

# **INVESTIGATION REPORT IN RELATION TO FOUR COMPLAINTS MADE UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT AGAINST COUNCILLOR GLENN WILLIAMS**

**COVENTRY CITY COUNCIL**

January 2021

1. This is the report of an investigation into complaints made against Cllr Glenn Williams by four persons following some comments he made on social media in August 2020. These related to the potential arrival of a number of asylum seekers who were to be placed, by the Home Office, in one of the hotels within Coventry.
2. I am a solicitor of the Senior Court of England and Wales and a partner in the firm of Anthony Collins Solicitors LLP where I am Head of Local Government. I qualified as a solicitor in 1985 and have had a career in the public sector, mainly in local authorities from then until 2010. During that time, I held positions such as Monitoring Officer, Head of Legal Services, Corporate Director and Chief Executive. In 2011 I returned to private practice where I specialise in local government law. During my career I have carried out many investigations into Code of Conduct and other matters for local authorities.
3. This report was sent out in draft to Cllr Williams and to the four complainants separately- giving them the opportunity to make comments before it was finalised.
4. The complainants have all confirmed that they are content and do not wish to make any comments. Cllr Williams replied ;

*"I totally reject the findings of the investigating officer. Her belief that the complainants being identified would result in their victimisation is also highly offensive, yet she is perfectly happy to besmirch my name. The Council leadership will be only too happy with her findings and use it as a stick to beat me, but I'm used to double standards."*

I have not changed any of my findings as a result of the responses I received.

## BACKGROUND

5. This is an investigation into four complaints which were received by the Monitoring Officer of Coventry City Council in respect of comments on social media made by Cllr Williams. I am most grateful to Cllr Williams and the complainants for the cooperation which I received into my investigation. This was much appreciated.
6. During the course of my investigation I interviewed Cllr Williams and the complainants; due to the Covid pandemic this was all carried out by telephone or Zoom call. Notes of the interview were sent to all of those involved and all have confirmed that they accept the versions which are attached to this report.
7. Cllr Williams was first elected to the Council in 2016 and would have been up for election again this year had Covid 19 not intervened to cancel the elections. He was a member of the Conservative Group upon election but left the group after two months

and has since sat as an Independent; the only Independent member of the Council. He is one of three councillors who represent Bablake ward.

8. This is a somewhat unusual matter in the sense that, whilst it is usual for complainants' names and contact details to be provided to the member they are complaining about, in this case they have been kept from him and the complaints are therefore anonymous. However, I accept that when these complaints were made, the Monitoring Officer of the Council, particularly given the high level of emotions about these issues at the time, felt that if Cllr Williams was able to know the identity of those complainants, there was a chance that they could be victimised or otherwise vilified by those who did not agree with their political stance.
9. This was heightened by the fact that at the time of the events complained of, there was a lot of activity across the country in relation to asylum seekers and refugees who were being placed by the Government in hotels. Indeed, at around the same time that the events leading to the complaints were made, there were violent clashes between members of Far-Right groups and the police at various hotels both in Coventry and in the surrounding region and more widely .
10. Therefore, whilst I know that Cllr Williams is extremely aggrieved by the fact that the identity of the complainants was withheld from him, and that he has complained this is against the Council's arrangements in dealing with Code of Conducts complaints and in certain cases, against the Councils' Constitution of which the Code of Conduct is of course part; I cannot but agree with the Monitoring Officer that this was a sensible course of action in the circumstances.
11. The situation which gave rise to these complaints is not in dispute.
12. On 27 August Cllr Williams was in his office at the Council when a friend, who hasn't been identified; spoke to him and asked him if he knew that the Royal Court Hotel, in his ward was going to *"receive 17 coaches of asylum seekers that weekend who are being sent there by the Home Office"*. Cllr Williams said that he also received, on the same day, a voicemail from a resident in a neighbouring ward who gave him further information about this from which he identified that *"approximately 200 separate asylum seekers across the 17 coaches"* would be sent to stay at the Royal Court and the hotel was closing as a result.
13. Cllr Williams investigated this by telephoning the hotel purporting to book rooms but was told that *"the hotel was closed that weekend for refurbishment"*. Cllr Williams explained to me that he knew *"the Home Office have a contract with the Britannia Hotel"*

*Group to house asylum seekers and I also knew that there was another hotel in my ward where asylum seekers were being housed where there were loads of problems; and which had been visited the previous weekend by the right-wing group Britain First".* He went on to say that he used social media as a quick way of getting messages out to residents and that *"I knew that the fact that another hotel was now to be used in this way would not go down well with residents and thought I should let residents know that it was about to happen"*.

14. Cllr Williams said that, that same evening in the light of what he had found out, he put out a tweet on Twitter which said *"Breaking news: C.17 coaches will arrive at the Royal Court Hotel in Coventry Friday a.m. with asylum seekers (source verified). Second hotel in Bablake Ward to be used like this. I am on the case"*.
15. Both local MPs and Nigel Farage were copied into the tweet. Cllr Williams said to me that he *"didn't really know why I copied Nigel Farage in"* but said he thought that *"copying him in would give the matter a higher profile, which in my view would be in the public interest"*.
16. In his statement Cllr Williams explained that he got lots of comments following his tweets; he said, *"most were positive about being notified by me about the situation; the ones that were not positive mainly came, I think, from non-residents"*. Cllr Williams then explained the further investigations he did about whether the hotel was being closed and which confirmed that it was closing that weekend.
17. The next day he put more information out on his personal Facebook page which contained a little more detail and this was *"shared 125 times"*. Cllr Williams said he was *"getting messages from residents and others thanking me for looking into this and saying they were worried"*.
18. The following day on Friday 28 August, Cllr Williams went to the Royal Court Hotel and was told that the hotel was closed and said that whilst he was there he noticed *"seven site notices"* on a nearby lamppost containing *"a copy of an injunction obtained by Coventry City Council who had put a stop notice on the hotel saying that if they took in asylum seeker the Council would take them to Court"*. Photographs of the stop notices are in the Appendix following Cllr Williams statement.
19. Cllr Williams investigated back at the Council offices and asked why he had not been told what was happening as he was a local member and so was, he believed, required by the Councils Constitution to be informed. He was told that the stop notice had been placed on the hotel as the Council and other bodies did not have the necessary

resources to support another 200 asylum seekers. Later that day a press release, a copy of which appears in the Appendix after Cllr Williams statement; and included in a newspaper article was received from the Council's communications team.

20. Cllr Williams submitted questions at the following Council meeting on 8 September and a link to the video of the Council meeting can be seen- again the link is in the Appendix. Mr Williams described that at the Council meeting the Leader had told him the action the council had taken with the stop notice was nothing to do with the tweet that Cllr Williams had made and that he (Cllr Williams) was simply stirring up communities.
21. In the end, the 200 asylum seekers never arrived in Coventry.
22. Cllr Williams said that he felt that by not telling him about the situation with the asylum seekers the Council was not complying with the Constitution and explained that he thought that residents need to be kept informed. He supplied a copy of one of his resident newsletters; which can be seen in the Appendix.
23. The situation which gave rise to these complaints was as follows: as the statement from Cllr Williams identifies, on 27 August he was in his office at the Council when someone spoke to him and asked him if he knew that a hotel in his ward, the Royal Court Hotel, was going to *"receive 17 coaches of asylum seekers that weekend who are being sent there by the Home Office"*. Cllr Williams said that he also received, the same day, a voicemail from a resident in a neighbouring ward who gave him further information about this from which he identified that *"approximately 200 separate asylum seekers across the 17 coaches"* would be sent to stay at the Royal Court and the hotel was closing as a result. Cllr Williams investigated this by telephoning the hotel purporting to book rooms but was told that *"the hotel was closed that weekend for refurbishment"*.
24. Cllr Williams explained that he knew that *"the Home Office have a contract with the Britannia Hotel Group to house asylum seekers and I also knew that there was another hotel in my ward where asylum seekers were being housed where there were loads of problems; and which had been visited the previous weekend by the right-wing group Britain First"*. He went on to say that he used social media as a quick way of getting messages out to residents and that *"I knew that the fact that another hotel was now to be used in this way would not go down well with residents and thought I should let residents know that it was about to happen"*.

25. Cllr Williams said that accordingly, that same evening he put out a tweet on Twitter which said *"Breaking news: C.17 coaches will arrive at the Royal Court Hotel in Coventry Friday a.m. with asylum seekers (source verified). Second hotel in Bablake Ward to be used like this. I am on the case"*.
26. Both local MPs and Nigel Farage were copied into the tweet. Cllr Williams said to me that he didn't really know *"why I copied Nigel Farage in"* but said he thought that *"copying him in would give the matter a higher profile, which in my view would be in the public interest"*.
27. In his statement Cllr Williams explained that he got lots of comments *"most were positive about being notified by me about the situation; the ones that were not o positive mainly came, I think, from non-residents"*. Cllr Williams then explained the further investigations he did about whether the hotel was being closed and was told it was closing that weekend.
28. The next day he put more information out on his personal Facebook page which contained a little more detail and this was *"shared 125 times"*. Cllr Williams said he was *"getting messages from residents and others thanking me for looking into this and saying they were worried"*.
29. The following day on Friday 28 August, Cllr Williams went to the Royal Court Hotel and was told that the hotel was closed and said that whilst he was there he noticed *"seven site notices"* on a nearby lamppost containing *"a copy of an injunction obtained by Coventry City Council who had put a stop notice on the hotel saying that if they took in asylum seeker the Council would take them to Court"*. Photographs of the stop notices appear in the Appendix.
30. Cllr Williams investigated back at the Council offices and asked why he had not been told as was, he believed, required by the Councils Constitution, and was told that the stop notice had been placed on the hotel as the Council did not have the necessary resources to support another 200 asylum seekers and later that day a press release, a copy of which appears in the Appendix, was received from the Council's communications team.
31. Cllr Williams submitted questions at the following Council meeting on 8 September and a link to the video of the Council meeting is here. Mr Williams described in his statement that the Leader had told him it was nothing to do with the tweet that he had made and that he was simply stirring up communities. The result however was that the 200 asylum seekers never arrived in Coventry. Cllr Williams said that he felt that by not

telling him about the situation with the asylum seekers the Council was not complying with the Constitution and explained that he thought that residents need to be kept informed. He supplied copies of his social media and monthly email updates to residents.

32. Cllr Williams explained that on the weekend of 29 August Britain First held protests at hotels in Coventry where migrants and asylum seekers had been placed and explained his view that *"whilst I believe that some of what Britain First say may be legitimate, because they talk about matters that the mainstream parties won't talk about and so people go towards such extremists as they are the only people talking about these issues; I find the way in which such organisations go about expressing their views is often difficult to support"*. The index includes a newspaper article which covers demonstrations at two hotels in Coventry on 29<sup>th</sup> August, one of which was the Royal Court Hotel.
33. Cllr Williams was adamant that he was not intending to encourage any demonstrations or such actions and that his actions were purely factual in the interests of informing the residents of his ward. He explained that he did not feel his actions offended against the Council's Code of Conduct; pointing out that the Council had effectively done the same thing by issuing the stop notice.

## THE COMPLAINANTS

34. Due to the anonymity given to the complainants, they are referred to simply as Complainants 1, 2 3 and 4. None of the Complainants appeared to know that other complaints had been made and none of the Complainants knew of each other. None of the Complainants were members of any political parties and none of them had had any previous association with Cllr Williams other than Complainant 3 who said that they had met Cllr Williams through a speed watch campaign a few years previously.
35. Given the nature of this complaint the Complainants' evidence is short and fully contained in their statements in the Appendix. In brief, they all felt that the tweet put out by Cllr Williams on social media was offensive and was *"a way of inciting further hatred and inciting violence against refugees and asylum seekers"*. One Complainant said, *"To my mind his actions would be likely to incite hatred and fear within the community and was totally unnecessary"*. One Complainant said, *"I believe that his statement was tantamount to inciting violence against asylum seekers...and to incite hatred and fear within the local community"*. Another said, *"I believe that by his post*

*Cllr Williams was failing to treat people with respect; I think he was attempting to dehumanise people and that brings his role as a councillor into disrepute”.*

36. Some of the Complainants also raised the issue of Cllr Williams being a member of the City Council; one said, *“I do not believe...he was behaving in accordance with the requirements of the Council’s Code of Conduct”.* Another said, *“I think it is clear to me that Cllr Williams is not upholding the spirit and principles of the City Council and the other principles a councillor should, and to my mind, adhere to”.* Another said *“For me the post is quite shocking and to see a local councillor unnecessarily doing it in that way and then trying to pass it off as his role as a councillor I find really low”* and *“I felt that this; [the tweet and Facebook feed] was particularly uncalled for because Cllr Williams is a member of Coventry City Council and I do not believe that by his tweet and his post he is behaving in accordance with the requirements of the Council’s Code of Conduct”.*

## FINDINGS

For the Code of Conduct to apply, it has to be established that a member was being in his role as a member of the Council, as these are the only situations in which the Code of Conduct will apply. When I interviewed Cllr Williams, he said that he was clear that when he made the tweets and the Facebook comments he was acting in his role as a member.

In addition, his Twitter feed identifies him as a councillor- he is described as :

*Councillor for Bablake ward, Coventry. True Brexit. Working hard to protect our Greenbelt. Making Bablake great again. Coventry’s favourite councillor*

Accordingly, I find that the Code of Conduct applies to his actions.

37. In considering whether or not his actions amounted to a breach of the Code of Conduct, I find that the evidence is sufficient to amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct. Whilst this matter is perhaps somewhat complicated by the actions of the City Council itself at the same time in making a stop notice, I think that this is different and can be distinguished from the actions of Cllr Williams.
38. The way in which Cllr Williams worded his tweet and his Facebook message, and copying in Nigel Farage for reasons he cannot now identify or explain, seems to me to have a different emphasis; not one based, as were the councils actions, on practical issues and indeed concern for the asylum seekers; but based upon alerting the local community to an issue and highlighting, from my reading of his words, a sense of threat. I believe that this is heightened by the events of the time- one of the



attachments in the appendix is a newspaper article about an attack on the Hotels housing asylum seekers- including, the following days after Cllr Williams tweet; the Royal Court, which as the above shows, did not in the end receive any asylum seekers. It is a fact that from at least August 2020 and continuing, Britain First and other far right activist groups staged protests both inside and outside hotels housing asylum seekers, ranging from hotels in London to Warrington, Birmingham, Bromsgrove and of course, Coventry.

39. In these protests it is alleged that the far-right groups sometimes entered the hotels, where they banged on doors in corridors and harassed residents. During July 2020 Nigel Farage had also made and published at least one video about asylum seekers being put up in hotels, including the following (taken from an article in The Independent dated 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020):

*“I tried to book a room at the 4 Star Bromsgrove Hotel & Spa, but it was closed to the public”, he wrote on Twitter. “Turns out it’s accommodating 147 illegal migrants and we’re all paying for it.”*

40. In my view it is important to understand the background at the time when considering the actions of Cllr Williams; although I should make it clear that this is simply background and that I have no evidence and do not suggest or imply any collusion whatsoever on his part with any far right groups.
41. I am also struck by the number of people who complained; it is in my experience unusual to have four unconnected people make complaints about the actions of a member; and all four objections are very similar, drawing attention to the likelihood of Cllr Williams’ action inciting violence and “*dehumanising*” people. Some of the complainants also mentioned that Cllr Williams was not behaving as they would expect a councillor to behave in by upholding the values of the council.
42. In my opinion, the evidence shows that his actions are capable of amounting to a breach of the Code of Conduct. The very first requirement in the Code is a requirement for members to “*represent the community and work constructively with our staff and partner organisations to secure better social, economic and environmental outcomes for all*”. There is no suggestion that Cllr Williams sought to deal with the news he had by speaking to the offices and members of the Council, or with partners, to deal with the situation; instead he simply went over there and made his own investigations; as he said in his tweet “*I am on the case*”. To my mind this emphasises the nature of his actions in spreading concern and not seeking to reassure; there seems to have been no attempt on his part to work constructively in this situation, as required.

43. The Code contains requirements for members to “*champion the needs of residents....and put the public interest first*”; to “*provide leadership*”; and to “*always treat people with respect*”; as well as the requirement given above.
44. Some of the complainants have suggested other potential breaches but I do not think that the evidence supports them.
45. This is a complaint where the evidence is clear and where the facts are not in dispute. This means that the question of whether or not Cllr Williams breached the Council’s Code of Conduct is a matter for judgment placed on the complaints and the effects that the words of Cllr Williams appear to have had.
46. It is therefore a difficult judgment, but taking all of the factors into account, and in accordance with my first finding above that the code does apply to his actions; I make a second finding that I believe there is sufficient evidence in this matter to justify a finding that Cllr Williams breached the Council’s Code of Conduct by his actions in relation to the tweet and post on social media on the 27 and 28 August 2020; in that he breached the requirements of paragraph 1; paragraph 2 (g); paragraph 2 (a) and paragraph 3(j) of the Code of Conduct.

**Olwen Brown**

**Partner**

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