



Standards Committee: Guidance on Member Correspondence

The Standards Committee recognises that Members of the Council receive a considerable volume of correspondence by letter and email. However, complaints are sometimes made about a member's approach to correspondence and it has been queried whether this could amount to a breach of the code of conduct. This guidance is offered to help members avoid getting into such difficulty.

A Answering correspondence

- 1 You should try to answer correspondence promptly. When you are going to be away, consider whether to put an "out of office" automated reply. Such a reply does not need to state that you are away until a certain date – indeed, there is a risk in doing so, given that your home addresses are published. However, you could include something along the following lines:

"Thank you for your email. I will reply as soon as I reasonably can."
- 2 Remember that the Council's Customer Services team is a useful resource for members. If you receive a complaint from a member of the public about the service they have received, you should consider referring them to
- 3 The Standards Committee recognises that there are times when members may find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of correspondence, particular in relation to controversial matters. [The Standards Committee takes the view that it would rarely regard a failure to answer correspondence as a breach of the Code of Conduct unless combined with some other complaint about the member's conduct.]
- 4 Furthermore, members may find that some correspondents, perhaps because they do not receive the reply they are seeking, repeat the same request in a series of emails or letters. Again, the Standards Committee would not regard a failure or refusal to continue to correspond on the issue as a breach of the Code. However, it recommends that the member sends a polite final response, making it clear that they regard the correspondence as at a close.

B Blind copying email (bcc)

If you are copying an email you write to other people, it is not recommended that you conceal other recipients. One such occasion can be where you want to send the same email to a number of parties equally, but to do so in the same email would involve disclosing private email addresses – which will often be private data. Generally, however, it is recommended that you copy emails openly.

C Confidentiality

Think carefully before copying or forwarding an email or letter to another person, including your reply. Even if the letter or email is not marked as “Private” or “Confidential”, it may contain confidential or personal information which the write may not want to share with a third party. This includes their home address – which can be an issue at any time, but particularly if the person is vulnerable or at risk (of which you may be unaware).

Further, emails which involve a series of replies, with or without attachments, may contain information, information or comments which the writer may not want to be forwarded. This includes communications with the press. It would always be appropriate to seek the writer’s consent before forwarding correspondence.