PLEASE NOTE THIS DOCUMENT IS REDACTED AS IT REFERS TO MATTERS THAT ARE NOT RELEVANT TO THIS HEARING

MEMBER COMPLAINT MC 13/2020

COMPLAINT AGAINST ALISON BECKETT, TIBSHELF PARISH COUNCIL

INVESTIGATION REPORT

Background

The complaint was initially received in October 2020. Although affected by a series of delays my initial assessment of the complaint, as Deputy Monitoring Officer, was concluded in May 2021. I determined that a prima facie case was made out. However I considered that a full investigation could be avoided by a formal apology on the record from Cllr Beckett.

Cllr Beckett rejected that conclusion and no apology was made.

Eventually it became apparent that no progress could be made, and that further investigation would be required. During this time it became apparent to the Monitoring Officer and her team that relationships at Tibshelf Parish Council had deteriorated significantly.

Summary of Complaint & Scope of Investigation

The initial complaint raised a series of allegations:

[redacted]

- Dishonesty regarding a 3rd Party – September 2020
- Dishonesty regarding emails sent to Council members

In taking forward the investigation it was determined that the public interest would be served by focus on the most serious element of the complaint; the allegation that Cllr Beckett had dishonestly misrepresented the views of a 3rd party in a Parish Council meeting on 15 September 2020. Specifically, that Cllr Beckett had knowingly attributed untrue comments to Zoe Andrews, Headteacher of Tibshelf Infant School, in respect of the local plan proposals for housing development in Tibshelf.

At the assessment stage Cllr Beckett had refuted that this occurred yet offered no alternative account of what she said. She did indicate that she contacted Mrs

Andrews the following day to apologise that she had been “used as part of political point scoring”.

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, who had expressed opposition to the development of additional housing in the village.

Further, 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.

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.

Subject Member's Evidence

Cllr Beckett was invited to submit her response to the summary of witness evidence. To date this has not been forthcoming.

Conclusion

Having considered the varying accounts of the complainants, witnesses and the subject member I have concluded that on the balance of probabilities there was a breach of the Tibshelf Parish Council Code of Conduct. There was clear evidence

from both Zoe Andrews and the independent witness who reported the comments to her. This evidence had a clarity and level of detail, despite the time which has elapsed since the events in question, which is compelling. This leads me to conclude that Mrs Andrews expressed no view on the local plan proposals to Cllr Beckett, and was careful not to do so. I find it implausible that Cllr Beckett misunderstood her position. Therefore, in accepting that Cllr Beckett subsequently misrepresented that position in the Parish Council meeting I find that she did so knowingly.

The requirement to act with honesty is especially important when dealing with third parties, i.e. those who are not members of or directly involved with the Parish Council. That the public may perceive that the views of an important community figure, in this case the Infant School headteacher, will be knowingly reported inaccurately by an elected member serves only to undermine confidence in local democracy.

Other Issues & Recommendations

During the course of this investigation – and for some time before – it has been apparent that relationships at Tibshelf Parish Council have deteriorated significantly. The impact of this is that it undermines the confidence not only of individual members not directly involved, but most importantly of the public.

While it appears the behaviour of Cllr Beckett is a significant factor in the dysfunction at Tibshelf Parish Council, there appears to be behaviour on the part of others on both sides of the dispute which also falls short of expected standards.

I make the following recommendations:

1. There are deep-rooted conflicts, with apparent “sides” emerging among some councillors. I recommend that, with the Monitoring Officer’s support, all members of the Parish Council engage in a form of mediation or clear-the-air talks, to be entered into with a view to find the best solution for improving public confidence.

2. Given the issues of poor conduct over a significant period of time, it is inexcusable that members could fail to attend training on Standards and the Code of Conduct. Accordingly, it is recommended that suitable training is made available to the members of the Parish Council, by way of a formal letter from the MO to the Council, which makes it clear that engagement is expected from all members, with a view to restoring confidence in the Council among the public.

3. It is incumbent on a Chairperson to manage meetings in a fair way that avoids conflict, takes personal enmity out of the situation and sustains public confidence. I recommend that Cllr Beckett undertakes any appropriate training, particularly in chairing skills, that may be available from an external provider procured by the Parish Council.

4. It appears that some conflicts arise from Parish matters being conducted in ways that are perceived to be inconsistent with the standing orders, guidance and convention that governs the business of a Parish Council. Subject to having the available resource, I would suggest that the MO offers to undertake a light touch review of procedures and governance arrangements for the Parish to ensure that they are fit for purpose. Additionally the Chair, the Clerk and the members, are encouraged to seek advice from the Monitoring Officer, DALC and their legal advisers to ensure that procedures are robust and compliant and where doubts arise about any process they seek clarification before proceeding.