

Part 5.6 - PROTOCOL FOR COMMUNICATIONS WITH ELECTED MEMBERS

INTRODUCTION

This Protocol explains how communication will take place with Members of the Council. It encompasses communication between Members themselves and between Members and officers of the Council.

It is intended to state clearly, to Members and officers:

- What information will be provided?
- What support will be provided?
- How it will be provided?
- Who is responsible for providing information and support?

The Protocol identifies three key areas:

- **Information provision**
- **Consultation**
- **Support Services**

All Members also have access to information through their respective Group Meetings, the monthly Shadow Cabinet Meeting and by contacting Cabinet Members direct.

Staff and members are provided with Authority e-mail addresses for conducting Council business and personal addresses should not be used. Based on this, electronic communication to elected members will be via @carmarthenshire / @sirgar addresses and not personal e-mail, in accordance with the Authority's E-mail Usage Policy.

1.INFORMATION PROVISION

Members are looking for information within the following broad categories:

- **Council, Executive and Committee Decisions**
- **Ward Information**
- **Contact Information**
- **Access to Information (private & confidential)**

1.1 Council, Cabinet and Committee Decisions

Members want access to information about the decisions being made by the Council, Committees, Cabinet and Cabinet Members.

Under political arrangements Cabinet Members make decisions in two forums:

- 1) Cabinet Meetings, and
- 2) Cabinet Member Decision-Making Meetings.

1.1.1 Agenda and Reports

The Council will:

- Publish agendas at least three working days in advance of meetings
- Publish copies of all agenda and reports on the Council Intranet and Internet
- Send e-mails to all Members, informing them that the agendas are available to view on the Intranet (an electronic link to the agenda will also be included in the message)
- Provide a hard copy of agenda and reports to view and inspect in the Members' Lounge at County Hall.

Council, Cabinet and Committee Meetings are held in public and members can attend as observers.

Members are entitled to have access to public committee papers and background information identified in a public report to Council, Cabinet or any committee. Exempt reports are only made available to the Members of the Committee considering that report. (See also Appendix 1 of this protocol regarding access to exempt /confidential information).

The Chair of Council, Leader and Deputy Leader of the Opposition Group and the Chairs of Scrutiny Committees will be allowed to remain at Cabinet meetings when exempt reports are considered and will be given a copy of the exempt report at the meeting.

A protocol for non-executive members' attendance at formal Cabinet meetings is available to view via the Democracy tab on the internet.

Cabinet Member Decision Meetings are not open to the public and press to attend but non-executive members can attend as observers.

The Democratic Services Unit is responsible for the publication of all Agendae and accompanying reports. Contact: Democratic Services 01267 224028 Int. Ext No. 4028

1.1.2 Minutes and Decision Notices

The Democratic Services Unit also produce and publish all Council and Committee Meeting Minutes and Cabinet and Cabinet Member Decision Notices.

The Council will:

- Send copies of the Decision Notices of Cabinet Meetings to all Members by email, within three working days of the meeting and publish them on the Council's intranet and website.
- Members of the relevant Scrutiny Committee then have an opportunity to "Call in" any decision within a further 5 working days where there are genuine and serious grounds for doing so, before the decision can be actioned. (The procedures for call in are set out in Article 6.6 of Part 2 of this Constitution).
- Copies of the minutes of Council and Committee Meetings are published on the Council Intranet and Internet normally within 10 working days of the meeting.

The Democratic Services Unit is responsible for publication of all Council & Committee Meeting Minutes and Cabinet / Cabinet Member Decision Notices.

Contact: Democratic Services 01267 224028 Int Ext No. 4028

1.1.3 Press Releases

The Council will:

Publish Press Releases, relating to Agenda items and Decision Notices, in advance of, and after, the respective meeting.

- All press releases will be published in accordance with the Protocol for Dealing with the Press & Media
- All press releases will be published daily on the Council's Intranet and Internet sites

The Marketing and Media Section is responsible for publishing all press releases.

Contact: Press Office 01267 224037, Int Ext No. 4037

1.2 Ward Information

Members want to be kept informed about what is happening in their area.

The Council will inform local Members, by email, about:

- **Planning Applications** – the Council has a statutory responsibility to inform Members about applications
- **New capital schemes** – e.g. highway schemes, new developments or buildings
- **Major work on Council property or facilities** – e.g. housing repair schemes, school extensions
- **Service developments/launch of new services or initiatives** – e.g. grant schemes, environmental initiatives, road safety projects, extension to schools
- **Closure of facilities or suspension of services** – e.g. closure of a leisure centre, school or care facility
- **Changes or disruption to service delivery** – e.g. road closure, refuse collection

Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring that Members are kept informed of new developments within their electoral wards.

1.3 Contact Information

Members want an effective system for dealing with their enquiries/complaints and they want up to date contact information for key officers.

The Council will:

Publish a contact list of key officers, within each Department. This information will be published in hard copy and will also be available on the Council Intranet.

Operate a Members Enquiry Service. Enquiries will be taken directly by the Democratic Services unit from members in person, via telephone, E mail or via the Enquiry Forms available on the Intranet.

Heads of Service are asked to respond to Members enquiries within a maximum of 7 working days but invariably will do so much sooner than this.

The Democratic Services Unit is responsible for Member Support and the Members' Enquiry Service. Contact: Democratic Services 01267 224028 Int Ext No.4028

1.4 Access to Information

The Council's Constitution clearly states what information Members have a right to access.

Under the Data Protection Act there are restrictions on accessing personal information. For further details please see Appendix One of this protocol and Part 4.2 of the Council's Constitution which contains the Access to Information Procedure Rules.

2. CONSULTATION

Members want to be consulted on matters affecting their ward.

The Council will:

- Consult Members on issues, concerning their ward, before the matter goes before Executive Board/Council/Committee for decision
- Consult Members, by email or in exceptional circumstances by post allowing at least five working days for that Member to respond
 - The consultation document will include a brief overview/letter detailing the purpose of the consultation, an executive summary of any relevant documentation and details of where further information is available
 - Where consultation meetings are being arranged for Members they will be sent a notice at least three working days in advance of the meeting
 - A summary of the response from Members will be included on the report cover sheet distributed with the Agenda
- Consult Members through the following forums:
 - Scrutiny Committees – have a role in policy development and will be used to consult Members on policy developments and decisions being considered by the Cabinet/Council
 - Advisory Panels – are forums established by the Cabinet to review existing policies and to develop new ones, they involve non-executive members as part of these groups.

Heads of Service are responsible for ensuring that Local Members are consulted on matters going before the Cabinet / Cabinet Members / Council and Committees for decision.

3. MEMBER SUPPORT

- **IT Support**
- **Postal Service**
- **Council Diary**

3.1 Information Technology Support

Members require support in using IT and all Members are expected to use the IT Equipment provided by the Council as the initial point for accessing information.

IT Services are responsible for IT support

Contact IT Services Help Desk 01267 246789 Int Ext No. 6789

Informal one to one IT training and advice is provided by IT Staff.

Formal IT Training for all Members, will be arranged by the People Management & Performance Division.

Following each County Council Election there will be a comprehensive induction programme for all members over a range of subjects including IT which will be complimented by an ongoing programme of development and seminars.

People Management and Performance is responsible for supporting Member Development. Contact 01267 246172 Int Ext No. 6172.

3.2 Postal Service

Members want to minimise the amount of information sent, to them, in the post.

The Council will:

Use email as the main method of communication with Members including sending notices of meetings and decisions.

Provide each Member with a pigeon hole in the Democratic Services Unit at County Hall where non urgent mail can be collected in person. Any mail placed in the pigeon holes will not be posted.

3.3 Council Diary of Meetings

Members want the Council Diary to be managed to minimise instances where meetings clash.

The Council will:

Ensure that all meetings involving Members are included in the Council Diary

Publish the Council Diary on the Internet and Intranet

Avoid arranging any meetings on the same day as County Council, to allow for Council meetings extending into the afternoon (The exception being All Member Development Seminars / Consultation events)

The Democratic Services Unit is responsible for managing the Council Diary of meetings. Contact: Democratic Services on 01267 224028 Int Ext No. 4028

Appendix 1 - Restrictions on access to information

The Council's Constitution clearly states what information Members have a right to access:

“Members have a right to inspect Council documents, so far as their access to the documents is reasonably necessary to enable them to properly perform their duties as members of the Council. This principle is commonly referred to as the “need to know” principle...but a member has no right to a “roving commission” to examine documents of the Council. Mere curiosity is not sufficient”.

The decision on whether there is a “need to know” basis for a member to access that information must initially be made by the relevant Director and Monitoring Officer. In the event of a dispute, the matter may be referred to the relevant Cabinet Member(s) and Director, with legal advice from the Monitoring Officer.

Access to personal or confidential information relating to a resident or business

Access by members to personal information held by the Council relating to a third party is a complex area of law and members are therefore advised to apply to the Council's Monitoring Officer for the release of such information setting out their reasons for doing so. The Monitoring Officer will then consider each case on its merits and advise the member on how such information can be used and if it should be released by them to the public.

Members should also be aware that individuals are protected by the Data Protection Act. Severe penalties (£100k and more) have been imposed by the Information Commissioner on Council's that have been found to be in breach of the provisions of the Act.

More detailed advice regarding Members' rights to inspect Council documents can be obtained from the Monitoring Officer, Linda Rees Jones on 01267 224010 ext 4010.