

SOLICITORS DISCIPLINARY TRIBUNAL

IN THE MATTER OF THE SOLICITORS ACT 1974

Case No. 12706-2024

BETWEEN:

SOLICITORS REGULATION AUTHORITY LTD.

Applicant

and

STUART COTTIS

Respondent

Before:

Mr E Nally (in the Chair)

Mr J Johnston

Dr S Bown

Date of Hearing: 26 June 2025

Appearances

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

JUDGMENT ON AGREED OUTCOME

Reporting restrictions apply

The reporting restrictions apply by virtue of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 whereby the provisions of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 apply to the allegations referenced in both the Rule 12 and Rule 14 Statements. Under those provisions, where a sexual offence has been committed against a person, no matter relating to that person shall, during their lifetime, be included in any publication if it is likely to lead members of the public to identify that person as the victim of that offence. This prohibition applies unless waived or lifted in accordance with s.3 of the Act.

Allegations

1. The allegations against the Respondent set out in the Rule 12 Statement are that whilst in practice as a Solicitor he:

- “2.1 Attempted sexual communication with a child. Between 3 February 2023 and 23 February 2023, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally attempted to communicate with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, contrary to section 1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981.
- 2.2 Attempted sexual communication with a child. Between 30 January 2023 and 24 February 2023, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally attempted to communicate with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, contrary to section 1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981.
- 2.3 Sexual communication with a child. On 21 June 2021, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally communicated with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, contrary to section 15A(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- 2.4 Arranged or facilitated the commission of a child sex offence. Between 3 February 2023 and 21 February 2023, intentionally arranged or facilitated the doing of an act, which he intended to do, and the doing of which would involve the commission of an offence of sexual activity with a child contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, namely the penetration of his mouth with the penis of a child between the ages of 13 and 16, contrary to section 14(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
- 2.5 Arranged or facilitated the commission of a child sex offence. Between 30 January 2023 and 24 February 2023, intentionally arranged or facilitated the doing of an act, which he intended to do, and the doing of which would involve the commission of an offence of sexual activity with a child, contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, namely the touching of a child's penis, child being between the ages of 13 and 16, contrary to section 14(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

and in so doing, the Respondent breached any or all of Principles 2 and/or 5 of the SRA Principles 2019 ('the Principles').”

2. The second set of allegations, detailed in a Rule 14 statement, included:
 - “3.1 Intentionally touching a child aged between 9 and 10 years old, with the touching being sexual, between January 1, 2019, and January 3, 2021, contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.
 - 3.2 Intentionally communicating sexually with a person under 16, for sexual gratification, via phone images, between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2017, contrary to section 15A of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.”

These also allegedly breached Principles 2 and/or 5 of the SRA Principles 2019.”

ADMISSIONS

3. The Respondent admitted all the allegations against him.

Documents

4. The Tribunal had, amongst other things, the following documents before it:-
 - The Form of Application dated 25 November 2024. (Rule 12) and 8 May 2025 (Rule 14)
 - Rule 12 Statement dated 25 November 2024 and exhibits.
 - Rule 14 Statement dated 8 May 2025 and exhibits
 - Agreed Outcome submitted 18 June 2025

Background

5. The Respondent was admitted to the Roll of Solicitors on September 2, 2002. He was employed as an Associate at Ashurst LLP from July 2, 2012, to January 8, 2021, and later as a Senior Associate at Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP from May 10, 2022, until June 8, 2023. He remains on the Roll but does not have a current practising certificate.
6. The Applicant relied on the Respondent's guilty plea, his convictions on 23 June 2023 and 27 August 2024 for the offences, together with the Certificate of Convictions dated 10 November 2023 and 16 April 2025, as evidence that the Respondent was guilty of those offences and it relied upon the findings of fact upon which those convictions were based as proof of those facts.

Application for Leave

7. The parties lodged the application less than 28 days from the date of the Substantive Hearing and therefore required the leave of the Tribunal to submit the Agreed Outcome proposal.

8. The Agreed Outcome Proposal, dated 18 June 2025, was submitted late, less than 28 days before the substantive hearing scheduled for 27 June 2025. The delay was due to several factors:
9. The Respondent is unrepresented and incarcerated, making communication protracted and challenging for the parties.
10. On 17 October 2024, the Applicant learned that the Respondent had been convicted of additional offences. An investigation followed, leading to the issuance of a Rule 14 Statement on 8 May 2025. This statement's issuance was delayed because Southwark Crown Court did not provide a certified Certificate of Conviction until 16 April 2025. The Rule 14 was subsequently certified on 15 May 2025.
11. It took some time for the parties to agree on costs. Once costs were settled, the Agreed Outcome was drafted and sent for agreement and signature.
12. The Applicant and Respondent have apologised for the late submission, clarifying that no discourtesy to the Tribunal was intended. They believed the proposal offered a proportionate and reasonable outcome.
13. Given the circumstances relating to the ongoing negotiations, the proposal set out in the Agreed Outcome and the delay caused by problems beyond the parties' control Tribunal decided it was right to grant the parties leave.

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

14. The parties invited the Tribunal to deal with the Allegations against the Respondent in accordance with the Statement of Agreed Facts and 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

15. 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 the Respondent's rights to a fair trial and to respect for his private and family life under Articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.
16. The Tribunal reviewed all the material before it and was satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the Respondent's admissions were properly made.
17. The Tribunal considered the Guidance Note on Sanction (11th edition). In doing so the Tribunal assessed the culpability and harm identified together with the aggravating and mitigating factors that existed.
18. Within the sphere of regulatory and disciplinary conduct there could be no mitigation to minimise the harm. The seriousness of the misconduct was self-evident and no sanction less than a strike off would be sufficient to protect the public and the reputation of the profession.

Costs

19. The parties agreed that the Respondent should pay costs in the sum of £3,870. The Tribunal considered the Applicant's costs schedule and determined that the agreed amount was reasonable and appropriate. Accordingly, the Tribunal ordered that the Respondent pay costs in the agreed sum.

Statement of Full Order

20. The Tribunal ORDERS that the Respondent, STUART COTTIS, solicitor, be STRUCK OFF the Roll of Solicitors and it further Orders that he do pay the costs of and incidental to this application and enquiry fixed in the sum of £3,870.

Dated this 10th day of July 2025

On behalf of the Tribunal

E. Nally

E Nally
Chair

BEFORE THE SOLICITORS DISCIPLINARY TRIBUNAL

Case No: 12706-2024

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

AND IN THE MATTER OF:

SOLICITORS REGULATION AUTHORITY LIMITED

Applicant

and

STUART COTTIS

Respondent

STATEMENT OF AGREED FACTS AND PROPOSED OUTCOME

1. By its application dated 25 November 2024, and the statement made pursuant to Rule 12 (2) of the Solicitors (Disciplinary Proceedings) Rules 2019 which accompanied that application (the Rule 12 Statement), and a statement dated 8 May 2025 made pursuant to and 14 (2) of the Solicitors (Disciplinary Proceedings) Rules 2019 (the Rule 14 Statement), the Solicitors Regulation Authority Ltd ("the SRA") brought proceedings before the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal making two (each with sub-categories) allegations of misconduct against Mr Stuart Cottis.

The allegations

2. The allegations against Mr Cottis, made by the SRA within the Rule 12 statement were whilst in practice as a Solicitor he:
 - 2.1 Attempted sexual communication with a child. Between 3 February 2023 and 23 February 2023, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally attempted to communicate with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication

being sexual, contrary to section 1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 (Count 1);

2.2 Attempted sexual communication with a child. Between 30 January 2023 and 24 February 2023, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally attempted to communicate with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, contrary to section 1(1) of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 (Count 4);

2.3 Sexual communication with a child. On 21 June 2021, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally communicated with a person aged under 16, who he did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, contrary to section 15A(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Count 7);

2.4 Arranged or facilitated the commission of a child sex offence. Between 3 February 2023 and 21 February 2023, intentionally arranged or facilitated the doing of an act, which he intended to do, and the doing of which would involve the commission of an offence of sexual activity with a child contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, namely the penetration of his mouth with the penis of a child between the ages of 13 and 16, contrary to section 14(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Count 2);

2.5 Arranged or facilitated the commission of a child sex offence. Between 30 January 2023 and 24 February 2023, intentionally arranged or facilitated the doing of an act, which he intended to do, and the doing of which would involve the commission of an offence of sexual activity with a child, contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, namely the touching of a child's penis, child being between the ages of 13 and 16, contrary to section 14(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Count 5);

and in so doing, the Respondent breached any or all of Principles 2 and/or 5 of the SRA Principles 2019 ('the Principles').

3. The allegations against Mr Cottis, made by the SRA within the Rule 14 statement were that whilst in practice as a Solicitor he:

3.1 between the 1st January 2019 and 3rd January 2021, being a person aged 18 or over, intentionally touched [REDACTED], the touching was sexual, and [REDACTED] was aged under 13 years, that is between 9 and 10 years old. [Becoming sexually aroused when [REDACTED] was sitting on his lap], contrary to section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (count 3),

3.2 between the 1st January 2017 and the 31st December 2017, at CCC, being a person aged 18 or over, for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, intentionally communicated with [REDACTED], a person under 16 who you did not reasonably believe to be 16 or over, the communication being sexual, namely phone images contrary to section 15A of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (count 5).

and in so doing, the Respondent breached any or all of Principles 2 and/or 5 of the SRA Principles 2019 ('the Principles').

Admissions

4. Mr Cottis admits the allegations against him as set out in paragraphs 2 and 3 above.

Agreed Facts

5. The following facts and matters are agreed between the SRA and Mr Cottis:

Professional Details

5.1 The Respondent is a Solicitor having been admitted to the Roll on 2 September 2002. The Respondent's SRA ID is 273884.

5.2 During the period the offences took place, the Respondent was employed as an Associate at Ashurst LLP from 2 July 2012 to 8 January 2021. He was unemployed until he was appointed as a Senior Associate at Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP from 10 May 2022 until 8 June 2023.

5.3 The Respondent remains on the Roll of Solicitors but does not have a current practising certificate. The Respondent's last practising certificate was for the period 2021 to 2022, which was free from conditions.

- 5.4 The Applicant relies on the Respondent's guilty plea, his convictions on 23 June 2023 and 27 August 2024 for the abovementioned offences, together with the Certificate of Convictions dated 10 November 2023 and 16 April 2025, as evidence that the Respondent was guilty of those offences and relies upon the findings of fact upon which those convictions were based as proof of those facts.

Rule 12 Statement

- 5.5 On 1 June 2023 the COLP at Ashurst LLP informed the SRA that the Respondent had been remanded in custody at Wandsworth prison in relation to child sex offences. The SRA received a similar report from in-house counsel at Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP on 12 June 2023.
- 5.6 Following the Respondent's arrest, a forensic examination of his devices revealed evidence of his communication with three boys who were the subject of the Indictment. Her Honour Judge (HHJ) Hales KC commented:

'Your communication with all three boys was highly sexualised from the outset and undoubtedly for the purpose of your sexual gratification. Their age (or apparent age) was no deterrent, indeed if anything it appears to have added to their attraction for you. You referred to them being at school and being in school uniform. You made repeated requests for them to meet you to engage in sexual activity. You solicited photographs from them and supplied photographs of yourself. In respect of █████ who said he only did 'cash meets' you indicated a willingness to pay and did pay to receive at least one sexual image. With █████ you discussed whether he would consider a threesome with another adult. Having a threesome with an underage boy, possibly as young as 12, was something you discussed with an adult male called █████ with whom you also shared images.'

- 5.7 The Respondent attended trial at the Crown Court at Southwark on 23 June 2023 and pleaded guilty to the charges set out at paragraph 2.1 to 2.5. The matter was subsequently adjourned for sentence before the same Court on 10 November 2023.

- 5.8 On 10 November 2023, the Respondent was sentenced to 36 months imprisonment. HHJ Hales KC sentenced the Respondent as follows:

'You have committed serious offences which can only properly be dealt with by way of an immediate custodial sentence. I impose the least possible sentence that I can having regard to the gravity of your offending and all the matters raised on your behalf in mitigation. Were it not for your pleas of guilty the appropriate total sentence would be 4 ½ years.'

Count 1 – 6 months [pertains to allegation 2.1]

Count 2 – 36 months [pertains to allegation 2.4]

Count 4 – 6 months [pertains to allegation 2.2]

Count 5 – 12 months [pertains to allegation 2.5]

Count 7 – 6 months [pertains to allegation 2.3]

All concurrent making a total of 36 months.'

- 5.9 The Respondent was also made subject to a Sexual Harm Prevention Order for a term of 11 years along with notification requirements. A Notice of Inclusion in the Children's Barred List and the Adult's Barred List for an indefinite period was also issued.

Rule 14 Statement

- 5.10 On 17 October 2024 the Chief Legal Officer at Ashurst LLP sent an email to the SRA which contained a link to an article detailing the Respondent's conviction and sentencing for two further offences detailed at 3.1 and 3.2 above.

- 5.11 The Respondent attended trial at the Crown Court at Southwark on 27 August 2024 and pleaded guilty to the allegations set out at paragraph 3.1 and 3.2. The matter was subsequently adjourned for sentence before the same Court on 1 October 2024.

- 5.12 On 1 October 2024, the Respondent was sentenced to 11 months imprisonment. This was in addition to the sentence imposed by HHJ Hales KC on 11 November 2023 for the allegations referenced above at paragraphs 2.1 to 2.5. HHJ Hales KC sentenced the Respondent as follows:

'You have committed serious offences which can only properly be dealt with by way of an immediate custodial sentence. I impose the least possible sentence that I can having regard to your overall offending, all matters raised on your behalf in mitigation, delay, prison conditions, credit and a further reduction on Count 5 for reasons of totality.

Count 3 – 8 months [pertains to allegation 3.1]

Count 5 – 2 months [pertains to allegation 3.2]

Total 10 months consecutive to the sentence currently being served (if still being served).

5.13 On 8 August 2024, a Notice recommending referral to the Tribunal was sent to the Respondent. No Representations were received from the Respondent.

5.14 On 23 September 2024, an Authorised Decision Maker at the SRA decided to refer the Respondent's conduct to the Tribunal.

5.15 The investigation officer drafted a Notice for the Authorised Decision Maker. Given the Respondent had pleaded guilty and was convicted of offences similar to those set out in the Rule 12 Statement, the giving of Notice was dispensed with in accordance with Rule 2.5(1) of the SRA Regulatory and Disciplinary Procedures Rules, which states:

The SRA may dispense with the giving of notice under rule 2.3 or 2.4 where:

- 1. it intends to include a further allegation in a matter already subject to an application or ongoing proceedings before the Tribunal;*
- 2. it intends to make an application to the Tribunal in a case in which it is exercising its powers of intervention as a matter of urgency; or*
- 3. it is otherwise in the public interest to do so.*

5.15 On 19 March 2025, an Authorised Decision Maker at the SRA decided to refer the Respondent's conduct set out in the Rule 14 statement to the Tribunal, to be added into the existing proceedings.

Non-Agreed Mitigation

6. The following mitigation in respect of the Respondent was referred to by HHJ Hales KC in her sentencing remarks, but is not endorsed by the SRA:

6.1 The Respondent had no previous convictions, was of previous good character and has shown remorse.

6.2 HHJ Hales KC recognised the Respondent had lost his good name, the high regard that others held him in and his profession.

6.3 HHJ Hales KC also noted that the Respondent had "*battled for many years with his mental health, suffering from depression that at times has rendered you [the Respondent] suicidal*". Lockdown saw a "*marked deterioration*" of his mental health when "*he was out of work, isolated and lonely, and drinking too much*". It was during that period the Respondent "*sought and found distraction on social media and the sexual contact with young boys commenced.*"

Proposed Sanction

7. Having considered the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal's Guidance Note on Sanctions (11th Edition), the SRA contends, and the Respondent accepts, that in light of the seriousness of the allegations against him, namely criminal conviction for serious sexual offences which demonstrates a lack of integrity, the proper penalty in this case is that the Respondent is struck off the Roll of Solicitors.

Costs

8. The Respondent agrees to pay the SRA costs of the application in the sum of £3,870.

Dated this 18th day of June 2025

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Head of Legal & Enforcement upon behalf of the SRA

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Mr Stuart Cottis, Respondent