



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

18 SEPTEMBER 2018

PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES – CODE OF CONDUCT CASEBOOK

REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To receive the Ombudsman's Code of Conduct Casebook (Issues 15 - 17) produced by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 To note the contents of the Ombudsman's Code of Conduct Casebook (Issues 15 - 17) published by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales produces quarterly Code of Conduct casebooks.

3.2 Issues 15 – 17 of the Code of Conduct Casebook are attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

3.3 Members should note that the Casebooks are able to be accessed via the Ombudsman's Website and the following link:

[Code of Conduct Casebooks](#)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972
AS AMENDED BY
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
18 SEPTEMBER 2018
REPORT OF MONITORING OFFICER

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Freestanding Matter

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The Code of Conduct Casebook

Issue 15 January 2018

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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 defence put forward by the member concerned. It is also for them to determine whether a breach has occurred and, if so, what



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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 2017.

Case summaries

No evidence of breach

Cardiff Council – Promotion of equality and respect

Case Number 201606695 – Report issued in October 2017

A complaint was made that a member (“the Councillor”) of Cardiff Council (“the Council”) breached the Authority’s Code of Conduct for elected members when he allegedly made comments to a former Councillor on two occasions about a local religious association.

The complaint was investigated on the basis that the member may have breached paragraphs 4(a), 4(b), 4(d) and 6(1)(a), relating to equality, respect, impartiality and bringing their office or authority into disrepute.

The investigation found that there were no witnesses to either of the conversations the member had with the former Councillor. The member also strongly denied the allegations. Therefore, under section 69(4) (a) of the Local Government Act 2000, the Ombudsman’s finding was that there was no evidence that the member failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council - Integrity

Case Number 201700102 – Report issued in October 2017

A complaint was made that a member (“the Councillor”) of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (“the Council”) breached the Authority’s Code of Conduct for elected members when she made comments about a member of the public in a Facebook messenger group chat.

The complaint was investigated on the basis that the Councillor may have breached paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code, by bringing her office or authority into disrepute.

The Ombudsman considered that the Councillor’s comments were made in extremely bad taste. However, he took into account that the Facebook messenger group in which the Councillor posted her comments only consisted of three members. It was clear that the Councillor deeply regretted her actions and when she realised that the subject of her comments had become aware of what she had posted, she provided a fulsome apology.

The investigation found that, whilst the Councillor’s actions may have brought herself into disrepute, for the reasons outlined above, she had not brought her office or authority into disrepute. Therefore, under section 69(4)(a) of the Local Government Act 2000, the Ombudsman’s finding was that there was no evidence that the Councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct. However, the Councillor was advised of her responsibility to take care when expressing her personal opinions.

Tywyn Town Council and Gwynedd Council – Promotion of Equality and Respect

Case Number 201607353 & 201607357 – Report issued in November 2017

Councillor X complained that a member (“Councillor Y”) of Tywyn Town Council and Gwynedd Council breached the Code of Conduct for elected members by making personal allegations about her. Councillor

X provided evidence that Councillor Y made comments about her in various emails, which he had sent to members of Tywyn Town Council and Gwynedd Council.

The complaint was investigated on the basis that Councillor Y may have breached paragraphs 4(b) (failure to show respect and consideration), 4(c) (bullying and harassment), and 6(1)(a) (bringing his office or authority into disrepute).

The Ombudsman did not consider that the comments made by Councillor Y were so offensive as to amount to a breach of paragraph 4(b) of the Code of Conduct. Neither did he consider that his actions were sufficiently serious to amount to a breach of paragraph 4(c) of the Code.

In relation to paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code, there was no evidence to suggest that Councillor Y had shared emails with members of the public. He had sent one email to a member of the press, and whilst the Ombudsman considered it was unwise for him to do so, it did not appear that the email was acted upon or shared further. That being so, the Ombudsman did not consider that the consequences of his actions were sufficiently serious to have brought his office or authority into disrepute.

Whilst the Ombudsman's finding was that there was no evidence that Councillor Y had failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, he was advised of his responsibility to be mindful of how his comments are perceived by others in future.

Llansannan Community Council – Promotion of Equality and Respect Case Number 201700953 – Report issued in November 2017

Mr X complained that a member ("the Councillor") of Llansannan Community Council ("the Community Council"), breached the Code of Conduct for members when he asked Mr X to leave a meeting of the Community Council and used the words "for your own safety," which Mr X considered to be a threat.

The complaint was investigated on the basis that there may have been a failure to comply with the following paragraph of the Code of Conduct for elected members:

- 4(b) – you must show respect and consideration for others; and
- 4(c) – you must not use bullying behaviour or harass any person.

There was no evidence to suggest that the Councillor's behaviour towards Mr X was in any way threatening and the Ombudsman was satisfied that his actions were reasonable under the circumstances.

Under Section 69(4)(a) of the Local Government Act 2000, the Ombudsman's finding was that there was no evidence that the Councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.

No action necessary

Conwy County Borough Council - Disclosure and registration of interests

Case Number 201702250 – Report issued in October 2017

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a member of Conwy County Borough Council (“the Councillor”) had breached the Code of Conduct when he submitted a written objection, in an official capacity, to a planning application which the complainants had made to the Council. The Councillor lives near the application site, and could be personally affected by it.

The Ombudsman concluded that it was likely that the Councillor had breached the Code given the proximity of the development site to his home and the fact his objections were sent from his Council email address and signed off “Councillor [Name]”. However, the Ombudsman decided to take no action in this case on the basis that the Councillor had shown remorse and apologised, his explanation that he had accidentally selected his Council email address from a drop down box when writing his email was plausible, he had acted swiftly to withdraw his objection when concerns were raised, and his actions did not adversely affect the planning application, which was granted permission.

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

More information

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Issue 16 May 2018

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Case summaries

No evidence of breach

There are no summaries in relation to this finding

No action necessary

Llanbedrog Community Council – Disclosure and registration of interests

Case Number: 201700942 & 201702074 – Report issued in January 2018

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a member of Llanbedrog Community Council (“the Councillor”) breached the Code of Conduct by failing to declare an interest when his planning application came up for discussion at a meeting of the Community Council (“the meeting”).

The Ombudsman investigated whether the Councillor had breached parts of the Code relating to personal and prejudicial interests. Interviews were conducted with those members of the Council who were present at the meeting. The evidence indicated that the Councillor:

- declared an interest when his planning application came up for discussion
- did not take part in the discussion
- did not leave the room but as the item was so brief, he did not have an opportunity to do so.
- The members present at the meeting did not feel that the Councillor’s presence influenced their decision

The Ombudsman found that the Councillor had acted appropriately and in line with the requirements of the Code of Conduct in declaring a personal interest when his planning application came up for discussion. However, his action in not leaving the meeting room was in breach of the Code of Conduct as he would have had a prejudicial interest in the matter.

The Ombudsman considered the breach was mitigated as the Councillor took no part in the discussion and as the item was so brief, the Councillor did not have an opportunity to leave the room before the item was concluded. The Community Council was also not the final decision-maker on planning matters. He took the view that the Councillor’s actions were of limited consequence.

Under section 69(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 2000, the Ombudsman found that no action needed to be taken in respect of the complaint.

Abertillery & Llanhilleth Community Council – Integrity

Case Number: 201700261 – Report issued in January 2018

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a member (“the member”) of Abertillery & Llanhilleth Community Council (“the Council”) had breached the Code of Conduct for members. It was alleged that the member had arranged for a sum of money, intended for the Council, to be paid to a community project (“the Project”). At the time of the actions complained of the member was Chairman both of the Council and of the Project.

The Ombudsman investigated whether the member’s actions amounted to a breach of para-

graphs 6(1)(a), 7(b)(ii) and 7(b)(iv) of the Code of Conduct relating to bringing their office or authority into disrepute, and the use of the authority's resources.

The Ombudsman found that the Council had no legal right to receive the money in question, and that it could not therefore be considered to be the Council's resources. The member had therefore not breached paragraph 7(b)(ii) or paragraph 7(b)(iv). However, the member had acted improperly in the way in which he obtained funding for the Project, representing himself as acting on behalf of the Council, at the possible expense of other groups, and may therefore have been in breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) in that he had brought his office or the authority into disrepute.

The Ombudsman noted the member's inexperience as Chairman, the fact that he believed, albeit mistakenly, that he was acting in the public interest and that he obtained no personal gain from his actions. The Ombudsman concluded that, on balance, the public interest did not require that the case should be referred to a Standards Committee or Adjudication Panel for Wales, and decided that no further action needed to be taken.

Case Number: 201701904 – Disclosure and registration of interests

Llay Community Council – Report issued in January 2018

The Ombudsman received a complaint from a member of the public that the Councillor had breached the Code of Conduct ("the Code") for Llay Community Council ("the Council"). The complainant said the Councillor had, at a meeting of the Council, failed to declare a personal interest in - and participated in a discussion about - a planning application which affected the site of the Llay branch of a charitable organisation. The Councillor is the Secretary of the Social Committee of the Social Club which is licensed to operate from the charitable organisation's site.

The Ombudsman considered whether, in failing to declare a personal interest and remaining in the room, the Councillor had breached the Code. The Ombudsman took witness statements from the other councillor's present at the meeting and interviewed the Councillor. The Council unanimously voted to oppose the planning application and none of the witnesses said they felt influenced by the Councillor's presence. There was some confusion amongst councillors as to whether the Councillor should have declared an interest and withdrawn. At interview, the Councillor remained of the view that he had not been required to declare an interest and withdraw. The Council was not the determining authority and so was simply being consulted on the application.

The Ombudsman concluded that the Councillor's personal interest was prejudicial and that he should have withdrawn from the room while the application was under discussion. However, the Ombudsman found that the Councillor did not stand to personally benefit from the outcome of the planning application. The Councillor's position as Secretary of the Social Committee and the Council's role in the determination of the application were sufficiently distant from application as to mitigate their impact. The Ombudsman considered the general confusion amongst councillors and the fact that the Councillor presence had no bearing on the Council's unanimous opposition to the application.

The Ombudsman concluded that there was evidence suggestive of a breach of paragraphs 11(1) and 14(1)(a)(ii) of the Code. Whilst the Ombudsman was concerned at the apparent confusion amongst councillors generally in respect of personal interests, he considered that additional train-

ing would address this. On balance, the Ombudsman concluded that although the Councillor may have breached two paragraphs of the Code, there were mitigating circumstances and so no further action was necessary.

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

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The Code of Conduct Casebook

Issue 17 July 2018

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Case summaries

No evidence of breach

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council – Promotion of equality and respect

Case Number: 201704719 – Report issued in April 2018

An employee (“the Complainant”) of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (“the Council”) complained that, at a staff meeting, an elected member of the Council (“the Councillor”) had made reference to some members of staff being “dead men walking”. The Complainant said that the Councillor made further comments which led some members of staff to conclude that this phrase referred to him. The Complainant said that this put him in fear for his job.

The Ombudsman investigated the complaint on the basis that the Councillor may have breached the paragraphs 4(b), 4(c), 6(1)(a) and 7(a) of the Code of Conduct for Members (“the Code”), relating to showing respect, bullying behaviour, disrepute and creating a disadvantage for others.

In the absence of any formal record of the meeting, the Ombudsman interviewed a selection of those present, as well as the Councillor, the Complainant and his manager. The Ombudsman considered what the Councillor said, his explanation of what he had meant and how his comments had been received.

The Ombudsman found that although the Councillor had used the phrase “dead men walking” there was no evidence to support the complaint that the comment was specifically directed at the Complainant or that it was intended to be seen as a threat to anybody’s job. The Ombudsman concluded that there was no evidence that the Councillor had breached the Code.

No action necessary

Chepstow Town Council – Disclosure and registration of interests

Case Number: 201703539 – Report issued in May 2018

A complaint was received that a member of Chepstow Town Council (“Councillor A”) had participated in discussions about the future ownership and management arrangements for a local public facility at a meeting of the Town Council, despite having declared a prejudicial interest in the matter.

The Ombudsman’s investigation found that it was likely that Councillor A had spoken at the meeting, despite having a prejudicial interest in the item, contrary to the requirements of paragraphs 14(1)(a), (c) and (e) of the Code of Conduct.

The Ombudsman decided that despite the fact the evidence suggested that there had been a breach of the Code, no further action should be taken. This was because Councillor A did not stand to gain personally from any decision made, the evidence suggested that he had withdrawn from the room for the vote, his preferred option was not agreed by the Council, and the Chair of the Council had indicated that he could speak. The Ombudsman did, however, remind Councillor A of his responsibilities in relation to prejudicial interests.

Trellech United Community Council – Objectivity and propriety

Case number 201700946 – Report issued in April 2018

The Ombudsman received a complaint that a Councillor (“the Councillor”) of Trellech United Community Council (“the Council”) had breached the Code of Conduct for members. It was alleged that the Councillor had breached the Code when he wrote to an adjudicator of a competition, giving the impression that he was acting as a representative of the Council, in an attempt to negatively influence the chance of a specific entry winning the competition and thereby creating disadvantage for a member of the public who would benefit if that entry was successful.

The Ombudsman investigated whether the Councillor’s actions amounted to a breach of paragraph 7(a) of the Code of Conduct which states that members must not, in their official capacity or otherwise, use or attempt to use their position improperly to create a disadvantage for another person.

The Ombudsman found that the Councillor, by writing to the adjudicator with information intended to lessen the likelihood of that specific entry winning the competition and by signing off that correspondence as a Councillor, may have breached paragraph 7(a).

The Ombudsman noted, however, that the entry subsequently won the competition, so the Councillor’s intervention did not actually cause a disadvantage to the person in question. The Ombudsman concluded that, on balance, it was not in the public interest to refer the matter to a Standards Committee or Adjudication Panel for Wales and, therefore, no further action should be taken.

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

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