

Hargrave Parish Council

Vexatious Complaints Policy

A policy for dealing with abusive, persistent or vexatious complaints and complainants

1. Introduction

1.1 This policy identifies situations where a complainant, either individually or as part of a group, or a group of complainants, might be considered to be habitual or vexatious. The following clauses form the Council policy for ways of responding to these situations.

1.2 In this policy the term habitual means 'done repeatedly or as a habit'. The term vexatious is recognised in law and means 'denoting an action or the bringer of an action that is brought without sufficient grounds for winning, purely to cause annoyance to the defendant'. This policy intends to assist in identifying and managing persons who seek to be disruptive to the Council through pursuing an unreasonable course of conduct.

1.3 The term complaint in this policy includes requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 2018 and reference to the Complaints Procedure is, where relevant, to be interpreted as meaning a request under those Acts.

1.4 Habitual or vexatious complaints can be a problem for Council staff and Councillors. The difficulty in handling such complainants is that they are time consuming and wasteful of resources in terms of Officer and Councillor time. While the Council endeavours to respond with patience and sympathy to the needs of all complainants there are times when there is nothing further which can reasonably be done to assist or to rectify a real or perceived problem.

1.5 Raising of legitimate queries or criticisms of a complaints procedure as it progresses, for example if agreed timescales are not met, should not in itself lead to someone being regarded as a vexatious or an unreasonably persistent complainant.

1.6 The aim of this policy is to contribute to the overall aim of dealing with all complainants in ways which are demonstrably consistent, fair and reasonable.

2. Habitual or Vexatious Complainants

2.1 For the purpose of this policy the following definitions of habitual or vexatious complainants will be used:

The repeated and/or obsessive pursuit of:

(1) unreasonable complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes; and/or

(2) reasonable complaints in an unreasonable manner

2.2 Prior to implementing the policy, the Council will notify the complainant that implementation is being considered.

2.3 Where complaints continue and have been identified as habitual or vexatious in accordance with the criteria set out in Section 3, the Clerk will seek agreement to treat the complainant as a habitual or vexatious complainant for the appropriate course of action to be taken. Section 4 details options available for dealing with habitual or vexatious complaints.

2.4 The Clerk on behalf of the Council will notify complainants, in writing, of the reasons why their complaint has been treated as habitual or vexatious and the action that will be taken. North Northamptonshire Unitary Councillors will also be informed that a constituent has been designated as a habitual or vexatious complainant.

2.5 The status of the complainant will be kept under review. If a complainant subsequently demonstrates a more reasonable approach, then their status will be reviewed.

3. Definitions

3.1 Hargrave Parish Council's definition of unreasonably persistent and vexatious complainants includes those complainants who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with the Council, hinder the Council's consideration of their or other people's complaints. The description 'unreasonably persistent' and 'vexatious' may apply separately or jointly to a particular complainant.

3.2 Examples include the way in which, or frequency with which, complainants raise their complaints with the Clerk or Councillors, or how complainants respond when informed of the Council's decision about the complaint.

3.3 Features of an unreasonably persistent and/or vexatious complainant include the following. (The list is not exhaustive):

An unreasonably persistent and/or vexatious complainant may:

- have insufficient or no grounds for their complaint and be making the complaint only to annoy (or for reasons that he/she/they do not admit or make obvious)
- refuse to specify the grounds of a complaint despite offers of assistance
- refuse to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved.
- refuse to accept that issues are not within the remit of the complaints policy and procedure despite having been provided with information about the scope of the policy and procedure
- refuse to accept that issues are not within the power of the Council to investigate, change or influence
- insist on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice (e.g., insisting that there must not be any written record of the complaint)
- make what appear to be groundless complaints about the staff dealing with the complaints, and seek to have them dismissed or replaced
- make an unreasonable number of contacts with the Council, by any means in

relation to a specific complaint or complaints

- make persistent and unreasonable demands or expectations of staff and/or the complaints process (an example of this could be a complainant who insists on immediate responses to questions, frequent and/or complex letters, faxes telephone calls or e-mails)
- harass or verbally abuse or otherwise seek to intimidate staff dealing with their complaint.
- raise subsidiary or new issues whilst a complaint is being addressed that were not part of the complaint at the start of the complaint process
- introduce trivial or irrelevant new information whilst the complaint is being investigated and expect this to be taken into account and commented on
- change the substance or basis of the complaint without reasonable justification whilst the complaint is being addressed
- deny statements he/she/they made at an earlier stage in the complaint process
- are known to have electronically recorded meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of the other person(s) involved
- adopts a 'scattergun' approach, for instance, pursuing a complaint or complaints not only with the Council, but at the same time with, for example, a Member of Parliament, other Councils, elected Councillors of this and other Councils, the Council's Independent Auditor, the Standards Board, the Police, other public bodies or solicitors
- refuse to accept the outcome of the complaint process after its conclusion, repeatedly arguing the point, complaining about the outcome, and/or denying that an adequate response has been given
- make the same complaint repeatedly, perhaps with minor differences, after the complaints procedure has been concluded and insist that the minor differences make these 'new' complaints which should be put through the full complaints procedure
- persistently approach the Council through different routes or other persons about the same issue
- persist in seeking an outcome which Council has explained is unrealistic for legal, policy, or other valid reasons
- refuse to accept documented evidence as factual
- complain about or challenge an issue based on an historic and/or irreversible decision or incident
- combine some or all of these features.

4. Imposing Restrictions

4.1 In the first instance the Clerk will consult with the Chairman/Chair of the Council prior to issuing a warning to the complainant. The Clerk will contact the complainant in writing, or by e-mail, to explain

why this behaviour is causing concern.

4.2 If the disruptive behaviour continues, the Clerk will issue a reminder letter to the complainant advising them that the way in which they will be allowed to contact the Council in future will be restricted. The Clerk will make this decision in consultation with the Chairman/Chair of the Council and at least one other Councillor and inform the complainant in writing of what procedures have been put in place and for what period.

4.3 Any restriction that is imposed on the complainant's contact with the Council will be appropriate and proportionate and the complainant will be advised of the period of time over which that the restriction will be in place. In most cases restrictions will apply for between three to six months, but in exceptional cases this may be extended. In such cases the restrictions would be reviewed on a quarterly basis, or at the next Full Council Meeting.

4.4 Restrictions will be tailored to deal with the individual circumstances of the complainant and may include:

- banning the complainant from making contact by telephone except through a third party e.g., a solicitor, a Councillor or a friend acting on their behalf
- banning the complainant from sending emails to individuals and/or all Council Officers and insisting they only correspond by post to a designated address
- requiring contact to take place with one named member of staff only
- restricting telephone calls to specified days and/or times and/or duration
- requiring any personal contact to take place in the presence of an appropriate witness
- letting the complainant know that the Council will not reply to or acknowledge any further contact from them on the specific topic of that complaint

4.5 When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a complainant, the Clerk will contact the complainant by post or email to explain:

- why the decision has been taken
- what action has been taken
- the duration of that action.

4.6 The Clerk will enclose a copy of this policy in the correspondence to the complainant.

4.7 Where a complainant continues to behave in a way that is unacceptable, the Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman/Chair of the Council and at least one other Councillor may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and stop any investigation into his/her/their complaint.

4.8 Where the behaviour is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, other

options will be considered, e.g., the reporting of the matter to the police or taking legal action. In such cases, the complainant may not be given prior warning of that action.

5. New complaints from complainants who are treated as abusive, vexatious or Persistent

5.1 New complaints from people who have come under this policy will be treated on their merits. The Clerk and the Chairman/Chair/Chair of the Council in conjunction with at least one other Councillor will decide whether any restrictions that have been applied before are still appropriate and necessary in relation to the new complaint.

5.2 The fact that a complainant is judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious, and any restrictions imposed on Council's contact with him/her/them, will be recorded and notified to Councillors.

6. Review

6.1 The status of a complainant judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious will be reviewed by the Clerk, the Chairman/Chair of the Council and at least one other Councillor. This will ordinarily take place at the end of the duration of initial restriction or the next Full Council Meeting.

6.2 The complainant will be informed of the result of this review if the decision to apply this policy has been changed or extended.

7. Record Keeping

7.1 The Clerk will retain adequate records of the details of the case and the action that has been taken. Records will be kept of:

- the name and address of each member of the public who is treated as abusive, vexatious or persistent, or any other person who so aids the complainant
- when the restrictions came into force and when they are due to end
- what the restrictions are
- when the person and Council were advised.

7.2 Councillors be provided with a report giving information about members of the public who have been treated as vexatious/persistent as per this policy.

Policy adopted 13 December 2021