

Disciplinary Panel Hearing

Case of

Miss Audrey Wong

Indonesia

On

Monday 14 October 2019

Paper Hearing

Panel

Helen Riley (Surveyor Chair)
Sue Heads (Lay Member)
Gregory Hammond (Lay Member)

Legal Assessor

Alastair McFarlane

The Formal Charge is:

That between 1 January 2018 and 1 February 2019 you have failed to comply with RICS' requirements in respect of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in that you have not completed and recorded, or caused to be recorded at least 20 hours of CPD on the RICS CPD portal

Contrary to Rule 6 of the Rules of Conduct for Members 2007 version 6.

And that you are therefore liable to disciplinary action under Bye-law 5.2.2.

Preliminary matters – Hearing on the papers

1. The case of Miss Audrey Wong, the Relevant Person, had been referred for consideration on the papers in the absence of the parties, pursuant to Rules 4(d) and 43(a) of the Disciplinary, Registration and Appeal Panel Rules 1 April 2009 (Version 7, 1 January 2017) (“the Rules”).
2. The Panel first considered the issue of service of the Notice of Hearing. The Legal Assessor reminded the Panel that:
 - The case had been referred to the Disciplinary Panel under Rule 4(d) for consideration in accordance with Rule 43(a), that it is a hearing on the papers;
 - Rule 43a(a) requires that not less than 28 days’ notice of a paper hearing be given;
 - Rule 23(e) provides that in cases referred to the Panel under Rule 4(d), the Notice must require the Relevant Person to indicate within 7 days whether he requires an oral hearing;
 - Rule 43a(d) provides that there will be no oral hearing of the case unless an application has been made under Rule 23(e), or unless the Panel decides that it is necessary in the interests of justice or in the public interest to refer the case for an oral hearing.
3. The Panel received a witness statement from Ms Maria Choudhury, Regulatory Tribunal Executive, for RICS, dated 1 October 2019. The statement confirmed that the Notice of Hearing had been sent to the Relevant Person on 13 September 2019, both to the email address and postal address held on RICS’ system. The email and notice were exhibited to the statement of Ms Choudhury. The Panel also had sight of an email receipt confirming delivery of the notice.
4. The Panel noted that the Notice of Hearing gave the required notice of the hearing date and informed the Relevant Person of the right to request an oral hearing within 7 days.
5. The Panel was satisfied that the requirements of the Rules for the case to be heard on the papers were satisfied. The Panel was further satisfied that the matter could properly be dealt with on the papers and that it was not necessary to refer the case for an oral hearing.

Response

6. Miss Audrey Wong has not made any substantive response. It noted that in an email dated 1 July 2018, Ms Wong had indicated that she would "like to know the concessions offered to maintain membership." The Panel further noted that RICS sent her a concession form on 8 August 2018 (and this was followed up on 4 January 2019) indicating that any concession request would be processed once the form had been completed, but there was no response.

Documents

7. The Panel received the hearing bundle prepared by RICS numbered pages 1 – 65, but considered the separate stages of this case and the evidence on each stage separately and sequentially.

Summary

8. Rule 6 provides: “Members shall comply with RICS’ requirements in respect of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).”
9. CPD requirements for members are set out in RICS’ document “CPD Requirements and obligations”.
10. Members must complete at least 20 hours’ CPD each calendar year, of which at least 10 hours must be formal CPD and must record their CPD activity online by the following 31 January through the RICS portal.
11. The Panel had sight of a witness statement of Mr Joe Poole, dated 16 May 2019, which confirmed that on inspection of the CPD records relating to the Relevant Person, 0 CPD hours had been recorded by or on behalf of the Relevant Person for the year 2018 by 31 January 2019. Print outs of the Relevant Person’s CPD record were exhibited to the witness statement.

Liability to Disciplinary Action

12. RICS submitted that it implemented a system in relation to CPD requirements. The requirement was reasonable and designed to ensure consistent standards within the profession. Members are required to maintain up to date knowledge in their area of expertise and, crucially, to demonstrate their compliance by completion of the CPD record. RICS submitted that the CPD scheme is in the interests of the maintenance of professional standards and of public protection.
13. RICS submitted that it had introduced a system for dealing with breaches of CPD obligations and that breaches must be treated as serious by RICS as the Regulator and by its disciplinary panels.

14. RICS submitted that by her failure to comply, the Relevant Person had disregarded a clearly expressed rule and a requirement imposed by her regulator. As a member of RICS she had accepted the obligation to comply with RICS' Rules, guidance and Bye-laws and also that she may be liable to disciplinary action if she failed to do so.
15. RICS submitted that a single breach of the requirements was sufficient to give rise to a liability to disciplinary action.
16. RICS submitted that the Relevant Person was liable to disciplinary action under Bye-law 5.2.2(c).

Legal Advice

17. The Panel received and accepted the advice of the Legal Assessor. The Panel was mindful that the burden of proof of facts in RICS proceedings is upon the RICS, which brings the charges. The standard of proof in RICS disciplinary proceedings is the civil standard, that is the balance of probabilities, meaning that before finding a fact proved, the Panel must be satisfied that it is more likely than not that it occurred.
18. The issue of whether there was liability to disciplinary action was a matter for the Panel's own judgment rather than the legal standard of proof. Before finding liability established, the Panel should be satisfied that the failings in question were of a serious nature and fell far short of the standards expected of RICS members.

Panel decision on facts

19. The online CPD print out record was attached to the charge. The Panel noted the evidence of Mr Joe Poole, a RICS CPD Administrator, which confirmed if no entry appeared in the CPD print out for any particular year, this indicated that no CPD had been recorded for that year. The Panel examined the record for Miss Audrey Wong and was satisfied that it showed that she had not recorded the requisite hours of CPD for the year 2018 and that Miss Audrey Wong did not have any relevant concessions for 2018.
20. The Panel found the factual allegation proved based on the documentary evidence produced by RICS.

Panel decision on liability to disciplinary action

21. The Panel concluded that the Relevant Person's failure to comply with the CPD requirements and Rule 6 of the Code of Conduct for Members amounted to a serious falling short of her professional obligations. The Panel was satisfied from the statement of Hayley Moore, a RICS' Improvement and Performance Manager that the Relevant Person had been sent explicit reminders of the requirements from RICS.
22. In any event, it was the Relevant Person's responsibility to ensure she was aware of and complied with her professional obligations regarding CPD. The Panel was concerned that the failure to record CPD tended to undermine public confidence in the profession. Compliance with its rules was a mainstay of proper professional regulation and ensuring public protection.
23. The Panel was satisfied for these reasons noted that the Relevant Person's failure rendered her liable to disciplinary action.

Sanction

24. At the sanction stage, the Panel considered "Stage 3" documents (pages 50-65).
25. The documents presented included a further statement from Mr Joe Poole, which informed the Panel of the Relevant Person's CPD sanction history. Mr Poole confirmed that Miss Audrey Wong was issued with a Caution for non-compliance with CPD requirements for the year 2014, when she recorded 23.5 hours but these were recorded late, and a Caution and a Fine for non-compliance with CPD requirements for the year 2016, when she recorded 0 hours. Mr Poole's statement further confirmed that having checked RICS' systems, it was evident that the Relevant Person had been sent notification of these decisions.
26. The Panel's attention was directed to RICS' Sanctions Policy in respect of CPD breaches. Paragraph 21.1 provides that policy is as follows:
 - the appropriate order for a single breach is a Fixed Penalty (Caution);
 - for a second breach within 10 years of receipt of a Caution, a Fixed Penalty (Caution and Fine);
 - and for a third breach within 10 years of receipt of a Caution, referral to Disciplinary Panel with a presumption of expulsion.

Decision on Sanction

27. The Panel bore in mind that the purpose of a disciplinary sanction is not to be punitive, though that may be its effect. The purpose of a sanction is to declare and uphold the standards of the profession, to safeguard the reputation of the profession and of RICS as its regulator and to protect the public. Sanctions must be proportionate to the matters found proved.
28. The Panel paid careful heed to the advice of the Legal Assessor and to RICS' sanctions guidance. It considered carefully whether any mitigating or aggravating factors were present in this case. The Panel considered the issue of proportionality in weighing up the most appropriate response.
29. The Relevant Person had correctly recorded hours from 2015 (22.5 hours) and the Panel concluded that this demonstrated that she was aware of the requirement to complete CPD and how to do so.
30. The Panel was unable to identify any mitigating factors.
31. The Panel considered that the following aggravating factors were present:
 - The Relevant Person had previously been sanctioned in respect of CPD breaches on two occasions, namely a Caution for 2014 and a Caution and Fine for 2016.
 - The Relevant Person had been sent multiple explicit reminders.
 - There has been only limited engagement with RICS. This was when she asked about a concession in July 2018. She did not respond when she was offered the opportunity to apply for a concession in August 2018 and January 2019.
 - As she had undertaken and recorded CPD in the past, the Panel was satisfied she knew she needed to record her CPD and how to record it.
 - She has demonstrated no insight as to the importance of the Regulator being able to verify compliance and thereby ensure public protection.
32. RICS is a professional membership organisation and sets standards for its members as a condition of membership. It is not difficult to record CPD online. Compliance is not optional.

33. The Panel first considered whether to impose a sanction. The Panel concluded that the repeated failure to meet CPD requirements was serious and in the absence of exceptional circumstances imposing no sanction would be neither proportionate nor appropriate.
34. The Panel went on to consider a Caution, but concluded that the failure could not be described as minor. It concluded that a Caution would not reflect sufficiently the seriousness of the case, recognising the cumulative pattern of non-compliance over two previous years and the fact that a Caution had already been imposed for the years 2014 and 2016.
35. The Panel did not consider that its concerns in this case, including the risk to the public, would be adequately addressed by the imposition of a Reprimand or by a Fine or Conditions, particularly given Miss Audrey Wong's lack of engagement on this matter. The Panel was mindful of the fact that the Relevant Person does not appear to recognise the importance of undertaking and recording CPD. Recording is necessary so RICS can ensure that members comply with the requirements and this promotes professional standards and enables RICS to protect the public.
36. The Panel was mindful that paragraph 21.1 of the Sanctions Policy provides for a presumption of expulsion where there is a third breach of Rule 6 of the Rules of Conduct for members within 10 years of a receipt of a caution for breach of the same rule. The Panel had considered carefully its own discretion in relation to the appropriate sanction. It was satisfied in this case that the only proportionate and appropriate sanction in the circumstances was expulsion. The Panel ordered that Miss Audrey Wong be expelled from RICS membership.

Costs

37. RICS applied for costs in the sum of £400 pursuant to Supplement 2 to the Sanctions Policy. The Panel noted that a schedule of costs had been provided to Miss Audrey Wong with the Notice of Hearing. The Panel considered it was fair and reasonable to award this sum.
38. The Panel directed that Miss Audrey Wong pay the costs of RICS in the sum of £400.

Publication

39. The Panel considered the policy on publication of decisions, The Sanctions Policy Supplement 3 - Publication of Regulatory Disciplinary Matters, and agreed that in this case there were no exceptional reasons to diverge from the presumption of publication. This decision will therefore be published on the RICS website and in the RICS Modus magazine.

Appeal Period

- 40 . Miss Audrey Wong has 28 days, from the service of the notification of the decision, to appeal this decision in accordance with Rule 59 of the Rules.

- 41 . In accordance with Rule 60 of the Disciplinary, Registration and Appeal Panel Rules, the Honorary Secretary of RICS has 28 days, from the service of the notification of the decision, to require a review of this Decision.