

A Message from the Chair of Standards Committee

Dear Resident,

A petition, requesting changes to our Standards regime, was received at the meeting of the Court of Common Council, held 25 April. This was referred to the Corporation's Standards Committee which, at its meeting on 3 May, asked officers to bring a report to its next meeting, in October. Meanwhile, we felt it might be helpful if I were to write to signatories and clarify some of the issues around which confusion seems to have arisen.

The Corporation seeks to ensure the highest ethical standards of behaviour from its members. It has its own code of conduct, its local authority functions are subject to the Localism Act 2011 and its housing to section 618 of the Housing Act 1985, which prohibits voting on Corporation housing matters, where a member rents or leases a property from the Corporation. At the heart of code and legislation alike is a commitment to members behaving selflessly, which means acting in ways which are demonstrably not self-serving.

Members are required to register any disclosable pecuniary interest (DPI), including the ownership of leases or freeholds of property within the City. The Localism Act makes clear that a member may neither speak nor vote on any matter in which they have a DPI, unless they have obtained a dispensation to do so. The Corporation has chosen to apply the same rule to non-local authority business, such as governing our independent schools.

It is only possible to grant a dispensation where the statutory grounds for doing so are met, but these are quite broad and the Standards Committee is able to exercise some discretion in deciding whether or not a dispensation should be granted. In order to ensure clear and consistent policy and practice in this regard, a working party was set up in July last year. Following extensive consultation, new policy and guidance on granting of dispensations was drawn up. This was received at the meeting of the Court of Common Council, held 7 March this year.

A matter which has proved problematic arises where members, like me, live in the ward they represent. It is almost inevitable that there will be times when a matter affecting the pecuniary interests of some of my constituents will also affect mine. As a result, there will be a conflict between my behaving selflessly and my speaking and/or voting on behalf of those I represent. In arguing their case, I will also be arguing my own. The working party gave a great deal of attention to this issue, and the Court made clear it favoured members being able to speak wherever possible. I believe our new policy means members with a DPI will usually be given

dispensations to speak. The policy is, however, less than three months old; its implementation will be monitored very carefully over the coming year.

I hope this note will give you some measure of reassurance that, far from seeking to limit the representative role of members, the Corporation has sought to maximise this role, within the confines of the law and our own code of conduct.

With all good wishes

Ann Holmes
Chair Standards Committee
Member for Farringdon Within