

Section 36

Gifts and Hospitality

Protocol for Members

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The acceptance of gifts and hospitality by Councillors is not merely an administrative issue. It reflects directly upon the perception of Councillors and of the Authority as acting in the public interest or as acting for the personal advantage of friends and for what personal benefit Councillors can get out of their position.
- 1.2 The law on the acceptance of gifts and hospitality is set out in the Authority's Code of Conduct for Members and in the Prevention of Corruption Acts. These requirements are then supplemented by the procedures which have been adopted by this Authority, to provide a clear set of rules for the protection of both Councillors and the Authority. Acceptance of a gift or hospitality in breach of the Code, or failure to declare receipt of such a gift or hospitality, can lead to disqualification from holding any public office for up to a period of five years. Corrupt acceptance of a gift or hospitality can lead to a heavy fine or up to seven years' imprisonment.
- 1.3 This Protocol of Conduct sets out:
- (a) the principles which you should apply whenever you have to decide whether it would be proper to accept any gift or hospitality.
 - (b) a procedure for obtaining consent to accept a gift or hospitality, when you consider that it would be proper to accept it.
 - (c) a procedure for declaring any gift or hospitality which you receive and for accounting for any gift to the Authority.
- 1.4 This Protocol does not apply to the acceptance of any facilities or hospitality which may be provided to you by this Authority.
- 1.5 It is impossible to cover every eventuality, but these guidelines should assist you in making a decision. If you are in any doubt as to whether to accept or refuse an offer of a gift or hospitality, you should seek advice from the Monitoring Officer.

2. General Principles

In deciding whether it is proper to accept any gift or hospitality, you should apply the following principles. Even if the gift or hospitality comes within one of the general consents set out below, you should not accept it if to do so would be in breach of one or more of these principles:

(a) Never accept a gift or hospitality as an inducement or reward for anything you do as a Councillor

As a Councillor, you must act in the public interest and must not be swayed in the discharge of your duties by the offer, prospect of an offer or the non-offer of any inducement or reward for discharging those duties in a particular manner.

The Public Bodies (Corrupt Offences) Act 1889 provides that if you accept any gift, loan, fee, reward or advantage whatsoever as an inducement to or reward for doing or forbearing to do anything in respect of any matter or transaction in which the Authority is concerned, you commit a criminal offence carrying a maximum term of imprisonment of seven years.

Further, the Authority's Code of Conduct for Members provides that you must act in the public interest, serving the Authority and the whole community, rather than acting in the interests of any particular individual or section of the community, and that it is a breach of the Code improperly to confer any advantage or disadvantage on any person, including yourself. As a general rule of thumb small tokens of gratitude, e.g. chocolates and flowers are acceptable.

(b) You should only accept a gift or hospitality if there is commensurate benefit to the Authority

The only proper reason for accepting any gift or hospitality is that there is a commensurate benefit for the Authority which would not have been available but for the acceptance of that gift or hospitality.

Acceptance of hospitality can confer an advantage on the Authority, such as an opportunity to progress the business of the Authority expeditiously through a working lunch, or to canvass the interest of the Authority and its area at a meeting. Acceptance of gifts is much less likely to confer such an advantage.

But unless the benefit to the Authority is clear, and is commensurate with the value of the gift or hospitality, the presumption must be that the gift or hospitality is purely for your personal benefit.

As set out above, the Authority's Code provides that you must not improperly confer any advantage on anyone, including yourself. Acceptance as a Councillor of a gift or hospitality for your own benefit or advantage, rather than for the benefit to the Authority, would be a breach of the Code.

(c) Never accept a gift or hospitality if acceptance might be open to misinterpretation

The appearance of impropriety can be just as damaging to the Authority and to you as a Councillor as actual impropriety. The Authority's ability to govern rests upon its reputation for acting fairly and in the public interest. You must therefore consider whether the acceptance of the gift or hospitality is capable of being interpreted as a sign that you or the Authority favours any particular

person, company or section of the community or as placing you under any improper obligation to any person or organisation. If there is any possibility that it might be so interpreted, you must either refuse the gift or hospitality or take appropriate steps to ensure that such a misunderstanding cannot arise.

Certain occasions are particularly sensitive and require the avoidance of any opportunity for such misunderstanding. These include:

- (i) occasions where the Authority is going through a competitive procurement process, in respect of any indication of a favour for a particular tenderer you as a Councillor are involved in the process.
- (ii) determinations of planning applications or planning policy, in respect of any person or organisations which stands to gain or lose from the determination.
- (iii) funding decisions when the Authority is determining a grant application by any person or organisation.
- (iv) where the Authority is in dispute with the person or organisation.

(d) Never accept a gift or hospitality which puts you under an improper obligation

Recognise that some commercial organisations and private individuals see the provision of gifts and hospitality as a means of buying influence. If you accept a gift or hospitality improperly, it is possible that they may seek to use this fact to persuade you to determine an issue in their favour. Equally, if others note that you have been prepared to accept a gift or hospitality improperly, they may feel that that will no longer be able to secure impartial consideration from the Authority. Hospitality given by employees of the Council should be justified as being in the public interest. It should be a scale appropriate to the occasion and should not be lavish or extravagant.

(e) Never solicit a gift or hospitality

You must never solicit or invite an offer of a gift or hospitality or sponsorship in connection with your position as a Councillor unless the acceptance of that gift or hospitality would be permitted under this Protocol. You should also take care to avoid giving any indication that you might be open to such any improper offer.

(f) Cash

Cash and monetary gifts must always, without exception, be refused, as should those which appear immodest or lavish.

3. Consent Regimes

(a) General consent provisions

For clarity, the Authority has agreed that you may accept gifts and hospitality in the following circumstances:

- (i) civic hospitality provided by another public authority.
- (ii) modest refreshment in connection with any meeting in the ordinary course of your work, such as tea, coffee, soft drinks and biscuits.
- (iii) tickets for sporting, cultural and entertainment events which are sponsored by the Authority and those events provided by others provided that attendance is beneficial for the reputation of the Authority and is not purely for personal pleasure.
- (iv) small gifts of low intrinsic value below £25, such as pens, pencils, mouse pads, calendars and diaries. However, you should take care not to display any such branded items when this might be taken as an indication of favour to a particular supplier or contractor, for example in the course of a procurement exercise.
- (v) a modest alcoholic or soft drink on the occasion of an accidental social meeting, such as a pint of beer from an employee of a contractor or party with whom you have done business on behalf of the Authority if you meet accidentally in a public house, café or bar. In such cases, you should make reasonable efforts to reciprocate where this is practicable.
- (vi) a modest working lunch in the course of a meeting in the offices of a party with whom the Authority has an existing business connection where this is required in order to facilitate the conduct of that business.
- (vii) modest souvenir gifts with a value below £25 from another public authority given on the occasion of a visit by or to the Authority.
- (viii) hospitality received in the course of an external visit or meeting which has been duly authorised by the Authority.
- (ix) other unsolicited gifts, where it is impractical to return them to the person or organisation making the gift, provided that the Councillor deals with the gift strictly in accordance with the following procedure:

The Councillor must, as soon as practicable after the receipt of the gift, pass it to the Monitoring Officer together with a written statement identifying the information set out in paragraph 3.(b) below. The Monitoring Officer will then write to the person or organisation making the gift thanking them on your behalf for the gift and informing them that you have donated the gift to the Chair's Charity Fund, on whose behalf it will be raffled or otherwise disposed of in due course, the proceeds being devoted to a charitable cause chosen by the Chair.

- (x) It is permissible to accept:
- modest refreshments offered in the normal course of business, e.g., coffee, sandwiches over a lunchtime meeting.
 - hospitality offered by other non-commercial bodies provided that there is a general understanding that no indebtedness will result the acceptance.
 - invitations to functions where you represent the Authority in an official capacity or by virtue of professional position, for example, when invited to/attending opening ceremonies, conferences etc.
- (xi) gifts offered, which would for cultural reasons, be considered offensive or an insult to refuse. Such gifts must be donated to the Chair's Charity.

(b) Special consent provisions

If you wish to accept any gift or hospitality which is in accordance with the general principles set out in paragraph 2, but is not within any of the general consents set out in paragraph 3.(a), you may also do so if you have previously obtained specific consent in accordance with the following procedure:

You must make an application in writing to the Monitoring Officer, setting out

- (i) the nature and estimate of the market value of the gift or hospitality
- (ii) who the invitation or offer has been made by or on behalf of.
- (iii) the connect which you have with the person or organisation making the offer or invitation, such as work which you have undertaken for the Authority in which they have been involved.
- (iv) any work, permission, concession or facility which you are aware that the person or organisation making the offer or invitation may seek from the Authority.
- (v) any special circumstances which lead you to believe that acceptance of the gift or hospitality will not be improper.

You must not accept the gift or hospitality until you have received the appropriate consent.

The Monitoring Officer will enter details of any approval in a register which will be available for public inspection.

4. Reporting

- 4.1 You must comply with the Code of Conduct for the reporting of gifts. Where you accept any gift or hospitality which you estimate to have a market value or cost or provision of £25 or greater, you must make a declaration in writing to the Monitoring Officer, setting out the information set out in paragraph 3.(b) above,

within 28 days of receipt. A form for this purpose is attached to this Protocol, but you can send the same information by any convenient means. The Monitoring Officer will retain a copy of any such declaration in a register which will be available for public inspection until the approval of the Authority's accounts for the year in question.

- 4.2 Even if the value of the gift or hospitality is less than £25, if you are concerned that its acceptance might be misinterpreted, and particularly where it comes from a contractor or tenderer, you may make a voluntary declaration in the same manner to ensure that there is nothing secret or underhand about the gift or hospitality.

5. Gifts to the Authority

Gifts to the Authority may take the form of provision of land, goods or services, either to keep or to test with a view to future acquisition, an offer to carry out works or sponsorship of a function which is organised or supported by the Authority.

You should not solicit any such gift on behalf of the Authority except where the Authority has formally identified the opportunity for participation by an external party and how that participation is to be secured, for example, in relation to sponsorship of public musical and theatrical performances and developers' contributions under Section 106 Agreements.

If you receive such an offer on behalf of the Authority, you must first consider whether it is appropriate for the Authority to accept the offer (in terms of whether acceptance of the gift might be seen as putting the Authority under any improper obligation, whether there is a real benefit to the Authority which would outweigh any dis-benefits).

If you do not have delegated authority to accept the gift, you should report the offer directly to the Monitoring Officer who has such delegated authority, together with your recommendation. The Monitoring Officer will then write back to the person or organisation making the offer, record the acceptance or non-acceptance of the gift, record the gift for audit purposes and ensure that the gift is properly applied for the benefit of the Authority.

If you have any concerns about the motives of the person or organisation making the offer, or whether it would be proper for the Authority to accept the gift, you should consult the Monitoring Officer directly.

6. Civic Gifts and Hospitality

The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Council may accept gifts or hospitality over £25 received by them by virtue of their office. They shall determine whether such gifts are personal or to be donated to their Charity Fund or to the Council. The Managing Director's office shall record all gifts in writing on the forms enclosed with Protocol whether personal or otherwise on a register which shall be kept by the Monitoring Officer. Such declarations are to be with the Monitoring Officer 28 after receipt of the gift/hospitality.

7. Definitions

- (a) "Gift or hospitality" includes any:
 - (i) the free gift of any goods or services.
 - (ii) the opportunity to acquire any goods or services at a discount or on terms which are more advantageous than those which are available to the general public.
 - (iii) the opportunity to obtain any goods or services which are not available to the general public.
 - (iv) the offer of goods, drink, accommodation or entertainment, or the opportunity to attend any cultural, sporting or entertainment events.
- (b) References to the "value" or "cost" of any gift or hospitality are references to the higher of:
 - (i) your estimate of the cost to the person or organisation providing the gift or consideration.
 - (ii) the open market price which a member of the public would have to pay for the gift or hospitality, if it were made available commercially to the public, less the cash sum of any contribution which you would be required to make toward that price to the person or organisations providing or offering the gift or hospitality.

To: The Monitoring Officer

Declaration of Receipt of Gift or Hospitality

Name:	
Address:	
What was the gift or hospitality?	
What is your best estimate of its market value or cost?	
Who provided it?	
When and where did you receive it?	
Does it come within one of the general consents set out in the Protocol of Conduct? If so, which? Gift or Hospitality?	
Did you get the consent of the Monitoring Officer before accepting it? If so, who?	
Were there any special circumstances justifying acceptance of this gift or hospitality?	
Do you have any contact in your job with the person or organisation providing the gift or hospitality?	

Signed:	Date:
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