

Public Document Pack



**Service Director – Legal, Governance and
Commissioning**

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Friday 13 October 2023

Notice of Meeting

Dear Member

Standards Committee

The **Standards Committee** will meet in the **Meeting Room 1 - Town Hall, Huddersfield** at **2.00 pm** on **Monday 23 October 2023**.

The items which will be discussed are described in the agenda and there are reports attached which give more details.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Julie Muscroft".

Julie Muscroft

Service Director – Legal, Governance and Commissioning

Kirklees Council advocates openness and transparency as part of its democratic processes. Anyone wishing to record (film or audio) the public parts of the meeting should inform the Chair/Clerk of their intentions prior to the meeting.

The Standards Committee members are:-

Member

Councillor Harry McCarthy (Chair)

Councillor Jo Lawson

Councillor James Homewood

Councillor Mohan Sokhal

Councillor Itrat Ali

Councillor Martyn Bolt

Councillor Alison Munro

Agenda

Reports or Explanatory Notes Attached

Pages

1: Membership of the Committee

To receive apologies for absence from those Members who are unable to attend the meeting.

2: Minutes of Previous Meeting

1 - 6

To approve the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 23rd March 2023.

To approve the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 24th May 2023.

3: Declaration of Interests

7 - 8

Members will be asked to say if there are any items on the Agenda in which they have any disclosable pecuniary interests or any other interests, which may prevent them from participating in any discussion of the items or participating in any vote upon the items.

4: Admission of the Public

Most agenda items take place in public. This only changes where there is a need to consider exempt information, as contained at Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. You will be informed at this point which items are to be recommended for exclusion and to be resolved by the Committee.

5: Deputation/Petitions

The Committee will receive any petitions and/or deputations from members of the public. A deputation is where up to five people can attend the meeting and make a presentation on some particular issue of concern. A member of the public can also submit a petition at the meeting relating to a matter on which the body has powers

and responsibilities.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 10, Members of the Public must submit a deputation in writing, at least three clear working days in advance of the meeting and shall subsequently be notified if the deputation shall be heard. A maximum of four deputations shall be heard at any one meeting.

6: Public Question Time

To receive any public questions.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 11, the period for the asking and answering of public questions shall not exceed 15 minutes.

Any questions must be submitted in writing at least three clear working days in advance of the meeting.

7: Code of Conduct Complains Update

9 - 20

To brief the Standards Committee on Councillor complaints under the Code of Conduct since the last Standards Committee meeting in March 2023.

Contact Officer: David Stickley, Senior Legal Officer

8: Cases and News Update

21 - 80

To brief the Standards Committee on any news and cases of interest since March 2023.

Contact Officer: David Stickley – Senior Legal Officer

Contact Officer: Leigh Webb

KIRKLEES COUNCIL
STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Thursday 23rd March 2023

Present: Councillor Jo Lawson (Chair)
Councillor James Homewood
Councillor Harry McCarthy
Councillor Alison Munro

In attendance: Julie Muscroft, Service Director, Legal, Governance and
Commissioning
Michael Stow – Independent Person

Apologies: Councillor Mohan Sokhal
Councillor Michael Watson

1 Membership of the Committee

Apologies were received from Councillor Sokhal and Councillor Watson.

2 Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th October 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

3 Interests

Councillor Munro declared an other interest in respect of item 6, Code of Conduct complaints update, as a Parish Councillor.

4 Admission of the Public

It was agreed that all agenda items would be held in public session.

5 Deputation/Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

6 Code of Conduct complaints update

The Committee received a report which provided an update on complaints that had been received since the previous meeting of the Committee on the 10th October 2022. The Committee was informed that the report looked at complaints received from 1st September 2022 to end of February 2023 and gave a breakdown. The report advised that since 1st September 2022 the Monitoring Officer had received 7 complaints relating to alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct. All complaints related to Kirklees Councillors. There were no complaints relating to Town or Parish Councillors. Of these 7, 1 had not progressed after the initial assessment process. The remaining 6 complaints were currently being considered under the initial

assessment process. One member complaint from the previous period had been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman but was dismissed.

In line with the decision of the Committee, published decisions on the website would only show complaints that had been upheld. Members were asked to consider whether it was appropriate to update the information when members had complied with any sanctions.

During consideration of the complaints update, Members of the Committee discussed whether it was appropriate for the published information to be updated to the record when members had complied with any sanctions.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the report be considered and noted,
- (ii) That Kirklees website be updated when members had complied with any sanctions,
- (iii) That reports to the Committee include an appendix showing decisions taken through the decision-making process,
- (iv) That a workshop be arranged to understand difficulties Officers and Members faced relating to Planning applications.

7 Cases and News Update

The Committee received a report which provided an update on matters arising in terms of local government ethics, including relevant case law and decisions of other local authorities or any existing standards boards. During discussion of a particular case relating to Brighton and Hove Council, Members sought clarification on the size and political make-up of the Council. The Monitoring Officer undertook to find out and report back to the Committee.

The report also provided an update on the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life that followed on from the report on 'Ethical Standards in Local Government.

RESOLVED: That the report be received and noted.

8 Interim update on Member-Officer workshop sessions

The Committee received a brief interim update on the recent workshop sessions undertaken on the Member-Officer protocol.

Three sessions took place as part of the review in January and February 2023 which were split across North and South Kirklees. The sessions were run by an independent consultant whose background included extensive experience as a Monitoring Officer and in local authority law, both in the public and private sectors. The sessions were based on encouraging member and officer participation.

During discussion, committee members provided comments on their experience of attending the session, along with some observations about what might be helpful to do moving forwards to embed the corporate knowledge of the protocol and use it to

Standards Committee - 23 March 2023

work together effectively. They noted that a more comprehensive report would come back to this committee with any proposed changes to the protocol when the work was completed.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the report be considered and noted,
- (ii) That Officers be thanked for arranging the workshops.

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Contact Officer: Andrea Woodside

KIRKLEES COUNCIL
STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Wednesday 24th May 2023

Present: Councillor Moses Crook (Chair)
Councillor Itrat Ali
Councillor Martyn Bolt
Councillor James Homewood
Councillor Harry McCarthy
Councillor Alison Munro
Councillor Mohan Sokhal

1 Admission of the Public

RESOLVED –

It was determined that all agenda items would be considered in public session.

2 Appointment of Standards Committee

RESOLVED -

1) That the appointment of the Standards Sub-Committee be approved.

2) That the Sub-Committee should not be in accordance with the requirements of Section 15 and 16 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and that the membership shall be drawn from the membership of the Standards Committee.

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KIRKLEES COUNCIL			
COUNCIL/CABINET/COMMITTEE MEETINGS ETC			
DECLARATION OF INTERESTS			
Standards Committee			
Name of Councillor			
Item in which you have an interest	Type of interest (eg a disclosable pecuniary interest or an "Other Interest")	Does the nature of the interest require you to withdraw from the meeting while the item in which you have an interest is under consideration? [Y/N]	Brief description of your interest

Signed: Dated:

NOTES

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

If you have any of the following pecuniary interests, they are your disclosable pecuniary interests under the new national rules. Any reference to spouse or civil partner includes any person with whom you are living as husband or wife, or as if they were your civil partner.

Any employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain, which you, or your spouse or civil partner, undertakes.

Any payment or provision of any other financial benefit (other than from your council or authority) made or provided within the relevant period in respect of any expenses incurred by you in carrying out duties as a member, or towards your election expenses.

Any contract which is made between you, or your spouse or your civil partner (or a body in which you, or your spouse or your civil partner, has a beneficial interest) and your council or authority -

- under which goods or services are to be provided or works are to be executed; and
- which has not been fully discharged.

Any beneficial interest in land which you, or your spouse or your civil partner, have and which is within the area of your council or authority.

Any licence (alone or jointly with others) which you, or your spouse or your civil partner, holds to occupy land in the area of your council or authority for a month or longer.

Any tenancy where (to your knowledge) - the landlord is your council or authority; and the tenant is a body in which you, or your spouse or your civil partner, has a beneficial interest.

Any beneficial interest which you, or your spouse or your civil partner has in securities of a body where -

- (a) that body (to your knowledge) has a place of business or land in the area of your council or authority; and
(b) either -

the total nominal value of the securities exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body; or
if the share capital of that body is of more than one class, the total nominal value of the shares of any one class in which you, or your spouse or your civil partner, has a beneficial interest exceeds one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that class.



Name of meeting: Standards Committee

Date: 23rd October 2023

Title of report: Code of Conduct complaints update

Purpose of report

To brief the standards committee on Councillor complaints under the Code of Conduct since the last Standards Committee meeting in March 2023.

Key Decision - Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?	not applicable
Key Decision - Is it in the Council's Forward Plan (key decisions and private reports?)	no
The Decision - Is it eligible for call in by Scrutiny?	no
Date signed off by <u>Strategic Director</u> & name	Rachel Spencer-Henshall - 26/9
Is it also signed off by the Service Director Finance?	Isabel Brittain
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Legal, Governance and Commissioning?	Julie Muscroft
Cabinet member portfolio	Cllr Paul Davis

Electoral wards affected: All

Ward councillors consulted: None

Public or private: Public

Has GDPR been considered? Yes

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report follows on from the report that was before the Standards Committee on the 23rd of March 2023.
- 1.2 This report will look at the number of complaints received from the 1st of March 2023 to the end of August 2023, along with their type and nature.
- 1.3 It will also look at which of those new complaints have been resolved and which are still subject to investigation or further action. It will also provide an update on those complaints that were received in the previous reporting period and were not resolved at the time of the previous report.
- 1.4 It will also compare this period's complaints with the previous period, to see if there are any significant differences or trends.

2. Information required to take a decision

2.1 Complaints Summary

- 2.1.1 Since the 1st of March 2023 the Monitoring Officer has received 24 complaints relating to alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct.
- 2.1.2 16 relate to Kirklees Councillors (a total of 17 Councillors) whilst the remaining 8 relate to Town or Parish councillors (4 named Councillors).
- 2.1.3 Of these 24, 8 were not progressed after the initial assessment process. 4 complaints (both multiple complaints) were found to be breaches of the Code of Conduct. The remaining 12 complaints are currently being investigated, being considered under the initial assessment process.

2.2 Update on previous complaints

- 2.2.1 Of the 8 complaints that were carried forward from the previous report as ongoing, 3 were dismissed at the initial stage, 2 were not pursued by the complainants, 2 were finalised informally and 1 remains unresolved and carried forward.
- 2.2.1 12 complaints have been carried forward in this reporting period.

2.3 Previous Report and comparison with the present report

- 2.3.1 The previous report, for the period the 1st of September 2022 to the end of March 2023, contained a total of 6 new complaints that related to 6 named Kirklees members and no Town or Parish Councillors. This

compares with the current period under review, where there is a total of 16 complaints relating to 17 Kirklees Councillors and 8 complaints relating to 4 Town or Parish Councillors.

2.3.2 The nature of the complaints in the present report concern the behaviour of members towards members of the public / fellow members (11 complaints relating to 9 members), behaviour at meetings (2 complaints relating to 2 members), social media behaviour (4 complaints relating to 2 members), the planning process (5 complaints relating to 4 members) and pre-election behaviour (1 complaint about 1 member).

The sources of the complaints are that 14 were received from members of the public, 6 received from members (4 Kirklees members, 2 Town or Parish Council members) and 4 from officers.

2.3.3 Comparing this to the previous report, complaints then were about the behaviour of members towards members of the public (5 complaints relating to 5 members), and one complaint about the planning process.

The sources of the complaints in the previous reporting period were that 5 were received from members of the public, with the remaining complaint being made by a Kirklees member.

2.3.4 Comparison between the two reports shows that the overall number of complaints has risen by 17. In percentage terms, this is an 340% rise in the number of member complaints from the last reporting period. If we extend the comparison to earlier periods, we can see that there is a general downward trend to the number of complaints being made, from a high of 32 complaints about Kirklees members in 2020 (the exceptional number of complaints about one member of a Parish Council have been discounted). Whether or not this period's figures are a one-off or a sign that complaints are rising again remains to be seen. The number of Councillors complained about has also risen, to 21, from the previous period's total of 6.

2.3.5 In this period, we have seen two instances of 'multiple' complaints, both of which relate to social media use.

2.3.6 The total number of complaints relating to Town or Parish Councils has risen in this reporting period, from zero to 8. Whether or not this can be ascribed to the changes following this year's Town and Parish Council elections remains to be seen.

2.3.7 The number of complaints relating to the planning process has risen in this period, from 1 to 5.

2.3.8 In terms of any trends, it is possibly too early to say whether the current reporting period is an exception and whether numbers of complaints will fall again.

2.4 **Published Decisions**

2.4.1 This report now contains a simple summary table that informs members of standards decisions that have been published on the Kirklees website. In line with the decision of the Committee, the published decisions will now only be complaints that have been upheld.

2.4.2 This is a summary only and full details, including copies of the relevant decision notices, remain available on the website.

Council	Councillor	Complaint	Date of decision	Outcome
Holme Valley Parish Council	Cllr James Dalton	member's use of social media	05/07/2023	Complaint upheld
Holme Valley Parish Council	Cllr James Dalton	member's use of social media	06/12/2021	Complaint upheld
Holme Valley Parish Council	Cllr James Dalton	member's use of social media	03/8/2020	Complaint upheld
Holme Valley Parish Council	Cllr James Dalton	member's use of social media	23/10/2019	Complaint upheld
Mirfield Town Council	Cllr Steven Benson	member's use of social media	16/10/2019	Complaint upheld

2.4.3 Members will note that the decision notice concerning former Cllr James Dalton has been added to the website.

2.4.4 The other breach that has been referred to in 2.1.3 above has not been recorded on the website as it was not the subject of a formal decision notice. Whilst a breach was found to have occurred, the member complained of took appropriate steps to address the issues complained of in line with the requirements of the Monitoring Officer, who took the decision that, as a result of that, there was no need for the complaint to proceed through the formal standards process.

2.5 **Discussion Points**

- 2.5.1 Members are asked to consider the following discussion points, which have arisen since the last Committee meeting and that members' views on would be helpful.
- 2.5.2 Members have been clear about publishing decisions on breaches on the Kirklees website, following decisions made through the formal standards process.
- 2.5.3 Members are asked to consider whether any complaints that do result in a finding of a breach but which are resolved informally, should also be recorded on the Kirklees website.

3. **Implications for the Council**

3.1 **Working with People**

N/A

3.2 **Working with Partners**

N/A

3.3 **Place Based Working**

N/A

3.4 **Climate Change and Air Quality**

N/A

3.5 **Improving Outcomes for Children**

N/A

3.6 **Financial Implications for the people living or working in Kirklees**

N/A

3.7 **Other (eg Legal/Financial or Human Resources)**

The promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by councillors is an important part of maintaining public confidence in both the council and its members. Failure to do so could have reputational implications.

3.8 **Do you need an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)?**

No

4. Next steps and timelines

- 4.1 The Monitoring Officer will continue to assess any complaints about members' conduct as and when they are received and will report the outcomes to this committee as appropriate.
- 4.2 Any recommendations from the discussion points at 2.5 above will be introduced.

5. Officer recommendations and reasons

- 5.1 It is recommended that the report is noted and that members consider the discussion points.

6. Cabinet portfolio holder's recommendations

N/A

7. Contact officer

David Stickley
Principal Lawyer
01484 221000
david.stickley@kirklees.gov.uk

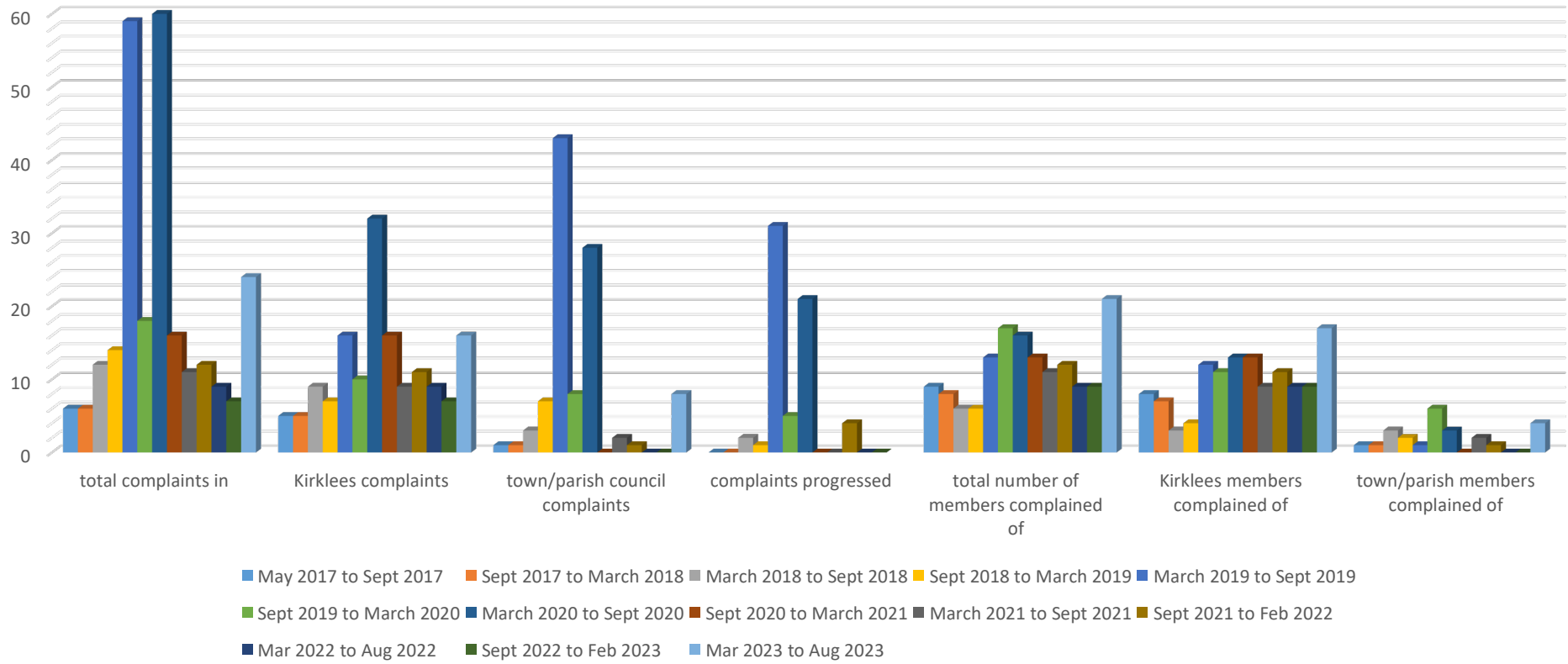
8. Background Papers and History of Decisions

- 8.1 N/A

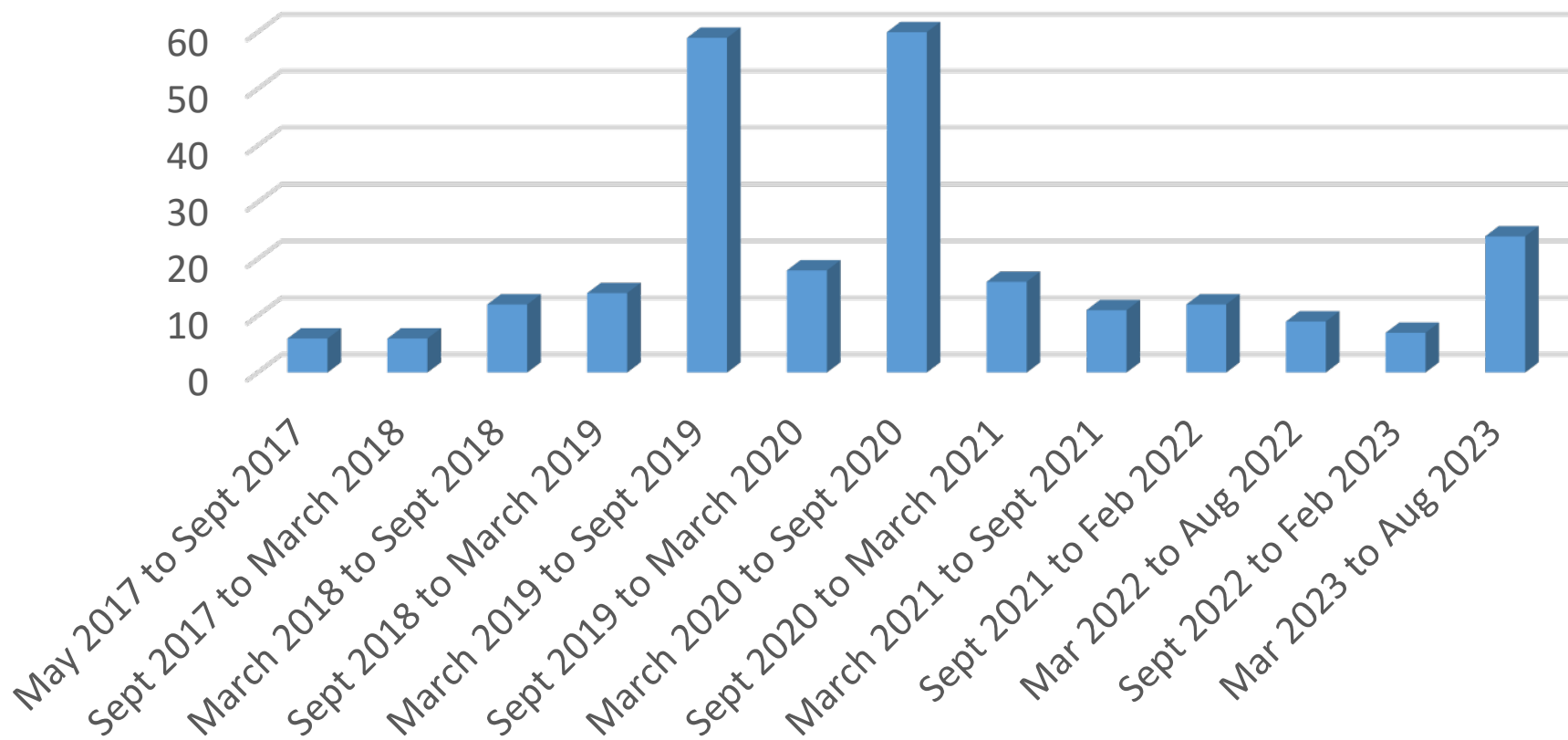
9. Service Director responsible

Julie Muscroft
Service Director – Legal, Governance and Commissioning
01484 221000
julie.muscroft@kirklees.gov.uk

Complaints summary

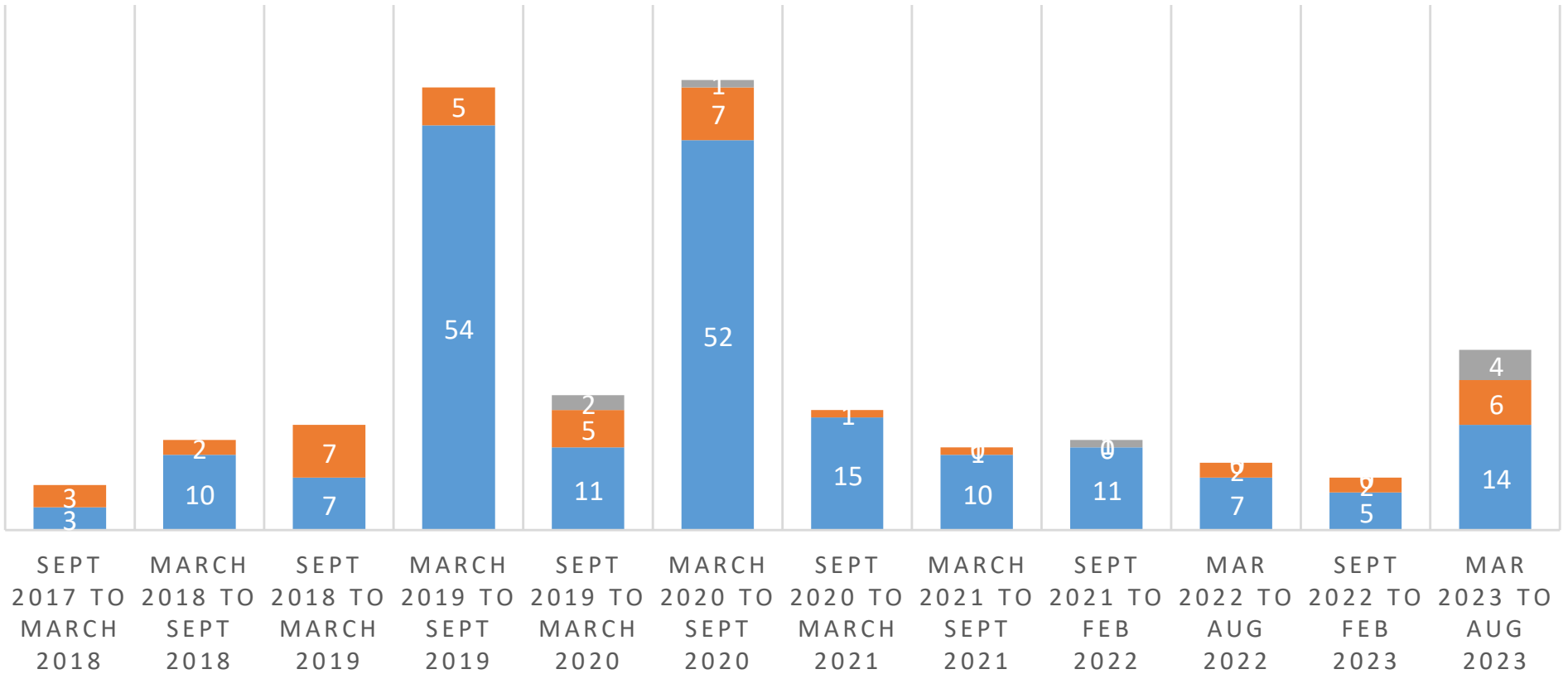


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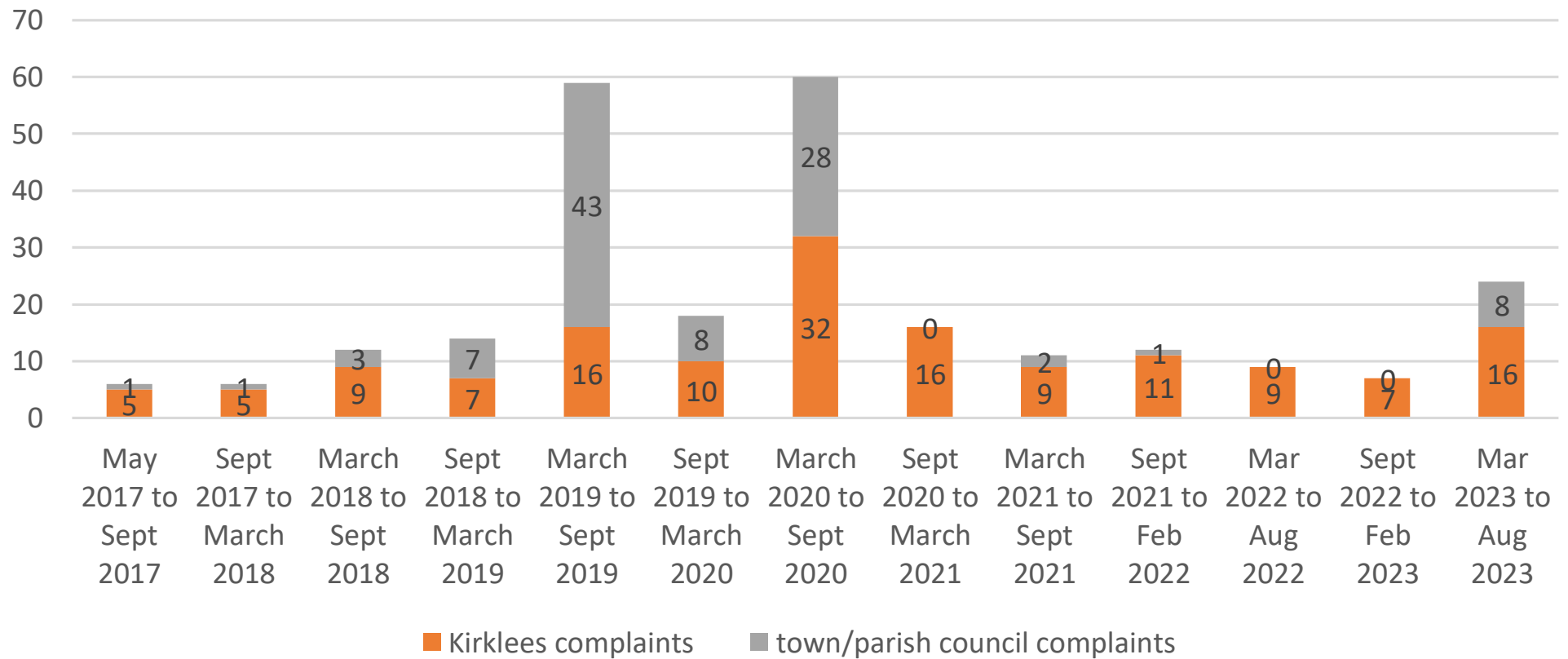


SOURCES OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

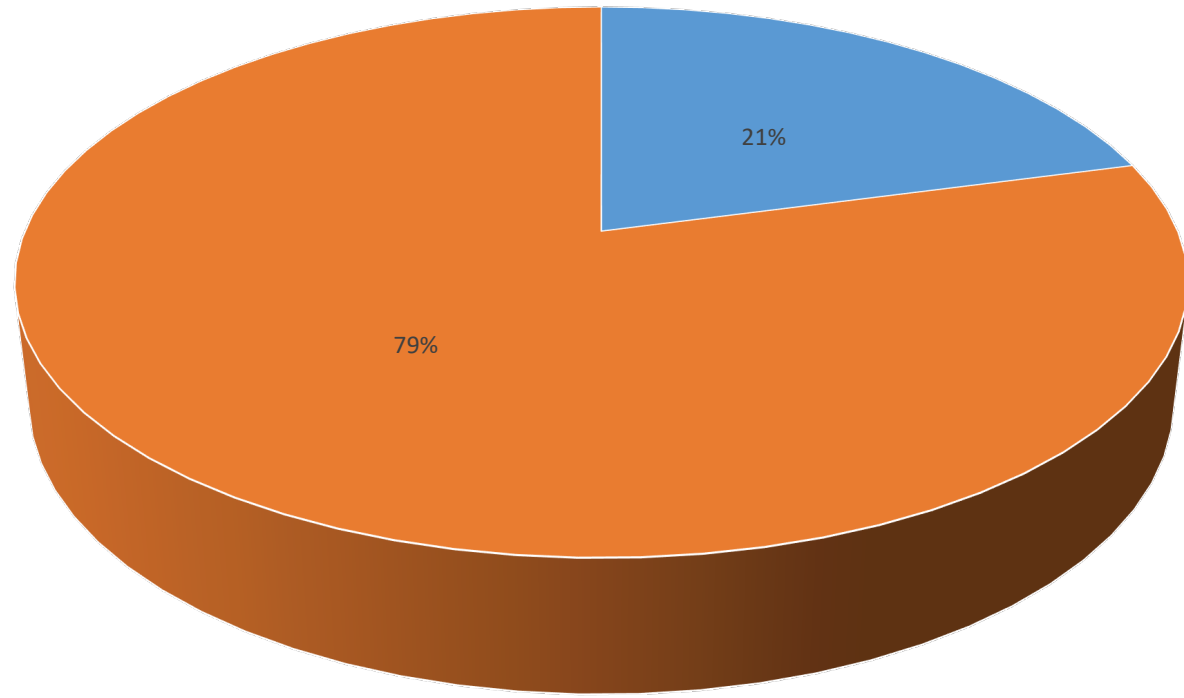
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COMPLAINTS - KIRKLEES / TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS



Mar 2023 to Aug 2023



■ Planning related complaints ■ Other complaints

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Name of meeting: Standards Committee

Date: 23rd October 2023

Title of report: Cases and News Update

Purpose of report

To brief the standards committee on any news and cases of interest since March 2023.

Key Decision - Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?	not applicable
Key Decision - Is it in the Council's Forward Plan (key decisions and private reports?)	no
The Decision - Is it eligible for call in by Scrutiny?	no
Date signed off by <u>Strategic Director</u> & name	Rachel Spencer-Henshall - 26/9
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Finance IT and Transactional Services?	Isabel Brittain
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Legal Governance and Commissioning Support?	Julie Muscroft
Cabinet member portfolio	Cllr Paul Davies

Electoral wards affected: All

Ward councillors consulted: None

Public or private: Public

Has GDPR been considered? Yes

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report is intended to brief members on any developments and news on matters of local government ethics.
- 1.2 It will look at news items and any relevant case law, as well as any recent published decisions from other local authorities or any of the existing standards boards.
- 1.3 It will also provide an update on the work of the CSPL, in particular that which follows on from their report 'Ethical Standards in Local Government'.

2. Information required to take a decision

2.1 News since March 2023

- 2.1.1 A number of sources have been checked for details of any news items that are of relevance or may be of interest to the committee.
- 2.1.2 These include Local Government Lawyer, Lawyers in Local Government, the various standards boards' websites, websites of other local authorities as well as local and national media.
- 2.1.3 There are a number of articles, from various sources, which may be of interest to the committee, even if all are not directly relevant to the work of the committee. Copies of the articles are at appendix A, but the following are of particular interest.
- 2.1.4 In June, Local Government Lawyer reported that the leader of Ashfield District Council had been charged with various offences, including fraud by false representation, money laundering and the fraudulent evasion of income tax. He was also charged with possession of a Class A drug. The fraud charges relate to misuse of Council funds over a 3 year period. Interestingly, the deputy leader has also been charged with criminal offences that relate to failing to declare a disclosable pecuniary interest.
- 2.1.5 In May the 'Metro' reported on the suspension of a Pembrokeshire County Councillor who allegedly stated in a recorded video that *'all white men should have a black man as a slave'*. He subsequently referred himself to the Ombudsman and was suspended by his party during the investigation.
- 2.1.6 In July the Mirror reported that King Lawal, a Northamptonshire Councillor had been suspended by his group after tweeting about Pride month.

- 2.1.7 In June, the BBC reported that the mayor of Keighley had resigned, following suspension by his party. This came after he appeared to apologise to members of the Muslim community for having supported a Pride event in the town. He faced criticism from the town's MP, a member of the same political party.
- 2.1.8 A survey conducted by the LGA has found that over 80% of Councillors reported experiencing abuse of intimidation when performing their Councillor roles.
- 2.1.9 Further to previous updates on hybrid and remote meetings, a survey by the LGA found that 95% of councils who responded to the survey wanted the ability to reintroduce virtual and hybrid meetings.
- 2.1.10 In a more recent development a House of Lords amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to allow the reintroduction of virtual and hybrid meetings has been passed in the Lords, but with opposition from the Government.

2.2 Recent published decisions

- 2.2.1 Some Local Authorities in England publish their decisions on member complaints, as do the Standards Boards in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 2.2.2 The Standards Commission for Scotland continues to work, holding hearings remotely.
- 2.2.3 Since March 2023, the Commission has considered 8 cases, with a further two scheduled for September, and has published its findings in respect of 6 of these.
- 2.2.4 In these 6 cases, breaches were found to have occurred in 4, that resulted in censure or suspension of the members complained of. The breaches included disclosure of confidential information to the press by a Councillor, which resulted in his suspension, a failure to treat an officer with respect, which resulted in censure, disrespectful and bullying behaviour, which resulted in a suspension, and disrespectful behaviour towards members of the public and officers, resulting in censure. Some of the Commission's press releases are at Appendix B. Members can read the full decision notices on the Commission's website.
- 2.2.4 The Commissioner for Standards in Northern Ireland has heard 2 cases referred to it since March 2023, with 2 more referrals yet to be heard. One complaint concerned allegations of conflicts of interest and failure to declare interests.

- 2.2.5 Breaches were found by the Commissioner in respect of disrepute, failure to mitigate any conflicts of interest, failure to declare an interest and act accordingly. Breaches were not found in respect of the remaining allegations. The sanction imposed was partial suspension (from Planning Committees) for 3 months.
- 2.2.6 The second case considered was a member on member complaint, that played out against the background of sectarian politics, in which it was alleged that a member had exhibited '*provocative and outrageous behaviour*' at a protest about an Orange Parade. There was a finding of breach and a 2 month suspension was imposed as a sanction.
- 2.2.7 The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales published its Annual Report in August. The report notes an increase in overall complaints, but an 11% fall in those relating to local councils. The report also notes a fall in referrals, from 20 to 12. These figures need to be noted within the context of the Ombudsman not making a distinction between complaints about Council services and elected Councillors.
- 2.2.8 The Ombudsman publishes its finding directly to its website and these have been checked. Local Government Lawyer has reported that a Bridgend County Borough Councillor was suspended for a breach of the Code of Conduct in July, over misleading information that was provided during a crowd funding campaign.
- 2.2.9 In England, publication of decisions still remains discretionary, although the CSPL did support publishing these, so it may be the case that we see more decisions from English local authorities being published in due course.
- 2.2.10 No reports have been identified in this period.

2.3 Case Law

- 2.3.1 No relevant case law has been identified in this period.

2.4 The work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life

- 2.4.1 In July 2023, the CSPL published a blog update on its report 'Upholding Standards in Public Life', which had been shared with the Government. The blog can be found here and contains links which members may find of interest:

[Reforming standards in central government - a step forward - Committee on Standards in Public Life \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

- 2.4.2 It also published a 'recommendation tracker', that summarised the current position with the recommendations. A copy of this is in the Appendix.
- 2.4.3 As reported previously, follow up on the 2019 report is no longer a standing item on the CSPL meeting agenda.

3. Implications for the Council

3.1 Working with People

N/A

3.2 Working with Partners

N/A

3.3 Place Based Working

N/A

3.4 Climate Change and Air Quality

In order to minimise any impact, printing is kept to a minimum.

3.5 Improving outcomes for children

N/A

3.6 Financial Implications for the people living or working in Kirklees

N/A

3.7 Other (eg Legal/Financial or Human Resources)

The promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by councillors is an important part of maintaining public confidence in both the council and its members. Failure to do so could have significant reputational implications.

3.8 Do you need an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)?

No

4. Next steps and timelines

- 4.1 The Monitoring Officer will continue to monitor any relevant news and cases and will report back to this committee. She will also continue to monitor and report back on any relevant work of the CSPL.

5. Officer recommendations and reasons

- 5.1 Members are asked to consider the report and comment on its contents (as applicable) and note its contents.

6. Cabinet portfolio holder's recommendations

N/A

7. Contact officer

David Stickley
Principal Lawyer
01484 221000
david.stickley@kirklees.gov.uk

8. Background Papers and History of Decisions

- 8.1 N/A

9. Service Director responsible

Julie Muscroft
Service Director – Legal, Governance and Commissioning
01484 221000
julie.muscroft@kirklees.gov.uk

Appendix

Parish council hit with slew of resignations after tempers flare at meeting to discuss poll on dissolution

A North Yorkshire parish council has become inquorate after a bitter row saw three councillors resign and a further two fail to show up for a council meeting.

Thornton le Dale Parish Council's Clerk opened a meeting on 25 July with just the Parish Clerk, Cllr Marguerite Markham and one other councillor present. She immediately closed the meeting after noting the resignations and absences.

The slew of resignations comes after a tense extraordinary council meeting the week prior (18 July) in which councillors clashed over the results of a non-binding poll on dissolving the parish council.

Declaring the results at the meeting, Cllr Markham began reading from the agenda, which reads: "1545 Electorate / 245 Voted 16% Yes 180 11.65% No 64 4%."

But Cllr Sandra Kathleen Bell interrupted, stating: "No, no, that is not how our elections work. Sorry, first past the post. There's no way that is appropriate. The way it's put here is nonsense."

Cllr Markham responded: "Sandra, you are not chair. Be quiet."

Cllr Bell went on to argue that the parish council should not have reported the vote in the manner set out in the agenda, stating that: "You cannot report the results of the election the way they have been. It's ridiculous.

"If somebody doesn't vote, that doesn't mean they vote no."

She argued that the result of the poll was 74% in favour of dissolving the council and 26% against.

The row led to all of the councillors except Cllr Bell standing up and leaving the room.

The parish council's website has now been updated to note that due to the council being inquorate, there will be no further meetings, and all activities will be stopped, including grass cutting and burials at the parish's cemetery, until further advice is sought.

The council has been subject to local scrutiny for some time, with one member of the public recording meetings and uploading the videos to YouTube. Recordings of the 18 July meeting have amassed more than 20,000 views.

Recordings of the meetings date back to December 2022. In one recording, some councillors can be seen to be covering their faces with sheets of paper for the entirety of the meeting.

In a statement on the media's coverage of the infighting at the council, Cllr Markham said she is saddened to see inaccurate reporting in the local press, "which is inflammatory and derogatory to the Parish Council and the village".

She added: "The council is absolutely clear that the audio and video recording of a Council meeting is legitimate. However, it was very disappointing to find the edited footage was then placed on Youtube."

She reported that the situation had affected the health of some councillors.

Local Government Lawyer

Council leader charged with fraud by false representation, money laundering and tax evasion

The leader of Ashfield District Council, Cllr Jason Zadrozny, has been summonsed to court on charges alleging fraud by false representation, five counts of money laundering, and four counts of being knowingly concerned in the fraudulent evasion of income tax.

According to Nottinghamshire Police, the fraud by false representation charges relate to the alleged misuse of Nottinghamshire County Council funds over a three-year period between February 2018 and February 2021.

The income tax evasion charges allege offences over a 15-year period between 2007 and 2022.

He was also charged with possession of a Class A drug.

As a result of the investigation, the police said the council's deputy leader, Cllr Tom Hollis, is also facing charges under the Localism Act 2011.

These charges relate to allegedly failing to declare his disclosable pecuniary interest in a property between 30 May 2019 and 10 September 2021, as required under the act.

Both councillors, who are members of the Ashfield Independents, will appear in Nottingham Magistrates' Court on 21 July 2023.

In a statement posted to social media, the Ashfield Independents said: "We note the events of the last few hours, and further note that those involved are strongly protesting their innocence. "While the full process takes place we will not issue any further comments."

It added: "This is following legal advice and we will continue with the business of doing the job our team have been entrusted to do."

Ashfield District Council said it is unable to comment at this time. Nottinghamshire County Council has been approached for comment.

Local Government Lawyer

Tory councillor finally suspended after saying 'white men need black slaves'

A Welsh Tory councillor who allegedly said 'all white men should have a black man as a slave' has finally been suspended.

In a 16-minute clip, [Pembrokeshire county councillor Andrew Edwards allegedly said](#):
'Nothing wrong with the skin colour at all.

'I think all white men should have a black man as a slave, or black woman as a slave, you know.'

The former magistrate is also accused of saying that black people are of a 'lower class than whites'.

On Wednesday, Edwards referred himself to the Public Services Ombudsman after the clip was reported by the Welsh news outlet [Nation.Cymru](#).

Edwards has neither confirmed nor denied the audio clip and it is not clear when or where the clip was recorded or who the man was speaking to.

Other councillors have said to have identified the voice in the audio clip as that of Edwards'.

But the Welsh Conservative Party confirmed today that Edwards, a licensee of a Swansea pub and restaurant, has been suspended.

A spokesperson for the Welsh Tories said: 'Andrew Edwards has been suspended by the party whilst an investigation is carried out.'

Senedd Welsh Tories leader Andrew Davies added: 'The views expressed in the recording are disgraceful, abhorrent and are not shared by the Welsh Conservatives.

'As the matter is being investigated, it would be inappropriate to comment further.'

Edwards left the party group for the council on Tuesday, having represented the Haverfordwest Prendergast ward as a Tory councillor since May 2022.

A magistrate until he resigned in July, Edwards is also a former school governor and owner of a barber shop called Freestyle Barbers in Haverfordwest.

He said in an earlier statement: 'I am aware of such serious allegations being made against me.'

'This is why I have self-referred to the Public Services Ombudsman for an independent evaluation.

'It is now in the hands of legal experts and the Ombudsman. It would be unfair on the process for me to comment now.'

The Pembrokeshire council said: 'We are aware of an allegation being made and have referred the matter to the ombudsman. It would be inappropriate to comment further.'

Metro

Tory councillor says being gay is a 'sin' and he 'won't be silenced' during Pride month

King Lawal, who represents Brickhill & Queensway in Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, posted a controversial tweet on Thursday and doubled down when met with criticism

A Conservative councillor who says both Pride and homosexuality are sins has found himself at the centre of a social media storm.

King Lawal posted a tweet on Thursday with a bible verse and a rainbow-coloured background.

The Tory councillor, who represents Brickhill & Queensway in Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, posted: "Whatever God calls 'sin' is nothing to be proud of. When did Pride become a thing to celebrate!

"Because of Pride Satan fell as an arch Angel. Pride is not a virtue but a Sin. Those who have Pride should Repent of their sins and turn to Jesus Christ. He can save you. #PrideMonth #Pride2023 #PrideParade."

Cllr Lawal tweeted: "Just to clear something up.

"In no way am I suggesting that LGBT people should be persecuted or should not live freely in which or whatever way they want.

"All I did, which my right to do, is point out that both Pride & Homosexuality is Sin, which it is."

He added: "I believe in Christ and I will not be silenced.

"I represent all people within my constituency, both Christians and LGBT people, I treat all people fairly.

"And my record speaks for itself. If you've taken offence to my tweet, then you take offence to the bible. Not my problem."

Labour councillor Zoe McGhee was one of many to express their outrage, Northants Live reports.

She wrote on Twitter: "Today a fellow Cllr in @NNorthantsC suggested that LGBTQIA+ people live in sin.

"To show that a colourful world is something to be celebrated & to show my love for all things queer and colourful, please enjoy these photos of me and my lovely friends celebrating pride..."

Leader of the Labour Group & Opposition at North Northamptonshire Council Matt Keane added: "The role of a councillor is to act with integrity and honesty, act lawfully. Treat all persons fairly and with respect.

"Lead by example and act in a way that secures public confidence in the role of councillor. I'm sure lots of constituents would take issue with this tweet."

Cllr Jason Smithers, Leader of North Northamptonshire Councillor and George Candler, Interim Chief Executive, has since issued a joint statement.

The Mirror

The mayor of Keighley has resigned after being criticised for describing his attendance at a Pride event as a "lapse in judgement".

In a Facebook post, Mohammed Nazam said his participation had contradicted his "personal religious beliefs".

He was suspended by the Conservative group on Bradford Council once his comments came to light and later announced he would quit as mayor.

In a statement he said he "did not mean any harm to the LGBTQ community".

He said he intended to carry on as an independent councillor, according to the Local Democracy Reporting Service.

In his post, on a page called Keighley Pakistanis, Mr Nazam said: "I wholeheartedly apologise for my participation in the flag-raising ceremony, as it contradicts my personal religious beliefs, as many of you are aware."

He said he had since "personally repented for this error," adding: "Looking back, I realise that I should have respectfully declined the request at the time."

Robbie Moore, Conservative MP for Keighley, who also attended the event on Friday, had called for Mr Nazam to consider his position.

He said: "I've seen comments made by [Mr] Nazam, stating that he feels the need to apologise for his part in the flag-raising ceremony and the need for him to "personally

repent for 'his' error" because of religious beliefs.

"The role of the town mayor is to represent everyone within the community and therefore it was deeply disheartening to read the mayor's statement."

Following his suspension, Mr Nazam issued a statement saying he would stand down with "immediate effect".

"By my apology I did not mean any harm to the LGBTQ community," he said.

"My religion teaches respect and tolerance for all and the law of the land. People should have the freedom to express their beliefs and live their lives as they wish to.

"This should apply to all communities and religious beliefs," he added.

David Shaw, chair of Keighley Pride, said Mr Nazam had agreed to a request to be involved in the flag-raising ceremony, as other mayors had done in the past.

"That was very brave of him, but he has to stand by that," he said.

"To retract it in the way that he did is really quite unacceptable. As mayor you need to represent everybody and be inclusive," he added.

BBC

Eight in ten councillors reported experiencing intimidation or abuse in their role in last year, finds IGA

A survey by the Local Government Association (IGA) has found that the number of local councillors who have reported feeling at risk in their role due to rising levels of abuse and intimidation has increased to a "new high" in the last year.

The survey, conducted in June 2023, found that 81% of councillors reported experiencing intimidation and/or abuse in their role as a councillor in the last year, which is an 8% increase from the year before.

Furthermore, 82% said they felt at risk "at least some of the time" whilst fulfilling their role, up from 73% last year.

At its Annual Conference in Bournemouth this week, the IGA warned that a rise in abuse is "preventing councillors from representing the communities they serve, deterring individuals from standing for election and undermining local democracy".

The survey also found that:

- 54% of councillors have seen abuse aimed at them increase since they were first elected, with 31% seeing a 'sharp increase'.
- Over the last year, the number of councillors who said they experienced abuse frequently has doubled and the number saying they never experienced abuse

reduced from 27% to 19%.

A number of respondents also highlighted that the use of social media has increased the level of abuse aimed at councillors, with some members of the public “behaving in a way online that they would not do so in person”, the survey revealed.

The LGA noted that councils had warned that current policing approaches are “inconsistent, under-resourced and vary too much from place to place”.

“Councils are urging the Government to ensure that the experience of councillors on social media is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill”, it said.

Cllr Marianne Overton, Chair of the LGA’s Civility in Public Life Steering Group, said: “Abuse and intimidation aimed at local councillors is completely unacceptable and it is deeply concerning that this survey suggests that this is a problem that is growing. If left unaddressed, it risks forcing good councillors out of local politics altogether.

“Robust debate and scrutiny are critical parts of a healthy democracy, ensuring people are able to express their views and that people in public life are held to account.

“However, there is a clear line between debate and abuse, which should not be crossed.”

She added: “To help tackle this issue, the Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online as well as working with the police to develop clearer guidance on tackling the abuse of locally elected members.”

The findings of the survey form part of the LGA’s Debate Not Hate campaign, launched last year.

793 councillors in England and Wales responded to the survey.

Local Government Lawyer

“Overwhelming majority” of councils want hybrid meeting powers, LGA survey finds, as wait for outcome of call for evidence continues

The overwhelming majority of councils (95%) surveyed by the Local Government Association (LGA) want the powers to be able to reintroduce virtual and hybrid technology for statutory council meetings.

The LGA claimed that the recruitment and retention of councillors, “particularly those balancing career or care commitments”, will be hampered if powers are not given to councils to be able to hold statutory meetings in a hybrid manner.

One in 10 councils surveyed had a councillor who had stepped down in their authority since May 2021 due to the requirement for them to attend council meetings in-person, the LGA said.

The findings from the survey, which was completed by around a third of local authorities in England, also found that:

- 84% of councils found their councillors with work commitments would benefit from hybrid meetings, whilst 64% of councils thought that their councillors with childcare commitments would also take advantage of the changes.
 - Almost 9 in 10 councils surveyed said they had councillors who would make use of virtual attendance options to attend council meetings as a reasonable adjustment.
- No council surveyed wanted to hold fully virtual meetings but the vast majority wanted hybrid options for those councillors who needed it.

Councils are required to hold certain statutory meetings, such as for planning and full council, in person. However, during the pandemic, councils were temporarily allowed to hold these meetings virtually until May 2021.

The LGA warned that without these powers, “communities will needlessly lose good councillors” and prospective candidates would be put off from standing for election because in-person meetings were creating real barriers to a range of people engaging with local politics.

The Government launched its call for evidence in March 2021. The following month the Divisional Court ruled that meetings held by local authorities in England under the Local Government Act 1972 had to take place in person from 7 May 2021 when emergency regulations introduced in the early stages of the first lockdown expired.

However, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has yet to publish the results of the call for evidence and any next steps more than two years after it closed.

In January 2022 the Secretary of State for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, said he was “strongly in sympathy with the view that hybrid meetings should continue in order to ensure the maximum amount of efficiency”.

In March this year, DLUHC refused a freedom of information request from the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) and Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) in relation to its remote meetings ‘call for evidence’, on the grounds of the burden it would impose.

The groups had asked for all information received by the Government in relation to its call for evidence, including a “breakdown of the responses received, the number received and the content of the responses, together with any documentation the government holds in respect of the analysis of those responses”.

On the results of the LGA survey, Cllr Joe Harris, the Association's Vice-Chair, said: “Good decision-making needs people who reflect the range of experiences, background and insight that exist in their communities.

“However, councillors are restricted by law to attend council meetings in person, which can deter a range of people including full time professionals, parents of young children, carers, workers and disabled people from stepping forward to represent their communities.”

He added: “The Government should provide councils, who know their communities best, with the flexibility they need to decide how to use hybrid technologies in their meetings.

“People’s expectations have changed due to improvements in virtual meeting technologies bought on by the pandemic. Many people now use hybrid meeting technologies every day in their work life and so there should be no reason why this cannot be used by councils across the country.

“This will help to drive up engagement in local democracy and ensure that we have a diverse range of councillors throughout our communities.”

John Austin, chair of ADSO, and Helen McGrath, Head of Public Affairs at LLG, said: "The results of the LGA survey very much supports the ADSO and LLG campaign to allow councils to hold remote meetings if they wish. The evidence and the merits of our case are compelling.

"We therefore call on the Secretary of State to make the necessary legislative change and allow councils to operate in the modern world as the Government and Parliament both do successfully."

Local Government Lawyer

Lords pass amendment to Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill that would allow councils to hold remote meetings

The House of Lords has passed an amendment to the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill that would allow council meetings to take place remotely, despite staunch opposition from the Government.

The amendment to the bill was proposed during a House of Lords debate last week (13 July) and passed with 167 votes in favour and 154 votes against.

Conservative peer Baroness McIntosh of Pickering tabled the amendment, which relied on the previous Regulation 5 of the regulations made under section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020.

In introducing her amendment, she said: "During the pandemic, it was generally felt that remote meetings of councils worked very effectively, and the change has been a source of great disappointment and increasing irritation to local councils, to those elected to represent their constituents at that level and to professional clerks."

Baroness McIntosh branded the lifting of the Covid regulations that permitted virtual meetings as "retrograde and undemocratic".

She argued that councils had suffered an impact on the recruitment and retention of councillors and that "barriers have been created since the removal of these regulations permitting virtual attendance, particularly where there are work and caring commitments or health and disability issues".

The baroness pointed to a survey from the Local Government Association (LGA) that showed 95% of councils supported reintroducing virtual meetings as an option for statutory meetings.

But the Deputy Leader of the House of Lords, Earl Howe, strongly disagreed with the amendment, stating that the Covid regulations were "reflective of a unique moment in time,

when a response to exceptional circumstances was needed".

He said: "That moment has now passed, and the Government are firmly of the view that democracy must continue to be conducted face to face, as it has been for the last two years and for most of history prior to the pandemic."

Earl Howe added: "Noble Lords have argued with some force as to the benefits of meeting remotely, and I completely understand why those arguments should be put forward. In the end, however, they are arguments based on one thing alone—expediency. With great respect, those arguments miss the point."

The Deputy Leader of the House of Lords went on to argue that a core principle of local democracy – that citizens are able to attend council meetings in person and to interact in person with their local representatives – would be undermined by the amendment.

"To allow for a mechanism that denies citizens the ability to do this, ostensibly on grounds of convenience, is in fact to allow for a dilution of good governance and hence a dilution of democracy in its fullest sense", he argued.

He later added: "I do not mean to cause offence to anybody, but someone whose life is directly affected by a planning decision, let us imagine, would not wish to find that the councillors concerned had taken the decision from their respective living rooms with test match coverage playing in the background.

"The same principle applies to the interaction between local councillors. If a council meets either in committee or in full session—especially if it meets to take decisions—councillors are entitled to expect that they will be able to deal with their fellow councillors face to face, debating with them, challenging them and taking decisions in the same room."

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill has passed through its first and second reading in the House of Lords and is currently at the report stage. A fourth day of the report stage is scheduled for today (20 July).

Local Government Lawyer



23 June 2023

MEDIA RELEASE

STIRLING COUNCILLOR SUSPENDED FOR BREACH OF COUNCILLORS' CODE

Following a Hearing held in Stirling on 21 June 2023, Stirling Councillor Danny Gibson was found by the Standards Commission to have breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct for behaving disrespectfully towards council officers, and for having bullied a senior council officer. Cllr Gibson was suspended for a period of five months.

Ashleigh Dunn, Standards Commission Member and Chair of the Hearing Panel, said: "In this case, the Panel found that Cllr Gibson's conduct, towards council officers and others, was entirely inappropriate and unacceptable.

"The Panel considered that councillors should be aware of the inherent influence their role brings and should note that as elected politicians, they are in a position of power over council employees. The Panel therefore emphasised the importance of the requirement for councillors to behave respectfully towards council officers, in order for officers to be able to undertake their tasks without being belittled, or subjected to bullying, unwarranted pressure or interference."

Cllr Gibson was also found to have acted disrespectfully towards an applicant's representative at a Licensing Board meeting. At that meeting, Cllr Gibson was further found to have breached the provisions in the Code that require councillors to:

- act fairly and being seen to act fairly;
- take into account only relevant and material considerations;

when making decisions on quasi-judicial and regulatory matters (which would include licensing applications).

In addition, Cllr Gibson was found by the Panel to have become inappropriately involved in operational matters by attempting to pressure officers to take certain courses of action, in respect of issues relating to a development site and regarding the future of a community hall.

Ms Dunn stated: "The Standards Commission considers that such serious breaches of the Code have the potential to interfere with the effective operation of the council, to undermine the important relationship between council officers and elected members, and to bring the council into disrepute (as well as potentially exposing it to successful legal challenge). As such, the Panel concluded that a five-month suspension was the appropriate sanction in the circumstances."

12 July 2023

MEDIA RELEASE

FORMER FIFE COUNCILLOR CENSURED FOR BREACH OF COUNCILLORS' CODE

Following a Hearing held in Glenrothes on 11 July 2023, former Fife Councillor Linda Holt was found by the Standards Commission to have breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct for behaving disrespectfully towards the secretary of a community council at a community council meeting held in August 2021. Former Cllr Holt was censured by the Standards Commission.

Anne-Marie O'Hara, Standards Commission Member and Chair of the Hearing Panel, said: "In this case, the Panel found that former Cllr Holt's conduct towards the secretary, at a public meeting of the community council, was entirely inappropriate and unacceptable."

The Panel heard that former Cllr Holt had attended the community council meeting in her capacity as an elected member of Fife Council. Having noted the largely consistent accounts provided by several witnesses to the Ethical Standards Commissioner during his investigation, the Panel concluded that former Cllr Holt had shouted at the secretary and behaved in an aggressive, disparaging and dismissive manner towards him at the meeting on 16 August 2021. As such, the Panel found that former Cllr Holt had failed to treat the secretary with courtesy and respect, as required by the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Ms O'Hara continued: "While the Panel understood that former Cllr Holt had concerns about the alleged treatment of a member of the public, by the secretary in an email, the Panel nevertheless considered there was no reason why those concerns could not have been raised in a respectful and courteous manner, without resorting to aggression and shouting. The Panel would emphasise the importance of the requirement for councillors to behave respectfully, at all times, in order to ensure that public confidence in the role of an elected member and the council itself is not undermined".

The Panel was concerned that former Cllr Holt had not demonstrated any insight into the effect of her behaviour on others. The Panel was also concerned that she had failed to show any understanding that, as an elected politician, she was in a role with inherent influence and was in a position of power over community councillors, who were acting in an unpaid and voluntary capacity.

The Panel noted that former Cllr Holt had not expressed any remorse over her behaviour nor any recognition that it might not be appropriate for a councillor to publicly and repeatedly comment on a member of the public's conduct. The Panel noted, in this regard,

that former Cllr Holt could have brought up any concerns she had about the Secretary's email at an earlier stage and in private.

In reaching their decision on the appropriate sanction, the Panel noted that former Cllr Holt was no longer a councillor and, as such, the option to suspend her was not available. As the Panel was of the view that former Cllr Holt's conduct did not come close to warranting a disqualification, it agreed that a censure, being a formal record of the Panel's disapproval, was a suitable outcome.



27 June 2023

MEDIA RELEASE

SOUTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCILLOR SUSPENDED FOR DISCLOSING CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

Following a Hearing held in Hamilton on 27 June 2023, South Lanarkshire Councillor Joe Fagan was found by the Standards Commission to have breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct by disclosing confidential information to the press. Cllr Fagan was suspended for a period of two months.

Suzanne Vestri, Standards Commission Member and Chair of the Hearing Panel, said: "the obligation on councillors to refrain from disclosing confidential information is a key requirement of the Councillors' Code of Conduct. A failure to respect confidentiality can damage the reputation and integrity of a Council, and can also impede discussions and decision-making."

"The Panel agreed that, in this case, it was legitimate for the Council to have decided that the information be kept confidential until such a time as the proposals discussed had been finalised and officers had sufficient time to prepare and manage external communications. This would ensure the Council's position and response were communicated clearly and fully."

Having reviewed all the available evidence, the Panel was satisfied that it was clear that the information was confidential at the time Cllr Fagan disclosed it to the press. The Panel was satisfied that there was evidence that Cllr Fagan disagreed strongly with the proposal to close the facilities in question. It noted that the disclosure had been made a week before the Scottish Parliament election on 6 May 2021 and considered that the Respondent was motivated to disclose the information, at least in part, for political gain.

The Panel noted, in mitigation, that Cllr Fagan had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes, and further noted his contribution to public life and to his community. Furthermore, there was no evidence of repeated behaviour over a long period of time, of dishonesty and / or concealment, or of any previous contraventions of the Code by Cllr Fagan.

The Panel found, nevertheless, that Cllr Fagan had deliberately disclosed the information and that he had done so, at least in part, for political gain. The Panel noted the potential impact of the Respondent's actions on others, particularly council officers, who would have been responsible for dealing with any resulting enquiries from the press and public. The Panel further noted that the disclosure was likely to have resulted in speculation about facilities being closed, before any final decision had been taken, which may have caused undue and unnecessary concern.

In the circumstances, the Panel concluded that a suspension of two months was an appropriate sanction. The Panel noted that it did consider the imposition of a longer suspension given the importance of the confidentiality provisions of the Code but, in light of the extensive mitigation provided, the Panel determined that a period of two months was justified.

Ms Vestri noted, The Panel was disappointed to note that Cllr Fagan had disclosed the information, despite the version of the Code in place at the time clearly stating that information provided to councillors for use in that role must not be disclosed or in any way used for personal or party-political advantage or in such a way as to discredit the Council. The Code states that the requirement to maintain confidentiality also applies in instances where a councillor holds the personal view that such information should be publicly available.”



Northern Ireland

Local Government Commissioner for Standards

Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014

In the Matter of Alderman John Smyth - Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Case Reference: C00434

The Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards, Ms Margaret Kelly (the Commissioner), has appointed Mr Ian Gordon, OBE, QPM, as Assistant Local Government Commissioner (the Assistant Commissioner) in relation to the Adjudication Hearing process in respect of this complaint. Mr Gordon was assisted by Mr Michael Wilson, Solicitor, Legal Assessor.

1. COMPLAINT

On 29 August 2019 the Commissioner received a complaint from Mr Robert Moore alleging that Alderman John Smyth (the Respondent), a member of Antrim and Newtonabbey Borough Council had, or may have, failed to comply with the Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors (the Code).

The allegation was investigated by Mrs Michaela McAleer, then Acting Deputy Commissioner for the Local Government Ethical Standards (LGES) Directorate of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's Office. The Assistant Commissioner has no role in the receipt, assessment or investigation of a complaint.

The Acting Deputy Commissioner submitted a report, dated 15 March 2022, to the Commissioner in accordance with sections 55 and 56 of Part 9 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, and it was accepted for Adjudication by the Assistant Commissioner on 30 June 2022.

The alleged breaches of the Code were:

Potential Breach 1

Disrepute

Paragraph 4.2

'You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your position as a councillor, or your council, into disrepute.'

Potential Breach 2

Obligations as a councillor

Paragraph 4.3

'You must review regularly (at least annually and when your particular circumstances change) your personal circumstances and to take steps to mitigate any conflict of interest in relation to your functions of councillor.'

Paragraph 4.8

'You must maintain and strengthen public trust and confidence in the integrity of your council. You must promote and support the Code at all times and encourage other councilors to follow your example'

Potential Breach 3

Use of your position

Paragraph 4.16

'You must not:

- (a) use, or attempt to use, your position improperly to confer on, or secure, an advantage for yourself or any other person;
- (b) use, or attempt to use, your position improperly to seek preferential treatment for yourself or any other person...'

Paragraph 4.17

'You must avoid any action which could lead members of the public to believe that preferential treatment is being sought.'

Potential Breach 4

Pecuniary interest

Paragraph 6.1

'Section 28 of the 1972 Act requires you to declare any pecuniary interest, direct or indirect, that you have in any matter coming before any meeting of your council. Such interests will be recorded in the register kept by your council for this purpose.'

Paragraph 6.2

'You must not speak or vote on a matter in which you have a pecuniary interest. If such a matter is to be discussed by your council, you must withdraw from the meeting whilst that matter is being discussed.'

Paragraph 6.3

You must also declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising at a council meeting. In addition to those areas set out in paragraph 5.2, an interest will also be significant where you anticipate that a

decision on the matter might reasonably be deemed to benefit or disadvantage yourself to a greater extent than other council constituents. Any sensitive information mentioned in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.6 is not required to be given.

Paragraph 6.4

You must declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interests in a matter as soon as it becomes apparent. You must then withdraw from any council meeting (including committee or sub-committee meeting) when the matter is being discussed. It is your own personal responsibility to determine, having regard to council advice and guidance, whether you have any such interest.

Potential Breach 5

Rules relating to decision making

Paragraph 8.1

‘When participating in meetings or reaching decisions regarding the business of your council, you must:

(a) do so objectively, on the basis of the merits of the circumstances involved, and in the public interest’

The following principles of public life were also noted:

Principle of ‘Public duty’:

‘You have duty to uphold the law and act on all occasions in accordance with the public trust placed in you. You have a general duty to act in the interest of the community as a whole. You have a special duty to your constituents and are responsible to the electorate who are the final arbiter of your conduct as a public representative.’

Principle of ‘Selflessness’:

‘You should act in the public interest at all times, and you should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. You should not act in order to gain financial or other material benefits for yourself, your family, friends or associates.’

Principle of ‘Openness’:

‘You should be as open as possible about the decision and actions that you take. You should give reasons for your decisions when required and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands it.’

Principle of 'Honesty':

'You should act honestly. You have a duty to declare any private interest relating to your public duties. You should take steps to resolve any conflicts between your private interests and public duties at once and in a way that protects the public interest.'

Principle of 'Integrity'

'You should not place yourself under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations, which might reasonably be thought by others to influence you in the performance of your duties as a councillor'.

2. PRE-ADJUDICATION HEARING REVIEWS

The management of the Adjudication process may include convening one or more Pre-Hearing Reviews (PHR). A PHR is a private meeting to determine procedural matters for the ongoing management of the matter up to and including the actual Hearing, but a PHR does not consider or determine the substance of the complaint.

On 7 November 2022 the Solicitors acting for the Respondent wrote to the Commissioner questioning the lawfulness of the delegated authority of the Assistant Commissioner to hear this complaint. On 30 November 2022, the Solicitor acting for the Commissioner replied stating that the Commissioner was satisfied that the delegation to the Assistant Commissioner to hear this complaint was lawful.

On 14 December 2022, the Respondent's Solicitors, wrote to the Assistant Commissioner. In this letter they stated:

"Ahead of the further pre-hearing review of the adjudication in this matter - scheduled for tomorrow (15 December 2022) - we are writing to advise that we maintain our position that Assistant Commissioner Gordon does not have lawful authority to conduct or to determine this adjudication. As such, neither we nor the Respondent will be in attendance at the pre-hearing review tomorrow, nor will we take any further part in this unlawful process (emphasis added)".

The Assistant Commissioner held a PHR to progress the case on 15 December 2022. The arrangements for this PHR had been agreed by all the parties (including the Respondent's Solicitors) at a previous PHR held on 15 November 2022. The PHR on 15 December 2022 was attended by Ms Fiona Fee BL, representing the Deputy Commissioner, but neither the Respondent nor his Solicitors or his Counsel were present.

On 15 December 2022 the Assistant Commissioner replied to the Respondent's Solicitors, confirming that the PHR had taken place and stating:

“Notwithstanding, the content of your letter I am satisfied that I have lawful authority to conduct the Hearing and I am satisfied that it is both appropriate and proportionate to proceed with the Adjudication of the case.

In your letter you expressly state that Alderman Smyth will not attend or be represented at the Adjudication Hearing. It is for you to advise your client as you see fit; however, in light of this statement, it is now my intention to implement paragraphs 25 to 27 of the Adjudication Procedures in order to determine whether there has been a breach of the Code without holding an Adjudication Hearing. I do not consider that I require any further evidence and the circumstances set out at paragraph 25b which states: “if the Respondent states that he or she does not intend to attend or wish to be represented at the Adjudication Hearing” are clearly met.

I will now deal with Stage 1 (Findings of Fact) and Stage 2 (Determination) on paper. I have asked for the draft Statement of Facts prepared by the Deputy Commissioner and any response from your client to be sent to me for inclusion in my consideration. I will also take into account the contents of the final paragraph of your letter of 14 December 2022.

I will of course continue to correspond with you, as Alderman Smyth’s legal representative, and the Deputy Commissioner’s office throughout this process”.

The Adjudication Procedures document, at page 7 paragraphs 25 to 27, sets out the procedure that permits the Commissioner to determine whether there has been a breach of the Code without holding an Adjudication Hearing:

Paragraph 25: Determination of Adjudication without an Adjudication Hearing

“The Commissioner has the discretion to adjudicate to determine whether there has been a breach without an Adjudication Hearing if he considers that he requires no further evidence and any one of the following circumstances apply:

25a. If no reply is received in response to the notification provided to the Respondent within the specified time or any extension of time allowed by the Commissioner; or

25b. If the Respondent states that he or she does not intend to attend or wish to be represented at the Adjudication Hearing; or

25c. The Respondent does not dispute the contents of the investigation report”.

For the reasons outlined above, the Assistant Commissioner has exercised his discretion not to hold an Adjudication Hearing to determine if there has been a breach of the Code.

Paragraph 26 of the Adjudication Procedures requires him to:

“send to the Respondent a list of the facts, together with any other supporting evidence, that he will take into account in reaching his decision. The Respondent will have 15 working days to submit any further written representations before the Assistant Commissioner makes his adjudication.”

3. STAGE 1 – FACTS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

At the direction of the Assistant Commissioner the Acting Deputy Commissioner submitted a proposed Statement of Facts which was sent to the Respondent's solicitors on 9 November 2022 and on 28 November 2022, having taken the Respondent's instructions, they replied as follows:

With regard to paragraph 8, after the words 'was employed', there should be inserted "by Mr Clarke MLA". This was agreed to by Acting Deputy Commissioner

With regard to paragraph 22 the word 'planning', ought to be deleted and replaced with the word 'all'. This was agreed to by Acting Deputy Commissioner.

Paragraphs 24 and 25 of the proposed Statement of Facts were disputed by the Respondent. Paragraph 24 has been removed by the Acting Deputy Commissioner, but Paragraph 25 remains as a 'disputed fact'.

As the Deputy Commissioner no longer sought to rely on either of them, both paragraphs 24 and 25 of the proposed Statement of Facts have been disregarded. All the other paragraphs of the proposed Statement of Facts were agreed between the parties and are now set out. This includes the amended paragraphs 8 and 22.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

1. At the relevant time (19 March 2019), Alderman John Smyth was a member of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council ('the Council').
2. Alderman Smyth signed a Declaration of Acceptance of Office on 5 June 2014, stating that he had read and would observe the Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors.
3. Alderman Smyth was first elected to the Council approximately 20 years ago. During this time, he has served as both Deputy Mayor (2018-2019) and Mayor (2019-2020).
4. At the relevant time (19 March 2019), Alderman Smyth also held the role of Deputy Mayor within the Council.
5. Alderman Smyth is a member of the Council's Planning Committee. He was appointed to the Planning Committee in 2014 and sat as a member since this time, with the exception of the period he served as Mayor (2019-2020).
6. Alderman Smyth commenced employment with Mr Trevor Clarke MLA in 2014.
7. Alderman Smyth recorded in the Council's Members' Register of interests on 21 January 2014 'Trevor Clarke MLA' under the heading financial and other personal interests.
8. At the relevant time (19 March 2019), Alderman Smyth was employed by Mr Clarke MLA for 12 hours per week. This has since increased to 24 hours per week.

9. At the relevant time, Mr Clarke had a planning consultancy business which bore the name 'Versatile Planning Consultancy'.
10. Alderman Smyth sat on the Council's Planning Committee at a meeting held on 19 March 2019.
11. Alderman Smyth did not declare an interest in respect of any matter under consideration at the Council's Planning Committee meeting on 19 March 2019.
12. Mr Clarke MLA made representations before the Council's Planning Committee on 19 March 2019, in respect of three applications.
13. Two of the applications in which Mr Clarke made representations were applications LA03/2018/1124/O and LA03/2018/1125/O.
14. Planning permission in respect of the two applications was refused due to the following votes cast:
LA03/2018/1124/O - five in favour of recommendation to refuse: four against and one abstention.
LA03/2018/1125/O - six in favour of recommendation to refuse: three against and one abstention.
15. One of the applications in which Mr Clarke made representations, application LA03/2018/0855/O, Mr Clarke was the Agent by virtue of his company Versatile Planning Consultancy.
16. Alderman Smyth asked a clarification question of Mr Clarke: 'Trevor is there a Farm ID for what we're shown at this moment in time?'
17. Planning permission in respect of this application was also refused, with the Planning Officer's recommendation to refuse carried by seven votes to zero, with three abstentions.
18. The minutes of the Council's Planning Committee meeting do not record the vote cast by each Member in respect of each application.
19. The investigation carried out by the Director of Investigations found no evidence that Alderman Smyth had direct or implied knowledge of Versatile being in the ownership of Mr Clarke MLA.
20. Alderman Smyth does not recall Mr Clarke being referred to as 'the agent' at the PC meeting. When asked if he had done so, would it have prompted a different course of action, Alderman Smyth said 'Not particularly' as Mr Clarke had not spoken to him on any planning issue.

21. Alderman Smyth had open access to Mr Clarke MLA's constituency office database containing information relating to Mr Clarke's constituency activities.
22. Following from this, Alderman Smyth had open access to information concerning all matters in which Mr Clarke MLA was involved as an MLA.
23. Alderman Smyth did not speak to Mr Clarke MLA prior to the Committee meeting regarding any of the three applications on which he made representations at the Council's Planning Committee on 19 March 2019.
24. Alderman Smyth's conduct received media attention in The Irish News on 1 August 2019 and 3 September 2019.

The Assistant Commissioner reviewed these proposed Facts and has also taken into account the supporting evidence contained in the Investigation Report and in correspondence from the Respondent's Solicitors dated 17 December 2021 and 21 June 2022. The Assistant Commissioner concluded that the Facts set out in paragraphs 1 to 24 above should represent the findings of Fact in this matter.

FINDING OF FACTS

On 27 January 2023, the Assistant Commissioner sent the Respondent his proposed Findings of Fact in accordance with paragraph 26 of the Adjudication Procedures and afforded him 15 working days to submit any further representations before the Assistant Commissioner would make his Stage 1 adjudication on the Facts of this matter. No response was received from the Respondent or his solicitors.

In circumstances where the Respondent was not present nor represented, the Assistant Commissioner had been careful to ensure that the 'undisputed and agreed facts' were made out to his satisfaction. Taking into account that the parties had put these facts forward as undisputed, and agreed, and have carefully considered the supporting evidence contained in the Investigation Report and the correspondence from the Respondent's solicitors dated 17 December 2021 and 21 June 2022, the Assistant Commissioner was satisfied that the Facts numbered 1 to 24 inclusive had been made out to his satisfaction.

4. STAGE 2 – DETERMINATION ON BREACH

In the process of coming to his Stage 2 conclusions on the alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct for Councillors ('the Code'), the Assistant Commissioner had again fully taken into account the response by the Respondent to the allegations, as provided in correspondence from his solicitors. This included their letters dated 17 December 2021 and 21 June 2022 and, in addition, a letter dated 14 December 2022.

The Finding of Facts, at paragraphs 1 to 24 inclusive, had been agreed by the parties and the Assistant Commissioner noted that these Facts were inclusive to his consideration of all alleged breaches.

The Code applies to councillors and councils established in accordance with Section 1 of the Local Government Act Northern Ireland 1972 as amended by the Local Government Boundaries Act Northern 27 Ireland 2008. The Code must be observed according to paragraph 1.7:

"Where the councillor conducts the business or are present at meeting of the council, whenever the councillor acts, claims to act or gives the impression they are acting in the role of councillor and whenever the councillor acts, claims to act or gives the impression that they are acting as a representative of the council."

In addition, the Code provides at 2.9 that the Code must be observed at all times in relation to:

- (a) Conduct which could reasonably be regarded as bringing the councillor's position as a councillor into disrepute or their council into disrepute.
- (b) Conduct relating to the procuring, advocating or encouraging of any action contrary to the code.
- (c) Conduct relating to the improper use or attempted use of the councillor's position to confer on or secure for the councillor or any other person an advantage or create or avoid for the councillor, or any other person, a disadvantage.
- (d) Conduct relating to the use or authorisation of the use by others of the resources of the council.

The Code is based on 12 principles of conduct: public duty, selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership, equality, promoting good relations, respect and good working relationships.

The Respondent was alleged to have breached five aspects of the Code (as set out at pages 1 to 3 above)

1. REASONS FOR THE DECISION

The Assistant Commissioner had established the facts of the case. The evidential test for consideration of a breach of the Code is whether the Deputy Commissioner had established to the satisfaction of the Assistant Commissioner, on the 'Balance of Probabilities', that there had been a failure to comply with the Code. The Assistant Commissioner applied that test to his determination.

The Assistant Commissioner considered a key factor in this case, and the core issue for determining any breach of the Code, lay in the analysis of any direct or indirect pecuniary interest, and/or significant non-pecuniary interest which the Respondent may have had, and, to that extent, a consideration of his attendance and conduct at the Council's Planning

Committee meetings (Potential Breach 4 above). The Code required the registration of such interests and, if such a matter was to be discussed by your Council, the Councillor having that interest must declare it and withdraw from the meeting.

The Assistant Commissioner referred to the Acting Deputy Commissioner's Report:

Registerable Interest - Paragraphs 2.9 and 43

p.29 Alderman Smyth stated that he has worked for Mr Clarke since 2014 and that in 2019, he was employed for 12 hours per week. Alderman Smyth also stated his 'primary role is dealing with benefit application since the increase in his number of hours worked per week, he now deals with general enquiries, social issues and housing in addition to benefit applications.

p.43 I considered paragraph 5.2 of the Code and conclude that Alderman Smyth had a clear registrable interest in his employment with Mr Clarke. The evidence suggests that this interest was properly registered on the Council's Register of Interests from 21 January 2014 under 'financial and other personal interests'. In consideration of paragraph 6.2 of the Code, I am satisfied that Alderman Smyth's employment constituted a pecuniary interest, in the continued remunerated employment and the desired continuation of that remuneration.

The Assistant Commissioner determined that the Respondent, in working for Mr Clarke, had a registerable interest as defined in paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Code. This interest was properly registered in the Council's Register of Interests.

On the 19 March 2019, the Respondent sat on the Council's Planning Committee when his employer, Mr Clarke, made representations to the Committee on three planning applications. In one application, Mr Clarke was the Agent for the application via his firm Versatile Planning Consultancy. The Investigation Report found no evidence that the Respondent had direct or implied knowledge of Versatile being owned by Mr Clarke.

Prior to the Committee Meeting, the Respondent did not speak to Mr Clarke regarding any of the three applications on which he made representations. During the Committee Meeting the Respondent made no declaration of interest in respect of any matter.

The requirements to declare any pecuniary interests are set out at paragraph 6.1 of the Code, and paragraph 6.2 states that a councillor must not speak or vote on a matter in which they have a pecuniary interest, and they must withdraw from a meeting whilst that matter is being discussed.

Likewise, paragraph 6.3 of the Code requires a councillor to declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising at a council (or committee) meeting, and paragraph 6.4 states that it is the personal responsibility of a councillor to declare such interest, and to withdraw from the meeting.

In the Investigation Report, the Acting Deputy Commissioner considered 'perception' in relation to the conduct of a councillor at the Committee Meeting:

p.46 In addition, the Code obliged Alderman Smyth to consider the perception of his actions. I consider that paragraph 4.17 of the Code and 4.13.13 of the Commissioner’s Guidance on the Code placed an obligation on Alderman Smyth to avoid actions which could reasonably lead to a perception of favourable treatment. The issue of perception was also addressed by the Commissioner in the decision of Rea¹ where the objective test was outlined:

‘The objective test requires Mr Rea Councillor to have considered not just whether he himself could be influenced by his employer’s interest in the matter under discussion (no decisions were made at the meetings in question) but also whether his actions might be perceived by a member of the public as being so influenced’²

p.47 “I consider a member of the public’s conclusion that Alderman Smyth would be reluctant to vote against the views of his employer, due to the potential impact it may have on his employment, is a reasonable conclusion. The investigation found no evidence to suggest that Alderman Smyth considered public perception in not declaring an interest and leaving the room”.

The Assistant Commissioner concurred with the Acting Deputy Commissioner’s conclusion that the Respondent had not considered the ‘public perception’ of his actions in the Committee Meeting. Further, the Guidance to the Code at paragraph 4.13.13 emphasised the relevance of considering the wider public perception:

“The key consideration is therefore not whether your decision would be influenced by your interest but whether a member of the public – if he or she knew all of the relevant facts – would perceive that the interest is such that it would be likely to influence your decision”.

In relation to Potential Breach 4, the Assistant Commissioner considered the Respondent’s response to the Investigation Report, through his legal representative, in their letter dated 17 December 2021:

“In short, there is simply no evidence that Mr Clarke himself had an interest in the outcome of the planning applications in question. The fact that he was speaking in favour of them, does not mean that he himself had any interest in the outcome. It is submitted that for Mr Clarke to have had a pecuniary interest in the outcome of these planning applications, in accordance with how that is defined within section 146 of the 1972 Act, he himself would have had to have stood to gain from planning permission being granted. There is no evidence that that is the case here. In the event that this is not accepted, then Alderman Smyth prays in aid of section 146(1)(ii) of the 1972 Act and would state that any advantage to Mr Clarke MLA as a result of the planning applications being granted was so indirectly

¹ Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards: 8 July 2019/ <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Decision-Notice-Mervyn-Rea-1.pdf>

² Ibid. Page 15 paragraph 4

or remotely related to Mr Clarke MLA, that Alderman Smyth’s judgment was not likely to have been affected or influenced thereby, and therefore that no question of a pecuniary interest, arises”.

The Assistant Commissioner accepted that, other than the Respondent’s employment by Mr Clarke, no evidence was put forward to quantify a direct pecuniary interest with a consequent advantage to the Respondent being shown. In the application LA03/2018/0855/O, where Mr Clarke was the Agent, the Respondent was not aware of that fact. All three applications were refused. There is no evidence as to how the Respondent voted in the three applications: the Council do not record individual’s votes and the Respondent cannot remember how he voted.

The Assistant Commissioner was satisfied on the facts that there was no evidence that this was a case which involved a direct or indirect pecuniary interest (as defined in section 146 of the Local Government Act (NI) 1972) and accordingly there had been no breach of paragraphs 6.1 and 6.2 of the Code.

The Assistant Commissioner found that the core of this case therefore related to the alleged breaches of paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4 of the Code.

Paragraphs 6.3

You must also declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising at a council meeting. In addition to those areas set out in paragraph 5.2, an interest will also be significant where you anticipate that a decision on the matter might reasonably be deemed to benefit or disadvantage yourself to a greater extent than other council constituents. Any sensitive information mentioned in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.6 is not required to be given.

Paragraph 6.4

You must declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interests in a matter as soon as it becomes apparent. You must then withdraw from any council meeting (including committee or sub-committee meeting) when the matter is being discussed. It is your own personal responsibility to determine, having regard to council advice and guidance, whether you have any such interest.

The Respondent was interviewed, on 6 October 2021, by Ms Nicola McGuire, Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) from the Acting Deputy Commissioner’s staff. Mr Brian Moss, the Respondent’s legal representative was present.:

In interview, the Respondent acknowledged he was aware that Mr Clarke (his employer) was to speak to three planning applications before the Committee Meeting on 19 March 2019. The Respondent did not seek any advice or speak to Mr Clarke about the situation. The Respondent was asked by the SIO in relation to the Committee Meeting:

Q. Okay, well, on that basis could you explain to us, on what basis you didn't declare an interest at that meeting and leave the room?

A. Because I'd declared an interest in my [register of interests], I've consistently done it from 2014, I've worked for Trevor Clarke MLA.

Q. Do you mean you registered your interest?

A. Yes.

Q. Okay, but you didn't declare it at that meeting or at the beginning of that meeting or during...

A. No.

Q. Okay and what basis...

A. Also because Trevor Clarke had never spoke to me about it, about any planning issue so I see no reason why I should declare an interest in it.

Q. And is that what you consider the pertinent question within the Code?

A. Yes.

Q. Whether he spoke to you about it?

A. Yes. He never raised any planning issue with me.

Q. Can I put to you that 5.2 of the Code makes an employment interest registerable and therefore it's automatically significant?

A. That's ... I had it registered that I worked with Trevor Clarke I had consistently, since 2014, done that, that I worked for him.

Q. Okay, I was just going to put to you that, yes, registration is not an issue and..

A. Okay, fair enough.

Q. It is clear that your employment is registered, however, paragraph 6.3 and 6.4 of the Code, refer to registered employment interests and that automatically makes that interest significant where it relates to a matter that comes before a Council or Committee...

At this point in the interview, the Respondent's legal representative commented that:

"..under the Local Government Act [(NI) 1972], registration of an interest in the Council's register is sufficient to discharge the Councillor's duty and that the Code can't go further than the legislation on that. ..[R]egistration in the Council's Register of Interests by a member is sufficient to discharge any duties that the Councillor otherwise would owe".

The Assistant Commissioner did not accept this proposition which conflated the obligation to 'register' an interest with the additional requirements in the Code, at paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4, for the declaration of a relevant significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest, and the withdrawal by the Councillor from the Committee meeting for the duration of the discussion of the matter. Likewise, at interview the following exchange took place:

Q. Did you consider declaring your interest as an employee of Mr Clarke's?

A. No more than what I've done to register an interest.

Q. Okay.

A. As Mr Moss alluded to, that's fulfilled my obligations.

Q. Okay. Do you believe it was possible to act impartially despite Mr Clarke, your employer, speaking in favour of this application?

A. Yes. As I said, I've got my own mind and as part of our training you have to make up your own mind on the same reasons why it should be either for or against the planning application.

Q. Did you consider the Commissioner's guidance in relation to considering whether there may be a perception that your interest may influence how you would vote or decide on the matter?

A. No, because I'd declared my interest and felt that I'd obligated all my interests as such, to all parties concerned.

Q. You didn't consider that a member of the public, or whether a member of the public would perceive that the interest would be likely to influence your decision?

A. No, I felt I acted in a clear and professional way, as my responsibilities as a Councillor.

Q. Okay, and I'm just going to ask you again about the Department for Infrastructure guidance in relation to application of the Code with regard to planning matters, and again, I'll just refer you to paragraph 9, which states, 'where you have a significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest, for example, a planning application submitted by a close friend, close associate, body or organisation of which you are a member, you must declare this and you must then withdraw from the meeting when the matter is being discussed'.

A. No more than what I've done in my register of interest and as nobody had contacted me in regard to any planning issue from family or friends or anybody else, I'd no reason to [do so at the] meeting.

The Assistant Commissioner considered that the Respondent was mistaken in his view that the Code, in relation to declaration of non-pecuniary interests (and pecuniary interests) was only relevant where someone had contacted him regarding the meeting/application. This reinforces the Assistant Commissioner's belief that the Respondent had not fully understood the implication of perception, by a member of the public, of influence and prejudice arising if the Respondent failed to declare and leave the Committee room where an application involved his employer. As paragraph 6.4 of the Code noted, it is the personal responsibility of Councillors to determine, having regard to council advice and guidance, whether they have any such interest.

Paragraph 6.3 obliges Councillors to 'declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising at a council meeting etc.'. A Council committee meeting falls within this definition.

To quantify, in non-pecuniary interests, the reason for the declaration and subsequent withdrawal process in p.64, the Assistant Commissioner drew upon the Guidance to the Code at:

p.4.13.9

The Code requires that you declare 'any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interests' in a matter coming before a meeting of your council as soon as it becomes apparent to you. Non-pecuniary interests are those that do not involve business or financial matters and can include, for example, those interests that arise through a

position of responsibility in, or membership of, a club, society or organisation. A non-pecuniary interest will be considered to be 'significant' if:

it is one that falls within any of the categories of interest listed in paragraph 5.2 of the Code; or

you anticipate that a decision on the matter coming before the meeting of your council might reasonably be considered by a member of the public to benefit or disadvantage you to a greater extent than other council constituents.

This sets out what 'Non-pecuniary interests' are and makes clear that a non-pecuniary interest would be considered as 'significant' if it is one that fell within any of the categories of interest listed in paragraph 5.2 of the Code, which created the requirement to register 'personal interests (both financial and otherwise)' and identified employment as a category of interest. The Respondent had been employed by Mr Clarke since 2014.

In her Investigation Report, the Acting Deputy Commissioner referred to:

p.65 I also took into account the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) 'Conflict of Interest Good Practice Guide' (March 2015) which at Section 2.9, states '...a conflict of interest that is concealed, even if unintentionally through ignorance of proper procedure, or managed poorly, creates at best a risk of allegations or perceptions of misconduct'.

p.66 Further, I took account of relevant caselaw relating to conflicts of interest. In the case of Toner³, the Hearing Panel determined that 'the objective test... obliges councillors and members of public bodies to consider whether a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard an interest as so significant it was likely to prejudice their discussion or decision-making'.

I further noted the Panel determined 'in applying the objective test, therefore, the Respondent should have considered not only whether he could be influenced by his employer's interest in the matter, but also whether his actions might be perceived by a member of the public as being so influenced'. I noted that this case can be distinguished to the present case as they did not involve the exercise of a quasi-judicial function, as Alderman Smyth was in sitting as a member of the PC.

2. DETERMINATION

The Assistant Commissioner determined that 'risk of allegations or perceptions of misconduct' was a significant aspect in his consideration of the alleged breaches set out in Potential Breach 4. Further, Fact 11 showed the Respondent did not declare an interest in respect of any of these applications or leave the meeting.

The Assistant Commissioner found, on the balance of probability, that the Respondent's conduct was in breach of the Code in a number of respects based upon his failure to observe

³ Standards Commission Scotland, 29 November 2016

the requirements of the Code of Conduct consequent upon his non-pecuniary interests. For the avoidance of doubt, the Assistant Commissioner found that this case did not involve any direct or indirect pecuniary interests.

POTENTIAL BREACH 1 – Disrepute

Disrepute, which is alleged as a breach of paragraph 4.2 of the Code by the Respondent, is considered at paragraphs 4.5.2 to 4.5.4 in the Guidance to the Code. As a councillor, your actions and behaviour are subject to a higher level of expectation and scrutiny than those of other members of the public. The Guidance implies conduct which brings the role or the Council into disrepute as likely to be of a very serious nature, which goes to a person's fitness to hold office. Whilst the Respondent has misinterpreted the requirements of disclosure and requirement to leave the meeting, the Assistant Commissioner does not find a deliberate action on his part.

On the facts of this case, the Assistant Commissioner is not satisfied to the requisite standard that the Respondent has breached paragraph 4.2 of the Code.

POTENTIAL BREACH 2 – Obligations as a Councillor

Paragraph 4.3 of the Code alludes to regular review by a councillor of their particular circumstances and take steps to mitigate any conflict of interest. The Investigation Report accepted that the Respondent had properly registered his interest as an employee of Mr Clarke, but found no evidence that he had taken steps to mitigate any conflict of interest in relation to his functions, including his membership of the Planning Committee, arising from this employment and the access to information relevant to Mr Clarke's constituency work which accompanied it.

Accordingly, the Assistant Commissioner found that the Respondent has breached paragraph 4.3 of the Code.

Paragraph 4.8 of the Code alludes to maintain and strengthen public trust and confidence in their council, with promotion and support of the Code at all times.

The Assistant Commissioner determined there was no evidence to support a breach of paragraph 4.8.

POTENTIAL BREACH 3- Use of your position

Paragraph 4.16 of the Code alludes to improper use of a Councillor's position to confer or secure an advantage and/or to use their position to seek preferential treatment.

The Assistant Commissioner determined there was no evidence to support a breach of paragraph 4.16.

POTENTIAL BREACH 4 – pecuniary interests

Paragraphs 6.1 and 6.2 of the Code define pecuniary interest both direct and indirect.

On the facts of this case the Assistant Commissioner has determined that it does not involve any direct or indirect pecuniary interests and therefore the Respondent has not breached paragraphs 6.1 and 6.2.

Paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4 of the Code define significant private or personal non-pecuniary interests.

The Assistant Commissioner considered the Respondent was mistaken in his belief that registration of his employment situation satisfied these parts of the Code. The Assistant Commissioner was satisfied that the facts established that the Respondent has a significant private and personal non-pecuniary interest as a consequence of his employment by Mr Clarke which gave rise to the additional need to declare that interest at the Planning Committee meeting, and to withdraw from the relevant parts of the meeting. In addition, the Respondent had not fully understood the implication of perception, by a member of the public, of influence and prejudice arising if he failed to declare this interest and leave the Committee room where an application involved representations by his employer. The Assistant Commissioner did not find that the Respondent's actions were deliberate on the night and it was apparent that they had had no detrimental effect on the outcome of the planning applications.

The Assistant Commissioner, on the facts of this case, found the Respondent had breached paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4. of the Code.

POTENTIAL BREACH 5 - Rules relating to decision making

The Assistant Commissioner was satisfied on the facts that in relation to Potential Breach 5, which engaged the rules relating to decision making, there was no evidence that the Respondent did not have an open mind on, or that he had pre-determined, any application. Consequently, the Respondent has not breached paragraph 8.1 of the Code.

This concluded Stages 1 and 2 of the Adjudication Hearing process, which then proceeded to Stage 3 (Sanction).

5. STAGE 3 – SANCTION

On the 15 June 2023, the Assistant Commissioner opened the public Adjudication Hearing to determine Sanction. The Hearing was conducted by WebEx, and arrangements were made for member of the public who wished to attend to view the virtual Hearing at the offices of the Commissioner.

The Assistant Commissioner was accompanied by Michael Wilson, Solicitor, whose function was to provide independent legal advice and assistance during the Hearing, and to ensure that it was conducted fairly but he had no role in the Assistant Commissioner's decision making.

The Deputy Commissioner was represented by Ms Fiona Fee BL. Neither the Respondent nor his legal representatives were present.

As a preliminary matter the Assistant Commissioner addressed the absence of the Respondent and his legal representatives from the Sanctions Hearing. He noted that the Respondent's legal representatives had previously notified him that they had advised the Respondent not to participate in the Adjudication process which was the reason why the

Assistant Commissioner conducted Stages 1 (Finding of Facts) and Stage 2 (Determination on Breach) under paragraph 25(b) of the Adjudication Procedures.

The Assistant Commissioner noted that paragraph 48 of the Adjudication Procedures allowed him to either adjudicate in the absence of the Respondent, or to adjourn the Hearing to another date.

On that matter, the Assistant Commissioner asked Ms Fee, for her submission on adjudicating in the absence of the Respondent.

Ms Fee said that in light of the approach adopted by the Respondent, she thought it had been a consistent approach not to participate. In the circumstances her submission was that it was appropriate to continue with the hearing in his absence. She was mindful of the fact that there would then be a particular enhanced onus on her to draw the Assistant Commissioner's attention to both the aggravating and the mitigating factors of the case.

The Assistant Commissioner then asked Mr Wilson, as the Legal Assessor, for his advice on adjudicating in the absence of the Respondent.

Mr Wilson said the Assistant Commissioner had already referenced, paragraph 48 of the Adjudication Procedures, which permitted him to proceed in the absence of the Respondent. In this case the Assistant Commissioner would be entitled to take into account the letter of the 14 of December 2022 from the Respondent's Solicitors in which they said that they would not be participating further in the Hearing. Mr Wilson said the Assistant Commissioner should adjourn to consider his approach.

Following a brief adjournment the hearing resumed.

The Assistant Commissioner said he had considered the papers in the Hearing bundle and had taken into account the submissions from Ms Fee and the advice from Mr Wilson, his Legal Adviser. He was very aware that it was important to exercise the utmost care and caution in deciding whether or not to proceed in the absence of the Respondent.

The Assistant Commissioner was satisfied that the Respondent was fully aware of the arrangements for the Hearing. The Respondent and his legal representatives had been issued with a full bundle of papers for the Sanctions Hearing, which included his findings at Stages 1 and 2. The Respondent had had the benefit of legal advice and had chosen not to attend any part of the Adjudication process. The Assistant Commissioner concluded, therefore, that it was unlikely an adjournment would make any difference to the Respondent's decision not to attend in the future.

Therefore, on balance, the Assistant Commissioner said that public interest in having this matter concluded outweighed the option to adjourn to another date.

In proceeding in the absence of the Respondent, the Assistant Commissioner reminded Counsel for the Deputy Commissioner of her obligation to draw to his attention not only the evidence relied on by the Deputy Commissioner, but also any matters raised by the Respondent in his Councillor Response Form.

In Stage 1 of the proceedings, the Assistant Commissioner had established the Findings of Fact. These Facts (which are set out above) were then read into the record.

Having established these facts at Stage 1, the Assistant Commissioner had then considered all the available evidence before him in Stage 2, where he found:

The Code applied to the Respondent.

1. He was satisfied that the Respondent had failed to comply with the Code at:

Paragraph 4.3:

‘You must not conduct yourself in a way which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your position as a Councillor into disrepute’.

Paragraph 6.3

You must also declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising at a council meeting. In addition to those areas set out in paragraph 5.2, an interest will also be significant where you anticipate that a decision on the matter might reasonably be deemed to benefit or disadvantage yourself to a greater extent than other council constituents. Any sensitive information mentioned in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.6 is not required to be given.

Paragraph 6.4

You must declare any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interests in a matter as soon as it becomes apparent. You must then withdraw from any council meeting (including committee or sub-committee meeting) when the matter is being discussed. It is your own personal responsibility to determine, having regard to council advice and guidance, whether you have any such interest.

The Assistant Commissioner’s Determination on Stages 1 and 2 had been sent to both the Deputy Commissioner and the Respondent. The Assistant Commissioner had received written submissions on mitigation and sanction from the Deputy Commissioner; however, the Respondent had not provided any such submissions.

The Deputy Commissioner’s written submissions are set out in full at Appendix A to this Decision Report. Ms Fee orally outlined the key submissions at the Hearing.

Ms Fee’s submissions:

The sanctions guidelines at Appendix A set out factors that the Assistant Commissioner may take into account when determining the appropriate sanction. The sanctions guidelines themselves set out the purpose of sanction and the various options which were available to the Acting Commissioner. The written submissions addressed each of these starting with no action, then censure, partial suspension, suspension and disqualification

Mitigating Factors:

Ms Fee confirmed that the Respondent had no history of breaching the Code and that this provided some evidence of previous good service and compliance with the Code. The Respondent had engaged with the investigation process, which included making himself available for interview, and the Deputy Commissioner considered that this constituted cooperation with the investigation stage.

During the Deputy Commissioner's investigation, the Respondent had indicated that he had tried to rely on his interpretation of advice provided by the Borough Lawyer, which might provide some evidence of an honestly held, but mistaken, view that the action concerned did not constitute a failure to follow the provisions of the Code, particularly where such a view had been formed after taking appropriate advice,

Ms Fee noted that the Assistant Commissioner's determination on breach had not found that the Respondent's actions were deliberate, and also noted that it was apparent they had no detrimental effect on the outcome of the planning applications.

There had been an apology by the Respondent. Ms Fee also referenced the significant passage of time since the events complained of and that the Respondent had continued to engage with the process to an extent, for example by providing input into the statement of agreed facts although, on the basis of legal advice, he had not participated in the previous determinations at Stage 1 and Stage 2 and again at the Sanctions Hearing.

Ms Fee said there were other mitigating factors which were set out in her written submissions, but these were the most pertinent.

Aggravating Factors:

An important factor in this case was the protection of the public interest and public confidence in the institutions of Local Government through those who had been democratically elected.

The Respondent had full knowledge of his employment role with Mr Clarke he should have erred on the side of caution by absenting himself from a situation which could have given rise to a potential conflict of interest.

The Assistant Commissioner had determined that there was no evidence that the Respondent had taken any steps to mitigate any conflict of interest in this regard. She highlighted the Commissioner's Guidance on the Code and noted that this Guidance was the subject of consultation with Councillors and other stakeholders and that the Guidance made clear that familiarity and understanding of the Code and its obligations and responsibilities was a matter of personal responsibility for the Councillor.

Ms Fee referenced the specific guidance which the Department for Infrastructure had issued in respect of the Code with regard to planning matters which made clear that the Code required Councillors to declare any pecuniary interest and withdraw from the meeting and, where there was a significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest the Councillor must declare this and withdraw from the meeting when the matter was discussed.

Ms Fee noted the previous case-law referenced in her written submissions, in particular the case of Mervyn Rea⁴, which dealt with the importance of registering and declaring interests (albeit in a matter which involved a pecuniary interest).

Sanction:

Regarding Sanction Ms Fee concluded:

1. No action: would not be a suitable outcome as the Respondent's breach of the Code was not an inadvertent failure by him.
2. Censure: it was questionable whether censure could adequately cater for the public interest in these circumstances and the breaches were not minor in nature.
3. Partial suspension. The Respondent was a member of the Planning Committee and, as the breaches arose in that context, a partial period of suspension from the Planning Committee might be considered to meet the public interest and be proportionate to the nature of these breaches.
4. Suspension: although these were serious breaches which related to aspects of the Code that were central to public confidence, nonetheless partial suspension might be considered to meet the public interest in this specific instance.
5. Disqualification: This would be the most serious sanction.

Determination on Sanction

The Assistant Commissioner adjourned the Hearing to consider his decision.

When the Hearing resumed, Ms Fee said she had omitted to specifically refer the Assistant Commissioner to the Respondent's Councillor Response Form, and the letter of the 17th of December 2021 from his solicitors, which the Assistant Commissioner was also entitled to take into account, although both were primarily focused on disputing breach. She added that where there were points in that correspondence and Form, which touched on the issue of sanction, she had sought to draw those out in her submissions.

Mr Wilson, when asked to comment by the Assistant Commissioner, said that no issue arose from that, and these documents essentially dealt with matters that had already been determined in the Adjudication process.

The Assistant Commissioner said he had considered the Sanctions Guidelines and noted that the principal purpose of sanction was the preservation of public confidence in Local Government representatives. He noted that the Respondent had no history of breaching the code of conduct.

⁴ <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Decision-Notice-Mervyn-Rea-1.pdf>

Mitigating factors:

In terms of mitigating factors, the Assistant Commissioner noted the submissions by Ms Fee and stated:

There was some evidence of a previous record of good service and compliance with the Code.

The Respondent had engaged with the Investigation process, although he had disengaged from the adjudication process. In the particular circumstances of the case however, the Assistant Commissioner did not consider this to be an aggravating factor as the Respondent had done so on legal advice.

The Respondent sought to rely on his interpretation of advice provided by the Borough Lawyer to members at the start of the PC meeting. This provided some evidence of an honestly held (although mistaken) view that the action concerned did not constitute a failure to follow the provisions of the Code, particularly where such a view had been formed after taking appropriate advice.

The Respondent had apologised for his failure to declare an interest and his apology was reported in the media.

There had been a considerable passage of time since the complaint arose.

Aggravating factors:

The Assistant Commissioner concurred with Ms Fee's submission that the Respondent, who was an experienced councillor with approximately 20 years of service, had full knowledge of his employment role with Mr Clarke and should have erred on the side of caution by absenting himself from a situation which could rise to a potential conflict of interest. He found, in his Stage 2 decision, no evidence that the Respondent had taken any steps to mitigate any conflict of interest in this regard.

The Commissioner's Guidance on the Code emphasised that familiarity and understanding of obligations under the Code and conduct was a matter of personal responsibility for the councillor. The Respondent had not demonstrated he had undertaken that responsibility.

Of particular note was Ms Fee's submission about specific Departmental guidance on the application of the Code with regard to planning matters, which made clear at paragraph 9 :

'The Code requires you to declare any pecuniary (financial) interest and withdraw from the meeting (for example, a planning application submitted by yourself, partner/spouse or family member). Where you have a significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest (e.g. planning application submitted by a close friend, close associate or body or organisation of which you are a member) you must declare this and you must then withdraw from the meeting when the matter is being discussed.'

FINDING:

The Assistant Commissioner said that any sanction imposed must also be justified in the wider public interest and should be designed to discourage or prevent any future failures to comply with the Code or to discourage similar conduct by other Councillors. This was a very important feature of the whole procedure in dealing with breaches of the Code.

The available sanctions were set out in paragraph 68 of the Procedures document:

1. NO ACTION - This was not an inadvertent failure - to take no action was not an appropriate sanction.
2. CENSURE – This was not a minor breach – perception and public interest in the Respondent's actions meant Censure was not an appropriate sanction on the Assistant Commissioner's findings in this case.
3. PARTIAL SUSPENSION - was more likely to be appropriate where the conduct related to a particular activity or Council business from which the Councillor could be easily removed. The Respondent's conduct, which led to this breach of the Code, was linked directly to his appointed role as a member of the Council's Planning Committee.
4. SUSPENSION - The Sanctions Guidelines stated that suspension was to be considered where the conduct was not sufficiently serious to warrant disqualification, but the conduct was of a nature that: it was necessary to uphold public confidence in the standards regime and/or local democracy.
 - a. there was a need to reflect the severity of the matter; and
 - b. there was a need to make it understood that the conduct should not be repeated.
5. DISQUALIFICATION - was the most severe option and the factors which may lead to disqualification were listed in the Sanction Guidelines at paragraph 19 a. to h. The Assistant Commissioner was satisfied that, having considered those Guidelines, the conduct in this case did not require disqualification.

The Assistant Commissioner had considered suspension was an appropriate sanction for the Respondent's failures to comply with the Code. He was, however, influenced by Ms Fee's submission that whilst these were serious breaches, 'on balance', the public interest could be met by the lesser sanction of Partial Suspension. The relevant case law, put forward in her submission, lent support to that finding, in particular the previously adjudicated cases of Rea⁵ and Boyle⁶. The Assistant Commissioner also referred to the case of Alderman J Rodgers⁷ and the Learning Points on the conflict of interest provisions of the Code set out by the Commissioner in that Case.

Paragraph 15 of the Sanctions Guidelines made clear that the "nature" of the conduct will be taken into consideration when considering whether the sanction was necessary to uphold public confidence, to reflect the severity, and make it understood that the conduct should not be repeated.

The Assistant Commissioner's decision was that a partial suspension, for the period from Monday 17 July 2023 to Sunday 15 October 2023 inclusive from the Council's Planning Committee, was both appropriate and proportionate to reflect the seriousness of the breaches and to maintain public confidence in local democracy. He was satisfied that this sanction was consistent with the approach taken in the previously decided cases in this jurisdiction and reflected a similar consideration of the underlying issues in this matter in other UK jurisdictions.

REASONS:

The Assistant Commissioner had determined that risk of allegations or perceptions of misconduct' was a significant aspect of the alleged breaches set out in Potential Breach 4. Further, Fact 11 showed the Respondent did not declare an interest in respect of any of these applications or leave the meeting.

He had found, on the balance of probability, that the Respondent's conduct was in breach of the Code in a number of respects based upon his failure to observe the requirements of the Code of Conduct consequent upon his non-pecuniary interests (6.3 and 6.4). For the avoidance of doubt, The Assistant Commissioner found that this case did not involve any direct or indirect pecuniary interests.

In his Determination, the Assistant Commissioner had considered the Respondent was mistaken in his belief that registration of his employment situation satisfied these parts of the Code. He was satisfied that the Respondent had a significant private and personal non-pecuniary interest as a consequence of his employment by Mr Clarke which gave rise to the additional need to declare that interest at the Planning Committee meeting, and to withdraw from the relevant parts of the meeting.

⁵ <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Decision-Notice-Mervyn-Rea-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Final-Decision.pdf>

⁷ <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Alderman-Rodgers-Decision-ref-C00098-1.pdf>

In addition, the Respondent had not fully understood the implication of perception, by a member of the public, of influence and prejudice arising if he failed to declare this interest and leave the Committee room where an application involved representations by his employer. The Assistant Commissioner did not find that the Respondent's actions were deliberate on the night, where it was apparent from the Investigation Report that they had had no detrimental effect on the outcome of the planning applications.

Finally, in the course of the Respondent's interview (noted in the Stage 2 Determination above) the Respondent's legal representative commented that:

“..under the Local Government Act [(NI) 1972], registration of an interest in the Council's register is sufficient to discharge the Councillor's duty and that the Code can't go further than the legislation on that. ..[R]egistration in the Council's Register of Interests by a member is sufficient to discharge any duties that the Councillor otherwise would owe”.

The Assistant Commissioner did not accept that proposition, which conflated the obligation to 'register' an interest with the additional requirements in the Code, at paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4, for the declaration of a relevant significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest, and the withdrawal by the Councillor from the Committee meeting for the duration of the discussion of the matter.

The sanction of a Partial Suspension was both necessary and proportionate to reflect the seriousness of the breaches and to maintain public confidence in local democracy.

LEAVE TO APPEAL

Pursuant to section 59 (14) of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 Alderman Smyth may seek the permission of the High Court to appeal against a decision made by the Assistant Commissioner, which must be made within 21 days of the date that he receives written notice of the Assistant Commissioner's decision.

I a n G o r d o n

Assistant Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards

APPENDIX A

STAGE 3 - ADJUDICATION HEARING – SANCTION - Alderman John Smyth (C00434)

Invitation by the Acting Commissioner for the Deputy Commissioner to set out previous history of breaches and draw out any mitigating and aggravating factors in the case which should be taken into consideration.

Introduction

1. I can confirm that Alderman John Smyth has no history of breaching the code of conduct.
2. In terms of mitigating and aggravating factors, there are some factors that I would draw attention to pursuant to paragraph 67 of the Adjudication Procedures. In doing so, I make reference to page 9 of the Sanctions Guidelines, Appendix A, headed: 'Factors that the [Acting] Commissioner may take into account when determining the appropriate sanction'
3. Obviously, these factors may or may not be to be taken into account in the exercise of the Acting Commissioner's discretion. I am also aware that the list provided is not an exhaustive list and that other factors may be taken into account by the Acting Commissioner in reaching his determination.

Mitigating factors

4. I would suggest that there are a number of potential mitigating factors in this case.
5. Alderman Smyth has no prior history of breaching in the code. This provides some evidence of 'Previous record of good service and compliance with the code.'
6. Alderman Smyth engaged with the Deputy Commissioner's investigation, including making himself available for interview and he therefore should be given some credit for his 'co-operation with the investigation'.
7. During the Deputy Commissioner's investigation, Alderman Smyth sought to rely on his interpretation of advice provided by the Borough Lawyer to members at the start of the PC meeting. This may provide some evidence of 'an honestly held (although mistaken) view that the action concerned did not constitute a failure to follow the provisions of the Code, particularly where such a view has been formed after taking appropriate advice'. It is relevant that the Assistant Commissioner, in his Stage 2 decision, "did not find that the Respondent's actions were deliberate on the night and it was apparent that they had no detrimental effect on the outcome of the planning applications".
8. Alderman Smyth has apologised for his failure to declare an interest and his apology was reported in the media.

9. At the time of making this written submission I am unaware if Alderman Smyth has submitted any character references. Where such references have been submitted they are a matter for the Acting Commissioner's consideration as to whether they provide additional evidence that should be taken into account when deciding on mitigation.
10. Finally, I would note the significant passage of time since the events complained of occurred and that Alderman Smyth continued to engage with the process to some extent e.g. by providing input into the Statement of Agreed Facts.

Aggravating Factors

11. I turn now to the issues of potential aggravating factors. An important factor in this case is the protection of the public interest in terms of public confidence in the institution of local government, through those democratically elected to represent constituents. The legitimate aim being pursued by the code is to provide for and secure the high standards required from elected Councillors. In turn, the purpose of sanction is preservation of confidence in local government representation.
12. In terms of the list of aggravating factors, these are listed on page 9 of the Sanctions Guidelines.
13. Alderman Smyth had full knowledge of his employment role with Mr Clarke and should have erred on the side of caution by absenting himself from a situation which could rise to a potential conflict of interest. The Assistant Commissioner has found, in his Stage 2 decision, no evidence that Alderman Smyth had taken any steps to mitigate any conflict of interest in this regard.
14. I would also highlight that the extant Commissioner's Guidance (which was the subject of consultation with councillors and other stakeholders to ensure its relevance) makes clear that familiarity and understanding of obligations under the Code and conduct thereafter is a matter of personal responsibility for the councillor.
15. The Department for Infrastructure has also issued specific guidance on the application of the Code with regard to planning matters, which makes clear at paragraph 9:

'The Code requires you to declare any pecuniary (financial) interest and withdraw from the meeting (for example, a planning application submitted by yourself, partner/spouse or family member). Where you have a significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest (e.g. planning application submitted by a close friend, close associate or body or organisation of which you are a member) you must declare this and you must then withdraw from the meeting when the matter is being discussed.'

16. In the Commissioner's 2019 decision in the matter of Mervyn Rea, the Commissioner dealt directly with the importance of registering and declaring interests. The decision included a list of 'learning points' for councillors. These included:

'The Commissioner wishes to highlight to councillors generally that a failure to declare a pecuniary interest (direct or indirect) may result in a sanction of disqualification. This is a serious conduct matter which is underpinned by 28 of the Local Government Act 1972. A breach of section 28 may in some cases be a criminal offence.'

It should be noted that the Rea case does differ from the present case, and involved a pecuniary interest, but it is none the less relevant in that it highlighted the importance of declaration of interests.

Outcome

17. I make the following comments in full appreciation that the question of sanction is a matter for the Acting Commissioner in the exercise of his discretion. Pages 2-5 of the Sanctions Guidelines respectively notes the options open to the Acting Commissioner at this stage in ascending order of severity:

- a. No action
- b. Censure - in such terms as the Acting Commissioner thinks is appropriate
- c. Partial suspension - for such a period as the Acting Commissioner thinks is appropriate but not exceeding one year.
- d. Suspension - for such a period as the Acting Commissioner thinks is appropriate but not exceeding one year.
- e. Disqualification - for such a period that the Acting Commissioner thinks appropriate but not exceeding five years.

18. I also note, as per paragraph 6, page 2 of the sanctions guidelines, the Acting Commissioner will take account of the actual consequences that have followed as a result of the Respondent's conduct and will also consider what the potential consequences might have been, even if these did not occur.

19. No Action - I would respectfully suggest that 'no action' is not a suitable outcome to these proceedings, given the nature of the conduct which has given rise to the Acting Commissioner's determination on breach of the Code. This was not an inadvertent failure.

20. Censure - In setting out the aggravating factors in this case, I drew attention to the weight of the public interest in this case. This is not to say that this is the only interest at play here, rather it is a case of balancing out all of the interests in this

case. That said I would respectfully suggest that, given the weight of the public interest in this case as opposed to the minor failures envisaged under this outcome; it is highly questionable in my view, whether censure could adequately cater for the public interest in the circumstances. My view is that the breaches are not minor in nature.

21. Partial Suspension - Alderman Smyth is a member of the Planning Committee, and the issue in question arose in this context. It seems to me that this provision, allowing for partial suspension, was designed to meet circumstances in which a Councillor's conduct was such that it was limited to a particular activity or section of council business from which the Councillor could be easily extracted. In all the circumstances, I would suggest that a period of suspension from the planning committee might meet the public interest and be proportionate to the nature of the breaches found by the Acting Commissioner.
22. Suspension - I turn now to the possibility of suspension. I note that suspension may be adequate in addressing the public interest in so far as it: a) Upholds public confidence in the standards regime and/or local democracy b) Reflects the severity of the matter c) Conveys the matter should not be repeated.
23. Factors which may justify suspension include: a. That the respondent's conduct has brought the office of councillor (emphasis added) or his council into disrepute, without being found to have failed to comply with the any other rule contained in the Code, or without being disqualified from being a councillor under the terms of the Local Government Act (NI) 1972 (section 4(1)(cc)).3 b. The likelihood of further failures to comply with the Code by the respondent.
24. Page 4 paragraph 15 of the Sanctions Guidelines makes clear that the "nature" of the conduct will be taken into consideration when considering whether the sanction is necessary to uphold public confidence, to reflect the severity, and it make it understood that the conduct should not be repeated.
25. My view is that these are breaches of a serious nature, relating to aspects of the Code that are central to public confidence. I consider that suspension is an option validly open to the Acting Commission, given the breaches found, and have set out in the paragraphs below some of the relevant case law. While it is a matter for the Acting Commissioner, I suggest that while sanction is a viable option for sanction in this case, on balance the public interest can be met by the lesser sanction of partial suspension in this specific instance.
26. Page 2 of the sanctions guidelines paragraph 4 acknowledge that Councillors have been democratically elected to undertake certain tasks and that their ability to serve the public and perform those tasks should only be restricted where such a restriction is justified in the particular circumstances of a case.
27. In the case of Patrick Heesom v Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and the Welsh Ministers [2014] EWHC 1504 Admin, in considering the approach to sanction by the Adjudicating Panel for Wales, Mr Justice Higginbottom referred to the need to ensure that a sanction is in line with other similar cases.

28. The Deputy Commissioner has also considered jurisprudence from other jurisdictions in relation to Councillor's failures to declare an interest. In the case of Councillor Maskell Case No APW/002/2009-010/CT ('First reference') APW/012/2009- 010/CT ('Second reference') the Adjudication Panel for Wales imposed a sanction of 18 months suspension upon the Councillor for failure to declare an interest.
29. In the case of Councillor Haulwen Lewis, Case No APW/002/2014-015/CT the Adjudication Panel for Wales imposed a sanction of three months suspension upon the Councillor for failure to declare a personal and prejudicial interest in relation to a planning application.
30. In the case of Councillor Matthew Pollard, Case Reference LGS/2012/0578, the First Tier refused an appeal by the Councillor of the decision the North West Leicestershire District Council Standards Committee. The Tribunal upheld the finding that he was in breach of the Code of Conduct and in particular had misused his position, failed to leave the room when his prejudicial interest was engaged and brought his office into disrepute. Given the nature of the breaches, the Tribunal held that it was entirely justified that Councillor Pollard's original sanction of suspension be increased from three months (imposed by the Standards Committee) to six months.
31. In the case of Alan Nimmo Case Reference LA/Fa/1799,2016 the Standards Commission for Scotland (SCS) found that the Councillor's actions in asking council officers to deal with his enquiry about a planning application in which he had a personal interest and his seeking information not normally available to the public, breached the Scottish Code of Conduct. The SCS censured Councillor Nimmo.
32. In the case of Councillor Frank Toner, https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/uploads/files/1480589991161129_WrittendecisionFINAL.pdf, the SCS imposed the sanction of censure for failure to declare a pecuniary interest.
33. In this jurisdiction, in the case of Meryn Rea, which involved declaration of interests, the Commissioner imposed a sanction of censure. The decision stated:

"On the facts of this case the Commissioner has determined that Mr Rea's conduct could not be considered as a minor failure to comply with the Code. The sanctions of partial and full suspension are not available to the Commissioner because Mr Rea has ceased to be a councillor." The Commissioner did not consider that the conduct was sufficiently serious, on the facts of that case, to warrant disqualification. The 'learning points' for Councillors incorporated in the Rea decision are of direct relevance to this case.
34. The case of Declan Boyle, also involving declaration of interests, was a case in which it was considered that suspension would have been the most appropriate sanction, but this was unavailable as he was not a serving councillor. Censure was deemed to be the most appropriate of the available options.

35. For all of these reasons including the relevant case law to which I have referred I think that a sanction of either partial suspension or suspension would be in line with the decisions on sanction in previous cases. While recognising that it is a matter for the Commissioner, I have suggested that on balance the lesser sanction of partial suspension may meet the public interest in this case.
36. Disqualification - The Acting Commissioner may wish to consider whether the conduct is of such gravity as to warrant disqualification. Page 5 paragraph 19 of the Sanctions Guidelines states: 'Disqualification is the most severe (emphasis added) of the options open to the Acting Commissioner.
37. This page goes on to list from a-h those circumstances in which disqualification may be an appropriate outcome. While there are aspects of the conduct at issue which might point towards disqualification, in all the circumstances of this case, my view is that the justice of the matter and the public interest can be met by means of the lesser sanction of suspension or partial suspension.
38. While the Alderman's conduct was not minor, given all the circumstances of the case, I respectfully submit that partial suspension is the most appropriate of the available sanctions. Public knowledge of the sanction itself, alongside an understanding of the factors that led to it, will help discharge the duty to the public in this case.

This is, however, ultimately a decision for the Acting Commissioner.

Councillor handed suspension over “misleading information” during legal crowd funding campaign

A Bridgend County Borough Council councillor has been suspended for three months following an investigation by the Welsh Ombudsman that concluded he had provided misleading information to residents while raising funds for a legal challenge against a planning application.

Bridgend found that Cllr Sean Aspey had breached the Code of Conduct as a result of his fundraising efforts to oppose plans by the Ministry of Justice to consider using a local hotel to house Wales' Residential Women's Centre.

The council's finding followed an investigation by the Welsh Ombudsman which concluded that "although the Member's intentions may have been well-meaning, he provided misleading information to residents when they were asked to donate money to a fund which was not necessary, and from which they could not retrieve their money if the anticipated legal action did not take place".

It added that no planning application had actually been submitted, so there was no planning application to be challenged.

The Ombudsman noted that the councillor, who has been a Bridgend member for more than a decade, "ought to have known that the information was not correct".

Ultimately, the Ombudsman considered that the Member's conduct was such that it may amount to a breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct, which says that councillors must not conduct themselves in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing their office or authority into disrepute.

The Standards Committee of Bridgend County Borough Council concluded that the Cllr Aspey breached paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct by providing misleading and inaccurate information to residents about the Ministry of Justice's plans for the hotel.

UPHOLDING STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE, NOVEMBER 2021 - GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AS SET OUT IN STRENGTHENING ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, JULY 2023, CP 900

(The fully met/partially met/rejected classification is CSPL's own assessment)

No.	Recommendation	Summary of government response	<div style="background-color: #90EE90; padding: 2px;">Fully met</div> <div style="background-color: #FFD700; padding: 2px;">Partially met</div> <div style="background-color: #FF0000; padding: 2px;">Rejected</div>
1	The Civil Service should review its approach to enforcing ethical standards across government, with a view to creating a more rigorous and consistent compliance system, in line with the recommendation of the Boardman report.	The Government will clarify the distribution of formal accountabilities, outlining the responsibilities of the relevant persons in departments.	
2	The government should pass primary legislation to place the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, the Public Appointments Commissioner, and the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments on a statutory basis.	The Government is not bringing forward new primary legislation to underpin the roles, remits, and codes of standards bodies.	
3	The Ministerial Code should be reconstituted solely as a code of conduct on ethical standards.	The Government is maintaining the existing structure of the Ministerial Code.	
4	A requirement for the Prime Minister to issue the Ministerial Code should be enshrined in primary legislation.	The Government does not believe the Ministerial Code should be enshrined in primary legislation.	
5	The Independent Adviser should be consulted in any process of revision to the Ministerial Code.	Section 3.1 of the terms of reference for the Independent Adviser states that "Before the Ministerial Code is amended, the Prime Minister will consult the Independent Adviser."	

6	The Ministerial Code should detail a range of sanctions the Prime Minister may issue, including, but not limited to, apologies, fines, and asking for a minister's resignation.	The Prime Minister has introduced graduated sanctions under the Ministerial Code, which now states at paragraph 1.7: "Where the PM retains his confidence in the Minister, available sanctions include requiring some form of public apology, remedial action, or removal of ministerial salary for a period."	
7	The Independent Adviser should be appointed through an enhanced version of the current process for significant public appointments.	The Government believes that the Independent Adviser should remain a direct ministerial appointment.	
8	The Independent Adviser should be able to initiate investigations into breaches of the Ministerial Code.	In line with the latest Terms of Reference and Ministerial Code, the Independent Adviser may now initiate an investigation having consulted the Prime Minister. While the Prime Minister could choose not to consent to an investigation where the Prime Minister considers there are public interest reasons for doing so, the Independent Adviser is able to require that the reasons be made public.	
9	The Independent Adviser should have the authority to determine breaches of the Ministerial Code.	The Government considers the Prime Minister must retain the ultimate right to make a determination on whether or not a Minister has breached the Ministerial Code.	
10	The Independent Adviser's findings should be published no more than eight weeks after a report has been submitted to the Prime Minister.	The Terms of Reference of the Independent Adviser state that he may "require that his advice at the conclusion of an investigation be published in a timely manner". The Government agrees that this should occur no more than eight weeks after a report is submitted to the Prime Minister.	
11	The Business Appointment Rules should be amended to prohibit for two years appointments where the applicant has had significant and direct responsibility for policy, regulation, or the awarding of contracts relevant to the	The Government considers that an automatic prohibition for two years is overly broad and could have unintended consequences. The Government thinks that, in practice, the system they are putting forward of including more of	

	hiring company.	the requirements about restrictions on future employment in contracts may come to similar conclusions as recommended here but will be taken on the basis of contractual clauses.	
12	The Business Appointment Rules should be amended to allow ACOBA and government departments to issue a ban on lobbying of up to five years.	The Government considers this recommendation is too broad. It considers that a ban on lobbying of five years could be deemed as an unreasonable restraint on trade. Lobbying bans will continue to be part of the ongoing system but applied proportionately.	
13	The lobbying ban should include a ban on any work for lobbying firms within the set time limit.	As for recommendation 12.	
14	The government should make adherence to the Business Appointment Rules (BAR) an enforceable legal requirement for ministers, civil servants, and special advisers, and set out what the consequences for a breach of contract may be.	The Government agrees that the Rules should be incorporated more effectively into contracts. While the Rules already form part of civil servant terms and conditions, this can be strengthened by increasing the detail in the contractual clauses so they make clear what people can and cannot do after leaving Government. The Government will develop a 'ministerial deed' which will be designed to legally commit ministers to the Rules, and any resulting conditions.	
15	ACOBA rulings should be directly binding on applicants.	The Government is clear that the Business Appointment Rules must be binding on all who are subject to them. The Government's proposal is that for those on new terms and conditions, the proposal will change from one where they apply to ACoBA for advice to one where they consult the Rules and their contract for the resulting conditions. In such cases, it will be the contractual clauses - rather than ACoBA rulings - that will be binding on individuals.	
16	ACOBA should have the power to undertake	The Government says that ACoBA is already empowered	

	investigations into potential breaches of the Business Appointment Rules, and be granted additional resources as necessary. The Cabinet Office should decide on sanctions or remedial action in the case of a breach.	to make inquiries into potential breaches of the Business Appointment Rules. The Government has provided more resources to ACoBA and discussions on resource allocation will continue to take place.	
17	Government departments should publish anonymised and aggregated data on how many applications under the Business Appointment Rules are submitted, approved, or rejected each year.	The Government agrees that the recommended information should be published.	
18	The Cabinet Office should ensure the Business Appointment Rules are applied consistently across all government departments, and work with ACOBA to promote best practice and awareness of the rules.	A new departmental training programme is underway and this will be supplemented as needed with other support, in collaboration with ACOBA. This will include guidance on the changes the Government is making to introduce a new application route for lower risk roles and will provide greater clarity on which roles do not require an application at all.	
19	The Governance Code for Public Appointments should be amended to make clear that ministers should not appoint a candidate who is deemed unappointable by an assessment panel, but if they do so, the minister must appear in front of the relevant select committee to justify their decision.	In the event that a Minister decides to appoint a candidate not deemed appointable by an Advisory Assessment Panel, Ministers will be obliged to write to their Select Committee, and appear before it if requested by the Select Committee Chair. The Governance Code on Public Appointments will be amended to reflect this.	
20	The Governance Code should be amended so that ministers must consult with the Commissioner for Public Appointments on the composition of all panel members for competitions for significant appointments.	The Government believes that the current process for Significant Public Appointments is properly constituted to ensure that the composition of Advisory Assessment Panels is balanced and fair.	
21	Senior Independent Panel Members should have a specific duty to report to the Commissioner on the conduct of significant competitions.	The Government believes the purpose of this recommendation is met by the Model Letter for Senior Independent Panel Members which says that SIPMs should highlight any material breaches of the Governance Code.	

22	The chairs of ACOBA and HOLAC, the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists, the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests should all be appointed through the process for significant public appointments, and the assessment panel for each should have a majority of independent members.	<p>The Chairs of ACOBA, HOLAC and CSPL are appointed via the process for significant public appointments, while the Commissioner for Public Appointments is appointed via an equivalent process. The Government believes that the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests should continue to be a direct ministerial appointment.</p> <p>The Government does not believe that these appointments require an extra layer of independent oversight (either through a panel having a majority of independent members, or the granting of a veto to the relevant select committee).</p>	
23	Chairs of standards committees should chair assessment panels for the appointment of their independent members.	The Government agrees that where standards bodies are committees (ACoBA, CSPL, HOLAC), that the Chair of the body chairs the Advisory Assessment Panel for the recruitment of their independent members.	
24	Government departments should publish a list of all unregulated and regulated public appointments.	The Government will require departments to publish annually a list of direct ministerial appointments (DMAs) under their remit. The terms of reference for DMAs will be published online.	
25	The appointments process for Non-Executive Directors of government departments should be regulated under the Governance Code for Public Appointments.	Future appointments of NEDs to Government Departments will be regulated by the appointments process laid out in the Governance Code.	
26	The Cabinet Office should collate all departmental transparency releases and publish them in an accessible, centrally managed and searchable database.	The Cabinet Office is developing a single database to collate and publish departmental transparency returns covering meetings, gifts, hospitality and travel.	
27	The Cabinet Office should provide stricter guidelines on minimum standards for the descriptions of meetings and ensure compliance by government departments.	New government guidance will create stricter minimum standards for descriptions of meetings and make clear that meeting descriptions contain relevant and instructive information.	

28	The government should publish transparency returns monthly, rather than quarterly, in line with the MPs' and peers' registers of interests.	Following the development, deployment, and adoption of an integrated transparency platform, the Government will look to move departments' transparency publications from a quarterly to a monthly basis.	
29	The government should include meetings held between external organisations, directors general, and directors in transparency releases.	The Government agrees that transparency obligations should be extended to all Directors General, Finance and Commercial Directors, and Senior Responsible Owners in the Government's Major Projects Portfolio. This change will be implemented in the next version of the Government's transparency guidance.	
30	The government should include meetings held between external organisations and special advisers in transparency releases.	The Government does not believe that transparency obligations should be extended to equivalent Special Advisers on the basis that Special Advisers cannot authorise public expenditure nor exercise any statutory powers.	
31	The government should update guidance to make clear that informal lobbying, and lobbying via alternative forms of communication such as WhatsApp or Zoom, should be reported to officials.	The Government has issued new guidance on Non-Corporate Communication Channels and the principle that any discussion of official business must be reported back to officials includes conversations conducted via WhatsApp or Zoom, or in social settings.	
32	The government should revise the categories of published information to close the loophole by which informal lobbying is not disclosed in departmental releases.	The Government will expand transparency obligations to include the disclosure of diarised phone calls and virtual meetings. The Government does not believe this needs to include letters, WhatsApps, impromptu phone calls or emails, which do not alone evidence a substantive lobbying engagement.	
33	Consultant lobbyists should also have to register on the basis of any communications with special advisers, directors general, and directors.	The Government accepts in principle that the scope of departments' transparency returns should be mirrored in the requirements of the Register of Consultant Lobbyists.	

		However, the Government will be assessing the impact of expanded transparency returns on departments before introducing such a change in primary legislation.	
34	Consultant lobbyists should have to declare the date, recipient, and subject matter of their lobbying.	The Government agrees in principle that consultant lobbyists should have to declare the subject matter of their lobbying and will look to implement this via secondary legislation. However, the Government does not agree that they should have to declare individual instances of lobbying (date and recipient), as this would change the nature of the Register from a list of consultant lobbyists' clients to a list of individual instances of lobbying. These are recorded in the departmental transparency returns, against which the Register of Consultant Lobbyists can be cross-referenced.	