CONFERENCES, VISITS AND HOSPITALITY RULES

1. **Introduction**

1.1 The way that Members and staff are expected to behave is set out in agreed Codes of Conduct. The key principles behind these Codes include the need to act with integrity, and, in particular, not to do anything which could call into question the validity of an action. The public’s perception of the way that Members and staff act is very important and these rules should ensure appropriate, reasonable and accountable actions when Members and staff are involved in certain events. It is particularly important that actions are transparent and therefore the rules do require certain registers and records to be kept for possible inspection or scrutiny.

2. **Meetings, Visits and Conferences**

2.1 The rules apply to the following meetings, conferences and visits involving attendance by Members and/or staff:

2.1.1 Conferences relating to a particular profession or service held outside the Borough;

2.1.2 Visits outside the Borough to other authorities and organisations to explore policy or service initiatives, or to develop partnership or twinning relations; and

2.1.3 Discretionary meetings, conferences and ‘away-days’ usually held within or near the Borough which are called by Members or staff to address specific issues, or to return hospitality received (this does not include training events similar to those which you would expect to find in the Staff Development Programme).

2.1.4 In the rest of the rules, any of these will be referred to as "the event".

2.2 The rules will not apply in exceptional circumstances where attendance at meetings or conferences is deemed essential in the context of the individual capability of a manager. In these cases the Chief Executive will retain delegated authority to authorise attendance.

2.3 The rules will also not apply in the case of special, personal invitations to the Leader of the Council to events which do not specially fall into the categories in paragraph 2.1 above. In such cases the Leader of the Council reserves the right to judge whether or not the invitation should be accepted and, at his/her discretion, he/she may pass the invitation to another Member. Only travel expenses will be funded in such instances. A record will be kept by the Leader’s PA.

2.4 If the total cost is likely to exceed £3,000 the event must be approved by the Cabinet - in advance where possible. (Note – the total cost does not include the cost of officer time).

2.5 Where a programme of events is involved the approval of the Cabinet should be obtained at the beginning of the year.

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2.6 In exceptional cases where timescales prevent prior approval, the appropriate Corporate Director* has authority, in consultation with the Leader or Deputy Leader of the Council, to approve the event but must submit a report to the Cabinet at the earliest opportunity.

2.7 The relevance of the event and the expected benefits of attendance must be explained in the report. The names of those planning to attend should also be given with appropriate justification.

2.8 Numbers attending must be kept to a minimum and attendance limited to those who have a relevant interest. An officer may accompany a Member(s) on any Council visits outside the United Kingdom, if deemed appropriate.

2.9 If a Member or staff wish to attend any event in a private capacity, that capacity should be made clear from the beginning to all involved. If the potential exists for a conflict of interest between private involvement and official duties, the Cabinet should be notified before the event takes place.

2.10 With the exception of the Mayor’s spouse, partner, consort, attendance at events by spouses and partners only is generally not allowed. However, it is recognised that there may be exceptional occasions when such attendance is appropriate.

2.11 A separate register is kept by the Members Support Officer recording details of attendance on visits outside the United Kingdom where any part of the event is funded by the Council. Any reciprocal arrangements are recorded in the same register. Details should be passed to the Members Support Officer for recording at the earliest opportunity.

3. Expenses

3.1 Incidental expenses should be kept to a minimum.

3.2 Any expenses not directly related to the event should normally be paid for personally by the Member or staff concerned (for example, the costs of any entertainment or leisure activities). Reimbursement of such expenses will only be considered if a written justification is provided. It is not, however, unreasonable for example, that someone should make a brief call home by telephone, email or fax when staying away and to include this on Council expenses.

3.3 Meals bought en route should fall within the subsistence regulations discussed in rule 9. The cost of refreshments between meals will only be refunded by the Council if they are reasonable.

4. Choice of Venue

4.1 When the location of an event is discretionary, Council premises and facilities should be used. Any exceptions to this must be approved by the Corporate Director*. The need to “get away from the office” is not an acceptable reason for using private locations.
4.2 Official meetings between Members, Members and staff, or staff must take place in the Borough in appropriate Council premises, (i.e. administrative accommodation), unless unavoidable (for example, at the invitation of an independent third party).

5. **Working Lunches and Out of Hours Meetings**

5.1 Meals taken in the Borough by staff should be paid for by the individuals concerned unless this is impractical (for example, an all day conference).

5.2 Discretionary meetings between Members and/or staff should be arranged, where possible, during normal working hours on Council premises. Out of hours and lunch hour meetings should be exceptional.

5.3 Food should only be provided where no reasonable alternative is available. When food is provided or funded by the Council, the relevant Corporate Director should authorise it and record the justification. The Council should not be seen to be unnecessarily subsidising meals nor to be providing them as an inducement to attract attendance at an event. The amount and standard of provision should be kept to a reasonable level. No food should be provided off Council premises.

6. **Staff Leaving Parties and similar**

6.1 Members of staff at all levels are expected to personally fund the whole cost of any retirement or other leaving event, save that upon request to their Corporate Director and the Divisional Director of Asset Management and Capital Delivery and subject to room availability, the Council will waive the room hire cost for any event held in any meeting room within the Council’s administrative buildings.

7. **Accommodation**

7.1 An event should be organised to minimise the extent of overnight stay.

7.2 Where practical, accommodation should not exceed a three star rating (or its equivalent when foreign travel is involved). Anything in excess should be justified in writing by the relevant Corporate Director* (for example, where alternative accommodation is not available or additional travel costs would be incurred).

8. **Travel Arrangements**

8.1 The choice of travel should be made with a view to keeping the cost of the visit as low as possible. People should share vehicles and travel together where practical. However, cheaper methods of transport should not be considered if this results in an additional overnight stay and greater overall cost.

8.2 First class or club class travel is not normally provided for Members or staff, but in exceptional circumstances the Chief Executive can approve it for Members, and a Corporate Director may approve it for staff. In the case of either Members or officers, specific justification must be documented.
9. **Allowances**

9.1 Subsistence should be seen as a reimbursement rather than as an allowance. Expenditure should be documented with supporting receipts where possible. Where receipts are not provided, the expenditure will be taxed. Where possible, one individual should be nominated to keep all receipts relating to a particular event.

9.2 Where meals and accommodation are paid for by the Council or others, subsistence cannot additionally be claimed. Overnight subsistence covers the cost of meals and/or accommodation.

9.3 In cases where a member of staff organises petty cash advances for a group event, they should inform accompanying Members and staff at the beginning so that all claimable expenditure can be channelled through that individual.

9.4 Travel claims should only be submitted by those Members or staff who provided the transport or paid for the tickets.

10. **Employee Overtime**

10.1 Overtime will only be paid for approved duties, and only for time reasonably spent outside of normal office hours, for example travelling to and from the venue, or for work linked to the event. Alternatively, time off in lieu, rather than overtime, may be granted.

11. **Financial Issues**

11.1 The funding of events should be finalised as far as possible in advance. This should allow most bills to be paid through the Council’s creditor system and minimise the amount of cash that needs to be carried.

11.2 When a cash advance is sought, the intended use should be clearly documented. Both receipts and unspent cash must be returned to the Corporate Director of Finance & Commercial Services at the end of the visit with a list of all expenditure.

11.3 The additional cost of spouses or partners must be clearly documented by the appropriate Finance section and a full recovery made as soon as possible. The calculation is not always easy but the objective should be to demonstrate that spouses or partners have not been paid for or subsidised by the Council. Where any doubt exists the matter should be discussed with the Audit & Risk Controller.

12. **Review Arrangements**

12.1 At the end of each event requiring Cabinet authorisation (see Section 2.3), a further report should be made to the Corporate Management Team within two weeks giving:

12.1.1 a brief summary of the event and the benefits of attendance

12.1.2 the full costs (including a comparison with the original estimates)
12.1.3 where relevant, the value of attending in the future.

13. Hospitality and Gifts Received

13.1 If gifts are offered to Members or staff in their Council role, they should not be accepted if they have anything more than a token value (for example, bottles of wine, boxes of chocolates, flowers, pens, calendars and diaries).

13.2 More significant gifts should be refused where practicable to do so and where refusal would not offend. Where this is not possible the gifts may be kept by the individual provided the value is considered to be less than £50.

13.3 Any gifts considered to be worth £50 or more must be entered in the relevant gifts and hospitality register and must be reported in writing to the Monitoring Officer with a recommendation for their disposal in a manner which is not to the sole advantage of the recipient (e.g. donation to charity). If considered appropriate, the Monitoring Officer will advise that the matter be reported to the Cabinet for consideration.

13.4 Decisions on whether to accept hospitality should be made by the following tests of reasonableness:

13.4.1 the scale and type of hospitality should not bring into question the motive of the person or organisation offering it. If there is any doubt at all about the motive, or if the hospitality could be viewed as being intended to influence judgement, the hospitality should not be accepted;

13.4.2 the proposed hospitality should be limited to Members or staff who have a relevant interest;

13.4.3 the hospitality should be directly linked to Council business and/or the well being of the community.

13.5 All hospitality received by Members and staff considered to be worth £50 or more must be recorded in the appropriate gifts and hospitality register and must be reported in writing to the Monitoring Officer.

13.6 These registers are available for inspection by the public. The register recording Members’ gifts and hospitality is maintained by Members’ Services. Staff registers are kept in each department.

13.7 Where hospitality received includes meals and accommodation, subsistence must not be claimed.

13.8 Hospitality or gifts refused need not be recorded in the register unless the motive was in doubt or they were offered with a view to influencing judgement in some way. In these cases, the matter should be reported to the Monitoring Officer.
14. Hospitality and Gifts Given

14.1 The approval of the Cabinet should be sought before any individual gifts are purchased with a value over £100. The value and purpose should be clear. The recipient should be clearly associated with Council business. Where practical or appropriate, gifts should be selected from an official range of items kept by Members’ Services.

14.2 The provision of hospitality to visitors should follow similar tests of reasonableness to those discussed in rule 13. All participants should have a link to the event. When appropriate, Council facilities should be used.

14.3 The level of hospitality provided should be on a scale relevant to the normal conduct of Council business. Existing subsistence allowances offer a reasonable guide in respect of hospitality funded by the Council. It is accepted that there might be a need for some flexibility in respect of schemes funded by the European Union where the nature of the scheme presumes a reciprocal level of funding for “networking” and other forms of international cooperation. For these activities the level of hospitality given should be similar to that normally received but remain at a reasonable level.

14.4 All hospitality given by Members and staff to visitors must be recorded in a register which is available for public inspection. The register for Members’ hospitality is maintained by Members’ Services. Staff registers are kept in each department.

15. Fees Received

15.1 Where Members or staff receive a fee for speaking or otherwise assisting at an event as a representative of the Council, it should be credited to a Council budget. The relevant Corporate Director* should decide which budget is most appropriate. If a gift is offered in lieu of, or in addition to, a fee, the rules in section 13 should be followed.

15.2 Where Members are asked to speak at an event in a personal capacity they should not expect officers to accompany or assist them.

16. Records and Registers

16.1 It is essential that records and registers are kept up to date and accessible for inspection or scrutiny if necessary.

16.2 Within departments, the Corporate Director is responsible for ensuring that all records/authorisations/justifications etc. relating to events are kept on one file and that staff are aware of this and where to find the hospitality registers.

* in the absence of the Corporate Director, the relevant Divisional Director may take the necessary action

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