

## Case summary

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<b>SBE case number</b>	SBE01262-30OBA
<b>member</b>	Councillor Peter McDonald
<b>authority</b>	Bromsgrove District Council
<b>allegation</b>	The member failed to treat others with respect and bullied another person
<b>date received</b>	2 July 2008
<b>date completed</b>	25 March 2009
<b>SBE outcome</b>	The ethical standards officer found that the member did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct

### Summary

The complainant alleged that, at a meeting of Bromsgrove District Council's scrutiny steering board which he was chairing, Councillor Peter McDonald addressed two senior council officers in an aggressively confrontational manner that amounted to bullying.

It was alleged that Councillor McDonald questioned Officer A, who was there to make a presentation and answer questions on a major council project, aggressively, by 'banging' questions at her without giving her time to draw breath or gather her thoughts. Officer A stated that she found Councillor McDonald's style of questioning difficult. She expected him to ask probing questions, but felt he did not let her answer before firing more questions at her, and talked over her.

It was further alleged that when Officer B interjected to try to diffuse an argument or difficult situation, Councillor McDonald cut her off in a way that the complainant considered rude.

Officer B stated that she did not think Councillor McDonald was particularly rude to her during what was a difficult and heated meeting.

Councillor McDonald stated that he did not think that he had been aggressive, but that Officer A and other officers present could not answer his questions. He thought that, as Officer A was the senior officer responsible for the project, who had come to the meeting to address that particular matter, she would have been fully briefed and able to answer him. She had not, to him, seemed distressed or upset and he did not think his questions would cause her to be so. Councillor McDonald did not feel that he had bullied Officer A and said that if he had offended her, he was deeply sorry.

Councillor McDonald recalled Officer B intervening in something he was saying to another member. He stated that he replied, "I am the chair, and I ask the questions". Councillor McDonald did not consider that he was rude or abrupt, but was trying to keep order at a difficult meeting. He said that, if he was rude or abrupt to anyone, he would be the first to apologise.

In reaching his conclusions, the ethical standards officer was able to listen to a tape recording of the meeting and to judge Councillor McDonald's exchanges with the officers for himself.

The ethical standards officer considered the way Councillor McDonald had questioned Officer A had been so robust and assertive that it bordered on rude. He did not appear to be listening to Officer A's answers, and on occasions intervened forcefully to challenge what she was saying before she had finished her response to his previous question. It was clear from the tape that Councillor McDonald held strong and predetermined views on the subject discussed.

However, the ethical standards officer did not consider that Councillor McDonald failed to treat Officer A with respect, or that he had bullied her, such that his conduct amounted to a breach of the Code of Conduct. In reaching this decision, the ethical standards officer took into account that Officer A is a senior officer who had attended to answer questions on a particular topic. Members could expect her to be well briefed and knowledgeable on that subject, and although Councillor McDonald's delivery was robust and assertive and allowed the officer little time to respond fully, all Councillor McDonald's questions were about the topic Officer A was there to discuss.

In respect of Councillor McDonald's exchange with Officer B following her interjection, while it was sharp and direct in tone, the ethical standards officer considered that in the context of a heated discussion, it did not amount to bullying or disrespect. The ethical standards officer took into account that Officer B did not feel that Councillor McDonald was particularly rude to her and that Officer B considered the context to be one of a difficult meeting.

Therefore the ethical standards officer concluded that Councillor McDonald did not breach the Code of Conduct.

**relevant paragraphs of the Code of Conduct**

The allegations in this case relate to paragraphs 3(1) and 3(2)(b) of the Code of Conduct.

**recommendations**

**Ends.**

