

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. There have been several complaints to the Committee based on a Member's approach to correspondence and, whilst in the main complaints have not been upheld the following guidance is offered to help Members avoid such complaints

Answering correspondence

1. You should try to answer correspondence promptly. When you are away it is good practice to activate the out of office assistant on lotus notes. This will put people on notice that they will not be receiving a prompt reply. You may wish to include the name of an alternative contact in your out of office message.
2. The Council's Customer Services team is a useful resource for members. If you receive a complaint from a constituent about the service they have received from the Council you should refer it to:

Customer Relations Team

Third Floor Conquest House
Wood Street
Kingston Upon Thames
Surrey KT1 1AB

Phone: 020 8541 9100

Fax: 020 8541 9575

Email: county.complaints@surreycc.gov.uk

This will enable it to be properly recorded and investigated.

3. The Committee recognises that there are occasions when Members may find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer volume of correspondence, particularly when a controversial decision arises. The Standards Committee has decided that it would not regard an occasional failure to answer correspondence as a breach of the Member's Code of Conduct. However, Members should be aware that repeated failure to respond to correspondence may be a breach, as it could amount to failure to treat people with respect, or conduct which brings their office or the Council into disrepute.

4. The Committee also recognises that 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 Committee would not regard a simple failure or refusal to continue to correspond as a breach of the Code. It however recommends that the Member send a polite final response, making it clear that they regard the correspondence as at a close.

5. Confidentiality

Think before copying a reply to a letter or email to another person. Even when a letter is not marked confidential it may contain confidential or personal information, which the writer may not wish you to share with a third party. Bear in mind that people may not be happy to let others know their home address.

6. Blind copying email (bcc)

If you are copying an email you write to other people, you should do so openly. There will only be very rare occasions when it is acceptable to conceal one or more recipients from other correspondents.

7. Guidance on Correspondence

Although directed mainly at staff, you may find the house style guide useful. This is available on Snet.