



Coxhoe Parish Council Member Officer Protocol

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Introduction

Councillors are democratically accountable and may have political affiliations. Officers must serve the whole Council objectively. Together they should balance a complex range of obligations and competing interests. For this to be effective, Councillors and Officers must have mutual trust and respect for each other's requirements and duties. Effective working relationships between Councillors and employees of the Parish Council are key if the Council is to work effectively, and are critical in maintaining public confidence in the workings of the Council. There is also a need for a transparent consistency in everyday working relations.

This Protocol offers guidance on some of the issues which most commonly arise. It is hoped, however, that the approach which it adopts to these issues will serve as a guide to dealing with other circumstances.

This Protocol is intended to guide Members and employees of the Parish Council in their relationships with one another. It is not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive and simply seeks to offer guidance on some of the issues which can arise. It does not in any way replace the Code of Conduct by which Councillors are legally bound, nor does it replace any employee Code of Conduct which the Parish Council may put in place. However, the Protocol may assist in interpreting what is required under either Code.

It also seeks to reflect the principles underlying any Codes of Conduct. The shared object of these codes is to enhance and maintain the integrity (real and perceived) of local councils and the Codes, therefore, demand very high standards of personal conduct. At the heart of the Codes and this Protocol, is the importance of mutual respect.

Principles

- 1.1 Members and officers must at all times observe this protocol.
- 1.2 The protocol has been approved by the Council and will be monitored along with the Codes which it supports.
- 1.3 The protocol seeks to maintain and enhance the integrity (real and perceived) of local government which demands the highest of personal conduct.
- 1.4 Members and officers must always respect the roles and duties of each other. They must show respect in all their dealings by observing reasonable standards of courtesy, and by not seeking to take unfair advantage by virtue of their position.
- 1.5 Whilst members and officers are indispensable to one another, their responsibilities are distinct. Members are accountable to the electorate and serve only as long as their term of office lasts. Officers are accountable to the Council as a whole. Their job is to give advice to members (individually and collectively) and to carry out the Council's work under the direction of the Council.
- 1.6 The Council has adopted codes of conduct which represent best practice. The Members' Code follows the national code which in turn is based on the general principles governing members' conduct enshrined in law.

These principles underpin this protocol. Until such time as a national code appears, officers are bound by the Council's own policies and any code of conduct for staff.

The Roles of Members

- 2.1 Members have a number of roles and need to be alert to the potential for conflicts of interest which may arise between the roles. Where such conflicts are likely, members may

wish to seek the advice of colleagues, the Clerk and/or the County Council's Monitoring Officer.

2.2 Collectively, members are the ultimate policy-makers determining the core values of the Council and approving the authority's policy framework, strategic plans and budget.

2.3 Members represent the community, act as community leaders and promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the community often in partnership with other agencies.

2.4 Every elected-member represents the interests of, and is an advocate for his/her ward and individual residents. They represent the Council in the ward, respond to the concerns of residents, meet with partner agencies, and often serves on local bodies.

2.5 Some members have roles relating to their position as members of committees and sub-committees of the Council.

2.6 Members who serve on committees and sub-committees collectively have delegated responsibilities.

2.7 Some members may be appointed to represent the Council on local, regional or national bodies.

2.8 As politicians, members may express the values and aspirations of the party political groups to which they belong, recognising that in their role as members they have a duty always to act in the public interest.

2.9 Members are not authorised to instruct officers other than:

a. Through the formal decision-making process

b. To request the provision of consumable resources provided by the Council for members' use

c. Individual Members are not authorised to initiate or certify financial transactions, or to enter into a contract on behalf of the Council. Authorised signatories however may sign cheques and authorise banking transactions.

2.10 Members must avoid taking actions which are unlawful, financially improper or likely to amount to maladministration. Members have an obligation under their code of conduct to have regard when reaching decisions, to any advice provided by officers.

2.11 Members must respect the impartiality of officers and do nothing to compromise it, e.g. by insisting that an officer change his/her professional advice, or by asking employees to breach Council policy or procedure or to act unlawfully.

2.12 Members have a duty under their code of conduct to promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person and to treat others with respect.

2.13 Under the code, a member must not, when acting as a member or in any other capacity bring the Council or their position as a member into disrepute, or use their position as a member improperly to gain an advantage or disadvantage for themselves or any other position.

2.14 Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Parish Council have additional responsibilities. Because of those responsibilities, their relationships with the Clerk may differ from, and be more complex than those of Councillors without those responsibilities, and this is recognised in the expectations they are entitled to have. However, such Councillors must still respect the impartiality of officers or to do anything which would put them in difficulty in the event of a change in the composition of the authority.

The Roles of Officers

3.1 Officers are responsible for giving advice to members, fairly, equally and efficiently, to enable them to fulfil their roles. In doing so, officers will take into account all available relevant factors.

3.2 Under the direction and control of the Council, officers, led by the Clerk, manage and provide the Council's services within the framework of responsibilities delegated to them. This includes the effective management of employees and operational issues. The Parish Clerk is responsible to the whole Council.

3.3 Officers have a duty to implement decisions of the Council, committees and sub-committees which are lawful, and which have been properly approved in accordance with the requirements of the law and the Council's constitution, and are duly minuted.

3.4 Officers have a contractual and legal duty to be impartial. They must not allow their professional judgement and advice to be influenced by their own personal views. They must keep confidentiality where it is proper to do so.

3.5 Officers must assist and advise all parts of the Council. They must always act to the best of their abilities in the best interests of the authority as expressed in the Council's formal decisions.

3.6 Officers must be alert to issues which are, or are likely to be, contentious or politically sensitive, and be aware of the implications for members, the media or other sections of the public.

3.7 Officers have the right not to support members in any role other than that of members, and not to engage in actions incompatible with this protocol. In particular, there may be a statutory limitation on officers' involvement in political activities. It is the officer's responsibility to know whether or not any limitation applies.

The Relationship between Members and Officers: General

4.1 The conduct of members and officers should be such as to instil mutual confidence and trust.

4.2 The key elements of this relationship are recognition of and a respect for each other's roles and responsibilities. These should be reflected in the behaviour and attitude of each to the other, both publicly and privately.

4.3 Informal and collaborative two-way contact between members and officers is encouraged. But personal familiarity can damage the relationship, as might a family or business connection.

4.4 It is not enough to avoid impropriety. Members and officers should always be open about their relationships to avoid any reason for suspicion and any appearance of improper conduct. Where a personal relationship has been disclosed, those concerned should avoid a situation where conflict could be perceived. Specifically, a member should not sit on a body or participate in any decision which directly affects the officer on a personal basis.

4.5 Officers serve the Council as a whole. They have a duty to implement the properly authorised decisions of the Council.

4.6 Officers work to the instructions of their senior officers, not individual members. It follows that, whilst such officers will always seek to assist a member, they must not be asked to exceed the bounds of authority they have been given by their managers. Except when the purpose of an enquiry is purely to seek factual information, members should normally direct their requests and concerns to the Clerk, at least in the first instance.

4.7 Officers will do their best to give timely responses to members' enquiries. However, officers should not have unreasonable requests placed on them. Their work priorities are set and managed by the Clerk. Members should avoid disrupting officers' work by imposing their own priorities.

4.8 Members will endeavour to give timely responses to enquiries from officers.

4.9 An officer shall not discuss with a member personal matters concerning him/herself or another individual employee. This does not prevent an officer raising on a personal basis, and in his/her own time, a matter with his/her ward (division) member.

4.10 Members and officers should respect other's free (i.e. non-Council) time.

4.11 Members and officers should be sensible about contacting each other at potentially inconvenient times unless in an emergency or otherwise agreed.

The Council as an Employer

5.1 Officers are employed by the Council as a whole.

5.2 Members' roles are limited to:

- a. the appointment of specified posts
- b. determining human resources policies and conditions of employment
- c. hearing and determining appeals.

5.3 If participating in the appointment of officers, members should:

- a. remember that the sole criterion is merit
- b. never canvass support for a particular candidate
- c. not take part where one of the candidates is a close friend or relative
- d. not be influenced by personal preferences
- e. not favour a candidate by giving them information not available to the other candidates.

Interpretation, Complaints and Allegations of Breaches

6.1 Members or officers with questions about the implementation or interpretation of any part of this protocol should seek guidance of the Clerk.

6.2 A member who is unhappy about the actions taken by, or conduct of, an officer should:

- a. avoid personal attacks on, or abuse of, the officer at all times
- b. ensure that any criticism is well founded and constructive
- c. never make a criticism in public
- d. take up the concern with the Clerk privately, or direct their concerns through the Chair or Vice Chair.

6.3 If direct discussion with the officer is inappropriate (e.g. because of the seriousness of the concern) or fails to resolve the matter, the member should raise the issue with the Clerk.

6.4 A serious breach of this protocol by an officer may lead to an investigation under the Council's disciplinary procedure.

6.5 An officer who believes a member may have acted other than in accordance with this protocol should raise their concern with the Clerk, who will consider how the complaint or allegation should be dealt with. More serious complaints may involve alleged breaches of the members' code of conduct.

Members of other Committees or Sub-Committees and Officers

7.1 The appropriate senior officers will offer to arrange informal meetings with Chairs, Vice Chairs, and spokespersons of committees and sub-committees if required.

7.2 The Clerk has the right to present reports and give advice to committees and sub-committees.

7.3 Members of a committee or sub-committee shall take decisions within the remit of that committee or sub-committee, and will not otherwise instruct officers to act.

7.4 At some committee or sub-committee meetings, a resolution may be passed which authorises a named officer to take action between meetings in consultation with the Chair. In these circumstances it is the officer, not the Chair, who takes the action and is responsible for it. A Chair has no legal power to take decisions on behalf of a committee or sub-committee; neither should they apply inappropriate pressure on the officer.

Use of Council Resources

8.1 The Council can provide all members with services such as printing and photocopying, and goods such as stationery, to assist them in discharging their roles as members of the Council. These goods and services are paid for from the public purse. They should not be used for private purposes or in connection with party political or campaigning activities.

8.2 Members should ensure they understand and comply with the Council's own rules about the use of such resources, particularly:

- a. where facilities are provided in members' homes at the Council's expense
- b. in relation to any locally-agreed arrangements e.g. payment for private photocopying
- c. regarding information security and data protection.

8.3 Members should not put pressure on staff to provide resources or support which officers are not permitted to give. Examples are:

- a. business which is solely to do with a political party
- b. work in connection with a ward or constituency party political meeting
- c. electioneering
- d. work associated with an event attended by a member in a capacity other than as a member of the Council
- e. private personal correspondence
- f. work in connection with another body or organisation where a member's involvement is other than as a member of the Council

Local Members and Officers

9.1 To enable them to carry out their ward role effectively, members need to be fully informed about matters affecting their ward. The Clerk must ensure that all relevant staff are aware of the requirement to keep local members informed, thus allowing members to contribute to the decision-making process and develop their representative role.

9.2 This requirement is particularly important:

- a. during the formative stages of policy development, where practicable
- b. in relation to significant or sensitive operational matters
- c. whenever any form of public consultation exercise is undertaken and may affect a single ward. Where they have a wider impact, a number of local members will need to be kept informed.

9.3 Whenever a public meeting is organised by the Council to consider a local issue, all the members representing the wards affected should be invited to attend the meeting as a matter of course.

9.4 If a local member intends to arrange a public meeting on a matter concerning some aspect of the Council's work, they should inform the Clerk in advance. Provided the meeting has not been arranged on a party political basis:

- a. An officer may attend but is not obliged to do so, and the meeting may be held in Council-owned premises.
- b. No such meetings should be arranged or held in the immediate run-up to Council elections.

c. Whilst support for members' ward work is legitimate, staff should not be asked to accompany members to ward surgeries.

9.5 In seeking to deal with residents' queries or concerns, members should not seek to jump the queue but should respect the Council's procedures. Officers have many pressures on their time. They may not be able to carry out the work required by members in the requested timetable, and may need to seek instructions from their managers.

Members' Access to Documents and Information

10.1 Members may request the Clerk to provide them with such information, explanation and advice as they may reasonably need to assist them to discharge their roles as members. This may range from general information about some aspect of the Council's services to specific information on behalf of a resident. Where information is requested on behalf of a third party, it will only be provided if:

- a. It is in the public domain, and
- b. It is not barred by the Data Protection Act from being given.

10.2 Every member of a committee or sub-committee has a right to inspect documents about the business of that committee or sub-committee.

10.3 A member who is not a member of a specific committee or sub-committee, may have access to any document of that specific part of the Council provided:

- a. they can demonstrate a reasonable need to see the documents in order to carry out their roles as a member (the "need to know" principle), and
- b. the documents do not contain "confidential" or "exempt" information as defined by the law.

10.4 Disputes as to the validity of a member's request to see a document on a need to know basis will be determined by the Clerk. Officers should seek their advice if in any doubt about the reasonableness of a member's request.

10.5 A member should obtain advice from the Clerk in circumstances where they wish to have access to documents or information:

- a. where to do so is likely to be in breach of the Data Protection Act, or
- b. where the subject matter is one in which they have an interest as defined in the members' code of conduct.

10.6 Information given to a member must only be used for the purpose for which it was requested.

10.7 Members and officers must not disclose information given to them in confidence without the consent of a person authorised to give it, or unless required by law to do so.

10.8 When requested to do so, officers will keep confidential from other members advice requested by a member.

10.9 Members and officers must not prevent another person from gaining access to information to which that person is entitled by law.

Media Relations

11.1 All formal relations with the media must be conducted in accordance with any Council agreed procedures and the law on local authority publicity.

11.2 Press releases or statements made by officers must promote or give information on Council policy or services. They will be factual and consistent with Council policy. They cannot be used to promote a party group.

11.3 Officers will keep relevant members informed of media interest in the Council's activities, especially regarding strategic or contentious matters.

11.4 Before responding to enquiries from the media, officers will ensure they are authorised to do so.

11.5 If a member is contacted by, or contacts, the media on an issue, they should:

- a. indicate in what capacity he/she is speaking (e.g. as ward member, in a personal capacity, on behalf of the Council, or on behalf of a party group)
- b. be sure of what they want to say or not to say
- c. if necessary, and always when they would like a press release to be issued, seek assistance from the Clerk, except in relation to a statement which is party political in nature
- d. consider the likely consequences for the Council of their statement (e.g. commitment to a particular course of action, image, allegations of jumping to conclusions)
- e. never give a commitment in relation to matters which may be subject to claims from third parties and/or are likely to be an insurance matter
- f. consider whether to consult other relevant members
- g. take particular care in what they say in the run-up to local or national elections to avoid giving the impression of electioneering, unless they have been contacted as an election candidate or political party activist.

Correspondence

12.1 Correspondence between an individual member and an officer should not be copied to another member unless the author expressly intends and states that this is the case or consents. Where correspondence is copied, this should always be made explicit, i.e. there should be no “blind” copies. 12.2 Official letters written on behalf of the Council should normally be in the name of the relevant officer.

12.3 Letters which create legally enforceable obligations or which give instructions on behalf of the Council should never be sent in the name of a member.

12.4 When writing in an individual capacity as a ward member, a member must make clear that fact.

Access to Premises

13.1 Officers have the right to enter Council land and premises to carry out their work.

13.2 Members have a right of access to Council land and premises to fulfil their duties.

13.3 When making visits as individual members, members should:

- a. whenever practicable, notify and make advance arrangements with the appropriate officer
- b. comply with health and safety, security and other workplace rules
- c. not interfere with the services or activities being provided at the time of the visit
- d. if outside their own ward notify the ward member(s) beforehand
- e. take special care at schools and establishments serving vulnerable sections of society to avoid giving any impression of improper or inappropriate behaviour.