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## **Policy on dealing with unreasonable, abusive, persistent or vexatious requests for information, complaints or 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 and ways of responding to these situations.

**1.2** This policy covers behaviour around repeated and duplicated requests for information and complaints regarded as unreasonable or vexatious. This includes behaviour which causes alarm or harassment to **Stokenchurch Parish Council** (hereinafter referred to as “**the council**”) officers or councillors and/or undermines the ability of the council to provide a fair service to others. Examples of what would be deemed unreasonable are outlined below under Section 3.

**1.3** In this policy the term habitual means ‘done repeatedly or as a habit’. The term ‘vexatious’ is recognised in law and defined as ‘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.

**1.4** This policy includes requests for information made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998 and reference to the complaints procedure is, where relevant, to be interpreted as meaning request under those Acts.

**1.5** Habitual or vexatious complainants can be a problem for Council staff and members. The difficulty in handling such complainants is that they are time consuming and wasteful of resources in terms of Officer and Member time. The

Council endeavours to respond with patience and professionalism to the needs of all complaints and complainants (covered in the Complaint handling policy). However, there are times when there is nothing further which can reasonably be done and the full process has been applied. If the behaviour continues, it will result in a reduced ability to meet the needs of other residents.

**1.6** 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. Similarly, the fact that a complainant is unhappy with the outcome of a complaint and seeks to challenge it once, or more than once, should not necessarily cause him or her to be labelled vexatious or unreasonably persistent.

**1.7** 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 complaints and complainants**

**2.1** For the purpose of this policy the following definition 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 considering its implementation the Council will send a summary of this policy to the complainant to give them prior notification of its possible implementation.

**2.3** Where complaints continue and have been identified as habitual or vexatious in accordance with the criteria set out in Section 3, the Management Committee 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 the options available for dealing with habitual or vexatious complaints.

**2.4** The Clerk on behalf of the Parish 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. The relevant County and District 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** The Parish Council defines unreasonably persistent and vexatious complainants as 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 or deliver a fair service to others. The description 'unreasonably persistent' and 'vexatious' may apply separately or jointly to a particular complainant.

**3.2** Examples include the way or frequency that complainants raise their complaint with staff 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 or individual repeatedly or vexatiously requesting information include the following (the list is not exhaustive, nor does one single feature on its own necessarily imply that the person will be considered as being in this category):

#### **An unreasonably persistent and/or vexatious contact may:**

Have insufficient or no grounds for their complaint or provides no valid grounds for their complaint to be considered further.

- Be making the complaint only to annoy (or for reasons that he or she does not admit or make obvious), harass or cause distress to officers or members.
- 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 agreed 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 after the unreasonableness has been explained to the complainant (an example of this could be a complainant who insists on immediate responses to numbers, frequent and/or complex letters, faxes, telephone calls or emails)

- Harass, verbally abuse or otherwise seek to intimidate staff dealing with their complaint, in relation to their complaint by use of foul or inappropriate language or by the use of offensive and racist language through any channel
- 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 or she made at an earlier stage in the complaint process
- Electronically record meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of all the other persons involved
- Adopts and excessively 'scattergun' approach, for instance, pursuing a complaint or complaints not only with the Council, but at the same time with a Member of Parliament, other councils, elected councillors of this and other councils, the council's independent auditor, the Standards Board, the police, 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 about the same issue
- Persist in seeking an outcome which has been explained as unrealistic or impractical for legal or policy (or other valid) reasons
- Refuse to accept documented evidence as factual
- Complain about or challenge an issue based on an historic and irreversible decision or incident
- Misrepresent to others the actions taken by the Council or officers or responses received whether by omission of relevant factual context or editing responses to misinform.
- Submitting repeat requests for information with minor additions/variations or which the requestor has already received or are in the public domain and they have been directed to the information already.
- The request is obsessive in nature e.g. a high volume of requests or lists of multiple items, repeatedly asking for the same information or using requests for information to open matters that have already been dealt with in other ways.
- Combine some or all of these features

#### **4. Imposing Restrictions**

**4.1** The Parish Council will ensure that the complaint is being, or has been, investigated properly according to the adopted complaints procedure.

**4.2** In the first instance the Clerk will consult with the Chairman of the Council and Chairman of the Complaints Committee, if applicable, prior to issuing a warning to

the complainant. The Clerk will contact the complainant in writing, or by email, to explain why this behaviour is causing concern and ask them to change this behaviour and outline the actions that the council may take if they do not comply.

**4.3** 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 Parish Council in future will be restricted. The Clerk will make this decision in consultation with the Chairman of the Council and Chairman of the Policy, Finance & General Purposes Committee and inform the complainant in writing of what procedures have been put in place and for what period.

**4.4** 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 the restriction will be in place. In most cases restrictions will apply for between 3-6 months, but in exceptional cases may be extended. In such cases the restrictions would be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

**4.5** 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. solicitor/councillor/friend acting on their behalf
- Banning the complainant from sending emails to individual and/or all council officers and insisting they only correspond by letter
- Requiring contact to take place with one named member of staff only
- Restricting telephone calls to specified days / times / 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 (in this case, a designated member of staff should be identified who will read future correspondence)

**4.6** When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a complainant, the Clerk will contact the complainant in writing to explain:-

- Why the decision has been taken
- What action is being taken
- The duration of that action

**4.7** The Clerk will enclose a copy of this policy in the letter to the complainant.

**4.8** Where a complainant continues to behave in a way which is unacceptable, the Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman of the Council and Chairman of the Complaints Committee may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and stop any investigation into his or her complaint.

**4.9** Where the behaviour is so extreme or 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, the Chairman of the Parish Council in conjunction with the Chairman of the Complaints Committee will decide whether any restrictions which have been applied before are still appropriate and necessary in relation to the new complaint. A blanket policy is not supported, of ignoring genuine service requests or complaints where they are founded.

**5.2** The fact that a complainant is judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious and any restrictions imposed on or contact with him or her will be recorded and notified to those who need to know within the Council.

## **6. Review**

**6.1** The status of a complainant judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious will be reviewed by the Clerk, the Chairman of the Parish Council and the Chairman of the Complaints Committee, after six months and at the end of every subsequent six months within the period during which the policy is to apply.

**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 and review**

**7.1** Adequate records will be retained by the Clerk 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
- When the restriction came into force and ends
- What the restrictions are
- When the person and Council were advised

**7.2** This policy will be reviewed annually.

— policy ends here —