

Witness Statement

Dear Dorset Council monitoring officer

Audit & Governance Committee 2 Feb 2021 - Complaint 013.20

As witness to Shaftesbury Town Council's 'Zoom' meeting of 14 April 2020 I have been asked to provide a statement for Cllr Karen Tippins in response to the Code of Conduct complaint made against her by Cllr Matthew Welch that I understand your Audit & Governance Committee is due to hear on 2 February.

I wish the committee to know I make the following statement in support of Cllr Mrs Tippins willingly and voluntarily and, as a former member of Shaftesbury Town Council (1999-2011) and North Dorset District Council (1999-2003), as someone with a good knowledge not only of Shaftesbury Town Council but also of how local government and democracy is supposed to work in this country, especially in the light of the Localism Act 2011.

It may be relevant that from 2002-3 I was also chairman of NDDC's overview and scrutiny committee and, as Ms Andrews will no doubt remember, in that capacity I considered it my duty to habitually challenge and test the policy and decisions of the council, sometimes forcefully, without being attacked or vilified for it. And certainly never to be reported to the then-Standards Board for England for the absurd charge of 'bullying' simply for having genuinely-held and robust views. Politics was, and is, ever thus and resilience of character is necessary to deal with it, as recent events in not only America have shown..

In summary, my view is that Cllr Mrs Tippins used intemperate language to describe Cllr Welch she should not have during the council's Zoom meeting on 14 April 2020 and for which she has shown me evidence she apologised to him for on 25 August 2020 and the matter should have rested there.

Her mitigation is that her language was the result of her frustration at the unjustified and unjustifiable provocation of her on the part of several members of the town council both at the meeting itself and for several months before, dating to her re-election to the council in December 2019. To this, the recent, and very painful, death of her mother shortly before the 14 April meeting had emotionally overloaded her to the extent that it was only going to take the slightest flame to ignite a blaze. Compassion and not condemnation should have been the appropriate response of the council.

The truth is that certain members of Shaftesbury council, the majority being part of a well known clique of Conservative party political activists, have clearly conspired to quite deliberately exclude Cllr Mrs Tippins from every standing committee of the council, thus rendering her incapable of representing the views

and concerns of the electorate of the ward for which she had been fairly and formally elected in December 2019.

They did this on the specious grounds that they did not like her manner and attitude, that did not apparently accord with their own, and because she dared frequently, and often correctly, to challenge the basis on which the controlling clique were making decisions.

This sense of disenfranchisement was compounded by the fact that the council was also at this time discussing a rejigging of its standing orders to delegate - quite improperly in my view - all key decision-making down to standing committees, thus further aggravating her feeling of frustration and impotence as a councillor.

At the meeting on 14 April, held during the peak of Covid hysteria during the first Covid outbreak, a relatively new male councillor took it upon himself to vehemently attack Mrs Tippins only a few minutes into the meeting when she challenged assertions he was making about plans to use public money to fund PPE equipment for local health and care workers she felt, correctly as it happened, was inappropriate. Pointing his finger at her and shouting, the member several times accused her of 'telling lies' and of being 'a liar.' Despite this the chairman of the meeting made no attempt to stop the member. Yet when Mrs Tippins retorted, he very quickly intervened to silence her.

My view is that Mrs Tippins, who I know to be a caring and conscientious councillor dedicated to the welfare of her ward, is being quite unfairly victimised by a bigotted majority of members of Shaftesbury town council who are quite wrongly depriving her of her right to representation on its standing committees because of their personal prejudice of her. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the face of this prejudice that Mrs Tippins, who is of an admitted emotional temperament, is sometimes stung into intemperate outbursts out of sheer frustration and upset. I sympathise with her.

The correct way to counter this frustration is not to attempt to suppress it with threats and exclusion as the council is currently doing but to behave with more compassion and understanding by allowing Mrs Tippins to become an active part of the council to which she was elected.

It is further my view this particular episode has been blown out of all proportion and that Shaftesbury Town Council is very largely to blame for the opposition it is facing from Mrs Tippins (as it is from another member, Cllr Peter Yeo, who is facing similar unjustifiable exclusion and hostility).

To a significant degree what happened at the council meeting on 14 April was a sad example of pusillanimous parochialism. But it was also the inevitable result

of incompetent and partisan chairmanship that should not be underestimated or ignored.

Taking a leaf out of new President Biden's book, Shaftesbury Town Council has to take positive steps to heal the divisions within its council - for which the town clerk herself has to take more responsibility - and the key necessary steps to doing that is not only to include both Mrs Tippins and Mr Yeo in whichever of its standing committees they wish to, but also to be mature enough to understand that that means they cannot expect either member to agree with them always on everything. Disagreement and challenge is not only healthy and necessary, it is democracy.

Given the fairer treatment of Cllr Mrs Tippins and Cllr Yeo, I would expect episodes of the constant round of Code of Conduct complaints to which STC is currently subject to evaporate. In other words, it is the council rather than Mrs Tippins and Mr Yeo that needs to amend its behaviour first. The rest will follow naturally.

Richard Thomas

Author & journalist