

## SECTION D2

### PROTOCOL ON COUNCILLOR INVOLVEMENT IN COMMERCIAL TRANSACTIONS

#### BACKGROUND

This protocol is designed to support Councillors in their work within the community which is an invaluable part of explaining the intentions of the Council at a local level and which assists in maintaining the Council's responsiveness to legitimate interest groups.

#### PRINCIPLES

The protocol is based upon the following principles.-

- Protecting the personal integrity of Councillors and officers.
- Ensuring the financial and probity interests of the Council are protected.
- Ensuring decisions are based on complete and sound information and advice from appropriate professional staff.
- Ensuring decisions are in accordance with the Council's agreed processes and standards.
- Protecting the Council, its Councillors and officers from undue pressure or inappropriate contact from contractors and parties with a commercial interest in a transaction.

#### PROTOCOL

The Council is engaged at any one time in a large number of commercial transactions, which range from such matters as the procurement of goods, services and works, the purchase or sale of land or the disposal of surplus property to such matters as the provision of advice and/or grant aid to companies.

Councillors frequently have a constructive involvement in such commercial transactions. That involvement is not limited to taking the decision in Council, Committee or Executive as to whether to enter into such contracts and arrangements and in exercising their scrutiny functions to ensure that such arrangements complied with the Council's requirements in terms of propriety and are designed and managed so as to provide the Council with the best possible value for money. Such involvement also extends to their role within the community in making the public aware of the services which the Council can make available, and in effecting introductions between such interested parties and the officers who are responsible for administering and delivering those services.

Because of their very close involvement with the community which the Council serves, Councillors may also become aware of opportunities for the Council to act to benefit that community, opportunities to buy land, or commercial or voluntary organisations who could expand their activities if the Council were able to secure the opportunity for them to extend their premises, or local businesses who provide high quality goods or services of a sort which the Council requires, and who might benefit from an opportunity to compete to supply the Council.

However, such commercial transactions also carry significant responsibilities. These include:

- the obligation to secure the best possible value for money for the Council;
- the legal obligation on the Council to secure “best consideration” on the disposal of its land, unless it obtains the consent of the Secretary of State;
- the Best Value obligations to secure the continuous improvement in all Council services, whether delivered directly or externally procured;
- the need to comply with relevant law;
- the need to ensure that a commercial transaction is drafted and documented in such a manner that it can be enforced, for example if the other party defaults or under-performs, or if the goods supplied or the work carried out subsequently prove to be defective;
- the requirement that the transaction and all matters leading up to the final transaction, should be fully and clearly recorded, so that it can be audited to ensure propriety in the procurement process; and
- compliance with the requirements of the Council’s Local Code of Conduct for Councillors and the national code for officers.

In addition, there is the danger that an individual Councillor or officer will be misrepresented by the advocates or opponents of a particular proposal who may, innocently or otherwise, claim that the Councillor or officer has given incorrect information or advice or misrepresented the proposal, are biased or have shown favouritism.

Failure to comply with these requirements can result in serious penalties for the Council, for individual Councillors involved in the transaction and for officers. Such penalties include:

**For the Council:**

- direct financial loss from entering into contracts which are not good value for money for the Council;
- inability to enforce the contract or to recover damages for breach;
- liability to third parties;
- liabilities where a decision made by or on behalf of the Council is overturned on judicial review because it is held to have been unlawful or unreasonable; and

- the loss of the Council's reputation as an organisation dedicated to the interests of the community which it serves.

**For individual Councillors:**

- suspension or disqualification from office for breach of the Council's Code of Conduct;
- personal liability, in the event of a Councillor's negligence or reckless or deliberate misconduct causing loss to the Council; and
- prosecution for Misuse of Public Office. (Note that it is for the recipient of any gift or hospitality from a tenderer or contractor with the Council to prove that it was not an inducement or reward for anything which the recipient has done in their public position).

**For an officer:**

- disciplinary proceedings by the Council, possibly leading to dismissal;
- personal liability to the Council for any loss caused by their negligence or reckless or deliberate misconduct; and
- prosecution for Misconduct in a Public Office.

**1. LOBBYING**

It is a natural part of a political process that those who may be affected by a proposed decision of a local authority should seek to influence that decision. In many cases they will approach their local Councillor, as the interface between the Council and the local community, or the Chairman of the relevant Committee, as the person who is seen as being responsible for the processing of the decision, or a relevant officer.

Councillors must be seen to determine matters on their merits. A Councillor or officer who has given a personal commitment to support or oppose a particular proposal will have committed themselves before the full issues have been explored, which exploration occurs from discussion of the officer's report and recommendation in the Council or executive or Committee meeting. Accordingly, when approached by an advocate or opponent of a particular proposal, a Councillor has to decide whether:

- 1.1 They will remain impartial, in which case they must limit themselves to listening politely to the arguments put forward, declining to state a personal position and advising the person making the approach of the proper channel for making such representations. When they attend any Council, Executive, Committee or other meeting at which the proposal is considered, they should report to the meeting that they have received such representations.
- 1.2 They will take sides on the issue by declaring their support or opposition to the proposal. In that case, they are either an advocate or an opponent of the proposal and are no longer impartial. As a result, they should declare an interest and withdraw from any such meeting at which the matter is under consideration. The only exception to this rule is that, where a local Councillor has received and supports strong representations from local residents in his/her ward, it is customary for the Councillor to be allowed to report those

representations to the Committee or Panel in declaring an interest at the commencement of discussion of the matter and immediately before withdrawing from the meeting.

- 1.3 No officer should meet and hear advocates or opponents of a proposal on his/her own, but should wherever possible arrange that another officer is present and make a contemporaneous record of the meeting, which should be kept on the matter file and included as a background document, and should report the meeting to the Council, Executive or Committee or Panel meeting where any matter which is material to the determination of the proposal has arisen.
- 1.4 Where a Councillor is of the opinion that a person or organisation have legitimate representations to make, he/she should advise them that they may make those representations in writing to the relevant officer, and the officer should ensure that any relevant representations which he/she receives are fairly report to the meeting of the Council or Committee or Panel at which the matter is considered.
- 1.5 In some cases, it will be appropriate for the advocate or opponent to have a face-to-face meeting with the Council. Where a Councillor is of the view that such a meeting is appropriate, he/she should request the relevant officer to arrange such a meeting. The officer will consider, in consultation with the relevant Executive Councillor or Committee or Panel Chairman as appropriate, whether such a meeting will be constructive and whether it should be at officer or at Councillor level. Where it is at Councillor level, the officer will ensure that the relevant Councillors are invited to attend by the appropriate Chief Officer. All such meetings will be attended by the officer of the Council who is responsible for the matter, or his/her representative, and the officers attending shall make a contemporaneous note of the course of the meeting and ensure that the fact of the meeting and any material issues which came out of it are reported to the meeting of the Council, Executive or Committee or Panel at which the matter is considered.

## **2. GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY**

~~Gifts and hospitality provide a particularly difficult area where local government rules are sharply at odds with private sector business practice. Recent events in national politics illustrate how careful local government Councillors and officers have to be to avoid the suspicion of impropriety, for their own protection as much as for the protection of their authority.~~

~~The best way to demonstrate such innocence is to be totally open about the matter, and it is for this reason that this local authority maintains a register of gifts and hospitality for Councillors and officers. That is not to say that Councillors and officers should never receive modest gifts or hospitality. A working lunch may be the most efficient way of transacting in a busy schedule. Equally, a contractor may reasonably wish to celebrate the completion of a project with a formal launch, and may wish to include some hospitality in such a launch. Whilst it is important not to offend by ungraciously refusing such an invitation, if innocently offered, it is more~~

~~important to ensure that the Council's reputation is protected and not to give the impression that a Councillor's or officer might be swayed in the performance of his/her public duties by such an offer.~~

~~The simple ground rules are as follows:~~

- ~~2.1 Always declare to the Monitoring Officer at the earliest opportunity any offer or receipt of a gift or hospitality from any person or organisation which has, or seeks to have, any commercial relationship with the Council.~~
- ~~2.2 If you have any suspicion that the offer of a gift or hospitality might have been made from improper motive, to influence you in, or to reward you for the performance of, your public duties you should politely but firmly decline the offer and advise the Monitoring Officer, or the Head of Paid Service in his absence, of your suspicions.~~
- ~~2.3 Any gift or hospitality offered should be appropriate in scale and nature to the occasion. In particular, any offer which is made at a time when an issue relating to the person offering the gift or hospitality is before the Council for determination should be viewed with particular care.~~
- ~~2.4 Where you accept a gift or hospitality has a commercial value, such as an invitation to a commercial sports event, you should always ensure that you pay the full commercial price (and not just the face value of the ticket) to the person providing the gift or hospitality, and that you declare this to the Monitoring Officer.~~
- ~~2.5 Whenever possible, you should put any invitation on an official footing by advising the Monitoring Officer of the offer and requesting an appropriate officer to accept or decline the offer on your behalf.~~

### **3.2. PROFESSIONAL ADVICE AND NEGOTIATIONS**

One area of special sensitivity relates to commercial negotiations, where the Council's public service objectives may conflict with the profit motivation of the other party to the negotiation, and where it is accordingly essential to ensure that the end result of the negotiation secures value for money for the Council and does not leave it exposed to excessive liability or risk.

There will be occasions when Councillors can play an invaluable part in such negotiations, not least in expressing to the other party the commitment of the Council to a particular project, or the political constraints within which the transaction occurs. However, given the risks to Councillors from involvement in such negotiations, Councillors should never undertake any commercial negotiation alone directly but limit their role to setting the policy and political framework for approving the final deal.

Council officers will conduct all commercial negotiations and will keep Councillors aware of the progress and implications of their actions. In the exceptional circumstances that the negotiations may benefit from Councillor involvement it will be in accord with the following protocol:

- (a) The Councillor will discuss the transaction in advance with a Council officer of suitable seniority and agree a strategy to progress the transaction.
- (b) Having agreed the strategy, any discussions with interested parties would be organised by a senior officer and would only take place in the presence of an appropriate senior Council officer.
- (c) Only Council officers will make offers to or indicate acceptance of an offer from interested parties on behalf of the Council.
- (d) A record of the meeting involving Councillors with interested parties would be produced by the Council officer in attendance and kept on file for future reference.

#### **43. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Commercial transactions, by their nature, involve the commercial activities of one or more party other than the Council. They will involve the disclosure to the Council of matters of commercial confidentiality, such as the business plans, performance standards or pricing structures of commercial organisations, disclosure of which to a competitor or to the market could be very detrimental. This is all the more so as Best Value encourages the development of Partnership and Open Book transactions. The maintenance of confidentiality is essential both to maintain the integrity of a competitive procurement process and to ensure that those who have commercial dealings with the Council know that they can rely upon the Council to protect their commercial secrets, and are therefore able to be open with the Council.

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