



Teaching
Regulation
Agency

Mr Matthew Coombs: Professional conduct panel meeting

**Panel decision and reasons on behalf of the
Secretary of State for Education**

2 December 2024

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Professional conduct panel decision and recommendations, and decision on behalf of the Secretary of State

Teacher:	Mr Matthew Coombs
Teacher ref number:	0336557
Teacher date of birth:	10 August 1972
TRA reference:	20237
Date of determination:	2 December 2024
Former employer:	Hartest Church of England Primary School, Suffolk

Introduction

A professional conduct panel (“the panel”) of the Teaching Regulation Agency (“the TRA”) convened on 2 December 2024 by Microsoft Teams, to consider the case of Mr Matthew Coombs.

The panel members were Mr Paul Hawkins (lay panellist – in the chair), Mrs Bev Williams (teacher panellist) and Mrs Jane Gotschel (teacher panellist).

The legal adviser to the panel was Mr Sam Bumby of Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP.

In advance of the meeting, after taking into consideration the public interest and the interests of justice, the TRA agreed to a request from Mr Coombs that the allegation be considered without a hearing. Mr Coombs provided a signed statement of agreed facts and admitted conviction of a relevant offence. The panel considered the case at a meeting without the attendance of the presenting officer Ms Sophie Allen, Mr Coombs or his representative.

The meeting took place in private.

Allegations

The panel considered the allegation set out in the Statement of Agreed Facts signed by Mr Coombs on 10 October 2024 (as the allegation set out in the notice of meeting dated 12 November 2024 referred to correct offence but the wrong statute).

It was alleged that Mr Coombs had been convicted of a relevant offence, in that:

1. On 16 December 2022, Mr Coombs was convicted at Ipswich Magistrates' Court of attempt to engage in sexual communication with a child between 10 February 2020 – 20 February 2020, contrary to s.1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981

The teacher in a Statement of Agreed Facts signed on 10 October 2024 admitted allegation 1. The teacher further admitted conviction of a relevant offence.

Preliminary applications

There were no preliminary applications.

Summary of evidence

Documents

In advance of the meeting, the panel received a bundle of documents which included:

Section 1: Chronology and List of key people – pages 3 to 4

Section 2: Notice of Referral, response, and Notice of Meeting – pages 5 to 10

Section 3: Statement of Agreed Facts – pages 10 to 12

Section 4: Teaching Regulation Agency documents – pages 14 to 105

Section 5: Teacher documents – pages 106 to 110

Section 6: Notice of Meeting (placeholder) – page 111

The panel also received five video recordings of one of Mr Coombs' police interviews, for which there was a placeholder in the bundle.

The panel members confirmed that they had read all of the documents within the bundle and reviewed the five video recordings, in advance of the meeting.

Statement of agreed facts

The panel considered a statement of agreed facts which was signed by Mr Coombs on 10 October 2024.

Decision and reasons

The panel announced its decision and reasons as follows:

The panel carefully considered the case and reached a decision.

In advance of the meeting, the TRA agreed to a request from Mr Coombs for the allegation to be considered without a hearing. The panel had the ability to direct that the case be considered at a hearing if required in the interests of justice or in the public interest. The panel did not determine that such a direction was necessary or appropriate in this case.

Mr Coombs began employment as the Headteacher at Hartest Church of England Primary School (“The School”) on 1 January 2017.

Between 10 and 20 February 2020, Mr Coombs communicated with an individual on the Grindr social media platform. The individual was an undercover police officer who had been trained and authorised to take part in undercover operations to engage with individuals who may have a sexual interest in children.

During those communications, the individual disclosed to Mr Coombs that he was only 14 years old. Mr Coombs sent sexually explicit messages and photographs to the individual. Mr Coombs arranged to meet the individual on 20 February 2020 at Cineworld in Ipswich. On 20 February 2020, Mr Coombs was arrested on suspicion of engaging in sexual communication with a child.

On 16 December 2022, Mr Coombs was convicted of an attempt to engage in sexual communication with a child, contrary to s.1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 in the Ipswich Magistrates’ Court. Mr Coombs was sentenced on 15 May 2023 in the Ipswich Crown Court to a 2 year Community Order with requirements and a Sexual Harm Prevention Order was made.

Findings of fact

The findings of fact are as follows:

The panel found the following particulars of the allegation(s) against you proved, for these reasons:

You have been convicted of a relevant offence, in that:

- 1. On 16 December 2022, you were convicted at Ipswich Magistrates’ Court of attempt to engage in sexual communication with a child between 10 February 2020 – 20 February 2020, contrary to s.1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981**

The allegation was admitted in the Statement of Agreed Facts signed by Mr Coombs and was supported by evidence presented to the panel within the bundle. The panel reviewed the Certificate of Conviction which was in the bundle and the transcript of the sentencing hearing and was satisfied that Mr Coombs had been convicted of the offence which had been alleged.

Findings as to conviction of a relevant offence

The panel was satisfied that the conduct of Mr Coombs, in relation to the facts it found proved, involved breaches of the Teachers' Standards. The panel considered that by reference to Part 2, Mr Coombs was in breach of the following standards:

Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The panel also considered that Mr Coombs would have been in breach of further aspects of the Teachers' Standards, but for the fact that the individual with whom he was communicating was not a pupil at the School. These standards were as follows:

Teachers uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school, by

- having regard for the need to safeguard pupils' well-being, in accordance with statutory provisions

The panel noted that Mr Coombs' actions were relevant to teaching, working with children and working in an education setting, on the basis that his conviction was for an offence of attempting to engage in sexual communication with a child and this included arranging to meet a child in person although he was arrested before this meeting could take place.

The panel noted that the behaviour involved in committing the offence would have been likely to have had an impact on the safety and/or security of members of the public, in this case the individual with whom Mr Coombs was communicating (had the individual not been an undercover police officer).

The panel also took account of the way the teaching profession is viewed by others. The panel considered that Mr Coombs' behaviour in committing the offence would be likely to affect public confidence in the teaching profession, if Mr Coombs were allowed to continue teaching. This was particularly the case as Mr Coombs was the Headteacher of the School and was responsible for delivering safeguarding training to his staff.

This was a case concerning an offence involving sexual activity and an attempt to engage in sexual communication with a child. The Advice indicates that a conviction for any offence that relates to or involves such offences is likely to be considered "a relevant

offence". The panel considered that this was a serious offence and one which went directly to the question of whether Mr Coombs was fit to be a teacher.

The panel took into account the submissions made by Mr Coombs' counsel at the sentencing hearing that he had no previous convictions and that Mr Coombs had taken steps to address his offending behaviour, in particular, by reducing his alcohol use (which was said by Mr Coombs in his personal statement to have contributed to his offending) and by engaging with his Church. The only evidence which the panel had of Mr Coombs' teaching ability was in the form of references which were attached to his job application for the School.

The panel had no opportunity, however, to test any of this evidence and found that the seriousness of the offending behaviour that led to the conviction was relevant to Mr Coombs' fitness to be a teacher. The panel considered that a finding that this conviction was for a relevant offence was necessary to reaffirm clear standards of conduct so as to maintain public confidence in the teaching profession.

Panel's recommendation to the Secretary of State

Given the panel's findings in respect of a conviction of a relevant offence, it was necessary for the panel to go on to consider whether it would be appropriate to recommend the imposition of a prohibition order by the Secretary of State.

In considering whether to recommend to the Secretary of State that a prohibition order is appropriate, the panel had to consider the public interest, the seriousness of the behaviour and any mitigation offered by Mr Coombs and whether a prohibition order is necessary and proportionate. Prohibition orders should not be given in order to be punitive, or to show that blame has been apportioned, although they are likely to have punitive effect.

The panel had regard to the particular public interest considerations set out in the Advice and, having done so, found all of them to be relevant in this case, namely:

1. The safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils;
2. The protection of other members of the public;
3. The maintenance of public confidence in the profession; and
4. Declaring and upholding proper standards of conduct.

In the light of the panel's findings against Mr Coombs, there was a strong public interest consideration in respect of the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils and of other members of the public, given the serious findings of attempting to engage in sexual communications with a child.

Similarly, the panel considered that public confidence in the profession could be seriously weakened if conduct such as that found against Mr Coombs were not treated with the utmost seriousness when regulating the conduct of the profession.

The panel was of the view that a strong public interest consideration in declaring proper standards of conduct in the profession was also present as the conduct found against Mr Coombs was outside that which could reasonably be tolerated.

The panel considered carefully the seriousness of the behaviour, noting that the Advice states that the expectation of both the public and pupils, is that members of the teaching profession maintain a high level of integrity and ethical standards at all times.

The panel took further account of the Advice, which suggests that a panel will likely consider a teacher's behaviour to be incompatible with being a teacher if there is evidence of one or more of the factors that begin on page 15. In the list of such factors, those that were relevant in this case were:

1. Serious departure from the personal and professional conduct elements of the Teachers' Standards;
2. The commission of a serious criminal offence, including those that resulted in a conviction or caution, paying particular attention to offences that are "relevant matters" for the purposes of the Police Act 1997 and criminal record disclosure;
3. Sexual misconduct, for example, involving actions that were sexually motivated or of a sexual nature;
4. A deep-seated attitude that leads to harmful behaviour;
5. Failure to act on evidence that indicated a child's welfare may have been at risk; and
6. Failure in their duty of care towards a child, including exposing a child to risk or failing to promote the safety and welfare of the children (as set out in Part 1 of KCSIE).

Even though some of the behaviour found proved in this case indicated that a prohibition order would be appropriate, taking account of the public interest and the seriousness of the behaviour and the likely harm to the public interest were the teacher be allowed to continue to teach, the panel went on to consider the mitigation offered by the teacher and/or whether there were mitigating circumstances.

In the light of the panel's findings, there was evidence that Mr Coombs' actions were deliberate and there was no evidence to suggest that he was acting under extreme duress. Whilst the panel noted the references provided as part of Mr Coombs' application to be Headteacher at the School had stated that Mr Coombs was a good teacher; however, the panel did not have the opportunity to test that evidence. However, given the

seriousness of the offence, the panel did not consider that such evidence would have been a significant factor in its decision making in any event.

The panel noted that Mr Coombs had shown a limited level of insight by recognising that his actions constituted “*unacceptable conduct*” for someone of his professional standing and background as a safeguarding lead. However, the panel considered that this insight was very limited and did not demonstrate that Mr Coombs fully understood the seriousness of the offence for which he had been convicted.

In particular, the panel did not accept the account given by Mr Coombs in his personal statement that he had simply been “*naïve*” and “*incredibly stupid*” in his actions and the panel did not accept his submission that he was unaware that the individual was a child. The panel also did not consider that excessive alcohol use, which was given by Mr Coombs as a partial justification for his actions, was an excuse for attempting to engage in sexual communications with a child. The panel also considered that Mr Coombs’ remarks were largely focused on the impact of the conviction on his own personal circumstances and did not show a requisite level of appreciation for the severity of his offence or its impact on others.

Proportionality

The panel first considered whether it would be proportionate to conclude this case with no recommendation of prohibition, considering whether the publication of the findings made by the panel would be sufficient.

The panel was of the view that, applying the standard of the ordinary intelligent citizen, it would not be a proportionate and appropriate response to recommend no prohibition order. Recommending that the publication of adverse findings would be sufficient would unacceptably compromise the public interest considerations present in this case, despite the severity of the consequences for Mr Coombs of prohibition.

The panel was of the view that prohibition was both proportionate and appropriate. The panel decided that the public interest considerations outweighed the interests of Mr Coombs. The facts of the offence, involving an attempt to engage in sexual communications with a child, and the lack of remorse shown by Mr Coombs were significant factors in forming that opinion. Accordingly, the panel made a recommendation to the Secretary of State that a prohibition order should be imposed with immediate effect.

The panel went on to consider whether or not it would be appropriate for it to decide to recommend a review period of the order. The panel was mindful that the Advice states that a prohibition order applies for life, but there may be circumstances, in any given case, which may make it appropriate to allow a teacher to apply to have the prohibition order reviewed after a specified period of time that may not be less than 2 years.

The Advice indicates that there are cases involving certain conduct where it is likely that the public interest will have greater relevance and weigh in favour of not offering a review period. These cases include serious sexual misconduct and any sexual misconduct involving a child. The panel found that Mr Coombs was responsible for attempting to engage in a sexual communication with an individual who he had been told was a child and that Mr Coombs had arranged to meet that individual, which the panel considered was serious sexual misconduct and, in any event, sexual misconduct involving a child.

As noted above, the panel did consider the potential mitigating circumstances, including the remarks made by Mr Coombs' counsel at his sentencing hearing that he had reduced his alcohol consumption and was actively engaging with his Church. However, the panel was concerned by the lack of remorse shown by Mr Coombs and the panel was concerned about the risk of repetition if Mr Coombs were to remain in the teaching profession.

The panel therefore decided that the findings indicated a situation in which a review period would not be appropriate and, as such, decided that it would be proportionate, in all the circumstances, for the prohibition order to be recommended without provisions for a review period.

Decision and reasons on behalf of the Secretary of State

I have given very careful consideration to this case and to the recommendation of the panel in respect of both sanction and review period.

In considering this case, I have also given very careful attention to the Advice that the Secretary of State has published concerning the prohibition of teachers.

In this case, the panel has found the allegation proven and found that those proven facts amount to a relevant conviction.

The panel has made a recommendation to the Secretary of State that Mr Matthew Coombs should be the subject of a prohibition order, with no provision for a review period.

In particular, the panel has found that Mr Coombs is in breach of the following standard:

Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The panel was satisfied that the conduct of Mr Coombs involved breaches of the responsibilities and duties set out in statutory guidance Keeping children safe in education (KCSIE).

The panel finds that the conduct of Mr Coombs fell significantly short of the standards expected of the profession.

The findings of misconduct are particularly serious as they include a finding of a conviction for the relevant offence of attempting to engage in sexual communication with a child.

I have to determine whether the imposition of a prohibition order is proportionate and in the public interest. In considering that for this case, I have considered the overall aim of a prohibition order which is to protect pupils and to maintain public confidence in the profession. I have considered the extent to which a prohibition order in this case would achieve that aim taking into account the impact that it will have on the individual teacher. I have also asked myself whether a less intrusive measure, such as the published finding of a relevant conviction, would itself be sufficient to achieve the overall aim. I have to consider whether the consequences of such a publication are themselves sufficient. I have considered therefore whether or not prohibiting Mr Coombs, and the impact that will have on the teacher, is proportionate and in the public interest.

In this case, I have considered the extent to which a prohibition order would protect children and safeguard pupils. The panel has observed, "In the light of the panel's findings against Mr Coombs, there was a strong public interest consideration in respect of the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils and of other members of the public, given the serious findings of attempting to engage in sexual communications with a child." A prohibition order would therefore prevent such a risk from being present in the future.

I have also taken into account the panel's comments on insight and remorse, which the panel has set out as follows:

"The panel noted that Mr Coombs had shown a limited level of insight by recognising that his actions constituted "*unacceptable conduct*" for someone of his professional standing and background as a safeguarding lead. However, the panel considered that this insight was very limited and did not demonstrate that Mr Coombs fully understood the seriousness of the offence for which he had been convicted."

The panel has also commented that Mr Coombs had shown a lack of remorse. In my judgement, the lack of full insight and remorse means that there is some risk of the repetition of this behaviour and this puts at risk the future wellbeing of pupils. I have therefore given this element considerable weight in reaching my decision.

I have gone on to consider the extent to which a prohibition order would maintain public confidence in the profession. The panel has observed, "Mr Coombs' behaviour in committing the offence would be likely to affect public confidence in the teaching profession, if Mr Coombs were allowed to continue teaching. This was particularly the case as Mr Coombs was the Headteacher of the School and was responsible for delivering safeguarding training to his staff." I am particularly mindful of the finding of a conviction for attempting to engage sexual communication with a child in this case and the impact that such a finding has on the reputation of the profession.

I have had to consider that the public has a high expectation of professional standards of all teachers and that the public might regard a failure to impose a prohibition order as a failure to uphold those high standards. In weighing these considerations, I have had to consider the matter from the point of view of an “ordinary intelligent and well-informed citizen.”

I have considered whether the publication of a finding of a relevant conviction, in the absence of a prohibition order, can itself be regarded by such a person as being a proportionate response to the misconduct that has been found proven in this case.

I have also considered the impact of a prohibition order on Mr Coombs himself. The panel has commented, “Whilst the panel noted the references provided as part of Mr Coombs’ application to be Headteacher at the School had stated that Mr Coombs was a good teacher; however, the panel did not have the opportunity to test that evidence.”

A prohibition order would prevent Mr Coombs from teaching. A prohibition order would also clearly deprive the public of his contribution to the profession for the period that it is in force.

In this case, I have placed considerable weight on the panel’s comments concerning the seriousness of the offence committed by Mr Coombs and his lack of full insight and remorse. The panel has said that “the public interest considerations outweighed the interests of Mr Coombs. The facts of the offence, involving an attempt to engage in sexual communications with a child, and the lack of remorse shown by Mr Coombs were significant factors in forming that opinion.”

I have given less weight in my consideration of sanction therefore to the contribution that Mr Coombs has made to the profession. In my view, it is necessary to impose a prohibition order in order to maintain public confidence in the profession. A published decision, in light of the circumstances in this case, that is not backed up by full insight and remorse, does not in my view satisfy the public interest requirement concerning public confidence in the profession.

For these reasons, I have concluded that a prohibition order is proportionate and in the public interest in order to achieve the intended aims of a prohibition order.

I have gone on to consider the matter of a review period. In this case, the panel has recommended that no provision should be made for a review period.

I have considered the panel’s comments:

“The Advice indicates that there are cases involving certain conduct where it is likely that the public interest will have greater relevance and weigh in favour of not offering a review period. These cases include serious sexual misconduct and any sexual misconduct involving a child. The panel found that Mr Coombs was responsible for attempting to engage in a sexual communication with an individual

who he had been told was a child and that Mr Coombs had arranged to meet that individual, which the panel considered was serious sexual misconduct and, in any event, sexual misconduct involving a child.

“As noted above, the panel did consider the potential mitigating circumstances, including the remarks made by Mr Coombs’ counsel at his sentencing hearing that he had reduced his alcohol consumption and was actively engaging with his Church. However, the panel was concerned by the lack of remorse shown by Mr Coombs and the panel was concerned about the risk of repetition if Mr Coombs were to remain in the teaching profession.”

I have considered whether not allowing a review period reflects the seriousness of the findings and is a proportionate period to achieve the aim of maintaining public confidence in the profession. In this case, factors mean that allowing a review period is not sufficient to achieve the aim of maintaining public confidence in the profession. These elements are the serious nature of the offence of which Mr Coombs was convicted, the lack of full insight and remorse, and the risk of repetition.

I consider therefore that allowing for no review period is necessary to maintain public confidence and is proportionate and in the public interest.

This means that Mr Matthew Coombs is prohibited from teaching indefinitely and cannot teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children’s home in England. Furthermore, in view of the seriousness of the allegation found proved against him, I have decided that Mr Coombs shall not be entitled to apply for restoration of his eligibility to teach.

This order takes effect from the date on which it is served on the teacher.

Mr Coombs has a right of appeal to the King’s Bench Division of the High Court within 28 days from the date he is given notice of this order.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Oatley', written in a cursive style.

Decision maker: David Oatley

Date: 3 December 2024

This decision is taken by the decision maker named above on behalf of the Secretary of State.