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AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE (HEARING) SUB-COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2026

Present: Cllrs Neil Eysenck, Gary Suttle and Andy Todd

Apologies: None

Also present: Cllrs Andrew Parry (Complainant) and Jane Somper (Complainant), Elizabeth Whatley (Independent Person)

Officers present (for all or part of the meeting):

Mary Dolley (Investigating Officer), Grace Evans (Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer) and Lindsey Watson (Senior Democratic and Governance Officer)

OPENING THE MEETING

The Senior Democratic and Governance Officer opened the meeting.

1. Election of Chair

It was proposed by N Eysenck seconded by A Todd

Decision

That G Suttle be elected Chair of the Audit and Governance (Hearing) Sub-committee for this meeting.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Exempt Business

The sub-committee agreed that the meeting would be held in public.

STATEMENT FROM COUNCILLOR N EYSENCK

N Eysenck provided the following statement at this point in the meeting:

"I have a short statement to make before the hearing starts.

At the recent Lib Dem group meeting, I was approached unexpectedly by Councillor Fuhrmann, who began speaking to me about this code of conduct complaint. I told him I could not discuss the matter and that he should attend the hearing to have his say, but he continued. I was so taken aback by the situation that I did not meaningfully engage with or absorb what he was saying. I want to make clear that I have not formed any views about the complaint in advance of this hearing and come to it with an open mind, ready to consider all the evidence and opinions presented today.”

5. Code of Conduct Complaint

The Chair of the sub-committee noted that the Subject Member, Councillor A Fuhrmann was not in attendance at the meeting and asked the sub-committee if they were content to continue the hearing in his absence. The sub-committee agreed that the hearing would continue.

M Dolley, Investigating Officer presented her report in respect of complaints made against Dorset Council Councillor Alex Fuhrmann by Dorset Council Councillors Jane Somper, Laura Beddow and Andrew Parry. The complaints had been supported by Dorset Council Councillors Jill Haynes, Sherry Jespersen, Cathy Lugg, Emma Parker, Carole Jones and Val Potheary.

The Investigating Officer provided detail of the complaints received which alleged a breach of paragraphs 1 (requirement to treat councillors and others with respect) and 2 (relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination) of the Dorset Council Councillor Code of Conduct.

To investigate the complaints, the Investigating Officer had taken into consideration the following evidence:

- Dorset Council Code of Conduct
- Dorset Council’s policy relating to the use of social media (applicable to members and officers), material about the use of social media offered by the Local Government Association and material about bullying provided by the Anti-bullying Alliance
- Research of information on posting and removing material from Facebook and Instagram
- Interviews with the three principal complainants, Councillor Fuhrmann and one other member of Dorset Council (statements included within the investigation report)

The complaints were set out in full in the report and the Investigating Officer took the sub-committee through the main points arising.

The complaints related to the use by Councillor Fuhrmann of social media, including messaging facilities, specifically Facebook and Instagram and as set out in the report, that his conduct breached paragraphs 1.1 and 2 of the Code of Conduct. The material complained of comprised screenshots of social media posts and of messages sent privately on an Instagram messaging facility. Most of the relevant events took place within the space of a few hours late in the afternoon and early evening on 18 December 2024. The report set

out the sequence of the relevant events and their timing, which included material posted on 5 December 2024 by Councillor Fuhrmann on his Instagram account and re-posted by Councillor Somper on her Facebook page on 7 December 2024. Comments were subsequently applied to the post on 18 December. The material shared as a story by Councillor Fuhrmann on his Instagram account on 18 December 2024 was in the same time frame as the above comments. The significance of the material being shared as a story on an Instagram account rather than being posted was set out in the report.

The Investigating Officer noted that in addition, a private exchange of messages between Councillor Fuhrmann and Councillor Beddow took place on 18 December 2024, at the same time that the comments were being made on the Facebook post.

It was noted that the material referred to above, was communication to which the Code of Conduct applied.

The Investigating Officer provided an overview of the conclusions set out in the report. The Investigating Officer had concluded that Councillor Fuhrmann had failed to treat other councillors with respect and was therefore in breach of paragraph 1 of the Code of Conduct. In respect of the other aspects of the complaints, it was noted that paragraph 2 of the Code of Conduct required a councillor not to bully, harass or unlawfully discriminate against any person and to promote equalities. The report set out in detail, the reasons why although the Investigating Officer believed that the conduct was ill-judged, they did not consider Councillor Fuhrmann's conduct to amount to bullying, harassment or unlawful discrimination, and did not indicate a failure to promote equalities and therefore was not in breach of paragraph 2 of the code.

The Independent Person confirmed that the report was clear and that she had no questions at this stage.

The Chair opened the meeting up for questions.

In response to a question from A Todd, the Investigating Officer noted that she was not aware of any complaint arising from the posting online by Councillor Fuhrmann of the image of him in the Council Chamber and that it was the comments and messages that were for consideration as part of the hearing. The Investigating Officer noted that the original post was on the 5 December on Instagram, which was re-posted by Councillor Somper to her Facebook page on 7 December, with comments on the post made on the 18 December.

N Eysenck confirmed that he had no specific questions at this point.

The Chair, G Suttle, noted that the investigation report was clear and thanked the investigation officer for their work.

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 4.16pm. Members of the sub-committee, the Deputy Monitoring Officer, the Independent Person and the Senior

Democratic and Governance Officer left the room in order for the sub-committee to make a decision on breach, in private.

The meeting reconvened at 5.37pm.

The Chair provided the decision of the sub-committee:

On the balance of probabilities, having reviewed the papers provided in the agenda pack, considered the presentation by the Investigating Officer, advice from the Deputy Monitoring Officer about definitions of respect, bullying, harassment and discrimination as set out in the Investigation report and consulted with the Independent Person, the sub-committee found:

- Failure to treat Councillors Jane Somper and Laura Bedow with respect – Breach
- Bullying – No breach
- Harassment – No breach
- Discrimination – No breach

The Chair noted that at this point in the meeting, the sub-committee would normally invite representations about aggravating or mitigating factors from the Investigating Officer and the Subject Member. However, as the Subject Member was not in attendance, the sub-committee would move to the matter of sanctions agreed.

The Chair set out the decision of the sub-committee on sanctions agreed as follows:

- Councillor Fuhrmann is required to make a written apology to Councillors Jane Somper and Laura Beddow
- The Monitoring Officer is instructed to arrange training for Councillor Fuhrmann; specifically in relation to the Councillor Code of Conduct and use of social media by councillors

The Chair noted that there was no right of appeal on this decision and closed the meeting.

Appendix - Decision notice

Duration of meeting: 4.00 - 5.39 pm

Chairman

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DORSET COUNCIL AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE (HEARING) SUB-COMMITTEE

COUNCILLOR CODE OF CONDUCT

DECISION NOTICE

Subject Member: Councillor Alex Fuhrmann
Date of Hearing/Decision: 25 February 2026
Decision: Complaint partially upheld
Sanction: written apology and training

1. Summary of the Complaint

Councillors Jane Somper, Laura Beddow and Andrew Parry alleged that Councillor Alex Fuhrmann breached the Dorset Council Councillor Code of Conduct in his comments on Facebook and Instagram on 18 December 2024 directed at Councillors Jane Somper and Laura Beddow.

2. Parts of the Code of Conduct alleged to have been breached

The Complainants alleged that Councillor Alex Fuhrmann breached the following parts of the Code of Conduct:

- Code section 1.1 a councillor treats other councillors with respect.
- Code section 2.1 A councillor does not bully any person
- Code section 2.2 A councillor does not harass any person
- Code section 2.3 A councillor promotes equalities and does not discriminate unlawfully against any person (specifically Age and Sex for this complaint)

3. Hearing Sub-Committee

The complaint was considered by the Audit and Governance (Hearing) Sub-Committee on 25 February 2026.

Councillors Jane Somper and Andrew Parry were in attendance virtually and did not address the Sub-Committee.

Councillor Alex Fuhrmann did not attend, having confirmed in advance that he would not attend or take part. The Sub-Committee considered whether to proceed and agreed to continue with the hearing in Councillor Fuhrmann's absence.

A recording and full minutes of the hearing are available on the Council website:
[Agenda for Audit and Governance \(Hearing\) Sub-Committee on Wednesday, 25th February, 2026, 4.00 pm - Dorset Council](#)

4. The Hearing Sub-Committee's Decisions

On the balance of probabilities, having reviewed the papers provided in the agenda pack, considered the presentation by the Investigating Officer, advice from the Deputy Monitoring Officer and consulted with the Independent Person the Sub-Committee found:

- Failure to treat Councillors Jane Somper and Laura Beddow with respect – Breach
- Bullying – No breach
- Harassment – No breach

- Discrimination – No breach

5. Sanctions

The Sub-Committee decided on the following sanctions:

- Councillor Fuhrmann is required to make a written apology to Councillors Jane Somper and Laura Beddow;
- the Monitoring Officer is instructed to arrange training for Councillor Fuhrmann; specifically in relation to the Councillor Code of Conduct and use of social media by councillors

Appeal

There is no right of appeal against this decision.

Jonathan Mair
Monitoring Officer
Dorset Council

[Date]