



ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION NOTEBOOK 4

# Developing Your Working Relationships with Officers



# About this notebook

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Your induction to the council will require you to absorb a significant amount of information to get you through the first few days, weeks and months. While this is important, arguably of greater importance is for you to start to build the working relationships that you will need over your five-year term and possibly beyond.

This notebook will help you to understand the context of your relationship with officers and explore some of the ways you can build effective working relationships that are crucial to a well-performing council.



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# The importance of effective working relationships

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The Accounts Commission, the public spending watchdog for local government in Scotland, states that

*“good working relationships, and members and officers being clear about their respective roles and responsibilities ... has a significant bearing on how well councils perform in delivering vital public services for local people and communities, and ensuring that public money is used wisely.”*

([Roles and working relationships in councils - Are you still getting it right?](#), Accounts Commission)

The first three induction notebooks have already started to cover your roles and responsibilities, but this notebook will give you a better understanding of the role of officers and explore what an effective working relationship between members and officers looks like. What ‘effective’ looks like can be slightly different in each council. However, there are certain behaviours that are less likely to lead to the type of relationships conducive to good governance and a well-performing council.

The exact nature of your own relationships with officers will be determined by several factors:

- ▶ Whether you are in the Administration or Opposition (if your council operates this way);
- ▶ Whether you have a senior position within the council or your group;
- ▶ The committees you sit on;
- ▶ The size of the council and number of elected members; and
- ▶ The culture of the council and the legacy relationships between elected members and officers.

Some of these factors can change throughout your term of office, therefore the exact nature of your relationships with officers can change too. However, what is certain is the more effort you put into establishing effective working relationships with officers now, based on a proper understanding of your respective roles and responsibilities, the more likely the council and the communities it serves will reap the benefits of those relationships in the months and years to come.



# Roles and responsibilities

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Thinking about the roles of elected members and officers, the relationship between them can be an area of ambiguity and debate.

The [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#) states:

*“Councillors and employees should work in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, with neither party seeking to take unfair advantage of their position or influence.”*

The first step in creating such an atmosphere is to understand the differences between members' and officers' roles. Some distinctions between the roles and responsibilities are relatively clear. Officers have professional or technical backgrounds and are paid to advise, manage, plan, develop, and carry out activity in the pursuit of the council's objectives. Their authority comes from their professional knowledge and position within the organisation, which has been earned through appropriate and lawful recruitment processes.

You and your fellow elected members are democratically elected, having laid out your views to the people in your ward and being successful in winning a seat on the council. Your authority comes from this democratic process and brings with it democratic legitimacy and accountability to the electorate.

The foundations of successful relationships between members and officers rests on the acceptance of the legitimacy and understanding of each other's authority.

## Where are the boundaries between roles?

The Councillors' Code of Conduct makes it clear that you should not become involved in operational management of the council's services as that is the responsibility of its employees. One phrase which has been used to describe the differences between the roles is that elected members should be 'steering not rowing'. In other words, elected members, through deciding upon policy issues, set the strategic direction in which they want things to head, and then rely on the effort of managers and officers to row the ship forward.

There is something compelling and attractive about this. It captures the sense in which non-professional experts (elected members) should not be burdened with detailed technical and operational issues. More sensibly these should be the responsibility of officers. It also enshrines the importance of it being the democratically elected politicians (rather than the less directly publicly accountable officers) who should exercise choices about policy direction.

However, the reality is not so simple.

Acting as an advocate for an individual constituent can necessitate elected members becoming involved in quite detailed explanations of day-to-day service delivery. Indeed, you can end up building an impressive stock of quite technical knowledge as a result of your case work. Sometimes you can only end up asking strategic questions by starting off with a specific operational problem.

For example, knowing that a constituent is finding it difficult to access support for their child with special needs might lead to an advocacy of that person's case. It might (if you can successfully influence the decision-making and policy development processes) also lead to a strategic level examination of how well different services which aim to support children and families fit together in practice and what can be done to improve this. Raising strategic questions like these is very much part of the elected member role as it involves a challenge to existing practices and the opening up of new ways of doing things.

It is an unrealistic view that 'elected members make policy and officers simply implement it'.

For example, elected members, often examine areas in which they have no direct professional expertise and so cannot produce policies without considerable input and advice from officers. In providing this advice, officers draw upon their professional knowledge and should support elected members to articulate and decide upon different policy choices.

Another illustration of this point is that skilled officers will have a highly tuned sense of the politics of the council, e.g. the relationship between different individuals or groups, the likely level of support for different options, the priorities of elected members, and so on. In other words, officers are not detached bureaucratic figures who merely implement policies. They play much more active roles in the life of the council and the policy and decision-making processes.

Although we have come to recognise that the roles of officers and elected members overlap, one convincing description is that:

*Elected members, drawing upon the legal, technical and professional advice of officers, have the responsibility of setting the broad direction for the council and for setting its key goals. Elected members can then expect the support of officers to make sure that the work of the council - its finances, professional knowledge, time, effort and creativity - is directed towards accomplishing these goals through both longer-term strategic planning and the management of day-to-day activities.*

Officers will have an important role in ensuring a clear strategic direction, but the legitimacy of this comes from the extent to which this direction is being driven by the values and priorities of the elected members (collectively).

Of course, the extent to which local people are involved in informing strategy and policy is an important consideration and will be a matter for you and fellow elected members. The **Being a Community Leader notebook** will help you reflect on this as will the [‘Doing Local Politics’](#) report by the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) on the link between the councillor, officer and citizen.



# Working with statutory officers

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Councils in Scotland are required by various statutes to make appointments to a number of specified offices. Those individuals who are appointed to these offices are commonly referred to as 'statutory officers'.

The term 'statutory officer' is generally used to refer to the principal statutory officers, who alongside their day-to-day roles have specific responsibilities, as set out in legislation.

The statutory officers that elected members are most likely to deal with on a day-to-day basis are:

- ▶ Head of Paid Service
- ▶ Monitoring Officer
- ▶ Chief Financial Officer
- ▶ Chief Social Work Officer
- ▶ Chief Education Officer
- ▶ Chief Planning Officer

It is crucial to understand these officers have important, independent roles to promote and enforce good governance and make sure the council complies with legislation.

The information in this section is intended to give you an initial awareness about statutory officers and the importance of their roles. It is incumbent upon you and those statutory officers to make the space and effort to build effective working relationships based on mutual understanding and respect towards each other and your respective roles and responsibilities.

## Head of Paid Service

The Head of Paid Service is the principal policy adviser and primary manager of the council and this is very likely to be a role remitted to the Chief Executive. The council is under a statutory duty to consider reports prepared by the Head of Paid Service on the management and deployment of staff.

Key roles include:

- ▶ being responsible to elected members for the staffing of the council and ensuring the work in different departments is coordinated;



- ▶ working with elected members to promote good governance by ensuring processes are in place that are fit for purpose and up to date;
- ▶ working with senior colleagues to ensure that elected members receive good quality information and support to inform decision-making and scrutiny; and
- ▶ ensuring other statutory officers have appropriate access and influence in carrying out their roles.

## Monitoring Officer

The role of the Monitoring Officer was established by virtue of section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The Monitoring Officer ensures that the council observes its constitution and operates legally. This includes reporting on the legality of matters, maladministration, and the conduct of elected members and officers. Key roles include:

- ▶ advising elected members about the legal position of proposed actions; and
- ▶ preparing a report for council if, at any stage, it appears that any proposal, decision or omission by the local authority, whether by committee, sub-committee, or officer, has given or is likely to result in the authority contravening legislation or any code of practice.

The Monitoring Officer usually prepares the Standing Orders and Schemes of Delegation, and will advise you on your matters relating to the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

The Standards Commission have produced [Advice on the role of the Monitoring Officer in respect of the Ethical Standards Framework](#) which you may find helpful to refer back to.

## Chief Financial Officer

The Chief Financial Officer is often referred to as the section 95 officer due to their role being established by virtue of section 95 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. This act requires local authorities to make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and appoint a Chief Finance Officer (CFO) to have responsibility for those arrangements. Key roles include:

- ▶ being responsible for the proper administration of the financial affairs of the council;
- ▶ ensuring the council has sound financial management;
- ▶ establishing and maintaining internal financial controls; and
- ▶ being responsible for providing professional advice to elected members on all aspects of the council's finances.

The Chief Financial Officer needs to have access to decision-makers and influence at a senior management level.

## Chief Social Work Officer

Section 3 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 requires Councils to appoint a professionally qualified Chief Social Work Officer to provide elected members and senior officers with advice about the delivery of social work services.

The role of chief social work officer, as leader of the social care and social work profession, involves:

- ▶ the provision of professional advice in the discharge of the local authority's statutory functions as outlined in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968;
- ▶ the provision of strategic and professional leadership in the delivery of social work services;
- ▶ the assistance to local authorities and their partners in understanding the complexities and cross-cutting nature of social work services and the key role social work plays in contributing to a wide range of local and national outcomes; and
- ▶ the support of overall performance management and the management of corporate risk.

These functions apply in respect of both council and integration authority services.

To carry out these roles effectively, the Chief Social Work Officer should have access to the Chief Executive and other senior managers, elected members and social work officers.

The IS briefing note on the role of the [Chief Social Work Officer](#) contains further information that you may wish to refer back to.

## Chief Education Officer

The Education (Scotland) Act 2016 requires the appointment of a suitably qualified and experienced Chief Education Officer to carry out the authority's education functions under this act and any other enactment.

## Chief Planning Officer

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced a provision for planning authorities in Scotland to appoint a chief planning officer. This statutory post is being established in 2022, after which planning authorities will be required to appoint an officer that has the proper qualifications and experience for the role, as outlined by Scottish Ministers.

The role of the chief planning officer's is to advise on "the functions conferred on them by virtue of the planning Acts, and any function conferred on them by any other enactment, insofar as the function relates to development."



# Members' Services and support staff

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The Councillors' Code of Conduct is clear that you should not be involved in directing council employees in their day-to-day management of the council.

The exception in the code (Annex A, paragraph 26) relates to any designated support staff that will provide a range of support for you and your fellow members. Some staff will have roles to directly support you with things like administrative work and constituent enquiries, but could also include helping you to navigate the council and signposting you to the appropriate person or department for your queries.

The exact support provided to you will depend upon decisions the council has made in the past about what elected members need. You will need to find out what support there is so you can plan your workload and time properly. The three main things to know at this early stage are:

1. The support staff are employees of the council, and while you will be able to direct them to carry out work on your behalf that falls within the scope of their role, you are not there to directly manage them. This is still the responsibility of their line manager.
2. Depending on the provision of support, these staff may be the council employees you work most closely with on a regular basis. Build up good relationships with them and they will become a valuable source of support over your term of office.
3. The provision of support to elected members in Scottish local authorities isn't comparable to that of MSPs and MPs. You will need to do a lot for yourself, while making best use of the available support.

# Constructive challenge

A key role for you and your fellow elected members is to scrutinise the implementation of policy, and delivery against the budget and priorities agreed by members. This requires you to challenge and question officers.

How you provide this challenge can facilitate the building of effective working relationships with officers that drives the council to achieve more for its communities. How you receive and embrace challenge from officers is equally important.

Of course, this goes both ways and officers need to be able to embrace and provide challenge in ways that are conducive to building and maintaining effective working relationships with elected members. One hard boundary that you must maintain, is to refrain from undermining officers or raising concerns about their performance, conduct or capability in public. To do so is a breach of the Councillors' Code of Conduct (paragraph 3.8), and a sure-fire way to destroy relationships and create an atmosphere of mistrust.

Your council may have guidance or protocols that outline the ways in which members and officers are expected to engage with each other, including how you escalate any issues you have with officers, and you should familiarise yourself with this.

Table 1 also outlines some advice for constructive challenge that, if followed, should make it more likely that officers and members can operate in an environment where challenge drives improvement rather than simply seeking to attribute blame.

**Table 1**

<b>When offering challenge, members and officers should:</b>	<b>When receiving challenge, members and officers should:</b>
Think about the interpersonal dynamics. Keep it professional - it's the issue you're challenging, not the person.	Not take it personally - the challenge isn't about you, it's about the issue at hand.
Make challenge with courtesy and politeness. Don't use leading questions as this can come across as manipulative.	Make it known that you welcome reasonable challenge, and create space to receive it. Recognise that challenge might result in change and assume the other persons intentions are positive.

When offering challenge, members and officers should:	When receiving challenge, members and officers should:
Be prepared to explain the logic and reasoning behind your alternative view and provide evidence from different sources. Keep your challenge concise and relevant to the issue at hand.	Seek real diversity of thought, not just shades of mainstream thinking. Ask the other person to explain their logic and reasoning and consider the merit of their idea.
Choose your moment and your medium. A one-to-one discussion or an informal meeting may be more appropriate than a public meeting at which positions are being taken and decisions are expected. You should be wary of using email for nuanced communications.	Demonstrate that you are giving serious thought to the challenge being offered - do not dismiss it out of hand and make sure people aren't just telling you what you want to hear.
Raise issues in a timely manner. Don't leave your challenge too late in the decision-making process, when changing course could be too difficult.	Respond respectfully - never belittle someone's view, and never sideline those offering it.
Accept if the eventual decision remains unchanged after reasonable challenge has been considered. Do not let it damage the relationship.	If you do not accept the challenge, explain your reasoning, including supporting evidence when necessary.

Adapted from 'The Good Operation: A handbook for those involved in operational policy and its implementation | Ministry of Defence' [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/674545/TheGoodOperation\\_WEB.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674545/TheGoodOperation_WEB.PDF)

There are also ways in which you can disagree that makes it more likely for the other person to be receptive to your opposing point of view and create a safer space for respectful disagreement. This article on [arguing better by signalling your receptiveness](#) by Dr Michael Yeomans (Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Imperial College London) outlines one approach for you to consider.



# Behaviours for building trust

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This notebook has covered the importance of trust within working relationships between elected members and officers. So how do you build trust in a working relationship?

There are certain behaviours that are more likely to lead to trusting working relationship. If followed by both members and officers, trust should start to build and be maintained over time.

## **1. Be transparent**

Be open and honest with your communication. Attempts to spin information can lead to feelings of a hidden agenda.

## **2. Do what you say you will do**

Demonstrating integrity by doing what you say you will do, means that people can rely on you. It also ensures there are no hidden surprises for people.

## **3. Demonstrate trust**

People are more likely to trust when they feel trusted by the other person. This creates reciprocity. Of course, the opposite is also true so start out by demonstrating trust.

## **4. Be personable**

Interactions between elected members and officers don't have to just be about work-related matters. Getting to know someone at a more personal level can be helpful for building a healthy working relationship. This does not mean people should disclose things that are deeply private. It is about getting to know someone as a human being and not just a person doing a specific job. This can help with understanding what makes people tick and how to get the best from them.

## **5. Be consistent**

Showing consistency in your behaviour allows people to anticipate what we might do in different situations and makes it easier for other people to know how they need to work with you.

## **6. Show appreciation**

When good work happens or someone goes the extra mile, show your appreciation of the effort. This is particularly important for more junior officers or frontline workers, and can raise morale as well as trust.



## **7. Listen and consider other points of view**

Trust is more likely to form when someone feels their point of view has been heard and considered. Even if you disagree, the other person is more likely to feel valued and believe they have been given a fair hearing.

## **8. Admit what needs to improve**

Large complex organisations such as councils need to have a willingness to continually improve as there will always be new challenges or issues that make it impossible to rest on your laurels. Admitting what needs to improve shows a level of vulnerability that helps to build trust.

*Adapted from research by Roffey Park, 2016. <https://www.roffeypark.ac.uk/knowledge-and-learning-resources-hub/eight-behaviours-that-build-trust/>*

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# Questions and notes

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**How well do you feel you understand the role of officers? What could you do to find out more?**

**How well do you understand the role of statutory officers and do you know which officers have been appointed to these roles in your council? What action can you take to begin to build relationships with them?**

**What interpersonal skills do you have which will help you to build effective relationships with officers? Are there any skills you would like to develop that will facilitate better relationships?**

**Do you trust officers professional advice and their ability to achieve the strategic goals of the council? What steps can you take to build trust and respect with officers?**

**Additional notes or questions you have**

If you have questions about what effective working relationships with officers should be, speak to your Monitoring Officer. Perhaps share with them your responses to the questions above and ask for their advice on anything you are unsure of.

You may also find it helpful to complete a [Relationship Map for Officers](#), which is a graphic representation of all the officers that you need to constructively work with to achieve the best outcomes for the people you serve. This will help you to identify which relationships you need to develop over the coming weeks and months.

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The logo for Improvement Service, featuring the letters 'is' in a large, bold, blue font. The 'i' has a red dot above it, and the 's' has a red dot at the bottom right. Below the 'is' is the word 'improvement' in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font, followed by the word 'service' in a bold, red, sans-serif font.  
improvement **service**