

PART 4 – B

ACCESS TO INFORMATION PROCEDURE RULES

1. SCOPE

These rules apply to all meetings of the Council, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels, the Standards Committee, all other ~~regulatory~~-committees and sub-committees and public meetings of the Cabinet and Cabinet sub-committee (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. RIGHT TO ATTEND MEETINGS

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

4. NOTICES OF MEETING

The Council will give at least five clear working days notice, or any minimum amount of time set by statute, of any meeting by posting details of the meeting at the Merton Civic Centre, London Road (the designated office) and on the Council's website (www.merton.gov.uk).

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 and on the Council's website at least five clear working days before the meeting.

If an item is added to the agenda later, the revised agenda and each such report will be available to the public and open to inspection as soon as the report is available to Councillors.

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) any background documents identified in the report or supplied to Councillors in connection with the report

to any person on payment of a charge for postage and any other reasonable 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 council or 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 author will set out in every report a list of those documents (under the heading background papers) relating to the subject matter of the report which is his/her opinion;

- (a) disclose any facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the report is based; and
- (b) which have been relied on to a material extent in preparing the report but does not include published works or those that disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in rule 10 below.

8.2 Public Inspection of Background Papers

The Council will make one copy of each background paper listed in a report available for public inspection for six years after the date of the meeting concerned.

9. SUMMARY OF PUBLIC'S RIGHTS

These Access to Information Procedure Rules, as part of the Constitution, constitute the written summary of the public's rights to attend meetings and to inspect and copy documents. These Rules and the entire Constitution are available at Merton Civic Centre and on the Council's website (www.merton.gov.uk).

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 reason of a Court Order.

10.4 Meaning of Exempt Information

Exempt information means information which falls within the seven categories below and is not prevented from being exempt by virtue of the two qualifications in paragraph 10.5 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.

Category	Condition
1. Information relating to any individual	
2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of any individual	
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).	“financial or business affairs” includes contemplated as well as past of current activities;
4. Information relating to any consultations or negotiations, or contemplated consultations or negotiations, in connection with any labour relations matters arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority.	<p>“employee” means a person employed under a contract of service;</p> <p>“labour relations matter” means – any of the matters specified in paragraphs (a) to (g) of section 218(1) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992(b) (matters which may be the subject of a trade dispute, within the meaning of that Act); or any dispute about a matter falling within paragraph (a) above; and for the purposes of this definition the enactments mentioned in paragraph (a) above, with the necessary modifications, shall apply in relation to office-holders under the authority as they apply in relation to employees of the authority;</p> <p>“office-holder”, in relation to the authority, means the holder of any paid office appointments to which are or may be made or confirmed by the authority or by any joint board on which the authority is represented or by any person who holds any such office or is employee of the authority.</p>

5. Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.	
6. Information which reveals that the authority proposes (a) to give under any enactment a notice under of 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 crime.	

10.5 Qualifications to Exemption of Information

Information falling within paragraphs 10.4 is not exempt information if it falls within either of the following categories:

Category	Definition
Information falling within paragraph 3 above is not exempt information by virtue of that paragraph if it is required to be registered under the companies Act 1985; the Friendly Societies Act 1974; the Friendly Societies Act 1992; the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts 1965 to 1978; the building societies Act 1986; or the Charities Act 1993.	“registered” in relation to information required to be registered under the building Societies Act 1986(c), means recorded in the public file of any building society (within the meaning of that Act).
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 19992(c)	
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~~10.6 The Standards Committee~~

~~When the Standards Committee or any sub-committee of the Standards Committee is convened to consider any matter referred under the provisions of section 60(2) or (3) or 64(2) of the Local Government Act 2000 a further three categories of exempt information shall apply, namely:~~

~~7A Information which is subject to any obligation of confidentiality.~~

~~7B Information which relates in any way to national security.~~

~~7C The deliberations under the provisions of Part 3 of the Local Government Act 2000 in reaching any finding on a matter referred under the provisions of section 60(2) or (3) or 64(2) of the Local Government Act 2000.~~

11. EXCLUSION OF ACCESS BY THE PUBLIC TO REPORTS

If the chief Executive or 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

- (a) **General Application.** Rules 13 – 24 apply to the Cabinet, its committees and sub-committees.
- (b) **Meetings to Take Key Decisions.** If the Cabinet or its committees meet to take a key decision then it must also comply with Rules 1 – 11 unless Rule 15 (general exception) or Rule 16 (special urgency) apply. A key decision is as defined in Article 13.3 of this Constitution.
- (c) **Meetings in Advance of Collective Key Decisions.** If the Cabinet or its committees meet to discuss a key decision with an officer other than a political adviser, within 28 days of the date the decision is to be taken according to the forward plan, then the Cabinet or committee must also comply with Rules 1 – 11 unless rule 15 (general exception) or Rule 16 (special urgency)

apply. 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 five clear working 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 Chief Executive 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 Chief Executive has reason to believe will be subject of a key decision to be taken by the Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, Cabinet Members, 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 an individual, his or her name and title, if any and 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 Cabinet, Cabinet Committee 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.

14.3 The forward plan must be published at least 14 days before the start of the period covered. The Chief Executive 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 Council's offices;
- (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 is 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 dates on each month in the following year on which each forward plan will be published and available to the public at the Council's offices.

14.4 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, then subject to Rule 16 (special urgency), the decision may still be taken 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 Chief Executive and the Leader have notified the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and/or of the relevant Panel, in writing, of the matter to which the decision is to be made;
- (c) the Chief Executive and the Leader have made copies of that notification available to the public at the offices of the Council and on the Council's Website; and
- (d) at least five clear normal working days have elapsed since the Chief Executive and the Leader complied with (a) and (b)

Where such a decision is taken collectively, it must be taken in public unless it is likely that confidential or exempt information would be disclosed.

16. SPECIAL URGENCY

If by virtue of the date by which a decision must be taken, Rule 15 (general exception) cannot be followed, then the decision can only be taken if the decision taker (if an individual) or the chair of the body making the decision, obtains the agreement of the Chair, or in their absence the Vice Chair, of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission that the taking of the decision cannot be reasonably deferred. If the Chair or Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission is unable to act, then the agreement of the Mayor, ~~or in his/her absence the Deputy Mayor,~~ will suffice. In all seven circumstances the Leader of the Majority Opposition is to be provided with copies of the relevant correspondence.

17. REPORT TO COUNCIL

17.1 When the Overview and Scrutiny Commission can Require a Report

If the Overview and Scrutiny Commission thinks that a key decision has been taken which was not:

- (a) included in the forward plan;
- (b) the subject of the general exception procedure; or

- (c) the subject of an agreement with the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, relevant Panel, the Mayor of the Deputy Mayor of the Council under Rule 16, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission may require the Leader and or Chief Executive to submit a report to the Council. The power to require a report rests with the Overview and Scrutiny Commission.

17.2 The 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 committee, then 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. CABINET MEETINGS RELATING TO MATTERS WHICH ARE NOT KEY DECISIONS

The Cabinet will decide whether meetings relating to matters, which are not key decisions, will be held in public or private.

19. NOTICE OF PRIVATE MEETING OF THE CABINET

- (a) Members of the Cabinet will be entitled to receive five clear normal working days notice of a meeting to which they are summoned, unless the meeting is convened at shorter notice as a matter of urgency.
- (b) Notice of private meetings of the Cabinet will be served on the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels, leader of the Opposition and the Leaders of the minority groups, at the same time as notice is served on Members of the Cabinet.

20. ATTENDANCE AT PRIVATE MEETINGS OF THE CABINET

- (a) **Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels.** Where a matter under consideration at a private meeting of the Cabinet is within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission or one of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels, the chair of the

Commission or the relevant Panel, or in their absence the appropriate vice chair, may attend that private meeting with the consent of the person presiding, though not speak unless those present agree.

- (b) **Members.** No Members other than Cabinet Members and those specified in (a) above will be entitled to attend private meetings of the Cabinet or those invited to attend by the Leader of the Council.
- (c) **Chief Officers.** The Head of Paid Service, the Chief Financial Officer and the Monitoring Officer, or their nominees, are entitled to attend any meeting of the Cabinet. The Cabinet may not meet unless the Chief Executive, or his or her nominee with responsibility for recording and publicising the decision, is present.

21. RECORD OF DECISIONS

After any formal meeting of the Cabinet, whether held in public or private, the Chief Executive or his or her nominee, 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.

22. KEY DECISIONS BY INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE CABINET AND/OR OFFICERS

22.1 Reports Intended to be Taken into Account

Where an individual decision maker receives a report which he/she intends to take into account in making any key decision, then he/she will not make the decision until at least three clear normal working days after receipt of that report.

22.2 Provision of Copies of Reports to Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels

On giving of such a report to an individual decision maker, the person who prepared the report will give a copy of it to the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and any relevant Panel as soon as reasonably practicable, and make it publicly available at the same time, whilst ensuring that exempt and confidential information is safeguarded.

22.3 Record of Individual Decision

As soon as reasonably practicable after an executive decision has been taken by an individual member of the Cabinet or 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. The provisions of paragraphs 7 and 8 will also apply to the making of decisions by individual decision makers. This does not require the disclosure of exempt or confidential information or advice from a political adviser.

23. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION'S AND PANELS' ACCESS TO DOCUMENTS

Subject to Rule 23.1 below, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels will be entitled to copies of any document which is in the possession or control of the Cabinet and which contains material relating to:

- (a) any business transacted at a public or private meeting of the Cabinet, Cabinet committee or Sub-committee; or
- (b) any decision taken by an individual member of the Cabinet.

23.1 Limit on Rights

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission and relevant Panels will not be entitled to:

- (a) any document that is in draft form;
- (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; or
- (c) the advice of a political adviser.

24. ADDITIONAL RIGHTS OF ACCESS AND PANELS FOR MEMBERS

24.1 Material Relating to Previous Business

All Councillors will be entitled to inspect any document, which is in the possession or under the control of the Cabinet and contains material relating to any business previously transacted at a private meeting unless it appears to the proper officer that compliance in relation to a document or part of a document that (a) or (b) below applies:

- (a) it would involve the disclosure of exempt information of a description within paragraph 10.4 above; or
- (b) It would involve the disclosure of the advice of a political adviser or assistant.

Notwithstanding sub-paragraph (a) above, a document shall be available for inspection if it falls within category 3 (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)) except to the extent that the information relates to any terms proposed or to be proposed by or to the authority in the course of negotiations for a contract or category 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).

24.2 Material Relating to Key Decisions

All Councillors will be entitled to inspect any document (except those available only in draft form) in the possession or under the control of the Cabinet, which relates to any key decision unless Rule 24.1 (a) or (b) above applies.

24.3 Nature of Rights

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