

City of London

Integrity Commissioner's  
Recommendation Report  
Regarding Councillor Susan Stevenson

November 29, 2024

**Executive Summary**

- [1] This report results from a complaint against Councillor Susan Stevenson for her conduct as a Councillor of the City of London in regard to a pattern of treatment of civic administration and the targeting of particular staff.
- [2] The allegations are that the Councillor has engaged in a pattern of harassing and bullying behaviour towards certain administrative staff members, and that she made a post on social media which identified a particular member of staff in relation to homelessness in the City, in a manner which incited members of the public to target staff in a threatening manner.
- [3] We find that the Councillor's conduct constitutes harassment, bullying and targeting, and that this pattern of behaviour is in contravention of the Code of Conduct.

**The Complaint**

- [4] On May 30, 2024 we received a complaint from the Deputy City Manager, Social and Health Development for the City of London.
- [5] The complaint alleged that Councillor Stevenson's conduct towards administrative staff amounts to harassment that breaches the Council Code of Conduct, the Respectful Workplace Policy and the Occupational Health and Safety Act.
- [6] The complaint included a specific incident in which a single 4 line quote was cited, with emphasis added through BLOCK LETTERS and punctuated with emojis which appear to suggest shock, chagrin, shame and embarrassment. An individual Staff member was identified in conjunction with the quote, which the complaint alleged amounted to targeting by the Councillor.
- [7] It has been alleged that the Councillor demonstrates a pattern of behaviour that is inappropriate, unwarranted, unwelcome, unprofessional, not conducive to respectful Council and Staff relations, and is creating a toxic work environment for civic administration.

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[8] It is alleged that this conduct breaches the London Council Code of Conduct.

### **Process Followed for this Investigation**

[9] In conducting this investigation, Principles *Integrity* applied the principles of procedural fairness and was guided by the complaint process set out under the Code of Conduct.

[10] This fair and balanced process includes the following elements:

- Reviewing the complaint to determine whether it is within scope and jurisdiction and in the public interest to pursue, including giving consideration to whether the complaints should be restated or narrowed, where this better reflects the public interest
- Notifying the respondent of the complaint against her and obtaining her response
- Conducting interviews of persons with information relevant to the complaint
- Reviewing the relevant documentation
- Providing the respondent with the opportunity to review and provide comments to the Integrity Commissioner's Preliminary Findings Report, and taking those comments into consideration prior to finalizing and submitting our Recommendation Report

[11] In this regard, we have assessed the information fairly, in an independent and neutral manner, and have come to our findings only after providing an opportunity to the respondent to respond to the allegations, and to review and provide comment on the preliminary findings.

[12] Our statutory obligation is to conduct a confidential investigation and so the report contains only the information we consider necessary for the purpose of demonstrating to Councillor Stevenson and Council how our recommendations relate to our findings.

[13] A confidential investigation also protects the identities of persons who give evidence from being disclosed. In each case we assess the credibility of witnesses and give their evidence appropriate weight as we make our findings.

### **The Council Code of Conduct and the Applicable Law**

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[14] The London Council Code of Conduct contains the following provisions relevant to this complaint:

### Rule 1. Key Principles and Framework

1.1 The Code is to be given a broad, liberal interpretation in accordance with the applicable legislation, the definitions set out herein and its general intent and purposes.

### Rule 2 – General Rules

2.6 Members shall accurately and adequately communicate the decisions of the Council, even if they disagree with Council’s decision, such that the respect for the decision-making processes of Council is fostered.

### Rule 6 – Conduct Respecting Staff

6.2 No Member shall injure the professional or ethical reputation, or the prospect or practice of an officer or employee of the Corporation, an individual contracted by the Corporation on a purchase of service agreement or a student on placement, and all Members shall show respect for the professional capacities of such persons.

### Rule 7 – Discreditable Conduct

7.1 Members have a duty to treat members of the public, one another, individuals contracted by the Corporation on a purchase of service agreement, students on placement and officers and employees of the Corporation appropriately and without abuse, bullying or intimidation and to ensure that their work environment is safe and free from discrimination and harassment. The Ontario Human Rights Code and the Occupational Health and Safety Act apply and, where applicable, the Corporation’s Respectful Workplace Policy (Anti-Harassment/Anti-Discrimination).

### Rule 12 - Respectful Workplace.

All Members have a duty to treat members of the public, one another and staff appropriately and without abuse, bullying or intimidation and to ensure that their work environment is free from discrimination and harassment.

## **Background and Context**

[15] The City of London, like so many other cities, is experiencing homeless encampments on a scale never before seen.

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- [16] The City has struggled to find solutions to accommodate and provide for the needs of the underhoused, while recognizing that encampments of homeless people can have a negative and deleterious effect on businesses and other citizens.
- [17] Issues of homelessness are complex and challenging, and not easily resolved. They often involve controversial yet related issues such as approaches to supporting those with substance abuse addictions and those involved in sex work.
- [18] Council and administrative staff have been working closely with agencies, experts and volunteers in the community, through a series of round-table discussions (the Encampment Table), and have developed a comprehensive approach (the Whole of Community System).
- [19] The approach which London City Council has endorsed focuses on ensuring the provision of life saving services for those in precarious life circumstances, while developing a framework approach - Hubs and Highly Supportive Housing.
- [20] There have been multiple staff reports<sup>1</sup> and hundreds of hours invested by Council in deliberating the issues.
- [21] Councillor Stevenson has made her views widely known that she objects to the presence of homeless individuals within the business area of her ward.
- [22] She has also made her views known that she objects to supporting a shelter which provides services to abused women because it would also support women who unapologetically operate in the sex trade.
- [23] At the Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee meeting of March 5, 2024, a staff report sought approval for a 2-month extension to funding for two existing drop-in shelters: London Cares and Safe Space.
- [24] Safe Space provides services to individuals involved in the sex trade.
- [25] Although the Report: Contract Amendments To Maintain Day and Overnight Spaces For Unsheltered Londoners, dealt solely with the issue of extending funding for only 2 months for these 2 existing shelters, and despite earlier reports on the topic, Councillor Stevenson persistently questioned staff about the long-term plan.
- [26] She declared the extension a 'band-aid' solution, and used the opportunity to suggest that information and underlying decisions through the Whole of the Community System were not being shared with Council, and, by implication, with the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Between December 2019 and March 2024 there were 14 reports brought to Council on the issue of homelessness.

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- [27] In his detailed explanation back to the Councillor, the Deputy City Manager went to great lengths to respond in a thorough and comprehensive way. He outlined that the provision of acute and short term services such as were addressed in the report before them that day were not representative of the vision and plan already approved by Council, or the road map that staff were following pursuant to Council direction, to address homelessness in a wholistic manner through the Hubs and Highly Supportive Housing approach.
- [28] In the context of this comprehensive explanation, it was explained that the wholistic approach (which had been canvassed extensively by administrative staff and Council) sought to change the approach from a seasonal one to one that recognizes that since the pandemic, homelessness is a year-round state within cities across the province.
- [29] It was in the course of this explanation that the Deputy City Manager explained the City's strategy:
- The Encampment Strategy is a long-term vision for our community on how we address encampments. They are here to stay. They are the fabric of every municipality now. What is our strategy to support them and address them?*
- [30] The comment, which was part of a lengthy discussion at Council, reflects the widespread recognition that encampments, as an aspect of the housing crisis, exist in communities and cities across the province, the country, and throughout North America.
- [31] On April 19, 2024, the Councillor posted the following on her twitter account:

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Friday, April 19, 2024 at 11:36 a.m.

<https://twitter.com/StevensonLDN/status/1781346071316164663>



[See Alt Text in electronic version of this Report for transcription]

[32] In response, the Deputy City Manager sought an informal resolution with the Councillor as follows:

Hello councillor

Can you kindly keep my name off your social media platforms. I'm a member of your staff team. It's not appropriate or welcomed.

If you have questions or you have concerns please set up a meeting to discuss but I do not welcome it, should it not come down or should it happen again, I will be filing a formal complaint.

In my role, like yours I am often required to speak to media, while I can't control what they publish, I do ask that as someone who is on the same team as I am refrain from using it in such an inappropriate manner and to position me in such a way personally. You'll notice staff do not do this to any member of council.

Your prompt attention to this is appreciated.

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[33] On April 22, 2024 the Councillor responded to the Deputy City Manager:

My social media post was a direct quote from the news article that I shared....

I'm not understanding what your complaint against me would be. I can assure you that I certainly did not intend to upset you in any way.

[34] Shortly after the Councillor's post identified the staff member by name, graffiti appeared on a pole in the downtown core, blaming the employee for "100s of homeless deaths".



### **Analysis and Findings**

[35] The Councillor has acknowledged making the post in question.

[36] In her defence, she advised us that the post:

*"... was in reference to a quote directly from a news article in which he advanced a view on homelessness and encampments in my own Ward that I believed was outside the direction of Council and certainly differed from my own political position. I intended no disrespect and recognized he was expressing his own perspective into a sensitive ongoing political issue between myself and my political colleagues. My social media posts did*

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*nothing more than quote the article directly in order to show my constituents the comment that had been made and published.”*

- [37] In fact, the Councillor editorialized the quote by the addition of provocative emojis; gratuitously included the staff member’s name (completely unnecessarily, if she had simply referenced the article), and unfairly implied that the views advanced were the staff member’s own, rather than reflecting the widely acknowledged prevailing view across the Province.
- [38] The quote can be understood as a public criticism and disparagement of the statement, identifying the administrative staff by name.
- [39] The post appeared to suggest that this individual was responsible for the continuing problem of encampments in the City. Naming the employee left him vulnerable to targeting by members of the public.
- [40] Some members of the public might interpret the social media post as suggesting, as at least one person did, that this individual staff member bears personal responsibility for the City’s policy to address homelessness.
- [41] The Councillor also expressed her view to us that it is unreasonable to expect councillors not to comment on identifiable members of staff when *‘that staff member has made public comments on issues with Council’s jurisdiction, in direct contrast with my previously stated political position, and in advance of any direction from Council.’*
- [42] Administrative staff are expected to provide their best professional and non-political advice, to inform Council’s decisions.
- [43] The fact is that staff reports are provided in a public forum, and that, in response to questions, staff expand on the information provided.
- [44] To equate staff fulfilling their obligation to respond to questions to *‘staff making public comments in direct contrast to my previously stated political position’* is inappropriate. Staff are not on a level playing field with Councillors. To characterize it as such is to create a false equivalency between elected officials and civic administration.
- [45] Questions of clarification asked of staff at a Council meeting should not be confused with Question Period where elected members of provincial parliament are permitted, even expected, to pillory the party opposite with pointed, difficult questions in an effort to embarrass them.
- [46] Question Period, unfortunately, provides a very poor example of what a well-functioning municipal council meeting should aspire to; yet there are those who



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enter the municipal political arena ready to do battle as if they were thrusting and parrying with a political opponent.

- [47] Administrative staff are not in their roles to pit their personal opinions against those of members of Council.
- [48] The Councillor has also acknowledged that her questioning of administrative staff may sometimes be provocative.
- [49] We have watched several public meetings and have observed a clear pattern in which the Councillor takes the opportunity, even where an issue only relates tangentially to homelessness or shelters, to ask questions in a manner which allows her to repeat her concerns around the encampments issue.
- [50] Although her words and tone may be moderated and sound respectful, the constant revisiting of the issue amounts to her harping on something that has been well-canvassed already.
- [51] The questions she poses are often prefaced with lengthy statements by the Councillor reiterating her views. Typically the questions could have been asked of staff before the meeting, making it apparent that the purpose of doing so during the meeting is to, once again, make known her disapproval of the City's responses to encampments.
- [52] Administrative staff experience the Councillor's repeated questions around the issue as harassment.
- [53] To be clear, elected officials are free, indeed expected, to ask questions of staff members respecting a report that is before them. They have latitude, within the bounds of a procedural by-law and the rules of decorum, to ask direct, probing questions which seek to inform them or Council on the issue before them.
- [54] In a workplace, however, if a manager were to constantly use opportunities to raise concerns about issues beyond the employee's control, in a manner that implied the employee were somehow responsible, particularly where the facts and positions are already known, this would be recognized as a form of harassment.
- [55] Workplace harassment is defined to include:
  - Engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome.
- [56] The Code of Conduct sets similar boundaries for members of Council.

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- [57] The Councillor also makes comments that imply that administrative staff are withholding information from Council.
- [58] Staff experience these statements – laden with innuendo and inferences that information is being intentionally withheld – as unfair and disrespectful.
- [59] A member of Council is entitled to ask probing questions and to seek relevant information in order to make informed decisions. The role of a member of Council includes the ability to ask questions but not to interrogate; to question the reasoning that supports a staff recommendation but not to publicly question staff's motives or competence.
- [60] However, the Councillor continually finds opportunities to express the same position, makes statements that are thinly-veiled expressions of distrust towards administrative staff, and attempts to re-visit the subject-matter when unrelated matters are before Council or its Committees.
- [61] We find that that the Councillor's pattern of conduct and behaviour, and her post identifying a staff member, are inappropriate and constitute harassment in contravention of the Code of Conduct.
- [62] Although reprimanded in December 2023, on the occasion of our previous Report, and cautioned regarding toning down her provocative social media posts, that advice has been generally disregarded. Her social media posts, continue to be provocative.
- [63] The Councillor has defended her conduct, acknowledging that she knows she is engaging in "provocative lines of questioning in an effort to clarify substantial matters within reports that appear in our Agendas" and that, on occasion, the Chair has asked her to change her language or retract her statements.
- [64] She advised us that whenever she has been called out on such a matter by the Chair, she has immediately complied with the Chair's requests; that she is respectful of her Council colleagues and of administrative staff; and that, to her knowledge, there have not been any more of these requests from the Chair directed towards her than other Councillors.
- [65] During our investigation, it was made clear to us that while there have occasionally been instances where Chairs (or the Mayor) must interject in reaction to members of Council "crossing the line", there is no doubt Councillor Stevenson's statements and questions in regard to the homelessness issue, taken together, are being experienced by administrative staff as harassment.
- [66] We observed evidence of the badgering nature of the Councillor's questioning of staff, and the repetitive and antagonistic nature of her approach in several portions

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of the City's Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee meetings (archived recordings of which are available on the City's website):

December 12, 2023 from timestamp 5:06:00 and especially 5:12:30  
February 6, 2024 from timestamp 28:00  
March 5, 2024 from time 28:00 to 1:60:00  
March 26, 2024 from timestamp 2:27:00  
April 16, 2024 from timestamp 2:43:00

- [67] Identifying individual staff by name can make them a target for aggressive remarks and personal attacks within the community, whether on social media or otherwise. This may have the unintended effect of putting civic administration in harm's way.
- [68] Presented with a respectful request from the employee to take the post down and refrain from identifying them by name in her social media, the Councillor refused to acknowledge having done anything wrong and refused to commit to refrain from the behaviour in the future.
- [69] Whereas a prompt removal of the post, following the request, might have resolved that issue, the Councillor has resisted a less provocative approach.
- [70] Giving the Code a broad, liberal interpretation in accordance with its general intent and purpose, as set out in the Key Principles, we find that the cumulative effect of the Councillor's conduct and behaviour amounts to harassment of staff contrary to Rule 12 of the Code of Conduct.
- [71] We find that the complaint against the Councillor is substantiated.

### **Disciplinary Role of Council**

- [72] The role of Council is not to reinvestigate the findings in this report. The role of the Integrity Commissioner is to undertake a thorough, confidential, and impartial investigation, which has now been completed. The tenets of procedural fairness require us to provide reasons for our conclusions and recommendations, and we have done that. Procedural fairness also requires us to conduct a process where parties can participate in the review and resolution of a complaint.
- [73] Rather, the role of Council is to review the report and decide which sanctions, if any, are necessary. The Integrity Commissioner can recommend training and/or sanctions as they deem appropriate based on the circumstances of the complaint, but it is Council who is the final voice in determining what should be done.

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### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

- [74] An Integrity Commissioner's investigation report is not simply the conclusion of a technical exercise to determine whether there has been a breach of codified standards of behaviour. Our role is more than simply the task of bringing adjudication to grievances between individuals. As noted at the outset, we see as our highest objective in concluding an investigation to be the making of recommendations that serve the public interest.
- [75] One of the most important functions of an integrity commissioner is to provide training, advice and guidance to members to help sort out ethical grey areas or to confirm activities that support compliance. The integrity commissioner's role is as much about education as it is about adjudication, so that municipal government can function better, and that members of the public are able to confidently conclude that members of their municipal council are acting with integrity.
- [76] Sometimes we are able to resolve complaints on the basis of course correction by the Member. Where the Member acknowledges inappropriate conduct and commits to meaningful change, a public report may not be necessary. In such cases, only the complainant and Respondent are made aware of the disposition of the matter.
- [77] However, where a breach is substantiated, and it is important to daylight the concern, the integrity commissioner, following procedural fairness, submits a public report.
- [78] As detailed above, we are of the view that the Respondent's conduct represents a significant breach of the provisions of the Code of Conduct.
- [79] In appropriate circumstances, it may be that a Member of Council is able to correct their behaviour. In those circumstances, it is fair to give the Member the benefit of the doubt.
- [80] However, where a pattern of behaviour is observed, informal resolution is not in the public interest.
- [81] In the circumstances of this investigation, the evidence reveals a persistent pattern of unacceptable conduct and behaviour which is directed at members of the City's administration, and specifically at particular senior management.
- [82] The Councillor's response to our preliminary findings report makes it clear that the Councillor defends her conduct and behaviour as warranted and appropriate (as simply fulfilling her role under the Municipal Act).
- [83] In our view, a significant change in behaviour is necessary.

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- [84] We are not inclined to believe that training would bring about meaningful change in the Councillor's behaviour, particularly as the Councillor appears to exhibit little self-awareness in regard to the impacts of her behaviours on others.
- [85] As such, we believe that a meaningful sanction is warranted.
- [86] The purpose of a sanction is to reinforce Council's ethical framework when education, or acknowledgement, is insufficient. In other words, the Code of Conduct must ultimately have 'teeth'.
- [87] Under the Municipal Act, upon receipt of a recommendation report from the integrity commissioner, Council may impose a reprimand or a suspension of pay for a period of up to 90 days.
- [88] A suspension of pay does not affect the Councillor's ability to attend meetings, but it does take away a portion of their salary, as a penalty for violation of the Code.
- [89] The important factors to be taken into consideration in determining that penalty ought to include proportionality and deterrence.
- [90] In our view, a meaningful monetary penalty is warranted to make the point that such continued conduct is not acceptable.
- [91] The Councillor, when given the opportunity to review our preliminary findings, has doubled-down, defending her conduct as necessary to carrying out her duties, deflecting, (claiming that such pattern of behaviours were condoned under the leadership of the presiding officer), and has shown herself to be unapologetic and defiant.
- [92] In view of the conduct, and her refusal to acknowledge any need for change, we are of the view that a monetary penalty is warranted. We are recommending that Councillor Stevenson's pay be suspended for a period of 30 days.
- [93] We therefore recommend:
1. That the remuneration paid to Councillor Stevenson be suspended for a period of 30 days;
- [94] We wish to conclude by publicly thanking all those who participated in our investigation.
- [95] We will be available to introduce this report and respond to questions during the Council meeting at which this report is considered.

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## About Principles *Integrity* and the Complaint Process

Principles *Integrity* was appointed the Integrity Commissioner for the City of London June 1, 2023. We are also privileged to serve as Integrity Commissioner for a number of other Ontario municipalities. The operating philosophy which guides us in our work with all of our client municipalities is this:

*The perception that a community's elected representatives are operating with integrity is the glue which sustains local democracy. We live in a time when citizens are skeptical of their elected representatives at all levels. The overarching objective in appointing an integrity commissioner is to ensure the existence of robust and effective policies, procedures, and mechanisms that enhance the citizen's perception that their Council (and local boards) meet established ethical standards and where they do not, there exists a review mechanism that serves the public interest.*

The City has as part of its ethical framework a Code of Conduct which is the policy touchstone underlying the assessments conducted in this report. It represents the standard of conduct against which all members of Council are to be measured when there is an allegation of breach of the ethical responsibilities established under the Code of Conduct. The review mechanism contemplated by the Code, one which is required in all Ontario municipalities, is an inquiry/complaints process administered by an integrity commissioner.

Integrity commissioners carry out a range of functions for municipalities (and their local boards). They assist in the development of the ethical framework, for example by suggesting content or commentary for codes of conduct. They conduct education and training for members of council and outreach for members of the community. One of the most important functions is the provision of advice and guidance to members to help sort out ethical grey areas or to confirm activities that support compliance. And finally, but not principally, they investigate allegations that a person has fallen short of compliance with the municipality's ethical framework and where appropriate they submit public reports on their findings, and make recommendations, including recommending sanctions, that council for the municipality may consider imposing in giving consideration to that report.

It is important that this broad range of functions be mentioned in this investigation report. Our goal, as stated in our operating philosophy, is to help members of the London community, indeed the broader municipal sector and the public, to appreciate that elected and appointed representatives generally carry out their functions with integrity. In cases where they do not, there is a proper process in place to fairly assess the facts and, if necessary, recommend appropriate sanctions. In every case, including this one, the highest objective is to make recommendations that serve the public interest, if there are recommendations to be made.

Our role differs from other 'adjudicators' whose responsibilities generally focus, to state it colloquially, on making findings of fact and fault. While that is a necessary component when allegations are made, it is not the only component.

Our operating philosophy dictates the format of this report. The tenets of procedural fairness require us to provide reasons for our conclusions and recommendations, and we have done that. Procedural fairness also requires us to conduct a process where parties can participate in the review and resolution of a complaint.