

COUNCIL BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Use of Mobile Phones at Council Meetings 17 January 2013

Report of the Democratic Services Manager

PURPOSE OF REPORT

For the Committee to consider whether Councillors should use mobile phones and other electronic communication devices during Council meetings.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATION:

- (1) That the Committee consider whether Councillors' use of mobile phones and other electronic communication devices should be banned during council proceedings.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This issue was raised by a question on notice at Council from Councillor Scott to Councillor Newman-Thompson in his role as Chairman of this Committee. Councillor Scott's question was:

Please can we have an agreement that all mobiles are switched off unless Councillors are expecting an emergency call from the family and a definite ban on texting during council proceedings, as it looks unprofessional.

- 1.2 Councillor Newman-Thompson pointed out that, in order to enforce such a protocol, there would need to be a provision within the Council Procedure Rules and that the current rules did not refer to the use of mobile phones during Council meetings. The matter has therefore been brought to this Committee to consider.

2.0 Additional Implications

- 2.1 It should be noted that some Councillors 'tweet' from the Council Chamber during meetings using a mobile phone. Therefore, if the Committee intends to enforce a ban on 'texting' during council proceedings because it looks unprofessional, it might wish to extend this to all electronic communication tools, as tweets can be sent from laptops, tablet computers, ipads and other devices.

3.0 Options and Options Analysis

- 3.1 Three options are set out overleaf for the Committee to consider, or to make other recommendations. There is no officer preferred option.

	Option 1: Recommend a change to the Council Procedure Rules banning the use of mobile phones and other electronic communication devices at Council meetings by Councillors except when an urgent call is anticipated.	Option 2: Make a recommendation that Members be asked to switch off their mobile phones and other electronic communication devices at the start of each meeting by the Mayor/Chairman.	Option 3: No change.
Advantages	All participants in the public meeting would be seen to be giving the meeting their full attention.	Would remind Councillors to switch off their phones.	Councillors would still be able to text and tweet during meetings. Some may feel this is an advantage.
Disadvantages	Councillors would no longer be able to tweet from the Council Chamber. Some may feel this is a disadvantage.	May not address the concerns of the Councillor who raised this issue, if Councillors don't comply with the request.	Does not address the concerns of the Councillor who raised this issue.
Risks	Councillors feeling they have been 'silenced' from commenting to a wider audience as proceedings unfold.	Potential for the public attending the meeting to perceive use of the phone during the meeting as 'unprofessional' and that Councillors are not giving their full attention to the meeting.	As option 2.

3.2 For clarification, any change in the procedure rules would apply to Members only and would not apply to the public attending Council meetings.

4.0 Other Councils

4.1 The Democratic Services Manager has asked other Councils about their policy on this issue and only one, Coventry City Council, has replied to say they ban the use of electronic devices during Council meetings. Coventry's Constitution simply states that "All electronic devices will be switched off during meetings of the City Council." Members who want to tweet have to leave the Council chamber to do so.

4.2 Some Councils do have protocols in place regarding use of social media during meetings and an example, from Westminster Council, is appended for information. Paragraph 7 is the relevant part. It does not ban the use of mobile phones and other modern media tools but does make the point about how this can be perceived by other participants and observers at the meeting.

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 Members are asked to consider the options in this report regarding use of mobile phones and other electronic communication devices during council meetings.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

None.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources:

None.

Information Services:

None.

Property:

None.

Open Spaces:

None.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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CITY OF WESTMINSTER COUNCIL'S PROTOCOL ON CONDUCT AT MEETINGS AND USE OF MODERN MEDIA TOOLS

Introduction

1. Under the Council's Standing Orders (Meeting Procedure Rules) the Chairman of each meeting has powers to deal with issues relating to the conduct of those present to ensure the due and orderly despatch of business.
2. The purpose of this protocol is to provide guidance on the conduct within meetings which is acceptable, particularly in the context of the use of modern media tools (eg blogging and tweeting) and filming and recording at meetings.

Background

3. The principle is that the proceedings of the meeting concerned should not be impaired or handicapped by the use of media tools and that it is a matter for the Chairman to determine on the day, in the particular circumstances, what he or she regards as not appropriate.
4. The protocol attempts to recognise the different obligations which rest on elected members, representatives of the media and members of the public respectively.

Members of the Public

5. No restrictions will be placed on members of the public attending meetings in relation to the use of Twitter, blogs, Facebook or still photography, provided that their actions do not affect the conduct of the meeting.

Filming and Recording

6. Filming and recording of meetings, normally by representatives of the media, shall be permitted provided that the detailed arrangements are agreed beforehand with the Chairman of the meeting by the Director of Communications and Strategy.

Elected Members and Other Participants

7. Members are in a different position to members of the public and their actions affect the reputation of the Council. Members have an obligation to pay close attention to the proceedings of meetings they attend and demonstrate that they are playing an active part. This is in addition to the general point of showing respect and courtesy to other participants. Any use of modern media tools by participants in meetings should be considered in this context.

Planning, Licensing and Similar Quasi Judicial Meetings

8. Filming and the taking of photographs may not generally be widely allowed at meetings of these bodies as they undertake matters of a quasi judicial nature which do not always make them suitable for filming.

With respect to Planning and City Development and Planning Applications Committee/Sub-Committee meetings it will generally be permitted provided that the detailed arrangements are agreed beforehand by the Chairman of the meeting in consultation with the Strategic Director Built Environment or Operational Director Development Planning and the Director of Communications and Strategy.