

## Wigan

Watchdogs have cleared a Wigan councillor in a racism row.

The local authority's standards committee accepted the findings of a probe into the conduct of Standish's Labour ward member, Emma McGurrin, after a meeting behind closed doors. She was accused of allegedly racially abusing the driver of a Bluestar taxi taking her home after a night out earlier this year.

The council is declining to release the report to the Wigan Evening Post.

But its recommendation by the monitoring officer to the Standards Committee, leaked to the WEP, reads: "In accordance with the council's arrangements for dealing with complaints about the Code of Conduct, the council's monitoring officer, having consulted with an independent person, decided that there had been no failure to comply with the Members' Code of Conduct.

"The report found that at the relevant times referred to in the complaint, Coun McGurrin was not acting in her capacity as a councillor and therefore the code of conduct did not apply. The monitoring officer having consulted the independent person accepting this finding."

Coun McGurrin, who was elected in 2010, said that she was "delighted and relieved".

She said: "The report uses very strong language and is very clear.

"I am happy with the report because it is evidential and proves the points that I have always maintained.

"I have cleared my name and shown my credibility.

"I am a committed Labour councillor and I always fight for social justice and the truth, which is what this was all about."

Boss of 22-year-old Wigan based Bluestar Taxis, Peter Bailey, said today: "It was an individual driver who, although he is an agent of ours, is self-employed and it is up to the driver whether he wants to take it any further - and it is my unstanding that he doesn't."

A member of Wigan's Standards Committee, who asked not to be named, said: "This was plain from the outset that Coun McGurrin was not on councillor business when whatever was supposed to have happened, happened.

"It cost the council money and officers' time when it should never have been investigated in the first place."

Coun McGurrin was reported to town hall chiefs over an alleged foul-mouthed and racist outburst to private hire driver Javad Ghadri from Worsley Mesnes.

In a statement seen previously by the WEP he claimed she told him to: "Go back to your country where you came from, or go to Bolton to live and work there, because you don't belong here."

But the councillor for Standish with Langtree has always passionately defended her position, insisting that her words had been taken out of context and that she must have been misunderstood.

A former National Union of Students equal opportunities officer, Coun McGurrin said the point she was making had nothing to do with race, but referred to her ongoing campaign against taxi drivers from other areas, who have been taking work away from private hire and Hackney carriage drivers who live in Wigan.

The complaint related to a fare Mr Ghadri picked up at 11.30pm in early February from Sam's Bar, in Wigan's Orchard Street.

Mr Ghadri had declined to speak further about the incident, beyond what had been written in his complaint.

John Mitchell, Head of Service, Legal and Risk said: "The complaint was investigated by an external investigator who concluded that at the times referred to in the complaint Coun McGurrin was not acting in her official capacity as a councillor and therefore the Council's Code of Conduct for Members did not apply to her conduct at that time.

"In view of this there was no need to investigate further and no conclusion was reached on the facts of the alleged incident."