

14 December 2018

PRESS RELEASE

Councillor suspended over conflict of interest breaches

The Local Government Commissioner for Standards, Marie Anderson, has imposed a 3 month suspension on Councillor George Duddy (Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council) following an Adjudication Hearing held yesterday (13 December).

The decision follows an investigation by Deputy Commissioner Paul McFadden into allegations that Councillor Duddy had breached the rules of the Local Government Code of Conduct relating to general conduct and the disclosure and declaration of interests.

At the Hearing, the Commissioner was informed that the councillor had a significant non-financial interest in Terrace Row Presbyterian Church, Coleraine. She was told that Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council was considering a proposal to rationalise car-parking in the town, and that the Council had been renting a car park from Terrace Row Church for a number of years. Part of the rationalisation programme involved considering the termination of this lease.

At a committee meeting which took place on 6 September 2016 Councillor Duddy declared his interest in respect of the item relating to the church. He then left the room, in compliance with the Code. However, immediately prior to the meeting and at the pre-group party meeting he had asked another councillor to raise issues and ask questions relating to the car park lease.

The Commissioner found the action of asking another councillor to ask questions 'on his behalf' was a deliberate attempt to circumvent the rules on disclosure and declaration of interest and represented a serious breach of the Code.

At a full council meeting on 27 September, Councillor Duddy did not declare an interest in the church, yet commented on the council's plans and voted in favour of a proposal to try and extend the car park's lease. This was in breach of paragraphs 6.3 and 6.4 of the Code. Although the motion was defeated, Ms Anderson noted that there would have been a significant financial benefit to the church if it had been agreed.

Having refused to attend a second interview with investigators, and not co-operated fully with the investigations into his actions, the Commissioner also found there had been a breach of rule 4.6 of the Code.

With the Commissioner's permission, the Deputy Commissioner withdrew allegations of Councillor Duddy's failure to register his interest in the church.

The Commissioner noted the previous good conduct of Councillor Duddy and exemplary public service record, as well as his willingness to learn from the events. However, she stated that these were outweighed by the deliberate nature of the breaches. Given the requirement to uphold public confidence in the conduct of local councillors, and the importance of discouraging similar conduct by others, she believed that a 3 month suspension was a proportionate sanction.

Notes:

The Respondent may appeal to the High Court against this decision in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The Commissioner's decision in full will be available at: <https://nipso.org.uk/nlgcs/hearings-and-adjudication-decisions/>

The period of suspension will be effective from a date to be set out in her written decision.

ENDS

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