



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Members' Declarations of Interest</b>
<b>Date:</b>	19 <sup>th</sup> March, 2010
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Liam Steele, Head of Committee and Members' Services
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Stephen McCrory, Principal Committee Administrator

### Relevant Background Information

At the Council meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> March the undernoted Notice of Motion was proposed by Councillor N. Kelly and seconded by Councillor B. Kelly:

*"This Council takes the view that there is now an urgent need for all Councillors to be more aware of the requirement to declare interests in matters being considered by the Council in which they may have a pecuniary or other interest.*

*The Council directs that this matter be considered at an early date by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee so that an enhanced level of transparency and openness can be created around this issue in order to provide a measure of reassurance to the public."*

In accordance with Standing Order 11 (e), the matter was referred to the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee for consideration and report.

### Key Issues

There is no doubt that the public in general and the press and media in particular are focusing more than ever before on the behaviour of all publicly elected representatives. This can be demonstrated by the protracted press reporting of the expenses which Members of Parliament claim and the subsequent damage which has been caused to the public perception of the democratic process. The Council has recognised this increased public scrutiny and agreed recently to revise and enhance the information which is published on payments made to Members.

Another area of public life where scrutiny by the press and media has been increasing over recent months is the requirement of elected representatives to be seen not to seek

personal advantage by virtue of the public office which they hold. For Councillors elected to local Councils this is dealt with under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, whereby Councillors are expected to declare both pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in any matter being considered by the Council and, where such an interest exists, not to take part in the discussion or vote on the matter.

Members of Council have been abiding by this principle and there has never been a challenge by the Local Government Auditor on the failure of any Member to declare such an interest. However, Members are increasingly being asked to represent the Council on a range of outside bodies and it is not always clear when such membership gives rise to pecuniary or, more frequently, non-pecuniary interests. It is accepted that the guidance available for Members in helping them to determine when such an interest exists is somewhat sparse and not easily understood and it is considered that the issuing of a Members' Guide to Declarations of Interest would help Members to ensure that they always abide by the highest principles of behaviour in public life and would provide practical assistance to Members.

Another related but separate matter which the Council may wish to give some consideration to is the possibility of publishing a Members' Register of Interests, which would require Members to declare all business and other interests which they hold. Such registers are used in Westminster, in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in most Councils in England and Wales.

#### **Resource Implications**

None.

#### **Recommendations**

The Committee is recommended to agree to a draft Guide to Members' Declarations of Interest being presented in the first instance to the Audit Panel, together with a report on the steps to be taken to establish a Members' Register of Interests, with a further report being presented to the Committee in due course.

#### **Decision Tracking**

Liam Steele, Head of Committee and Members' Services

30<sup>th</sup> June, 2010.