

## Report to Council on Social Media Issues

Report by the Leader of the Council

---

Enquiries to Paul Turner, Director, Legal and Assurance or Gavin Jones, Chief Executive

Given the concerns expressed about the Council's use of social media to amplify messages and about other spending, it was originally intended that this matter would be referred to the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee to look at these issues in more detail and, if appropriate, make recommendations. However, the leaders of the Labour and Liberal Democrat groups have made it clear that their view is that this should be referred to the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee. In the interests of seeking cross party support, the recommendation below has been put forward which reflects the concerns raised by councillors.

The Council has sought to be transparent and has already published as much information as possible about the transactions. The information that the Council holds to answer many of the questions has been voluntarily published.

The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee does not normally carry out investigations and it will therefore need to decide how it responds to the request, should it be approved by Council.

### Recommendation

This Council, given the media interest and public disquiet and being ever mindful of the need to spend taxpayers money wisely, requests an urgent investigation by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee into the circumstances in which Essex County Council engaged Mr Simon Harris in contracts and payments amounting to £493,000 to provide social media posts from June 2020 until April 2023. The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to pay particular regard to the following:

By what selection process was Mr Harris initially awarded these contracts, who made the decision and what background checks were made given his reputation as a comedian and prankster?

What precisely were these contracts awarded for, who signed them off, what due diligence was carried out and what value for money was carried out before further contracts or payments were awarded?

Were declarations of interest correctly recorded by those directly authorising the payments?

Why wasn't the in house ECC Communications Team given the additional resource to carry out the work by Mr Harris given that it was for a corporate public health awareness messaging campaign?

What analysis of the viewing data is available, considering the average view of a typical Facebook page is three seconds, and in particular Mr Harris's Facebook coverage in Essex? The Committee should consider use of an Independent data analyst to be engaged as a witness to the committee to verify how meaningful published reach data is.

It has been reported that serious concerns were raised in 2021, why did payments continue until 2023?

What is the usual budget for social media and how much has been spent on social media since April 2023?

Does the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee consider this expenditure to be value for money, and if so, how?

What learning so far has been taken and what changes made or are being explored in procurement processes?