



Ombwdsmon Ombudsman

Cymru • Wales

Your ref:

Ask for: Michelle Morris

Our ref: MAM/mm



Date: 15 April 2024



Peredur Owen Griffiths
Chair, Finance Committee

By email only
seneddfinance@senedd.wales

Dear Peredur

I am writing to brief the Finance Committee following recent events regarding the social media posts made by a team leader at the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW).

There can be no doubt that these events have damaged the reputation of the organisation and, unfairly, cast doubt on the independence, impartiality and integrity of all of those who work for PSOW. The situation the organisation finds itself in has come as a shock to staff and continues to cause huge concern.

This letter is intended to provide information on the recent events and the action being taken to begin the process of rebuilding trust in our work. Events started when I received a letter detailing allegations that a team leader had posted political comments on social media. These posts called into question her impartiality. The team leader was subsequently suspended and, the following week, she resigned and is no longer employed by PSOW. In line with our contract of employment she will receive pay in lieu of the contractual notice period. No severance payment above contractual payments will be made.

The team leader managed the Councillor Code of Conduct team from February 2019 until August 2023, when a rotation of team leaders took place and she moved out of the team. From April 2021 onwards this team was responsible for assessing complaints against councillors and making decisions on which complaints should not be investigated. Prior to this date these assessments were made in a different team that was not managed by the team leader in question.

In view of the damage done to the organisation's reputation, I am conscious that an independent external review is required to provide assurance that there has been no bias in decision making and that we continue to deliver an independent, fair and impartial service.

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We are happy to accept and respond
to correspondence in Welsh.

The review will consider our processes for handling code of conduct complaints and those cases brought into question by recent events. In particular it will consider decisions not to investigate, made by the team leader and the Code of Conduct Team. Decisions made at that stage follow the application of a two-stage test: firstly, whether the evidence suggests that a breach of the Code of Conduct has occurred and, secondly, whether an investigation is required in the public interest.

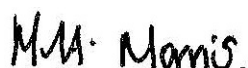
My role, as Ombudsman, is to investigate and to decide whether, or not, to refer the case to the relevant Standards Committee or the APW, for consideration. I have no role reaching a finding as to whether the Councillors' Code of Conduct has been breached, nor in deciding any sanction. Any complaints referred to Standards Committees or the APW are subject to an independent hearing, in which the investigation is challenged and scrutinised and witnesses can be called. These hearings then reach their decision independently and the councillor had the right to appeal against those decisions. For these reasons these cases cannot be reopened and will not be included in the review.

While there is no evidence that the team leader expressed her personal views or influenced others in the office we recognise that any review also needs to provide assurance on this point.

I recognise that it is essential that this review has the confidence of the Senedd and stakeholders across local government. Whilst I remain confident that James Goudie KC would have carried out the review with integrity, impartiality and professionalism, it is evident that concerns have been expressed by several people and would lead to a lack of confidence in the review and its findings. I have listened to these views and reconsidered this appointment and will now be seeking another person to lead this work instead.

I do not underestimate the damage done by these social media posts and the subsequent events. I remain committed to working with my staff and our stakeholders across local government to rebuild trust in our work. I recognise it is now more important than ever that the role of Ombudsman, and of my office, is held to account by the Senedd through the work of the Finance Committee and I will make myself available to the Committee to provide updates and to attend Committee to provide any further information or explanation that the Committee may seek, including the final report of the independent review.

Yours sincerely



Michelle Morris
Public Services Ombudsman