

The Code of Conduct Casebook

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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

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 April to June 2018.

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

More information

We value any comments or feedback you may have regarding The Code of Conduct Casebook. We would also be happy to answer any queries you may have regarding its contents. Any such correspondence can be emailed to Matthew.Aplin@ombudsman-wales.org.uk or sent to the following address:

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