

Scope of Investigation

The initial complaint included 4 allegations. In the public interest this investigation is confined to the most serious allegation, that Cllr Beckett dishonestly misrepresented the views of a third party during a council meeting in September 2020.

Summary of Witness Evidence

In the course of the investigation I spoke directly to the following:

- Cllr D Watson & Cllr R Heffer (2 of the 4 named complainants).
- 2 members of the public attending the meeting on 15 September 2020.
- Zoe Andrews, Headteacher of Tibshelf Infant School.
- 3 other Parish Councillors, selected at random, all of whom were in attendance at the meeting on 15 September 2020.

NB Some witnesses showed a reluctance to be named given the poor relationships at the Parish Council. Therefore accounts from all those in attendance at the Council meeting (other than Cllrs Beckett, Watson & Heffer) are anonymised.

Complainants:

In conversation Cllrs Watson and Heffer reiterated their accounts of the meeting and were clear that Cllr Beckett had attributed to Zoe Andrews comments that she opposed the proposed development in Tibshelf. No additional details were provided, although the conversations featured comments on other allegations which fall outside the scope of this investigation.

In summary, the details they reiterated were:

At the September meeting of TPC, during a discussion around the Tibshelf Neighbourhood Plan, Cllr Beckett sought to strengthen her own argument by making a statement which she claimed to be from the Headteacher of Tibshelf Infant School, Mrs Zoe Andrews. This lie was heard by a member of the public ... who knew Mrs Andrews and recognised Cllr Beckett's comments as untruthful. They contacted the Headteacher immediately after the meeting, who was reportedly angry. Cllr Beckett then spoke to Mrs Andrews the following day, acknowledging the comments were misleading and claiming that she had said this in the midst of a heated debate.

Mrs Andrews contacted one of the complainants to advise that Cllr Beckett had admitted to the above and, furthermore, had promised to voice a retraction at the following Council meeting. Mrs Andrews said she had contacted them as she wanted to be sure that other Cllrs were aware so she could be reassured that the retraction would indeed be aired and duly minuted at the October meeting.

Members of the Public:

The first witness corroborated the complainants' account that Cllr Beckett had stated that she had spoken prior to the meeting with Mrs Andrews, and that she had expressed opposition to the development of additional housing in the village. In addition, he advised that following the meeting he had informed Mrs Andrews of what had been said. He did this because he knew Mrs Andrews and believed the comments were inconsistent with her position. He also confirmed that he had no personal relationships with any of those present at the meeting.

The second witness provided a slightly different recollection of events. She believed the proposition that Mrs Andrews opposed the development had first been suggested by a councillor other than Cllr Beckett, although she could not recall who. It was her belief that Cllr Beckett had agreed with the other councillor, indicating that was consistent with a conversation which she had with Mrs Andrews. In addition this witness expressed concerns regarding the deterioration of relationships at the Parish Council. The witness confirmed that she is a friend of Cllr Beckett.

Zoe Andrews:

Mrs Andrews confirmed that a witness at the meeting had spoken to her and advised what comments had been attributed to her. Mrs Andrews was clear that she had not said what Cllr Beckett had alleged at the meeting. Indeed, she was at pains to emphasise that, given her role in the community and the sensitivity of the issue in question, she had always been careful not to offer a personal opinion on the development proposals.

Mrs Andrews had been upset that her comments had been misrepresented. Her recollection is that she subsequently emailed her concerns to Cllr Beckett, who spoke to her, apologised and agreed to clarify the comments at a future meeting.

The minutes of the October meeting make no reference to the conversation at the previous meeting, nor any mention of an apology or clarification.

Other Councillors:

The accounts were as follows:

- One councillor was adamant that Cllr Beckett had not done what was alleged. However when asked to provide their account of the meeting they couldn't recall what was said by anyone present.
- One councillor corroborated the complainants' account that Cllr Beckett had attributed to Mrs Andrews comments that were in opposition to the development. The councillor further discussed at length concerns about the deterioration of relationships at the Parish Council.
- The third councillor couldn't recall what was said at the meeting, although they commented that they "didn't know anyone" who wanted the development.