



Select Committee on Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions [Written Evidence](#)

Memorandum by the Brethren's Gospel Trusts (STA 21)

1. SUMMARY

1.1 Our clients operate worldwide and throughout Britain, where they are accepted as charitable organisations, responsible for the provision and maintenance of Gospel Halls.

1.2 The need for a Code of Conduct is understood and accepted.

1.3 However, our clients are concerned at an inequitable application of the Code of Conduct, which we submit calls into question the effectiveness of the Standards Board in promoting and overseeing the Code of Conduct.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 We represent Charitable Gospel Trusts established by Christians commonly known as "Brethren", who have long established and growing congregations in many towns and cities throughout Britain.

2.2 There are currently about 100 assemblies of "Brethren" in Britain. Each assembly will typically comprise a "City" hall as a focal gathering point, together with several "local" halls to serve a more limited local function in a neighbourhood.

2.3 There are about 400 halls throughout Britain with about 15,000 communicants. Numbers continue to increase and "planting" of new assemblies and an ongoing need for new halls in existing areas continues. As a result of these needs, our clients are active participants in the planning process, both in pursuing an appropriate Development Plan policy framework and in the planning Development Control process (ie planning applications).

2.4 Brethren, including Trustees of the charitable Gospel Trusts, welcome the opportunities to testify to authorities at national and local level in order to seek a sympathetic understanding of their needs, and special limitations.

3. THE ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND

3.1 We note the detailed issues raised in the Notice of the Inquiry and would wish to comment on the rules governing the behaviour of members of local authorities, in particular those serving on "Planning Committees".

3.2 We understand and appreciate the need for appropriate regulation of relationships to ensure that, so far as possible, scope for corruption is removed. Nonetheless, we feel that there must continue to be opportunity for local authority members to interact with applicants for planning permission, whether or not they be their own constituents.

3.3 If planning applications are to be considered in a balanced manner, it is often necessary for elected members to be aware of wider background issues beyond pure policy, particularly as to when the need for development may or may not amount to a "material consideration" which may justify a departure from such policy.

3.4 Contact between members and applicants can often be of material assistance to this end. However, in our involvement with a number of Gospel Trusts, we have become aware of a number of instances across the country where local authority members are extremely reluctant, and often refusing, to listen to applicants both prior to and after submission of applications for fear of prejudicing their position at Committee.

3.5 This practice and interpretation of the Code of Conduct is by no means universal and in some instances members are prepared to accept informal contact prior to formal submission, without any need for them to indicate any prejudicial decision to support or oppose a proposal. Equally, we are aware of a situation where members "hid" behind the Code of Conduct in refusing contact with applicants but appeared to be ready to accept ill informed adverse comments from neighbours.

3.6 For all, these reasons, we submit that the effective promotion and overseeing the Code of Conduct by the Standards Board for England is questionable and has led to an inequality of treatment of applicants and objectors. We consider that there is a definite need for a clear directive to members as to the extent to which they may interact with applicants and objectors. We submit that it can only be beneficial to members to make themselves fully aware of the complexities of the background to an application, to enable them to judge for themselves the sincerity, or otherwise, of the applicants concerned. In our submission this should not commit them to the support of or opposition to an application, such as to be prejudicial to an unbiased handling of an application.

J R Shephard

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[Previous](#)

[Contents](#)

[Next](#)

[Commons](#)

[Parliament](#)

[Lords](#)

[Search](#)

[Enquiries](#)

[Index](#)
