

Extract from minutes of -

## STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

19th MARCH, 2010

### **“Democratic Services and Governance**

#### **Members’ Declarations of Interest**

The Committee was reminded that the Council, at its meeting on 1st March, had agreed that a Notice of Motion on Members’ Declarations of Interest be referred to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration and report.

The Head of Committee and Members’ Services explained that there was no doubt that the public in general and the press and media in particular were focusing more than ever before on the behaviour of all publicly elected representatives. That could be demonstrated by the protracted press reporting of the expenses which Members of Parliament claimed and the subsequent damage which had been caused to the public perception of the democratic process. The Council had recognised that increased public scrutiny and had agreed recently to revise and enhance the information which was published on payments made to Members.

He pointed out that another area of public life where scrutiny by the press and media had been increasing over recent months was the requirement for elected representatives to be seen not to seek personal advantage by virtue of the public office which they held. For Councillors elected to local Councils that was dealt with under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, whereby Councillors were expected to declare both pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in any matter being considered by the Council and, where such an interest existed, not to take part in the discussion or vote on the matter.

The Head of Committee and Members’ Services explained that Members of the Council had been abiding by that principle. However, Members were increasingly being asked to represent the Council on a range of Outside Bodies and it was not always clear when such membership gave rise to pecuniary or, more frequently, non-pecuniary interests. It was accepted that the guidance available to Members in helping them to determine when such an interest existed was somewhat sparse and not easily understood and it was considered that the issuing of a Members’ Guide to Declarations of Interest would help Members to ensure that they always abided by the highest principles of behaviour in public life and would provide practical assistance to Members.

The Head of Committee and Members’ Services indicated that there was another related but separate matter which the Council might wish to give some consideration to which was the possibility of publishing a Members’ Register of Interests, which would require Members to declare all business and other interests which they held. Such registers were used in Westminster, in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in most Councils in England and Wales.

The Committee agreed the draft Guide to Members’ Declarations of Interest be submitted 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 view to such a Register being introduced with effect from the commencement of the next Council term.”