

District Parish Conference 22 March 2016

Report on

Email conversation between Cllr J Spackman and M Dunscombe (WBC)

and

between Cllr T Renouf and M Dunscombe

Following receipt of the emailed conversation between Cllr Spackman and Martin Dunscombe (numbered 1-3) which was copied but not addressed to me, together with one from Cllr Spackman to me (number 4) I felt that the allegations being made were so outrageous as to warrant an investigation. I contacted Martin Dunscombe to ask for an explanation and his response is attached (number 5).

Steve rang me in the morning of the Conference (22nd) to say that he had registered both names, albeit late. Although the name badges would have been printed, the registrar confirmed they had blanks for late bookings.

He asked me to confirm that he had said that the venue was St. Bartholomew's school – he was sure that he had but wanted to check.

At that point I told Steve that I had decided not to go but that I had sent in a written question to Peter Argyle, the conference Chairman, on 21st March which he had accepted.

(JS) Upon registration I was asked to wait for some uncomfortable minutes to find out if I might enter the conference.

(MD) When Mr Spackman arrived it was explained to him why the badges had not been prepared in advance but we made one for him there and then.

(JS) I was taken aback to be mistaken for Cllr Renouf given our very different age and appearance together with his reputation as a widely recognised public servant of long standing in the district, so I must say the lack of a name badge immediately rang alarm bells.

(MD) Mr Spackman was not mistaken for you; indeed none of those on the registration desk can recollect having met either of you in order for the confusion to have arisen

(JS) I was saved by another registrar who was able to ask my name only because she'd had a conversation about this earlier that day. She informed me that my name had been removed from the attendance list for Cllr Renouf who was expected to attend in my place specifically to ask an urgent question.

(MD) The registration team did not say that a name had been removed from the attendance list, nor had there been a request to do so.

(JS) The question was read out as submitted 'from Woolhampton Parish Council' with no mention of Cllr Renouf's name or position which contradicts the Chairperson acting in a personal or individual capacity. You will recall that I initially approached you to ask who submitted the question since no mention had been made of any name. I appreciate this may have been an oversight but considering the two incidents in tandem with the relative 'urgency' of the question itself revives some serious worries about the Chairperson of our parish.

(TR Comment) The question needed to be answered given that the Parish Council had agreed that it was prepared to cut some verges if safety became an issue.

Steve had said that it looked a good conference but he could not attend. Had he been able to he would have asked WBC about co-ordinating service delivery where two contractors could be used.

I had said at the Parish Council meeting that I would go, subject diary commitments.

(JS) I have copied this email to our village clerk who will be able to confirm that Cllr Renouf offered no notification of his intention to attend the conference at or before our council meeting and did not consult members on the question or that I was informed of his wish for me not to attend your excellent event. Please rest assured that these and other concerns about Cllr Renouf's conduct will be discussed in greater length.

(TR Comment) Other than Peter Argyle, I contacted no one prior to the Conference.

Conclusions

Cllr Spackman's emails to Martin Dunscombe are a fabrication from beginning to end. Given the seriousness of the allegations he makes it beggars belief that he clearly hadn't considered that I would ask the Communications Officer for an explanation.

This is the latest of a series of statements made by the Cllr Spackman over the past year all of which have breached the most important Nolan Principle – HONESTY.

His behaviour, which includes bringing the Parish Council into disrepute, warrants a complaint to the Monitoring Officer.

However, based on my experience as a member of the West Berkshire Council's Governance and Ethics Committee, I know that a councillor found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct cannot be removed unless it involves fraud or bribery.

In any investigation an enormous amount of public money can be spent to achieve little more than an official admonishment lost amongst notices of road closures in the Newbury Weekly News.

This is the latest in a series of incidents over the last 10 months but for that reason and that alone that I don't propose making a complaint as his ill-advised rant is principally aimed at me and I am not easily intimidated.

However, in my opinion his pattern of behaviour should not have to be tolerated. My advice to Cllr Spackman is that if wishes to be involved in Local Government he should move on to a different authority.

Tony Renouf

Chairman

District Parish Conference

Martin Dunscombe <Martin.Dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk>
To: James Spackman <jamesspackman@hotmail.com>
Cc: "tony@renouf.me.uk" <tony@renouf.me.uk>

31 March 2016 at 10:19

Hi James,

Thank you for your email yesterday evening following last week's District Parish Conference. I'll answer your questions as best as I can.

You asked about the question read out in relation to grass cutting in your parish. The question was not submitted collectively on behalf of the Woolhampton Parish Council but by Chairman Tony Renouf in an individual capacity and because he was unable to attend in person. All the questions and answers from the event will be published online in due course but a copy of the original question relating to Woolhampton, and the response from Councillor Hilary Cole, are copied below for your information.

You also asked about attendance at the event and suggested a request had been made for you to be removed from the guest list. I am not aware of any such request and indeed only became aware of your attendance when someone took a message for me on the day of the event. This is why we didn't have a name badge waiting for you. The conference is open to elected members, officers or clerks from town and parish councils with invitations sent in the first instance to the parish clerks. If you feel there has been some confusion somewhere along the line you will need to address this with your colleagues.

You will note that I have copied Mr Renouf into this email so that he is aware of this discussion around his question and in case you wish, as a parish council, to discuss the Conference further.

The next event is scheduled for October but we are always looking for feedback to help us shape future events – and make sure they meet the needs of local councils. If you have any feedback about the event please have take part in our survey before Wednesday. <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/DPCmarch16>.

The question and answer from the meeting is:

Question: Tony Renouf (Woolhampton Parish Council) submitted a written question in advance of the meeting and which was answered at the conference. He said: Woolhampton Parish Council is concerned about the reduction of verge grass cutting where excessive growth could present a danger due to sight lines being obscured. The Council is prepared to undertake cutting using their grounds contractors in those circumstances but clearly there will be a need to co-ordinate with Highways to avoid duplication of effort. How will this be done? Also, if this is what is needed, what would be the insurance arrangements?

Councillor Hilary Cole responded that grass cutting in rural areas is done twice a year and in urban areas ten times a year. Sightline problems should always be reported through the Council's website and it will be dealt with urgently. If a parish does have a contractor they should contact the Head of Highways to discuss what's required in terms of permission – we would expect risk assessment, insurance and safe working practices to be in place.

Regards,

Martin

Martin Dunscombe

Communications Manager

Strategic Support West Berkshire Council Market Street Newbury RG14 5LD
(01635) 519125 | Ext 2125 | martin.dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk
www.westberks.gov.uk

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District Parish Conference

James Spackman <jamesspackman@hotmail.com>

7 April 2016 at 23:05

To: Martin Dunscombe <martin.dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk>

Cc: Tony Renouf <tony@renouf.me.uk>, Steve Brady <woolhamptonparishcouncil@hotmail.com>

Dear Martin,

thanks very much for your reply. It does however leave me somewhat confused.

Firstly, upon registration I was asked to wait for some uncomfortable minutes to find out if I may enter the conference. I was taken aback to be mistaken for Cllr Renouf, given our very different age and appearance, together with his reputation as a widely-recognised public servant of long-standing in the district, so I must say the lack of a name badge immediately rang alarm bells.

I was saved by another registrar who was able to ask my name only because she'd had a conversation about this earlier that day. She informed me that my name had been removed from the attendance list for Cllr Renouf, who "was expected to attend in my place", specifically due to his wish to ask an 'urgent' question (which you've confirmed was submitted in written form as he did not attend, despite his late request). She explained this was "unusual" because there is "no restriction on the number of attendees from each parish council", indeed that WBC encourages attendance in order to facilitate improvements in public business, in line with government policy on localism - which was a major theme of the evening.

Secondly, the question was read out as submitted "from Woolhampton Parish Council" with no mention of Cllr Renouf's name or position, which contradicts the Chairperson acting in a personal or individual capacity. You will recall I initially approached you after the close of the conference in order to ask who submitted the question since no mention had been made of any name. I appreciate this may have been an oversight in the moment, but considering the two incidents in tandem with the relative 'urgency' of the question itself revives some serious worries about the Chairperson of our parish.

Please note that I have also copied this email also to our village clerk, who will be able to confirm that Cllr Renouf offered no notification of his intention to attend the Conference at or before our council meeting held seven days previously, that he did not consult council members on the question (although it was a topic of some discussion), or that I was informed of his wish for me not to attend your excellent event. Mr Brady will therefore be able to clarify the intervening chain of events, so please rest assured that these and other concerns about Cllr Renouf's conduct will be discussed in greater length.

Thank you again for your very helpful reply and for organising such a successful event - it was both valuable and enjoyable - I look forward to attending many more in the future!

Best regards

James Spackman

Woolhampton Parish Council

Subject: District Parish Conference

From: Martin.Dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk

To: jamesspackman@hotmail.com

CC: tony@renouf.me.uk

Date: Thu, 31 Mar 2016 09:19:06 +0000

[Quoted text hidden]

District Parish Conference

James Spackman <jamesspackman@hotmail.com>

10 April 2016 at 08:52

To: Tony Renouf <tony@renouf.me.uk>

Cc: Steve Brady <woolhamptonparishcouncil@hotmail.com>, "martin.dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk" <martin.dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk>

Dear Cllr Renouf,

I have spoken to our Clerk, who has reassured me of his chain of events. This leads to the only conclusion that there was a mix-up in the information I was told because of the late notification given to WBC on the day of the conference, to which Mr Dunscombe has already attested.

This confusion could easily have been averted had you chosen to keep me updated of your intentions, either before or since that point in time, so I am disappointed to have read your email to the council explaining your wish to formally confront the breakdown of relations under your chairmanship.

It was unfortunate for this reason that you chose not to attend the Parish Conference which presented the case for effective communications across communities, due to the unprecedented changes to UK local government law and finance. So, rather leading the debate on how we approach this in our parish, you will be unable to provide a report or the perspective of your experience to benefit other members of our council. I feel it obvious that leadership on governance issues should be directed from the chair, and argue this is therefore a failure of duty on your part.

I had asked for a consequent agenda item on 'Communications and Community Engagement' to be included for our next meeting, in the hope that you would be able to clarify your approach is in line with government policy and WBC's stated support for this, starting with provision of the relevant governance documents and consideration of the diverse means available (particularly considering your proposals for cooption to fill the casual vacancy on WPC). However your email clearly demonstrates again your repeated preference for personalising matters of serious public concern and in doing so diverting from the issues they raise or decisions about appropriate action.

It will be a pleasure to assist in any way possible any investigation which can unpick the causes and account for the lack of progress in our village in recent years, and I eagerly look forward to answering any questions put to me.

With regards

Cllr J Spackman

Woolhampton Parish Council

From: jamesspackman@hotmail.com

To: martin.dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk

CC: tony@renouf.me.uk; woolhamptonparishcouncil@hotmail.com

Subject: RE: District Parish Conference

Date: Thu, 7 Apr 2016 23:05:11 +0100

[Quoted text hidden]

Conference

Martin Dunscombe <Martin.Dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk>
To: Tony Renouf <tony@renouf.me.uk>

11 April 2016 at 09:09

Hi Tony,

I have now had a chance to speak to colleagues who were working on our registration desk at the event – and the person who took a phone message for me earlier in the day. They have seen the chain of events alleged and this is what happened that day:

We were contacted by the parish clerk (by phone) on the day of the conference to say that both you and Mr Spackman might attend and to expect one or both of you at the event. The message was passed to me, and I wrote both names on the attendance sheet, which had already been printed. Name badges for delegates had already been prepared and it was too late to print additional badges. We had a supply of blank badges to fill out on the night for those who either confirmed their attendance late or not at all.

When Mr Spackman arrived it was explained to him why the badges had not been prepared in advance but we made one for him there and then. Mr Spackman was not mistaken for you; indeed none of those on the registration desk can recollect ever having met either of you in order for the confusion to have arisen. The registration team did not say that a name had been removed from the attendance list, nor had there been any request to do so. I'm told that an explanation was provided along the lines that the Clerk had advised us that they were unsure if either you or Mr Spackman would attend but wanted to provisionally book places for both of them.

This summary of events is taken from the recollections of colleagues who were working on the registration desk – and who have been involved in previous conferences and know the process well. I don't think there is anything more that I can add. I provide this commentary to you, as Chair of the parish council, for accuracy and so you have an overview of events on the night. I will leave this matter in your hands.

Regards,

Martin

From: parenouf@googlemail.com [mailto:parenouf@googlemail.com] **On Behalf Of** Tony Renouf

Sent: 08 April 2016 11:39

To: Martin Dunscombe

Subject: Conference

Conference

Tony Renouf <tony@renouf.me.uk>

8 April 2016 at 11:38

To: Martin Dunscombe <Martin.Dunscombe@westberks.gov.uk>

Dear Martin

In his email to you (7 April) Cllr Spackman alleges, amongst other things, that he was told that his name had been removed. I would be very grateful if you were able to confirm if any part of the conversation he quotes actually took place.

I can understand any reluctance on your part to be involved in a Woolhampton Parish Council internal matter but I am sure you will appreciate that it is important that any resolution is based on fact.

Regards

Tony