

Reply to Sharon Bridglalsingh
Call 01908 252095 Ref SB/JEK
E-mail sharon.bridglalsingh@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Private and Confidential

Cllr Chris Williams
10 Rhuddlan Close
Shenley Church End
Milton Keynes MK5 6EL

Date 29 June 2017

Dear Councillor Williams

Code of Conduct – Letter of Censure

At the hearing which took place on 10 May at Civic Offices in Milton Keynes the Assessment sub-Committee found that in sending the email dated 11 May 2016 to the complainant you had breached the Code of Conduct applicable to members of Milton Keynes Council.

This letter of censure is to inform you that the Assessment Sub-Committee found that your use of language and the tone of your email to the complainant was disrespectful and bullying and felt short of what should be expected of Members of Milton Keynes Council.

Whilst the sub-Committee took account of your assertion that you had found dealing with the complainant and her company frustrating, you are advised that they found the manner in which you responded to her unacceptable

As Chair of the Standards Committee I trust that you will take on board the sub-Committee's assessment of the manner in which you behaved towards the complainant and ensure that you show proper respect to others in the future when acting in your capacity as a Milton Keynes Councillor.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Ric Brackenbury
Chair – Standards Committee

**Resources Directorate
Legal and Democratic Services**



Reply to Sharon Bridglalsingh
Call 01908 252095 Ref SB/014870
E-mail Sharon.Bridglalsingh@milton-keynes.gov.uk

Private and Confidential

**Councillor Chris Williams
C/o Milton Keynes Council
Civic Offices
1 Saxon Gate East
Milton Keynes
MK9 3EJ**

15th May 2017

Dear Cllr Williams

Decision Notice

I am writing to confirm the outcome of the Hearing before the Assessments Sub-Committee which took place on 11 May.

As you will recall, the Sub-Committee heard from yourself and from Mark Neale (Deputy Monitoring Officer, Bedford Borough Council) and from the Independent Person, Maureen Briggs. The complainant had earlier indicated that she did not want to attend or be heard at the hearing. The hearing centred solely on the contents and tone of an email you sent to the complainant dated 11 May 2016.

It was common ground that you had offered to apologise for the final sentence of your email, only. The Monitoring Officer advised that it was not possible to reach a resolution to the complaint on the basis of that restriction.

At the Hearing you stated that you were aware that your email was aggressive in tone and that indeed you meant it to be so. You said you felt no remorse about the contents of the email and that you would write it again.

The Sub-Committee decided that in sending the email to the complainant you were in breach of the following parts of the Code of Conduct applicable to Members of Milton Keynes Council:-

The Members of Milton Keynes Council must:

2. respect others and not bully any person
6. not conduct themselves in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing their office or the Authority into disrepute.

The Committee decided that the following sanctions should be applied to you in respect of those breaches:-

Censure
Publication of the findings

**Report to Full Council
Instruction to the Monitoring Officer to arrange training**

Before those sanctions are implemented, you have 21 days from the date of this letter to lodge an appeal against this Decision Notice. An appeal must be in writing and be received by the Monitoring Officer within the 21 day period. There is no specific format for an appeal and a letter may suffice. However, an appeal may only be made on one or more of the following grounds:-

The procedure being wrongly applied,
New evidence has come to light since the hearing, or
A misdirection in law
which has resulted, in the Appellant's view, in an unfair decision.

Yours sincerely,




Clr Norman Miles
Chair
Standards Sub-Committee Committee

Bedford Borough Councils Deputy Monitoring Officers Report - Tuesday 7th March 2017

Complaint against Councillor Chris Williams

Background Summary

On the 11th May 2016 Councillor Williams sent an email to [REDACTED] copying into that email 13 other people. The email was a strongly worded criticism of [REDACTED] and her organisation. Within the text of the email there were paragraphs and sentences in bold and the final sentence of the email also in bold type read "I cannot wait to meet you face to face".

Following receipt of this email [REDACTED] filled in a Councillors complaint form dated 21st August 2016. The details of the complaint were "Councillor Williams sent me a threatening, extremely abusive email. There was absolutely no need for the way he spoke to me. Please see attached email, paying attention to the last sentence".

A letter was sent to Councillor Williams on the 20th October 2016 by Janet Kealey, the Deputy Monitoring Officer for Milton Keynes stating that the Monitoring Officer and the Independent Person had considered the matter and would be referring the complaint to the Assessment Sub Committee for alleged breaches of the Milton Keynes Councillors Code of Conduct. The parts of the code to which the complaint refers are:

2. respect others and not bully any person
6. not conduct themselves in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing their office or the Authority into disrepute.

The complaint was taken to the Standards Sub Committee on Friday 2nd December 2016 where it was resolved that the complaint be referred to the Monitoring Officer for investigation in conjunction with a fellow Monitoring Officer, with a view to resolution.

Meeting with Councillor Chris Williams Friday 3rd March 2017 – Shenley Brook End Parish Council Office – 10.00am

Attending the meeting were Councillor Chris Williams, Janet Kealey, Interim Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer for Milton Keynes and Mark Neale, Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer for Bedford Borough Council.

Councillor Williams requested that a member of the Milton Keynes Legal team be present as he was concerned as to whether his comments would be reported accurately.

Following introductions the matter of the complaint was outlined to Councillor Williams together with the resolution of the Standards Sub Committee.

It was explained to Councillor Williams that Mark Neale had been asked to speak with him to try and seek a resolution to the complaint by way of a more fulsome apology to [REDACTED]

Mark Neale then outlined the issues surrounding the complaint and the email and in particular the sentences in bold and the last line of the email. Councillor Williams stated that he had sought advice from a senior police officer who had advised him that the last line could be perceived as threatening. Councillor Williams stated that there was no intention for the last line to be threatening and that he was merely looking forward to meeting [REDACTED]

We then discussed whether the 'threatening' last line in conjunction with other sentences in bold type would make the email as a whole threatening, but Councillor Williams did not agree with this approach. He stated that he made no apology whatsoever for the tone of his email apart from the last line, for which he has already offered an apology.

Discussion then focussed on what sanctions a Standards Committee could impose. Councillor Williams mistakenly thought that he could be suspended. Both Mark Neale and Janet Kealey informed Councillor Williams that suspension was no longer a sanction but other sanctions could be imposed. Councillor Williams asked what other sanctions were available. A brief explanation of what sanctions could be available to a Standards Committee, such as being required to undertake training possible censure, or even being removed from Committees. Councillor Williams thought these sanctions were "toothless" and would not prevent him from sticking to his principle. He also felt that any adverse publicity surrounding a sanction was not an issue as he felt that 'transparency' was a part of public service.

We then discussed the code of conduct and whether the letter may have breached the parts of the code, relating to respect and bullying. Councillor Williams was adamant that he did not think that he had breached the code of conduct. Councillor Williams did comment that a lot of his fellow Councillors (Parish?) applauded the stance he had taken.

Councillor Williams showed no remorse at the tone of the email and had little regard in respect of the Councillors Code of Conduct. He did state on several occasions that he would be willing to apologise for the last line of the email but would not apologise for the email itself. Councillor Williams thought this a trivial matter and felt that should it be investigated that it was a waste of resource and time. He stated that he would not be attending for any hearings before the Standards Committee in relation to this matter.

Conclusion

As matters stand I have been unable to resolve this complaint with Councillor Williams.

I understand that the original complainant, [REDACTED] has indicated that she wants to have nothing further to do with Councillor Williams and that, as the matter is being taken forward through the Council's procedures, it is resolved so far as she personally is concerned. She does not wish to take part in any proceedings and leaves the fact of Councillor Williams' email to speak for itself.

Mark Neale - Head of Legal Services & Deputy Monitoring Officer, Bedford Borough Council.

Report of the Independent Member

1. I have set out below my consideration in respect of the complaint about Cllr Williams.
2. I think it is pertinent to have regard to the comments of Mark Neale, Deputy Monitoring Officer of BBC in his report dated 7 March 2017. Mr Neale states that Cllr Williams showed "no remorse at the tone of the email and had little regard in respect of the Councillors Code of Conduct. He went to report that "Cllr Williams thought this was a trivial matter."
3. I believe that there is a legitimate expectation from the community that they are entitled to expect the very highest standards of ethical behaviour from those they elect. It is therefore concerning that we are considering the conduct of a Councillor who we are told had little regard for the standards of conduct clearly set out in the Councillor Code of Conduct.
4. I believe that the Code of Conduct has been breached.
5. There is a general obligation to "provide leadership by example". In my view the content, tone and subsequent attitude and approach by Cllr Williams does not meet this test.
6. Similarly in respect of the second general obligation – to treat people with respect and not bully any person – I am of the opinion, based on the evidence provided that this element of the Code has been breached. It is incumbent upon an individual in a position of trust, such as a Cllr, to have regard to how their own comments and/or actions may be interpreted and/or received. As a community leader it is not unreasonable to expect Councillors to exhibit high personal standards in line with the guidelines set out by Nolan and framed the Code of Conduct. Having considered the evidence presented to me I do not see this being exhibited and in my opinion the actions and communications fall short of showing respect.
7. Finally, I refer again to the comments of the Deputy Monitoring Officer of BBC. At face value, the comments that Cllr Williams has little regard in respect of the Councillors Code of Conduct suggest that Cllr Williams does not embrace the spirit or intention of the Code of Conduct and therefore it seems to me that he is in denial about his actions and their consequences.