

Report



Standards Committee

Part 1

Date: 15th November 2022

Subject **Complaints Update**

Purpose To update Standards Committee on Code of Conduct complaints made to the Ombudsman.

Author Head of Law & Standards

Ward General

Summary The report provides an update of complaints made to the Ombudsman about City and Community Councillors, the nature of the complaints and the outcomes.

Proposal To note the report.

Action by Head of Law & Standards

Timetable Immediate

Background

1. All complains made to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales about alleged breaches of the Members Code on Conduct by City and Community councillors are reported to Standards Committee for information.
2. Where the Ombudsman has decided not to accept the complaints for investigation or they are still under investigation, then they are reported on a strictly confidential and anonymised basis and neither the identity of the member nor the complainant is disclosed.
3. However, details of the allegations, the nature of the complaints and the outcomes, including the reasons for the Ombudsman's decision, are all reported to Committee, for information purposes and to identify any specific areas of concern or matters that may require further clarification or training.
4. The attached Schedule sets out those complaints that have been submitted to the Ombudsman since the last meeting, together with details of complaints still under investigation.

Financial Summary

There are no financial implications

Risks

| Risk Title / Description | Risk Impact score of Risk if it occurs* (1-5) | Risk Probability of risk occurring (1-5) | Risk Mitigation Action(s) What is the Council doing or what has it done to avoid the risk or reduce its effect? | Risk Owner Officer(s) responsible for dealing with the risk? |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| Failure to receive regular updates on numbers of complaints and their outcome will reduce the effectiveness of the Committee's role in improving ethical standards | 3 | 1 | Receiving regular updates and reviewing the outcome of the cases will enable the Committee to take a more effective role in improving ethical standards. | Head of Law & Standards and Assistant Head of Legal Services |

*Taking account of proposed mitigation measures.

Links to Council Policies and Priorities

The underlying Nolan principles are all enshrined in the Council's corporate and well-being objectives.

Proposed action

To note the report.

Comments of Chief Financial Officer

There are no financial implications

Comments of Monitoring Officer

Set out in the Report.

Comments of Head of People Policy & Transformation

There are no specific staffing or policy implications

Fairness and Equality Impact Assessment:

- **Wellbeing of Future Generation (Wales) Act**
- **Equality Act 2010**
- **Socio-economic Duty**
- **Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011**

No FEIA is required, as the Committee are just receiving this report for information.

- There are no negative impacts in terms of equalities or social disadvantage.
- In terms of the sustainable development principle and 5 ways of working

Long-term – The complaints update will assist Standards Committee in taking a long-term view about ethical standards

Prevention – The complaints update will help to prevent future complaints

Integration – The complaints update has been prepared on the basis of information provided by the Ombudsman's office

Collaboration – The complaints update should facilitate the resolution of complaints, in a more collaborative way.

Involvement – The complaints update will facilitate greater involvement on the part of Standards Committee in identifying and addressing any trends or issues.

Background Papers

Confidential correspondence with the Ombudsman's office regarding individual complaints.

Dated: 28th October 2022

CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

| PSOW Reference | Council | Complainant | Alleged breach of the Code | Outcome |
|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|---|---|
| 2021/06820 | Newport City | Corporate | Criminal conviction of a former City Councillor, which brought his office and the Council into disrepute. | Still under investigation |
| 2022/10227 | Newport City | Councillor | Complaint regarding an offensive private Facebook post during the pre-election period, in breach of equalities and duty to show respect and consideration for others | PSOW did not find any evidence of a breach. The post was made in a private capacity, so the only potential breach was in relation to bringing the office of Councillor into disrepute. PSOW felt that the comment may have offended some people but it came within the Councillor's Article 10 rights to freedom of expression. |
| 2022/02284 | Newport City | Public | Failure to respond to constituent's concerns about homelessness and begging in the City Centre | PSOW did not find any evidence of a breach. The Code did not require members to respond to constituents. That was a matter for the ballot box. |
| 2022/02545 | Newport City | Public | Alleged defamatory posts on a community Facebook page, which the Councillor had failed to remove. Breach of equalities duty, failure to show respect and consideration and bringing office into disrepute | PSOW did not find any evidence of breaches of the Code and, in any event, did not consider it in the public interest to intervene. The Councillor was not required to either remove the offending posts or |

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| | | | | disassociate herself from them. She could not be personally liable for other people's comments. But they were removed from the site quickly, in any event. |
| 2022/02641 | Langstone community | Councillor | Alleged disrespectful and bullying behaviour towards the Clerk and other community councillors | PSOW found no evidence of any breach. The Councillor was entitled to make a complaint against the Clerk and to complain about other Councillors criticising his attendance record. This did not amount to bullying or disrespectful conduct. |
| 2022/03726 | Newport City | Public | Refusal to take up objection to planning application on behalf of the complainant because of declared friendship with applicant. Alleged conflict of interest. | PSOW did not find any breach. The Councillor had properly declared a personal interest in the planning application because of the close association with the applicant. The complainant could have objected in person or asked another ward Councillor to speak on her behalf at Planning Committee |
| 2022/04331 | Langstone Community | Public | Alleged failure to show respect and consideration to another community councillor. | PSOW did not find any breach. There was no failure to show respect and councillors need to have "thicker skins" when it comes to personal criticism. Councillors do not have to agree with one another and they can be robust in their disagreement, provided that their |

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| | | | | language is not gratuitously offensive. |
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