



25 June 2019 (*as amended on 26 July 2019 – see note below)

MEDIA RELEASE

COUNCILLOR SUSPENDED FOR NOT REGISTERING AND DECLARING AN INTEREST

A Fife councillor, Linda Holt, was suspended by the Standards Commission at a public Hearing held in Glenrothes on 25 June 2019, from all committee and sub-committees of Fife Council that make decisions on quasi-judicial or regulatory matters, for two months, for failing to register an interest as a former member of a national campaign group, Scotland Against Spin (SAS) and for failing to declare the interest at a planning committee meeting on 30 May 2018, when an application for renewal of planning consent for a wind turbine was being considered.

Cllr Holt accepted that she should have registered her interest. After weighing up the evidence the Panel decided that she should also have declared the interest at the planning committee meeting on 30 May 2018 and not taken part in the discussion on the planning application. This is because even after resigning from SAS before being elected, Cllr Holt continued to express her public views about wind farms.

Mrs Tricia Stewart, Standards Commission Member and Chair of the Hearing Panel, said: “The need to register and declare certain interests is a very important part of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct as it gives the public confidence that planning decisions are being made entirely on merit and are not influenced by any councillor’s own interest in the matter.

“Registering and declaring interests provides transparency and helps maintain the public’s confidence that a councillor’s personal interests will not influence their discussions and decision-making. The public must have confidence that councillors are considering any planning application objectively, on its individual merits.”

“The Panel considered that not only should Cllr Holt have registered her interest in SAS, she should also have declared it at the planning meeting and should have taken no part in the discussion and voting on the planning application in question”.

The Panel heard that Cllr Holt accepted that she had been quoted in two BBC reports dated 5 October 2016 and 2 November 2016, respectively, as being a spokesperson for SAS. The Panel noted that while Cllr Holt’s position was that she had resigned as spokesperson in October 2016, some six months before the election, she remained the Administrator for SAS’s Facebook page and referred, on her website, to her involvement with the organisation as a lobbyist.

The Panel heard that Cllr Holt further accepted that, on 31 May 2017, a national newspaper had published a letter that she had submitted in which she had designated herself as a councillor and had indicated strong views about issues relating to wind farms.

The Panel was of the view that a member of the public would reasonably consider that Cllr Holt's involvement with such pressure group, along with her own publicly stated views on the alleged saturation of wind farms, could affect her discussion or decision-making on any matters concerning the use of wind turbines. Given Cllr Holt's ongoing involvement with SAS and the fact that the application in question concerned planning permission for a wind turbine, the Panel was not persuaded that her interest was too remote or insignificant to require a declaration. While the Panel noted that Cllr Holt may have believed that she was able to consider the application in question on its merits, it determined a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard the interest as so significant as being likely to prejudice her discussion and decision-making.

The Panel concluded that Cllr Holt had breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

A full written decision of the Hearing will be issued and published on the Standards Commission's website within 14 days.

All councillors have a personal responsibility to adhere to the provisions outlined in the Councillors' Code of Conduct, which is based on nine key principles, including, integrity, honesty and respect.

The Standards Commission for Scotland is an independent public body, responsible for encouraging high standards of behaviour by councillors and those appointed to boards of devolved public bodies.

The public bodies include colleges, National Health Service boards and regional bodies, such as the Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

It also covers national organisations like the Scottish Qualification Authority, Sport Scotland and Scottish Water, among many others.

Further information on the role of the Standards Commission for Scotland can be found at <http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/>

** Note: This press release was amended on 26 July 2019 to make it clear that Cllr Holt's two-month suspension was a partial one in that it only related to all committee and sub-committees of Fife Council that make decisions on quasi-judicial or regulatory matters.*

ENDS

Issued by the Standards Commission for Scotland. For further information please contact the Standards Commission on 0131 348 6666 or enquiries@standardscommission.org.uk