

GUIDANCE NOTE – CONDUCT OF MEMBERS DURING MEETINGS

Code of Conduct

Members are clearly subject to the relevant provisions of the Members' Code of Conduct whilst attending meetings of the Council's member bodies:

- *"You must treat others with respect"*. This includes respect for other members, and members of the public
- *"You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or authority into disrepute."*
- members *"must, when using...the resources of, or under the control of, the authority act in accordance with the authority's reasonable requirements"*.

This note provides some practical guidance on behavioural issues to help members observe the Code of Conduct, particularly in relation to electronic or social media.

General

- The Chairman of the meeting has an important role in setting the tone of the meeting for the behaviour of members and the legitimate use of electronic or social media. In order to avoid disrupting the meeting it would be helpful for Chairmen to remind members that all electronic devices (such as mobile phones, laptops and pagers) must be switched to silent or vibrate during the meeting, and if there are exempt agenda items that the use of social media is not permitted during those items
- Strong public expectation is that members are elected to carry out their duties including concentrating on the business in hand at meetings. Members should themselves be businesslike and conduct themselves in an appropriate manner
- It is important that Members listen to the debate and comments and are not distracted by other non-work-related activities. Members need to be aware that they could be disrespecting others or bringing their office or authority into disrepute by their behaviour if they do not pay proper attention to the meeting
- Members should be particularly respectful to public participants who have taken the trouble to address the meeting. Their comments should be listened to by Members without being distracted by electronic communications or unrelated reading materials

- Similarly, members of Scrutiny (or other) bodies should give their full attention to the views being expressed by external parties who have been invited to address them
- Appropriate use of e-media is in line with the Council's general Digital Strategy and can be helpful for members to access electronic information relevant to particular meetings (including the agenda itself or background material). Members can (and are encouraged to) access electronic information which is relevant to the meeting to improve the democratic process but the meeting should not be disrupted nor the member distracted from the item in hand. Members should remember that tweeting as a Councillor will mean that the content is subject to the Code of Conduct
- Subject to the above point, Members should not play electronic games, nor read newspapers/books/magazines unconnected with the agenda at any point during any meeting, as this is disrespectful to other members/speakers at the meeting and to the public on whose behalf the decisions are being taken. This is the case whether or not the meeting itself is webcast
- Whilst the use of social media such as tweeting and blogging is permissible during most meeting items, it should relate to the matter in hand and Members should ensure they are not distracted nor distract others from decision items requiring their full attention as appropriate to the meeting. Members should not disrupt the meeting. Social media activities are not permissible during quasi-judicial or exempt agenda decision items.
- For uncontroversial information items not directly involving the member, the implications of being distracted from the item are less likely to have serious impact on the democratic process
- Expectations are more flexible for Members who attend a meeting merely as an observer. Such Members may have other matters to attend to whilst awaiting the items of particular interest to them and are entitled to make best use of their time and may not need to pay full attention to other items. However, even attending as an observer it would still be inappropriate for members to play games during the meeting due to poor public perception
- Members should not, of course, visit websites which are not suitable for work whilst at meetings, and must ensure screensavers are appropriate
- During longer meetings such as full Council, Members may need to leave the chamber for various reasons. Members are asked to reduce moving around to the necessary minimum to avoid disrupting the meeting, and to avoid disrupting the webcast of nearby speakers through their movement.

Quasi-judicial meetings

- Expectations are stricter for quasi-judicial meetings such as Planning and Regulatory Committee, Appellate Panel, Appointments etc Panel, and Standards and Ethics hearings

- Unlike for other general meetings, Members **must be present** for the whole of the discussion before voting. Should they leave the meeting during the agenda item, they will not be able to vote on that item as they have not heard all the relevant information
- Members should pay full attention to all of the proceedings to ensure the fairness of the process. They may access the agenda documentation electronically, but should not be distracted by using social media or other mobile devices at all during the debate and vote.

Standards and Ethics Committee

SPM/ vf 4 August 2014