

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Safonau Ymddygiad
[Ymchwiliad i Urddas a Pharch](#)

DR07

Ymateb gan: Cangen Staff Cymorth y Senedd - Unite

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Welsh Parliament
Standards of Conduct Committee
[Dignity and Respect Inquiry](#)

DR07

Evidence from: Unite Senedd Support Staff Branch

This submission is on behalf of support staff members of the Unite Senedd Staff Branch and we focus our response on the area of most concern to our members which is the current system for raising concerns and making complaints. With that in mind, we have endeavoured to answer the questions set out in the section of the consultation related to this and as part of our response are sharing direct feedback from members.

- *Would you feel comfortable making a complaint about a Member of the Senedd or somebody who works on the Senedd estate? If not, why?*

The overwhelming feeling from our members is that they would neither be comfortable nor confident in making a complaint about a Member of the Senedd or somebody who works on the Senedd estate. Concerns have been flagged around how the current structure exacerbates the power imbalance that already exists within a workplace, one which is magnified in such a political environment as the Senedd and a Senedd Member's office. Concerns have been raised around complaints being responded to with the correct levels of seriousness and a lack of trust in sufficient accountability for inappropriate behaviour, at the end of what could be a traumatic complaints process. Members have told us that they would rather go to their Union Rep in the first instance or to the head of the Labour Group Office but would not feel comfortable making a complaint through the current process. In addition, there is the perception that MBS are predominantly there to support Members of the Senedd not their staff – a perception that is often born out in reality. How can MBS support and advise both Members and support staff within the same small working environment without a conflict of interest and in a way which assures all parties?

- *Do you know how to make a complaint about a Member of the Senedd or somebody who works on the Senedd estate?*
- *Do you feel there are any barriers to you raising concerns about the inappropriate behaviour of a Member of the Senedd or somebody who works on the Senedd estate?*

MS Support staff are not clear on the steps to take and any support available from the Senedd itself when it comes to making a complaint full stop, let alone in respect of inappropriate behaviour. Feedback from support staff says they might try and find some information on the intranet but wouldn't know where to start and it isn't easy to find the information. However, concerns extend much further than simply not being clear on where to access support or how to go about making a complaint – support staff members have raised consistent and considerable concerns about a lack of faith and confidence in the system and process as stands. They understandably ask, how can they make a complaint to the commission or the Senedd process as they deal with both Members of the Senedd and support staff. Significant concern has also been flagged regarding the role Members of the Senedd have in the complaints/standards process – this does not give people in more vulnerable

positions confidence in coming forward in making a complaint regarding inappropriate behaviour against a fellow MS.

- *Do you have any suggestions regarding how the complaints procedure could be improved?*

It is clear that there is an absolute absence of confidence in the present procedure - it is not clear, not transparent and a lack of trust in the system as currently constituted. When an allegation is made all reasonable steps should be taken to protect those that have come forward. It is not uncommon in other organisations or workplaces to take measures to protect alleged victims by preventing people from attending places of work – it can be seen as a neutral act.

However, from the conversations we have had with support staff members and the experiences we are aware of and continue to be made aware of, the current complaints procedure needs more than small changes. It is not fit for purpose and needs a complete overhaul.

Given the evidence we have heard from our members and also more widely, the current procedure needs to be replaced with a completely independent system – independent from members and separate to every day HR structures (eg MBS). There needs to be a stand alone process, that is separate for both parties involved with a complaint. The nature of a Member of Senedd's support staff team means the offices are too small and not equipped to deal with complaints adequately. Support staff are also less likely to trust a process that serves both employer and employee. Additionally, there is a need for the people entrusted to deal with the complaints processes to have a sufficient amount of expertise. Our members have spoken about the need to have an intersectional and trauma-informed approach to the process, where there is understanding of the complexities and barriers individuals from different backgrounds with various life experiences may face when bringing forward a complaint. Without this understanding, there is a real risk of exacerbating an already upsetting situation and of deterring people from coming forward at all.

This would not only aid confidence in the system in respect of ordinary workplace power imbalances but also the 'political' dynamic that is central to working as part of a small team for a politician from a party the support staff member is likely active in and would like to progress in the future. Many support staff members don't presently feel comfortable making a complaint because they would be worried about the political ramifications – for the politician in question, for themselves and for the party of which they are a member.

Victims need to know complaints are taken seriously and investigation will be handled within reasonable timescales. It is not easy making a complaint and if at the outset you feel it could go on for years this becomes a barrier.