HARBOROUGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

DISTRICT OF HARBOROUGH

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

E-MAIL USAGE POLICY

Version 7.0 October, 2011
Peter Rowbotham - Head of Customer and Community Services

Contents

1. Introduction

E-mail is the principal means for sending and receiving messages between individuals within the Council. Officers and elected members have external e-mail facilities allowing them to send e-mail via the Internet to any external e-mail recipients.

2. Use of E-mail

The e-mail system is primarily intended for use in connection with Council business. It is recognised however that e-mail is a widely accepted form of communication and reasonable use of external e-mail for personal purposes will be allowed by the Council.

All e-mail (including any personal e-mail) will be expected to conform to these guidelines for e-mail use, and not make unreasonable or excessive use of the facilities.

3. Monitoring of E-mail

Whilst respecting the privacy of authorised users, Harborough District Council maintains its legal right, in accordance with the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, to monitor and audit the use of e-mail by authorised users to ensure adherence to this Policy. Any such interception or monitoring will be carried out in accordance with the provisions of that Act and the Council's ICT Security Policy and E-mail Policy. Users should be aware that deletion of e-mail from individual accounts does not necessarily result in permanent deletion from the Council's ICT systems.

All e-mail users should be aware that the Council monitors e-mail traffic by automatic means and e-mail is saved to a central server so that if necessary it can be subject to further audit. The content of e-mail (including attachments) is also subject to monitoring and filtering policies, e.g. e-mail containing profanities is sent but is flagged for manual checking; the sender receives notification of this.

4. Advantages of E-mail and potential problems

E-mail offers many advantages - it is quick and easy to use, and the message can be sent and received almost instantaneously. However e-mail is only effective and efficient if users regularly inspect and read their e-mail messages. File attachments whilst useful do have some disadvantages and limitations which users must be aware of.

- The sender (and receiver) has no control over the route taken by an e-mail message sent to an external e-mail address to reach its destination. A message may reach its destination in a few minutes, a few hours, a few days or maybe never. Important information, which must arrive by a specified time, should not be sent by e-mail alone, but some back-up arrangement should be available.

- The method of transmission via the Internet is generally unsecured. There is the possibility the message may be intercepted or copied at any point in its 'journey' via the Internet, so ***do not send sensitive messages from a standard dotgov e-mail account***.

- Some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have limits on the file size of attachments so ***large files should not be sent as attachments***; they may be 'lost' in transit. As a general rule if the file attachment is over 5 MB it is best to speak to ICT Services before sending the e-mail.

The council is prepared to allow staff with e-mail to make modest use of e-mail for personal purposes but this usage should be subject to the guidelines in Sections 2 and 7.

A disclaimer message will be automatically attached to all external e-mail.

Care must be taken receiving incoming e-mail messages. Many computer viruses are transmitted in e-mail messages particularly in attached documents. All incoming e-mail will be automatically scanned including attached documents but there is always the risk that some new, previously unknown, virus will evade the virus scanner. If you suspect that a message may contain a virus then contact the ICT HelpDesk (ext. 1313) for further advice and guidance. The deliberate and knowing introduction by any member of staff of any virus or similar disruptive program via e-mail will be regarded as a serious disciplinary offence. If you do not know the sender of an e-mail it is safer to avoid clicking on links embedded within the e-mail.

Because e-mail is so quick and easy to use, people can respond in the 'heat of the moment', to incidents or e-mail received without proper consideration and 'dash off' an e-mail message which later, on reflection, they may regret or feel was ill considered. Also because it is a remote communication medium - not face-to-face or even person-to-person such as the telephone - some people may overlook the normal courtesies that apply in our social inter actions. Messages may appear brusque or even rude, often without people even realising it. Research has shown that in some extreme cases, people can be very aggressive and even bullying to their colleagues in their use of e-mail. This form of behaviour is often referred to as 'flaming' an individual. Such 'flaming' - even one incident of such behaviour - can often damage personal relationships and some cases can cause an irreversible deterioration in the relationship between two individuals.

As e-mail is a 'written communication', many people attach particular authority to it - for example some people give an e-mail message the same authority as

a well written, carefully thought out letter. Unfortunately this frequently is not the case. Simple spelling mistakes, poorly expressed ideas, capitalised words and ambiguities of language in an e-mail message can easily lead to misunderstandings, false assumptions, and errors. Great care must be taken particularly with external e-mail messages to ensure that the same courtesies and care are taken as with a written letter or memorandum.

5. Freedom of Information (FOI) Act Implications

Requests for information should be dealt with speedily irrespective of the communication channel through which the request is received. Information which is included on the Council's Publication Scheme should be provided in accordance with that scheme. If the information is not included on the Publication Scheme and there is doubt as to if it can be provided, then the e-mail request should be dealt with as a written request for information under the Freedom of Information Act and copied to the Freedom of Information Officer.

It is therefore important:

- To check e-mails regularly – at least once per day, to identify any potential requests for information and arrange for these to be actioned within the FOI guidelines and policy (see the Intranet for FOI policies).

- That, if you are absent on holiday or business for more than one day, an automatic reply is set on your e-mail account to indicate when you expect to return and alternative contact details, so if necessary the sender can redirect a request for information.

- To remember that we only have 20 working days to respond to a valid Request for Information

6. E-mail Communications between Members and Officers

E-mail is an established method of communication between elected members and officers, and to make the most effective use of this method of communication, the following rules should be observed:

- There is an expectation that e-mail will be dealt with promptly (by the nature of the immediacy of the communication method) and e-mail qualifies as a 'written request' for information under the Freedom of Information Act (see section 5 above). If a request is received which is going to take a number of days to collate information and respond, then

briefly explain the action being taken with an indication of the expected timescale.

- All e-mail sent or received by an officer of the authority remains the intellectual property of the authority as a whole. An e-mail received by an officer, therefore, may be shared with other officers or a committee of the authority, or the Council itself. As identified in 4 above, e-mail is an unsecured medium and as general rule confidential information should not be sent by e-mail.

- An e-mail sent by an officer to a Member of the authority should be assumed to be for the purpose of internal correspondence only and respected as such (as per the Member and Officer protocol) i.e. e-mail from officers to members, or members to officers, should not be forwarded to other individuals outside of the Council without the prior agreement of the original sender.

- Wherever possible, any practice of 'blind' copies of e-mails should be avoided by both officers and Members.

- E-mail should be regarded as having the same authority as a written letter but as identified in 4 above as much care must be exercised in composing an e-mail as for writing a letter.

7. Secured E-mail (GovConnect)

- Certain officers with a requirement to access and use RESTRICTED information (e.g. Benefits officers dealing with sensitive DWP information) will have an additional mailbox (GCSx – GovConnect Secure eXtranet) setup to send and receive e-mail securely.

- A GCSx mailbox will only be setup after necessary checks have been performed and ICT have received a signed "Personal Commitment Statement" form.

- E-mail sent and received via this additional mailbox will be delivered via a secured route, different to that taken by e-mail sent from standard mailboxes.

- The automatic forwarding of e-mail from a GCSx mailbox by officers to any other e-mail address is forbidden.

- Compliance with the GovConnect Code of Connection for information security is mandatory. Any breach of requirements may disbar the council from sharing information electronically with bodies such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Communities and Local Government (CLG).

8. General E-mail Guidelines

The following general guidelines should be observed:

- Care should be taken in ensuring the correct address is applied to an e-mail message e.g. mis-spelling e-mail addresses or selecting the wrong address from a list. The e-mail system will normally inform you if an unrecognisable address has been used by returning a Non Delivery Receipt.

- The automatic forwarding of e-mail by mail users from a “dotgov” e-mail address to any external e-mail address is forbidden. However, in certain circumstances where permissible and deemed necessary, the ICT Team is permitted to temporarily setup forwarding. This is only to be with the approval of the ICT Manager and will be subject to regular review, and strictly only in the event of a problem with a user's normal method of accessing email.

- Do not use e-mail to avoid face-to-face communications on difficult matters.

- Do not use e-mail as a substitute for normal face-to-face discussions, particularly for managing people.

- Always ensure that personal information is communicated in a face-to-face situation.

- Under no circumstances send aggressive, abusive or deliberately anti-social e-mail.

- Never send sexually or racially biased e-mail messages. Any such behaviour will be subject to disciplinary action.

- For all e-mail, but particularly external e-mail, do make sure your message is clear and easily understood (avoid any jargon or ‘local terms’) particularly if you are sending a message to a colleague in an external organisation.

- Ensure you complete the “Subject” box with a meaningful description.

- Always think before you send an e-mail. Never e-mail rashly or in anger.

- Use e-mail messages efficiently to keep e-mail traffic (and traffic generally on the network) to a minimum and to avoid unnecessary work for others.

- Frivolous use of the e-mail system cannot be condoned and the blatant wasting of resources and time by frivolous use of the e-mail system may

be regarded as a disciplinary matter. Avoid sending e-mails to "Allmailboxes" unless there is a specific business need.

- Monitoring of message traffic on the e-mail system will be undertaken; both internal and external e-mail messages, and copies of the messages will be retained for audit purposes.

- Refer any suspected 'flame mail' internal messages between staff, to the appropriate line manager and if necessary raise the matter under the Council's grievance procedures. If it comes to your attention that unsuitable or discourteous external e-mail messages are being sent, then the matter must be bought to the attention of the appropriate line manager for disciplinary action to be considered.

- Do take care if you send personal messages - the e-mail address belongs to the Council. An unsuitable private message could be an embarrassment to the Council if it is thought to have some official endorsement. Offenders could be subject to disciplinary procedures.

- Avoid sending large documents as attachments, particularly for external e-mail. If you do send an attachment, ensure that the receiver has the necessary software to be able to read the document.

- E-mail is an unsecured medium.

- If there are requirements for a message to arrive at a particular time do not depend on e-mail alone. Have some other method available for getting the information to its destination.

9. Conclusion

E-mail is a powerful tool and if the above guidelines are observed then it will be used wisely as an effective communication aid helping you in your job. Please also refer to the Council's ICT Security Policy.