

## 6. Officers and party political groups

6.1 It must be recognised by all Officers and Members that in discharging their duties and responsibilities Officers serve the Council as a whole and not exclusively any political group, combination of groups or any individual Member. However it should be noted that:-

6.1.1 Officers serving the Council as a whole may attend meetings at the request of individual Members without the respective Cabinet Member or other representative of the administration being present. Any advice or assistance given at those meetings should be considered to be confidential unless the Member agrees to it being shared.

6.1.2 In providing such advice or assistance to the Member the Officer will also respect the need to keep confidential any information which may relate to advice given to the administration which is not yet in the public domain.

6.2 There is statutory recognition for party political groups and it is common practice for such groups to give preliminary consideration to matters of Council business in advance of such matters being considered by the relevant Council decision making body. Senior Officers may properly be called upon to support and contribute to such deliberations by political groups but must at all times maintain political neutrality. All Officers must, in their dealings with political groups and individual Members, treat them in a fair and even-handed manner.

6.3 The support provided by Officers can take many forms, ranging from a briefing meeting with the Leader of the Council, a lead member/chair/spokesperson prior to a Council, Cabinet, committee or sub-committee meeting to a presentation to a political group meeting. Whilst in practice such Officer support is likely to be in most demand from whichever political group is in control of the Council at the time, assistance is available to all party groups.

6.4 In recognition of the important role provided by Portsmouth's Members of Parliament to the life of the city, Officers should also provide advice and assistance to them in a similar manner to that provided to Members namely in relation to the business of the Council

6.5 Directors are responsible for deciding, who, apart from themselves, in their services (and in what circumstances) is responsible for giving policy advice to Members or dealing with Members' non-routine questions.

6.6 Certain points, however, must be clearly understood by all those participating in this process, Member and Officer alike. In particular:

6.6.1 Requests for Officers to attend any political group meeting must be made only to the appropriate Director. Normally only that person will attend the meeting, although in exceptional circumstances the Officer may be accompanied by one or more senior Officers.

6.6.2 The Chief Executive reserves the right to preclude officers from attending political group meetings that include persons who are not Members. However where the Chief Executive has not precluded such

attendance, special care needs to be exercised by Officers involved in providing information and advice to such political group meetings. Persons who are not elected Members will not be bound by the Code of Conduct for Members (in particular, the provisions concerning the declaration of interests and confidentiality) and for this and other reasons Officers may not be able to provide the same level of information and advice as they would to a Members only meeting.

**6.6.3** Officer support (whether in the form of a written report or otherwise) must not extend beyond providing information and advice in relation to matters of Council business. Officer support will be limited to a statement of material facts and identification of options and the merits and demerits of such options for the authority. Reports or other support will not deal with any political implications of the matter or any option, and Officers are not expected to be present at meetings or part of meetings when matters of party business are to be discussed.

**6.6.4** Political group meetings, whilst they form part of the preliminaries to Council decision making are not empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Council. Conclusions reached at such meetings do not therefore rank as Council decisions and it is essential that they are not interpreted or acted upon as such.

**6.6.5** It must not be assumed by any political group or Member that any Officer is supportive of any policy or strategy developed because of that Officer's assistance in the formulation of that policy or strategy.

**6.6.6** Officers must respect the confidentiality of any political group discussions at which they are present in the sense that they should not relay the content of any such discussion to another political group or Member thereof without the express consent of those political group members who confided in the Officer during their discussions. However, Members should be aware that this would not prevent Officers from disclosing such information to other Officers of the Council so far as is necessary to perform their duties.

**6.6.7** Where Officers provide information and advice to a political group meeting in relation to a matter of Council business, it should be understood that the Officers have a statutory duty to provide all necessary information and advice to the Cabinet or relevant committee/sub-committee when the matter in question is considered.

**6.7** Members should not ask staff to assist with any personal, business or party political matters, attend surgeries or decide how case work will be dealt with. Although Section 9 of the Local Government and Housing Act, 1989 allows the political affiliation of an individual to be taken into account in the appointment of any political adviser/assistant, they remain Officers of the Council and must therefore not undertake any activity, which may be deemed unlawful. In this context, it should be realised that Officer support to the political groups is in the context of their role in the discharge of Council business and although it may require liaison with political parties, at both local and national level, should not be used in promoting the views of an individual political party or undertaking campaigning or other party political business.

6.8 Any particular cases of difficulty or uncertainty in this area of Officer advice to political groups must be raised with the Chief Executive who will discuss them with the relevant group leader(s).