ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION NOTEBOOK 5

Developing Your Working Relationships with Other Elected Members

Introduction

The first four national induction notebooks will have helped you to learn about your roles and responsibilities, as well as the importance of having effective working relationships with officers built on respect and understanding of your respective roles and responsibilities. You should have a greater awareness and understanding of the context you are now operating in as an elected member.

The final piece of the jigsaw, is an understanding of the importance of having effective working relationships with other elected members in the council. You will need to make choices about which members you which members you need to work most effectively with, the type of working relationships you have with other elected members and to what extent those relationships are collegiate or adversarial.

It should be acknowledged that regardless of how collegiate or adversarial relationships are, the Councillors' Code of Conduct makes it clear you should always treat other elected members with courtesy and respect. This applies to you when you are communicating in person, in writing, at meetings, online and using social media. The code also makes clear that conduct which could amount to bullying and harassment (including sexual harassment) is completely unacceptable. The Standards Commission have produced an Advice Note on Bullying and Harassment which you should familiarise yourself with.

You have a responsibility to comply with the code, and importantly, by doing so, you will be choosing to act in a way that meets the public's expectations for how elected members should conduct themselves while undertaking their duties.

It's also worth noting that the Accounts Commission have found 'professional and constructive relationships' between elected members to be a common feature in successful councils. In contrast, poor working relationships, heightened political tensions and a lack of trust and mutual respect among members, were contributing factors for councils struggling to achieve best value for the public pound (Accounts Commission, How council's work: Roles and working relationships: are you getting it right?, 2010).

The main factors that will influence working relationships between and amongst elected members are outlined in this notebook. This notebook will help you be more informed about the environment you are operating in and outline the considerations you should make about what kind of working relationships you need to have with other elected members in the council.

"There will be political difference between different people elected to a council. But don't let those get in the way of working with people and pointing things out to people that can help them come to the right decision, regardless of what political colour or none they stand for."
Elected Member

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The importance of developing working relationships with other elected members

As outlined in the *'What is a council and how does it work?'* section of the **Getting Started with your Roles and Responsibilities notebook**, legally and constitutionally, you and your fellow members are 'the Council' with all the powers and duties lying with you and your fellow elected members collectively.

The *'Limitations of your powers'* was also explored in the **Governing Effectively: Keeping your Eye on the Big Picture notebook**, in which it was highlighted that the power you have as an individual is limited and this limitation was necessary for the proper functioning of a large complex democratic organisation delivering hundreds of services. For example, not intruding into the operational management of the council, and not being allowed to instruct officers to take action which contravenes council policy, are two limitations which are necessary for the proper functioning of the council.

All of this means the extent to which you contribute and influence the work of the council, is heavily dependent upon the influence you have within the collective membership of the council. Being a 'lone wolf' will limit your potential to influence changes of policy, resource allocation and strategy, all of which require you to work with other elected members.

Also, as outlined in the *'Working with other elected members in your ward'* section of the **Being a Community Leader notebook**, there are advantages to working collaboratively with fellow members in a multi-member ward. These are important relationships, and where you can constructively work together, caseloads can be better managed, representation is more forceful and it's easier to understand what all the issues in the ward are and what can be done about it.

Your ability to build effective relationships with elected members will depend on your interpersonal skills, self-awareness about how your behaviour impacts on others, and developing an understanding of how to successfully navigate and collaborate with others across the political spectrum.

Factors that affect working relationships between members

This section will explore some factors that affect your choices on how you are going to work with other elected members, and what you can do to make informed choices that build effective relationships with other elected members. The phrase "political group" is used. Although this no longer has any statutory meaning it is the term used to describe party relationships in councils. A political group is likely to consist of members of one political party, however, a political group can also be made up of members from more than one party where there is some cooperation agreement, or a mix of party and Independent members.

Political composition of your council

The political composition of your council has been determined by the electorate and will play a big part in determining what roles and responsibilities are going to be more prominent for you, as well as influence the relationships you're likely to have with officers and other elected members. There is no legal requirement for membership of committees and other internal bodies or working groups to match or reflect the overall political composition of the council. Each council will determine its own structure and memberships and those will depend on the type of administration arrangement in your council.

This section outlines some of the key considerations you will need to make when deciding what kind of working relationships you want to cultivate with other members. These are not exhaustive and you should develop and use your own judgement to work out the dynamics within your council.

You can read the relevant parts of this section that apply to you, and of course return to read other sections should you find yourself in a different position in future.

"I sit in opposition but there's still things that I'll notice and maybe put in an amendment or I'll mention it in the corridors with those with do sit in Administration. There's been cases where by highlighting that, I've been able to get things changed. Sometimes quite big policy things, sometimes very small things."
Elected Member

Majority Administration

Following the 2017 Local Government elections, no council in Scotland had a political group that made up the majority of elected members in the council. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system makes this difficult to achieve.

However, if you have found yourself in a council where there is a political party with a majority, this section will help you consider what it could mean for the way you work with other elected members.

Political groups with a majority of members of the council, have control of the council and are in a position to implement as much of that group's manifesto and other policy choices as they wish.

This provides clarity on what the policy direction of the council will be, which also comes with a high degree of accountability for the majority group. This dynamic can encourage a traditional adversarial 'opposition' to form, which seeks to leverage influence by opposing, criticising and creating negative publicity to bring about changes in decisions and policy direction.

Majority administrations aren't required to build consensus with non-administration members to do the things they want to do, but may choose to act on well-formed arguments and recommendations arising from scrutiny functions controlled by non-administration members. Processes for cross-party working, such as short-life working groups, can also provide effective ways for administration and non-administration members to work together and facilitate the development of constructive relationships where administration members can come to respect the input of non-administration members in the development and implementation of policy.

Minority Administration

Minority administration were a common arrangement in Scottish Local Government from 2017-22 as a result of the STV electoral system. Typically these will be formed by one political party, but there were instances of minority coalitions/partnerships between two or more groups during the last Local Government term.

Minority administrations are not in a position to implement their manifesto and other policy choices as they wish. They have less power and need to work hard to build consensus or negotiate with elected members outwith the minority administration to ensure decisions are made or don't get overturned (for example through 'call-in' procedures).

Non-administration members will typically have greater leverage and more opportunities for influencing decisions.

If elected members can build effective working relationships and governance arrangements that facilitate consensus rather than traditional adversarial politics, then minority administration can function well.

If relationships are poor and the prevailing culture is one of adversarial politics in councils with minority administration, this can result in a strain on management capacity and negatively impact the work of the council.

Coalitions/Partnerships

Another common arrangement in Scottish Local Government between 2017-22 were coalitions or partnership agreements between two or more political groups, or also Independents. While these arrangements typically result in majority coalitions/partnerships, this is not always the case and so the section on *Minority Administrations* may be of interest if you find yourself part of a minority coalition/partnership. Arrangements can range from a full formal coalition agreement which is made public through to an informal and private agreement that agrees support in certain circumstances. One possibility is a "supply and confidence agreement" whereby one party or group will guarantee support for the budget and votes of no confidence, but no more.

Coalitions/partnerships that have a majority of elected members in the council, need to identify areas of alignment with policy views and priorities. In their report on Roles and Working Relationships in Councils (2016), the Accounts Commission reported:

> *"Some council administrations use coalition agreements to set out the joint expectations of the administration parties. These can be used to set out their shared vision and commitments, arrangements for budget setting, decision making and scrutiny, and arrangements for resolving any differences. Coalition agreements can also be a useful focus for officers to help clarify the goals they need to work to. If managed well coalition working can lead to better decisions through testing policy proposals more widely."*

Of course, coalitions/partnerships can fail to provide clarity and direction if members struggle to agree joint expectations, or stick to what has been agreed. The Accounts Commission (2016) stated they take "more effort" and require a "more sophisticated or nuanced approach to balance different interests across political groups."

Independent council with no Administration

Not every council in Scotland operates with an Administration. Councils that don't operate with an Administration in Scotland are most likely to be found in Island Councils without strong political party representation.

If you have been elected to a council that doesn't operate with an Administration, you will likely be working with mostly Independent elected members, and you will need to build relationships with these members and get to know their political views, values and get a sense of who they are as a person. This will help you understand their perspectives on council business and identify who could be an ally for policy proposals or changes you'd like to make to the way council conducts its business.

If there are party political members, you will also want to get to know them as individuals, but also what obligations they have to their political party and if applicable,

the political group they sit with on the council. Understanding the motivations and drivers that affect how they operate will be crucial should you want to building effective working relationships.

> " "I think people have to be willing to work with other people – this role is all about relationships. You can't be a councillor by yourself; I'm an independent member but I'm also working with 21 other people."
> **Elected Member**

Legacy relationships and views of political opponents

Legacy relationships, political and personal, from the previous council can also impact on the formation of new working relationships, and you may find yourself in a council where existing relationships are more or less adversarial than you had expected.

Working relationships between different groups of members don't always represent the relationships between individual members of those groups. Relationships between different political groups can be tense, while at the same time, members of those groups can form and maintain respectful working relationships, and sometimes personal friendships.

You have the chance to establish your own working relationships and you should seek out opportunities, such as short-life working groups and joint activities with fellow ward members, to facilitate this.

You may find opportunities such as coffee breaks or lunches to meet with elected members during or after meetings. You should use these opportunities, away from the limelight of public scrutiny, to get to know other elected members as people and not just politicians. The number of opportunities to meet with fellow elected members informally will depend on how your council is conducting its business and whether remote working practices are in place.

Remote working

Councils in Scotland had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, putting in place new remote ways of working that, included remote council meetings.

Councils in Scotland can choose to use technology to hold formal meetings remotely. Some have also provided an option for hybrid meetings, where some elected members and officers to be present physically while allowing others to join in remotely.

Your council will need to make choices about how to conduct its business. Research conducted by the Improvement Service into governance arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that remote meetings constrained the ability of members

to build coalitions, defuse conflict, broker decisions, or gather political intelligence, but had typically made it easier for members to attend meetings and generally improved behaviour at meetings where these were webcast to the public.

The use of technology has significantly impacted the routines and practices of political life, but there are examples where elected members have adapted and are using technology to mitigate having fewer opportunities to meet with fellow members informally. You will need to find ways to build and maintain relationships with other elected members and how your council conducts its business will have an impact on this.

Dialogue or debate

When looking to find common ground and work together with other elected members, how you communicate is vitally important. A political environment will naturally create situations for debate amongst elected members, and it is right and proper that there are spaces for debate to happen. However, debate alone is unlikely to be enough for elected members to find shared perspectives, new understandings and for building respect and working relationships.

For that, you should consider the use of dialogue, which is "a form of communication oriented towards building understanding and relationships." (Oliver Escobar, 2011). Dialogue requires meeting with other elected members in spaces that aren't solely for the purposes of public debate and decision-making. This gives members an opportunity to talk freely out of the eye of the public scrutiny and the pressures that brings to be seen to debate, win the argument and beat their opponent. They are not places where decisions can be taken that are binding on your council. There are also some limits to these types of discussions in relation to regulatory or quasi-judicial business (Part 7 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct)".

Table 1 outlines the differences between dialogue and having a debate. Take some time to read the statements and reflect on the type of communication you have had or want to have with fellow elected members when discussing council business. Do they typically take the form of 'debate' or 'dialogue'?

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Dialogue is collaborative: participants work together towards shared understanding of issues and perspectives	Debate is oppositional: various sides oppose each other and try to prove each other wrong
Participants speak to each other	Participants speak to their own constituencies and the undecided middle
The atmosphere is one of safety: ground rules may be agreed to enhance safe and respectful exchanges	The atmosphere is threatening: attacks and interruptions are expected and usually permitted
The goal is exploring common ground and differences	The goal is winning by beating down

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Participants listen to understand and gain insight into the beliefs and concerns of the others. They try to find strengths, rather than only weaknesses	Participants listen in order to refute, to find flaws, and to counter arguments
Questions are asked from a position of genuine curiosity that serves the purpose of shared inquiry	Questions are asked from a position of certainty. They are often rhetorical challenges or disguised statements
Participants reveal and investigate their own and others' underlying assumptions	Participants defend their own assumptions as truth
Participants aim to learn through inquiry and disclosure	Participants aim to convince through advocacy and persuasion
Dialogue fosters an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change	Debate fosters a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right
Participants express uncertainties, as well as deeply held beliefs	Participants express unwavering commitment to a point of view, approach, or idea
Differences amongst participants on the same 'side' are revealed, as individual and personal beliefs and values are explored	Differences within 'sides' are denied or minimised
Participants share their ideas knowing that other people's reflections will improve them rather than destroy them	Participants share their ideas and defend them against challenges in order to show that they are right
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to avoid alienating or offending	Debate ignores feelings or relationships, and often allows belittling or deprecating
Participants are encouraged to question the dominant public discourse, to express needs that may not often be reflected in that discourse, and to explore various options for problem definition and resolution. Participants may discover inadequacies in the usual language and concepts used in public debate	Debates operate within the constraints of the dominant public resolution. That debate defines the problem and the options for resolution. It assumes that fundamental needs and values are already clearly understood

DIALOGUE	DEBATE
Participants strive to overcome ritualised exchanges, allowing new information to surface	Participants statements are predictable and offer little new information
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view	Debate entrenches a participant's own point of view
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can make them into a workable solution	Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it
Success requires exploration of the complexities of the issue	Success requires simple impassioned statements
Dialogue remains open-ended	Debate seeks a conclusion

Adapted from [Oliver Escobar, 2011](#)

Remember, there should be space for both in an effective council. If you want to build effective working relationships with other elected members, make sure you find space for dialogue.

Summary

Now you have read through all five national induction notebooks, you should be better prepared to undertake your roles and responsibilities as elected members. You should be well aware of the importance of building effective working relationships with officers and other elected members, and how this is crucial to being able to make a positive difference as an elected member in your communities.

These induction notebooks will only serve as an aid to you as your learn how to operate as an elected member. As you become more experienced or changes happen in the council, you'll need to reflect on how you carry out your roles and responsibilities and how you need to adapt to the new political environment. You may wish to revisit these notebooks and reflect on your notes from time to time.

Questions and notes

What are your working relationships like with other elected members? What do you hope they would be?

How does the political composition and legacy relationships effect your working relationships with other elected members? What other factors are at play?

What is your approach to communicating with other elected members? Are there spaces for both dialogue and debate with other elected members on council business?

What actions could you take to build more effective working relationships with other elected members in your council?

How will your working relationships with other elected members impact on how you carry out your roles and responsibilities? (refer back to notebook 1 if helpful)

How might your working relationships with other elected members impact on your working relationships with officers? (refer back to notebook 4 if helpful)

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Additional notes or questions you have

You may also find it helpful to complete a Relationship Map for Members, which is a graphic representation of all elected members 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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