

It's 'back to school' for scandal-hit council's politicians and officers

By Leigh Marles

WIRRAL councillors and officers are going back to school for lessons in how to run the town hall.

The move comes in the wake of a series of scandals that rocked the authority.

Now the council's Local Government Association-led improvement board, set up following a highly critical report into corporate governance, has agreed to send politicians on an elected member development programme.

The aim is to ensure they have 'current skills and knowledge to oversee and run an effective local authority'.

Officers will be completing a similar course later in the year.

On several occasions, Birkenhead MP Frank Field has said he believed if councillors and directors had reacted more decisively when alarm bells were sounded following an investigation by the district auditor, the present crisis, in which four of the most senior officers are suspended from work, could have been avoided.

His view was formed when a review by local government watchdog the Audit Commission,

Social Services, which were first revealed in the *Globe* by whistleblower Martin Morton - reached worryingly similar conclusions to the earlier audit report.

Ms Klonowski's inquiry paper, published in September last year, stated Wirral had failed to respond to numerous top-level warnings sounded by the Audit Commission and Care Quality Commission.

The report said that, for most councils, just one of these warnings would have been enough to sound alarm bells.

But in Wirral, practices other authorities 'would consider abnormal' were viewed as 'commonplace'.

Ms Klonowski found the town hall has struggled to generate accurate information, not responded to complaints and failed to properly execute agreed decisions.

'The ink had barely dried on the Klonowski review before another scandal was to hit the beleaguered council, when a group of whistleblowers - championed by Mr Field - claimed there were irregularities in a multi-million pound outsourced contract with highways maintenance company Colas.

"Practices other authorities would consider abnormal were viewed as commonplace"

- Klonowski report

published in August 2005, found Wirral guilty of 'alarming errors' at the most senior level, as it sought to transfer its highways administration centre from Bebington to the Cheshire Lines building in Birkenhead.

The auditor said the council chief officer group had combined weak corporate governance with a lack of concern for legislative procedures, and had failed to inform elected members of major decisions taken exclusively by directors.

The chief executive of Wirral Council at the time, Steven Maddox, said such non-compliance with good governance would never again be tolerated, and that he expected his officers to comply fully with constitutional requirements.

In 2011, however, another investigation - this time by consultant Anna Klonowski into abuses by the Department for Adult



Wallasey Town Hall, the headquarters of Wirral Council

An 'astonishing' report, published in June this year by the Audit Commission, concluded that David Green, the council's currently suspended director of technical services, had 'probably' broken European Union Treaty rules by meeting with a company representative - and by further then failing to declare an interest when the contract was awarded.

The inquiry said councillors were not kept informed of problems, nor was their approval sought for £1.4m of extra spending, which became necessary as the highway maintenance works progressed.

Mr Field pursued the issue vigorously - at one point asking the serious fraud office to investigate - and said the probe highlighted 'astonishing basic failings'.

He said at the time: "The Audit Commission report reveals a state of affairs in Wirral Council that I hardly believe possible to exist."

"I had come to believe that the administration of the council was merely broken-backed."

"I was clearly far too optimistic."

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