

**STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY**

## **STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY**

### **SOUTH DERBYSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL (WILLINGTON PARISH COUNCIL) – Complaints against Cllr Paul Cullen**

**Summary notes of conversation between Cllr Caroline Blanksby (CB) and Melvin Kenyon (MK - Investigating Officer), Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020, 13.00 hrs – by telephone**

#### **Preamble**

MK read the following preamble before starting the interview:

“My name is Melvin Kenyon and I am an investigator for the Monitoring Officer of South Derbyshire District Council who has asked me to assist her in this matter.

We are going to be talking today about seven complaints made against Councillor Paul Cullen that relate to his alleged behaviour at meetings on three separate occasions last year relating to Willington Parish Council. The complainants have asked for confidentiality, so I am unable to share with you who made the complaints.

I am conducting this interview under the powers given to the Monitoring Officer by the Localism Act 2011 which places councils under a duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

Once we have finished talking I will prepare a write-up of our discussion and I will share it with you and ask you to agree that it is an accurate record of what was said before issuing it as a final record.

Once I have completed all my interviews and obtained sign-off of my interview notes I will produce a draft report of my Investigation. That will be shared first of all with the Monitoring Officer so that she can confirm that the Investigation has been thorough and of the right quality. I will then send the Subject Member and Complainants copies of the reports to enable them to make any representations they consider necessary. Having considered comments on the draft report, I will then issue my final report. Parts of what we say today may be included in the draft and final report.

If the case is considered at a hearing, the summary of what you say may be submitted as evidence and you may be called as a witness. I appreciate that you might want to preserve your confidentiality and, if needs be, that can be discussed with the Monitoring Officer before any Standards Committee hearing, should a hearing take place.

If you provide me with information of a private or sensitive nature - normally very personal information that needs to be protected - I will ask the Standards Committee that this be kept confidential. However, there is no guarantee that my request will be followed, and the information may end up in the public domain.

Please treat information provided to you during the course of this discussion as confidential.

That’s the end of the formal piece. Are you content with what I have said?”

## **STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY**

CB confirmed that she was content with what MK had said and asked for confirmation that the Monitoring Officer is Ardip Kaur, which MK confirmed.

MK said that there had been a number of complaints against PC and that he himself appeared to have made complaints against other councillors too. MK was investigating only some of those complaints and wanted to talk about three separate alleged incidents with CB about which there had been seven complaints.

MK explained that he reached his conclusions based upon the balance of probability and the available evidence. He intended as part of his investigation to try to speak to all members of Willington Parish Council and he would be giving equal weight to the testimony of every councillor he spoke to. His aim was to be independent, open-minded and objective in his investigation.

### **Discussion**

CB has lived in Willington for 28 years. Before joining the Parish Council, she knew PC vaguely, through friends of friends, though he was not part of her social circle. CB had been elected to the Council in May 2019. She had originally become involved in village affairs through involvement with a campaign and petition to prevent the car park opposite the Dragon which is owned by the County Council becoming pay and display.

That was a spur to her becoming more involved in village life. In doing this she had “rubbed up the Council the wrong way” and been blocked from joining the Parish Council as a co-optee when Cliff Warner was Chair. Later Phill Allsopp had been preferred to her in a co-option process even though she was the only potential co-optee who had followed the correct process. CB complained to Ardip Kaur at SDDC informing Ardip that Phill Allsopp had not followed the correct procedure and informed SDDC in writing that he wanted to stand as a Willington Parish Councillor. Ardip Kaur was not helpful at all and CB’s complaint was not looked into. This had left a bad taste. When the May 2019 election was approaching CB was persuaded to stand by Tim Bartram. She was successful and achieved the second highest vote.

The villagers had been against the pay and display car park, but the Parish Council was in favour because they had hoped that any subsequent profit would be ploughed back into the Parish Council. CB had therefore started on the Council on the wrong foot and was disliked by Andy Macpherson, John Houghton, Ian Walters and John Phillips. She did not know Phill Allsopp except as the successful co-optee when she had been unsuccessful – though she did not hold that against him.

### **LAC/107 – Ordinary Parish Council Meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

It was alleged that filming by PC at the Ordinary Parish Council Meeting of 12th was intimidatory in that it was directed at a single individual. Whilst other complaints have apparently been made about such alleged filming MK had not been asked to investigate those.

## STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY

It is alleged that PC filmed an individual councillor (Claire Carter) in close proximity and that he had repeatedly moved his camera to ensure that she was “in shot”. MK had listened to an audio recording of the incident and it was clear to him that PC did make a video recording at the meeting. The meeting had been suspended by the Chair and PC was persuaded, with his father Joe’s intervention, to pass the camera to a member of the public so that she could carry on filming. MK asked what CB remembered of the meeting?

CB said she recalled the meeting “very well”. PC had been videoing the meeting from the very beginning. Around halfway through the meeting Claire Carter suddenly realised that the meeting was being videoed. The camera was “pointing to a selection of people, definitely not just Claire”. CB recalled PC turning the camera as different people spoke.

CB recalled Claire getting up and “she went and sat in the corner like a spoilt child”. “There was no way the camera was just on her”. Claire and John Houghton tend to sit either side of Paul. John swings back on the back two chair legs and he and Claire pull faces, talk about Paul, make silly remarks behind his back, “it’s embarrassing actually”. This meeting stood out because Claire was continuously tapping her pen when Paul was talking to the point where CB had asked Claire, possibly through the Chair, to stop tapping her pen. The tapping had been getting louder and louder and louder. Claire was almost being aggressive towards Paul.

MK suggested that it had been alleged by several witnesses that PC kept moving the camera so that Claire was in shot. CB did “not recall that at all, that was not right, he was moving it as different people were speaking”. MK said, playing devil’s advocate, that words like, “upsetting, confrontational, intimidating, threatening, aggressive” had been used by witnesses. CB replied, “She never said that at any of the meeting as far as I am aware, I am pretty sure she didn’t”. CB did not believe that Claire was being intimidated at any point in that meeting. If Claire was in shot, she was not alone.

MK said that he had listened to an audio recording of the meeting. It was clear that PC was filming and that he had been asked to switch the camera off. The meeting had been suspended. CB said that that was the point at which Claire had moved her chair into the corner of the room.

MK then asked whether CB believed that the filming was intimidating or could have been interpreted as intimidating? CB said, “No. I don’t. I am a Parish Councillor. I shouldn’t be worried about anybody filming me or anything I say at a meeting. Definitely not”.

MK said that it was further alleged that, after the meeting and having left the building, PC returned to the building and started to shout at some of those who were still there. CB did not recall this.

MK then said that he understood that at the subsequent meeting in December there were three video recording devices or cameras. One was in front of Caroline and there were two others. CB recalled that. She said that meetings have always been audio recorded but it was obviously not possible to see facial expressions on audio – the sneering and staring that goes on at meetings, which was ridiculous. This was why video recording was necessary. It was necessary too because the minutes are sometimes not accurate at all.

## **STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY**

When asked by MK why Claire and other witnesses might suggest that she had been intimidated CB replied there was “a clique and you are either one side or the other”. There was a “cosy club” and CB, Tim Bartram and Ros Casey “upset the apple cart when [they] were elected. They didn’t want any fresh blood on the Council. They wanted things to go on as they had done for years”.

This was the motivation for all the complaints that had been made against herself, Ros and Tim. It was “horrible. I didn’t join Willington Parish Council at all for this”. They couldn’t get anything done because of the cosy club, “every time we try to get anything done for the good of the village they go against us”. CB said that there was a “campaign of hate” against PC. Whatever he said it would never be right. There were complaints after every meeting he went to. There had been several complaints against CB as well.

MK said that, in his opinion, both Claire and PC were suffering because of this. If it were all one-sided why might that be? CB replied that she thought there was a campaign to get PC off the Council. John Phillips and Ian Walters had only joined the Council to get PC off it. CB did not know why they wanted to do that.

CB then raised the proposed Axis 50 development as a case in point. She, Ros, Tim, Joe and Paul were the only people who wanted to do anything about it and oppose it because that was what the vast majority of the villagers wanted (though a few residents certainly *did* want it to go ahead).

### **LAC/94, LAC/95, LAC/96, & a letter by the author of an earlier complaint LAC/77 Extraordinary Parish Council Meeting held on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.**

At the Extraordinary Parish Council Meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019 a parishioner, Nicola Phillips [wife of John Phillips, daughter of Sue Carter], had made a statement about the need for the Council to start to work together for the benefit of the village and the treatment of clerks (MK had a transcript of the text). This statement had apparently spun out of a report that had been presented by the clerk at a previous meeting. This was captured on an audio recording, which MK had listened to, and it appeared to him that PC had left his seat and made a statement “as a parishioner”.

CB remembered the incident very well. At the previous meeting Nicola Phillips and her mother “read out a statement that was appalling and shocking, it was disgusting, she tried to make out that she and John Phillips were the victims”. The statement had come about because Nicola’s husband had called PC a scumbag and a drug dealer in an email. “I was shocked that she had the audacity to stand up and read out a statement painting herself and John to be victims. I was horrified. She said that he had had to step down and it was in the best interests of their family. There was no remorse, no shame”.

At 24<sup>th</sup> September meeting PC had then got up and walked to the public area. He read out a statement he had prepared. He said he was going to speak as a member of the public. His statement was “very good, very accurate and very reasonable”. Nicola constantly tried to speak and interrupt him, but he ignored her and carried on speaking. “When he had finished

## **STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY**

I stood up and clapped because of all the abuse he had had. Because of that, I received a complaint about my inappropriate behaviour”.

MK said that he had listened to the audio of the incident. There had been (his words) “a bit of a kerfuffle” and the Chair and Clerk had gently invited PC to come back to the Council table and sit down. CB replied that the Clerk had “shouted at him – “shut up, shut up” I think she said (it was Deb’s favourite word)”.

MK asked CB to confirm that she was talking about the meeting of 24<sup>th</sup> September and CB confirmed that it was.

### **LAC/103 + LAC/105 – Abortive RAC Meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

MK said that it had been alleged that, after the RAC Meeting on 4th November, which was closed by the Chair because insufficient notice had been given, PC lost his temper with an older, female parishioner (Sue Carter) who had attended the meeting, pointed his finger at her in a “menacing” way and verbally abused her before leaving the building. MK asked if CB had been present at the meeting? She confirmed that she had, and she recalled the meeting.

CB said that PC was present as a member of the audience and a member of the public. He was very knowledgeable and knew “all that stuff [standing orders etc.] upside down, standing on his head”. He was a stickler for such things being done correctly and John and Phill were seething. It was right to stop the meeting because procedure had not been followed.

CB did recall Sue Carter bursting into tears. PC went out of the meeting. Sue Carter continued to talk to John Houghton and Phill Allsopp. Paul came back in. CB was with Ros Casey. He was “wagging his finger” at all of us, not just Sue. He said, “Careful, make sure you listen to what she says because she always talks about me behind my back” and then he left. MK said that it had been suggested that SC had said, “Who do you think you are calling she?” before PC turned round, jabbed his finger and said, “You, you”. CB did not recall him jabbing his finger, but he did say, “You, I’m talking about you”. In CB’s view his behaviour was appropriate “because she was talking about him and he had perhaps caught her out”. He did not trust Sue Carter because Nicola Phillips was her daughter. He had not been aggressive towards Sue.

CB had no idea why Sue had burst into tears, nothing happened to warrant her doing that. She did not give her any sympathy, nor did Ros Casey, “she probably did it for effect”. They made no comment and simply sat there as this happened.

### **General discussion**

MK asked how the problems on the Parish Council could get resolved? CB replied, “It doesn’t”. She herself would support mediation but too much water had flowed under the bridge. It might be too late for mediation from the Cullens’ perspective thought it was not too late from her own perspective.

Phill Allsopp is a nice man, but he is not a good chair. He does not understand the procedures. He tells lies to CB’s face and tells CB to shut up and stop talking.

## STANDARDS HEARING STATEMENT 10 – CLLR CAROLINE BLANKSBY

MK then asked a question about burials software and a discussion about it at the Parish Council. A councillor had wanted to go on a course to understand how to use the software and there was opposition to it in the Council. Had CB voted against it? CB replied yes, "Because he's not the right person. He's rubbish. It would have been a waste of money for him to be trained on it .... it wasn't the principle, the councillor concerned was the wrong person." CB had been proved right in that when someone in the village had needed to be buried and he had been "most unhelpful, considering he is the lead on burials". Tim Bartram had had to go and see the grieving family and sort it out. Then councillor, Ian Walters, attends meetings occasionally, but he does nothing on burials. It is all left to the Clerk, he simply manages it.

CB said that she was worried about the effect on PC's health of the campaign of hate, the harassment and the bullying against him. It was relentless and constant. He only had to step into a meeting and "they're at him. They know he's at the end of his tether. You can see it by his behaviour and his mannerisms. He always has a nervous tic. They are doing everything they can to antagonise him. He's Willington born and bred with a good job as a fireman. He cares, especially about footpaths and open spaces". He had had to step back as Chair of this committee because you can't get anything done with him as a member of it. "They vote down anything he wants". There is a "campaign to undermine him and get rid of him".

PC would make a good Chairman because he was so knowledgeable. John Houghton would make a better Chair [than Phill Allsopp]. MK suggested that if a Chair did not know the procedures then they would need to a good clerk to support them. CB replied that Willington did not have a good clerk, in fact they had a terrible clerk. After CB's first meeting she had told two members of the public that she did not like CB and did not trust her. She never speaks to CB. She did not know why there had been six or seven clerks over a short period of time.

CB began as she began the discussion – she had started off in the wrong foot and was never going to be in favour. She hoped that MK could see through all the lies.

The discussion closed at 14:05 hrs