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Council leader says sorry for £32m bungle

Published Date: 19 April 2009

The leader of Northamptonshire County Council has made a public apology for the "Carillion affair", but said no members of his cabinet should resign.

The £32m privatisation deal, which was signed by the county council in 2007, handed the management of council buildings to the West Midlands-based construction firm.

But the deal collapsed this year and a subsequent review into how the deal was put together found a series of problems at County Hall, including missing papers and incomplete documents.

Senior lawyers have also warned the deal may not have been legal.

Following the findings of the initial investigation, opposition leaders called for several council cabinet members to resign.

The leader of the authority, Councillor Jim Harker (Con, Kettering Rural) said nobody would go. But in a letter sent to the Chronicle & Echo, he issued a full apology to Northamptonshire residents for the situation.

He said: "I am, of course, personally very sorry that this has come about under the current administration and apologise to the people of Northamptonshire for the fact that the county council has not been performing as efficiently as it should have been."

The council leader blamed poor internal practices at County Hall, which he claims were inherited from the previous Labour administration, which lost power in 2005.

He said: "By 2007, we had already put huge changes in place to remedy this long-ingrained inherited culture of sloppy corporate governance, and I have great confidence that our new team of chief executive and directors will not let it happen again."

The £8 million-a-year Carillion agreement was scrapped by the council in March, after a number of concerns were raised inside County Hall.

The matter is due to be fully discussed at a meeting of the council tomorrow.

The leader of the Labour opposition group, Councillor John McGhee (Lab, Kingswood),



Jim Harker

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called for three Conservative councillors to resign.

They are Councillors Harker, Bill Parker (Con, Brambleside), the council's cabinet member for finance, and Robin Brown (Con, Braunston), who was involved in setting up the Carillion deal.

He said: "As far as I am concerned, these three councillors have no option but to resign. I would like to say I'm surprised this hasn't already happened, but frankly, I'm not."

The leader of the Liberal Democrat opposition, Councillor Brian Hoare (Lib Dem, Abington), also attacked the Conservative leadership. He said: "This was a bungled process awarding a contract without proper preparation or safeguards in place. The oversight of the process by key councillors is a scandal."

n The full text of Councillor Harker's letter will be in tomorrow's Chron.

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Last Updated: 20 April 2009 8:23 AM

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