Local Government Association

Effective member and officer relations

Councillor workbook

Contents

Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a learning aid for elected members. It makes no judgement about whether you have been a member for some time, or whether you have been elected more recently. If you fall into the former category the workbook should serve as a useful reminder of the key features of effective member/officer relations in local government.

Those members who are new to local government will recognise that they have much to learn. This workbook will provide you with an understanding of the principles behind effective member/officer relations and the importance of this for you and your council. Aspects of the guidance may also be of interest to members in specialist roles, such as those who sit on a standards committee or officers who have a member training responsibility.

The document should be read in conjunction with your council's own guidance on the members' code of conduct and any protocols for member/officer relations.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it is recognised that each individual must decide how best to work with their officer colleagues. This will be influenced by the nature and extent of the contacts you have with officers, any specialist roles you have taken on and the nature of the governance arrangements in your council. There is no presumption about 'typical wards' or 'typical members' and the workbook should serve more as a direction marker rather than a road map.

In practical terms, the document will take around **two hours** to work through. You do not need to complete it all in one session and may prefer to work through the material at your own pace. The key requirement is to think about the issues presented and how the material relates to your local situation, the people you serve and the council you represent.

Introduction

In working through the material contained in this workbook you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about the nature of effective member/officer relations. 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 – these represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.

Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information is also set out in Appendix B of the workbook.

Defining the relationship

Basic Principles

Members and officers are indispensable to one another and mutual respect between both is essential for good local government. Together, they bring the critical skills, experience and knowledge required to manage an effective public sector organisation. Members provide a democratic mandate to the council, whereas officers contribute the professional expertise needed to deliver the policy framework agreed by members.

While collaborative working is the accepted norm for members and officers, it is important to recognise and take account of their different roles. This is necessary for the day to day interaction between members and officers and for the public perception of the council – by ensuring transparency between the political role of members and the professional, impartial, role of officers.

> ### The Seven Principles of Public Life:
>
> - Selflessness
> - Integrity
> - Objectivity
> - Openness
> - Honesty
> - Leadership
>
> Nolan Committee principles

Officers are employees of the council – the people who put policies into effect and organise the provision of services. Officers may also be delegated by members to make policy decisions. But officers may have to advise members from time to time that certain courses of action cannot be carried out. Officers therefore have a duty to give unbiased professional advice – even if it is not what members want to hear.

Officers cannot respond to personal criticism in the same way that politicians can and temper their remarks accordingly. Mutual respect and good communication is the key to establishing good member and officer relations. Close personal familiarity should be avoided – in simple terms, 'be friendly, but don't be friends'.

In establishing an effective working relationship, there should be clarity about the respective roles of members and officers. 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

- members identify their priorities, assisted by officers

- officers provide clear advice and offer alternative courses of action where they exist

- members 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.

While members and officers may have their own specific roles and responsibilities, there are clearly some grey areas in which both groups have a shared responsibility, eg agreeing workable policies and monitoring performance. In addition to this, members and officers both face the same public service agenda, ie delivering quality services to local people in a climate of tough challenges and constraints (budgets and timescales). Effective team working is therefore essential. Why does it matter?

Tips for effective working

Do be:	Don't be:
Impartial	Unhelpful
Professional	Jargonistic
Authoritative	Arrogant
Respectful	Deferential
Sensitive	Subservient
Positive	Imprudent
Communicative	Indiscriminate
Discreet	Evasive
Reliable	Reliant
Friendly	Friends

⏳ Exercise 1 – 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 members or officers? Can you think of any ways in which you could work with others to tackle the improvements you have identified?

Clarifying the working relationship

We have highlighted already that mutual trust and respect are essential in setting the right tone for effective working relationships between members and officers. This should be based on a clear understanding of the following:

- The distinct contribution that members 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 members.

- The areas in which roles and responsibilities overlap and members and officers must act together to provide democratic governance.

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 managers, 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.

Quick guide to some of the distinct roles

Members: ←—————————————————→ **Officers:**

Members:	Officers:
Accountable to the electorate	Accountable to the council
Community leader for a ward	Serve the whole council
Add a political dimension	Politically Impartial
Set high level policy/strategy	Ensure operational delivery
Involved in senior appointments	Day to day staff management

⏳ Exercise 2 – 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, e.g. 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 members (M), officers (O), or jointly by members and officers (J).

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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

This new form of leadership is about defining clearly how member and officer relations can work to best effect and for mutual benefit. Characteristics of this relationship are:

• Knowing how to debate, decide and act in a joint way, taking into account both political and managerial priorities and realities. In order for this to work appropriately, politicians and managers need to sit down as equals (albeit, sometimes, with different roles and different interests) and act jointly as a result.

• Knowing what will take place in the separate responsibilities of members and officers. Research has shown that the greater the degree of openness and understanding about this, the better he working relationship. Most councils attempt to provide this clarity through joint working protocols.

Membership/officer leadership - clarifying the roles

Political leadership

Joint leadership

Managerial leadership
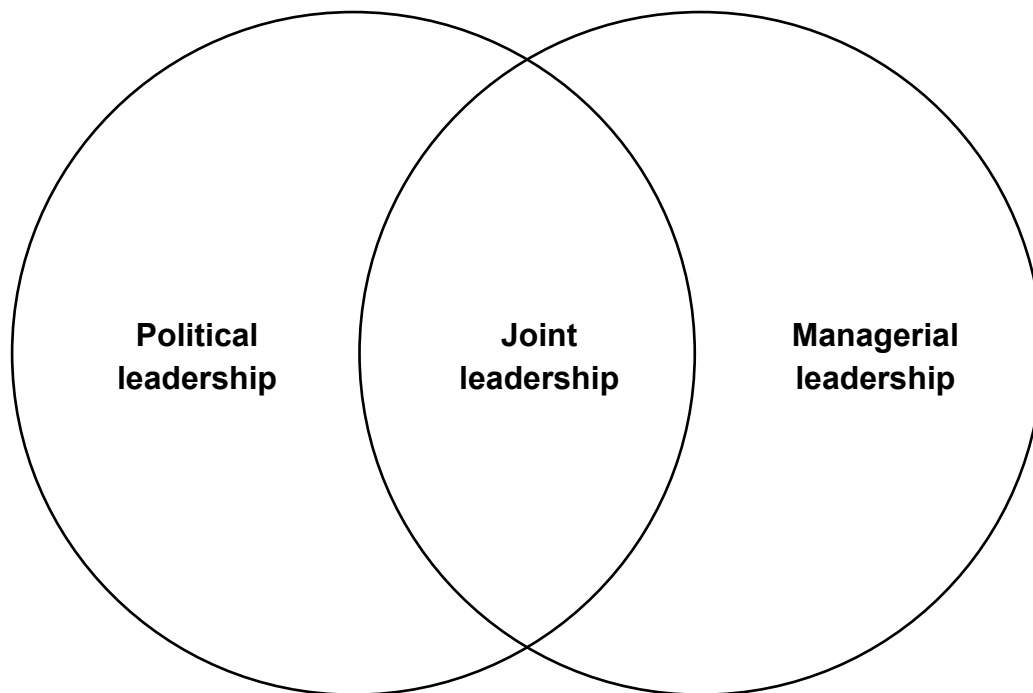
Elected authority from the community to set the council's direction and make choices on its behalf

Authority gained from acting together and ensuring that choices respect the interests and concerns of the community and of each other

Appointed authority to act on political choices and delegated responsibilities to deliver services and use the council's influence.

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 members and officers.

- **How are individual leaders to develop?** Arrangements to strengthen the skills, knowledge and experience of both members and senior officers (eg training and development).

📁 Working together for local people in Waltham Forest

Many councils have agreed protocols for member/officers relations. In the London Borough of Waltham Forest, a comprehensive working protocol has been produced covering a wide range of areas relevant to the member/officer relationship. This includes:

- some basic principles of member/officer relations

- support to political groups and individual members

- the management of officers

- access to information

- media relations and publicity

- what to do when things go wrong.

www.walthamforest.gov.uk

Exercise 3 – working together more effectively

Imagine your council has a history of poor working relations between members and officers because members are too bullish, vocal and quick to blame in their dealings with officers. What ideas could you suggest for improving the working relationship?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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 members), there may also be merit in providing some training for members on joint working or ethical governance. In some cases, you may consider it useful for group leaders to talk to individual members about the strengths and weaknesses of their personal approach to joint working with officers.

Forging the relationship

Recognising your mutual expectations

There are some challenges in bringing together politicians and officers to provide for joint leadership – particularly where are tensions around other important political relationships, eg non-executive versus scrutiny relations, non-executive versus ward relations or administration versus opposition relations. Nevertheless, it is essential that officers work closely with political leaders while retaining sufficient impartiality.

In forging an effective working relationship, members 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 g overnance. A separate, but complementary, LG Improvement and Development workbook on 'Ethical Governance' can provide you with more specific information on this. At a simple level, much of this is again about mutual trust and respect.

A guide to expectations

What members 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 members:

- 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.

⏳ Exercise 4 – ethical behaviour

Think about the nature of member/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 members.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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

Using Your Interpersonal Skills

A key element of your success in forging effective working relationships with officers will be your own interpersonal skills. As with all other aspects of your role, good communication skills will help, as will your ability to influence those you are working with.

Influencing is about understanding yourself and the effect or impact you have on others. Though it can, on occasions, be one way, the primary relationship is two way, and it is often about changing how others perceive you for the better. In member/officer relations, influencing is about moving things forward without pushing, forcing or telling others what to do. All too often, if you seek to influence officers through bullying or coercion you will not succeed in winning their support – and their lasting impression of you is likely to be negative.

The personal characteristics that can help to positively influence officers' perceptions can include:

- energy and enthusiasm

- a calm, even tempered, disposition

- an ability to be flexible and adaptable to different people and situations

- strong listening and observation skills

- an ability to act impartially or with neutrality

- self confidence and gravitas

- demonstrable empathy and perception.

Interpersonal tactics for good member/officer relations

Be yourself, without defensiveness or hidden agendas, and share your experiences and feelings to establish empathy.

Describe what you see rather than being judgemental, eg "on the basis of what you've said, you don't look to be supportive…".

Show you understand people's situation, needs and feelings.

Maintain your assertiveness, but avoid displays of unnecessary emotion (weakness or aggression) and unhelpful behaviours, eg immediate counter-attacks and talking over the top of people.

Keep people and problems separate, ie recognise that in many cases officers are not just 'being difficult' – 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.

Explore options together, ie being open to the idea that a third position may exist and that you can get to this idea in collaboration with officers.

Listen first and talk second – to stand any chance of influencing officers you must first understand where they are coming from before feeling you must 'defend' your own position.

Focus on getting the support of the 'early adopters', ie there will usually be a proportion of officers who are open to new ideas or new ways of doing things. Their support can often be influential in encouraging the more resistant to come forward, over time, in support of your views or action plans.

Of course the way that you approach officers and the particular style you adopt in trying to influence them can take a variety of forms, depending on your personal preferences and the situation you find yourself in. Being a good influencer will require you to adapt your approach depending on how directive you wish to be and whether you believe you should appeal to officer's emotions or intellect to achieve your desired result. This is again about judgement on your part.

⧗ Exercise 5 – using your influencing skills in member/officer relations

What tactics might you employ in seeking to influence your officer colleagues' views in the following scenarios?

(1) You are looking to get some officer support for a community meeting in your ward, during which residents will be asked what they see as being the 'big issues' for the locality. You would like the council's newly recruited Director of Community Services to attend the evening meeting with you, but have to find a way of convincing him that this is time well spent.

_____

_____

(2) A joint member 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.

_____

_____

Relations with statutory officers

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

- chief financial officer, whose duties are prescribed under section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988

- monitoring officer, whose duties are set out under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989

- chief legal officer, who should be consulted when there is any doubt as to the council's power to act – or in determining whether any action proposed lies within the policy framework agreed by the council - or where the legal consequences of action or failure to act by the council might have important repercussions.

The statutory officers of the council are the head of paid service (usually the chief executive), the monitoring officer and the Section 151 officer. All have a duty to advise the council as a corporate body. The ability of these officers to discharge their duties depends not only on effective working relations with their member 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 that are based on a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Exercise 6 – the role of statutory officers

Imagine there have been a range of issues facing your council about member behaviour and member and officer relations. The issues have been focused around one member. 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 member 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 members, ensuring that any guidelines on appropriate/inappropriate behaviour are circulated to members and invoking locally agreed standards procedures.

Final word

Summary

The working relationship between members 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.

Next steps

⏳ 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, e.g. further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix A
Ethical considerations in exercise 4

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 members.

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 member 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 members must not bring pressure on the officer or direct change). Members can overturn the recommendation at committee, and this occurs where good reasons can be shown at planning committees.

Members' 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 members' involvement in day to day operations rather than strategic decision making. An appropriate response would be to use the officer and member briefing mechanism to exchange advance information and to explore political sensitivities prior to drafting of reports and recommendations.

All members should be aware of:

- policy, protocols and/or guidance on officer reports and rules of delegation
- legislation and protocols for access to information and in particular the additional rights of members of scrutiny committees
- guidance on the role of chairman's briefing.

Appendix B
Sources of further information

Printed publications

'A Councillor's Guide', Local Government Association.

'The Conduct regime in a post-Standards Board world' (extract), Communities and Local Government, www.communities.gov.uk

'The Code of Conduct: Guide for Members', Standards Board for England (until March 2012 and in the LGA Knowledge Hub thereafter).

'The Code to Protect You', Standards Board for England (until March 2012 and in the LGA Knowledge Hub thereafter).

'The Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) (England) Order 2007', Office for Public Sector Information, www.legislation.gov.uk

Useful websites

www.local.gov.uk

The Local Government Association website is an invaluable source of help and advice for all those in local government and contains guidance and case studies on all aspects of the councillor role.

www.public-standards.gov.uk

Website of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. This includes reports and research relevant to the development of ethical governance.

For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
We consider requests on an individual basis.

L12-190