

Investigation Report into a Complaint brought by  
Councillor Jon Button against Councillor Denise  
Saliagopoulos of Spelthorne Borough Council

**PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**

**FINAL VERSION**

**5 FEBRUARY 2025**

**Investigator: Claire Storey MA (Cantab.)**

**Subject Member:** Councillor Denise Saliagopoulos

**Complainant:** Councillor Jon Button

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1. I was commissioned by Karen Limmer, Interim Monitoring Officer at Spelthorne Borough Council to investigate a complaint brought by Councillor Button in relation to the conduct of Councillor Denise Saliagopoulos.
- 1.2. Writing to the former Head of Corporate Governance, Farida Hussain, the Complainant alleged a breach of the Member's Code of Conduct by the Subject Member relating to the Subject Member's posts on X (formerly Twitter). In particular, the Complainant alleged that:
  - (a) Councillor Saliagopoulos reposted hateful far-right Tweets and in doing so breached the Members Code of Conduct, specifically:
  - (b) paragraph 1.1 (I treat other councillors and members of the public with respect);
  - (c) paragraph 2.3 (I promote equalities and do not discriminate unlawfully against any person); and
  - (d) paragraph 5.1 (I do not bring my role or local authority into disrepute).
- 1.3. A copy of the complaint is appended as Appendix 1 to this report.

## **2 Summary of Findings**

- 2.1. I have concluded that there has been:
  - (a) **A breach of Paragraph 1.1 of the Code of Conduct**
  - (b) **A breach of Paragraph 2.3 of the Code of Conduct**
  - (c) **A breach of Paragraph 5.1 of the Code of Conduct.**

## **3 Terms of Reference**

- 3.1. I conducted my investigation in accordance with Spelthorne Borough Council's arrangements for dealing with standards complaints under the Localism Act 2011 and have based my findings on the Council's Members' Code of Conduct.
- 3.2. The Council has adopted the Model Councillor Code of Conduct as provided by the Local Government Association.
- 3.3. All Council Members sign up to the Code of Conduct upon taking office. A copy of Cllr. Saliagopoulos' Declaration of acceptance of office is attached at Appendix 2.

## **4 Documents Reviewed**

- 4.1. In the course of my investigation, I have referred to the following documents:
  - (i) The complaint from Cllr. Button together with the attachments provided (reproduced at Appendix 1)

- (ii) The Standards Assessment Sub-Committee report date 8 August 2024 (which also attached documents (i) above)
- (iii) Trail of email correspondence between Cllr. Saliagopoulos and council officers in connection with the complaint
- (iv) The Council's Code of Conduct (the LGA Model Code of Conduct 2020)
- (v) The Council's Arrangements for dealing with complaints against members under the Localism Act 2011

## **5 Process so far**

- 5.1. Following submission of the Complaint the Council's Independent Person was consulted by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, Linda Heron. The Independent Person concluded that there was a case to answer.
- 5.2. Informal Resolution was offered to the Subject Member but I understand she refused to engage. The Monitoring officer therefore referred the matter to the Standards Assessment Sub-Committee.
- 5.3. The committee considered the complaint and directed the Monitoring Officer to take other appropriate action, namely to secure apologies to the Complainant and, via the Monitoring Officer, to the Sub-Committee, from the Subject Member. The Subject Member was to remove the social media posts referred to in the Complaint. Both actions were to take place within two weeks of the Sub-Committee Meeting minutes being published. If the apologies were not forthcoming the Monitoring Officer was to instigate an investigation under the Council's Member Misconduct Complaints Procedure.
- 5.4. Apologies, acceptable to the Independent Chair of the Standards Committee were received by the Monitoring Officer from the Subject Member, however, the Subject Member was not prepared to give these to the Complainant. The matter was therefore passed for formal investigation under the Council's Member Misconduct Complaints Procedure. It is unclear whether the social media posts were removed.

## **6 Evidence Gathering**

- 6.1. I contacted the Complainant by email on 9 December 2024 and received a response to that email on 12 December 2024.
- 6.2. As the complaint was self-contained it was not considered necessary to formally interview the Complainant, but it was confirmed that the Subject Member had blocked the Complainant on Twitter.
- 6.3. The Complainant did refer to the draft apology that had been provided by the Subject Member to the Monitoring Officer. The Complainant asserted that the apology missed the point of the complaint which had been brought on the basis that the Complainant considered the re-tweets brought the Council into disrepute. The Complainant acknowledged the differing political viewpoints and stated that *"If she had posted pro-Conservative, or anti-Labour posts, I would not have had an issue as this is part of the political process. It was the far right, nasty content of the re-tweets that my complaint was based on"*

- 6.4. I contacted the Subject Member by email on 17 December 2024, 6 January 2025 and again on 13 January 2025. No responses to those emails were received prior to the draft reports being published.

## **7 Comments on the Draft Report**

- 7.1. A draft report was sent to the Complainant and to the Subject Member on 26 January 2025 with a deadline for responses set at 5pm on Monday 3 February 2025.
- 7.2. The Complainant responded on 27 January 2025 acknowledging receipt and confirming that he had no comments.
- 7.3. The Subject Member contacted me by email on 28 January 2025. She responded not to my email sending out the draft report, but to an email of 13 January 2025 where I confirmed that, having had no response to my earlier emails requesting contact, my reports would be completed without the benefit of her input. In her response the Subject Member stated, *“That’s a shame because had you read my previous emails you would see that I had indeed already sent responses some many months back.”* For the sake of good order, I confirm that I have seen and read the email trails provided to me as set out in paragraph 4, above.

The Subject Member contacted me again on 3 February 2025 responding in the email thread that attached the draft report. She stated, *“Thank you for your email. I really am going against my principles here of responding to this ridiculous complaint. I have far too much other important things to see to in my life. I sent a response to Karen Limmer, with an apology for both of the councillors you mention. If that has not been included in any paperwork sent to you then I am not sure what more can be done.”*

I have made a change, shown in red italics, to paragraph 10.3 as a result of the responses from the Subject Member.

- 7.4. No specific comments on the draft report were received from the Subject Member.
- 7.5. Other than the completion of this paragraph 7, and the changes noted above, there are no other substantive changes to the draft provided to each of the Subject Member and the Complainant. A few minor typographical changes have been made from the draft provided.

## **8 Application of the Code of Conduct**

- 8.1. The Members’ Code of Conduct applies when a Member:
- (i) is acting in their capacity as a Councillor or representative of the Council
  - (ii) is claiming to act as a Councillor and/or a representative of the Council
  - (iii) gives the impression that they are acting as a Councillor and/or a representative of the Council
  - (iv) refers publicly to their role as a Councillor or uses knowledge that they could only obtain in their role as a Councillor.
- 8.2. It does not appear to be in dispute that the “retweets” were made and posted by the Subject Member on X (formerly Twitter). Screenshots of the posts were appended to the complaint. Although the Subject Member chose not to engage in this investigation, there was no

attempt to deny that the retweets were made by the Subject Member in any of her correspondence with officers and the email apology given to the Monitoring officer in relation to this complaint did not seek to deny the publication of the tweets in question. I think it reasonable to conclude that the retweets were made and posted by the Subject Member.

- 8.3. The Subject Member's social media account clearly references their role as a Councillor. The Local Government Association's guidance on the Model Councillor Code makes it clear, however, that simply describing yourself as a councillor in your profile is not sufficient to render every posting subject to the Code. There must be a link to the role as a councillor or to local authority business.
- 8.4. The Subject Member's social media account in question is now and appears to have been at the time of the complaint, a private account. That is to say, it is not available for general public view. The account was, however, accessible to almost 600 "followers" and that, coupled with the clear statement that the Subject Member is an elected Councillor, is, in my view, sufficient to conclude this is more than personal use and that there is a case to answer that the tweets were made in her capacity as a Member.

## **9 Assessment of the Complaint**

- 9.1. I have assessed the Complainant's complaint against the Code of Conduct and, specifically paragraphs 1.1, 2.3 and 5.1 of the Code as adopted by the Council.
- 9.2. The tweets which are the subject of this complaint are "retweets", that is to say, they were statements posted by a third party and then reposted, or promoted, by the Subject Member. In each case, the retweets were done without amendment or additional comment by the Subject Member. Whilst it is true to say that a "retweet" does not necessarily indicate support for the original tweet, there is no evidence to suggest that the Subject Member was distancing themselves from the original tweet in either case.
- 9.3. The Subject Member's Twitter name (that is to say, the name that is displayed on the account, as opposed to the "handle" which is the username that appears at the end of the unique Twitter URL) was, at the time of the complaint and is at the time of report writing "*Denise (promoted by me)*". As the Subject Member did not engage in this investigation, I was unable to clarify what was meant by the addition of the words in brackets. I suspect that it is likely to be a reference to the fact that she is an Independent Councillor, rather than being promoted by a particular political party but I am not convinced that that would be obvious to members of the public with less knowledge of local politics. Whatever the reason behind the words, the effect, in my view, is to lend weight to any reposted material as the words "promoted by me" appear above the reposted material.
- 9.4. The two tweets which are the subject of the complaint come from two different sources. One is a repost of a tweet made by Britain First, a registered political party (the "First Tweet"), and the second is a repost of a tweet by Tommy Robinson, a far-right activist (the "Second Tweet") (together the "Tweets").
- 9.5. I consider that there is a case to answer that the Tweets are not behaviour consistent with the following principles set out in the Code of Conduct:
- (a) Paragraph 1.1 – I treat other councillors and members of the public with respect

- (b) Paragraph 2.3 - I promote equalities and do not discriminate unlawfully against any person
  - (c) Paragraph 5.1 - I do not bring my role or local authority into disrepute.
- 9.6. **Regarding paragraph 1.1 of the code**, it is acknowledged specifically in the code that a councillor is free to express views, ideas and opinions in a robust but civil manner. However, individuals, groups of people or organisations should not be subject to personal attack. Rude and offensive behaviour lowers the public's expectations and confidence in councillors. I think that there is a case to answer that the Tweets breached this provision of the code in that they could be viewed as discriminatory and/or biased against immigrants and/or Islam amongst others. They do not show the kind of respect that is expected of those holding public office.
- 9.7. **Regarding paragraph 2.3 of the code**, public authorities have specific duties placed on them by the Equalities Act 2010 (part 11) to ensure that there is a public commitment to equality across the public sector. Councillors are elected to represent all their constituents, regardless of whether they voted for them or whether they share the same views. I consider it arguable that the Tweets could be considered derogatory or offensive to a group's characteristics which would be protected characteristics under the Equalities Act. The reposting of the Tweets could therefore be argued to be a failure to promote equalities in breach of the Code of Conduct.
- 9.8. **Regarding paragraph 5.1 of the code**, disrepute can be defined as a lack of good reputation or respectability. Elected councillors will be subject to greater scrutiny than ordinary members of the public and actions of a councillor that lack respect might have the effect of adversely impacting the public's confidence in that councillor's or their local authority's ability to discharge their functions. I consider that there is a case to answer that, in reposting material that could reasonably be considered to be discriminatory, the Subject Member might be considered to be in breach of this paragraph of the Code of Conduct. It would, in my opinion, be reasonable to conclude that residents from the referenced communities might not feel confident approaching the Council as a result of the views that were published. This brings both the role and the authority into disrepute.
- 9.9. I considered the application of a member's right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The free expression of views is a key part of democracy, but I think that there is a distinction between the expression of views and insulting language and swearing. Whilst it might be argued that the First Tweet is an expression of a political view, I find it harder to say the same of the Second Tweet where the language and the subject matter could be seen as highly offensive to many people.
- 9.10. For the sake of completeness I have considered whether my opinion would have differed if the Tweets had been removed as it has not been possible to ascertain whether they remain. It does not. The case to answer on all limbs remains as the Tweets should not have been made in the first place.

## 10 Conclusion

- 10.1. I have concluded that there is evidence to support the contention that the Tweets were made by the Subject Member in her capacity as a Member such that the Code of Conduct applies.

- 10.2. I have further concluded that there is evidence to support a failure by the Subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct and in particular with paragraphs, 1.1, 2.3 and 5.1 of the Code.
- 10.3. It is extremely disappointing that the Subject Member chose not to fully engage in earlier attempts to resolve this matter nor engage in this investigation (in turn, arguably breaching paragraph 8.2 of the Code – I cooperate with any Code of Conduct investigation and/or determination). This report has not had the benefit of the Subject Member's input as a result. *I do not consider that the Subject Member can be regarded as having responded to this investigation by dint of the email exchanges which happened between the Subject Member and Council officers prior to the date of this investigation as suggested by the Subject Member in her email responses to me on 28 January 2025 and 3 February 2025. Failure to cooperate in an investigation risks undermining the process of good governance. The response sent on 3 February 2025 shows, in my opinion, a disregard for the Complaints Procedure which has been adopted by the Council.*

## **Appendix 1 – Complaint by Cllr. Button**

### **Complaint by Cllr Button**

Dear Farida

I wish to register a formal complaint against Cllr Saliagopoulos regarding her social media activity. See the attached email I sent to Cllr Boughtflower – I have yet to receive a response so am escalating to a formal complaint. I am told by the leader that Cllr Saliagopoulos has been asked to but refused to take down the attached re-tweets.

The re-distribution of hateful far right views is harmful to the reputation of the council. I do not bring this complaint to score political points, but to uphold the reputation of the council.

I believe this behaviour is against the member's code of conduct, specifically

1.1 I treat other councillors and members of the public with respect. 2.3 I promote equalities and do not discriminate unlawfully against any person. 5.1 I do not bring my role or local authority into disrepute.

**Cllr Jon Button**

Stanwell North

Leader of the Labour Group

**From:** Button, Jon (Councillor)

**Sent:** Wednesday, May 29, 2024 11:09 PM

**To:** Boughtflower, John (Councillor)

<[cllr.boughtflower@spelthorne.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.boughtflower@spelthorne.gov.uk)> **Subject:** Cllr Saliagopolous on Twitter

Dear John

I would normally approach a councillor's group leader about such an issue, but as Cllr Saliagopolous is an independent affiliated to the Conservative Party you are the best placed person.

Are you aware that Cllr Saliagopolous is retweeting far right offensive material to her followers (see screenshots)? Not a great look for an elected councillor to be promoting such material. May I suggest you have a word with her about it? Much better if it is handled this way rather than more formal channels.

Happy to discuss further.

Thanks



Jon





**Appendix 2 – Declaration of Acceptance of Office by Cllr. Saliagopoulos**

148.

## Declaration of Acceptance of Office

I<sup>(1)</sup> DENISE SALIAGPOULOS

having been elected to the office of<sup>(2)</sup> Councillor

of<sup>(3)</sup> Spelthorne Borough Council

DECLARE that I take that office upon myself, and will duly and faithfully fulfil the duties of it according to the best of my judgment and ability.

Signed D. Saliagopoulos

Date 5th May 2023

This declaration was made and signed before me,

Signed [Signature]  
Proper Officer of the Council<sup>(4)</sup>

Date 5th May 2023

<sup>(1)</sup> Insert the name of the person making the declaration.

<sup>(2)</sup> Insert "member" or "Mayor" as appropriate.

<sup>(3)</sup> Insert the name of the authority of which the person making the declaration is a member or mayor.

<sup>(4)</sup> Where the declaration is made before another person authorised by section 83(3) of the Local Government Act 1972, state instead the capacity in which that person takes the declaration.<sup>(5)</sup>

<sup>(5)</sup> Under section 83(3) of the Local Government Act 1972, a declaration for members or elected mayors of a county, district or London borough council shall be made before two members of the council, its elected mayor, its proper officer, a justice of the peace or magistrate in the United Kingdom, the Channel Isles or the Isle of Man, or a commissioner appointed to administer oaths in the Supreme Court. A declaration for members of a parish council shall be made before a member or the proper officer of the council.