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Questions of due diligence cast a long shadow

MILTON Keynes Council has announced the appointment of a new chief executive. A couple of simple checks revealed two major financial investigations which mention her name.

Carole Mills is an accountant and is currently deputy chief executive and corporate director for resources at Nottingham City Council. Previously, she was acting chief executive, yet apparently did not apply for the job full time.

One of the negative articles I discovered was in the Nottingham Post. In it, she does not come out well: "The city council has agreed an action plan to tackle failings in how it managed a £12 million jobs fund."

"The District Auditor has raised concerns over the mismanagement of the schemes. Among other matters, the auditor's report said around £5 million of public money had been spent on [the jobs fund] without any evidence of formal decisions being taken."

"She said decisions were 'unsafe' and the council failed to comply with its own financial regulations." It goes on to say that Carole Mills (then Carole Mills-Evans) was the accountable financial officer for the Future Jobs Fund.

I then found an article in Outsource magazine detailing

another scandal involving large sums of public money: "Whitehall departments have been criticised for overspending by £500 million on schemes that were actually intended to save money. None of the schemes looked at had broken even."

Carole Mills-Evans and Nottingham City Council are named and she is quoted again.

My publicising this has caused a firestorm at Milton Keynes Council. Current chief executive David Hill wrote to me to say I risked losing credibility and respect among senior colleagues at the council. In a separate letter to me, the three party leaders Andrew Geary, Peter Marland and Douglas McCall said: "Throughout the whole process Carole Mills was the outstanding candidate." However, they failed to state whether due diligence had been concluded.

In the meantime one of our local papers carried this denial: 'Council leader Andrew Geary has backed her appointment - batting away claims in an article in the Nottingham Post that Ms Mills was involved in the failing of a £12 million jobs fund in the city.'

'And Nottingham City Council disputed the newspaper's report, saying that Ms Mills "was not the authorised officer for this scheme and had no man-

agerial responsibility for the areas involved".'

So this anonymous quote from Nottingham City Council ends speculation. Except it does not. I called the paper and they sent me another article which says this: "According to a copy of the council's submission for funding, the accountable financial officer with responsibility for the Future Jobs Funds scheme was Carole Mills-Evans, the council's deputy chief executive."

I have written back to Cllrs Geary, Marland and McCall and said: "The flurry of emails and other correspondence you describe was for one simple purpose, and that is to discover whether the council and its recruitment agent has completed a thorough process of due diligence. If they have, and everyone involved in her selection was aware of the negative stories, and if that candidate was able to prove to your satisfaction that the matters were either not her responsibility or that she had some other convincing explanation, this is the last you will hear from me on this."

"Therefore I have one simple question, for which I believe the people of Milton Keynes are entitled to a reply, and it is this: Were those who played a part in the selection process, namely the 'numerous external stakeholders,

council members, other key staff, the full council and those seven elected members conducting a final interview' all made specifically aware of these easily discoverable links between Ms Mills and the '£12 million jobs fund' scandal and the '£500 million shared back office' scandal?"

As I write this column, I have had no reply.

More importantly, I have discovered that the claims by those three that she was the obvious choice might crumble a little under investigation. For instance, I understand that the full meeting of councillors before the final meeting of the seven who appointed her was very far from unanimously endorsing the candidate in question. And there were three independent panels which also interviewed the final four candidates.

I know that the Business Panel, made up of local business luminaries, was only provided with the candidates' CVs, was told that references would only be taken up once an appointment had been made and was so unenamoured with Ms Mills that they said she was not of sufficient experience and knowledge for the growth of MK. Furthermore I understand that they did not recommend the appointment of any of the last four candidates.

I do not know Ms Mills. I have no opinion of her. She may make a fine chief executive and be worthy of her £150,000 salary.

However, in order for MK to

pick the right candidate, everything relevant must be properly considered. If it isn't, surely the appointment must be put on hold until it is.

Cheerio.

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A world of opportunity: Alumnus returns to teach next generation

A 21-year-old former Milton Keynes College apprentice is "giving back" to the next generation by having a big hand in training others.

Joe Tse is senior stylist and assistant manager at Carmelo Alessi Hairdressing in Stony Stratford having learned his trade at the College. Now, just three years after thinking he'd completed his own education he is learning to become an assessor helping with new young apprentices coming through the business. "It's all happened so fast" Joe says, "and it's really hard to believe I'm in this position now."

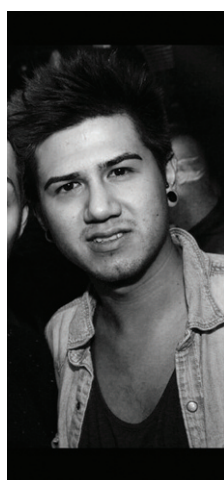
Joe began studying full time for a NVQ in hairdressing but almost gave up on the profession before switching to an apprenticeship.

"The full-time course just wasn't right for me at that point in my life but the staff at the College were really helpful when I said I

wanted to leave," he says. "They helped me find an apprenticeship and persuaded me not to give up on hairdressing and I'm so grateful for that now because I love what I do and would almost certainly be dissatisfied working in a dead-end job without that support."

As it was, Joe completed his training in 2011 and has not looked back. "Making that switch was the best thing I could have done" he says, "because I was working professionally in the College salon with paying customers but all the while there was the safety net of qualified staff on hand to make sure I was doing the right thing."

"Also, people who come to the College salon are quite often prepared to be more adventurous with colours or styles than they might be elsewhere so it gave me the chance to experiment and explore my creativity."



Joe is enjoying his first forays into management and says his training really helped him to appreciate that the industry offered a broad range of opportunities.

"My time at Milton Keynes College influenced me by making me realise that hairdressing doesn't just stop in the salon - there are so many jobs within the hairdressing industry."

"One of my highlights definitely has to be styling on photo shoots and being sent to Amsterdam on an all-expenses-paid trip for a three-day training course."

He continues: "People sometimes don't appreciate how rewarding the job can be. There's nothing better than having clients who sit down being very shy and reserved but leave my chair with a big confident smile, ready to take on the world."

Joe's time at college made him, for a while, one of the most recognised people in

the city. He applied to be in the annual prospectus, went for an afternoon photo shoot and ended up not only in the book but also on posters and buses all over Milton Keynes.

To young people considering their next move after school he has this to say: "They definitely ought to see what the College has to offer because there is such an extraordinary range of courses available."

"The key thing is to have a plan - knowing what the course you choose can lead to in life and the staff can help talk you through that too. Going there has opened up a world of opportunity for me and it can do the same for them."

Milton Keynes COLLEGE

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