

10 October 2022

PRESS RELEASE

Councillor suspended over Facebook post

Alderman John Carson (Mid and East Antrim Borough Council), has been suspended from his role as councillor for 3 months following an Adjudication Hearing held on 10 October.

Acting Commissioner Ian Gordon decided that Alderman Carson had breached the Councillor's Code of Conduct by making an abusive comment on Facebook in April 2021.

The comment was a reference to Ms Michelle O'Neill, Deputy Leader of Sinn Fein, and at the time the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland.

The sanction was imposed after a complaint was received by the Local Government Ethical Standards Directorate, and an investigation report sent to the Acting Commissioner for his consideration.

Having looked at the report, the Acting Commissioner found no evidence, despite Alderman Carson's description, that the comment related to political issues. Instead, he considered that the wording was an unreasonable personal attack on Ms O'Neill, with a 'misogynistic' tone.

He was satisfied his conduct was likely to diminish the trust and confidence the public placed in his position as an elected representative. He determined that a member of the public, knowing all the relevant facts, would reasonably consider that the Alderman's conduct was such that it brought his position into disrepute.

He also found that Alderman Carson had failed to comply with the Respect Principle which underpins the Code.

The Acting Commissioner considered the mitigating factors in this case, which included a statement issued on Facebook by Alderman Carson saying, *'In hindsight I realise I have caused offence by a robust comment made in anger. I retract the comment and apologise accordingly'*. He also had no previous record of breaching the Code.

However, the Commissioner felt that the apology was 'half-hearted' and not a personal apology to Ms O'Neill. In addition, he concluded that the Alderman had not shown meaningful hindsight into his actions.

Having regard to previous decisions and to the need to uphold confidence in the standards regime, the Acting Commissioner considered that a period of suspension of 3 months was a necessary and proportionate response to the breach found.

Notes:

The Respondent may appeal to the High Court against this decision in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The Acting Commissioner's full written decision will be made available shortly on the Commissioner's website at:

<https://nipso.org.uk/nlgcs/hearings-and-adjudication-decisions/>

ENDS

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