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Council launches investigation into £48,000 payment

Exclusive by
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SURREY County Council (SCC) waived its own tender process when awarding a £48,000 deal to a firm linked to its then chief executive, it has been revealed.

Last year the authority paid for four of its senior managers to go on a training course provided by London-based company Common Purpose.

Documents seen by the *Surrey Advertiser* show that former SCC chief executive Richard Shaw was part of an advisory group for the company's Oxfordshire operation in 2004 when he was chief executive of Oxfordshire County Council.

A series of emails between Mr Shaw and the firm's operation director sent last summer discuss setting up a Common Purpose branch in Surrey.

In an email dated July 30 2008, the director said: "Dear Richard, thank you for meeting with me this afternoon to discuss bringing Common Purpose to Surrey."

The email went on: "I feel we

are making good progress with getting key organisations in Surrey to buy into the idea and now that I am clearer about the options for financial support for places, I will start encouraging applications."

By the time this exchange happened, the wheels were already in motion for SCC to commit to spending £48,000 to send its senior officers on Common Purpose's InsideOUT programme.

The council has confirmed it has launched an investigation into the nature of the deal.

An SCC 'waiver request' details the specific need to send the senior officers on the eight-day course.

Much of the wording for justifying the purchase order for the course appears to have been taken directly from Common Purpose marketing literature.

It said the course provided "access to broader, more diverse network of relationships with senior leaders and key figures locally and more widely".

The exact sentence appears on the website of the not-for-profit organisation.

The form added: "This is a highly unique programme which sits outside the leadership development programme currently being planned and developed for internal delivery across SCC."

It is not known exactly which county council officers attended the course.

Mr Shaw left his £195,000 a year job at County Hall last November – four months after the publication of Ofsted's damning Joint Area Review.

The review, which uncovered failings in Surrey's social care department, was the primary reason the authority was later given a one-star rating by the audit commission.

A member of the public discovered the connection between the course and the council's chief executive by submitting requests under the Freedom of Information Act.

Graham Robertson has since made a formal complaint to Surrey County Council about his discovery. Mr Robertson said guidelines should be in place to monitor the conduct of council employees similar to how council members are regulated.

"The fact that there was no financial benefit for his is irrelevant," he said.

"There is clearly a conflict of interest. It's the kind of thing you would never know about if this sort of thing goes on regularly. It seems to be one rule for officers and another rule for council members."

A Surrey County Council spokesman said: "Richard Shaw retired from the council in January this year to pursue other career opportunities.

"We take this matter very seriously and are investigating the circumstances of the relationship with Common Purpose. It would not be appropriate to prejudge the outcome of this review."

A spokesman for Common Purpose said it was inappropriate to comment on Surrey's tendering process. "Our course in 2008 was the first we ran in Surrey. 2008 was also the first time that Surrey County Council sent employees as part of a wider participant group but we hope to run a course every year and dare currently working on our second one, starting November 2009," she said.