

THH EFFECTIVE MEMBER AND OFFICER RELATIONS GUIDE

1. Introduction

This Guide has been produced to support staff working in Tower Hamlets Homes in understanding the member officer protocol adopted by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The Guide aims to

- Support understanding of the roles and responsibilities of councillors
- Provide brief information on how the council works
- Enable understanding of the principles behind effective member/officer relations and the importance of this for THH when dealing with members' enquiries.

The Guide should be read in conjunction with LBTH Constitution, specifically the sections relating to members' code of conduct, the protocol for member/officer relations and any related procedures. THH has adopted this Protocol. This Guide should not be viewed as a blue print as each individual must decide how best to work with councillors in carrying out the objectives of THH when dealing with members' enquiries. This will be influenced by

- THH procedures and systems which guide the relationship with councillors
- the nature and extent of the contacts you have with councillors
- the nature of the relationship between individual councillors and staff
- any specialist roles staff have and the governance arrangements at THH and the LBTH.

2. Summary

Together, councillors and officers lead and manage their councils to provide services that improve the lives of local people. Trust, confidence and good conduct between councillors, and between councillors and officers, are essential for building and maintaining good relationships, and supporting good leadership, management and performance.

Councillors provide a democratic mandate to the council, whereas officers contribute the professional expertise needed to deliver the policy framework agreed by members. This is extended to THH as agreed and delegated through formal agreements of delivering housing services.

Collaborative working between councillors and officers is normal, however, it is important to recognise and take account of the different roles. This is necessary for the day-to-day interaction between councillors and officers. It ensures transparency between the political role of members and the professional, impartial, role of officers.

3. How councils work

There are several types of local council in England, for example district, borough, county, metropolitan and unitary councils. Sometimes these are referred to as local authorities.

All councils have things in common in the way they work and make decisions on behalf of local communities. Most are run on a system similar to that of central government, with an elected executive (or cabinet) to decide on policy and make decisions which other councillors then 'scrutinise' or examine in detail. Some councils like LBTH are lead by an elected Mayor.

Local councils vary widely in terms of their style, political leadership and approach to delivering central government programmes.

Over recent years the role of councils has changed. They now have additional responsibilities such as improving the health and wellbeing of local people through joint working with health services. Another important responsibility is community safety and crime reduction, usually achieved through partnership working with the police and voluntary and community groups.

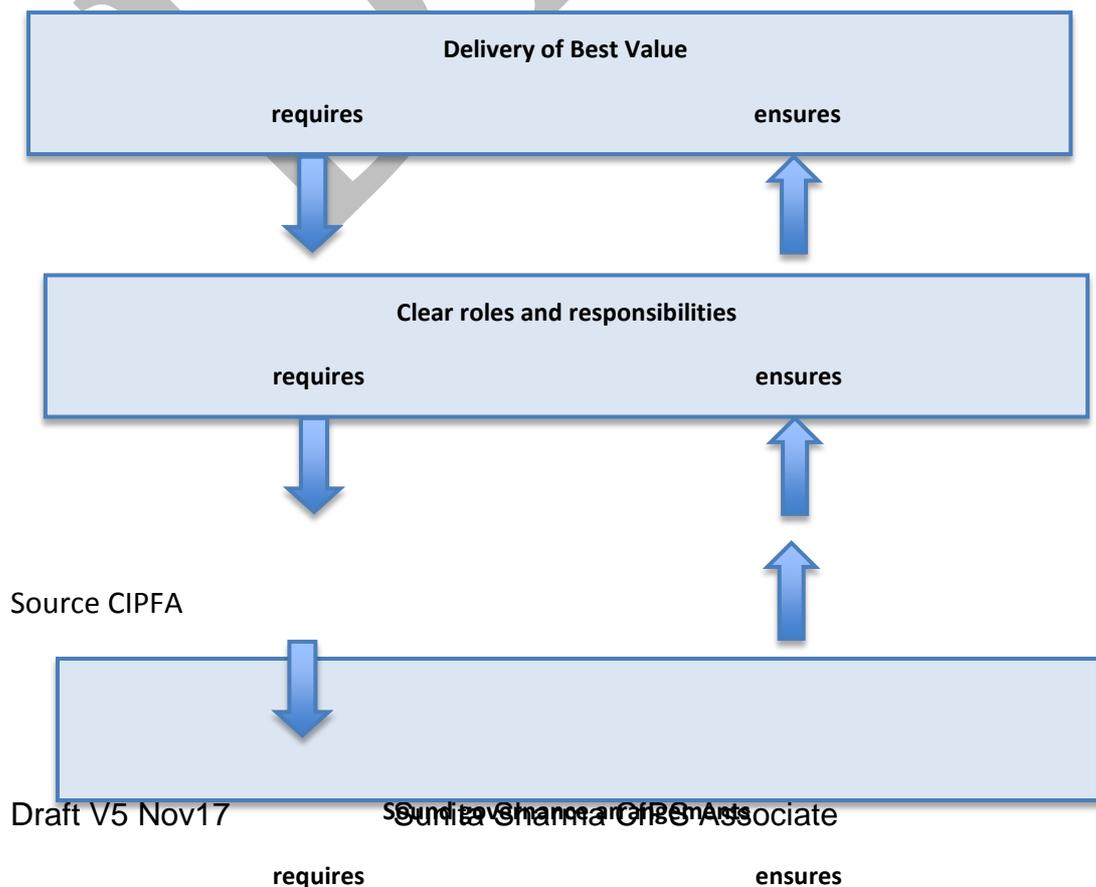
Councils now deliver much of what they do in partnership with other councils, services and agencies. They also delegate or commission services to be provided by others through formal agreements.

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4. Governance, working relationships and best value

Councils are required to ensure they deliver Best Value for residents. The following diagram shows the interrelationships between governance, clarity of roles and responsibilities, good working relationships and delivery of Best Value.



5. How is Tower Hamlets organised?

LBTH has an elected Mayor voted in to serve a term of four years. There are 45 councillors elected to serve residents in Tower Hamlets. These 45 councillors are divided between 21 wards and are members of the following political groups or are Independents, that is they have no political affiliation:

- Labour (23 councillors)
- Independent Group (10 councillors)
- Conservative (5 councillors)
- Peoples Alliance of Tower Hamlets (5 councillors)
- Independent (2 councillors)
- Liberal Democrat (1 councillor)
- Not specified (1, Speaker of the Council Cllr Sabina Akhtar)

The Council takes decisions every day about how to provide public services and spend money. Decision making is split between the Executive (Mayor and Cabinet) and the Council and its Committees.

Full Council

Full Council consists of the Mayor and all Councillors. It is chaired by the Speaker. It meets to make major decisions including setting Council policy, the budget and Council Tax. The Council appoints a number of Committees to carry out specific functions. These include: the regulatory committees (Planning and Licensing), the Pensions Committee and a Standards (Advisory) Committee.

Debates and public questioning also takes place at full Council..

The Mayor and Cabinet (Executive)

The Mayor appoints and is supported by a Cabinet. The Mayor and Cabinet are responsible for most regular decisions of the Council. This includes preparing the budget and plans for the Council to consider, implementing and monitoring them and other major decisions.

The Mayor and Cabinet have to take decisions in line with the Budget and Policy framework set by Full Council. Any proposals outside this must be referred to Full Council to decide.

The Mayor may also take decisions as Mayor's Executive Decision's and these can be found at www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/committee

The Forthcoming Decisions Plan (Forward Plan)

Any 'key decision' to be taken by the Mayor and Cabinet (i.e. that involves two or more wards or significant funding/savings) must be included in the Forthcoming Decisions Plan. The plan is published 28 days before the decision is planned to be taken.

Overview and Scrutiny

Most council decisions are taken by the council's Cabinet. This concentrates a lot of responsibility into the hands of a relatively small number of councillors.

Overview and Scrutiny acts as a check and balance to the Cabinet and seeks to involve the public to ensure that decisions are made in line with council policy and in the public interest. External bodies whose policies and decisions affect the Borough can also be scrutinised by local scrutiny committees.

Tower Hamlets council carries out its oversight and scrutiny work through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC). The OSC has 3 sub committees:

- Grants Scrutiny Sub Committee
- Health Scrutiny Sub Committee
- Housing Scrutiny Sub Committee

Further information can be found at www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/committee

6. The Councillor's Role

Councillors have the potential to make a real difference to people's lives. They are expected to balance the needs of their local area, their residents and voters, community groups, local businesses, their political party (if they belong to one) and the council. All make legitimate demands on their time. This is on top of their personal commitments to family, friends and workplace.

Local councillors are elected by the community to decide how the Council should carry out its various activities. They represent public interest as well as individuals living within the ward in which he or she has been elected to serve a term of office.

They have regular contact with the general public through council meetings, telephone calls or surgeries. Surgeries provide an opportunity for any ward resident to go and talk their councillor face to face and these take place on a regular basis.

Councillors are not paid a salary for their work, but they do receive allowances. By law, all members of the Council are required to complete a declaration of interest form, the details of which are published annually.

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In order to understand and represent local views and priorities, councillors need to build strong relationships and encourage local people to make their views known and engage with them and the council.

7. Code of conduct and standards

Councillors are required to adhere to their council's agreed code of conduct for elected members. Each council adopts its own code, but it must be based on the Committee on Standards in Public Life's seven principles of public life. These are often referred to as the Nolan principles.

The Seven Principles of Public Life:

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

These principles apply to anyone who works in public service. For example, local government, the police, courts and probation services, non-departmental public bodies, health, education and social care sectors. The principles also apply to those in other sectors who deliver public services, including ALMOs.

Officers have a duty to give unbiased professional advice – even if at times its is uncomfortable and not what members want to hear.

Officers cannot respond to personal criticism in the same way that politicians can. They must behave professionally at all times.

The expectations and standards of behaviour that apply to officers of the council, equally apply to staff at THH as they are delivering housing services on behalf of the council.

Mutual respect and good communication is the key to establishing effective relationships with councillors.

8. Roles, responsibilities and relationships

When improving awareness and understanding about roles and responsibilities councils must

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- ensure councillors and officers reflect on how well they understand the distinctions between their roles and responsibilities
- ensure all newly elected councillors are provided with training and support to help them understand their roles and responsibilities
- work with councillors to increase their awareness, understanding and use of governance procedures; and explain the purpose of key documents in supporting working practices.

Question: How do you ensure that there is clarity on the areas highlighted above? How are concerns and issues raised with individual councillors or managers and / or the council, if roles and responsibilities are blurred? Or perhaps not clearly understood?



While councillors and officers have their own specific roles and responsibilities, there are some areas in which both have a shared responsibility, e.g. agreeing workable policies and monitoring performance. Members and officers both face the same public service challenges, i.e. delivering quality services to local people in a climate of tough challenges and constraints (budgets and timescales). Effective team working is essential.

Question: Think about how this is achieved at THH? What can be done differently?

Why does it matter?

Task – Think about the nature of your working relationship with councillors.

What works well? What could be improved?

What is the risk if working relationships are not improved?

How can you work with others to tackle the improvements you have identified?

Member Officer Protocol - Clarifying the working relationship

Roles

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Members:	Officers:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accountable to the electorate• Community leader for a ward• Add a political dimension• Set high level policy/ strategy• Involved in senior appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accountable to the council/THH• Serve the whole council/THH• Political impartial• Ensure operational delivery• Day to day staff management

Setting the right tone for effective working relationships between councillors and officers is important. This requires a clear understanding of the following:

- The distinct contribution that councillors and THH staff make in addressing the problems and challenges faced by tenants and leaseholders and the boundaries between them, e.g. officers must act with political impartiality, serving all councillors rather than particular groups or councillors.
- The areas in which roles and responsibilities overlap and councillors and THH staff must act together.

Question: Can you think of some examples of where roles and responsibilities overlap? How did you act together?

The evolving nature of councillor and officer roles means that the distinction of roles has become blurred in some areas. Increasingly it is common for local politicians and officers (and other service providers) to come together to tackle the challenges presented by the communities they serve. This requires an understanding of the skills, knowledge and experience that all bring to the leadership role.

Clarity is provided through working protocols. Member officer roles are set out in the **LBTH Member Officer Protocol** (adopted by THH) which highlights:

- 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.

A number of practical implications are considered in the protocol. These include:

- Who does what?
- Political / managerial split?
- How to work together?

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- Different cultures, different career routes
- Developing leaders
- Strengthening skills, knowledge and experience of members and officers

The table below shows what needs to happen for councillors to deliver their roles.

Keeping up to date with a councillor's complex and evolving role	
<i>Councils must:</i>	<i>Councillors must:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide guidance, training and advice to councillors serving on external boards provide regular training and support to councillors to help them fulfil their roles • provide new councillors with a more detailed understanding of what their roles and responsibilities mean on a day-to-day basis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communicate with officers and explain their training and development needs; • provide feedback on training courses to help ensure these meet their needs • make better use of training and development opportunities to help them fulfil their role.

9. Statutory officers

When councillors make decisions, they must consider the advice given by key officers known as **statutory officers**. Namely, the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer. All have a duty to advise the council. The ability of these officers to carry out their duties depends on effective working relations with councillors and on the flow of information and access to the debating processes of politicians. The table below shows the key statutory officers and their titles at the LBTH.

LEGISLATION	DESIGNATION	POST at LBTH
Section 4, Local Government and Housing Act 1989	Head of Paid Service	Chief Executive
Section 5, Local Government and Housing Act 1989	Monitoring Officer	Corporate Director, Governance
Section 151 Local Government Act 1972 (and section 114 of the	Chief Finance Officer	Corporate Director, Resources

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Local Government Finance Act 1988)		
Section 6 Local Authority Social Services Act 1970	Director of Adult Social Services	Corporate Director, Health, Adults and Community
Section 18 Children Act 2004	Director of Children's Services	Corporate Director, Children's
Section 30 Health and Social Care Act 2012	Director of Public Health	Director, Public Health
Section 9FB Local Government Act 2000	Scrutiny Officer	Divisional Director Policy and Strategy

Task – the role of statutory officers

You are having problems with councillors or a councillor in particular. It is clear that all is not well. Some of the problems are 'low level' but recurrent.

Whose responsibility is it to take the issue up with statutory officers?

What responsibilities do you have? Have you addressed genuine service concerns?

Who or what can support you in taking your concerns forward about this behaviour?

10. Managing expectations

In building effective working relationships, councillors 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 Governance. Put simply this is about mutual trust and respect.

A guide to expectations



Task – ethical behaviour

In your experience of dealing with members enquiries and or councillors, have any of these experiences raised ethical concerns for you? What were they? How did you address them?

Using Your Interpersonal Skills

To be successful in building and sustaining effective working relationships with councillors will be your own interpersonal skills. Good communication skills will also 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. The 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.

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

- energy and enthusiasm
- a calmness, even tempered
- 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.

11. Interpersonal tactics for good member officer relations

Be yourself, without defensiveness or hidden agendas, and share your experiences and feelings (as appropriate and relevant) to establish empathy.

Describe what you see rather than being judgemental, e.g. “on the basis of what you’ve said, you don’t seem to be pleased with my suggested solution...”.

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

Maintain your assertiveness, but avoid displays of unnecessary emotion (weakness or aggression) and unhelpful behaviours, e.g. talking over or interrupting someone.

Keep people and problems separate, i.e. recognise that in many cases councillors 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, i.e. being open to the idea that a third position may exist and that you can get to this idea in collaboration with councillors.

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

Focus on getting the support of others, i.e. there will those, including other councillors, who are open to ideas or new ways of doing things to resolving issues. Their support can often be influential in ensuring satisfactory resolution / outcome.

The way that you approach councillors and the style you adopt in trying to support 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 councillor’s emotions or intellect to achieve your desired result. This is again about judgement on your part and the professional outcome you are seeking .

12. Final word

The working relationship between councillors and officers is integral to the successful operation of THH. Politicians and staff have vital roles to play in providing a form of joint leadership which is based on shared knowledge, skills and experience. At the heart of this relationship should be a common vision, shared values and mutual respect in order to deliver best value for tenants and leaseholders of THH and the LBTH.

Use the following checklist to support good working relationships with councillors.

<i>Understanding of roles and responsibilities</i>	<i>Behaviour and conduct</i>	<i>Guidance, information and support</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent are our relationships with councillors professional and constructive?• How well do we work with councillors to deliver the best outcomes for residents?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How effective are we in ensuring that governance documents:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– are up to date and easy to understand?– support understanding of respective roles?• Is there a climate of	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How well do we support councillors to understand:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– their role and responsibilities in relation to THH?– the role and limits of key THH services?• How well do we support

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent do we share information openly with councillors?• How well do we understand the importance of good working relationships?• How well do we understand our roles and responsibilities and those of councillors?	trust and respect?	councillors to fulfil their roles and responsibilities by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– enforcing the members enquiries process?– providing opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge of THH?
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Next Steps

Where do you go from here?

- (a) What key action points can you identify to improve the way you work with your councillors, what three 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, identify how any further training or development might help you, e.g. further reading/research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing.