

Disciplinary Panel Hearing

Case of

Mr Avi Alkas MRICS

On

Tuesday 8 October 2019

Paper Hearing

Panel

Carolyn Tetlow (Chair)
John Anderson (Lay Member)
Justin Mason (Surveyor 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 Mr Alkas, 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:
3. The case had been referred to the Disciplinary Panel under Rule 4(d) for consideration in accordance with Rule 43(a), that is a hearing on the papers;
4. Rule 43a(a) requires that not less than 28 days’ notice of a paper hearing be given;
5. 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;
6. 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.
7. The Panel received a witness statement from Mrs Jae Berry, Regulatory Tribunal Manager for RICS, dated 1 October 2019. The statement confirmed that the Notice of Hearing had been sent to the Relevant Person on 3 September 2019, both to the email address and postal address held on RICS’ system. The email and notice were exhibited to the statement of Mrs Berry. The Panel also had sight of an email and postal receipt confirming delivery of the email and notice.
8. 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.
9. 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

10. Mr Alkas has completed a RICS Listing Questionnaire and admitted the charge and accepted that this rendered him liable to disciplinary action.

Documents

11. The Panel received the hearing bundle prepared by RICS numbered pages 1 – 67, the completed Listing Questionnaire and attachments, together with emails from Mr Alkas attaching a spreadsheet listing CPD he has completed since 2015 and a list of professional associations of which he is a member and educational organisations with which he is involved. It considered the separate stages of this case and the evidence on each stage separately and sequentially.

Summary

12. Rule 6 provides: “Members shall comply with RICS’ requirements in respect of Continuing Professional Development (CPD).”
13. CPD requirements for members are set out in RICS’ document “CPD Requirements and obligations”.
14. Members must each calendar year complete at least 20 hours CPD and must record their CPD activity online by 31 January the following year through the RICS portal.

15. The Panel had sight of a witness statement of Mr Joe Poole, dated 20 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

16. 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.
17. 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.
18. By his failure to comply, the Relevant Person had disregarded a clearly expressed rule and a requirement imposed by his regulator. As a member of RICS he had accepted the obligation to comply with RICS' Rules, guidance and Bye-laws and also that he may be liable to disciplinary action if he failed to do so.
19. RICS submitted that a single breach of the requirements was sufficient to give rise to a liability to disciplinary action.
20. RICS submitted that the Relevant Person was liable to disciplinary action under Bye-law 5.2.2(c).

Legal Advice

21. 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.
22. 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

23. 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 that 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 Mr Alkas and was satisfied that it showed that he had not recorded the requisite hours of CPD for the year 2018 and that Mr Alkas did not have any relevant concessions for 2018.
24. The Panel found the factual allegation proved based on the documentary evidence produced by RICS and on Mr Alkas's admission.

Panel decision on liability to disciplinary action

25. 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 his

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.

26. In any event, it was the Relevant Person's responsibility to ensure he was aware of and complied with his 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. For these reasons the Panel was satisfied that this failure was sufficiently serious to render Mr Alkas liable to disciplinary action.
27. Further, the Panel noted Mr Alkas's acceptance that his failure rendered him liable to disciplinary action.

Sanction

28. At the sanction stage, the Panel considered "Stage 3" documents (pages 44-67), the Listing Questionnaire, and Mr Alkas's emails and attachments.
29. The documents presented included a further statement from Mr Joe Poole, dated 20 May 2019, which informed the Panel of the Relevant Person's CPD history. Mr Poole confirmed that Mr Alkas was issued with a Caution for non-compliance with CPD requirements for the year 2013, when he completed 0 hours. He was issued with a Caution and a Fine for the year 2014, when he completed 0 hours. In 2015 he recorded 43 hours; in 2016, 21 hours and in 2017 47.5 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 earlier decisions.
30. The Panel's attention was directed to RICS' Sanctions Policy in respect of CPD breaches. Paragraph 21.1 provides that policy is as follows:
 31. the appropriate order for a single breach is a Fixed Penalty (Caution);
 32. for a second breach within 10 years of receipt of a Caution, a Fixed Penalty (Caution and fine);
 33. 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

34. 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.
35. 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.
36. The Relevant Person had recorded hours in 2015, 2016, and 2017 and the Panel concluded that this demonstrated that he was aware of the requirement to complete CPD and how to do so.
37. The Panel took note of the Relevant Person's submissions contained in the Listing Questionnaire and in a series of emails he sent to RICS. While he referred to the failure being "due to a departing assistant" the Panel did not consider this an excuse for non-compliance as compliance was his responsibility. It identified the following mitigating factors:

- The Relevant Person had offered a sincere apology and remorse for his lapse of CPD recording.
- He indicated that he was "a fervent follower and ambassador" for RICS and regretted causing any embarrassment to RICS.
- He indicated that he was fully committed to fulfilling his CPD obligations and had furnished evidence of having undertaken extensive CPD in 2018, although he had not recorded it online.
- He had demonstrated some insight into the importance undertaking and recording CPD.
- He has engaged with RICS and had made admissions to the charge
- 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 2013 and a Caution and Fine for 2014.

38. 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.
39. The Panel first considered whether to impose a sanction. The Panel concluded that the repeated failure to record CPD was serious and in the absence of exceptional circumstances imposing no sanction would be neither proportionate nor appropriate.
40. 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 earlier years and the fact that a Caution had already been imposed for the years 2013 and 2014. The Panel did consider that its concerns in this case including the risk to the public would be adequately addressed by the imposition of a Reprimand accompanied by a Fine and a Condition. The Panel was mindful of the fact that the Relevant Person does not appear to recognise his personal responsibility for 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.
41. The Panel was mindful that paragraph 21.1 of the Sanctions Policy states that expulsion is likely 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. Given Mr Alkas's disregard of the previous sanction, by reason of the fine for his 2014 failure remaining unpaid, the Panel gave serious consideration to imposing a sanction of expulsion. However, the Panel considered that to go beyond a Reprimand and Fine would be excessive and disproportionate in the circumstances, having balanced the aggravating and mitigating factors.
42. The Panel's decision was to impose a Reprimand, a Fine of £1,250 (including the £250 unpaid Fine for 2014) and to impose a Condition in the following terms:
- As a condition of continuing membership Mr Alkas is directed to comply with the RICS CPD requirements for 2019 by completing his CPD hours for the year 2019 by 31 December 2019 and recording his CPD hours online by 31 January 2020.
 - Failure to comply with this condition will result in automatic expulsion from membership, without further reference to a Disciplinary Panel.

Costs

43. 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 Mr Alkas with the Notice of Hearing.
44. The Panel directed that Mr Alkas pay the costs of RICS in the sum of £400.

Publication

45. The Panel considered the policy on publication of decisions, The Sanctions Policy Supplement 3 - Publication of Regulatory Disciplinary Matters. This decision will be published on the RICS website and in the RICS Modus.

Appeal Period

46. Mr Alkas has 28 days, from the service of the notification of the decision, to appeal this decision in accordance with Rule 59 of the Rules.
47. 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.