

Shelina Akhtar: Will The Truth Emerge?

James Frankcom: As the rumours surrounding the position of Tower Hamlets Councillor Shelina Akhtar circulate, East London News has spoken exclusively with Cllr Shelina Akhtar herself.

Cllr Akhtar explained that legal advice has prevented her from countering the negative presumptions and false rumours that are currently being spread in the media. She told us that she will be in a position to explain some of the misunderstandings presented as fact in the press soon. She also indicated she may well resign her council seat after the case has concluded, because of the stress caused by the media frenzy.

Press reports allege that Cllr Akhtar has twice been convicted of benefit fraud, had sublet her housing association flat while claiming benefits on it and had even changed her name from Akhtar to "Aktar" in an alleged attempt to hide her past from the public. ELN has discovered that there are explanations for Cllr Akhtar's actions.

Shelina Akhtar was elected to represent the people of Spitalfields & Banglatown in May 2010 and for council purposes gave her address as 37 Toynbee Street, E1 in that same ward. ELN now understands this is in fact the home of her mother, who is in poor health. Within two months of being elected, Cllr Akhtar was standing in Thames Magistrates' Court charged with three counts of benefits fraud and fraud by false representation relating to a Swan Housing Association property leased in her name in Blackwall Way, E14.

ELN understands that the Blackwall Way flat was always Cllr Akhtar's main abode, but because she wanted to avoid the social stigma in her community which would attach to a single woman living alone, she recorded Toynbee Street as her official address. With her mother unwell and since the death of her father, Cllr Akhtar had been de facto head of her family and, as such, had to spend much time at the family home.

It has since been reported that whilst she was "living" at Toynbee Street, Cllr Akhtar was also allegedly subletting her social housing property at 112 Blackwall Way while – it has been claimed – receiving Housing and Council Tax Benefit for it.

What is true is that Cllr Shelina Akhtar was found guilty on three counts of defrauding the public at Thames Magistrates Court in July 2010 and sentenced to 100 hours community service. She was also made to pay £250 costs.

At some point during 2010 the spelling of her surname began to be changed in official documents from being spelt "Akhtar" to "Aktar". In a motion tabled to the Council and in a letter written to the chief legal officer of the council, the Conservative Group claims this was "a ruse" to avoid public association with her July 2010 conviction under the name "Akhtar". Cllr Akhtar has told us that she will explain what happened after her court case concludes on 6th February.

Cllr Akhtar received the standard backbench councillor's allowance of £10,065 per year from Tower Hamlets. She also worked part-time work at Tower Hamlets College. According to Tower Hamlets Benefits Calculator, it would appear the councillor (even without her part time job being taken into account) would not have been eligible to receive any benefits. Cllr Akhtar has told us that she claimed only benefits which she believes she was entitled to. We expect the councillor to be able to give a full explanation after 6th February.

The hearing in February will deal with a second round of charges, that Cllr Akhtar failed "to notify changes to her circumstances" – also in relation to receiving benefits at the Blackwall Way property. Earlier this month, Cllr Akhtar pleaded guilty to the new charges against her. She is now awaiting sentencing. If she is sentenced to three months (or more) imprisonment, it follows that under the Section 80 of the Local Government Act (1972) that her council seat would become vacant and a by-election must be called. If the sentence is non-custodial or for less than three months, then there is no legal obligation for her to vacate her seat.

Political leaders in the Borough have called on Cllr Akhtar to resign her seat, regardless of her sentence – thus forcing another winter by-election on the people of Spitalfields & Banglatown.

Mayor Lutfur Rahman commented: "As I have consistently made clear, elected politicians and public servants have a moral and legal duty to abide by the highest standards of personal conduct. The council takes a tough stance against the misuse of public funds. That is why despite the fact that Cllr Aktar is not part of any official group I have asked her to resign her seat as a councillor as well as to return the benefit overpayment."

Cllr. Peter Golds, Leader of the Conservative councillors, has formally written to the Council demanding that Akhtar is immediately suspended from the council because her continued involvement is "bringing the council in to disrepute."

Cllr Josh Peck, Leader of the Labour councilors, has said, "In most local authorities it would be inconceivable that she didn't resign on the first occasion." Cllr Peck has not commented on Labour's role in selecting Cllr Akhtar as a candidate in the first place.

Cllr Akhtar was elected as a Labour Councillor in May 2010. She was vetted by a team from the Greater London Labour Party and was deemed to be a suitable candidate. Usually Borough Labour Parties select their own candidates, but London Labour Party bosses pulled rank over the Tower Hamlets Party and chose all its candidates in the Borough – insisting that it was more competent to do so than local members. This is the second time that a candidate who received a positive vetting from the London Labour Party has come a cropper. Although there has been no sign of a rethink on procedures at Labour Party HQ, the Regional Director who supervised the process, Ken Clark, was exiled to Scotland some months ago.

Cllr Akhtar resigned from the Labour Party in September 2010 and now sits as an Independent councillor.

As the dust from the Cllr Akhtar affair settles down, ELN is asking the question: if one councillor is able to conceal past convictions from the local authority – could there be more? We believe the people of Tower Hamlets have the right to know if their elected representatives are the recipients of social housing and whether they are receiving any benefits from the authority that is also paying their allowances.

We have written on your behalf to each of the 50 other councillors at Tower Hamlets, asking a series of simple questions that put on record their domestic circumstances and help bring closure to the media speculation.

We asked each councillor:

Are you the authorised tenant of either a council or housing association property?

If so, are you or have you ever sublet that property to another person?

Have you claimed either Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit while serving as a councillor at Tower Hamlets?

So far we have received responses from about a quarter of the council. We shall print their responses to these questions and expose those who refuse to be open with their electorate in the next issue of the East London News.