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The investigation of a complaint
against
Councillor Steven Bletsoe
of
Bridgend Town Council

A report by the
Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
Case: 202204885

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Introduction

Report by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales on the investigation of a complaint made against Councillor Steven Bletsoe of Bridgend Town Council, of breaches of the Council's statutory Code of Conduct for Members

This report is issued under section 69 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Summary

We received a complaint that a member (“the Member”) of Bridgend Town Council had breached the Code of Conduct.

The complainant was concerned that the Member had: failed to declare a personal and prejudicial interest in a Council meeting; had taken part in a discussion in the Council meeting when he should not have done, given his interests; and that by taking part in the discussion, he had tried to influence a decision on the matter discussed to gain an advantage for his wife.

We found that Council members were asked to ratify draft minutes of a committee meeting. The draft minutes documented, in part, the Member’s wife’s behaviour at the committee meeting. The Member knew that his wife’s behaviour was the subject of a formal complaint to the Ombudsman’s office.

We found that the Member had a personal interest in the matter because Paragraph 10 of the Code states that members must regard themselves as having a personal interest in any business of their authority if a decision upon it might reasonably be regarded as affecting their wellbeing or that of a person with whom they live. Our Guidance also makes clear that a member will have a personal interest if the council business affects a close personal associate of the Member, and a close personal associate includes close relatives – in this case the Member’s wife.

We also found that the Member had a prejudicial interest in the matter because we considered that a member of the public with knowledge of the fact that he took part in discussions about ratifying minutes of a meeting which documented his wife’s behaviour, and which behaviour was the subject of a formal investigation to the Ombudsman, would reasonably regard these as so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Member’s judgment of the public interest.

We found, given the Member had a personal and prejudicial interest in the matter, his subsequent actions in failing to disclose his interests and in taking part in discussions, without dispensation from the Authority’s Standards Committee, were suggestive of various breaches

of Paragraph 14 of the Code including that he must not seek to influence a decision about matters.

We also found that the Member, in making the suggestions he did regarding amendments to the draft minutes, used his position improperly in an attempt to gain an advantage for his wife, and a disadvantage to the person who had complained about his wife's behaviour, contrary to paragraph 7(a) of the Code. The Member's failure to seek advice on the matter from the County's Monitoring Officer, or to seek dispensation from the Standards Committee in order to make representations, was also suggestive of a breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code because he acted in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing his office or authority into disrepute.

We referred our report on our investigation to the Monitoring Officer of Bridgend County Borough Council for consideration by its Standards Committee.

The Complaint

1. On 25 October **2022**, I received a complaint from Mrs Leanne Edwards, the Clerk at Bridgend Town Council (“the Council”). She was concerned that Councillor Steven Bletsoe (“the Member”) had failed to observe the Code of Conduct for members of Bridgend Town Council. She said that the Member had failed to declare a prejudicial interest in a matter and had improperly influenced council members in order to gain an advantage for his wife, Councillor Freya Bletsoe. A copy of the complaint is attached at Appendix 1.

Legal background

2. As required by Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 (“the Act”), the Council has adopted a Code of Conduct for members which incorporates the provisions of a Model Code contained in an order made by the Welsh Ministers. A copy of that Code is at Appendix 4. Council members are required to sign an undertaking that, in performing their functions, they will observe the Council’s Code of Conduct. Councillor Bletsoe gave such an undertaking in May 2022. A copy of that declaration is attached at Appendix 5.

3. Section 69 of the Act provides the authority for my investigation and the production of this report.

My investigation

4. Having considered the complaint we received; the following provisions of the Code of Conduct were relevant:

- 6(1)(a) – [Members] must not conduct [themselves] in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing [their] office or authority into disrepute.
- (7a) - [Members] must not in [their] official capacity or otherwise, use or attempt to use [their] position improperly to confer on or secure for [themselves], or any other person, an advantage or create or avoid for [themselves], or any other person, a disadvantage.

- 10(2)(c)(i) – [Members] must regard [themselves] as having a personal interest in any business of [their] authority if a decision upon it might reasonably be regarded as affecting [their] wellbeing or financial position, or that of a person with whom [they] live, or any person with whom [they] have a close personal association.
- 11(1) - Where [Members] have a personal interest in any business of [their] authority and [they] attend a meeting at which that business is considered, [they] must disclose orally to that meeting the existence and nature of that interest before or at the commencement of that consideration, or when the interest becomes apparent.
- 14(1)(a) - Where [Members] have a prejudicial interest in any business of [their] authority [they] must, unless [they] have obtained a dispensation from [their] authority's standards committee withdraw from the room, chamber or place where a meeting considering the business is being held.
- 14(1)(c) - Where [Members] have a prejudicial interest in any business of [their] authority [they] must, unless [they] have obtained a dispensation from [their] authority's standards committee not seek to influence a decision about that business.
- 14(1)(e) - Where [Members] have a prejudicial interest in any business of [their] authority [they] must, unless [they] have obtained a dispensation from [their] authority's standards committee not make any oral representations (whether in person or some form of electronic communication) in respect of that business or immediately cease to make such oral representations when the prejudicial interest becomes apparent.

5. The Member was informed we had decided to investigate on 13 December 2022 (Appendix 2).

6. During our investigation, we obtained copies of minutes and other documents from the Council, and we have interviewed the complainant

and Deputy Clerk to the Council. Copies of all statements and documents referred to in this report are attached.

7. We put the evidence we found to the Member so that he could review it before responding to our questions in interview. A transcript of the interview is available at Appendix 12.

8. The Member has also had the opportunity to comment on a draft of this report which included our provisional views and findings.

My guidance on the Code of Conduct

9. I have issued guidance for members of local authorities in Wales on the Model Code of Conduct (“my Guidance”). I include at Appendix 13 extracts of my Guidance which are relevant to this complaint.

10. Paragraph 3.6 of my Guidance states members, while carrying out their duties, must consider whether they have a personal interest and, if so, whether they need to disclose it. Paragraph 3.8 makes clear a member has a personal interest when any business of the council is likely to affect somebody with whom the member has a close personal association. A close personal associate includes close relatives (Paragraph 3.15).

11. My Guidance includes reference to a case example (28) where a member was found in breach of the Code for failing to declare a personal and prejudicial interest at a meeting which considered the Clerk’s remuneration package. The Member and the Clerk were engaged to be married at the time. The Adjudication Panel found that the Member should have declared a personal interest in the item of business by virtue of his close personal association with the Clerk. There are other Adjudication Panel cases of relevance, and these authorities are cited in the footnotes below.¹²

¹ [APW/001/2015-016/CT: Councillor Paul Cawley | The Adjudication Panel for Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

² [apw-decision-report-s-jenkins.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

Events

12. On 14 June 2022, the Regeneration Committee of the Council met. The Member and his wife, Councillor Freya Bletsoe, were in attendance. The Member was Chair of the Committee.

13. A discussion took place about extending an invitation to a very high profile royal guest to unveil a plaque. The Clerk provided advice that such a decision, given its resource consequences, would need to be referred to the Council. The Clerk also provided advice as to why the matter could not be dealt with “on pink papers”, as suggested by Councillor Freya Bletsoe. (Confidential/exempt information relating to Council business is provided to councillors on pink paper, to make clear the confidential nature of matters).

14. Councillor Freya Bletsoe disagreed with both pieces of advice the Clerk provided, and the discussion escalated to such an extent that the Clerk told the Committee members that she felt bullied and intimidated by Councillor Freya Bletsoe’s behaviour towards her.

15. On 14 and 15 June 2022, Councillor Freya Bletsoe raised a formal complaint with the Clerk’s Line Manager about events that occurred in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022.

16. On 24 June 2022, the Clerk submitted a formal complaint to the Council about Councillor Freya Bletsoe. This included concerns about Councillor Freya Bletsoe’s behaviour towards her in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022.

17. On 27 June 2022, the Clerk submitted a formal complaint to my Office about Councillor Freya Bletsoe. This included concerns about her behaviour towards the Clerk in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022. We decided to investigate these concerns and Councillor Freya Bletsoe was informed of our decision in July 2022.

18. On 26 September 2022, at a full Council meeting, which the Member attended, there was an agenda item to “receive draft minutes of the Regeneration Committee meeting held on 14th June 2022”. The draft minutes included details about the contentious discussion that had taken

place between the Clerk and the Member's wife. The draft minutes referred, among other things, to Councillor Freya Bletsoe having:

- Disputed the advice given by the Clerk.
- Asked the Committee to obtain "proper advice" and having said that the advice "undermined" the Committee's delegated authority.
- Become "irate" and "angry".
- Announced to the Chair that she did not wish the Clerk to interrupt her.
- Asked the Clerk to specify where her advice came from.
- Suggested she was annoyed at the Clerk "throwing curve balls".
- Abruptly left the meeting without apology.

19. The Member did not declare a personal or prejudicial interest in the agenda item and remained in the meeting to discuss it. The Member stated he had questions regarding inaccuracies in the minutes and proposed that they be deferred to the next meeting, which was agreed.

20. On 24 October 2022, the Regeneration Committee met. There was again an agenda item to "confirm and sign the Minutes of the Regeneration Committee Meeting held on 14th June 2022". The Member did not declare a personal or prejudicial interest in the agenda item and remained in the meeting to discuss it. The minutes of the meeting of 24 October 2022 record that the Member said:

- That the minutes from the previous meeting [14 June 2022] needed to be reviewed.
- That he was not commending the minutes for sign off as he felt that one or two references should not have been included and the purpose of the minutes was not to record conflict, just resolutions.
- That other Councillors have left meetings previously without apology and not been recorded and that he had heard Councillor Freya Bletsoe say, "I'm sorry I can't do this", prior to leaving the meeting.

21. Although not stated in the minutes, a recording of the meeting (which was taken by the complainant on her phone when she attended the meeting remotely as a guest) showed that the Member also said "my

original proposal for the minutes...was to state for the public record that there had been a disagreement between a councillor and the Clerk and the Clerk...[stated] she has felt bullied and intimidated...My concern is that we can't openly discuss this because there are people who are in attendance, both officers and councillors who maybe asked for witness statements so we can't discuss it, around our recollection of this because we may be asked individually...to give witness statements".

22. The minutes of the meeting then record that Councillor Spiller said that, although he was not present at the meeting in question, he believed the minutes were too detailed and not a summary. The minutes of the meeting went on to record that he said, "he was happy that the minutes had been taken accurately, but was not comfortable with page 3, bullet points 3 to 10 and proposed that bullet points 3 to 10 be removed and replaced with 'Cllr F Bletsoe disputed the advice given by the Clerk, a discussion took place after which Cllr F Bletsoe left the meeting at 7.30pm'". The Committee resolved to summarise the meeting as Councillor Spiller had proposed.

23. On 25 October 2022, my Office received the Clerk's complaint that the Member had tried to influence Committee members to remove details about his wife's behaviour at the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 14 June 2022 for the personal gain of his wife.

24. On 12 December 2022, there was a full Council meeting. One agenda item was to "to receive draft minutes of the Regeneration Committee meeting held on 24th October 2022". The Member said he believed he said in the meeting of 24 October that Councillor Freya Bletsoe had said in the Regeneration Meeting of 14 June 2022 "I can't do this, **I'm leaving**" rather than "I'm sorry I can't do this" as recorded in the draft minutes of 24 October 2022. He requested that this be recorded in the minutes. The Deputy Clerk advised, if his proposal to amend the minutes was seconded and approved at the next Regeneration Meeting, the minutes could be changed.

25. At this stage, the minutes of the meeting of 12 December 2022 show that Councillor Felton stated that the previous amendment to the minutes of 14 June 2022 was problematic and impacted "tone and intent".

She also expressed concern that changes to the minutes of 14 June 2022 could be construed as interfering with the minutes.

26. The minutes of the meeting of 12 December 2022 go on to show that the Mayor was asked if he could recall whether the Member had previously referred to his wife having said she was leaving. The Mayor could not recall what was said. The Member said he was happy for his comments to be recorded in the minutes of “this full Council meeting” of 12 December 2022. Council then resolved “to receive and note the minutes of the Regeneration Committee meeting held on 24th October 2022”.

What the Witnesses said

The Complainant, Leanne Edwards, Clerk to the Council

27. The Clerk said (Appendix 1 and Appendix 9):

- She watched the Council meeting of September 2022 online as a guest. The Member queried the minutes of the Regeneration Committee meeting and said there were some inaccuracies. It was agreed that a discussion about the minutes would be deferred.
- She attended the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 24 October 2022 online, as a member of the public could.
- She recorded some of the meeting on her phone as she was concerned the Member wanted to amend the minutes which formed part of her complaint to the Ombudsman.
- On 12 December 2022, when the draft minutes of the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 24 October 2022 were presented, the Member queried the minutes again. The discussion was noted by the Council.
- The Member did not seek advice from the Clerk as to whether he should declare an interest in the above mentioned meetings.

- She said that the evidence she had provided to the Ombudsman, in its ongoing investigation of her concern, was being tampered with and the references to Councillor Freya Bletsoe regarding the incident were being redacted.
- If something happened in a meeting, the minutes were the only evidence and because they had now been redacted, evidence had been removed.
- She said the Member instigated this, and she felt it was wrong because he was Councillor Freya Bletsoe's husband and he therefore had an interest. She felt he influenced others in his position as Chair.

The Deputy Clerk – Debra Jones

28. The Deputy Clerk, Debra Jones said (Appendix 10):

- After the meeting of 26 September 2022, in which it was agreed that a discussion about the minutes of the Regeneration Committee of 14 June 2022 would be postponed, she relayed advice in the full Council meeting of 17 October 2022 that any proposed changes or amendments to the minutes of the meeting of 14 June 2022 should be put in writing to the Deputy Clerk. The Deputy Clerk would then circulate these proposals to Committee members in advance of the next Regeneration Committee meeting of 24 October 2022.
- In the meeting of 24 October 2022, the Member reminded fellow members that items relating to personnel matters could not be discussed and the Deputy Clerk did not understand why the Member said this.
- The Member apologised for not having sent his amendments in writing and he said he believed there were some items which should not be in the minutes.

- Councillor Spiller proposed that the minutes were too detailed. The Members took a vote, and it was resolved that a number of bullet points would be removed.
- The Deputy Clerk’s impression was that Councillor Spiller and the Member had discussed the matter beforehand and were ready to say what was said in the meeting.
- She found it strange that the Member had not given his proposed changes in writing, which she said would have been a lot more helpful.
- She felt a “game was being played” to make sure the minutes were framed with a particular narrative, as she knows members are aware of how important minutes are when there is an Ombudsman investigation.
- She thought that the Democratic Services Officer’s (“the DSO”) confidence was affected, because she was the staff member who minuted the meeting and drafted the minutes. She had told the DSO that this was not something she should take personally.
- She said the Member was a good councillor and it was a shame this had come about. She felt he should have left the meeting of 24 October 2022 and not led the discussion about the minutes of the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022.

What Councillor Steven Bletsoe said

29. The Member in his written submissions and in interview said (Appendix 3 and Appendix 12):

- He contested that any breach of the Code had occurred. He considered there was no basis for the complaint. He did not consider he had a prejudicial interest; at worst he had a “loose personal interest”.

- As Chair of the Committee, he did not feel that the minutes were factually accurate. He also considered they were not written in the way in which the Council records minutes or in accordance with guidance from the WLGA and One Voice Wales. He said they were “erroneously in a verbatim style”.
- “Regardless of who this “dispute” was between, [he] believed that using the minutes as an attempt to write a narrative of the event was actually bringing [the Council] into disrepute and [he] acted as a Councillor and Chair of a committee to remedy what [he] considered to be a very serious breach of Council standards”.
- He does not believe such important and sensitive situations should be played out in a political arena. He believes that the situation should not be dealt with in the minutes of a public document of minutes. He believed that the minutes should state that a disagreement took place between the Councillor and the Officer and that would suffice under the adopted policy of the Council.
- There was no “manipulation of the minutes as... claimed, just the public recording that a debate occurred between the Clerk and a Councillor, which was all that was required under the practise of the Council”.
- He considered it a “dangerous precedent” if, as Chair, he was unable to voice his concern that minutes were not correct “and potentially allow incorrect minutes to be proposed for approval, simply because I am married to a person in the meeting...”
- The fact that he is married to the person alleged to be involved in the dispute “had zero influence in my actions regardless of the accusation levelled against me”.
- He said it was his belief that the minutes “...were deliberately written to support [the Clerk’s] complaint against Councillor Freya Bletsoe. He considered that the Clerk’s complaint [about his wife] had been “engineered” and that the Clerk wanted her version of events of the

Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022 to be available, outside of the Council's usual way of minuting.

- He abstained from the vote. Once he had made his views as the Chair of the Committee known, he was satisfied to allow the Committee itself to decide what it felt was the best course of action, through a majority.
- He did not, and would refuse to speak to any other Independent Councillor on the Regeneration Committee meeting before this or any other committee meeting. This is not something he has ever done.
- There was no benefit to be gained from his actions; the Ombudsman complaint would continue into the Clerk's original complaint, this would not alter, however, he had the right, as the Chair of the Committee to state that he believed that the minutes were incorrect and should not be verbatim "...otherwise, where is democracy?".
- He referred to the minutes of the full Council of 17 October 2022, which referenced a dispute between 2 councillors to show that debates between councillors were not usually minuted. He said, "I am being accused of manipulating a situation to record minutes in exactly the same way that the Council records minutes".
- He simply believed that "some of the detail was wrong and the style of recording was incorrect... [the Clerk] was ...miffed that someone (anyone) was changing her narrative of the occurrence, which as the Chair of the Committee I have the right to put forward my recording of the event".
- There was a "key" line that he felt needed to be addressed. He heard his wife say, "I'm sorry, I can't take this any more I'm leaving". So, it "stood out" to him when the draft minutes said his wife abruptly left the meeting, without apology. He may have been one of the only ones to raise this issue because he was with his wife in Yorkshire when the meeting took place, whereas others were attending in different locations remotely. The apology when leaving the meeting,

was something he felt the Ombudsman could consider was important.

- He did not say that people who were in the meeting could not comment; he said that people who were in the meeting could be called as a witness in the investigation and that they should be mindful of that and pay respect to proper process. He said he did not want people to have an open discussion about their recollection that would jeopardise the complaint. He wanted people to allow the process of the Clerk taking forward her complaint in the proper way.
- When asked if he thought about his position and relationship with Councillor Freya Bletsoe before taking part in the agenda discussion, he said he decided 2 things. He had decided he was not going to make a “public declaration that Freya’s my wife because everyone in Bridgend knows that anyway...” and, secondly, that whatever happened, he was not going to vote, which is why he abstained.
- When asked why he had decided not to vote, he said because of the public perception, he tried to err on the side of caution while trying to find a balance.
- When asked if he sought advice, he said he had nobody to go to because he could not approach the Clerks and One Voice Wales was for Clerks and the Chair. There is no support for community councillors.
- He is not naïve, he knows the political games being played, and therefore why the minutes were so important.
- He said everyone on the Committee is a very good friend of his wife (except Councillor Felton), so they could not have chaired the meeting and would have been in the same position as the Member in having difficulties in making representations on the matter.
- If he made sure the truth was known, and he was charged with not declaring an interest, he’d rather the truth be known.

- When asked, he did not agree that the removal of the details of Councillor Freya Bletsoe's behaviour from the minutes reflected things in a better light for her or were advantageous to her. He said the minutes still reflected there was a dispute, and the Ombudsman could then interview witnesses etc. The Ombudsman would not take minutes as absolute; they would interview.
- When asked if he thought changing the minutes could jeopardise the complaint, he said allowing the minutes to go through incorrectly would have done exactly the same because he knew they were wrong.
- When asked if he considered his conduct could have brought the Council or his office into disrepute, he said he did not. He said he would not have done anything differently, because fundamental and core to his values was that truth was more important than anything else and the truth was that the minutes were not right, and his actions were with a view to making sure the Council did not bring itself into disrepute.

30. The Member provided comments on our draft report which are appended in full at Appendix 14. The Member said, among other things:

- Paragraph 19 of my report was not accurate because he had arrived late for the full Council meeting of 26 September 2022, having been detained by a County Borough Council meeting. The agenda item, to receive the minutes of the Regeneration Committee of 14 June 2022, had already been “bypassed”. However, Councillor Morelli asked the Mayor to return to the item “on instruction from a WhatsApp chat”. It was at this point that he made a public statement that as Chair he did not agree with the accuracy of the minutes, and at this time derogatory messages appeared on the chat function on screen in the meeting at 19:23 (Appendix 5, Page 42). He said there was “clear evidence of the political manipulation that was being undertaken around the matter, which has been completely ignored and again, is being ignored to create a false narrative around the matter.”
- He was concerned that the complainant’s recording of the meeting of 24 October 2022 had been taken covertly without his permission or that of the Council. Such action by the Clerk was contrary to the Council’s Standing Orders, and also contrary to her general position that meetings should not be recorded. He considered this was a “pre-planned attempt to provide evidence” and the complainant’s motivation was to make sure the minutes reflected “her singular recollection of them to support her separate complaint [the complaint she had made to the Ombudsman about Councillor Freya Bletsoe’s behaviour]”. He felt this was an extremely important aspect not conveyed in our draft report. “My singular motivation has been the full accuracy and truth of the minutes, the complainant’s motivation is that the minutes are to her recollection and to support a separate complaint against another member...”
- He considers it an important factor that all councillors, other than Councillor Wood, attended the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 14 June 2022 remotely. He was the only person in the same location as Councillor Freya Bletsoe (as they were both attending remotely too) and that the minute takers were only able to hear her

through the Owl System (a video conferencing camera) in the Chamber.

- He considers details about why Councillor Freya Bletsoe disputed the advice in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022 should be included, and that certain details, such as that complaints were made about Councillor Freya Bletsoe to the Ombudsman, should not have been included in the draft report as he considers they are not relevant to the complaint about him.
- Although the minutes of the meeting of 24 October 2022 record that Councillor Spiller “advised that he was happy that the minutes had been taken accurately, but was not comfortable with page 3, bullet points 3 to 10...” as referred to at Paragraph 22, he said this was misleading. He said Councillor Spiller stated that “he was not disputing that they had been [taken accurately] as he was not at the meeting”.
- He felt strongly that the WhatsApp messages he provided to my Investigation Officer prior to being interviewed, which were appended to the report as part of his written response, should be referred to in the report. He considered these showed that Councillor Felton’s comments about the Regeneration Committee minutes of 14 June 2022 (Paragraph 25) did not reflect her true position. He said the messages showed she had made her comments due to political pressure and interference from party colleagues.
- He felt an important factor to include in the report was that in the meeting of 26 September 2022, where the complainant attended as a guest, there was only one guest at the meeting and a guest [identity showing as ‘Carwyn (Guest)’] made remarks in the on screen chat at 19:23 which said “what aspect of the minutes is being questioned for accuracy? this is being fudged – turn up late and then put off making a decision on important issues” (Appendix 3, page 42). He felt this showed the complainant’s motivation and that the complaint was malicious. [No evidence has been provided to suggest that the Clerk is the guest shown on screen].

- He said there has never been a contradiction that the change he proposed was not correct, and therefore there has to be an acceptance that his proposal was true.
- He said our investigation was not thorough because we did not interview all the councillors “who were present in the meeting”. [It is not clear which meeting the Member may be referring to].
- He referred to his concerns that the complainant “wrote” the contentious minutes, and at other times to the complainant’s “version of the [contentious] minutes produced by her staff and taken from her notes”. He considers an adverse inference should be drawn because the complainant’s notes of the meeting have been destroyed and cannot be checked. He also said a very important factor was that the Deputy Clerk, who provided witness evidence in the case, was the complainant’s best friend, they have worked together before, they holiday together and “they do everything together”. He said this has a material impact on the evidence gathered in the matter.
- He felt another important factor, not mentioned in our report, was that not a single member of the public had made a complaint to my Office about the matter.
- He reiterated that he did not seek “to gain anyone an advantage at any time”, his “drive and motivation” was “to ensure true and accurate recording of official minutes, which I knew were incorrect, regardless of who they were about.” Similarly, he said he had no intention of influencing or restricting debate and this was an “insulting” conclusion to draw. Rather, because the complaint about Councillor Freya Bletsoe had been discussed in the Personnel Committee meeting on pink papers, he considered if the councillors discussed matters at the Regeneration Meeting, which were not on pink papers, they could have breached the Code. He said, “my advice as Chair of the Committee was designed to protect them and that of the Clerk, whose personal information I was seeking to protect.”

- He said he did not try to influence other councillors and we have not interviewed councillors to ask them if it was true. He said he did not try to influence Councillor Spiller in the meeting of 24 October 2022, and we have not interviewed Councillor Spiller.
- He disagreed with the conclusions in my draft report overall. He said of particular concern was that a councillor in attendance at a meeting could not state that minutes were wrong, when knowing that to be the case, and it is “beyond belief that the Ombudsman considers I should not have corrected the public record so that it was true and accurate”. He also said he was required to act equally in regard to the 7 Nolan principles, and he did so in this case by telling the truth about what he heard in the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 14 June 2022.

Undisputed facts

31. The Member is married to Councillor Freya Bletsoe.

32. On 14 June 2022, the Regeneration Committee met, which the Member and his wife, Councillor Freya Bletsoe, attended.

33. The Clerk told Committee members in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022, that she felt bullied and intimidated by the Member’s wife.

34. On 14 and 15 June 2022, Councillor Freya Bletsoe raised a formal complaint to the Clerk’s Manager about events that occurred in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022.

35. On 24 June 2022 and 27 June 2022, the Clerk submitted formal complaints to the Council and to my Office about Councillor Freya Bletsoe (which included concerns about what happened in the Regeneration Committee meeting of 14 June 2022).

36. On 26 September 2022, at a Council meeting, the Member, who had not declared a personal or prejudicial interest, stated he had questions regarding inaccuracies in the minutes of the Regeneration Committee of

14 June 2022 presented for ratification. The item was deferred to the next meeting.

37. On 24 October 2022, the Regeneration Committee met and discussed whether to approve the draft Minutes of the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 14 June 2022.

38. The Member did not declare a personal or prejudicial interest in the meeting held on 24 October 2022. The Member made representations about the meeting of 14 June 2022 and the way in which discussions involving his wife were recorded in the minutes.

39. On 24 October 2022, the Committee resolved to summarise the minutes from the meeting of 14 June 2022 and to remove any details about the dispute and the Member's wife's behaviour.

40. On 25 October 2022, we received the Clerk's complaint about the Member's conduct in his involvement in ratifying minutes of the Regeneration Committee of 14 June 2022.

Disputed facts

41. Did the Member have a personal interest in the agenda item to ratify committee minutes of 14 June 2022?

42. Did the Member have a prejudicial interest in the agenda item to ratify committee minutes of 14 June 2022?

43. Did the Member attempt to influence other Committee members on the question of whether minutes, as drafted, should be ratified - either inside or outside the Chamber?

44. Was there any advantage to his wife in the Member raising concerns about the draft minutes?

Did the Member have a personal interest in the agenda item to ratify committee minutes of 14 June 2022?

45. The Member considered that he did not have a personal interest in the matter or, if he did, it was “at the very worst a loose personal interest”.

46. Paragraph 10 of the Code states that members must regard themselves as having a personal interest in any business of their authority if a decision upon it might reasonably be regarded as affecting their wellbeing or that of a person with whom they live. My Guidance also makes clear that a member will have a personal interest if the council business affects a close personal associate of the Member, and a close personal associate includes close relatives.

47. A decision as to whether the draft minutes, which documented his wife’s behaviour, should be ratified could reasonably be regarded as affecting the wellbeing of his wife (a person with whom he lived). I consider the Member therefore had a personal interest in the matter pursuant to 10(2)(c)(i) of the Code.

Did the Member have a prejudicial interest in the agenda item to ratify committee minutes of 14 June 2022?

48. The Member did not consider he had a prejudicial interest in the matter.

49. Paragraph 12 of the Code states that, where a member has a personal interest, they will also have a prejudicial interest if the interest is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice their judgment of the public interest.

50. In this case, I consider that a member of the public with knowledge of the following listed factors, would reasonably regard these as so significant that they were likely to prejudice the Member’s judgment of the public interest when he took part in a discussion about whether the draft Committee minutes should be ratified:

- The Member's wife was being investigated by my Office for concerns about her professional conduct in relation to a Committee meeting.
- The Member was aware that his wife disputed that she behaved inappropriately in the Committee meeting in question.
- The draft minutes of the Committee meeting detailed the dispute between the Member's wife and Clerk and detailed his wife's alleged behaviour at that meeting.

51. While the Member considered most Committee members had similar difficulties in making representations because they were friends with his wife, I am not persuaded that friendship, unless deemed to be a close personal associate, would have put them in the same position as the Member; one Committee member made a proposal as to how the meeting should be minuted, which was seconded by another member. The Member's relationship with Councillor Freya Bletsoe as her spouse is entirely different.

Did the Member attempt to influence other Committee members on the question of whether minutes as drafted should be ratified - either inside or outside the Chamber?

Was there any advantage to his wife in the Member raising concerns about the draft minutes?

52. The Member was Chair of the Regeneration Committee. In 3 meetings (26 September 2022, 24 October 2022 and 12 December 2022) he referred to there being inaccuracies in the draft minutes of 14 June 2022 which recorded the discussion between his wife and the Clerk, and which detailed the alleged behaviour of his wife. In the meeting of 24 October 2022, the Member said he would not commend the minutes from the previous meeting [14 June 2022]. The Member specifically referred to his wife having said she was leaving and that he considered she apologised, because she said, "I'm sorry, I can't take this any more I'm leaving".

53. More generally, the Member told the meeting that he considered minutes should record resolutions not conflict, and that he considered the minutes should refer to a dispute between a member and the Clerk and no more.

54. Even after the Regeneration Committee of 24 October 2022, when members had resolved to simply state in the minutes of 14 June 2022 that “Cllr F Bletsoe disputed the advice given by the Clerk, a discussion took place after which Cllr F Bletsoe left the meeting at 7.30pm”, the Member again raised in a subsequent meeting of 12 December 2022 that his wife had apologised and said she was leaving.

55. In his interview, the Member said that he felt this was a point my Office may consider important and that he may have been one of the only people who could have raised the point, given he was with his wife when she said this (whereas others were in different locations, remotely).

56. While the Member said he did not consider the amendments could be favourable to his wife, because my Office would conduct its own investigation through witness statements, by his own admission, he considered the point about his wife having apologised before leaving a significant one, which he thought my Office may find important.

57. The Member also said he was content to leave the Committee to decide the issue of the minutes once he had made his points. However, when the Committee decided to record that “Councillor F Bletsoe left the meeting at 7.30”, he raised the issue again, in a subsequent meeting, that his wife had apologised and said she was leaving. It was clear, therefore, that the Member was attempting to influence matters and was determined to make sure his recollection of events was recorded.

58. The Member also told Committee members that the issue could not be openly discussed, and in his interview, the Member told us that he felt members should not discuss their recollection about what happened on 14 June as this could jeopardise the complaint. It therefore appeared that the Member was seeking to influence the Committee to record matters in the way he felt appropriate, and for there to be no detailed discussion between members, as that would not be appropriate, in the Member’s

view. While the Member in his comments on the draft report disagrees strongly about this, and stated his advice was designed to protect others and the Clerk, I remain of the same view.

59. The Member said the Council would not usually record details of disputes, and he referred to minutes of a particular meeting as an example. I note the example did not simply record that a dispute occurred with no further details, as suggested. Rather the minutes went on to record the nature of the dispute and summarised what some members had said. I am not of the view there is evidence to suggest the Council protocol was clear that only resolutions, and never disputes, would be recorded in minutes. In any event, whether matters were minuted in a manner that was usual for the Council is not relevant to the issue of concern which was whether the Member should have involved himself in the discussions that related to his wife.

60. I consider, on balance, the evidence is suggestive of the Member trying to influence the outcome of what should be recorded in the minutes of the contentious meeting in question, for the advantage of his wife, to portray her alleged comments and actions at the meeting in the best possible way. He felt my Office would consider the matter of his wife leaving the meeting with an apology to be an important factor. I am not persuaded by the Member's comments on the draft report. He said that his comments in interview were taken out of context and that he was providing but "one example of why the minutes were wrong and why they could not be relied upon in the separate investigation" and why interviews in the separate investigation were so important.

The Member has also expressed concern that I arrived at my conclusions without interviewing other councillors to understand if they considered they had been influenced. This concern may arise from a misunderstanding of the Code which is clear that when councillors have a prejudicial interest in council business, they must not "seek to influence a decision about that business". It is irrelevant as to whether any councillors were in fact influenced and it was neither necessary nor proportionate therefore to interview councillors in this case.

61. One of the Clerk's concerns was that the Member used his contacts to influence others (not just in the meeting but outside the chamber). The Clerk was concerned that Councillor Spiller's proposal that the minutes were too detailed and should be summarised to say only that a dispute occurred (which the Member had himself suggested a little earlier in the same meeting), may have been discussed with the Member before the meeting. While I can understand the Clerk's concerns, particularly given that Councillor Spiller was not, in fact, in the original meeting, the Member stated that no such conversation took place. While I note the Deputy Clerk had the impression in the meeting that Councillor Spiller and the Member knew what they were going to say in advance, I do not consider there is sufficient evidence to suggest a discussion took place before the meeting. While Councillor Spiller was not at the original meeting, the principle about what generally should be recorded in meetings was one Councillor Spiller was entitled to have an opinion about. As mentioned above, however, given the Member made this point first in the meeting, I consider this an attempt to influence a decision on matters.

62. The Member raised concerns in his response to the draft report that the recording was covert and may not be admissible. While it appears that the Clerk may have breached the Council's Standing Orders, by recording the meeting without the permission of the Council, this does not render the recording inadmissible in our view. One of the important factors we consider when assessing whether to include recording evidence in our reports, is whether we are satisfied the recording is accurate and has not been altered in any way. The Member in interview confirmed the transcript was not inaccurate, and had opportunities both in interview, and in responding to my draft report, to challenge any inaccuracies which he considered material. The Member in interview did raise his concerns about trust because he did not know he was being recorded. The Member in interview also referred to what he had said in the recording because he felt this showed he was being respectful of the ongoing situation. He said "You'll notice from the recording at the outset, I ask everybody to be respectful of the ongoing situation. Because I'm trying to be fair to the two different parties who are taking part... in quite a serious and...uncomfortable accusation." The Member did not ask for a copy of the recording prior to interview, or after interview. He asked for a copy in response to the draft report which we have sent to him with our final report.

In addition, even without the recording, the conclusions in respect of the disputed facts above, and overall conclusions below would remain the same given all the other evidence which has been considered in this investigation.

63. I appreciate the Member has concerns about the witness evidence of the Deputy Clerk, given her relationship with the Complainant which he describes. However, we have not been provided with any evidence that would cause us to have concerns about her honesty in matters or call into question her credibility as a witness. Again, our conclusions would remain the same without the Deputy Clerk's evidence because the series of Council minutes clearly reflect the course of events. Similarly, I can see the Member feels very strongly that WhatsApp messages he provided between Labour party members show some political interference in the Council's discussion and what he refers to as "attempts to manipulate the evidence". However, having considered these messages very carefully, I am not of the view they evidence what the Member suggests. More importantly, however, they are not relevant to the issues which are being considered in this matter. This case was not about what was said in the Regeneration Committee Meeting of 14 June 2022, and whether the draft minutes were in fact accurate or not, or whether the Member's recollection of what was said was accurate. This case was about one discrete issue, whether, given the Member's interests in the matter, he was able to take part in Council discussions about the ratification of the minutes.

Conclusions

64. The Member had a personal and prejudicial interest in the agenda item to receive and ratify the minutes of the Regeneration Committee of 14 June 2022. That being the case, the Member's participation in the specific agenda item in the meeting on 24 October 2022 was suggestive of breaches of Paragraphs 11(1), 14(1)(a), 14(1)(c) and 14(1)(e) of the Code.

65. The Member had a personal interest in the minutes which were discussed, and therefore had to disclose orally the existence and nature of his interest before or at the start of the discussion (Paragraph 11(1) of the Code.

66. In accordance with these various provisions under Paragraph 14 of the Code, unless dispensation from the authority's Standards Committee had been obtained, he was:

- Obligated to withdraw from the Council's discussions when they met (Paragraph 14(1)(a)).
- Not permitted to make any representations (whether oral or written) in respect of the agenda item (Paragraph 14(1)(e)).
- Not permitted to seek to influence a decision about the agenda item (Paragraph 14(1)(c)).

67. The Member had not sought or obtained such dispensation.

68. I also consider the Member used his position improperly, in an attempt to gain an advantage, when he suggested the minutes should not include the detail of the dispute (nor details about his wife's alleged behaviour therefore), and by stating that he had heard his wife apologise and say she was leaving the meeting. I am not persuaded by the Member's argument that there was no advantage to his wife, because my Office would seek its own evidence, regardless of what the minutes said. While my Office would of course investigate impartially and independently, minutes are an important evidential document, and his suggestion to remove any details

about the dispute, including what was alleged to have been said and by whom (including references which showed his wife may not have treated others with respect and consideration), can only have been advantageous to his wife and disadvantageous to the Clerk, contrary to paragraph 7(a) of the Code.

69. I appreciate that the Member felt he was in a difficult position. He suggested he wanted to balance the need to adhere to the Code with making sure the truth, as he saw it, was made known. He also considered the wider principle, that non-verbatim minutes were the style adopted by the Council, and that such conflicts should not be played out publicly, which he considered were important principles to uphold. Nonetheless, I consider the breaches both deliberate and concerning.

70. I say deliberate because the Member, in his interview, said he would prefer to have been found to have breached the rules than to fail to set out the truth. He also said he would not have done anything differently with hindsight. This, therefore, is indicative of a member who will only follow the statutory ethical rules in place when he considers them a good idea, in any given circumstances. This is a concern. While there will be situations when members may be frustrated by the rules, public confidence in councillors and their authorities is severely undermined if the ethical rules of good governance and democracy are not adhered to, even in difficult situations. It is of further concern, that when presented with our draft report and findings, the Member remains resolute and entrenched in his position, which shows there has been no reflection or insight into why his behaviour may have been the cause of concern. The purpose of the ethical standards regime is to give the public confidence that their elected officials are not involving themselves in personal matters, so as to preserve the probity and integrity of decision making in local administrations.

71. I have also said the breach was concerning because this was a very sensitive situation. The Member's wife was being investigated by my Office for serious concerns of alleged bullying. This will naturally have been a source of great distress to both the Member's wife and the Clerk. Suggesting the removal from minutes of any details about the dispute, as the Member did, could have concerned the Clerk and other members of staff who were involved in minuting the meeting. The Member should have

recognised the message his involvement in such a contentious issue will have sent to Council staff and to the public too, being involved, as he was, when he had such an apparent conflict.

72. That is not to say that it would be inappropriate for anybody else to have challenged the draft minutes in such circumstances. Certainly, I would expect committee members to be concerned if the minutes were substantively inaccurate or completely out with the usual manner in which minutes were recorded. However, the Member could not make representations on the matter, given his prejudicial interest. I do not agree that most other members, being friends with the Member's wife, placed them in the same position.

73. While I appreciate the Member said he could not approach the Clerk or Deputy Clerk for advice, given the circumstances, he could have spoken to the Monitoring Officer at Bridgend County Borough Council and consider whether he could obtain dispensation from the Standards Committee, but he did not. In not doing so, I consider, in the circumstances, that the Member's behaviour was also suggestive of a breach of Paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code – members must not conduct themselves in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing their office as councillor or their authority into disrepute.

Finding

74. My finding under section 69 of the Local Government Act 2000 is that my report on this investigation should be referred to the Monitoring Officer of Bridgend County Borough Council, for consideration by the Council's Standards Committee.

MM. Morris.

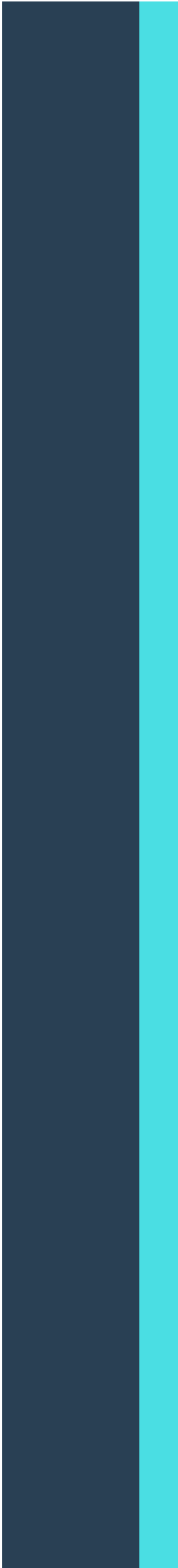
Michelle Morris

Ombwdsmon Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus/Public Services Ombudsman

27 March 2024

Appendix

Appendix 1	The Complaint and Supporting Information
Appendix 2	Investigation Start Letter
Appendix 3	Councillor Bletsoe's Comments and submissions
Appendix 4	Bridgend Town Council Code of Conduct
Appendix 5	Declaration of Acceptance of Office
Appendix 6	Register of Interests
Appendix 7	Information from the Council
Appendix 8	Minutes of Meetings
Appendix 9	Leanne Edwards Witness Statement and Exhibits
Appendix 10	Debra Jones Witness Statement
Appendix 11	Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Outcome letter of complaint against Councillor Bletsoe 9 September 2019
Appendix 12	Interview Transcript
Appendix 13	Extracts from my Guidance on the Code of Conduct
Appendix 14	Councillor Bletsoe's response to the Ombudsman's draft report



Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
1 Ffordd yr Hen Gae
Pencoed
CF35 5LJ

Tel: 0300 790 0203
Website: www.ombudsman.wales
Email: ask@ombudsman.wales
Follow us on Twitter: [@OmbudsmanWales](https://twitter.com/OmbudsmanWales)