

**Meeting of the standards panel**  
**Wednesday 9 October 2013; Room 18a, Brockington**

**Complaint 13026: Councillor Jim Knipe; complainant: Mr Russell Pryce**

**Present:**

**The standards panel:**

David Williams, Appointed Independent Person (chairman)  
Councillor Chris Chappell (Herefordshire Council representative)  
Richard Gething (Town & Parish Council representative)

**Legal advisor:**

John Jones, Monitoring Officer

**Clerk:**

Hazel Lavelle, Democratic Services Support Officer

**Subject member:**

Councillor Jim Knipe

**Complainant:**

Mr Russell Pryce

**Witnesses for Councillor Knipe:**

Councillor Bob Matthews, Herefordshire Council  
Mr S. Madison, Chairman of the Kingstone Sportsfield Association  
Mr P. Wright, Vice-Chairman of Kingstone Parish Council

**Witness for Russell Pryce**

Mr Mike Willmont

**Also present:**

Mrs C. Jenkins, accompanying Cllr Knipe as a personal friend.  
John Sharman (Appointed Independent Person), observing

**Proceedings**

1. The chairman introduced all those present and outlined the structure of the meeting.
2. The monitoring officer advised the panel that he had received a communication from the subject member, Councillor Knipe, querying his ability to provide the panel with unbiased advice on the grounds that the monitoring officer had received Councillor Knipe's complaint against Russell Pryce. The monitoring officer confirmed that he had referred that complaint immediately to the council's complaints unit and had not been involved with it in any way and was not, therefore, prejudiced in any way.
3. The chairman asked Russell Pryce to explain the grounds for his complaint. Russell Pryce explained that he was a very experienced planning officer, with 16 years' experience, and had taken part in meetings of the planning committee over the last 10 years. During the last three years, he had dealt with large scale development plans and was experienced in handling heated discussions.
4. Russell Pryce explained that, at an informal meeting prior to a site meeting on 4 June 2013, Councillor Knipe's attitude towards him had been abrasive from the outset and, in particular, Councillor Knipe had said "I'm going to rip you to shreds at Committee tomorrow and enjoy it". Russell Pryce stated that, at the planning committee meeting, Councillor Knipe had made

personal comments relating to him, and that the chairman of the committee had intervened three times to ask Councillor Knipe to modify his conduct. The comments related to:

- a fee of £3,000 paid to the council for pre-planning advice. Russell Pryce alleged that Councillor Knipe had insinuated that he had received the payment and that this should have been declared to the committee as a conflict of interest. He had suggested that Russell Pryce acted improperly because he had been paid to help design the scheme, and then recommended approval;
  - an e-mail from an internal consultee, Hayley Crane, beginning 'Hi Russell', which Councillor Knipe had insinuated implied an unprofessional relationship;
  - a conversation with the chairman of the local Sports Field Federation (Steve Maddison);
  - data on affordable housing need in the village which Councillor Knipe claimed that Russell Pryce had deliberately omitted from a report.
5. Mike Willmont, the council's Head of Neighbourhood Planning, explained that Russell Pryce had acted at all times within the council procedures. He confirmed that case officers are allocated to deal with planning applications, providing pre-planning advice and seeing the application through to its conclusion. This provides continuity and is common practice. He explained that most authorities charge fees for pre-planning advice, that the pre-application process is encouraged by government policy and that Herefordshire Council had charged for this service for the last two years, which was normal procedure and good practice.
  6. Russell Pryce felt that Councillor Knipe had attempted to bully him before the committee site visit, sought to question and undermine his professional credibility both during the site visit and at committee and made personal remarks that were unfounded, inappropriate and irrelevant in a public arena.
  7. The chairman asked Councillor Knipe to respond to the allegations. Councillor Knipe said that any comments he had made had been the views of the community he represented, and that he had simply passed them on. He acknowledged that he had told Russell Pryce that he would 'rip him to shreds', but stated that he had been referring to the report and not to Russell Pryce personally.
  8. Councillor Knipe denied that any comments he had made were intended to be personal.
  9. Councillor Knipe's witnesses supported his statements that he had been voicing the views of the community, and that they had asked him to speak on their behalf.
  10. The chairman reminded Councillor Knipe that the minutes of the planning committee meeting recorded that three interventions by the chairman regarding Councillor Knipe's conduct. He ask Councillor Knipe whether he felt that, before making comments in public, he should have made a judgement about whether it would be appropriate to make them, whether they were the views of the community or Councillor Knipe's own views.

## **Conclusion**

11. The panel accepted that:

- Councillor Knipe had attempted to intimidate Russell Pryce at the informal meeting prior to the site visit;
- Russell Pryce was an experienced planning officer, who had been following the council's procedures;
- some of the comments made by Councillor Knipe could be interpreted by a reasonable person as being inappropriate;
- some of Councillor Knipe's comments implied an inappropriate relationship between Russell Pryce and the planning applicant;
- Councillor Knipe's comments implied that the pre-planning advice fee of £3,000 paid to the council meant that Russell Pryce was prejudicially biased;

- the minutes of the planning committee meeting were a true record of the proceedings, and supported the allegation that Councillor Knipe's conduct had been inappropriate;
- Councillor Knipe's comments had publicly called into question Russell Pryce's professional credibility.

#### **Relevant parts of the code of conduct**

12. The panel agreed that Councillor Knipe had breached the following parts of the code of conduct:

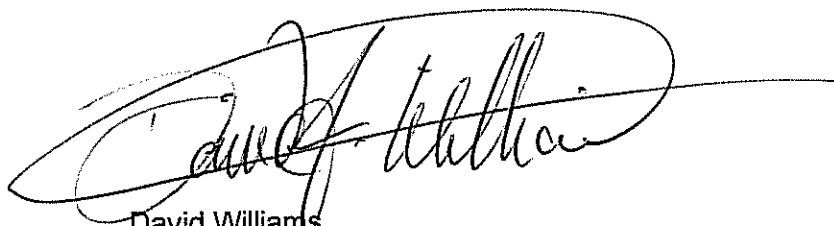
#### **VI. Rules of Conduct**

11. Members shall in particular observe the following rules when acting as a Member or co-opted Member of the Authority and Members are informed that you:

- (a) **Do treat others with respect and courtesy.**

#### **Recommendation**

13. The panel's agreed recommendation was that Councillor Knipe should be required to make a public, written apology to Russell Pryce



David Williams  
Independent Person  
Chairman of the standards panel

[Date]

21.10.13.