

Dallen's Dilemma

28 October 2026



Cllr Neil Dallen has a decision to make. How much more public money should be spent deciding whether another councillor was sufficiently respectful towards him during an argument about public money?

The external invoices arising from his complaint against Cllr Chris Ames already total £8,567.64. Council officers' time has not been separately costed. Further proceedings could add to the bill, and the Council has disclosed no estimate for completing them.

This is not expenditure on finding out how the Rainbow Leisure Centre came to require up to £500,000 of repairs. It is expenditure on investigating and adjudicating upon the conduct of a councillor who pressed for answers about the secrecy surrounding that decision.

The distinction ought to trouble every councillor responsible for safeguarding the public purse.

A failure of collective judgement

The confrontation at January's Strategy and Resources Committee was avoidable.

Dallen had supported the urgent Rainbow decision and its confidential treatment. He then chaired the meeting at which Ames questioned those matters, putting himself in the position of controlling scrutiny of a decision in which he had participated.

His declaration, "It is my meeting", captured the problem. A committee meeting belongs to the Council and serves the public. The chair's authority exists to facilitate its business, including uncomfortable scrutiny.

The Constitution gives a chair powers to regulate debate. EET questions the suggestion that those powers justified closing down questions about the chair's own involvement without first addressing whether he should hand over to his vice-chair.

Ames, too, mishandled the confrontation. Calling Dallen arrogant personalised a legitimate argument and made it easier to divert attention from the unanswered questions. Ames has acknowledged that he should have raised a formal point of order.

Dallen should have recognised the difficulty of presiding over scrutiny of his own actions. The Monitoring Officer should have helped the meeting resolve that difficulty. Other councillors could have intervened to bring the discussion back to proper procedure.

Instead, a collective failure of judgement became a disciplinary case against one participant.

Who stands outside the dispute?

The position of Monitoring Officer Piero Ionta deserves particular scrutiny. He advised during the January exchange, supporting Dallen's position. His advice was itself challenged by Ames.

The subsequent external investigation was commissioned on the Monitoring Officer's behalf. Ames's complaint about Dallen's conduct at the same meeting was rejected without an equivalent external investigation.

Those facts create an obvious question about the separation of roles. An officer whose advice formed part of the dispute should not simply assume that commissioning someone else to investigate removes every concern about his continuing involvement.

The investigator's independence must be respected. Being paid by the Council does not establish bias. But an external appointment does not, by itself, answer questions about who decided that an investigation was warranted, who settled its scope and who controlled the subsequent process.

Dallen's personal decision to complain did not itself justify committing public resources. That required an official assessment under the Council's arrangements. Responsibility for the expenditure therefore extends beyond the complainant to those who authorised the machinery to proceed.

The investigator's recommendation against Ames is also a recommendation, not a verdict. The hearing panel has yet to determine the complaint. The September proceedings instead became entangled in questions about the arrangements under which the Council was acting.

A process invoking standards should be able to demonstrate its own.

This is no criminal prosecution

Dallen's statement that the process should run its course invites examination of what kind of process this is.

In a criminal case, there are institutional divisions between investigation, prosecution and adjudication: police investigate, the CPS makes independent prosecution decisions in cases within its remit, and courts determine guilt. Those divisions provide safeguards against one institution controlling the whole course of a disputed allegation.

A council standards complaint is a different system. Here, a powerful councillor complained about an opponent; the Council's own administrative machinery assessed and progressed the matter; an investigator commissioned at Council expense recommended a finding; and a Council panel is to determine it.

That does not automatically make the proceedings unfair. It makes transparency about independence, conflicts, authority and proportionality essential.

Dallen chairs Strategy and Resources, the Financial Strategy Advisory Group and the Shareholder Sub-Committee, and is vice-chair of Licensing and Planning Policy. He is among the borough's most influential councillors. Scrutiny of how the institution responds to his complaint is entirely proper.

Whose answer was the Council sending?

EET asked Dallen whether, in light of the costs, he would withdraw his complaint. The Council's communications team supplied a statement attributable to him.

Why was the Council's publicly funded communications machinery answering a question about whether an individual councillor would continue a complaint he had personally chosen to lodge?

There may be an administrative explanation. Councils can properly explain their procedures and assist with enquiries concerning public duties. But the distinction between explaining an institutional process and providing communications support for its complainant matters.

The Council should explain the basis on which that assistance was provided, who authorised it and whether equivalent assistance would be available to the councillor complained about.

Otherwise, the appearance is that the institution funding the complaint's progression is also helping its initiator defend its continuation.

Public scrutiny is not improper pressure

Dallen said: "The process should be allowed to run its course without external pressure being placed on any of those involved."

He also said the appropriate forum was the standards process, rather than the media.

A panel must decide the complaint fairly on the evidence. EET is not asking it to decide according to newspaper opinion.

But whether continuing the complaint justifies further public expenditure is a question for public debate. So are the handling of apparent conflicts, the treatment of competing complaints and the deployment of Council staff.

A complainant cannot place those questions beyond scrutiny merely because proceedings remain unfinished.

For residents unable to attend meetings, examine committee papers or pursue unanswered enquiries, the local press is often the only practical means of discovering what their Council is doing. Public questioning of public expenditure is accountability in action.

A senior councillor who seeks protection from that scrutiny should consider what his position says about his understanding of public office.

The choice now

The disclosed external fees are a small fraction of EEBC's annual budget. They nevertheless equal almost 36 households' annual payments of the borough council's Band D Council Tax share.

The issue is proportionality. What useful public outcome now justifies spending more?

A finding, a censure, an apology or training might mark the Council's disapproval of Ames's language. None would explain the Rainbow repair liabilities or answer the original questions about confidentiality. With EEBC due to disappear in April 2027, the practical benefit of prolonging this dispute becomes harder to identify.

Dallen received £17,057.52 in councillor allowances in 2025/26. The external invoices alone amount to slightly more than half that sum.

If he withdraws, residents may reasonably ask whether he should voluntarily return some allowance to acknowledge the resources consumed. Withdrawal would not establish a legal obligation to repay, nor would it make him solely responsible for expenditure officers authorised. It would, however, leave a political question about taking responsibility.

Continuing the complaint cannot sensibly be justified by a desire to avoid that question. Money already committed is no reason to commit more.

The most troubling appearance is that Ames faces formal condemnation after trying, however intemperately, to obtain answers about public money, while Dallen faces no equivalent proceedings for stopping those questions. A complaints system that concentrates on the language of challenge while leaving the obstruction of scrutiny unexamined risks

teaching councillors the wrong lesson.

Ames should have chosen his words and procedure better. Dallen should now demonstrate the financial judgement expected of the chair of Strategy and Resources.

He should withdraw his complaint and ask the Council to bring the matter to a proportionate close. The Council should explain whether any further action is necessary, what it would achieve and what it would cost.

The public has already paid enough for a meeting that those present should have managed properly.

