

Local Protocol – Group Assistants

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Group Assistants appointed and governed under section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and by the Regulations made under that Act and are subject to a number of restrictions. This Protocol is intended as a guide to the role and responsibilities of Group Assistants and the support and help they shall be given by other officers. It also sets out the limits of access that Group Assistants may have.
- 1.2 The three largest political groups (provided that they have more than ten per cent of the Council's elected membership) are entitled to appoint Group Assistants where the budget is allocated. It is recognised, however, that a qualifying group may not wish to take up an allocated post. This is a matter for each group to decide, but a decision by one group to decline to take up an allocated post does not prevent any other qualifying group from having a Group Assistant.

2. Group Assistants as Officers

- 2.1 Group Assistants are employees of the Council. Whilst, like all other Council employees, such assistants must be appointed on merit, regard may also be had to their political affiliations and political activities prior to their appointment.
- 2.2 Unlike other Council employees, Group Assistants:
 - **must not** have any powers of the Council (or Cabinet) delegated to them; and
 - **must not** manage any other Council employees (except secretarial and/or administrative support staff).
- 2.3 Like all other Council employees and members, Group Assistants may only use Council resources to undertake Council business.
- 2.4 Group Assistants are all **politically restricted posts**. In common with other Council employees in politically restricted posts, such assistants **must not**:
 - (i) stand as a candidate for election as a member of the House of Commons, Police and Crime Commissioner or a local authority;
 - (ii) act as an agent or sub-agent for a candidate who is standing in such an election;
 - (iii) canvas on behalf of any candidate standing in such an election;
 - (iv) canvas on behalf any political party; or
 - (v) act as an officer of a political party (or branch) if that would be likely to require:
 - (a) participation in the management of the party (or branch); or
 - (b) acting on behalf of the party (or branch) in dealings with non-party members.
- 2.5 Unlike other Council employees in politically restricted posts, Group Assistants **also must not**:
 - (i) speak to the public in a manner likely to create the impression that they are speaking as an authorised representative of a political party; or

- (ii) publish (or permit the publication of) any written or artistic work of which they are the author (or has acted in an editorial capacity) which is likely to create the impression that the publication is authorised by a political party.

3. The Role of Group Assistants

- 3.1 The role of Group Assistants is to support the group to which they are appointed and this includes the smooth running of group meetings and other group discussions. However, it does **not** include undertaking party political campaigning or party activity outside the Council's business.
- 3.2 Members and officers shall expect a Group Assistant to do some or all of the following, if asked to by the Group Leader of the relevant group:

Network to facilitate information gathering

- (a) Establish and maintain links with the relevant group's headquarters, parliamentary and research bodies, regional local government bodies, and other relevant external groups.
- (b) Develop a good knowledge of the functions and operations of the Council and its departments and establish effective working relationships with officers of the Council, including the Chief Executive and other senior officers.
- (c) Liaise with members of the public and community groups, to collect a wide range of information, including in relation to issues that may be sensitive.
- (d) Attend meetings of relevant local and national bodies, groups, agencies and associations.

Assist policy formulation and research for the Group

- (e) Undertake research and analysis, obtain information and investigate matters to assist policy formulation and other developments or queries.
- (f) Collate and analyse data for statistical purposes.
- (g) Monitor the local media, relevant legislative and political developments, key projects and other issues that may impact on the group or Council policies.
- (h) Gather information on and share good practice operated in other organisations.
- (i) Disseminate information to the group and advise on items of interest or concern.
- (j) Prepare reports and position and briefing papers, providing statistical information and recommendations on policy change and formulation, exercising judgement and decision making on likely repercussions on the local community and Council.

Providing administrative and organisational support to the Group Leader and group members as required

- (k) Carry out general administrative duties.
- (l) Draft speeches, motions, amendments and questions for the group.
- (m) Liaise with the local media in respect of press statements by and interviews with the Group and act as a point of contact on behalf of the Group for media enquiries (but **not** act as a spokesperson on behalf of the Group (or Council) or issue press statements in their own name (or on behalf of the Council)).

- (o) Pass on enquiries from members of the public, media, voluntary bodies and other local agencies/organisations on all aspects of Council policy and initiatives to the appropriate officer or group member.
- (p) Maintain manual and computerised information retrieval systems used by and for the Group Leader and group members.
- (q) Organise, prepare agendas for and minute group meetings, ensuring any follow-up action is carried out.
- (r) Liase with the Group Leader and Chair to oversee and facilitate the effective servicing of group meetings, sub-groups and any associated meetings.
- (s) Act as a point of contact for group members in order to aid group cohesion, co-ordination and efficient conduct of group business, ensuring the group is able to act swiftly and effectively, facilitating excellent group communication and reducing the likelihood of members sending out contradictory messages.
- (t) Identify, in conjunction with the group, individual members' training needs and liaise with the Head of Governance Support regarding the provision of such training.
- (u) Contribute to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery through maximisation of resources within the office and identifying and implementing initiatives for making improvements.

4. Management Arrangements

- 4.1 The appointment procedures to be followed in relation to the Group Assistants are set out in the Standing Orders in relation to Officer Employment.
- 4.2 Group Assistants will for most day-to-day purposes report to the Leader of the Group to which they have been appointed. The Group Leader will agree the work programme of the relevant assistant, set the priorities within that programme and undertake day to day supervision of the work.
- 4.3 The posts will be based in the Democratic Services Team and Group Assistants will be line managed by the Head of Governance Support (or such other officer to whom he/she may delegate responsibility) in relation to pay and conditions, equipment purchase and expenses claims, leave and sickness, team briefing, and learning and development. Leave arrangements will be subject to approval by relevant Group Leader, as appropriate.
- 4.4 'Group Assistants' annual appraisal will be undertaken either by the Head of Governance Support (after seeking structured feedback from the relevant Group Leader), or the Group Leader and the Head of Governance Support together.
- 4.5 If a Group Assistant feels they have been asked to undertake any role inappropriately, or that they have been denied access to people or information unfairly, then the assistant may raise that with the relevant Group Leader, as appropriate, or (if the assistant prefers) with the Head of Governance Support. In the event of a dispute between the Group Leader and the Head of Governance Support then the matter will be raised with the Chief Executive.
- 4.6 The Head of Governance Support (or such other officer as he/she may delegate responsibility to) shall be responsible for all disciplinary action (including dismissal) in relation to Group Assistants, but the Head of Governance Support shall consult with the relevant Group Leader in relation to any such disciplinary action.

5. Assistants' Rights to Information

- 5.1 Group Assistants have the same rights to information as elected members of the Council and fellow Council officers must be willing to provide the same information to such assistants as they would if a member of the Council sought the same help.
- 5.2 The rights of members to be given information are set out in detail in the Council's Constitution. Broadly, any member of the Council has a right to all Committee/Cabinet Reports and their background documents unless prohibited under the Constitution. In addition, members have a common law right to information on a "need to know" basis to enable them properly to undertake their duties as a councillor.
- 5.3 Most exempt reports and documents may also be available to members but there are a limited number of situations (such as matters of high sensitivity in relation to individual employees or legal cases) where documents will not be made available to all members or the Group Assistants. Such cases will need to be dealt with on their individual merits and in consultation with the Monitoring Officer.
- 5.4 Where Group Assistants have access to exempt or confidential documents they must not disclose their contents to anyone who is not equally entitled to the information, or to anyone outside the Council.
- 5.5 Group Assistants will direct all routine requests for information and advice to the relevant manager in the Business Unit concerned. Requests for information about more sensitive matters, or complaints about how a matter has been dealt with initially, shall be addressed to the relevant Director.

6. Obligations of Group Assistants

- 6.1 Applicants for a post of a Group Assistant will be asked to disclose any current or past political activities or affiliations.
- 6.2 Group Assistants will be expected to work mainly under their own discretion and initiative for the Group Leader. A day-to-day programme may be assigned by the relevant Group Leader.
- 6.3 Group Assistants will be expected to maintain the highest level of confidentiality and discretion at all times during the course of their work.
- 6.4 Group Assistants will be expected to maintain up-to-date knowledge of working practices, policy development, techniques and legislation and undertake professional development activities.
- 6.5 Group Assistants will be expected to adhere to the principles contained in the Council's Protocol in relation to Member and Officer Relations so far as that is not inconsistent with the specific obligations applicable to such assistants.

7. Groups without Group Assistants

- 7.1 It is possible that a Group that is entitled to a Group Assistant may choose not to take up the allocated post. A Group that has previously decided not to fill its allocated post may change its mind at any time by giving written notice to the Chief

Executive and the appointed post holder will then be entitled to the same rights as existing Group Assistants and subject to this Protocol.

- 7.2 There may be other groups in the Council (or individual members), who are not entitled to have a Group Assistant. Officers generally shall take care to ensure that if briefings are given to any one political group then the same level of information is given to groups (or individual members), who do not have a Group Assistant as to those that do. All groups are provided with opportunities to obtain information whether or not they have a Group Assistant.