

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1993

SECTION 440I

STATEMENT OF REASONS FOR TAKING DISCIPLINARY ACTION UNDER SECTION 440I

COUNCILLOR PAUL FUNNELL – WAGGA WAGGA CITY COUNCIL

1. I, Tim Hurst, Deputy Secretary, Local Government, Planning and Policy, having considered a departmental report prepared under section 440H of the *Local Government Act 1993*, am satisfied that Councillor Paul Funnell of Wagga Wagga City Council has engaged in misconduct pursuant to s.440F(1)(b) of the *Local Government Act 1993*; and
2. That by Order, I direct he:
 - cease engaging in the misconduct. Specifically, to cease engaging in conduct that causes, comprises or involves intimidation or verbal abuse and to cease engaging in conduct that is overbearing or threatening to Council staff (s.440I(2)(c)); and
 - apologise to Council staff and councillors for inappropriate behaviour towards them on 19 November 2018. The apology is to be tabled at the first available Council meeting, but within three (3) months of this Order (s.440I(2)(d)); and
 - be suspended from civic office for a period of 1 (one) month (s.440I(2)(g)).

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

3. “Misconduct” is defined under section 440F of the Act as any of the following:
 - (a) a contravention by the councillor of this Act or the regulations,
 - (b) a failure by the councillor to comply with an applicable requirement of a code of conduct,
 - (c) a failure by a councillor to comply with an order issued by the Departmental Chief Executive under this Division,
 - (d) an act of disorder committed by the councillor at a meeting of the council or a committee of the council,
 - (e) an act or omission of the councillor intended by the councillor to prevent the proper or effective functioning of the council or a committee of the council.
4. Section 440H(5A) of the Act provides that the Departmental Chief Executive may arrange for a departmental report to be prepared about

whether a councillor has engaged in misconduct without an investigation being carried out under this section if:

- (a) the matter has been referred to the Departmental Chief Executive by the council and the Departmental Chief Executive is of the opinion that the report may be based on the findings of an investigation conducted by or on behalf of the council, or
 - (b) the Departmental Chief Executive is of the opinion that the alleged misconduct, if proven, would be minor in nature and, were it to warrant disciplinary action, the disciplinary action would be comprised only of counselling or reprimanding the councillor, or
 - (c) the Departmental Chief Executive otherwise considers it appropriate to do so.
5. Section 440I(1) provides that the Departmental Chief Executive may take disciplinary action against a councillor if satisfied that:
- (a) the councillor has engaged in misconduct (whether on the basis of a department report or a report by the Ombudsman or Independent Commission Against Corruption), and
 - (b) disciplinary action is warranted.
6. Section 440I(2) authorises the Departmental Chief Executive to take one or more of the following disciplinary actions:
- (a) counsel the councillor,
 - (b) reprimand the councillor,
 - (c) by order, direct the councillor to cease engaging in the misconduct,
 - (d) by order, direct the councillor to apologise for the misconduct in the manner specified in the order,
 - (e) by order, direct the councillor to undertake training,
 - (f) by order, direct the councillor to participate in mediation,
 - (g) by order, suspend the councillor from civic office for a period not exceeding 3 months,
 - (h) by order, suspend the councillor's right to be paid any fee or other remuneration to which the councillor would otherwise be entitled as the holder of the civic office, in respect of a period not exceeding 3 months (without suspending the councillor from civic office for that period).

7. Section 440J of the Act provides for referral of matters to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

THE MATTER

8. On 19 November 2018 Clr Funnell walked into the Council Chamber approximately 15 minutes late and once he sat down, he began to loudly shout questions at a Council staff member who was presenting information.
9. Clr Funnell continued to direct questions to the staff member in a heightened voice and he did not allow the staff member to fully respond as he would constantly interrupt and speak over the staff member. Clr Funnell used a dismissive and antagonising tone whilst subjecting the staff member to a confrontational kind of questioning.
10. Clr Funnell's behaviour was overbearing, threatening, disrespectful, argumentative and dismissive.
11. When Clr Funnell was asked to speak to the staff member more respectfully, Clr Funnell's behaviour escalated, and he commenced directing profanities at some Councillors.
12. Clr Funnell's verbal abuse continued for up to 10 minutes until he left the workshop.
13. The available evidence supports the finding that Clr Funnell has breached several clauses of Council's Code by behaving in a disrespectful, intimidating and inappropriate manner towards Council staff and by directing foul language towards fellow Councillors at the Council's workshop on 19 November 2018.
14. As a result of Clr Funnell's conduct, Council staff and Councillors have been subjected to behaviour which has caused them to fear for their personal safety in the workplace.

REASONS FOR ORDERING CLR FUNNELL TO CEASE ENGAGING IN THE MISCONDUCT, PROVIDE AN APOLOGY FOR THE MISCONDUCT AND SUSPEND CLR FUNNELL FROM CIVIC OFFICE FOR ONE MONTH UNDER SECTIONS 440I(2)(c), 440I(2)(d) and 440I(2)(g) OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1993.

15. I have carefully considered the Departmental Report and Annexures, submissions and advice provided to me throughout the course of this matter.
16. The misconduct, as detailed in the Departmental Report and Annexures, is sufficiently serious as to warrant taking disciplinary action.
17. The misconduct cannot be reasonably characterised as merely technical or trivial in nature.
18. There were multiple complaints concerning the conduct during the councillor workshop on 19 November 2018, where Clr Funnell behaved in a disrespectful, offensive and aggressive manner towards Councillors and Council staff.
19. As a result of the behaviour I am satisfied a number of the complainants were concerned for their personal safety.

20. I have considered and taken into account that this conduct occurred in a single episode, and the absence of any prior offending or post event conduct in the past two years and the lack of previous incidents of misconduct on the part of Clr Funnell.
21. Having regard to the absence of submissions or other evidence supplied by Clr Funnell, I believe that apart from Clr Funnell's partial apology, he has at no time explained his conduct or accepted that his conduct has fallen short of that required by the code demonstrating a lack of contrition and insight into his conduct on his part.
22. I have concluded that Clr Funnell's conduct was conduct which would be regarded by reasonable persons as falling below, if not well below the standards of conduct to be expected of Councillors, in that it tends to bring into disrepute the civic office held by Councillors, or the Council, or both.
23. In determining that the conduct warrants suspension, given other options available to me, I have specifically noted that this course of action will have the effect of depriving the constituents of their representative for one month, and I gave this outcome significant consideration in weighing the disciplinary options.
24. In my view this is not a matter that would be appropriate to refer back to Council given the seriousness and the limited courses of action open to Council to deal with the matter.
25. Having said that, the matter is not so serious or complex as to warrant referral to the NCAT for consideration of a penalty that is beyond those available to me to impose.

DATED: 5 February 2021



Tim Hurst
Deputy Secretary, Local Government, Planning and Policy
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1993

SECTION 440I(2)(c), (d) and (g)

ORDER

REQUIRING COUNCILLOR PAUL FUNNELL OF WAGGA WAGGA CITY COUNCIL TO APOLOGISE, CEASE ENGAGING IN THE MISCONDUCT,

AND

SUSPENDING COUNCILLOR PAUL FUNNELL OF WAGGA WAGGA CITY COUNCIL FROM CIVIC OFFICE FOR A PERIOD OF ONE MONTH

1. I, Tim Hurst, Deputy Secretary, Local Government, Planning and Policy, under delegation from the Secretary, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, by **ORDER, direct** that Councillor Paul Funnell of Wagga Wagga City Council:
 - cease engaging in the misconduct. Specifically, to cease engaging in conduct that causes, comprises or involves intimidation or verbal abuse and to cease engaging in conduct that is overbearing or threatening to Council staff (s.440I(2)(c)); and
 - apologise to Council staff and councillors for inappropriate behaviour towards them on 19 November 2018. The apology is to be tabled at the first available Council meeting, but within three (3) months of this Order (s.440I(2)(d)); and

2. I, Tim Hurst, Deputy Secretary, Local Government, Planning and Policy, under delegation from the Secretary, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, by **ORDER, direct** that Councillor Paul Funnell of Wagga Wagga City Council:
 - be suspended from civic office for a period of 1 (one) month (s.440I(2)(g)).

The period of suspension commences on 19 February 2021 and ends on 18 March 2021.

Dated: 5 February 2021



TIM HURST

**Deputy Secretary, Local Government, Planning and Policy
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment**