

PROTOCOL FOR OFFICERS AND POLITICAL GROUPS

1. There is statutory recognition for political Groups as it is common practice for such Groups to give preliminary consideration to matters of Council business in advance of consideration by the relevant Council decision-making body.
2. Officers have a duty to inform and advise all Councillors to enable them to carry out their duties effectively. Party Groups have an important part to play in the development of policy and the political management of the Authority. Groups will want to have processes and procedures in place whereby they can receive factual information or professional advice in confidence without the presence of Councillors of other political Groups. At the same time, officers will wish to protect their position and avoid any appearance of bias or allegiance to one particular political Group. In view of this it is in the interest of the Authority to support the effective operation of political Groups in so far as Council business is concerned and officers with the consent of the Chief Executive/Deputy Chief Executive/Head of Service may therefore properly be called upon to attend a Group Meeting. The information is designed to help both Councillors and officer by setting out some principles for officer attendance at Group Meetings.
3. Attendance at Group Meetings will be the exception not the rule. The usual way to brief Councillors will be at 1:2:1s and through the Chair of the relevant Committee. That Councillor will in turn brief their Group. In some cases however, that channel of communication may be too restrictive and therefore officers may be asked to attend Group Meetings to provide relevant factual information and professional advice to Councillors.
4. A request for an officer to attend a Group Meeting should be made in writing by a Group Leader and/or Group Secretary to the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive or Head of Service. It will be up to the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive or Head of Service to decide which officer should attend the Group Meeting. The Head of Legal, Democracy and HR and Chief Executive (where appropriate) should also be informed.
5. If the request is made for an officer to attend a Group Meeting on a sensitive matter, that request will be referred to the Chief Executive to determine whether an officer should attend in consultation with Group Leaders.
6. Officer support at Group Meetings must not extend beyond providing factual information or professional advice in relation to matters of Council business. Officers must not be involved in advising on matters of Party business. The observance of this distinction will be assisted if officers are not expected to be present when matters of Party business are discussed.
7. Group Meetings, while they form part of the preliminaries to Council decision making, are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Council. Conclusions reached at such meetings are not Council decisions and it is essential that they are not interpreted or acted upon as such.
8. Similarly, where officers provide information and advice to a Group in relation to a matter of Council business this cannot act as a substitute for the Officer providing all necessary information and advice to the relevant Council decision making body when the matter is considered, and where a report is presented it should be limited to a statement of material facts and identification of options and the merits and demerits of such options for the Council.

9. Officers will not normally attend and provide information to any Political Party Group Meeting which involves non-Councillors. Exceptions to this may be approved by the Chief Executive who shall do so in writing and copy the correspondence to all the Political Group Leaders.
10. In all dealings with Councillors, in particular when giving advice to Political Party Groups, officers must demonstrate political impartiality and must suppress their professional advice in the face of political views.
11. Officers must respect the confidentiality of any Political Party Group Meeting at which they are present. They must not relay the content of any such discussion to another Party Group. This should not prevent an officer providing feedback to other senior officers on a need-to-know basis if considered appropriate and with the consent of the Group Leader.
12. The duration of an officer's attendance at a Party Group Meeting will be at the discretion of the Group, but an officer may leave at any time if they feel it is no longer appropriate to be there.
13. An officer accepting an invitation to attend a meeting of one Party Group shall not decline an invitation another Group Meeting on the same matter.
14. Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in this area of officer advice and assistance to Political Party Groups should be raised with the Chief Executive who will discuss them with the relevant Group Leaders.