

Meeting of:	Standards Committee
Date of Meeting:	Thursday, 25 March 2021
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	All Scrutiny Committees
Report Title:	Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Annual Report 2019/20
Purpose of Report:	To present to Members extracts from the Annual Report and Accounts for the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales for the year ending 31st March, 2020 in respect of Members' Code of Conduct matters
Report Owner:	Principal Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer
Responsible Officer:	Report of the Monitoring Officer / Head of Legal and Democratic Services
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	This report does not require consultation to be undertaken
Policy Framework:	This is a matter for decision by the Standards Committee
Executive Summary:	<p>The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales report is a combined report relating to the dual functions of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (the Ombudsman).</p> <p>Standards Committee Members are requested to consider the references detailed in the Ombudsman's report in respect of complaints of Members of Local Authorities who have breached their Authority's Members' Code of Conduct as detailed at pages 10, 11, at Appendix 1, of this report, pages 12, 13 at Appendix 2 and pages 28-36 at Appendix 3.</p>

Recommendation

1. That the contents of the report be noted.

Reason for Recommendation

1. To inform Members of the Standards Committee.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Annual Report is a combined report addressing matters relating to the dual functions of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (the Ombudsman).

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1 There are two elements to the role of the Ombudsman, which are to consider complaints about public service providers in Wales and to consider complaints of members of Local Authorities who have breached their Authority's Members' Code of Conduct. The link to the full Annual Report can be found at <https://www.ombudsman.wales/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PSOW-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20.pdf>.
- 2.2 The Ombudsman's office has also produced an Executive Summary and an Easy Read Version of the document which can also be found via the Ombudsman's for Wales website at <https://www.ombudsman.wales/annual-report-accounts/>
- 2.3 With particular reference to Members' Code of Conduct complaints, the Ombudsman may consider complaints about the behaviour of:
 - County and County Borough Councils;
 - Community Councils;
 - Fire Authorities;
 - National Park Authorities.
- 2.4 The Annual Report notes that all the Authorities' Members' Code of Conduct set out in detail how Members must follow recognised principles of behaviour in public life. The Ombudsman further states that if a County Council wishes to make a complaint about another County Council in their own Authority, he would expect them first of all to make their complaint to that Authority's Monitoring Officer as it may be possible to resolve the matter locally without the Ombudsman's involvement.
- 2.5 Members' attention is drawn to the following :
 - Pages 10 and 11, of the Annual Report which are attached at Appendix 1 to this report and provide a snapshot of the year 2019/20.
 - Pages 12 and 13 of the report which refers to the Ombudsman's Office Key Performance Indicators, in particular KPI 4 the percentage of Code of Conduct Complaints which are investigated - cases closed at Appendix 2 to this report and to

- The Delivering Justice section of the Ombudsman's report which at pages 28-36 reproduced at Appendix 3 to this report refer to of allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct by Elected Members.

2.6 The Full Annual report has not been reproduced in its entirety as the remaining sections refer primarily to internal governance arrangements and financial matters.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

3.1 This report relates to the role of the Standards Committee to promote and maintain high standards of conduct of Members as detailed in the Council's Constitution.

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

4.1 None as a direct result of this report.

Employment

4.2 None as a direct result of this report

Legal (Including Equalities)

4.3 None as a direct result of this report.

5. Background Papers

None

Snapshot of the Year

2019/20

April

We delivered a TPAS Cymru seminar on effective complaints handling in social housing sector.



May

Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Bill was given Royal Assent.



June

We hosted International Ombudsman Seminar at Aberystwyth University.



July

We met the Welsh Language Commissioner to discuss Welsh Language Standards.



August

We participated in a Youth Rights Panel at the National Eisteddfod in Llanrwst.



September

We gave evidence to the Assembly's Health Committee on the Health and Social Care (Quality and Engagement) (Wales) Bill.



Snapshot of the Year

2019/20

October

Sitemore 'State of the Nation' report named website ombudsman.wales in its top 10.



November

We published our first ever human rights-focused casebook.



December

We attended the International Ombudsman Institute seminar on the Venice Principles.



January

Our new powers of Complaints Standards and investigations on own initiative became operational.



February

We issued three public interest reports, two covering health matters and one regarding student loan finance.



March

We published thematic report entitled 'Justice Mislaid: Lost Records and Lost Opportunities'.



Our Key Performance Indicators

Like all public bodies, we measure our performance against a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The table below presents an overview of our KPIs. We discuss these figures in more detail throughout this Report. You can navigate easily to the relevant sections of the Report by clicking on the KPI title in the table below.

	2018/19	Target 2019/20	2019/20	Target 2020/21
KPI 1: Complaints about public bodies - decision times				
Decision that a complaint is not within jurisdiction < 3 weeks	83%	90%	95%	90%
Decision taken not to investigate a complaint (after making initial enquiries) < 6 weeks	84%	90%	92%	90%
Where we seek early resolution, decision within 9 weeks	85%	90%	94%	90%
Decision to investigate and start investigation within 6 weeks of the date sufficient information is received	55%	80%	67%	80%
KPI 2: Complaints about public bodies which are investigated - cases closed				
Cases closed within 12 months	82%	85%	81%	85%
KPI 3: Code of Conduct complaints - decision times				
Decision taken not to investigate within 6 weeks	92%	95%	93%	90%
Decision to investigate and start investigation within 6 weeks of the date sufficient information is received	76%	80%	86%	90%
KPI 4: Code of Conduct complaints which are investigated - cases closed				
Cases closed within 12 months	88%	90%	88%	90%
KPI 5: Customer satisfaction*				
Easy to find PSOW	84%	90%	91 / 98%	91 / 98%
Service received helpful	51%	70%	63 / 83%	63 / 83%
Clear explanation of process and decision	71%	80%	65 / 89%	65 / 89%

* In 2019/20 we changed the way we measure our customer satisfaction, which makes it difficult to assess our performance against the 2019/20 targets. The 2019/20 results are presented for all respondents as well as those satisfied with the outcome.

	2018/19	Target 2019/20	2019/20	Target 2020/21
KPI 6: Compliance				
% of recommendations made due and complied with by public service providers in the year	N/A	N/A	72%	N/A
Number of compliance visits	1	3	4	6
KPI 7: HR				
Completion of PRDP (appraisal) reviews	100%	100%	100%	100%
Employee response to staff survey	86%	85%	92%	N/A
KPI 8: Staff training				
% of staff achieving target number of days of continuing professional development	77%	90%	93%	95%
KPI 9: Staff attendance				
Average number of days lost through sickness per member of staff	3.3	< 6	9.0	6.5
% of working days lost through staff sickness	1.2%	2.0%	3.4%	2.5%
% of working days lost through short term sickness	N/A	N/A	1.0%	1%
% of working days lost through long term sickness	N/A	N/A	2.4%	1.5%
KPI 10: Financial				
Cash repaid to Welsh Consolidated Fund	0.5%	< 3%	1.0%	< 3%
Unit cost per case	£599	£700	£669	£700
Support costs as percentage of budget	3.5%	< 5%	4.3%	< 5%
External Audit Opinion on Accounts	Unqualified accounts	Unqualified accounts	Unqualified accounts	Unqualified accounts
Internal Audit Opinion on internal controls	Substantial Assurance	Substantial Assurance	Substantial Assurance	Substantial Assurance
KPI 11: Complaints about us				
Number of complaints received	30	N/A	36	N/A
Number of complaints upheld	9	N/A	7	N/A
KPI 12: Sustainability				
Waste (kg)	31,110	<30,000	26,996	26,000
Electricity (kWh)	106,701	<100,000	104,521	104,000

Code of Conduct complaints

(a) New Code of Conduct complaints

This year we received **231** new Code of Conduct complaints - a decrease of 18% compared to 2018/19:

Body	2019/20	2018/19
Town and Community Councils	135	190
County and County Borough Councils	96	91
National Parks	0	1
Total	231	282

This decrease relates entirely to complaints made against members of Town and Community Councils. This is encouraging and suggests that standards of conduct of members of these bodies may be improving and/or that local resolution of issues may be taking place with good effect.

Nevertheless, within a small number of Town and Community Councils we are still seeing complaints which appear to border on frivolity or are motivated by political rivalry or clashes of personalities, rather than being true Code of Conduct issues.

In fact, 18% of the Town and Community Council complaints received related to members of just one body and were, in effect, 'tit for tat' complaints. In those cases, we were very grateful to the Monitoring Officer of the principal authority who agreed to visit the Council to remind its members of their obligations under the Code and their democratic responsibilities to the communities they serve.

We take a very dim view of complaints of this nature and have, where appropriate, advised members that making frivolous and/or vexatious complaints is a breach of the Code of Conduct in itself.

We categorise the subject of the Code of Conduct complaints based on [the Nolan Principles](#), which are designed to promote high standards in public life.

The table below shows the proportion of complaints received under each principle when compared to 2018/19:

Subject	2019/20	2018/19
Accountability and openness	11%	7%
Disclosure and registration of interests	17%	17%
Duty to uphold the law	7%	9%
Integrity	10%	13%
Objectivity and propriety	2%	2%
Promotion of equality and respect	49%	51%
Selflessness and stewardship	3%	1%

As in previous years, the majority of the Code of Conduct complaints that we received during 2019/20 related to **matters of ‘promotion of equality and respect’ (49%)** and **‘disclosure and registration of interests’ (17%)**.

We are concerned that these themes continue to dominate. In fact, we have seen year on year an increase in the number of complaints where bullying behaviour is being alleged, particularly from Clerks or employees/contractors of Local Authorities or Town and Community Councils.

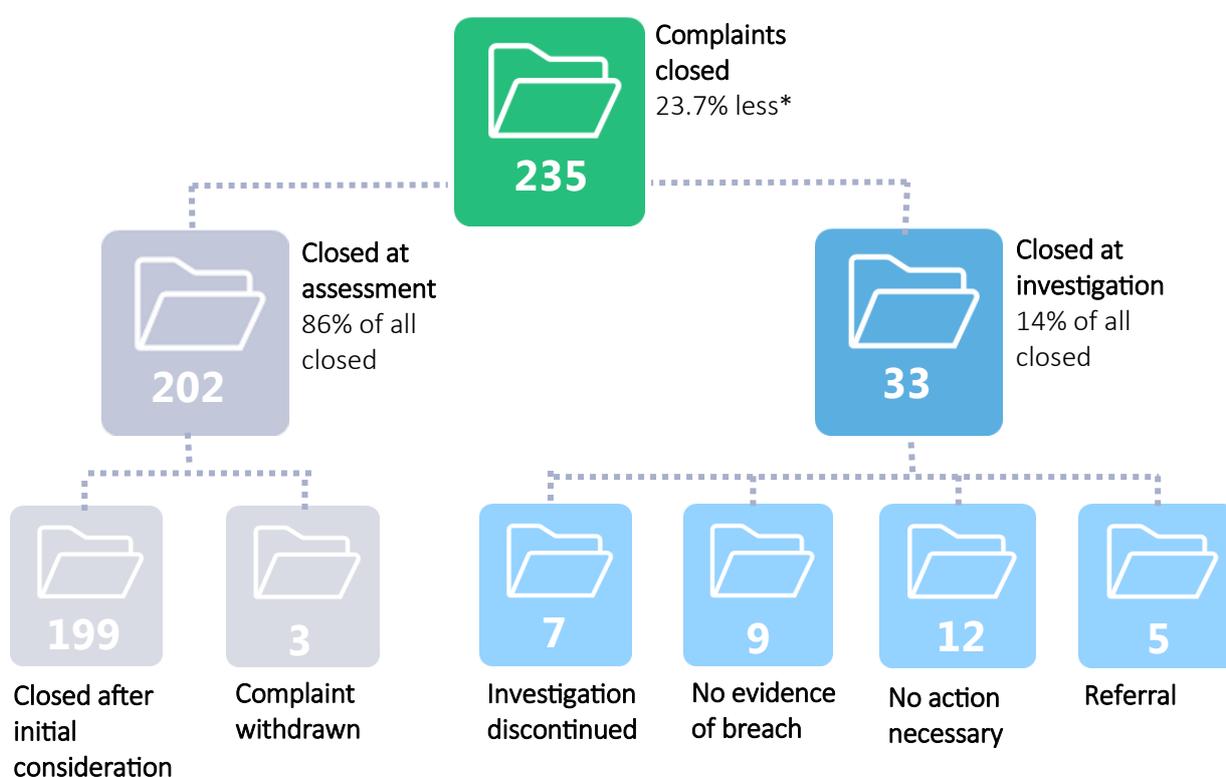
This suggests that members could benefit from training or refresher training on these subjects. However, our impression from investigations is that many members of Town and Community Councils often do not take up opportunities offered to them to receive training on the Code of Conduct.

Our view is that Code of Conduct training is essential to becoming a ‘good councillor’. We believe that members should embrace this training as soon as they become elected/ co-opted and refresh themselves on the provisions regularly. Whilst there is no statutory obligation for members of Town and Community Councils to complete such training, we and the Monitoring Officers across Wales strongly advise them to do so.

(b) Closed Code of Conduct complaints

This year we closed 235 Code of Conduct complaints. This represented a 23.7% decrease compared to the previous year. The rate of closures was also inevitably affected by the number of new complaints received. However, we are glad that we still closed more complaints this year than we received.

The graphic below presents an overview of outcomes of the Code of Conduct complaints that we closed in 2019/20:



* compared to 2018/19

All the Code of Conduct complaints received by our office are assessed against our two-stage test. We consider whether:

- a complaint is supported by direct evidence that is suggestive that a breach has taken place
- it is in the public interest to investigate that matter.

Public interest can be described as “something which is of serious concern and benefit to the public”

In 2019/20, **we closed 202 or approximately 86% of all Code of Conduct complaints after assessment against our two-stage test or after a complaint was withdrawn at the assessment stage**. This proportion is only marginally higher compared to the previous year (83%).

The remaining complaints taken forward to investigation represented the most serious of the complaints received.

During the life cycle of an investigation, we review the evidence gathered to assess whether it remains in the public interest to continue. Where it appears that investigating a matter is no longer in the public interest, we will make the decision to discontinue that investigation. Also, sometimes when we investigate we find no evidence of a breach. Finally, when an investigation is concluded, we can determine that ‘no action needs to be taken’ in respect of the matters investigated. This will often be the case if the member has acknowledged the behaviour (which may be suggestive of a breach of the Code) and has expressed remorse or taken corrective or reparatory action to minimise the impact of it on the individual, the public or the authority concerned.

We made one of these determinations in 85% of the Code of Conduct investigations this year.

In cases which cannot be concluded in this manner or feature serious breaches of the Code, it is necessary for us to refer these matters to a Standards Committee or the Adjudication Panel for Wales for consideration. In 2019/20 **we made 5 referrals - that is, we referred 2% of all the Code complaints that we closed, compared to 8 or 3% last year**.

The subjects of the Code of Conduct complaints that we closed this year largely mirrored the subjects of the new complaints received. The majority related to ‘disclosure and registration of interests’ and ‘promotion of equality and respect’. We did, however, investigate a higher proportion of cases related to ‘disclosure and registration of interests’ than the proportion of this theme in the closed Code of Conduct complaints overall:

Subject	All closed	Closed at assessment	Closed at investigation
Disclosure and registration of interests	17%	15%	30%
Promotion of equality and respect	49%	50%	42%

(c) Referrals

In 2019/20 we made:

- 4 referrals to the Standards Committees
- 1 referral to the Adjudication Panel for Wales

The Adjudication Panel for Wales and the Standards Committees consider the evidence we prepare, together with any defence put forward by the member concerned. They then determine whether a breach has occurred and if so, what penalty, if any, should be imposed.

The referrals to the Standards Committees this year featured behaviour which was considered to be disrespectful, capable of being perceived as bullying and/or disreputable behaviour. One of the cases referred involved conduct suggestive of bullying behaviour towards an employee of a contractor of the authority. At the time of writing, the Adjudication Panel for Wales was considering an appeal, on the issue of sanction only, in this case. Two of the referrals featured behaviour which suggested that the members had used their positions improperly to create an advantage or disadvantage for themselves or others. At the time of writing, these two referrals were awaiting determination.

The referral to the Adjudication Panel for Wales concerned the conduct and behaviour of a member in their private life and considered whether the behaviour complained about was capable of impacting on and bringing the authority into disrepute. It also concerned whether that member had used their position improperly for the advantage of another. In the case of this referral, the Panel determined there were serious breaches of the Code. As a result, a member of Flintshire County Council was suspended from holding office for 3 months.

Between 2016/17 and 2018/19, the Adjudication Panel for Wales and the Standards Committees upheld and found breaches in 88% of our referrals

This year Standards Committees and the Adjudication Panel for Wales also determined 5 cases referred by us in 2018/19. In all these cases, the Standards Committees and the Panel found serious breaches of the Code. Some of the breaches found included serious examples of disrespectful, disreputable and improper behaviour on the part of members towards other members and members of the public. In one case, the member was found to have been in breach of the Code for attempting to interfere with and prejudice our investigation of a complaint made about them. In all cases, the members, or former member, concerned were suspended for a period of 4 months.

(d) Lessons

As is clear from the above, we make referrals only in a very small number of cases. We do not believe that the cases that we do refer are indicative of a wider decline in member conduct. Nevertheless, outcomes of these referrals demonstrate the importance of standards of conduct in public life and provide a helpful indication to members of all authorities as to the behaviours expected of them.

However, even when we do not refer a case, we try to use our investigation as an opportunity to promote good practice. We usually remind the members investigated of their obligations under the Code and, where possible include instruction on further training or engagement with the authority to prevent further possible breaches. We may also make the members aware that the matter could be taken into consideration in the event of any future complaints of a similar nature.

We think that it is important that we continue to look for innovative and pragmatic ways to resolve matters to ensure a timelier outcome for all concerned. Where appropriate, we also want to give members the opportunity to account for their own actions and for further development.

We plan to revise our Guidance to Members to include analysis of recent cases determined by Standards Committees and the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

(e) Whistleblowing disclosure report

Since 1 April 2017, the Ombudsman is a 'prescribed person' under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The Act provides protection for employees who pass on information concerning wrongdoing in certain circumstances.

The protection only applies where the person who makes the disclosure reasonably believes:

1. that they are acting in the public interest, which means that protection is not normally given for personal grievances
2. that the disclosure is about one of the following:
 - criminal offences (this includes financial improprieties, such as fraud)
 - failure to comply with duties set out in law
 - miscarriages of justice
 - endangering someone's health and safety
 - damage to the environment
 - covering up wrongdoing in any of the above categories.

As a 'prescribed person' we are required to report annually on whistleblowing disclosures made in the context of Code of Conduct complaints only.

In 2019/20 we received 5 Code of Conduct complaints that would potentially meet the statutory definition of disclosure from employees or former employees of a council. The disclosures mostly related to allegations that the members concerned had 'failed to comply with duties set out in law'. Of these:

- we closed 2 after an investigation did not identify evidence of a breach of the Code
- we concluded in 1 case that no further action was required
- at the time of writing, investigation into 2 cases is continuing.

In addition, 3 cases which were ongoing in 2018/19 have now been concluded.

These cases have been referred to the Standards Committees of the respective councils for further consideration.

Timeliness

We are conscious of the need to consider complaints in a timely manner. The length of our process reflects the need to investigate thoroughly and diligently, to consider carefully the views and comments of complainants and public bodies and to draw on professional advice when needed. Whilst there is still more work for us to do, the timeliness of our service in 2019/20 has improved in most areas compared to the previous year.

The table below presents our performance this year against our Key Performance Indicators:

	Target	2019/20	2018/19
Complaints about public bodies - decision times			
Decision that a complaint is not within jurisdiction < 3 weeks	90%	95%	83%
Decision taken not to investigate a complaint (after making initial enquiries) < 6 weeks	90%	92%	84%
Where we seek early resolution, decision within 9 weeks	90%	94%	85%
Decision to investigate and start investigation within 6 weeks of the date sufficient information is received	80%	67%	55%
Complaints about public bodies which are investigated - cases closed			
Cases closed within 12 months	85%	81%	82%
Code of Conduct complaints - decision times			
Decision taken not to investigate within 6 weeks	95%	93%	92%
Decision to investigate and start investigation within 6 weeks of the date sufficient information is received	80%	86%	76%
Code of Conduct complaints which are investigated - cases closed			
Cases closed within 12 months	90%	88%	88%

Whilst we have made progress in improving the proportion of investigated cases where the investigation is started within 6 weeks, we have not yet reached our target of 80%. However, we have been working on this aspect of our service and have been doing better as the year progressed.

We reported last year that an increased number of complex complaints about health services would affect our ability to complete investigations within 12 months. We also reported that performance was likely to be worse in 2019/20 as more older cases were closed. We actually completed investigations within 12 months in 81% of cases (82% in 2018/19). We continue to consider some cases against public bodies brought forward from 2018/19. These will unfortunately continue to affect our ability in 2020/21 to meet our target of 85% cases closed within 12 months.

We measure timeliness from the point at which we have sufficient information from the complainant to decide how to proceed. This is so that our reported performance reflects the experience of complainants. However it also means that our performance is affected by any delays on the part of public bodies, or our clinical advisers to respond to us, as well as the

timeliness of our own work.

We are working hard to focus on completing investigations and issuing reports, but Covid-19 related pressures and restrictions are understandably limiting the ability of GPs, Health Boards and Local Authorities to engage with our investigations. We are avoiding putting additional pressures on these organisations during these challenging times.

Our performance regarding Code of Conduct complaints is broadly consistent with the previous year, with work ongoing to improve our performance against Key Performance Indicators.