

Appendix 1.1 to the Report on Guidance on Member Correspondence

Guidance on Member Correspondence

Members receive an increasing volume of correspondence by email as well as by letter. This guidance aims to clarify expectations so as to assist them in avoiding complaints that they have failed to respond to communications promptly or appropriately.

Responding promptly to correspondence

All members should endeavour to answer correspondence promptly as a matter of courtesy. Where this is not practicable because of other commitments, members are normally expected to send an acknowledgment of receipt indicating when a more substantive response will be forthcoming.

Whilst it is for each Member to judge the particular circumstances, by way of general guidance, it is suggested that Members acknowledge correspondence within 3 working days, and either send a full reply within 10 working days or give an indication of when they expect to be able to send a substantive response. It is acknowledged that this may not always be practicable and members need to adopt a common sense approach whereby they endeavour to deal with correspondence as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Use of the out of office facility for email

Where members are away for 3 days or more or otherwise unavailable, they are encouraged to make use of the out of office assistant available on Outlook to put people on notice that there may be a delay in responding and the likely timeframes of any response. Ideally members will offer other channels of communication, however if including details of an alternative contact in your message, please check with them first.

Responding to correspondence and the Code of Conduct

It is recognised that there are occasions when Members may find themselves overwhelmed by a sheer volume of correspondence, particularly when a controversial decision arises. Failure to reply or a delay in replying caused by unmanageable volume of correspondence or an occasional failure to respond, would not, normally, constitute a breach of the Member's Code of Conduct. However Members should be aware that repeated failure to respond to correspondence promptly or at all could amount to failure to treat people with respect and/or be deemed to be conduct which brings their office or the Council into disrepute.

Constituents disagreeing with a Member's response or views

This has been a source of a number of complaints in the past. As long as a response is clear and courteous, there is no requirement to support a constituent's request. This, in particular, tends to be raised in cases where constituents expect a Member to support whatever they think the majority of the residents support. Members are expected to take the views of their ward residents into account, but they still have to apply independent judgement and decide, vote or respond, in line with their objective judgement.

What about vexatious or frivolous correspondence?

It is recognised that some correspondents – whether because they do not receive the reply they are seeking, or for some other reason - repeat the same request in a series of emails or letters. The Council's procedure for dealing with corporate complaints makes provision for a decision not to enter into further communication with a complainant on a particular issue where on a careful review of the case and having taken appropriate advice a topic has been exhaustively covered.

It is acknowledged that members are faced with competing demands on their time and need to apply a common sense approach where an exchange has become unproductive. The Monitoring Officer and Independent Persons apply a case-by-case approach to allegations that members have breached the Code by failing or refusing to continue to correspond and have a discretion to take the context of any allegations into account. It is strongly recommended however that members apply appropriate standards of courtesy by despatching a clear final response which indicates that they regard the correspondence to be at a close, ideally explaining the reasons why.

Similarly, while members are not expected to engage in exchanges which they consider to have become aggressive or abusive, they are expected to communicate clearly their reasons for bringing any exchange of communications to a close.

Further advice and guidance

If Members need any further advice or guidance, they may contact Mark Wall, Head of Democratic Services (ext 1006) or Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis, Monitoring Officer (Ext 1500).

Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorghis

Monitoring Officer

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