

Executive Report

Ward(s) affected: N/A

Report of the Monitoring Officer

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Councillor Email Signature Guidance

Executive Summary

Following a councillor misconduct complaint which had been referred for investigation, the investigator identified an issue that needed to be addressed by the Council. The issue was the apparent confusion around the email signatures used by some councillors who tended to list various non-Council roles in their signature, resulting in confusion in respect of the capacity in which a councillor was communicating with a correspondent. The matter was referred to the Corporate Governance Task Group for consideration.

The Task Group considered the matter initially on 12 April and, more recently, on 16 August 2021 and drafted the guidance for councillors, which is set out in Appendix 1. The Task Group recommends that the guidance be adopted and that all councillors be advised to apply the template, content and format as set out so as to provide clear communication when conversing with residents and other correspondents.

The Task Group also recommend that it should be a requirement in the Councillors' Code of Conduct that councillors comply with this guidance, in the same way that it was agreed last year that the Code of Conduct should include a requirement for councillors to comply with the adopted Social Media Guidance for Councillors.

Recommendation to Executive

That the Councillor Email Signature Guidance, as set out in Appendix 1 to this report, be approved.

Recommendation to Council (5 October 2021)

That the Council be requested to agree the following amendment to paragraph 9 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct:

"9. In addition to compliance with this Code of Conduct, you are also expected to comply with:

- (i) the relevant requirements of the Protocol on Councillor/Officer Relations, the Social Media Guidance for Councillors, the Councillor Email Signature Guidance, and the Probity In Planning – Councillors’ Handbook, and
- (ii) any reasonable request by the Council that you complete a related party transaction disclosure.”

Reason for Recommendation:

To ensure clarity for the recipients of emails sent by ward councillors in which capacity they are writing.

Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication? No

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide the Executive with the findings and recommendations of the Corporate Governance Task Group in respect of the proposed Councillor Email Signature Guidance.

2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 The Council strives to be efficiently run using innovation, technology and new ways of working to improve value for money and efficiency in Council services.

3. Background

- 3.1 Following a councillor misconduct complaint from a resident about the lack of clarity regarding the capacity in which a member was corresponding there was an investigation. The investigator raised an issue with the Council that ought to be investigated further. This matter was the way in which some councillors used Borough Council email addresses to correspond on matters that were separate from Council business and that the councillors’ Borough Council email signatures listed various appointments and responsibilities that were separate to the business of the Borough Council. The Corporate Governance Task Group¹ was asked to investigate the matter and provide recommendations as a way forward.
- 3.2 The Task Group met on 12 April 2021, and more recently on 16 August 2021, to consider the matter. The membership of the Task Group was as follows:
- 3.3 The Task Group considered draft guidance prepared by the Monitoring Officer, which contained a number of guiding principles for councillors. In considering the guidance, the Task Group suggested to avoid the risk of confusion, non-Council roles (such as residents’ associations or companies to which they are appointed

¹ The Task Group currently comprises Councillors Deborah Seabrook (Chairman), Will Salmon, Nigel Manning, Ramsey Nagaty, and James Walsh, together with Julia Osborn and Murray Litvak (Parish Council Representative and Independent Member respectively on the Corporate Governance and Standards Committee)

in their personal capacity) should not be included in email signatures or on paper correspondence.

- 3.4 It should also be noted that councillors should not use personal email addresses to conduct Council business.
- 3.5 It should be further noted that Council officers have been issued with a style template with which to create an email signature. The current template is set out below and may form a further example of how councillors might design their email signature to be in line with a cohesive corporate style which includes links to the Council's website and social media information points in Calibri 11 font.

Officer name

Job title

Service area

Contact telephone number

Guildford Borough Council

Twitter | Facebook | Instagram

Have you registered for your new MyGuildford account?

Your MyGuildford account gives you personalised access to a range of our services in one place. You can make requests, track progress, view your balance or bills and update your details. For more information or to register go to <https://my.guildford.gov.uk/customers/s/login/SelfRegister>

- 3.6 The Task Group resolved that the Email Signature Guidance attached as Appendix 1 be referred to the Executive for formal approval. The tracked changes marked on Appendix 1 have been suggested by the Corporate Management Team. The Task Group also felt that compliance with the guidance should be a requirement of the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

4. Key Risks

- 4.1 The intention of the guidance is to reduce or eliminate a risk of confusion. There are no further risks arising.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 No financial implications apply.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 Although there is no legal requirement for guidance on email signatures, it is important to be clear as to the capacity in which a Councillor is corresponding to residents, and others. If there is any confusion, it may lead to the person with whom they are corresponding attaching inappropriate weight to the correspondence or considering it to be a reflection of the Council's official view, which could lead to further Councillor complaints.

7. Human Resource Implications

7.1 No human resource implications apply.

8. Equality and Diversity Implications

8.1 Public authorities are required to have due regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) when making decisions and setting policies. This duty has been considered in the context of this report and it has been concluded that there are no equality and diversity implications arising directly from this report.

9. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications

9.1 No Climate Change or sustainability implications apply.

10. Summary of Options

10.1 The Executive may follow the recommendation to adopt the Guidance as set out in Appendix 1, or agree to modify the Guidance, refer the Guidance back to the Task Group for further consideration, or decline to adopt the Guidance.

11. Conclusion

11.1 The Council always seeks to be clear in its communications with residents and other correspondents. To contribute to this, there is a template for Council officers to use so that recipients of emails are clear with whom they are corresponding. It is suggested that councillors in following the suggested Guidance should adopt a similar template email signature.

12. Background Papers

Minutes of the private meetings of the Corporate Governance Task Group held 12 April 2021 and 16 August 2021.

13. Appendices

Appendix 1: Draft councillor Email Signature Guidance.