

VERITA

IMPROVEMENT THROUGH INVESTIGATION

Independent investigation into the Green Party's actions following the allegations and charges brought against David Challenor

A report for
The Green Party of England & Wales

January 2019

3. Executive summary and recommendations

Introduction

3.1 In late August 2018, the Green Party of England and Wales learned that one of its members, David Challenor, had been convicted of multiple serious sexual offences. David Challenor, a member of the party in Coventry, had acted as election agent for his daughter (Aimee Challenor) in the general election in May 2017, and for his daughter and his wife (Tina Challenor) in local elections in May 2018. Aimee Challenor was the party's national spokesperson on LGBTIQ+ issues, a member of the executive of the national party and was standing for election as deputy leader of the party.

3.2 Verita was asked to investigate if members of the party acted in accordance with party policy and procedures, and if they took appropriate actions once they learned of David Challenor's conviction.

3.3 The investigation was undertaken in private. It comprised formal interviews and an examination of documents the Green Party and others supplied. We have made comments and recommendations based on our interviews and the information available to us to the best of our knowledge and belief.

Chronology

3.4 David Challenor was charged with 22 serious criminal offences including taking indecent photographs, false imprisonment, rape and sexual assault of a child, assault by penetration, and assault causing actual bodily harm on, 5 November 2016. On the same day, Aimee Challenor sent a message to the Green Party's external communications co-ordinator about the charges. She also informed Coventry Pride. David Challenor appeared in court on 7 November 2016 and reporting restrictions were imposed.

3.5 In April 2017, Aimee Challenor was selected as a general election candidate for the Green Party in Coventry South. She appointed David Challenor as her election agent. In September 2017, Aimee was elected to the national executive of the Green Party.

3.6 In May 2018 Aimee Challenor, and her mother stood as candidates for Coventry City Council. They both appointed David Challenor as their election agent.

3.7 In June/July 2018 Aimee Challenor stood as a candidate for deputy leader of the Green Party.

3.8 David Challenor was convicted and sentenced to 22 years in prison in August 2018. The Green Party expelled him from the party shortly afterwards.

The charges

3.9 After he was charged, David Challenor was released on bail. We have seen no evidence that the media reported the charges. The case only received substantial local and national publicity after David Challenor's conviction in August 2018.

3.10 The nature of the charges against David Challenor raises the issue of whether other children or vulnerable adults were at risk from the time of the charges through to his conviction and imprisonment. This type of concern is generally referred to as 'safeguarding'. Although legislation and policies relating to safeguarding can be complex, in this context it amounts to a simple question: "*is any vulnerable person at risk*" ? In this report, we use the term safeguarding to mean the general responsibility of every citizen to protect vulnerable people.

3.11 We found no evidence that the West Midlands police told anyone in the Green Party about the charges against David Challenor. Activity in political parties, particularly at the time of a general election, provides the opportunity to interact with a large number of people in an unstructured environment. This is likely to include young and/or vulnerable people. In general, if the police have information that a person involved in political activities has been charged with these types of offences, they should consider if safeguarding issues arise and take action, if needed.

Awareness of the charges

David Challenor

3.12 David Challenor joined the Green Party on 17 December 2015. Over the subsequent two and a half years, he gradually became more active in the party. As a party member, the first person who had a responsibility for drawing the charges to the Green Party's attention was David Challenor himself. We found no evidence that he did so. He should have done.

Tina Challenor

3.13 Tina Challenor became a party member on 1 May 2016. She was not active in the Coventry Green Party. She told us she did not tell anyone in the Green Party about the charges because of the reporting restrictions. Tina Challenor had the opportunity to inform the party of the charges against her husband, but she did not do so. However, we note that her involvement in the party was minimal.

Aimee Challenor

3.14 Aimee Challenor joined the Green Party on 11 December 2014. The following year she became chair of the national LGBTIQA+ Greens. She became membership secretary of Coventry Green Party in April 2017 and subsequently stood as the general election and local election candidate. She was elected to the Green Party's national executive committee in September 2017 and ran for deputy leader of the national party in June 2018.

3.15 Aimee told us that she found out about the charges from her family. She did not ask for details as it was a time of major stress for her and her family. Discussion of the decisions Aimee took must be seen in the context that this was a very difficult and stressful time for her personally.

3.16 Aimee told us that the fact David Challenor had been released on bail was a significant factor in how she perceived the seriousness of the charges as she took it to mean that he was not a threat to society.

Informing the party

3.17 On 5 November 2016 Aimee Challenor sent Matt Hawkins a Facebook message with Clare Lorraine Phipps copied in. At the time, Matt Hawkins was a member of the national executive of the Green Party and one of three external communications co-ordinators for the party. Clare Lorraine Phipps was the chair of the national executive committee.

3.18 The message Aimee Challenor sent referred to her father being charged with 22 offences. It said: *“it is my understanding that the majority of them were sexual offences”*.

3.19 Matt Hawkins, replied:

“I’m so sorry Aimee. How are you doing? Is there anything we can do as friends (as opposed to colleagues!)?”

3.20 We note a number of things about the exchange:

- it was informal;
- it makes no mention of David Challenor having any connection with the Green Party;
- Aimee Challenor did not say why she sent the message or ask for Matt or Clare to take action;
- Matt Hawkins’ response raises the question of the capacity in which the message was sent to him - whether it was as a friend or as a colleague and how this affected his response;
- There appears to have been no discussion about the implications of the message or agreement on next steps; and
- Although Clare Lorraine Phipps was copied in to the message, Aimee Challenor does not appear to have expected her to take action in response to it.

3.21 Aimee Challenor told us that as a party spokesperson she saw the external communications co-ordinator of the party as the person she reported to in the national party. We do not believe that she told anyone else in the party.

3.22 It is to Aimee’s credit that she made this disclosure. However, the brevity, informality and ambiguity of this exchange are problematic. While it allowed Aimee to say afterwards that she had “*told the party*”, it also created the risk that the recipients would not absorb the message and communicate it to the people with relevant responsibilities.

Other occasions when charges might have been raised

3.23 The Green Party code of conduct says that members should disclose anything in their personal history that could potentially bring the party into disrepute before they stand for election to any office within the party or for selection as a candidate to represent the Green Party. Aimee Challenor might therefore have notified the party under the code when she stood as a general election candidate (June 2017), when she ran for the executive committee of the national party (Summer 2017), when she and her mother stood as local election candidates (May 2018) or when she stood as a candidate for deputy leader of the party (June 2018). She completed a ‘Nomination Statement Form’ when standing in the 2017 general election but did not declare any issues.

3.24 A question here is whether the charges against David Challenor were part of Aimee Challenor’s “*personal history*”. Aimee has told us she believes that the code of conduct does not cover this case because she is not responsible for her father’s actions. We agree that Aimee is not responsible for her father’s actions and the code of conduct could be better worded. However, although there is ambiguity about the wording of the code of conduct, its intention is clear - that the party should be given advance warning of problems that might bring the party into disrepute.

3.25 Aimee apologised for appointing David Challenor as her election agent. Doing so was a clear error of judgement.

Other roles given to David Challenor

3.26 In addition to being her election agent, David Challenor helped Aimee carry out her roles in the party. We were told that David Challenor’s involvement included acting as her representative and as her photographer. Although Aimee disputes some of the details of his involvement, it is clear that David Challenor’s involvement in the party grew over time and

became substantial. Much of his activity was related to supporting Aimee, but he also acted as a member of the party in his own capacity.

Reasons for informing the party

3.27 Many of the people we spoke to during the investigation raised the fear of adverse publicity as a major concern. We asked if Aimee Challenor contacting Matt Hawkins suggested that she saw the issue primarily as one of communications. She replied, “Yes, because I was a spokesperson.”

3.28 We reviewed the party’s safeguarding policy and procedures. We found that the party members we interviewed had a low level of awareness of safeguarding issues and risks.

3.29 Prioritising the safety of children and vulnerable people is an individual responsibility of every member of society. There could hardly be a bigger ‘red flag’ in this respect than someone being charged with 22 sexual offences. Irrespective of where the responsibility lies, one of the effects of the way this case was handled was that someone who had committed serious sexual offences was given roles of responsibility within the Green Party during a period of almost two years after a major safeguarding risk should have been apparent. David Challenor bears some responsibility for this, but Aimee Challenor, as an officer of the party both nationally and locally should have considered safeguarding issues.

Reasons for not disclosing the charges more widely within the party

3.30 Aimee Challenor told us that at the time of the events discussed in this report, she was trying to build her relationship with her father and that this explains the actions she took to involve him in the party. It is clearly the case that Aimee is not responsible for her father’s actions. However, in the roles that she undertook she had significant responsibilities to the party as a member, spokesperson and member of both national and local executives.

3.31 Aimee Challenor also told us she took no further action about additional disclosure of the charges because she had already told the party and had therefore discharged her responsibilities. Although she did tell two people in the party who held senior positions, it

is important to note that she said that they were also friends of hers, she told them through an informal channel, the information she provided was minimal and she did not check that they had done anything with the information. Crucially, she did not tell Matt Hawkins and Clare Lorraine Phipps that her father was a member of the party.

3.32 Furthermore, she did not follow the issue up over the subsequent 20 months, during which time she appointed her father as her election agent twice. We were unable to identify anyone in the national party who was aware that David Challenor was a member of the party at the time of Aimee's first disclosure in November 2016. When Clare Lorraine Phipps and Matt Hawkins learned about the charges against him they did not check to see if he was a member. Aimee does not appear to have considered that it was odd that no-one in the party had come back to her to ask her further details - she simply assumed that no response meant everything was okay.

3.33 Reporting restrictions were imposed on 7 November 2016, two days after Aimee Challenor had told Matt Hawkins and Coventry Pride about the charges. Aimee told us that this prevented her from telling more people about the charges. Reporting restrictions are intended to protect the victims of crime rather than the alleged perpetrators. It would be undesirable if restrictions were to discourage someone from identifying an alleged perpetrator in a way that might lead to people being placed at risk. In addition, telling people in the party about charges is not the same as reporting something in the media. All Aimee needed to tell the party was:

- a) that criminal charges had been made against her father, which she did; and
- b) that he was active in the party, which she did not.

Post-conviction

3.34 On the night the conviction was handed down, Aimee Challenor called the Green party's on-call press team to tell them. On 22 August 2018 she emailed three people: the head of communications at the party; the party's social media officer; and the party's press email address with the details of the conviction. At this stage, Aimee provided full disclosure about her father's convictions. This is to be commended.

Knowledge and response of the national party

Matt Hawkins

3.35 Matt Hawkins was elected to the executive of the party in 2014 and re-elected in 2016 in a job share as external communications co-ordinator. He stepped down from this role in early 2017. When he received the message from Aimee Challenor on 5 November 2016 he emailed three members of the communication team to tell them that “*a very close relative of one of our spokespeople has been arrested. I can’t really share with you the full details... but in case anyone does get in touch about it we do know about it and just raise it with me*”.

3.36 Given the contents of the message Matt Hawkins sent to them, we do not believe that any criticism can be made of the recipients that they took no further action.

3.37 Matt Hawkins told us he regrets not asking Aimee Challenor for more details of the charges, and not asking if David Challenor was a member of the party. He told us his first instinct was to look after Aimee and to give her re-assurance that he would handle issues that arose.

Clare Lorraine Phipps

3.38 Clare Lorraine Phipps was chair of the national Green Party executive committee from September 2016 until November 2017. We do not believe that Clare responded directly to the Facebook Messenger message, but on the day Aimee Challenor sent it, Matt Hawkins told Clare he had managed the communications issue with the press office. Clare’s response was therefore to contact Aimee and focus on supporting her personally. Clare told us she did not speak to the chief executive of the party (Nick Martin, whom she line managed) about the charges because she saw it as a communications issue. She believed that the communications team would have told him if they judged it necessary. Nick Martin told us that if he had been informed the party would have taken action in accordance with its safeguarding policies.

Evaluation

3.39 We have made the following evaluation of the decisions taken by people involved.

David and Tina Challenor

3.40 David Challenor should have told the party about the charges as soon as he was charged. Subsequently he should not have accepted the role of election agent. When he did, should have informed the party of the charges he faced. That was his responsibility as a party member and it was wrong of him not to do so.

3.41 Similarly, Tina Challenor could have informed the party, although her involvement in the party was minimal. She should not have appointed David Challenor as her election agent.

Aimee Challenor

3.42 Evaluating Aimee Challenor's actions is more complex because she had a national role in the party. In carrying out that evaluation, there are several factors that weigh in Aimee's favour, including the difficult circumstances she was in, that she raised the issue promptly and that she did not know many details of the case. In addition, party policies were unclear and she was not provided with appropriate training.

3.43 However, there are also a number of factors that we weigh negatively. The message that Aimee sent to Matt Hawkins was via an informal medium, she did not say why she was sending it or ask for it to be acted on or follow it up. Crucially, she did not mention that David Challenor had a connection to the Green Party.

3.44 We have considered what might be expected of a person in these circumstances and what standards we should apply. Whether, for example, we should evaluate the decisions that Aimee made as those of a person who had been a party member (at that time) for just two years, or whether we should evaluate her actions as a Parliamentary candidate and someone with national responsibilities to speak on behalf of the party.

3.45 The roles Aimee held in the party are not ‘normal’ jobs. Many roles in political parties are not remunerated (such as this one) and we are therefore cautious about applying overly strict criteria to judge the competence and performance of people in them.

3.46 The appropriate place to start in evaluating someone’s actions is to look at what would normally be expected in the role that they are undertaking. The community at large or a political party can expect anyone who undertakes a particular role to do it to a certain standard, irrespective of their protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (e.g. age, disability, and gender-reassignment) or any vulnerabilities arising from inexperience or difficult life experiences, etc. When this evaluation has been carried out, therefore, it is appropriate to consider whether a person’s performance could have been affected by such factors and what support and training they may need to be offered as a result.

3.47 Aimee Challenor had a number of roles, both locally and nationally, each of which carried important responsibilities. In not ensuring that the right people in the party were told what they needed to know, Aimee failed to fulfil her roles adequately. This is even clearer in her encouragement of her father to become more involved in the party by, for example, appointing him as her election agent in 2017 after she knew of the charges against him. This was a serious error of judgement, which she repeated when she appointed him as her election agent in 2018.

3.48 We also recognise that although Aimee failed in a number of respects, she was operating in difficult circumstances. These include the challenging personal situation she was in, and her autism.

3.49 It is a legitimate aim of the party to encourage young, diverse and potentially inexperienced people to participate in the democratic process. This means that people who then take on these responsibilities may need extra support and training to make the approach work well. The evidence we have seen in this case suggests that the party is not strong in these areas and did not provide sufficient training to Aimee Challenor.

Overall comment on Aimee Challenor’s explanation of her actions

3.50 We find it hard to understand some of Aimee Challenor’s actions and explanations:

- we do not understand how she could not have been aware that, in giving her father official roles in the party, she was putting her own reputation at risk;
- we do not understand how she could have had the good judgement to inform officials in the party about the charges that her father faced, but the poor judgement not to make sure that all relevant information was included. It would have done her no harm to have told the officials that her father was a party member. If she had done so, it seems highly likely that Aimee would have been guided away from using him as her election agent; and
- we accept that Aimee chose not to seek further information about the charges her father faced, but we do not understand why she did not recognise that this was a mistake. Once again, sheer self-preservation would suggest that she should know as much as possible about these matters, so that she could make well-informed decisions about her own actions.

3.51 Aimee Challenor told us about the pressure she was under during this period and about her autism, and we accept that these could have affected her judgement and thinking, but we are not qualified to come to any definite conclusion on such matters.

Matt Hawkins and Clare Lorraine Phipps

3.52 It is important to consider what action Matt Hawkins took given the small amount of information he had at the time. On what he knew, he did not think this was likely to turn into a ‘big issue’ and only with hindsight can we see that it did. It would have been helpful if Matt Hawkins had been more curious and asked more questions. He accepts this. In the context of the situation he was in, however, it is not surprising that he handled the issue in the way he did.

3.53 For Clare Lorraine Phipps it is also important to bear in mind that she was not aware that David Challenor was involved in the party. Nevertheless, she was chair of the national executive of the party when Aimee Challenor told her about the charges. She knew that Aimee held a high-profile spokesperson role in the party. She was also the chief executive’s line manager. She could have been more curious about the charges - either at the time, or in the following 18 months - and should have told the chief executive herself about the potential risk to the party. Clare was experienced and familiar with the party’s safeguarding

policy and it is our view that she could have been more alive to the possibility of the charges against Aimee's father being a safeguarding issue.

3.54 We have weighed a number of pros and cons for both Matt and Clare, including the lack of information that they had and their seniority in the party. Overall it is clear that Matt Hawkins and Clare Lorraine Phipps closed the matter off too quickly and should have followed up more. It is hard to believe that they did not raise the issue again with Aimee, or with other people in the party in subsequent months. They did not give any thought to the wider safeguarding implications nor did they consider informing the local party. That was remiss of them and may have led Aimee to believe that she did not need to take further action.

Knowledge and response of people in Coventry

3.55 David, Tina and Aimee Challenor were all members of Coventry Green Party and lived in the city. Aimee held offices in the local party.

3.56 The people we spoke to in the Coventry Green Party confirmed that they had no knowledge of the charges against David Challenor until August 2018. Aimee told us that she had not told the Coventry Green Party because she had told the national executive of the party.

3.57 The local party should have been told of the charges against David Challenor. Local party members would have immediately known that David Challenor was involved there and would have been able to take appropriate safeguarding actions.

3.58 It would have been helpful if the West Midlands police had drawn the charges to the attention of the party, particularly when David Challenor was undertaking public roles such as being a general election agent.

3.59 Clearly David Challenor should have told his local party about the charges, but it is also disappointing that Aimee Challenor did not do so. Having spoken to Aimee and to members of the local party we believe that Aimee saw herself as someone who worked more at a national level than a local level - hence her telling the national rather than the local party about the charges. Aimee's failure to tell the local party was a serious omission.

Coventry Pride

3.60 Aimee Challenor was a trustee of Coventry Pride. She told us that she informed them on the same day or the following day that she had messaged Matt Hawkins. In response to being told about the charges, Coventry Pride took immediate safeguarding actions, such as preventing David Challenor from volunteering for the charity.

3.61 The contrast between the actions Coventry Pride took and the Green Party took is stark. Coventry Pride knew of David Challenor's involvement as a volunteer in their work and acted.

3.62 Members of the Coventry Green Party knew locally of his membership and his involvement in party activities, while people in the national party knew about his arrest and charges. However, party members in Coventry were not informed of the charges against David Challenor and were unable to take action.

Conclusions

Roles and responsibilities within the Green Party

3.63 We found that in several areas, roles and responsibilities within the party are unclear. Several people we spoke to questioned the overlap between the roles of professional and voluntary staff, particularly in the area of communications. The party should review its process for the recruitment, induction and management of volunteers.

3.64 We were also told about issues with the process relating to the appointment and management of spokespeople. These include determining the scope of their portfolios and the management of spokespeople when appointed. We understand that work is underway within the party to clarify these issues.

The code of conduct

3.65 We have identified several areas where the code of conduct for party members should be tightened. The code of conduct needs to make clear what should be reported and how it should be reported.

3.66 When defining what issues need to be reported the party should consider the possible reasons for reporting. Clearly the reputation of the party, and therefore political considerations, are at the forefront of the people's minds. However, issues such as safeguarding also need to be prioritised. A natural part of the handling of any issue of this kind is that the first question asked is "*are there any safeguarding implications?*". The party's current safeguarding policy does not give members a duty to report issues and this needs to be spelt out.

3.67 There should also be greater clarity on the responsibilities of those standing for public elections or holding offices within the party (including election agents) for reporting information that may damage the party.

3.68 The action to be taken when issues arise needs to be spelt out. There should be a clear, easy to use and well-publicised process for raising issues. Members, volunteers and staff also need to know what will happen if they raise a concern and what the consequences might be if important information is not disclosed to the party.

3.69 The chief executive of the party told us that the party are currently reviewing safeguarding policies and looking at an improved training programme. We have also been shown a draft paper about appointing a party safeguarding officer. These moves are welcome if they deliver the required improvements in policy and practice.

Support for diversity

3.70 As we have noted, the party aims to promote diverse participation in the membership in general and in its leadership in particular. This is entirely legitimate. For this to be successful, however, it needs to support more effectively those people coming into positions of responsibility who may lack experience, family or financial support or who have particular needs for adjustments to be made for any health or disability issues. This will require the

party to improve training and support for people taking on leadership roles. Aimee's difficult family background and her transition are all relevant in this case, for example.

The importance of safeguarding

3.71 Overall, the importance of the party developing a strong safeguarding culture is the key issue that arises from this case.

3.72 It is disappointing that many people we spoke to in the party failed to see the safeguarding issues that arise here. Those in the party who were told about David Challenor's activities saw the issue as primarily a communications one - about protecting the reputation of the party. Awareness of safeguarding issues in the party in general appears to be low.

3.73 The party therefore needs to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding issues, including when and how they should be raised.

3.74 The chief executive of the party acknowledged weaknesses in the party's safeguarding record in the past. However, he told us that these pre-dated the party's growth as an organisation employing significant numbers of professional staff. He told us that the party has made significant improvements to safeguarding procedures and practice in recent years and is fully committed to continuing to improve them in the future.

Wider issues

3.75 This report has focussed on decisions and actions that members of the party took, but safeguarding is a universal concern. We have not been able to establish whether West Midlands police took any safeguarding actions, but it would be desirable for the police who bring charges of this nature to draw them to the attention of appropriate people. We have suggested that the party raise this with them.

Recommendations

R1 The Green Party should discuss with West Midlands police as soon as possible whether it is their policy to draw to the party's attention charges against a party member that could give rise to safeguarding concerns.

R2 The Green Party's code of conduct should, as a matter of urgency, be made clearer about what members should report. In particular it should emphasise the importance of raising issues that give rise to safeguarding concerns.

R3 The Green Party should urgently review its safeguarding policy and procedures to strengthen its approach to raising awareness and improving processes for reporting safeguarding concerns and risks to people outside the party.