

180 complaints alleging councillors' misconduct sent to South Tyneside Council - chief fears process is being 'weaponised'

Claims complainants are "weaponising" council processes as reports of alleged councillor misconduct soar in South Tyneside.

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A large spike in complaints against councillors could be linked to a “weaponisation” of council processes, legal chiefs have said.

Since January 2020, South Tyneside Council’s monitoring officer has received a total of 178 emails, letters or calls from potential complainants.

This included complainants expressing a wish to make a complaint or sharing information in respect of “perceived elected member misconduct.”

Of this number, only 23 complainants provided further information to support their complaint, with several cases rejected or resolved without the need for investigation.

A total of 13 complaints are currently ongoing, with many nearing conclusion following delays caused by Covid-19, the meeting heard.

“The [complaints] process itself provides for complaints or communications, that are described as being complaints but mainly aren’t, to be rejected fairly early on if they’re considered to be tit for tat, politically motivated or ‘vexatious’,” Interim Head of Legal Services, John Rumney, said.

“That said, I do think the weaponisation of the process may account for the large numbers that we have seen in recent months.

“But it is certainly nothing new and the process does provide for them [complaints] to be dealt with appropriately.”

The legal chief was speaking at a Standards Committee meeting on July 6 in response to a question from Coun Doreen Purvis about the complaints process potentially being “weaponised”.

Coun Purvis said examples could include a complaint against a councillor(s) being posted on social media and staying in the public domain, regardless of whether the complaint is pursued.

At the meeting, which was broadcast live on the council’s YouTube page, councillors heard about recent steps that have been taken to improve the complaints process.

This included the introduction of a new ‘complaints form’ which helps complainants to structure their complaint and provide necessary information and evidence.

Despite the large number of complaints, no cases have progressed to the final stage so far such as a formal hearing and/or sanction.

Independent chair of the Standards Committee, Professor Grahame Wright, said that the complaints figure of 178 may be “ a little bit misleading”.

But he noted a “significant number of complaints” were still under active consideration, pending any decision to investigate further.

Coun Anne Hetherington added that the complaints figures showed “a very serious issue” and asked if there was any previous data to look at comparisons and trends.

“I know the process for dealing with complaints against elected members since some legal reforms are a bit of a toothless tiger,” she said.

“But there are means in the council’s constitution where members can be sanctioned to a degree if a complaint is found to be proven and I would like to see that we’re actually following that through and dealing with complaints to the full extent that we’re able to.

“Particularly if we’re receiving complaints from residents that they see we’re addressing these complaints because we can’t put ourselves above the law that is there to supervise our behaviour as elected members.”

Legal officer Mr Rumney, responding, confirmed council bosses are recording complaints to allow for statistical analysis in future.

But he warned that records for previous complaints may not be available to build a historical picture.

He told the meeting: “The plan is going forward that each complaint which is reviewed and found to be capable of proceeding within the process will be given a number.

“We have already started numbering complaints so that they can be logged and outcomes recorded so statistical analysis can take place in the future.

“Whether it’s possible to go back beyond the beginning of this year or late 2019 I’m not sure that the records will be there I’m afraid.”

Standards Committee chair, Prof Wright, added: “If you see some of the complaints that we get they’re extremely difficult to work out what exactly it is the councillor has meant to have done wrong.

“It’s more that somebody is just angry and they want to blame somebody so one of the reasons we have this [complaints] form is to try and guide people so if they have a complaint they can make clear what the nature of that complaint is.”

For more information on South Tyneside Council’s complaints process, visit:

www.southtyneside.gov.uk/article/38290/Complaints-against-councillors

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