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Resources Directorate

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1. Decision Notice



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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COVENTRY CITY COUNCIL

DECISION NOTICE OF ETHICS COMMITTEE

A Subject Member: Councillor Glenn Williams

B Introduction

1. On 9th December 2016, the Ethics Committee of Coventry City Council considered a report of an investigation into the alleged conduct of Cllr Glenn Williams, a member of Coventry City Council. A general summary of the report is set out below.

C Attendance at Sanctions Hearing

2. The Ethics Committee consisted of:
 - Cllr Seamus Walsh (Chair)
 - Cllr Roger Bailey
 - Cllr Linda Bigham
3. The following also attended the Sanctions Hearing:
 - Cllr Williams
 - The Co-opted Independent Person, Mr Peter Wiseman OBE, LLB
 - The Acting Monitoring Officer, Helen Lynch

D Summary of Investigation Report and Conclusions

4. The Acting Monitoring Officer carried out an investigation into remarks alleged to have been made by Cllr Glenn Williams to the Coventry Telegraph in July 2016 in relation to a private WhatsApp conversation in May 2016.
5. On 14 July 2016 the Coventry Telegraph published a story about the conversation having first asked Cllr Williams for his response. On 15 July Cllr Williams was interviewed on the BBC Coventry and Warwickshire Radio Breakfast Show in relation to the story.
6. The Acting Monitoring Officer did not receive a complaint in respect of the comments reported in the media. However, there was some negative publicity regarding the comments. The City Council has a statutory duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Elected Members. It was therefore considered appropriate (despite the lack of complaint) to investigate the comments made to establish whether they amounted to a breach of the code.

7. Full details of the remarks made by Cllr Williams and the conclusions of the Acting Monitoring Officer are set out in her report published with the agenda for the 9th December meeting.
8. Following her investigation into the incident, the Acting Monitoring Officer concluded that:
 - (a) Cllr Williams was not acting in his official capacity during the WhatsApp conversation and so the Code of Conduct did not apply on that occasion.
 - (b) Cllr Williams was acting in his official capacity when he was speaking to the Coventry Telegraph journalist and when he was interviewed on BBC Coventry and Warwickshire Radio and so was bound by the Code of Conduct on those occasions.
 - (c) Cllr Williams' comments set out in paragraph 24 iii), iv) and v) of the Acting Monitoring Officer's Investigation Report amounted to a breach of the Code of Conduct.
 - (d) Cllr Williams' remarks set out in paragraph 24 vi) and vii) did not constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct.
9. The paragraphs of the Code of Conduct that the Acting Monitoring Officer considered to have been breached were:
 - 3h. To behave in accordance with all my legal obligations, alongside any requirements contained within the Council's policies, protocols and procedures including the use of Council resources;*
 - 3j. Always treat people with respect, including the organisation and public I engage with and those I work alongside;*
 - 3k. Provide leadership through behaving in accordance with these principles when championing the interests of the communities with other organisations as well as within the Council.*
10. Cllr Williams agreed with the conclusions of the final investigation report and so the Ethics Committee was required solely to decide what sanctions, if any should be applied in this case.
11. Before making their determination, the Committee invited Mr Wiseman and Cllr Williams to address them.

E Comments of the Independent Person

12. The Co-opted Independent Person, Mr Peter Wiseman OBE, LLB, reminded the Committee that his general observations on the Investigation Report were set out at Appendix 3 to the agenda report.
13. It seemed to Mr Wiseman that there had been, in the past but not today,

some confusion in Cllr Williams' mind about where the line was between legitimate debate about issues such as immigration and unacceptable remarks. He felt that the problem was the way in which Cllr Williams' remarks were expressed. Mr Wiseman felt that these remarks gave rise to serious concerns about the extent to which Cllr Williams' views might enflame some sections of the community. This should therefore be regarded as a serious breach.

14. However, Mr Wiseman also pointed out that at a very early stage in the matter Cllr Williams had issued apologies to the Lord Mayor, on Twitter and to his then party group. Mr Wiseman felt that he had accepted that he had done wrong and had taken practical steps to engage with organisations and communities, for example by visiting the refugee centre, Sikh groups and a mosque. Nevertheless, Mr Wiseman felt that the behaviour should be marked by the Committee as unacceptable and details of any sanction, or sanctions, should be made public. Beyond that, he thought it was a matter for the Committee to determine an appropriate sanction.

F Comments of Cllr Williams

15. Cllr Williams told the Committee that, because of the incident, he had done things that he might never otherwise have done. He had visited a mosque and been to the refugee centre (which he had found to be an eye-opener). He felt his views had softened slightly and he had learnt from the experience.
16. Cllr Williams said that he had been naïve in his dealings with the media. The matter had been dealt with straightaway when a complaint was made to the Conservative Association and he wrote a letter of apology at that time. He had thought that it would go no further so had been taken aback when telephoned by the Coventry Telegraph. He went on the defensive in his responses and was naïve and, as a result, gave the reporter his story.
17. Cllr Williams referred to the extraordinary council meeting which was called to consider his behaviour. He had found this to be a very unpleasant experience but felt that it had made him stronger. He did not agree with everything in the Acting Monitoring Officer's report but he did accept the findings: his remarks had not been measured or informed, and they should have been.

G Decision of the Committee on Sanctions

18. The Committee considered all of the representations very carefully. They accepted that Cllr Williams had recognised that the way in which he had expressed his views was unacceptable and that he had taken steps to educate himself about the issues raised and had apologised for his remarks. The Committee also recognised that Cllr Williams' dealings with the media were, to a certain extent, coloured by a degree of

naiveté.

19. Nevertheless, the Committee also agreed with Mr Wiseman's view that these remarks were capable of enflaming some sections of the community and would seriously affect community cohesion. It was unacceptable for an elected member to make these remarks.
20. The Committee decided to impose the following sanctions:
 - (a) A letter of censure will be sent to Cllr Williams from the Committee;
 - (b) Cllr Williams is recommended to undertake further training on equality and diversity and dealing with the media (including social media): such training to be agreed with the Acting Monitoring Officer;
 - (c) The Committee's findings will be published on the Council's website; and
 - (d) Cllr Williams is recommended to continue to try to engage with different sections of the community in Coventry.

H Appeal

There is no right of appeal against the Committee's decision.

I Notification of decision

This decision notice is sent to:

Councillor Glenn Williams

The decision will also be published on the Council's website.

J Additional help

If you need additional support in relation to this decision notice or future contact with the City Council, please let us know as soon as possible. If you have difficulty reading this notice, we can make reasonable adjustments to assist you, in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. We can also help if English is not your first language.

Cllr Seamus Walsh
Chair, Ethics Committee

21 December 2016