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# West Berkshire Conservatives at war as councillor stripped of committee roles

By John Garvey - john.garvey@newburynews.co.uk  
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A CIVIL war could be brewing among West Berkshire Council Conservatives after a member was publicly stripped of her committee roles.

The action, taken by district council leader Lynne Doherty (Con, Newbury Speen) against Claire Rowles (Con, Hungerford and Kintbury), has prompted a furious backlash and allegations of bullying.

The step was taken after Ms Rowles was told she may have been involved in a conflict of interest stemming from a council ethics committee meeting in January at which she had championed two householders who have received a combined bill of almost £90,000 after incorrectly filling out paperwork before developing their properties.

## Changes proposed:

<b>Governance and Ethics Committee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To appoint Mr Simon Carey as an Audit Independent Person</li> <li>Clir Alan Law to replace Clir Claire Rowles as a substitute member</li> </ul>
<b>Health Scrutiny Committee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clir Graham Pask to replace Clir Claire Rowles as a member</li> </ul>
<b>Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clir Graham Pask to replace Clir Claire Rowles as a member</li> </ul>
<b>Western Area Planning Committee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clir Jeff Beck to replace Clir Claire Rowles as a member</li> <li>Clir Garth Simpson to replace Clir Jeff Beck as substitute member</li> </ul>
<b>Appeals Panel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clir Ross Mackinnon to replace Clir Claire Rowles as a member</li> </ul>
<b>Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clir Howard Woolaston to replace Clir Claire Rowles as the Council's representative</li> </ul>

Ms Rowles said: "Despite asking repeatedly for clarification, I got none and it's been going on for months.

"Because the western area planning committee meets so often and I couldn't vote until this was resolved, I asked if I could step down from from that committee.

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Claire Rowles (47099887)

She said Mrs Doherty told her she could not pick and choose and that she would be removed from other committees, too.

Ms Rowles said: "I replied that it was a matter for her and that was the last I heard."

Then, at a West Berkshire Council meeting on Thursday, December 1 – at which Ms Rowles was not present – a slide was projected showing she had indeed been removed from committees, without any clarification.

One person could be heard responding: "Oh dear – what's Claire Rowles done?"

No explanation was forthcoming.

Ms Rowles said she had no idea the slide would be shown and was only told of its contents by constituents.

She added: "No one communicated, either before of after the meeting, to say exactly what was happening."

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The row has prompted a unanimous condemnation from Hungerford's apolitical town council, while Ms Rowles has said the whole affair has made her consider her future on the district council.

Her colleague James Cole (Con, Hungerford and Kintbury) meanwhile condemned Mrs Doherty's actions and said he was considering his own political future.

Mr Cole told a Hungerford Town Council meeting on Monday, December 5: "This was done quite deliberately.

"To me, this sort of vindictiveness is totally and utterly inexcusable – it's bullying."

Mr Cole said he viewed it as "an insult" to Ms Rowles and to himself and added: "I find my future as a West Berkshire councillor open to consideration; I can not abide this sort of behaviour."

James Cole (54491843)

Hungerford town councillors also expressed their dismay and solidarity with Ms Rowles and mayor Helen Simpson said: "For another female to make an example of our ward member is disgraceful behaviour...I really feel strongly about this."

The town council unanimously voted to write to Mrs Doherty expressing "concerns and frustration and our support for our ward member".

Ms Rowles told the Newbury Weekly News: "It's a shame because I've tried to encourage more women into politics but now I don't even know if I want to stand again."

Ms Doherty said: "Claire and I communicated several times on this; not only was she fully aware of my intent, she welcomed the move.

"The reasons behind it are confidential to the individual and I would not break that confidence.

"I would however say that our constitution is clear on how committees are currently constituted...only council can appoint, which means any changes have to be done at council and not at other times.

"The unwritten convention is that this is left to the group leader to allocate all of their members to the various committees.

"This is normally a task which I do annually, however from time to time circumstances change and I respond to those with changes in-year.

"Appointments are based on experience, capacity, individual wishes and skills, rather than on a ward by ward basis."

Hungerford Newbury John Garvey

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