and to coordinate a training and development programme for members of group, individually and collectively.
- To hold an annual personal review with all members of group to establish their support or other needs and agree a way of meeting these if possible, preferably in advance of the AGM.

- To co-ordinate committee places allocation in accordance with the group standing orders.

Model Person Specification – desirable attributes:

- Sympathetic
- Able to negotiate
- Fair
- Trusted to keep confidences
- Firm
- Able to listen
- Diplomatic
- Able to take a decision and stick to it

APPENDIX 2

Useful links and resources

Parental leave policy for Labour Groups

local.gov.uk/parental-leave-policy-all-labour-groups

Parental leave policy for Full Councils

local.gov.uk/lga-labour/our-work/parental-leave-policy-councillors/parental-leave-policy-councils

Guidance to support councillors who are carers

local.gov.uk/lga-labour/our-work/guidance-support-councillors-who-are-carers

Suzy Lamplugh Trust – Safety on the doorstep

suzylamplugh.org/staying-safe-on-the-doorstep

