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ACCESS
TO
INFORMATION:
PROCEDURE
RULES

ACCESS TO INFORMATION: PROCEDURE RULES

1. SCOPE

These rules apply to all meetings of the Council, Scrutiny Committee, policy panel, the Standards Committee and other committees of the Council and public meetings of the Cabinet (together called meetings).

2. ADDITIONAL RIGHTS TO INFORMATION

These rules do not affect any more specific rights to information contained elsewhere in this Constitution or the law.

3. RIGHTS TO ATTEND MEETINGS

Members of the public may attend all meetings subject only to the exceptions in these rules.

4. NOTICE OF MEETING

The council will give at least five clear days' notice of any meeting by posting details of the meeting at the Civic Offices, Harlington Way, Fleet (the designated office).

5. ACCESS TO AGENDA AND REPORTS BEFORE THE MEETING

The Council will make copies of the agenda and reports open to the public available for inspection at the designated office at least five clear days before the meeting. If an item is added to the agenda later, the revised agenda (where reports are prepared after the summons has been sent out, the designated officer shall make each such report available to the public as soon as the report is completed and sent to councillors) will be open to inspection from the time when the item was added to the agenda.

6. SUPPLY OF COPIES

The Council will supply copies of:

- (a) any agenda and reports which are open to public inspection;
- (b) any further statements or particulars necessary to indicate the nature of the items in the agenda; and
- (c) if the Head of Support thinks fit, copies of any other documents supplied to Councillors in connection with an item

to any person on payment of a charge for postage and any other costs.

7. ACCESS TO MINUTES ETC. AFTER THE MEETING

The Council will make available copies of the following for six years after a meeting:

- (a) the minutes of the meeting (or records of decisions taken, together with reasons, for all meetings of the Cabinet) excluding any part of the

minutes of proceedings when the meeting was not open to the public or which disclose exempt or confidential information;

- (b) a summary of any proceedings not open to the public where the minutes open to inspection would not provide a reasonably fair and coherent record;
- (c) the agenda for the meeting; and
- (d) reports relating to items when the meeting was open to the public.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

8.1 List of background papers

The report author will set out in every report a list of those documents (called background papers) relating to the subject matter of the report which in his/her opinion:

- (a) disclose any facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the report is based; and
- (b) have been relied on to a material extent in preparing the report.

The list of background papers will not include published works or those that disclose exempt or confidential information (as defined in Rule 10).

8.2 Public inspection of background papers

The Council will make available for public inspection for four years after the date of the meeting one copy of each of the documents on the list of background papers.

9. SUMMARY OF PUBLIC'S RIGHTS

A written summary of the public's rights to attend meetings and to inspect and copy documents must be kept at, and be available to the public at the designated office.

Because the Constitution must be available to the public, these Rules will constitute the written summary.

10. EXCLUSION OF ACCESS BY THE PUBLIC TO MEETINGS

10.1 Confidential information - requirement to exclude public

The public must be excluded from meetings whenever it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that confidential information would be disclosed.

10.2 Exempt information - discretion to exclude public

The public may be excluded from meetings whenever it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that exempt information would be disclosed.

Where the meeting will determine any person's civil rights or obligations, or adversely affect their possessions, Article 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 establishes a presumption that the meeting will be held in public unless a private hearing is necessary for one of the reasons specified in Article 6.

10.3 **Meaning of confidential information**

Confidential information means information given to the Council by a Government Department on terms which forbid its public disclosure or information which cannot be publicly disclosed by Court Order.

10.4 **Meaning of exempt information**

Exempt information means information falling within the following:

SCHEDULE 12A

ACCESS TO INFORMATION: EXEMPT INFORMATION

PART 1

DESCRIPTIONS OF EXEMPT INFORMATION: ENGLAND

1. Information relating to any individual.
2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding the information).
4. Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matter arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.
5. Information in respect of which a claim to legal profession privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.
6. Information which reveals that the authority proposes –
 - (a) to give under any enactment a notice under or by virtue of which requirements are imposed on a person; or
 - (b) to make an order or direction under any enactment.
7. Information relating to any action taken or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime.

PART 2

QUALIFICATIONS: ENGLAND

8. Information falling within paragraphs 3 above is not exempt information by virtue of that paragraph if it is required to be registered under –
- (a) the Companies Act 1985
 - (b) the Friendly Societies Act 1974
 - (c) the Friendly Societies Act 1992
 - (d) the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965 to 1978
 - (e) the Building Societies Act 1986; or
 - (f) the Charities Act 1993
9. Information is not exempt information if it relates to proposed development for which the local planning authority may grant itself planning permission pursuant to regulation 3 of the Town and Country Planning General Regulations 1992

10. Information which –

- (a) falls within any of paragraphs 1 to 7 above; and
- (b) is not prevented from being exempt by virtue of paragraph 8 or 9 above,

is exempt information if and so long, as in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

11. EXCLUSION OF ACCESS BY THE PUBLIC TO REPORTS

If the Monitoring Officer thinks fit, the Council may exclude access by the public to reports which in his or her opinion relate to items during which, in accordance with Rule 10, the meeting is likely not to be open to the public. Such reports will be marked “Not for publication” together with the category of information likely to be disclosed.

12. APPLICATION OF RULES TO THE CABINET

Rules 13 - 21 apply to the Cabinet and its Committees. If the Cabinet or its committees meet to take a key decision, it must also comply with Rules 1 - 11 unless Rule 15 (General Exception) or Rule 16 (Special Urgency) apply. A key decision is defined in Article 12.03 of this Constitution.

If the Cabinet or its committees meet to discuss a key decision to be taken collectively, with an officer (other than a political assistant) present, within 28 days of the date according to the forward plan by which it is to be decided, it must also comply with Rules 1 - 11 unless Rule 15 (General Exception) or Rule 16 (Special Urgency) apply. A key decision is defined in Article 12.03 of this Constitution. This requirement does not include meetings whose sole purpose is for officers to brief members.

13. PROCEDURE BEFORE TAKING KEY DECISIONS

Subject to Rule 15 (General Exception) and Rule 16 (Special Urgency), a key decision may not be taken unless:

- (a) a notice (called here a forward plan) has been published in connection with the matter in question;
- (b) at least three clear days have elapsed since the publication of the forward plan; and
- (c) where the decision is to be taken at a meeting of the Cabinet or its committees, notice of the meeting has been given in accordance with Rule 4 (Notice of Meetings).

14. THE FORWARD PLAN

14.1 Period of forward plan

Forward plans will be prepared by the Leader to cover a period of four months, beginning with the first day of any month. They will be prepared on a monthly basis and subsequent plans will cover a period beginning with the first day of the second month covered in the preceding plan.

14.2 Contents of forward plan

The forward plan will contain matters which the Leader has reason to believe will be the subject of a key decision to be taken by the Cabinet, a committee of the Cabinet, officers, or under joint arrangements in the course of the discharge of an executive function during the period covered by the plan. It will describe the following particulars in so far as the information is available or might reasonably be obtained:

- (a) the matter in respect of which a decision is to be made;
- (b) where the decision taker is a body, its name and details of membership;
- (c) the date on which, or the period within which, the decision will be taken;
- (d) the identity of the principal groups whom the decision taker proposes to consult before taking the decision;
- (e) the means by which any such consultation is proposed to be undertaken;
- (f) the steps any person might take who wishes to make representations to the executive or decision taker about the matter in respect of which the decision is to be made, and the date by which those steps must be taken; and
- (g) a list of the documents submitted to the decision taker for consideration in relation to the matter.

The forward plan must be published at least 14 days before the start of the period covered. The Head of Support will publish once a year a notice in at least one newspaper circulating in the area, stating:

- (a) that key decisions are to be taken on behalf of the Council;

- (b) that a forward plan containing particulars of the matters on which decisions are to be taken will be prepared on a monthly basis;
- (c) that the plan will contain details of the key decisions to be made for the four-month period following its publication;
- (d) that each plan will be available for inspection at reasonable hours free of charge at the designated office;
- (e) that each plan will contain a list of the documents submitted to the decision takers for consideration in relation to the key decisions on the plan;
- (f) the address from which, subject to any prohibition or restriction on their disclosure, copies of, or extracts from, any document listed in the forward plan are available;
- (g) that other documents may be submitted to decision takers;
- (h) the procedure for requesting details of documents (if any) as they become available; and
- (i) the date in each month in the following year when a forward plan will be published and available to the public at the Council's offices.

Exempt information need not be included in a forward plan, and confidential information cannot be included.

15. **GENERAL EXCEPTION**

If a matter which is likely to be a key decision has not been included in the forward plan, the decision may still be taken, subject to Rule 16 (Special Urgency), if:

- (a) the decision must be taken by such a date that it is impracticable to defer the decision until it has been included in the next forward plan and until the start of the first month to which the next forward plan relates;
- (b) the proper officer has informed the chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, or if there is no such person, each member of that committee in writing, by notice, of the matter to which the decision is to be made;
- (c) the proper officer has made copies of that notice available to the public at the designated office; and
- (d) at least three clear days have elapsed since the proper officer complied with (b) and (c).

Where such a decision is taken collectively, it must be taken in public.

16. **SPECIAL URGENCY**

If, by virtue of the date by which a decision must be taken, Rule 15 (General Exception) cannot be followed, the decision can be taken only if the decision taker (if an individual) or the chairman of the body making the decision, obtains the agreement of the chairman of the Scrutiny Committee that the taking of the decision cannot be reasonably deferred.

17. REPORT TO COUNCIL

17.1 When the Scrutiny Committee can require a report

If the Scrutiny Committee thinks that a key decision has been taken which was not:

- (a) included in the forward plan; or
- (b) the subject of the general exception procedure; or
- (c) the subject of an agreement with the relevant Scrutiny Committee chairman, or the chairman/vice-chairman of the Council under Rule 16,

the committee may require the Cabinet to submit a report to the Council within such reasonable time as the committee specifies. The power to require a report rests with the committee, but is also delegated to the proper officer, who shall require such a report on behalf of the committee when so requested by the chairman. Alternatively the requirement may be raised by resolution passed at a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

17.2 Cabinet's report to Council

The Cabinet will prepare a report for submission to the next available meeting of the Council. However, if the next meeting of the Council is within seven days of receipt of the written notice, or the resolution of the Scrutiny Committee, the report may be submitted to the meeting after that. The report to Council will set out particulars of the decision, the individual or body making the decision and, if the Leader is of the opinion that it was not a key decision, the reasons for that opinion.

17.3 Quarterly reports on special urgency decisions

In any event the Leader will submit quarterly reports to the Council on the executive decisions taken in the circumstances set out in Rule 16 (Special Urgency) in the preceding three months. The report will include the number of decisions so taken and a summary of the matters in respect of which those decisions were taken.

18. RECORD OF DECISIONS

After any meeting of the Cabinet or its committees, the Head of Support will produce a record of every decision taken at that meeting as soon as practicable. The record will include a statement of the reasons for each decision and any alternative options considered and rejected at that meeting.

19. Decisions by Officers

As soon as reasonably practicable after a key decision has been taken by an officer, he/she will prepare, or instruct the proper officer to prepare, a record of the decision, a statement of the reasons for it and any alternative options considered and rejected.

20. THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S ACCESS TO DOCUMENTS

20.1 Rights to copies

Subject to Rule 20.2 below, the Scrutiny Committee (including any sub-committees) will be entitled to copies of any document which:

- (a) is in the possession or control of the Cabinet or its committees; and
- (b) contains material relating to any business transacted at a public or private meeting of the Cabinet or its committees.

20.2 Limit on rights

The Scrutiny Committee will not be entitled to:

- (a) any document that is in draft form; or
- (b) any part of a document that contains exempt or confidential information, unless that information is relevant to an action or decision they are reviewing or scrutinising or intend to scrutinise.

21. ADDITIONAL RIGHTS OF ACCESS FOR MEMBERS

21.1 Material relating to previous business

All members will be entitled to inspect any document which is in the possession or under the control of the Cabinet or its committees and contains material relating to any business previously transacted at a private meeting unless it contains exempt information falling within paragraphs 1 to 6, 9, 11, 12 or 14 of the categories of exempt information.

21.2 Material relating to key decisions

All members of the Council will be entitled to inspect any document (except those available only in draft form) in the possession or under the control of the Cabinet or its committees which relates to any key decision unless paragraph (a) or (b) in 20.2 above applies.

21.3 Nature of rights

These rights of a member are additional to any other right that he/she may have.