

Investigations – work through

Case study one

Mr A Jones
Monitoring Officer
Goodluck Council

Dear Mr Jones

Thank you for taking on this investigation under our reciprocal arrangements.

Councillor Drew has been a member of our council for five years, and a portfolio holder for two years. I have received numerous complaints from staff about his communications with officers.

The head of IT has described Councillor Drew as hectoring and overbearing in telephone conversations with both him and two of his managers over the last two years.

Examples include:

- A telephone call in which the head of IT was called “a crap manager”.
- A telephone call in which a manager was repeatedly questioned about his professional qualifications and his experience of IT.
- A telephone call which concluded with Councillor Drew telling an IT manager: “If you are looking for a confrontation, I shall enjoy it.”

I do not have the dates of these telephone calls. I understand that at some point in the last few months the head of IT began logging calls from Councillor Drew and noting their content.

Councillor Drew has also sent emails to the IT department over a 20-month period. His issues have included: his concerns at the blocking of certain emails sent from his home email address; the speed with which the head of IT has provided various breakdowns of costs to him; and what Councillor Drew has described as “inadequate” explanations

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about the provision of IT services to councillors. Sometimes Councillor Drew has copied his emails to junior officers in the IT department and to senior officers in other departments within the council.

The email content has included the following:

- “For goodness sake, either sack the lot of them and start again, or DO SOMETHING!”
- “Your obscenity blocker would be the laughing stock of any half-way competent IT service.”
- “Thank you for your input – I would never have known how you could twist the democratic process without it.”
- “May I remind you that you are merely the SERVANTS and not the masters.”
- “I can’t possibly match your lightning intelligence.”

Our chief executive met last year with Councillor Drew and asked him to amend his approach to officers. Councillor Drew apologised on that occasion for any offence caused, and said that his emails were largely intended to be seen as humorous, but that his real concerns about the progress of IT projects for members had been repeatedly “fobbed off” by the head of IT. He said that officers were frequently abrupt and condescending to him on the telephone and that he should not have to accept this.

Following that meeting, Councillor Drew ceased to send these types of emails or make such telephone calls for a short time. However, in the last six months he has allegedly returned to his disparaging and derogatory approach to officers.

One further recent incident concerns Councillor Drew’s public criticism of the IT department. He involved himself in a dispute between the council and an IT firm contracted to provide a service. The council terminated that contract. Councillor Drew was then quoted in the press

saying that the council had made a serious error and that the contract had been terminated because the council's IT services had been "running scared" of the competition. The IT firm is now demanding compensation for the terminated contract.

Following that press coverage, Councillor Drew has sent at least two emails to the head of IT complaining that his council emails are being intercepted improperly by IT staff, and allegedly copied those emails to a member of the IT firm in question.

The head of IT then decided to make a formal complaint to me under the Code of Conduct.

Councillor Drew came to see me and expressed his view that this was an attempt by officers to suppress his legitimate criticism of a poorly performing service. He referred to a recent internal investigation within the council that had uncovered serious concerns about the IT department and that had led to the departure of one or two managers. I am happy to discuss the relevance of that with you, in due course.

Yours

Mr B Smith
Monitoring Officer
Hardluck Council

Questions

- 1.1 What are the minor problems with this investigation?
- 1.2 How do you measure "hectoring" and "overbearing"?
- 1.3 Councillor Drew says the chief executive drew only two emails to his attention, and that he has had no warning of the "numerous" complaints against him. The monitoring officer of Hardluck Council says that this is probably true. Is ignorance a defence?
- 1.4 Do you have a benchmark for bullying?