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'Whistleblower' says Town Hall drummed her out of job after she discovered £6m overspend by housing department



Pictured, top, is Julie Clarke who is claiming unfair dismissal from Camden Council.

Pictured, above, are council workers at the Jamestown Road depot

Published: 22 March 2012
 by TOM FOOT

A HIGHLY rated business analyst was dismissed after blowing the whistle on "extortionate waste" at the Town Hall, an employment tribunal has heard.

Julie Clarke filed a 190-page report to her bosses in 2010 revealing a £6million overspend by Camden Council's housing department.

She also challenged the official amount the council claimed central government had cut its budget by.

Ms Clarke, who is now working as a business lecturer, has launched a legal challenge to her dismissal in a case being heard at Victory House in Holborn.

She claims unfair dismissal and breach of contract in what could prove to be a test case for dozens of council staff who lost their jobs in a controversial shake-up of the housing repairs department.

The overhaul triggered the first industrial action from Camden Council workers since



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the 1980s.

The tribunal heard how, in 2010, Ms Clarke completed her report "Failing To Deliver", "highlighting failures and non-compliances" in the housing department.

Her findings went to the then chief executive Moira Gibb, and Mike Cooke, who was promoted to chief executive after Ms Gibb's departure at the end of last year, and former director of housing Jim Wintour. The latter left his £158,000-a-year post after just seven months in the job.

Ms Clarke, in evidence submitted to the tribunal, said: "I had tried in vain for over two years to bring to the attention ... the seriously flawed asbestos management shortcomings and extortionate amount of waste and overcharging we were experiencing."

Her manager eventually commissioned consultants firm Savills which, in a report, Ms Clarke told the hearing, "vindicated my concerns, finding we had overspent by £6million".

During the four-day hearing, Ms Clarke said: "I disagreed with the figures and why the cuts were being made – it has to do with the losses that were made in the previous three to four years."

Ms Clarke told the hearing she was "frustrated" that nothing was done to stop the waste and added that management had interpreted her whistleblowing as an act of dissent.

She said: "I was slowly, but surely, marginalised.

The whole period from mid-2010 until my dismissal in 2011 was demoralising, degrading and totally unfulfilling. I begged for more work."

Ms Clarke said her bosses' response was to "reprimand me" and that she was later regarded as a "troublesome employee" who "had to go".

Her dismissal from what she described as a "perfect job" was "predetermined", Ms Clarke told the tribunal.

At least 20 others – of a department of 110 – lost their jobs last year and the tribunal heard that the council was spending £110,000 a month on temporary staff.

Colleagues in a council base in Jamestown Road, Camden Town, took industrial action last July in what officials from the Unison trade union told the hearing on Friday was "the first Camden Council strike since the 1980s".

Ms Clarke's unfair dismissal claim hinges on the process by which staff were selected during a jobs "reorganisation".

All positions in the department were axed and staff were asked to apply for new ones.

Managers decided on an interview process, but Unison favoured a point-based system based on their performance during the course of their employment.

Unison shop stewards Mandy Berger and Liz Wheatley told the tribunal that poor performance in an interview was difficult to challenge and was often used to get rid of out-of-favour staff members.

The process of "management assessments" was fairer, they said.

The hearing was told that managers sent emails out to staff saying they would "not be disadvantaged" if they chose the management assessment option.

But evidence from Jeannie Gielen, lead business partner for adult social care, said: "Staff were urged to attend the interview.

It was highlighted to staff that previous performance may not demonstrate the required behaviours or skills required for a new role in the structure."

Ms Clarke argues her wider experience was not taken into account by her managers, who gave her the worst score and did not select her for the new role.

"I was assured that I would not be disadvantaged," said Ms Clarke.

A judgment is expected in May.

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