

Scottish Government committee meets to consider handling of Harassment Complaints

The first witness was heard today at the meeting of the Committee on The Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints made up of MSPs from all parties.

Leslie Evans is the Permanent Secretary, The Scottish Government, the top position in the Civil Service in Scotland. Ms Evans addressed the committee who have just begun hearing evidence in public this morning. She opened with a ten minute statement on the development of the HR policy which deals with any complaints against Ministers. This was a retrospective policy drafted in 2017.

This committee is a direct result of the government's handling of complaints of sexual harassment against former First Minister, Alex Salmond which ended up at the Court of Session. The government admitted then it had not met its own guidelines as the investigating officer appointed had prior involvement in the case. Mr Salmond called then for Leslie Evans to resign – or 'consider her position'. He funded the civil suit with over £100,000 from a public crowdfunder.



Convener Linda Fabiani MSP pictured as The Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints takes evidence from Leslie Evans, Permanent Secretary, Scottish Government on development of the Scottish Government policy on

handling harassment complaints involving current and former Ministers. 18 August 2020. Pic Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

Linda Fabiani, Deputy Presiding Officer, is leading the inquiry into the development of the government's procedure on harassment complaints, how that was applied to Mr Salmond and the Court of Session judicial review. You can watch today's proceedings [here](#) and

Ms Evans said: "When complaints were raised, it would have been unconscionable, and a failure in our duty of care, not to investigate those complaints. However it was accepted at Judicial Review that one part of our procedure should have been applied differently. I apologise unreservedly to all concerned for this procedural failure. We've already learned early lessons from this experience as part of the work being led by our People Directorate." She also went on to put on record that she wished to cooperate fully with the committee, despite the Convener saying she is frustrated and disappointed at the limited amount of information the Scottish Government has chosen to disclose about the legal action.

Mr Salmond won a civil suit against The Scottish Government including a £500,000 claim of expenses. Lord Pentland said then that the investigation had been unlawful and 'tainted with apparent bias'. Mr Salmond was also found not guilty of 13 charges of sexual assault in March this year in the High Court in Edinburgh.

Nicola Sturgeon has supported the Permanent Secretary and she will give evidence to the committee in due course.



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Scottish Government policy on handling harassment complaints involving current and former Ministers. 18 August 2020. Pic Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

The Scottish Conservatives have said Nicola Sturgeon must come clean about what she knew and when, after an admission that she may have been aware of allegedly inappropriate behaviour by Alex Salmond back in November 2017.

Leslie Evans revealed in evidence today that she told Nicola Sturgeon that Scottish Government staff had been contacted by Alex Salmond about a Sky News story regarding his alleged behaviour at Edinburgh Airport.

The First Minister has claimed in the Scottish Parliament that she was not aware of complaints to The Scottish Government about Alex Salmond's behaviour until April 2018.

Leslie Evans refused to answer a question from Scottish Conservative MSP Murdo Fraser about her knowledge of claims that female civil servants were allegedly not to be left alone with Alex Salmond.

The question was rejected by the SNP chair of the committee, Linda Fabiani, although there were strong objections from other members of the committee.

One of the Scottish Conservative members of the committee, Murdo Fraser MSP, said: "Leslie Evans' apology for these mistakes is hollow and meaningless when she immediately chooses secrecy over scrutiny.

"Ducking questions on day one is not a good look for someone who cost the Scottish public more than £500,000 that could have been spent on schools or hospitals.

"She cannot refuse questions about the claims that female civil servants couldn't work alone with Alex Salmond. And the SNP convener cannot shut down valid enquiries – or else it's clear that the cover up is already under way.

“That Ms Evans told Nicola Sturgeon about Alex Salmond’s contact ‘in case it became a story’ is a stunning revelation that tells you all you need to know about a government that is rotten at its core.

“We now know that Nicola Sturgeon was aware of Alex Salmond contacting Scottish Government staff in November 2017.

“Are we really to believe that the First Minister didn’t ask anyone what Mr Salmond was saying? She really didn’t even look into this matter any further? We are genuinely meant to accept that Leslie Evans didn’t even ask what the Sky News story was about – and neither did the First Minister?

“It seems that Nicola Sturgeon has been caught out by her permanent secretary and she must urgently come clean about what she knew and when.

“Time is up for the First Minister. The Scottish public cannot be treated like mugs any longer. She must tell us exactly when she found out about Alex Salmond’s alleged behaviour. No more spin and secrecy.”