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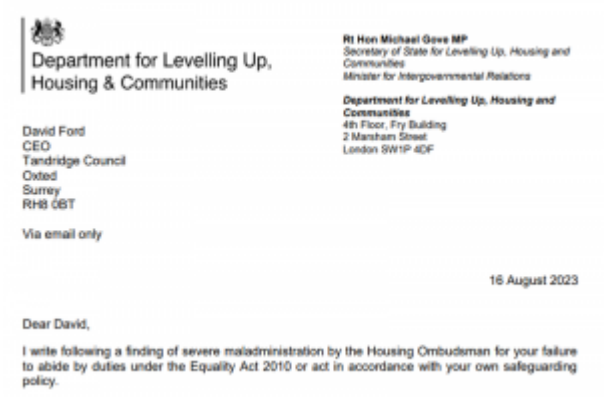
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Gove gives Tandridge a severe telling off

19 September 2023



Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
Minister for Intergovernmental Relations

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
4th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

David Ford
CEO
Tandridge Council
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Surrey
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Via email only

16 August 2023

Dear David,

I write following a finding of severe maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman for your failure to abide by duties under the Equality Act 2010 or act in accordance with your own safeguarding policy.

An “extremely vulnerable person” with poor mental health suffered “aggressive” and “intimidating” behaviour at the hands of **Tandridge District Council** staff.

The unacceptable behaviour has led to the secretary of state for communities, **Michael Gove**, to write to the council to formally warn that he be taking “a personal interest” in how it delivers for residents.

Levelling Up secretary Michael Gove wrote to the local authority after an investigation by the local government watchdog found the behaviour of a housing officer amounted to severe maladministration.

According to the **housing ombudsman**’s report, the resident as well as an independent mental health advocate said the housing officer’s approach was “aggressive and intimidating” and that “she had never been spoken to in that manner in all her years in the role”.

This carried on until the housing officer left three months later.

The ombudsman ordered the council to apologise to the resident in person, pay £1,000 in compensation and review its Vulnerabilities and Reasonable Adjustment policies.

Mr Gove, writing to Tandridge Council’s chief executive David Ford in August 2023, said: “I write following a finding of severe maladministration by the Housing Ombudsman for your failure to abide by duties under the Equality Act 2010 or act in accordance with your own safeguarding policy. In this case you failed an extremely vulnerable resident.

“Her case was not referred immediately, as it should have been, to the relevant support services. The behaviour of a member of your staff towards both the resident and the mental health advocate supporting the resident was described as aggressive, intimidating and neither appropriate nor solution focused.

“This is not acceptable. Your residents should expect their concerns to be taken seriously, for reasonable adjustments to be made where appropriate, and that an investigation of any complaint should be fair. Residents, particularly those who are vulnerable, should expect that their needs are understood and acted upon.”

He added: “I will take a personal interest in how you deliver your responsibilities to your residents.”

Richard Blakeway, housing ombudsman, said: “At the heart of this case, there were three different officers involved, but none took appropriate action. Failure to appropriately respond to the resident’s requests for reasonable adjustments or to act in accordance with its own safeguarding policy caused serious detriment.

“The failure by the landlord to demonstrate that it had taken steps to ensure it understood the needs of the resident also led to missed opportunities which adversely impacted the resident. On top of this, there was a complete absence of recognition, acknowledgement or apology from the landlord for its failings, or to take any action to put things right.”

Responding to Mr Gove was Councillor **Catherine Sayer**, leader of Tandridge District Council. She said they recognised there were problems in how the council dealt with the long-running case, which stretched over several years, and that they failed to fully consider the resident’s needs and vulnerabilities.

Cllr Sayer said: “We are sincerely sorry for the distress and inconvenience caused. Compensation was paid to the resident and we continue to work with and support them with their future needs.

“In January 2023, the Ombudsman did acknowledge several reasonable adjustments were made during the handling of the case.” She said the council had also learned from its mistakes and will put all customer-facing staff into refresher training on safeguarding, vulnerability, equality and diversity and requirements for reasonable adjustments.

Among the changes the council has since made include a staffing structure review as part of a council-wide programme to ensure a dedicated housing officer is assigned to a case and that each case is reviewed monthly by senior officers.

Tandridge Council has also appointed a resident engagement manager to oversee supporting those with vulnerabilities. Cllr Sayer added: “In addition, we made a referral to the Regulator for Social Housing who was satisfied with the response and action we have taken and they did not require us to take any further action.”

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