



## NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

### PROTOCOL FOR MEMBER AND OFFICER RELATIONS

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## **PROTOCOL FOR MEMBER AND OFFICER RELATIONS**

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## **PROTOCOL FOR MEMBER AND OFFICER RELATIONS**

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Localism Act 2011 introduced a new ethical framework for local government, pursuant to which the Authority has adopted a Members' Code of Conduct and appointed a Standards Committee.
- 1.2 The Members' Code of Conduct addresses in general terms the aspects of a Member's conduct in carrying out the whole range of official duties and has direct relevance to the relations between Members and officers.
- 1.3 The Authority seeks an excellent working relationship between Members and officers as the best means of ensuring clear and consistent strategy and proper representation by outside interests in the work of the Authority. Such good working relationships require this protocol as a framework.
- 1.4 This protocol guides Members and officers of the Authority in their relations with one another. To a large extent it is no more than a statement of current practice and convention. It is neither prescriptive nor comprehensive but aims to promote clarity and certainty. Accordingly it will be kept under review and amended as necessary. It addresses the issues which most commonly arise, and may also serve to provide guidance on dealing with other issues.
- 1.5 The protocol also seeks to reflect the principles underlying the respective Codes of Conduct which apply to Members and officers. The shared objective of these Codes is to enhance and maintain the integrity of the Authority in the eyes of the people it serves.

### **2 Member/Officer relations**

- 2.1 Both Members and officers are servants of the public and they are indispensable to one another but their responsibilities are distinct. Members represent the wider public. Officers are responsible to the National Park Authority. Their job is to give advice to Members and the Authority and to carry out the Authority's work under the direction and control of the Authority, its Committees and Sub-Committees.
- 2.2 Members should respect the role of the Authority's officers and treat them in a way that engenders mutual respect at all times which is essential to good local government.
- 2.3 Officers should respect the role of the Authority's Members and treat them in a way that engenders mutual respect at all times which is essential to good local government.

#### *Expectations*

- 2.4 Members can expect from officers:

- a commitment to the Authority as a whole and not only to any part of it
- respect and courtesy
- the highest standards of integrity
- a working partnership
- an understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads and pressures
- timely responses to enquiries and complaints
- professional advice, not influenced by political views or preference, which does not compromise the political neutrality of officers
- regular up to date information that can be considered appropriate and relevant to their needs, having regard to any individual responsibilities that they have and positions they hold
- awareness of and sensitivity to the political environment
- training and development in order to carry out their role effectively
- appropriate confidentiality
- that they will not use their relationship with Members to seek to advance their personal interests or to influence decisions improperly
- support for the role of Members within the arrangements made by Authority compliance with the protocols at all times.

## 2.5 Officers can expect from Members:

- respect and courtesy
- the highest standards of integrity
- a working partnership
- an understanding of and support for respective roles, workloads and pressures
- leadership
- not to be subject to bullying, or discrimination or to be put under undue pressure

- that Members will not use their position or relationship with officers to seek to advance their personal interests or those of others or to influence decisions improperly
- compliance with the Members' Code of Conduct and protocols at all times.

### *Working relationships*

- 2.6 Both Members and officers should take care not to give the impression that their distinct roles have become blurred in some way. Maintaining confidence in the separation of these roles necessarily imposes limitations on behaviour. Members and officers should exercise caution in forming close personal friendships between each other. This can confuse their separate roles and affect the proper discharge of the Authority's functions. The perception could be in others that a particular Member or officer may be able to secure advantageous treatment as a result of such a friendship. Where a relative of, or person with a close association with, an employee becomes a Member of the Authority the employee should make the circumstances known to the Chief Executive (National Park Officer).
- 2.7 Any act against an individual officer may be regarded as a form of bullying, intimidation or harassment if it is intended to influence unfairly that person's actions, thoughts or deeds. Whilst no policy statement can give guidance on every instance where such behaviour may occur the Authority is committed to promoting standards of behaviour which reflect the proper, professional, working relationship which should exist between Members and officers at all times and to ensure normal standards of courtesy and behaviour between individuals.
- 2.8 All dealings between Members and officers should, therefore, observe reasonable standards of courtesy and neither party should seek to take advantage of their position. On occasions, Members may have reason to complain about the conduct or performance of an officer. All such complaints should be made personally to the Chief Executive, the Executive Director or the Monitoring Officer. It is particularly important that such complaints are made in this way and are not aired in public such as at a meeting of the Authority, its Committees or Sub-Committees or other external bodies, or in the press.
- 2.9 The corollary to the Member's concern about an officer's performance is a concern by an officer in relation to a Member's conduct. All such concerns should be brought personally to the attention of the Chief Executive or in her absence the Executive Director and the Monitoring Officer. They will if necessary discuss the matter with the Chairman of the Authority and, where appropriate, with the Chairman of the Committee or Sub-Committee affected. In the absence of the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman should be approached. Officers should also have regard to the Authority's whistle blowing policy, which provides further options for raising certain serious concerns about conduct.

### **3 Roles of Members**

3.1 The role of the Member is to foster and promote the core purposes of the National Park (as set out in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 as amended) and, in so doing:

- to provide strategic leadership and direction in partnership with the Executive
- to have regard to and contribute to the development of national and regional policies
- to monitor, review scrutinise and debate strategies, policies plans and performance
- to participate in community engagement with all stakeholders
- to represent the Authority to the public and stakeholders at all levels
- to represent national and local interests on the Authority.

3.2 The role of a Committee Chairman is legally recognised for procedural purposes such as chairing meetings and exercising a casting vote. In practice, Chairs are recognised as the 'lead members' on the areas and issues within the terms of reference of the Committee concerned. This involves working closely with officers and acting as the Authority's external 'spokesperson' on those issues.

3.3 Lead Members (or 'Member Champions') may be appointed with the role of working with the officers in driving forward new areas of work or where a transformation or stepped change is required in strategies or services. The themes for the Lead Members are linked to the Authority's priorities. Lead Members need to ensure that in exercising their role that this does not conflict or become confused with the role of the relevant Committee Chairman.

### **4 Responsibilities and rights of Members**

4.1 All Members appointed to the Authority have equal status, equal opportunity to hold office and are equally responsible. Members are expected to be equally committed to fulfilling the purposes for which National Parks exist and accept their appointment to the Authority with that commitment in mind.

4.2 Members of a National Park Authority, in their individual capacity, have no executive powers and can exercise no lawful authority to make decisions.

4.3 Members should be able to leave the day-to-day implementation of policies, including management to officers. Members have a right to

ensure that the decisions for which they are statutorily responsible and accountable are implemented by officers. Officers should demonstrate that they are sensitive to Members' aspirations underlying those policies.

## **5 Rights and duties of individual Members**

5.1 There are other clear rights for individual Members, principally:

- rights of access to Committee papers
- rights to attend meetings
- rights to see the accounts and make copies, and before the annual audit to inspect specific books, contracts, bills etc
- rights to receive approved allowances.

5.2 There are also duties on individual Members, principally:

- to abide by the Authority's Members' Code of Conduct and protocols
- to disclose pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in accordance with the Code of Conduct and the Localism Act 2011 as appropriate
- to attend meetings of the Authority, its Committees, Sub-Committees, other events and any outside bodies that they have been appointed to
- to attend and participate in opportunities for training and development
- to take into account advice provided by the Chief Executive or officers of the Authority.

## **6 Inspection of documents**

6.1 The Authority wishes to conduct its affairs in an open and transparent way and to give Members maximum access to information and documents to enable them to discharge their role as Members of the Authority. Requests for information can range from general information about some aspect of the Authority's work to specific requests for information on behalf of a member of the public. Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, both members of the public and Members of the Authority have the same rights of access to information. However, some types of information, such as information that would infringe someone's data protection rights or breach confidentiality, or where release of the information would prejudice an investigation, are exempt from the access to information provisions. Where requests for information are made by a Member on behalf of a member of the public, the Authority member should make this clear at the time of making the request. Such requests should be made to senior officers to avoid putting junior staff in a difficult

position. This type of request will be treated in the same way under the Freedom of Information Act or Environmental Information Regulations 2004, as appropriate, as if the member of the public has asked for the information directly.

- 6.2 The legal rights of Members to inspect Authority documents are covered partly by statute (the Local Government Acts) and partly by the common law. A Member will be permitted access to private Authority documents if he or she can demonstrate that access to the documents is reasonably necessary to enable him or her properly to perform his or her duties as a Member (the “need to know” principle) and there is no overriding reason (such as the protection of personal data) why that information should not be disclosed to him/her.
- 6.3 Members wishing to inspect or obtain a copy of information which is in the public domain should approach the relevant officer in writing or by e-mail.
- 6.4 Where information is not in the public domain, or there is doubt about this, an approach should be made to the Chief Executive, the Executive Director or the Monitoring Officer. The Chief Executive or his or her nominee (with advice, where necessary, from the Monitoring Officer) will decide whether the information can be released. The Member will be expected to justify the request in specific terms. In the event of a dispute, the Standards Committee will be asked to decide.

## **7 Confidentiality of Committee Reports**

- 7.1 All Officers have a duty to satisfy themselves that Committee reports to which they are signatories are only classified as ‘exempt information’ or ‘confidential information’ when the statutory criteria for confidentiality are met as set out in the Local Government Act 1972. The Monitoring Officer has an overriding responsibility to determine this compliance.
- 7.2 Once a report has been issued with Part II of the agenda for a meeting a Member must respect the confidentiality of the report and (subject to Paragraph 7.4 below) not disclose its contents to a third party. However this restriction does not apply if the Committee decides at the meeting that the report should be discussed in the presence of the press and public.
- 7.3 It does not however follow that all the contents of the report must be regarded as confidential. It may only be certain items of information or terms of negotiations that justify the inclusion of that report in Part II. Other aspects may be within the public domain or otherwise outside the definition of ‘exempt’. A Member may accordingly refer to these aspects in discussions with third parties but must exercise proper care and judgement not to reveal those elements of the paper which are protected but it will also be prudent for that Member to consult with the Chief Executive and the Monitoring Officer (or Deputy Monitoring Officer if the Monitoring Officer is not available) before doing so. Particular caution



should be exercised where a report contains the personal data of individuals and in these circumstances it will be necessary to consult the Authority's Information & Data Protection Officer in addition to the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer (or Deputy Monitoring Officer if the Monitoring Officer is not available).

- 7.4 While, in general, Members must not disclose confidential information, this may be permissible where the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, and is made in good faith and in compliance with any reasonable requirements of the Authority. It should be appreciated that it is only in quite exceptional circumstances that the conditions justifying disclosure in the public interest will be met and that, if the necessary conditions are not met, Members are at risk of breaching the Code of Conduct and of compromising the position of the Authority. The guiding principle remains, therefore, that information which is received as confidential should, in general, remain confidential. Any Member who is of the view that disclosure may be justified in the public interest is required to take advice on the matter from the Monitoring Officer, before any disclosure is made.

## **8 Roles and responsibilities of officers**

- 8.1 A mutual and working understanding of the roles and responsibilities of officers is essential to the Authority developing and applying a clear and consistent approach to the role and responsibilities of its Members.
- 8.2 Officers, through reports, formal and informal advice, play an essential role in the formation and carrying out of the Authority's decisions and policies. If officers, in their professional judgement, consider a proposed course of action is imprudent or unlawful they will advise Members accordingly. The prime responsibility of officers in the matter of all challengeable decisions is in advising Members before such decisions are reached, although officers can only be expected to do so where they have been made aware of all relevant circumstances. In such cases, the advice should include clear legal and financial advice, on relevant and irrelevant factors and on how to approach decision-making. The fact that such advice has been given and considered will be material in any court proceedings that will be concerned to see that the Authority has properly applied its mind to the relevant issues.
- 8.3 If despite officers' advice the Authority decides to proceed with its course of action, officers will implement the decision unless it contravenes their professional statutory codes of practice or ethics to such an extent as to place their continued professional practice at risk. In these circumstances an officer must take advice from the Monitoring Officer.
- 8.4 An officer is under a duty not to implement a decision or take any action that is contrary to statute law or is unlawful. An officer will also not implement a decision where the Monitoring Officer or Chief Finance Officer has issued a statutory report that has not yet been considered by the Authority or has not yet been complied with.

## **9 Roles of specific officers**

9.1 There are three officers that have specific roles defined by statute:

- i) Head of Paid Service: is under a duty, 'where he or she considers it appropriate' to report to the Authority and Members on:
  - the manner in which the discharge by the Authority of its different functions is co-ordinated;
  - the number and grades of staff required by the Authority for the discharge of its functions;
  - the organisation of the Authority's staff; and
  - the appointment and proper management of the Authority's staff.
- ii) Section 151 Chief Finance Officer: (designated under s.151 of the Local Government Act 1972) is responsible for the proper administration of the Authority's financial affairs. He or she is under a duty to report, to both Members of the Authority and to the District Auditor, any decision involving unlawful, (or potentially unlawful), expenditure by the Authority; any unlawful course of action likely to cause a loss or deficiency on the part of the Authority; or an unlawful entry of an item of account.
- iii) Monitoring Officer: (designated under s.5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989) has a duty to put a formal report to the Authority where it appears that the Authority, its Committees or officers are involved in any proposal, decision or omission which is likely to be illegal or give rise to maladministration or injustice. It is also implicit in legislation, and indicated elsewhere in guidance, that the Monitoring Officer may give informal advice, including to individual Members, and that they may also seek guidance on legal or propriety matters. The Monitoring Officer also has specific duties and powers in respect of the Members' Code of Conduct and the Standards Committee. The Monitoring Officer's duties may be performed by a nominated Deputy.

## **10 Delegation of functions to the Chief Executive and other officers**

10.1 The Authority's Standing Orders set out the various powers delegated to the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) and other officers. In exercising delegated functions, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) is obliged to act in accordance with:

- i) the overall policies approved by the Authority or any of its Committees or Sub-Committees;
- ii) the Authority's Standing Orders including those relating to contracts; and

iii) the Financial Regulations.

10.2 Additionally, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) is expected in appropriate cases to consult Members as follows:

- i) to maintain a close liaison with the Authority's Chairman and/or the appropriate Committee Chairman or Sub-Committee Chairman (or in his or her absence the Deputy Chairman or appropriate Vice-Chairman); and/or
- ii) to consult as necessary with any other Member who has specific local or specialist interest in the matter.

10.3 In all cases it is open to the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to refer a matter to the Authority, Committee or Sub-Committee for decision if in his or her opinion the matter is of such a nature that it should more properly be referred to Members. Such referrals will include items of controversy or where a Member of the Authority has specifically asked for the matter to be referred to a Committee. The scheme of delegation specifically enables Members to ask for a planning application to be so referred. Such a request must be made within 21 days of the receipt of the Schedule of Planning Applications (the Weekly List).

10.4 The Chief Executive will not act under delegated powers where any planning application involves a Member or officer of the Authority. All such matters shall be referred to the Authority or one of its Committees for a decision.

10.5 Officers are responsible to their appropriate line manager and whilst officers should always seek to assist Members, they must not, in doing so, go beyond the bounds of whatever authority has been delegated to them by the Chief Executive.

## **11 Relationships with the Authority Chairman, Deputy Chairman and Committee Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen**

11.1 The Chief Executive, Executive Director, and other senior staff should foster close working relationships with the appropriate Authority Chairman, Deputy Chairman and Committee Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen. However, these relationships should never be allowed to become so close, or appear to be so close, as to bring into question the Chief Executive's (or other Officer's) ability to deal properly with other Members and to discharge his or her duty to serve the Authority as a whole. In some circumstances it may be necessary for the Chief Executive or other officer to bring forward reports on a particular matter in furtherance of this general duty.

11.2 The law only allows for decisions relating to the discharge of any of the Authority's functions to be taken under delegated authority by a Committee, Sub-Committee or an officer. Individual Members including Chairmen are not allowed to act (save in the case of a Chairman who

under local government law may decide that an item of business is 'urgent').

- 11.3 Where action is likely to be required between meetings the usual method of authorising it is to delegate action to the Chief Executive or other officer in consultation with the Chairman or a group of named Members. The officer must nevertheless reach a decision to act on a delegated matter independently.

## **12 Urgent business**

- 12.1 Members or officers wishing to raise an item of urgent business should contact the Chief Executive or the relevant officer before the meeting who will then discuss the request with the relevant Chairman. The decision as to whether an item of business is urgent is one for the Chairman of the meeting to take under powers granted by the Local Government Act 1972. The Chairman's decision on whether an item is urgent is final and is not open to discussion or debate.

## **13 Relations with the press and media**

- 13.1 Relations with the press and media need to be handled with care to ensure the Authority's position on any issue is represented properly. Day to day contact with the press and media will normally be handled by the Chief Executive. Where necessary he or she will consult with the Authority Chairman and/or other Members. Where a media interview is needed on major, or Member, issues, the Chief Executive and the Chairman will discuss who is to be the appropriate spokesperson. On occasions other Members may assume this role and similarly the Chief Executive may nominate one of his or her staff to speak on his or her behalf.
- 13.2 On occasions other Members may be approached directly by the press and media and asked to make a comment or to appear for interview. In these circumstances Members are asked, where practicable, to discuss this first with the Chief Executive and/or Chairman.
- 13.3 When Members have been authorised to speak on behalf of the Authority any contacts should be notified to the Chief Executive as soon as possible. They should make it clear that any 'personal' views they express are not necessarily those of the Authority. In all cases Members are asked to uphold the good name and integrity of the Authority.

## **14 Support Services to Members**

- 14.1 The only basis on which the Authority can lawfully provide support services (e.g. stationery, typing, printing, photocopying, transport etc) to Members is to assist them in discharging their role as members of the Authority. Such support services must therefore only be used for Authority business and never in connection with party political or campaigning activity or for private purposes.

## **15 Attendance by Members at meetings arranged by officers**

- 15.1 Within the Authority, Members are free at any time to meet officers to discuss aspects of the Authority's business.
- 15.2 Officers will arrange many meetings with colleagues or third parties to discharge the routine business of the Authority or to action its decisions. The convention is that Members will not be present at these meetings but will be advised either informally or through reports to Committees, of any relevant discussions and/or outcomes. There may be occasions where a Member may be invited to attend a meeting by the appropriate officer or by a resolution of a Committee.

## **16 Breaches of the Protocol**

- 16.1 Allegations of specific breaches of this protocol by a Member will be dealt with under the National Park Authority's arrangements for dealing with allegations; allegations of specific breaches by officers will be dealt with under the Authority's complaints procedure. Potential problems may be resolved by early discussion between a Member and the Chief Executive or, if necessary, between the Chairman of the Authority and the Chief Executive. More general concerns about relationships between Members and officers or perceived breaches of the principles embodied in this Protocol can be discussed with the Authority's Monitoring Officer.

## **17 Training and briefing**

- 17.1 Training and briefings on the operation of the Protocol for Members and Officers will be arranged as required.

## **18 Advice**

- 18.1 The Authority's Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer will give advice on the interpretation and operation of this Protocol where requested to do so.

## **19 Review**

- 19.1 The operation of the Protocol shall be regularly monitored and reviewed annually and any appropriate amendments made when necessary.