

# SOLICITORS DISCIPLINARY TRIBUNAL

IN THE MATTER OF THE SOLICITORS ACT 1974

Case No. 12643-2024

**BETWEEN:**

SOLICITORS REGULATION AUTHORITY LTD

Applicant

And

MATTHEW HOWELLS

Respondent

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Before:

Mr R Nicholas (in the chair)

Mrs C Evans

Mr B Walsh

Date of Hearing: 27 February 2025

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**Appearances**

There were no appearances as the matter was dealt with on the papers.

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**JUDGMENT ON AN AGREED OUTCOME**

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## **Allegations**

1. The allegation against Mr Howells made by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (“SRA”) was that while in practice as a solicitor:
  - 1.1 Between 31 March 2022 and 8 July 2022, he pursued a course of conduct which amounted to the stalking of Person A and which he knew or ought to have known amounted to the harassment of her in that he repeatedly made contact and sent her unsolicited items contrary to Section 2A(1) and (4) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and in doing so, he breached either or both of Principles 2 and 5 of the SRA Principles 2019 (the Principles).
2. The Applicant relied upon Mr Howells’ conviction on his own admission at the Wimbledon Magistrates’ Court on 30 March 2023, the Pre-Sentence Report, and the Orders for the offence described at Paragraph 1.1 above, as evidence that Mr Howells was guilty of that offence and relied upon the findings of fact upon which that conviction was based as proof of those facts.
3. For the avoidance of doubt, the Applicant did not seek to prove that Mr Howells had further contact with Person A after his arrest on 23 June 2022 as no evidence was provided in this regard
4. Mr Howells admits the allegation on the basis of conduct which occurred up to 23 June 2022

## **Documents**

5. The Tribunal had before it the following documents:-
  - Rule 12 Statement and Exhibit AHJW1 dated 11 July 2024
  - Answer and Exhibits dated 23 August 2024
  - Applicant’s Reply to the Respondent’s Answer dated 4 September 2024
  - Statement of Agreed Facts and Proposed Outcome filed and served on 26 February 2025

## **Background**

6. Mr Howells was born in 1991 and was admitted to the Roll of Solicitors in March 2018. He held a current unconditional Practising Certificate.
7. On 21 December 2022, Mr Howells was charged with an offence under Section 2A(1) and (4) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. On 16 March 2023, following his guilty plea, Mr Howells was convicted of that offence.
8. On 30 March 2023, Mr Howells was sentenced by Wimbledon Magistrates’ Court as follows:
  - A 12-month Community Order with a Rehabilitation Activity Requirement of 10 days
  - Victim Surcharge in the sum of £85

- Compensation to the victim in the sum of £500
- Prosecution Costs in the sum of £144
- A Restraining Order for a period of 2 years, prohibiting him from contacting the victim directly or indirectly or attending her home address

### **Application for the matter to be resolved by way of Agreed Outcome**

9. The parties invited the Tribunal to deal with the Allegations against the Respondent in accordance with the Statement of Agreed Facts and Proposed Outcome annexed to this Judgment. The parties submitted that the outcome proposed was consistent with the Tribunal's Guidance Note on Sanctions.

### **Findings of Fact and Law**

10. The Applicant was required to prove the allegations on the balance of probabilities. The Tribunal had due regard to its statutory duty, under Section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, to act in a manner which was compatible with Mr Howells' rights to a fair trial and to respect for their private and family life under Articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.
11. The Tribunal reviewed all the material before it and was satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the Respondent's admissions were properly made.
12. The Tribunal considered the Guidance Note on Sanction (11<sup>th</sup> edition – February 2025). In doing so the Tribunal assessed the culpability and harm identified together with the aggravating and mitigating factors that existed. The Tribunal noted the sentence imposed by the Magistrates' Court, in particular the imposition of a low-level community penalty. Mr Howells conduct had been planned and had continued over a period of time. His conduct, as admitted by him, was in material breach of his obligation to protect the public and the reputation of the profession. He was solely responsible for the circumstances of his misconduct and his culpability was high. The Tribunal determined that given the serious nature of his misconduct, sanction such as No Order, a Reprimand and a Financial Penalty were not proportionate.
13. The Tribunal determined that there was a need to protect the public and the reputation of the profession from future harm but that such protection did not necessitate Mr Howells being indefinitely suspended from practise or being struck off the Roll. The Tribunal considered that a fixed suspension for a period of 6 months was appropriate and proportionate to Mr Howells misconduct and also provided the requisite level of protection for the public and the repute of the profession. Accordingly, the Tribunal approved the sanction proposed by the parties,

### **Costs**

14. The parties agreed costs in the sum of £2,096.00. The Tribunal determined that the agreed amount was reasonable and accordingly ordered Mr Howells to pay costs in that sum.
15. Accordingly, the Tribunal approved the application for the matter to be dealt with by way of an Agreed Outcome.

**Statement of Full Order**

16. The Tribunal ORDERED that the Respondent, MATTHEW HOWELLS solicitor, be SUSPENDED from practice as a solicitor for the period of six months to commence on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of February 2025 and it further Ordered that he do pay the costs of and incidental to this application and enquiry fixed in the sum of £2,096.00.

Dated this 6<sup>th</sup> day of March 2025  
On behalf of the Tribunal

*R. Nicholas*

Mr R. Nicholas  
Chair

**JUDGMENT FILED WITH THE LAW SOCIETY**  
**6 MARCH 2025**

Case No: 12643-2024

**BEFORE THE SOLICITORS DISCIPLINARY TRIBUNAL**

**IN THE MATTER OF THE SOLICITORS ACT 1974 (as amended)**

**AND IN THE MATTER OF:**

**SOLICITORS REGULATION AUTHORITY LIMITED**

Applicant

and

**MATTHEW HOWELLS**

Respondent

**STATEMENT OF AGREED FACTS AND PROPOSED OUTCOME**

1. By its application dated 11 July 2024, and the statement made pursuant to Rule 12(2) of the Solicitors (Disciplinary Proceedings) Rules 2019 which accompanied that application, the Solicitors Regulation Authority (“the SRA”) brought proceedings before the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal making an allegation of misconduct against Mr Matthew Howells.
2. The allegation against Mr Howells made by the SRA within that statement was that:

**Allegation 1.1**

- 1.1 Between 31 March 2022 and 8 July 2022, he pursued a course of conduct which amounted to the stalking of Person A and which he knew or ought to have known amounted to the harassment of her in that he repeatedly made contact and sent her unsolicited items.

contrary to section 2A(1) and (4) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and in doing so, he breached either or both of Principles 2 and 5 of the SRA Principles 2019 (the Principles).

3. The SRA relies upon Mr Howells' conviction on his own admission at the Wimbledon Magistrates' Court on 30 March 2023, the Pre-Sentence Report, and the Orders at pages 64 to 65, 66, 67 to 69 of Exhibit AHJW1 for the offence described at Paragraph 1.1 above, as evidence that Mr Howells was guilty of that offence and relies upon the findings of fact upon which that conviction was based as proof of those facts.
4. For the avoidance of doubt, the SRA did not seek to prove that Mr Howells had further contact with Person A after his arrest on 23 June 2022 as no evidence was provided in this regard

### **Admission**

5. Mr Howells admits the allegation on the basis of conduct which occurred up to 23 June 2022.

### **Agreed Facts**

6. Mr Howells, who was born                      June 1991, is a solicitor having been admitted to the Roll on 15 March 2018.
7. At the material time, he was a solicitor at Cooley (UK) LLP, a recognised body whose head office is at 22 Bishopsgate, London, EC2N 4BQ (the Firm). Mr Howells left the Firm on 27 April 2023.
8. Mr Howells holds a current practising certificate free from conditions.
9. On 21 December 2022, Mr Howells was charged with the following offence:

*Stalking without fear/alarm/ distress*

*Between 31/03/2022 and 08/07/2022 at a location within the jurisdiction of the Central Criminal Court in the Borough of Wandsworth, he pursued a course of conduct without amounted to the stalking of Person A and which he knew or ought to have known amounted to the harassment of her in that he repeatedly followed, made contact and sent unsolicited items.*

*Contrary to Section 2A(1) and (4) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.*

10. The Protection from Harassment Act is an act that provides protection from harassment and similar conduct.
11. On 14 February 2023, Mr Howells' employer at the time reported the charge to the SRA.
12. Mr Howells submitted a 'Written Basis of Plea' in which he pleaded guilty to the offence but not the entirety of the facts laid out in the offence charge, and he did not plead guilty to any harassing behaviour beyond the date of arrest. The plea was accepted by the Court on 16 March 2023, and Mr Howells was convicted of that offence.
13. On 30 March 2023, at the Wimbledon Magistrates' Court, Mr Howells was sentenced to undertake a 12-month Community Order, with a Rehabilitation Activity Requirement of 10 days.
14. Mr Howells was also ordered to:
  - (i) Pay the victim surcharge in the sum of £85 and Prosecution costs in the sum of £144;
  - (ii) Pay the victim compensation in the sum of £500;
  - (iii) Be made subject to a Restraining Order for a period of two years, prohibiting him from contacting the victim directly or indirectly or attending her home address.
15. The conduct in this matter came to the attention of the SRA on 14 February 2023 following receipt of a report from the Firm explaining that Mr Howells had been charged with the offence noted at Paragraph 9, above.

16. The SRA was notified that Mr Howells had been arrested on 22 June 2022, with the police stating that they had received a complaint of "stalking" from Person A. It was alleged, and later accepted, that Mr Howells had made unwanted contact with Person A on numerous occasions and sent her unsolicited items on one occasion. This included leaving a chocolate Easter Egg, Easter card, bouquet of flowers and a packet of Haribo Tangfastics outside of Person A's door on 15 April 2022.
17. The events leading up to Mr Howells' conviction are summarised in the Pre-Sentence Report of Cleopatra Jones, Probation Officer, dated 20 March 2023. The impact of the events were claimed to have caused distress to Person A, however as there was a lack of evidence to support this allegation, Mr Howells was charged and pleaded guilty to an offence that explicitly excluded any element of fear, alarm, or distress.
18. On 31 January 2023, a hearing took place at South West London Magistrates' Court at which the case was adjourned until 7 March 2023 for Mr Howells to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty. The Court granted bail, with the condition that Mr Howells must not contact Person A.
19. Prior to the hearing on 7 March 2023, Mr Howells submitted a 'Written Basis of Plea,' in which he pleaded guilty of the offence but disputed a number of the allegations made against him.
20. In the Written Basis of Plea, Mr Howells made admissions that:
  - (i) Between 31 March 2022 and 18 April 2022, he contacted or attempted to contact Person A, some of this contact was necessary however, the contact was unwanted. Whilst there was no intention to harass her, he accepted that he did.
  - (ii) He saw Person A on the tube and later visited her address. He accepted that she told him the relationship was over and that he should stop contacting her.
  - (iii) He agreed with all that Person A said after 11 May 2022 because he realised that he had lost her for good. He accepted that he had used a dating app to



have contact with her. However, he did not accept that he visited her house at the beginning of May 2022 or contacted her after his arrest on 23 June 2022.

21. At a hearing on 7 March 2023, the Crown Prosecution Service stated that it needed time to review the Written Basis of Plea and confirm whether it accepted the fact pattern submitted by Mr Howells in the plea. Subsequently, the hearing was adjourned. Mr Howells was sentenced on 30 March 2023.

### **The SRA's investigation**

22. The SRA took the following steps to investigate the allegations.

23. On 6 February 2024, the SRA sent a Notice recommending referral to the Tribunal to Mr Howells' legal representatives at the time.

24. Mr Howells' legal representatives responded on behalf of their client on 12 March 2024, which referred to a letter to the SRA, dated 30 May 2023, containing Mr Howells' full response to the allegations. In that letter, Mr Howells accepted that, although it was not his intention, he harassed Person A, and his irrational conduct was a consequence of the very high levels of anxiety he had been suffering from that had worsened because of the relationship breakdown.

25. The SRA responded on 15 April 2024.

26. On 9 May 2024, an Authorised Officer of the SRA decided to refer Mr Howells' conduct to the Tribunal.

### **Mitigation**

27. The following mitigation, which is not endorsed by the SRA, is put forward by Mr Howells (paragraphs 28-37 inclusive):

28. Mr Howells fully acknowledges that his actions fell short of the standards expected of a solicitor and deeply regrets the impact of his behaviour. Mr Howells takes full responsibility for his conduct and understands the importance of upholding public trust in the legal profession. Mr Howells acknowledges that this experience has

been a significant period of reflection, and Mr Howells is committed to ensuring that such conduct is never repeated.

29. While the offence was classified under Section 2(a) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, it is important to note that the conduct did not involve harm, fear, or distress. The Magistrates' Court explicitly remarked that Mr Howells' actions were at the very low end of the seriousness spectrum, and as a result, imposed the lowest possible sanction available within sentencing guidelines. The proven behaviours underpinning Mr Howells' conviction involved phone calls, emails, and the leaving of pre-purchased gifts, which, while inappropriate, did not involve threats, intimidation, or physical harm and such actions were only ever intended as gestures of goodwill in a bid for forgiveness and reconciliation of the relationship between Mr Howells and Person A.
30. The sentencing court considered these factors carefully and issued an ultra-low-level sentence, which was noted by both the court and Mr Howells' legal representatives as being unusually lenient for an offence under this section.
31. Mr Howells accepts that, as a solicitor, his personal actions can have a wider impact on public confidence in the profession. However, there are a number of strong mitigating factors that Mr Howells respectfully asks the SDT to consider:
  - First-time offence: Mr Howells has no previous disciplinary history, and Mr Howells' professional record prior to this incident has been exemplary.
  - Early admission and cooperation: Mr Howells pleaded guilty at the earliest opportunity and fully cooperated with both the criminal and regulatory investigations.
  - Absence of dishonesty: This was a personal matter with no dishonesty, financial gain, or professional misconduct.
  - Mental health impact: At the time of the offence, Mr Howells was struggling with significant personal difficulties and very high levels of anxiety .
  - Steps taken to rehabilitate: Since April 2022, Mr Howells has engaged in regular therapy to address his mental health challenges and develop stronger emotional resilience.

- Unique circumstances: The offence arose from a distressing personal situation that is now fully resolved. The factors that contributed to Mr Howells' conduct no longer exist.
  - Significant personal and professional consequences: Mr Howells has already faced serious repercussions, including the loss of his home, career opportunities, and professional reputation.
  - Commitment to reform: Mr Howells has used this experience as a learning opportunity and remains committed to rebuilding his career with integrity.
32. Since this incident, Mr Howells has actively sought to improve his emotional regulation, self-awareness, and ability to handle personal challenges constructively. Mr Howells' participation in therapy and continued professional development demonstrates a genuine commitment to self-improvement and ethical practice. Mr Howells has taken time to reflect on his decision-making and has implemented practical strategies to prevent any recurrence of such behaviour.
33. The Magistrates' Court recognised that this was an isolated incident that did not warrant a custodial or community-based punitive sanction beyond a short rehabilitation order. Mr Howells fully appreciates the impact his actions have had on his personal and professional standing, and Mr Howells is committed to ensuring that he conducts himself in a manner that upholds the integrity of the legal profession moving forward.
34. Mr Howells acknowledge that his actions, even though arising from personal circumstances, have had professional consequences. However, Mr Howells has taken extensive steps to ensure that he never finds himself in such a situation again. Mr Howells has developed better coping mechanisms, maintained his engagement with therapy, and built a stronger support network. As a result, Mr Howells is confident that there is no risk of repetition.
35. The impact of this matter has been severe and lasting for Mr Howells. Mr Howells has already lost his home, his job, and his financial stability. Mr Howells has also suffered significant reputational damage, both personally and professionally, which will take time to recover from. Despite these setbacks, Mr Howells has worked hard to maintain his connection to the profession, staying engaged with legal developments, attending professional events, and continuing to develop his skills.

36. Despite the challenges Mr Howells has faced, Mr Howells remains deeply committed to the legal profession. Mr Howells has spent his career working diligently to uphold the highest standards of professionalism and integrity, and intends to continue doing so. During Mr Howells' suspension period, Mr Howells will focus on further legal education, professional development, and ethical training to ensure that he returns to practice as a better and more responsible solicitor.
37. This experience has reinforced Mr Howells' understanding of the responsibilities that come with being a solicitor, and Mr Howells is determined to use it as a catalyst for personal and professional growth. Mr Howells appreciate the SDT's consideration of these factors in assessing the proportionality of the agreed sanction, and Mr Howells looks forward to the opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to the legal profession upon his return.

**Sanction proposed**

38. Taking account of the admitted misconduct and having considered the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal's Guidance Notes on Sanction – 11<sup>th</sup> Edition, the SRA contends, and Mr Howells accepts, that the proper penalty in this case is for him to be suspended from practice for 6 months from the date of the Tribunal's Order.
39. With respect to costs, it is further agreed by Mr Howells that he should pay the SRA's costs of the enquiry and application fixed in the sum of £2,096.00.

**Explanation as to why such an order would be in accordance with the Tribunal's sanctions guidance.**

40. In the circumstances, the seriousness of Mr Howells' admitted misconduct is such that neither a Restriction Order, Reprimand nor a Fine is a sufficient sanction or, in all the circumstances, appropriate. There is a need to protect the public and the reputation of the legal profession from the future risk of Mr Howells but neither an indefinite suspension nor a Strike off Order is justified. A suspension from practice for a period of 6 months is the appropriate sanction to protect the public, and proportionate to the seriousness of the admitted misconduct.
41. The SRA deem Mr Howells' level of culpability as high.

42. The principal factors that aggravate the seriousness of Mr Howells' misconduct are:

42.1 The misconduct was intentional There is evidence of planning and prior intent as Mr Howells had to buy the items he left for Person A in advance.

42.2 The misconduct continued over a period of time and involved Mr Howells repeatedly making unwanted contact with Person A, despite warnings to stop.

42.3 The SRA deem the misconduct caused harm and distress to Person A.

42.4 Mr Howells was convicted by his own Written Plea to what the SRA deems a serious criminal offence. Mr Howells knew or ought to have known that the misconduct complained of was in material breach of obligations to protect the public and reputation of the legal profession.

43. The appropriate sanction is suspension from practice for a period of 6 months commencing from the date of the order. Mr Howells' conduct involves breaches of the SRA Principles including integrity. The sanction is proportionate to the totality of the admitted act of misconduct.

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**Alastair Henry John Willcox, Case Manager, on behalf of the SRA**

MATTHEW HOWELLS (signed electronically).....

**Matthew Howells**