

Pecyn Dogfennau Cyhoeddus

Pwyllgor Safonau

Man Cyfarfod
By Zoom

Dyddiad y Cyfarfod
Dydd Mercher, 23 Mehefin 2021

Amser y Cyfarfod
2.00 pm

I gael rhagor o wybodaeth cysylltwch â
Carol Johnson
01597 826206
carol.johnson@powys.gov.uk



Neuadd Y Sir
Llandrindod
Powys
LD1 5LG

Dyddiad Cyhoeddi

Mae croeso i'r rhai sy'n cymryd rhan ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg. Os hoffech chi siarad Cymraeg yn y cyfarfod, gofynnwn i chi roi gwybod i ni erbyn hanner dydd ddau ddiwrnod cyn y cyfarfod

AGENDA

1.	YMDDIHEURIADAU
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Derbyn ymddiheuriadau am absenoldeb.

2.	COFNODION
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Awdurdodi'r Cadeirydd i lofnodi cofnodion cyfarfod blaenorol y Pwyllgor a gynhaliwyd ar 20 Chwefror 2020 fel cofnod cywir.

(Tudalennau 1 - 4)

3.	DATGANIADAU O FUDD
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Derbyn unrhyw ddatganiadau o fudd gan Aelodau mewn perthynas ag eitemau i'w trafod ar yr agenda.

4.	ADRODDIAD PENNAETH GWASANAETHAU CYFREITHIOL A DEMOCRATAIDD.
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Derbyn adroddiad Pennaeth Gwasanaethau Cyfreithiol a Democrataidd.

(Tudalennau 5 - 30)

Mae'r dudalen hon wedi'i gadael yn wag yn fwriadol

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE HELD AT
COMMITTEE ROOM A - COUNTY HALL, LLANDRINDOD WELLS, POWYS ON
WEDNESDAY, 12 FEBRUARY 2020**

PRESENT: Mr S Hays (Chair)

Independent Members: Mrs C Jackson, Mrs C Moore, Mrs J Evans and
Mrs C Mulholland

County Councillors: I McIntosh, S McNicholas, K M Roberts-Jones and K S Silk

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

2. MINUTES

The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the meeting held on 2 October, 2019 as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were received.

4. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

The Committee received the report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (copy filed with signed minutes).

A. General Standards Issues for County Councillors and Co-opted Members

A1. Code of Conduct Training

The Committee noted that the mid-term mandatory Code of Conduct training had been scheduled for 5 June, 2020.

A2. Mandatory Training

The Committee noted that all Members had completed the mandatory training as required at the previous meeting. The Committee thanked the members for completing the training.

B. Referral of Councillors to the Public Services Ombudsman

B1. County Council Referrals

The current position regarding matters with the Ombudsman is detailed below:

01/CC/2018 Adjudication Panel for Wales [APW] suspended for four months – 20/11/19 – 20/03/20. The Committee received the APW report.

- 12/CC/2018 Concluded no breach. Review requested – No further action and case closed
- 04/CC/2019 Ombudsman deciding whether or not to investigate
- 05/CC/2019 Not investigating
- 06/CC/2019 Ombudsman deciding whether or not to investigate
- 07/CC/2019 Concluded not investigating

C. Dispensations

C1. Applications - County Councillors

No applications for dispensation had been received from County Councillors.

D. Late Payment of Expenses

The Committee noted there were no late claims for expenses.

E. Independent lay Member on Standards Committee

The Committee noted the appointments process.

RESOLVED THAT	Reason for decision
<p>the Appointments Panel would consist of: Independent Members – Stephan Hays and Claire Moore County Council representative – County Councillor Kath Roberts-Jones or County Councillor Iain McIntosh, depending on their availability.</p>	<p>To enable the appointments process to continue.</p>

F. Ombudsman's Casebook

The Ombudsman had published the April – June 2019 and July – September 2019 Code of Conduct Casebooks.

G. The North Wales Standards Committee Forum

The Committee asked that the draft Local Government & Elections [Wales] Bill be considered. The Committee was asked to forward any other items to the Chair by the end of the week, for consideration.

H. Draft Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill

The Committee noted the draft Bill and the implications for the Committee. In response to questions the Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that the provisional timetable was that the Bill would be passed in the autumn and become effective in April 2021.

The Committee considered that it could write an annual report, even before the Bill came into law. Comment was made that not all councillors

understood the role of the Standards Committee. It was noted that the Committee's agendas and minutes were available to all councillors but an annual report could provide a useful summary of its work. It was suggested that a work programme could be developed for the Committee.

It was noted that leaders of political groups may be required to take steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members of their groups. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised that the Committee would need to ensure that group leaders could access advice and training to understand any new duty. In response to questions he advised that if issues regarding conduct were brought to the Standards Committee, it would consider what actions a group leader had taken to promote good conduct. It was suggested that the Standards Committee could have annual meetings with Group Leaders to develop engagement.

I. Correspondence

The Committee noted the letter and Practice Direction - APW/PD/01/2020 published by the President of the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

J. Meeting dates

The dates of future meetings were noted:
Wednesday 10 June 2020
Wednesday 7 October 2020

Mr S Hays (Chair)

Mae'r dudalen hon wedi'i gadael yn wag yn fwriadol

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

Standards Committee
23 June, 2021

REPORT BY: Head of Legal and Democratic Services

SUBJECT: Standards Issues

REPORT FOR: Decision, Information and Discussion

A. General Standards Issues for County Councillors and Co-opted Members**A1 Code of Conduct Training**

Mid-term mandatory Code of Conduct training was arranged for 5 June, 2020. However, due to the pandemic and the Council concentrating on business critical work, the session was cancelled.

A session was provided via Teams on 2 December, 2020 by Bethan Evans, Governance Training and Consultancy. The training was attended by Councillors, Independent Members of Standards Committee and Town and Community Council members of the Standards Community Sub-Committee and Independent Members on Scrutiny Committees. The session was recorded and was forwarded to the 16 Councillors who were unable to attend the session. One councillor is still required to complete this training.

B. Members attendance

Attendance for Members at main Committees for the period 14 May 2020 to 12 May 2021 has been calculated. No Councillors have attendance below 60%.

C. Referral of Councillors to Public Services Ombudsman**C1. County Councillor Referrals**

The current position regarding matters with the Ombudsman is as follows:

04/CC/2019	Ombudsman deciding whether or not to investigate
05/CC/2019	Not investigating
06/CC/2019	Concluded not investigating
08/CC/2019	Not investigating
09/CC/2019	Not investigating
10/CC/2019	Not investigating
11/CC/2019	Not investigating
01/CC/2020	Not investigating

02/CC/2020 Ombudsman investigating
03/CC/2020 Not investigating
04/CC/2020 Not investigating
05/CC/2020 Not investigating
06/CC/2020 Not investigating

D. Dispensations

D1 Applications - County Councillors

An application for dispensation has been received from County Councillor Elwyn Vaughan on 4 March 2021 as follows:

“I would ask that the Standards Committee consider my request for special dispensation for all Cllrs who are farmers, or those closely related to the agricultural sector, to enable them to partake in any discussion surrounding my motion regarding wool.

The motion places emphasis on facilitating innovation, adding value and creating new enterprises using Welsh wool as done in New Zealand. Hence, whilst the overall aim is to boost the market and utilisation for wool, it does not directly relate or benefit any individual farmer and no direct link could be placed between the potential effects of this motion and the overall price of wool for any individual farmer, bearing in mind that wool is a international commodity and sold at open online auctions.

Also, if someone claimed that personal gain could be derived as a result of this motion, then likewise the argument could be made that those other Cllrs who are consumers have a vested interest in keeping the price of wool down. That would mean that nobody could partake in the discussion.

Whilst considering this motion, i suggest that the same principle is taken into consideration with other similar farming related matters. Should similar motions on eg adding value to crops or food products, diversification or environmental changes such as Rewilding or alike come forward, unless individuals have a clear direct benefit as result of that motion then that dispensation is automatically given. It makes a mockery for those that have a understanding of such matters not to be able to partake in a discussion although it's clear they don't benefit directly.

Hence, I ask you to consider giving a dispensation for this motion and the wider treatment of similar motions in future in order to facilitate a mature and open discussion.”

E. Late Payment of Expenses

There are no late claims for expenses.

F. Independent lay Member on Standards Committee

An independent member vacancy still exists on the Committee. Interviews had been arranged for February 2020 but as a result of two members of the shortlisting/interview panel advising that they knew some applicants, the shortlisting meeting was postponed and was to be rescheduled. However, due to Covid 19 and the Council moving into business critical work, this has not taken place.

The Council agreed the recruitment process at its meeting on 23 January, 2020 and a copy of the report and process is attached Appendix 1. A new timetable for the shortlisting/interview process is being developed.

Applications will be considered by an Appointments Panel of five members:

- two of the current Independent (Lay) Members of the Standards Committee,
- one of the four county councillors sitting on the Standards Committee,
- one Town/Community Councillor sitting on the Standards Community Sub-Committee

and one lay person [High Sheriff] who will act as Chair.

The Standards Committee is requested to nominate Members of the Committee to sit on the Appointments Panel.

G. Ombudsman's Casebook

The Ombudsman has published Code of Conduct Casebooks for the following periods:

- October – December 2019
- January – December 2020

A copy of the Casebooks are attached at Appendix 2.

Back copies of the casebooks can be accessed from the website of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales at: [Casebooks](#)

H. The North Wales Standards Committee Forum

A meeting of the above is being held on 24 June, 2021. The main topic for discussion is the review of the Ethical Framework [including the code of conduct] which has been commissioned by the Welsh Government. Information regarding the review is attached at Appendix 3.

I. Standards Conference Wales

The Wales Standards Conference did not take place in October in 2020 due to the pandemic and will hopefully now take place in October 2021. Further details will be provided as soon as they are available.

J. Monitoring of Complaints handling

The Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 requires that in future the Council's Governance and Audit Committee must review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively and to make reports and recommendations in relation to the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively. This was a function that the Standards Committee undertook but can no-longer undertake due to the 2021 Act.

The Council's Constitution was amended by full Council on 30th April 2021 to reflect the requirements of the 2021 Act.

K. Correspondence - None

L. Meeting dates

To note the next meeting:
Wednesday 13 October 2021 – 1400hrs

Contact Officer Name:	Tel:	Fax:	Email:
Clive Pinney – Head of Legal & Democratic Services	01597 826746	01597 826220	clive.pinney@powys.gov.uk

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

County Council – 23 January 2020

Arrangements to fill one vacancy arising from the completion of a term of office of an Independent (Lay) Member on the Standards Committee**1. Forthcoming Vacancy on the Standards Committee.**

- 1.1 The term of office of an Independent Member of the Standards Committee, Mrs Claire Jackson, ends on 21 June, 2020. Mrs Jackson will have completed one term of six years and although she is eligible to be appointed for a further term of four years, she has advised that she does not wish to continue.
- 1.2 The County Council will therefore need to undertake an appointment process for a new Independent Member to replace Mrs Jackson in accordance with the Standards Committees (Wales) Regulations 2001 (as amended). The Regulations and the Constitution provide that Independent Members are appointed for not less than 4 years and not more than 6 years and the convention has been to appoint for a 6 year term. Approval is sought from the County Council for officers to commence the appointments process to ensure a new Independent Member can commence their appointment from 22 June 2020.
- 1.3 The starting point under the regulations is a requirement for the Council to publish an advertisement in not less than two newspapers (which are not published by the Council) circulating within Powys advising local government electors that the Council is seeking to appoint an independent (lay) member to its Standards Committee. Such advertisement may also, if the Council considers appropriate, notify electors:
 - (a) that the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the Standards Committee are elected from independent (lay) persons; and
 - (b) the qualities and experience that may be required of independent (lay) members serving on the Standards Committee.
- 1.4 Additionally the Council can also publish such advertisement in any newspaper that it publishes or online. It is intended to publish information on the Council's website.
- 1.5 A suggested draft newspaper advertisement based on the one used on the last occasion is attached as **Appendix A** which will appear in the County Times and the Brecon and Radnor Express. Other news releases will also be made referring to the information on the Council's website.
- 1.6 The Council is also required under the regulations to:
 - (a) Establish criteria for the appointment of independent members to its Standards Committee, and
 - (b) Publish those criteria in the newspaper advertisement referred to above.

- 1.7 A draft set of criteria (based on that used on the last occasion) is attached as **Appendix B** .
- 1.8 The regulations further stipulate that the Council must establish a Panel to:
- (a) Consider every application received;
 - (b) Apply the criteria established in considering applications;
 - (c) Make recommendations to the County Council in relation to applications.
- N.B.** Appointments of Independent (Lay) members must be made by the County Council which must have regard to the recommendations of the Panel.
- 1.9 The previous practice of such Panels has been to invite applicants to attend before the Panel for interview. There may also be need to consider a shortlisting stage in the event of there being a number of applicants.
- 1.10 The regulations go on to provide that a Panel established by the Council must not consist of more than 5 panel members one of whom must be a “lay panel member” and one of whom must be a member of a community council. In this context “lay panel member” means someone who is not or has not been a County Councillor and is not or has not been an independent member of the Standards Committee.
- 1.11 Based upon the composition of panels established previously it is suggested that the panel on this occasion comprises the following:
- Lay Panel Member (Who normally Chairs the Panel) – Lord Lieutenant or the High Sheriff
 - Chair of the Standards Committee
 - Independent ‘Lay’ Member of the Standards Committee.
 - 1 County Council representative from the Standards Committee – to be selected by the Standards Committee
 - 1 Town / Community Council representative from the Community Standards Sub-Committee – to be selected by the Sub-Committee
- 1.12 In the event of the non-availability of any member of the Panel it is suggested in accordance with past practice that the function of appointing a substitute be delegated to the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chair of the County Council and the Chair of the Standards Committee.
- 1.13 A provisional timetable for the appointment process in this connection is set out in **Appendix C** and is recommended for adoption by the County Council. It will be observed that this timetable anticipates that the County Council will make the formal appointment of a new Independent (Lay) Member to the Standards Committee at its Meeting in May 2020.
- 1.14 Given the obvious need to attract the widest interest and encourage as many suitable candidates as possible to apply it is suggested that the Chair and Vice Chair of the Standards Committee be authorised to take such steps as appear necessary to them to achieve these objectives. This to include (but not be limited to)

the power to (i) add to and modify the contents of the newspaper notice (subject to compliance with the regulations); (ii) undertake additional advertising/awareness raising steps; and (iii) produce additional literature/promotional material.

JOIN OUR STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Council has a vacancy for an Independent (Lay) Member and is looking for a person who would be interested in joining the Standards Committee.

You would join four County Councillors and four other Independent (Lay) Members on the 9 person Standards Committee. You would also sit on the Standards Community Sub-Committee dealing with standards issues relating to all the town and community councils in Powys.

Independent (Lay) Members receive a co-optees allowance of £99 for a half day or £198 for a whole day. Travel expenses may also be claimed.

Further details are obtainable on the Powys County Council website: www.powys.gov.uk or to find about more about the role of the Standards Committee and obtain an application form contact:

Carol Johnson (Clerk to the Standards Committee)
Powys County Council
Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5LG
Tel (01597) 826980

e-mail: carol.johnson@powys.gov.uk

The deadline for receipt of application is 28 February, 2020.



CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Criteria for the Appointment of Independent (Lay) Members

1. An interest in seeking to uphold and promote high ethical standards in local government.
2. Candidates should be able to demonstrate the following qualities:-
 - (a) good character;
 - (b) understanding and communication skills;
 - (c) social awareness, including an understanding of local communities within Powys;
 - (d) maturity and sound temperament;
 - (e) sound judgement.
3. Members of the Standards Committee must be able to give a commitment to serve on the Committee and its Sub-Committee as required.
4. Some knowledge of local authority or public sector business, or knowledge or experience gained within a regulatory or ethical standard area, would be an advantage.
5. The following are not eligible to serve as Independent (Lay) Members of the Standards Committee by virtue of regulations made by the National Assembly for Wales :-
 - (i) a councillor, officer, or the spouse of a councillor or officer, of Powys County Council, any other Welsh county council, a Welsh National Park Authority, or a Fire Authority or Town or Community Council in Wales.* N.B. 'Officers' includes all staff of one of these authorities including teaching staff.
 - (ii) any person who was previously a member or officer of Powys County Council (post 1996).
 - (iii) any person who, within the previous 12 months, was a member or officer of any other Welsh county council, or a Welsh Fire Authority.

*Town and Community Councillors are welcome to apply but would be required to resign from their Town or Community Council role if appointed as an Independent Member.

Provisional Timetable for Appointments Panel 2020

It is necessary to have Panel of no more than 5 Members including a Lay Member and a Community Councillor.

Agree process at Council	Thur	23 January 2020
Delegate appointment of Standards Committee Panel Members to Standards Committee and Community Sub-Committee	Wed	12 February 2020
Press Notice to papers	Fri	31 January 2020
Notice in the papers (2 papers)	Fri	7 & 8 February 2020
News release and publication on the Council's website / social media – ongoing Social media promotion	Fri/Sat	7 & 8 February 2020
Re-issue of press release (if necessary)	w/c	17 February,2020
Closing date for applications	Fri	28 February 2020
Shortlisting (left longer after closing date to give time to copy pack for selection panel)	w/c	16 – 20 March 2020
Panel Sitting	w/c	30 March 2020
County Council to confirm appointment (and commencement of term of office)		14 May 2020

Term of office of Mrs C Jackson finishes on 21 June, 2020.

The Code of Conduct Casebook

Issue 23 January 2020

Introduction

The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales considers complaints that members of local authorities in Wales have broken the Code of Conduct. The Ombudsman investigates such complaints under the provisions of Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 and the relevant Orders made by the National Assembly for Wales under that Act.

Where the Ombudsman decides that a complaint should be investigated, there are four findings, set out under section 69 of the Local Government Act 2000, which the Ombudsman can arrive at:

- a) that there is no evidence that there has been a breach of the authority's code of conduct;
- b) that no action needs to be taken in respect of the matters that were subject to the investigation;
- c) that the matter be referred to the authority's monitoring officer for consideration by the standards committee;
- d) that the matter be referred to the President of the Adjudication Panel for Wales for adjudication by a tribunal (this generally happens in more serious cases).

In the circumstances of (c) and (d) above, the Ombudsman is required to submit the investigation report to the standards committee or a tribunal of the Adjudication Panel for Wales and it is for them to consider the evidence found by the Ombudsman, together with any defense put forward by the member concerned. It is also for them to determine whether a breach has occurred and, if so, what penalty (if any) should be imposed.

The Code of Conduct Casebook contains summaries of reports issued by this office for which the findings were one of the four set out above. However, in reference to (c) and (d) findings, The Code of Conduct Casebook only contains the summaries of those cases for which the hearings by the standards committee or Adjudication Panel for Wales have been concluded and the outcome of the hearing is known. This edition covers October to December 2019.

The Code of Conduct Casebook

Issue 23 January 2020

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Case summaries

No evidence of breach

There are no summaries in relation to this finding.

No action necessary

[Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council – Duty to uphold the law](#)
Case Number: 201805269 - Report issued in December 2019

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member (“the Member”) of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (“the Council”) had breached the Code of Conduct by voting on the setting of the rate of council tax at a meeting of Full Council in March 2018 when he was in arrears of council tax for a former home. It is an offence under s106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 for a member to vote on setting the rate of council tax when they are themselves in arrears.

The relevant parts of the Code in this case are paragraphs 6(1)(a) relating to bring the authority into disrepute and paragraphs 10(1), 11(1) and 14(1)(a), (b) and (c) about the actions a member should take if they have a personal and prejudicial interest in a matter the authority is considering.

The Ombudsman obtained relevant documentary evidence, including copies of the council tax records for the property involved. He also viewed the webcast for the meeting of Full Council and interviewed the Council’s Monitoring Officer and the Member.

The Ombudsman considered that the evidence suggested that the Member had breached the Code as he accepted that he had not declared an interest and had voted on setting the council tax rate. The Member also accepted that at the time of that meeting he was in arrears of council tax for the former property. However, the Ombudsman decided that it would not be in the public interest to pursue the matter given the significant mitigating circumstances in this particular case. These included the personal circumstances that had led to the Member incurring the original debt and the fact that the member was inexperienced. He had apologised, paid off the arrears and said that it would not happen again. In view of the mitigating circumstances, the Ombudsman concluded that no further action needed to be taken

[Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council – Disclosure and registration of interests](#)
Case Number: 201807334 – Report issued in December 2019

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member (“the Member”) of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (“the Council”) had breached the Code of Conduct. It was alleged that, contrary to the Monitoring Officer’s advice that a conflict of interest existed, the Member accepted a specific cabinet position. It was also alleged that the Member had failed to declare an interest in such matters.

During the investigation, information was sought on the Monitoring Officer’s advice, and the Member was interviewed. The Member explained that he had considered the advice of the Monitoring Officer and was confident that an appropriate strategy had been formulated to manage and mitigate any potential conflicts of interest. The Member said that he and the Leader of the Council had undertaken research to identify where similar scenarios had occurred in other councils and the impact it had on those authorities. The Member also produced evidence of declarations of interest that he had made.

Although the Ombudsman was satisfied that the Member had regard to the Monitoring Officer’s advice, the lack of transparency in relation to aspects of the appointment (including the timing of

the Member's resignation from employment which would have conflicted with the appointment) was of concern and caused others to reasonably question the appointment. As the Member had eventually resigned from his former employment and taken up his role the Ombudsman found that it was not in the public interest to pursue the matter further and found that no further action needed to be taken. Given the potential for a conflict of interest to arise, the Member was reminded of the need to seek advice from the Monitoring Officer in future matters.

Referred to Standards Committee

There are no summaries in relation to this finding.

Referred to Adjudication Panel for Wales

There are no summaries in relation to this finding.

Introduction

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Where the Ombudsman decides that a complaint should be investigated, there are four findings, set out under section 69 of the Local Government Act 2000, which the Ombudsman can arrive at:

- a) that there is no evidence that there has been a breach of the authority's code of conduct;
- b) that no action needs to be taken in respect of the matters that were subject to the investigation;
- c) that the matter be referred to the authority's monitoring officer for consideration by the standards committee;
- d) that the matter be referred to the President of the Adjudication Panel for Wales for adjudication by a tribunal (this generally happens in more serious cases).

In the circumstances of (c) and (d) above, the Ombudsman is required to submit the investigation report to the standards committee or a tribunal of the Adjudication Panel for Wales and it is for them to consider the evidence found by the Ombudsman, together with any defence put forward by the member concerned. It is also for them to determine whether a breach has occurred and, if so, what penalty (if any) should be imposed.

The Code of Conduct Casebook contains summaries of reports issued by this office for which the findings were one of the four set out above. However, in reference to (c) and (d) findings, The Code of Conduct Casebook only contains the summaries of those cases for which the hearings by the standards committee or Adjudication Panel for Wales have been concluded and the outcome of the hearing is known. This edition covers January to December 2020.

The Code of Conduct Casebook

Issue 24 / April 2021

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Case summaries

No evidence of breach

There are no summaries in relation to this finding.

No action necessary

Wrexham County Borough Council – Duty to uphold the law Case Number: 201804590 – Report issued in January 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint about a Member of Wrexham Council. It was alleged that the Members' conduct and behaviour had brought the Council into disrepute in breach of the Code of Conduct. The Ombudsman investigated the matters complained about. Information was provided by relevant parties including the Council. After careful consideration of the evidence obtained during the investigation the Ombudsman determined that it would not be in the public interest to pursue matters further and that no action should be taken in respect of the matters investigated.

Pembrey & Burry Port Town Council – Promotion of equality and respect Case Number: 201906707 - Report issued in March 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member ("the Member") of Pembrey & Burry Port Town Council ("the Council") had breached the Code of Conduct. It was alleged that the Member did not show respect and consideration for others, used bullying behaviour, and behaved in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing the Council into disrepute. During the early stages of the investigation, the Member provided an account. He said that he believed his actions to have been justified and offered an apology if his assertiveness had been perceived differently by the Complainant. The Ombudsman considered the Member's response and his offer of an apology to be sufficient to resolve the complaint. The Ombudsman, therefore, considered that no action needed to be taken in respect of the matters investigated.

St Donats Community Council – Disclosure and registration of interests Case Number: 201905525 – Report issued in March 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member ("the Member") of St Donats Community Council ("the Community Council") had breached the Code of Conduct. It was alleged that the Member failed to declare a personal and prejudicial interest when she sat on the Interview Panel during an interview for the role of Co-opted Member of the Community Council. The Ombudsman found that the Member had a personal interest in the interview by virtue of her relationship with the applicant's estranged brother and admittance that there was tension between them. It was the Ombudsman's view that a member of the public, with knowledge of the circumstances, would regard the Member's interest as so significant as to prejudice her judgement of the public interest. The investigation established that the Member was advised by the Clerk that she was not required to declare an interest in the interview. Whilst a decision

to declare an interest is the responsibility of each individual member, it was not unreasonable for the Member to have acted upon the Clerk's advice. The investigation considered whether the Member's failure to declare a personal and prejudicial interest caused any harm and whether it affected the decision to appoint to the role of Co-opted Member. There was no documentary evidence or written record of the interviews. Therefore, the Ombudsman's decision was guided by the fact that the decision to appoint the successful applicant was taken unanimously by the Interview Panel. On the basis of the information available it was not considered that the applicant's application was adversely affected by the Member's presence and involvement in the interview process. In view of these factors it was concluded that the Ombudsman did not need to take further action in the public interest. However, he recommended to the Clerk of the Council that training on members interests and their obligations under the Code of Conduct is provided to the Council.

St Harmon Community Council – Disclosure and registration of interests Case Number: 201903933 – Report issued in March 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a member ("the Member") of St Harmon Community Council had breached the Code of Conduct for members ("the Code"). It was alleged that the Member had failed to show respect and consideration to others, and that he had failed to take appropriate action in respect of a personal and prejudicial interest he had in a co-option process the Council undertook.

During the course of the investigation, information was sought from the Council as well as from a number of witnesses. The evidence gathered did not substantiate that the Member's behaviour had demonstrated a failure to show respect and consideration to others such that could be considered a breach of the Code.

The evidence suggested that the Member had failed to take appropriate action in relation to a personal and prejudicial interest he had in the co-option process. However, the Member did not influence the decision taken on co-option in any way, he had already acknowledged, accepted and apologised for his actions and he had taken steps to seek training on his obligations under the Code.

Therefore, the Ombudsman determined that no action needed to be taken in respect of the matters investigated.

Carmarthenshire County Council – Integrity Case Number: 201900874 – Report issued in March 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member ("the Member") of Carmarthenshire County Council ("the Council") had breached the Code of Conduct. It was alleged that the Member had failed to treat members of staff at the Council with respect and consideration, had breached confidentiality, and had brought the office of Councillor into disrepute in relation to 2 incidents which occurred during the selection process for the Council's new Chief Executive. The first incident was that the Member had deliberately informed the unsuccessful candidate for the post that they had not been successful, thus circumventing the Human Resources ("HR") procedures in place. The second incident was that the Member had ignored a clear instruction that Councillors should not publicise the identity of the successful candidate for 30 minutes.

The Ombudsman interviewed a number of witnesses and found that the evidence suggested the Member had accidentally informed the unsuccessful candidate that they had not been successful and had not intended to circumvent HR procedures. The Ombudsman accepted that the Member had shown remorse and had apologised. The Ombudsman determined that no breaches of the Code had occurred as this had been a genuine error by the Member.

The Ombudsman determined that there was evidence that the Member had ignored a clear instruction not to publicise the identity of the successful candidate, and that this may have amounted to a breach of the Code. The Member had not considered the impact on the candidates, their wider friends and families, or the staff employed by the Council with due respect when publishing the result. Further, the information had been confidential until the proper procedures to publicise it had been completed, which the Member had pre-empted. The Ombudsman determined that these actions were capable of bringing the office of Councillor into disrepute.

However, the Ombudsman was not persuaded that it would be proportionate and in the public interest to make a referral to the Standards Committee, due to the short period of time the information was disclosed before the official announcement and taking into account the opinions of the candidates that the effect on them was limited; however, he considered that it had been appropriate for the matter to be referred to him. The Ombudsman found that no action needed to be taken in respect of the matters investigated.

Llantwit Fardre Community Council – Promotion of equality and respect Case Number: 201904216 - Report issued in May 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member (“the Member”) of Llantwit Fardre Community Council (“the Council”) had breached the Code of Conduct.

It was alleged that the Member made several accusations against serving Community Councillors during a Community Council meeting on 24 September 2019. It was further alleged that the Member then shared a written copy of his address, in which he accused Community Councillors of bullying the former Clerk of the Community Council, with members of the press and public.

The investigation considered the following paragraphs of the Code:

- Paragraph 5(a) – disclosing confidential information.
- Paragraph 6(1)(a) – disrepute.
- Paragraph 6(1)(c) – reporting breaches of the Code to the Monitoring Officer.
- Paragraph 6(1)(d) – vexatious, frivolous or malicious complaints.
- Paragraph 8(a) – having regard to the advice of the authority’s officers.

The investigation established that the Member addressed the Community Council at its meeting on 24 September 2019, where members of the press and public were present. There was no evidence to suggest that the Member disclosed confidential information during the meeting.

The investigation found that during his address, the Member made several accusations against other members of the Council. Rather than airing his concerns in public the Member should have raised his concerns through the proper processes available for doing so. Raising accusations in such a public forum when those being accused did not have a fair opportunity to respond could amount to a breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct. The investigation found that the Member disregarded advice from the Clerk of the Council and that his actions were in breach of paragraph 8(a) of the Code.

When deciding whether to take further action in relation to these possible breaches of the Code of Conduct, the Ombudsman carefully considered whether it was in the public interest for him to do so. The Ombudsman considered recent steps taken by Rhondda Cynon Taf's Monitoring Officer and the Chair of the Council's Standards Committee to meet with the majority of the members of the Council in February to encourage better working relationships within the Council. It was understood that a collective agreement was reached on taking a fresh approach on how to deal with situations where disagreement had previously escalated into personal attacks. The Member was present at this meeting. As the events which were considered as part of this investigation took place some months before the meeting with the Monitoring Officer and Chair of the Standards Committee, it was not in the public interest to pursue this investigation further.

Torfaen County Borough Council – Promotion of equality and respect Case Number: 202000681 & 202000667 - Report issued in July 2020

The Ombudsman received complaints that an elected Member ("the Member") of Torfaen County Borough Council ("the Council") had breached the Council's Code of Conduct for Members ("the Code").

Two Police Community Support Officers ("PCSOs") complained that, on 7 June 2020, the Member approached them at Cwmbran Boating Lake ("the Lake") in an aggressive manner. They said that the Member was shouting and demanding that they dealt with people who were angling at the Lake whilst it was the closed season. They said that the Member did not accept that it was not a policing matter and identified himself as a Councillor to try and use his position to intimidate them.

The Ombudsman received an account from the Member, obtained a witness account from another Councillor who was present at the Lake, and obtained information from Gwent Police. On the balance of probabilities, the evidence indicated that the Member may have breached paragraph 4(b) of the Code by speaking to the PCSOs in a raised voice.

The investigation found that there was no dispute that the Member identified himself as a Councillor. The Member explained that he had done so to explain his knowledge of angling legislation. The Ombudsman found that the Member did contact Gwent Police to seek clarification regarding the enforcement of angling legislation and to raise a concern that the PCSOs had not spoken to, or provided advice, to the anglers as they had informed him.

The Ombudsman did not find sufficient evidence that the Member had displayed bullying and/or harassing behaviour, or that he had brought the authority into disrepute.

The Ombudsman found that, whilst the evidence suggested that the Member may have breached paragraph 4(b) of the Code, it was not in the public interest to pursue matters further.

The Ombudsman asked the Member to be mindful of how his conduct may be perceived when acting in his role as a Councillor and suggested that he complete refresher training on the Code.

Glynneath Town Council – Promotion of equality and respect
Case Number: 201904472 - Report issued in July 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member (“the Member”) of Glynneath Town Council (“the Council”) had breached the Council’s Code of Conduct (“the Code”).

A member of the public complained that when the Member entered Glynneath Town Hall (“the Hall”) on 20 September 2019 she had been aggressive and shouted at them, and that the Member had threatened to “put paid” to their Hall Hire Agreement with the Council.

The Ombudsman obtained conflicting witness statements from 3 members of the public, as well as the complainant and the Member. On balance, the evidence obtained suggested that the Member may have breached paragraph 4(b) of the Code by shouting at the member of the public.

The Ombudsman did not find sufficient evidence that the Member had displayed bullying behaviour, or that they had brought their authority into disrepute. Furthermore, there was no supporting evidence that the Member had threatened the complainant’s future hire of the Hall, nor had the Member acted on such a threat.

The Ombudsman found that, whilst the evidence suggested that the Member may have breached paragraph 4(b) of the Code, it was not in the public interest to pursue further enquiries into the matter, given the conflicting nature of the evidence obtained.

The Ombudsman recommended to the Council that it should arrange training on the Code for its Members as soon as is practicable.

Tywyn Town Council – Promotion of equality and respect
Case Number: 201900952 - Report issued in September 2020

An officer of Tywyn Town Council (“the Council”) complained that a member had written a disrespectful letter to a third party.

The Ombudsman’s investigation considered whether the content of the letter may have breached paragraphs 4(b) and 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct for members (“the Code”).

The member asserted that they were not acting in their capacity as member when writing the letter. However, the Ombudsman found that, as the letter referred to Council business, it was reasonable to conclude that the member gave the impression they were acting in their capacity as a member of the Council when they wrote the letter. The Ombudsman found that the majority of the comments made by the member were political in nature.

However, the member's comments to the third party recipient of the letter were considered to be disrespectful. Whilst the Ombudsman considered that those comments were suggestive of a breach of paragraph 4(b) of the Code, having taken into consideration the information provided by the recipient and the wider evidence available, he did not consider it would be proportionate or in the public interest for any further action to be taken.

The Ombudsman did not consider that there was evidence to suggest that the content of the letter sent by the member was suggestive of a breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code.

Mumbles Community Council – Duty to uphold the law
Case Number: 201904820 - Report issued in November 2020

The Ombudsman received a self-referred Code of Conduct ("the Code") complaint from a Member ("the Member") of a Community Council in Wales ("the Council") because they had been named in a Welsh Audit Office ("Audit Wales") Report concerning unauthorised Council expenditure. The Ombudsman considered whether the Member may have breached paragraph 7 (b) (i), (ii), (iii) of the Code for use of Council resources which was imprudent, in breach of the authority's requirements and unlawful.

The Ombudsman's investigation found that a Planning Consultancy had billed the Council for work which had not been agreed, and the Planning Consultancy said it had been instructed by the Member. The Member said at the time of the events he was new to the Council and he thought the work undertaken for the Council by the Planning Consultancy had been part of a previously agreed arrangement with the Council. The Member said he had not worked with planning consultants before and he had not realised that his specific communications with them would incur additional costs. The Ombudsman's investigation found that the Member had a responsibility to fully understand the terms of the Council's arrangements with the Planning Consultancy, and the Member's actions and failure to do so, could reasonably be considered as a potential breach of paragraph 7(b) (i), (ii), (iii) of the Code.

However, the Ombudsman also found that whilst the Clerk had suggested the Member should contact the Planning Consultancy, the Member had not been provided with clear guidance on the implications of doing so, and that the Member's communications had a limited impact on the overall expenditure. In addition, Audit Wales had not engaged with the Member or the Planning Consultancy to establish what instruction it attributed to the Member.

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Having taken into consideration the evidence available and the information provided by the Member, the Ombudsman did not consider it would be proportionate or in the public interest for any further action to be taken.

Referred to Standards Committee

Denbighshire County Council – Objectivity and propriety Case Number: 201806601 - Report issued in September 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Member (“the Member”) of Denbighshire County Council (“the Council”) failed to observe the Code of Conduct for members of the Council. It was alleged that the member abused his position by visiting a member of the public’s place of work and complaining to her employer about a private altercation between her and a constituent in a local store car park.

The Ombudsman determined that there was evidence to suggest that the Member had conducted himself in a bullying and harassing manner, and that his actions sought to create a disadvantage for the member of the public in the eyes of her employer. The evidence also suggested that such conduct was capable of damaging the reputation of the Council and bringing it into disrepute. The Ombudsman determined that the member had failed to abide by paragraphs 4(c), 6(1)(a) and 7(a) of the Council’s Code of Conduct.

The Ombudsman referred his investigation report to the Monitoring Officer of the Council for consideration by its Standards Committee.

Laleston Community Council – Duty to uphold the law Case Number: 201807411 - Report issued in November 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Former Member (“the Former Member”) of Laleston Community Council (“the Council”) had failed to observe the Code of Conduct for Members of the Council. It was alleged that the Former Member had misused Council funds via unauthorised cashpoint withdrawals and debit card transactions between November 2018 and January 2019.

A police investigation took place, and the Former Member subsequently resigned from the Council. The Ombudsman’s investigation established that at the time of the events the Former Member had taken on extra duties and been paid agreed allowances by the Council. It was found that the Former Member then took charge of the Council’s debit card and used it for purchases and cash withdrawals which were in excess of what he already received and could not be accounted for. The Former Member said he had accessed the Council’s finances in this way because he felt he was entitled to the funds; however, he did not provide any further information to suggest his transactions were for the benefit of the Council.

The Ombudsman determined that the Former Member may have breached the Council’s Code of conduct, in particular, paragraphs 7(a) and 7(b) i), ii), iii), iv) and vi) as he has sought to gain a personal and financial advantage via unauthorised access to Council finances, and misused Council funds. The Ombudsman also found that the Former Member’s actions and conviction could reasonably be regarded as behaviour which might bring the office of member or the Council into disrepute and a potential breach of paragraph (6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct.

The Ombudsman referred his investigation report to the Monitoring Officer of Bridgend County Borough Council for consideration by its Standards Committee.

Referred to Adjudication Panel for Wales

Sully and Lavernock Community Council – Integrity Case Number: 201901994 - Report issued in September 2020

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a member (“the Member”) of Sully and Lavernock Community Council (“the Council”) failed to observe the Code of Conduct for elected members. It was alleged that the Member made a series of public posts, on the social media platform Facebook, which could have the potential to damage the reputation of the Council.

The Ombudsman found that 3 public posts, dated between 10 January and 11 March 2019, which made reference to high profile female politicians, were gratuitously offensive and could reasonably be regarded as bringing the Councillor’s Office or Authority into disrepute which was suggestive of a breach of paragraph of 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct. The Ombudsman considered that the language used went beyond political expression and was so egregious that, should a breach of the Code of Conduct be found and a sanction imposed, it would be a proportionate interference with the Councillor’s right to freedom of expression.

The Ombudsman also found that the Councillor had failed to supply evidence he claimed to hold in respect of the privacy of the posts and that, in refusing to provide information, he had failed to comply with a request in connection with the investigation which was suggestive of a breach of paragraph 6(2) of the Code of Conduct.

The Ombudsman referred his investigation report to the Adjudication Panel for Wales for its consideration.

Independent Review Of The Ethical Standards Framework – provided by Richard Penn

At a meeting of the Partnership Council for Wales on 1 March the Minister for Housing and Local Government discussed a range of issues connected to the implementation of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. One of the issues discussed was her intention to commission an independent review of the ethical standards framework. Leaders agreed this was timely in light of the changes to the framework set out in the Act and the time which has elapsed since the framework was first established.

The ethical standards framework in Wales was established in 2000, more than 20 years ago, and has remained largely unchanged, though there have been a number of small modifications to improve the operation of the framework over this period. The subordinate legislation underpinning the framework was last reviewed and amended in 2016. The model code of conduct, first introduced in 2001, was significantly recast in 2008 and further amended in 2016.

The review will take place in two phases.

- The first phase will involve engagement with partners to establish views about the process and operation of the framework including details of where the framework works well and whether there are areas which could be improved. The outcome of this first phase will be a roadmap for building on the positive elements of the framework while strengthening those areas where it is considered improvements could be made. Options to bring the requirements of the register of interests provisions in the Model Code of Conduct Order in line with the policy of the Act to stop councillors' addresses being published will also be explored as part of this work.
- Phase two will focus on working with partners and stakeholders to deliver the necessary changes.

I am a former Chief Executive of two major local authorities in England, and amongst the other posts that I have held since returning home to Wales I was the first NAW Commissioner for Standards from 2000 to 2012. I have been commissioned to undertake this review, with the aim to report to Ministers by the end of June. The intention is for any changes to be made ahead of the local government elections in May 2022.

I welcome the opportunity to meet with Chairs of Standards Committees. Generally I am interested in:

- what they consider are the strengths and weakness of the current Framework,
- how it might be improved and
- how the requirements of the recent legislation will be managed.
- The big question is how can ethical standards in local government in Wales be enhanced, and on a practical point how can the number of complaints be reduced?

Mae'r dudalen hon wedi'i gadael yn wag yn fwriadol