

From: communications <communications@ombudsman.wales>
Sent: 20 September 2024 13:16
To: communications
Subject: Independent Review finds the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' decision making to be appropriate, fair and free from political bias

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Press Release

Under embargo until 00:01, 27/09/24

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Independent Review finds the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' (PSOW's) decision making to be appropriate, fair and free from political bias. The Review concludes that this should provide reassurance to the public that they can have trust and confidence in the work of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and its Code of Conduct Team.

Background

Following the discovery of the inappropriate use of social media by a former team manager in the spring of this year, concerns were raised about the impartiality and independence of the office, particularly in relation to the handling of complaints about local councillors who may have breached the Code of Conduct for members.

The Ombudsman therefore commissioned an independent review, to establish whether processes, delegations, and decisions in relation to the assessment and

investigation of complaints by the Code of Conduct Team, and the former team manager, had been sound and free from political bias.

Dr Melissa McCullough* was appointed to lead the review.

Key Findings from the report

The Review concluded that:

- The PSOW's Code of Conduct processes and delegations are robust, in terms of safeguarding, fairness and impartiality. They are systematic, well documented and supplemented with appropriate guidance and the reasoning for decisions is required to be recorded and explained, as applicable.
- All decision-making is based solely on evidence, facts, and solid, well-articulated reasoning and, as such, there was no evidence of political bias. The case review found no evidence that the decision-making on any of the cases reviewed was influenced by any political affiliation of the person who made the complaint and/or the member who was complained about.
- There was no evidence that the former team manager expressed her personal views on political matters "akin to her social media posts" in the office and/or inappropriately influenced any other staff members, in the performance of their duties under the Local Government Act 2000.

The review made recommendations to improve the current safeguards for ensuring fairness and impartiality. Lessons learned were also identified to lessen the risk of this type of thing happening again in the future.

PSOW Response

The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales welcomes this report and the confirmation that decision making, in respect of Code of Conduct complaints, is free from political bias.

This review recognises the excellent work done by the Code of Conduct Team and we are pleased that the Independent Reviewer has stated that it should provide reassurance, to the public and elected members, that they can trust and have confidence in the work of PSOW.

All the recommendations are accepted, and the lessons learned will be used to further strengthen internal policies and practices, recruitment, and training.

Notes

- *Dr Melissa McCullough is the Commissioner for Standards for the Northern Ireland Assembly (since 2020) and also the Commissioner for Standards for the Jersey and Guernsey States Assemblies (since March 2023). Melissa

moved to Belfast from the United States in 1994 and obtained a PhD from Queen's University Belfast, Faculty of Medicine in 1997. She has worked as an academic in law, ethics, and professionalism in the UK and Ireland since 2005. Melissa also holds the Advanced Professional Certificate in Investigative Practice, a Master's degree in Bioethics and Applied Ethics and a Bachelor of Laws degree. Melissa served as a ministerial appointed non-executive director on the Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland from 2009 until 2020 and is currently a member of the BMJ Ethics Committee.

- The Ombudsman is available for pre-recorded interviews on Thursday 26 September and can consider live interviews on Friday 27 September.
- For further information or to make media interview requests, please contact communications@ombudsman.wales or call 0300 790 0203 (option 3).
- For more information about the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, visit www.ombudsman.wales

About us

We have three main roles:



We investigate complaints about public services.



We consider complaints about councillors breaching the Code of Conduct.



We drive systemic improvement of public services and standards of conduct in local government in Wales.

We are committed to supporting the Welsh language and its speakers. You can find more information on how we comply with the Welsh language standards on our website [here](#).



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