

Although made well over a year ago I have not made any comment on this complaint until now as it would have been inappropriate to do so whilst it was still under investigation and the findings had not been reported to the Parish Council.

The investigation ended some time ago (30th October 2024) when the Audit and Governance (Hearing) Sub-Committee found that Cllr Soper had broken the code of conduct for councillors.

My complaint related to:

(a) a statement made by Cllr Soper at the July 2023 meeting of the Parish Council, which I felt was inappropriate, unsubstantiated, inaccurate, and defamatory;

(b) an unofficial meeting of councillors on the 26th of September 2023 at which I was subjected to what I felt to be bullying behaviour by my fellow councillors (although I named only Cllr Soper in my complaint) and had my legitimacy as a councillor called into question; and

(c) the repeated failure of Cllr Soper to respond to my questions relating to the aforementioned public statement, either at the September and subsequent meetings or via email.

In his report the Independent Person found that, whilst Cllr Soper is not obliged to offer any form of explanation for his statement, Cllr Soper has not treated me with respect by his failure to subsequently acknowledge or respond to my questions. He adds that an explanation and/or apology would have gone a long way towards bridge-building.

He also finds that it appears that several members of the Parish Council may have been unduly critical of myself at the September meeting.

Disagreements should be dealt with internally by the Council, within the parameters of healthy debate and mutual respect. I regret that, despite my best efforts, this was not possible in this case and that I was left with no alternative to making an official complaint. As councillors it is our duty to challenge malpractice where we consider it to have occurred.

The statement made by Cllr Soper and the meeting held on the 26th September 2023 ultimately stem from questions asked and challenges made by me with regard to the proper functioning of the Parish Council. In particular, I raised the issues of:

(a) the Council's failure to comply with almost all of its statutory requirements; and

(b) the Council's accounting procedures, which were clearly inadequate.

I understand that this may have been difficult for my fellow councillors, and that they may not have liked my approach, however, to quote part of the Independent Person's report, *"The Subject Member, and indeed other members of the Parish Council, may not like the approach taken by the Complainant and whilst this may be not how things have been done in the past, it does not mean the Complainant's approach is incorrect and often a wish to get things done can be seen as aggressive."*

Great progress has been made by the council in the last year and a half in ensuring that correct policies and procedures are in place, not least thanks to Penny, who has proved already to be a magnificent Clerk and guide. I really hope we can move on from the last couple of years and focus on doing our best to serve the community that has elected us.

This wish to move on notwithstanding, it is important to me that the recommendations of the Hearing Panel are followed and that this on the public record.

The panel were clear in their censure of Cllr Soper. With regards to any apology, it is for Cllr Soper, and indeed others, to act as they see fit. I will say however that well over a year ago I received conciliatory phone calls from both Cllrs Hannaford and Wotton, for which I am grateful.

With regards to the recommendation for training on governance, leadership and IT, in early 2024 sitting councillors had received some training based on a session designed for new councillors. I hope that going forward all new councillors receive this training and that a version of it is used as a refresher for all councillors at the beginning of any new term. I personally feel that any opportunities to attend DALC forums or briefings and attend networking events are invaluable for any councillor and that we should all take it upon ourselves to do so wherever possible. I would also hope that the Chair of the Council, whoever that may be, will attend any relevant training or forums designed to support them in their role.

With regards to IT, I understand that the development and use of digital technology accelerates at a rate some may find difficult to keep pace with and we must be sensitive to this. However, like it or not, there is a certain level of digital literacy needed to be able to carry out one's role as a councillor effectively. I would suggest that this is, at the very least, familiarity and confidence using Zoho mail and basic Microsoft office software. We need to ensure as a council that internal and/or external support and training is in place for those that need it.

Thank you.

Cllr. C. Toorneini