

Audit & Governance Committee  
12 March 2025

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## **Officer Gifts and Hospitality Policy - Benchmarking Update 2025**

### **Purpose of the report:**

A request was made by the Audit and Governance Committee in September 2024 to conduct a benchmarking exercise of other Local Authorities with regards to how their Officer Gifts and Hospitality policies compare with Surrey County Council's policy.

This report presents the benchmarking results and the subsequent decision made by the Council's statutory officers to the Audit and Governance Committee.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Committee:

1. Notes the benchmarking results within Appendix 1.
2. Notes the decision made by the Council's statutory officers, i.e. the Head of Paid Service, the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Director of People and Change and Chief Internal Auditor, after reviewing the benchmarking results, to continue with the existing Officer Gifts and Hospitality policy, and to provide an annual return to this committee of all offers made to officers, and whether they were accepted or declined. This will include an annual nil return for members of the Corporate Leadership Team if appropriate (i.e. if no offers or gifts or hospitality were made), to further demonstrate appropriate compliance with the policy.

### **Introduction**

1. The Officer Gifts and Hospitality Annual Report for 2023/24 was presented to the Audit and Governance Committee in September 2024 and it was recommended that a benchmarking exercise be carried out to compare Surrey County Council's policy with other Local Authorities'

policies and practices. The benchmarking report is attached below, in the Appendices.

2. Within the benchmarking report, 6 councils applied a zero-tolerance policy whilst 3 councils applied a threshold of £25.
3. As part of its governance arrangements, the Council ensures that effective arrangements for logging and reporting any gifts and hospitality offered and accepted, or declined, by officers are in place and are scrutinised regularly by the appropriate governance groups
4. An effective and positive culture of declaring any offers of gifts and hospitality has the following advantages:
  - Detects and deters wrongdoing.
  - Provides information to managers so they can make decisions and contain the risk.
  - Demonstrates to stakeholders that Surrey County Council is serious about good governance.
  - Reduces the chance of anonymous or malicious leaks.
  - Reduces the chance of legal claims against the Council; and
  - Clear declarations of gifts and hospitality are likely to help with a defence under the Bribery Act 2010.
5. The Council's statutory officers (the Head of Paid Service, the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer), in consultation with the Director of People and Change and Chief Internal Auditor, have considered the benchmarking report and have decided not to change the current Officer Gifts and Hospitality policy.
6. For members of the Corporate Leadership Team, it was also agreed that an annual nil return should be made if appropriate (i.e. if no offers or gifts or hospitality were made) to further demonstrate appropriate compliance with the policy.

<b>Implications:</b>
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### **Legal – Monitoring Officer**

7. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. However, reviewing the gifts and hospitality offered to employees on a regular basis will help to demonstrate that the Council continues to monitor and review ethical standards within the Council. The report complies with Surrey County Council Officer Code of Conduct as set out in the Council Constitution under Part 6.

## Financial and value for money

8. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Continued improvements in governance will support the delivery of the council's objectives.

## Equalities and diversity

9. There are no direct equalities implications of this report.

## Risk management

10. Transparent declarations of gifts and hospitality support the council's commitment to good governance and the effective delivery of services and achievement of objectives, whilst managing any risk associated with the acceptance of any gift or hospitality by an officer.

## Conclusions

11. The Council's statutory officers, in consultation with the Director of People and Change and Chief Internal Auditor, have considered the findings of the benchmarking exercise to evaluate Surrey County Council's Gifts & Hospitality Policy versus other councils and have concluded that the current policy will stand, with the addition of a provision of an annual nil return for Senior Officers.

## Next steps

12. Any actions and recommendations from the Audit and Governance Committee will be considered for future reports.

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### Sources/background papers:

None

### Annexes/Appendices:

- Annex 1 - Benchmarking - Council Gifts and Hospitality Policies
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