

STANDARDS AND CONSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 31 October 2017

Present: Councillor M McLaughlin (Chair)

Councillors	P Stuart	P Gilchrist
	C Blakeley	B Kenny
	WJ Davies	B Mooney (In place
	G Ellis	of RL Abbey)

In attendance: Prof RS Jones – Independent Person

18 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

Councillor M McLaughlin announced that it had not been possible to arrange for signers to be in attendance at the meeting to assist Councillor L Reecejones (the Subject Member) who had hearing difficulties. The soonest that they were able to attend was 6pm. She asked Councillor Reecejones if she was happy and comfortable to go ahead without them or would she like the meeting adjourned until 6pm.

Councillor Reecejones confirmed that she was happy and comfortable with the arrangements in the meeting room and that the meeting could go ahead. She informed that she had brought a Mr Michael Chard with her to provide her with assistance.

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Abbey and J Hale.

20 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor C Blakeley informed that he was the subject Member of a complaint.

Professor RF Jones informed that he had been present at the Standards Panel meeting on 15 June 2017.

STANDARDS PANEL DECISION OF 15TH JUNE 2017 CONCERNING COUNCILLOR LOUISE REECEJONES AND FURTHER REVIEW

Councillor M McLaughlin introduced the Interim Director: Law and Governance who then presented his report and supporting appendices. He informed that the Standards Panel, at its meeting on 15 June 2017, had considered an investigation into allegations that Councillor L Reecejones had breached the Members' Code of Conduct and had determined that she had done so.

This decision had required a number of actions to be taken, including reporting the outcome to a public meeting. This decision had been subject to a request for an appeal which had been unsuccessful as the former Director: Law and Governance had considered there to be insufficient grounds to allow it. The Interim Director's report set out the steps that had, or had not been taken by Councillor Reecejones and others in responding to the actions required.

Members were informed that the procedure that was being adopted for the meeting was that the Committee would receive the report, Members could then ask any questions they may have and then the complainants would each be invited to make a short statement. Councillor Reecejones would then be invited to respond and then the Committee would debate and decide what was to happen next.

The Committee considered the background to the allegations in detail and noted that the sanctions the Panel had agreed would be imposed on Councillor Reecejones were as follows:

- (a) The Monitoring Officer should write a formal warning letter to Councillor Reecejones reminding her of the need to comply with the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (b) Councillor Reecejones must apologise in writing to all the complainants for breaching the Members' Code of Conduct within 14 days of receiving this Decision notice;
- (c) The Labour Political Group Leader be asked to consider whether party disciplinary action should be taken against Councillor Reecejones and whether she should be removed (through Council) from all outside bodies to which she has been appointed;
- (d) The Monitoring Officer shall arrange both internal and external training for Councillor Louise Reecejones as soon as practicably possible. Should Councillor Reecejones fail to attend the training arranged, the Monitoring Officer shall report this fact to her Political Group Leader for consideration and action; and

- (e) The Panel's decision shall be reported to the next public meeting of the Standards and Constitutional Oversight Committee for consideration.

The Committee received an update on the next steps from the Interim Director, following the Standards Panel's decision being relayed to Councillor Reecejones on 28 July 2017. It noted that to date Councillor Reecejones had not fulfilled any part of what was required of her and the Committee was presented with evidence from the Interim Director and the complainants to support this.

It was noted that on 28 July 2017 the former Director: Law and Governance had received further allegations against Councillor Reecejones from the complainants concerning her behaviour at the Standards Panel meeting and, in particular, that she was continuing with her social media posts making false allegations against them. He determined that as these related to the same causal events and matters already heard they would be included in the review rather than beginning a whole new Standards Panel process. Members noted that the subsequent conclusions of this review were as follows:

- "Although nobody is actually named in the post, in light of the background history and the small community in which the complainants and Councillor Reecejones move it is my view that it is likely that others would know to whom Councillor Reecejones was referring and this could have had the effect of sullyng their reputations.
- "... it is my view that it can be argued that the act complained of, although not signed in an official capacity, was done in a manner which failed to maintain a clear distinction between her personal capacity and role as a councillor and therefore created a risk that there could be a negative impact on the Council and others.
- "I therefore find Councillor Reecejones to be in breach of the Council's Code of Conduct in relation to her post of 11 July 2017. This failed to treat the complainants with respect and engaged in conduct which was contrary to the Council's duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct."
- "I am compelled to conclude that in her conduct in relation to this investigation Councillor Reecejones has failed to show respect to the Standards process and therefore to the need to maintain high standards of conduct as a councillor."

The Committee was made aware that counter-allegations made by Councillor Reecejones against the complainants had been made both directly and publicly, whereas by contrast the complainants had maintained their silence whilst formal investigations were conducted at the request of the Council and the Police.

The Committee was also presented with a report from the Labour Group Chief Whip which stated that Councillor Reecejones had had the Party Whip withdrawn for an indefinite period by the Labour Group, and also with a statement from the Labour Party Acting Regional Officer informing that this had been reduced on appeal to a four month suspension, backdated to September 2017. This was because of mitigating circumstances that the Regional Labour Party had heard from Councillor Reecejones and it was dependant on her fulfilling certain requirements.

Members asked a number of questions and made various comments and, as a result, it was expressed that it had become clear to the Committee that Councillor Reecejones had not shown respect to the Standards process and that she had not co-operated fully with the original investigating officer.

The Committee heard from the three complainants who in turn described the impact that Councillor Reecejones' actions had had on their lives and that of their families. They informed of their disappointment that the actions of the Wirral Labour Group had not been supported by the Regional Labour Party. Committee Members felt the need to apologise for that and commented that in its actions the Labour Appeal Panel appeared to have failed to recognise the seriousness of this case and the impact that the behaviour of a Labour Councillor had had on the complainants and their families.

The complainants stated that they wanted the false allegations to stop now and that as recently as this week Councillor Reecejones had made a false allegation on social media.

Councillor Reecejones informed the Committee that she had apologised to all of the complainants but that the Interim Director had perceived that the way she had done this had not been in the spirit of the Standards Panel's decision. Consequently, Councillor Reecejones asked for advice on how to apologise.

Councillor Reecejones informed that she would never seek to deceive or discredit another person. She reported that her Facebook was locked and the screen shots of 11 July 2017 were not her Facebook posts. She asked that they be sent to Merseyside Police. She had done so and received a crime number but had been told that as she had not received the screen shots directly they would only be considered if the complaint was submitted by the Council. Councillor Reecejones also informed that she had not been advised to apologise in respect of the further complaints. She considered that the whole investigation had been about fraudulent documents.

The Interim Director reported that any allegation that Cllr Reecejones wished to make to the police was a matter for her, although of course the Council would co-operate with Merseyside Police. However, it had not been contacted by them over this matter.

Councillor Reecejones told the Committee that she had suffered catastrophic reputational damage and that had affected her life and that of her family. Her university studies had suffered and she had received a death threat. She stated that she had not been charged with any offense

Councillor McLaughlin stated from the Chair that holders of the public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. The Members' Code of Conduct was based on the seven principles of public life that were set out in the Localism Act, 'The Nolan Principles'. These included the principles of selflessness, integrity, honesty and leadership. The Standards Panel's decision in June had shown how the wrongs committed might be put right. Councillor McLaughlin considered that what Members had heard today was that, instead, Councillor Reecejones' conduct had continued in the same vein as before, seeking to wrongfully blame and victimise the complainants in this matter and doing as little as possible, as late as possible, in order to maintain her position.

Therefore, Councillor McLaughlin proposed that:

- (1) the apology to be provided should be provided in writing to each of the complainants within 14 days of Councillor Reecejones receiving the outcome of this meeting and be worded in such a way as to show that she appreciates that, through her actions in breaching the Members' Code of Conduct, she damaged others and she undertakes to apologise for that and agrees not to do that again;
- (2) this Committee considers that Councillor Reecejones has failed to abide by the Standards Panel's decision and wishes to make it clear that it expects her to write personally to the complainants and make a full and public apology for her actions, as set out in the Panel's decision;
- (3) this Committee finds that Councillor Reecejones continued to seek to victimise the complainants even after the Standards Panel's decision was made and then sought to cover that up when a further complaint was submitted, showing herself to be an unreliable witness before the investigators and the Panel;
- (4) this Committee asks that the Labour Group considers this further information and what steps it might now take in terms of Group and Party discipline within their procedures;

- (5) the Chair of the Committee be requested to write to the Leader of the Labour Group to express how seriously the Committee regards the original breach and further actions and to ask that the actions of the Labour Group and Labour Party should reflect the seriousness of the situation;
- (6) this Committee asks Councillor Reecejones to now fulfil the actions required of her to make a full and public apology to the complainants and to cease her victimisation of them; and
- (7) this Committee formally apologises to the complainants in this case, on behalf of the Council, and in the absence of Councillor Reecejones having done so as required by the Standards Panel. Their decision to come forward and highlight the issues they identified was both brave and borne out of nothing other than their desire to do the right thing. As a result, they became the targets in a series of accusations and allegations, as outlined in the paperwork before the Committee that, as the Council instigated reports show, were false and indeed vindictive. Their behaviour was and continues to be exemplary and they should be applauded.

A Member also proposed that as well as the apology at (1) above, Councillor Reecejones must apologise for her unacceptable behaviour orally at the next meeting of the Council scheduled for 11 December 2017.

These proposals were seconded by Councillor Paul Stuart and put to the vote and it was

RESOLVED (unanimously): That

- (1) the apology to be provided should be provided in writing to each of the complainants within 14 days of Councillor Reecejones receiving the outcome of this meeting and be worded in such a way as to show that she appreciates that, through her actions in breaching the Members' Code of Conduct, she damaged others and she undertakes to apologise for that and agrees not to do that again;**
- (2) as well as the apology at (1) above, Councillor Reecejones must apologise for her unacceptable behaviour orally at the next meeting of the Council scheduled for 11 December 2017;**
- (3) this Committee considers that Councillor Reecejones has failed to abide by the Standards Panel's decision and wishes to make it clear that it expects her to write personally to the complainants and make a full and public apology for her actions, as set out in the Panel's decision;**

- (4) this Committee finds that Councillor Reecejones continued to seek to victimise the complainants even after the Standards Panel's decision was made and then sought to cover that up when a further complaint was submitted, showing herself to be an unreliable witness before the investigators and the Panel;**
- (5) this Committee asks that the Labour Group considers this further information and what steps it might now take in terms of Group and Party discipline within their procedures;**
- (6) the Chair of the Committee be requested to write to the Leader of the Labour Group to express how seriously the Committee regards the original breach and further actions and to ask that the actions of the Labour Group and Labour Party should reflect the seriousness of the situation;**
- (7) this Committee asks Councillor Reecejones to now fulfil the actions required of her to make a full and public apology to the complainants and to cease her victimisation of them; and**
- (8) this Committee formally apologises to the complainants in this case, on behalf of the Council, and in the absence of Councillor Reecejones having done so as required by the Standards Panel. Their decision to come forward and highlight the issues they identified was both brave and borne out of nothing other than their desire to do the right thing. As a result, they became the targets in a series of accusations and allegations, as outlined in the paperwork before the Committee that, as the Council instigated reports show, were false and indeed vindictive. Their behaviour was and continues to be exemplary and they should be applauded.**