

Norfolk County Council

The leader of Norfolk County Council is to be brought before his own council's standards committee over his role in the sending of an email which appeared to undermine a fellow Conservative council leader.

A top lawyer, who was appointed by the county council to compile a report after seven people complained about the conduct of Derrick Murphy, told the authority she believed the County Hall leader did have a case to answer.

But bullish Mr Murphy last night said he was "confident" about the hearing and insisted he had no intention of quitting ahead of it.

Cambridge University-educated QC Jenni Richards, an expert in local government, was appointed to look into the complaints in August and submitted her report to County Hall on Christmas Eve.

While her report has not been made public at this point, she felt there was evidence to suggest Mr Murphy could have breached the councillor code of conduct.

The county council's monitoring officer, head of law Victoria McNeill, and Stephen Revell, the council's 'independent person' - a recently created role to help deal with standards matters - have agreed the authority's standards committee should hold a hearing into the issue.

A spokesman for the county council said: "The monitoring officer and independent person have concluded there should now be a hearing by members of the authority's standards committee and a date is being scheduled in liaison with the committee chairman.

"The committee will consider the report, following the procedures laid out in the county council's constitution and decide whether any action is appropriate."

The council has said it will publish the conclusions of the investigation when the matter is referred to the standards committee, but that it will be a matter for the standards committee as to whether the QC's full report will be published.

The complaints surround an email which was sent by Kevin Vaughan, the political assistant to the Conservative group at County Hall, to BBC Radio Norfolk, in April last year.

It was sent two days before Nick Daubney, leader of West Norfolk Council, was due to appear on Nick Conrad's show to discuss the King's Lynn incinerator, which has long been a source of tension between West Norfolk and Norfolk County Council.

It suggested it might "be pertinent information" for the broadcaster to know that the borough council leader was facing "a serious leadership challenge" and that his authority had failed to procure alternative technology to the plant.

When the email came to light it sparked an independent investigation at County Hall, which concluded in the summer that Mr Vaughan had acted on the wishes of leader Mr Murphy.

Mr Murphy, who represents Freebridge Lynn division and has been leader of the county council since October 2010, previously said Mr Vaughan had been aware of abusive emails Mr Murphy had received during the incinerator saga and had been "caught in the crossfire".

He said then: "There is no excuse for Kevin sending an email like that, but the two statements he made were factually correct and in the public domain.

"But I should have called up the Nick Conrad show myself. I wouldn't have been the first politician to call up a journalist and I wouldn't have been the last. I feel sorry for Kevin because he was caught in the crossfire."

And last night he was bullish about the prospect of appearing before the standards committee. shrugging off rumours he might resign before it meets.

He said: "I will be there. It's up to the standards committee what they decide and one cannot prejudge what they do."

He said he was not surprised that the QC had concluded the committee should consider the complaints, but added: "I have been confident all the way through this."

The complainants - John Martin, Ron Cornell, Jenny Perryman, Joy Franklin, Christine Hall, Mark Russell and Stuart Wilkie - have alleged that, in asking his publicly funded political assistant to suggest the questions Mr Conrad might want to put to Mr Daubney, that Mr Murphy had failed to treat both Mr Daubney and Mr Vaughan with respect and that he had brought his office or the authority into disrepute.

The standards committee consists of seven county councillors. Five, like Mr Murphy, are Conservatives, one is Liberal Democrat and one is Green.

They are Richard Bearman (Green), Brian Hannah (Liberal Democrat), Judy Leggett (Conservative), Tony Tomkinson (Conservative), Michael Langwade (Conservative), Ron Hanton (Conservative) and John Ward (Conservative).

If the hearing concludes there has been a breach of the code, the committee could recommend to the council that Mr Murphy be removed from his position.

It could also censure him, order training in ethics or standards or prevent him from having access to council premises.

Mr Murphy is no stranger to the standards committee, with a number of complaints tabled against him since he became leader.

In January, the seventh complaint against him in 12 months ended with a standards committee concluding he was disrespectful of the then leader of the Liberal Democrat opposition Paul Morse, but did not breach the councillor code of conduct.

The other complaints against Mr Murphy included allegations of bullying and disrepute. No evidence of bullying was found, but monitoring officers did write to members, urging them to adhere to the spirit, as well as rules on scrutiny, while meetings with Mr Murphy and other cabinet members were ordered to discuss avoiding public discontent at meetings and to ensure decisions were seen to be taken in an open and transparent way.