

	<p><b>BODMIN TOWN COUNCIL</b></p> <p><b>POLICY: PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINTS</b></p>
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**APPROVAL:**

	Date	Minute Reference
Approved by Policy & Resources Committee:	26/08/2021	PR/2021/110
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**REVISION SUMMARY:**

Revision Date	New Version Number	Summary of Changes



## **BODMIN TOWN COUNCIL PERSISTENT OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINTS POLICY**

### **1. ABOUT THIS PROCEDURE**

1.1 This policy concerns the management of abusive, persistent and/or vexatious complainants. It sets out how Bodmin Town Council ('the Council') will deal with complainants that fall within the scope of this definition. Those identified will be treated consistently, honestly, and proportionately while ensuring that other service users, officers and the Council suffer no detriment. This policy applies to all areas of the Council.

1.2 It is considered that all complainants have the right to have their concerns examined in line with the relevant complaint procedure. In most cases, dealing with complaints will be a straightforward process; however, in some cases, the complainant may act in a manner that is deemed unacceptable.

1.3 Complainants may act in a way that is considered abusive, unreasonably persistent, or vexatious and, by doing so, this may hinder the Council's ability to investigate their complaint or the complaints of others. This behaviour may occur at any time before, during or after a complaint has been investigated.

1.4 The time spent on dealing with all complaints should be proportionate to the nature of the complaint and consistent with the outcome sought, that being realistic and achievable.

### **2. HOW IS UNREASONABLE COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR DEFINED?**

2.1 It should be noted that raising a complaint about Bodmin Town Council's service does not in itself constitute unreasonably persistent behaviour, nor does complainants escalating their complaint(s) through all stages of the relevant procedure or expressing criticism about the complaints process itself.

2.2 The Council has adopted the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's definition and the identified characteristics for unreasonable or unreasonably persistent complainants: *"For us, unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants are those complainants who, because of the nature or frequency of their contacts with an organisation, hinder the organisation's consideration of their, or other people's, complaints"*.

2.3 Examples of unreasonably persistent behaviour:

(This list is not exhaustive, nor does one single characteristic imply that the person will be considered as being in this category)

- Refusing to specify the grounds of a complaint, despite offers of help.
- Refusing to cooperate with the complaint investigation process.

- Refusing to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the Council's jurisdiction or within the scope of a complaint procedure.
- Insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaint procedure or with good practice.
- Making unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues or seeking to have such staff dismissed.
- Changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds.
- Denying or changing statements he/she made at an earlier stage.
- Introducing trivial or irrelevant new information at a later stage.
- Raising many detailed but unimportant questions, and insisting they are all answered.
- Submitting documents falsified by themselves or others.
- Adopting a 'scatter gun' approach: pursuing parallel complaints on the same issue with various members of staff and/or organisations.
- Making excessive demands on the time and resources of staff via placing lengthy phone calls, sending emails/letters to numerous staff, or sending detailed emails/letters every few days and expecting immediate responses.
- Submitting repeated complaints with minor additions/variations, which the complainant insists on referring to as 'new' complaints.
- Refusing to accept the outcome of a complaint or repeatedly arguing points with no new evidence.

#### 2.4. Examples of abusive and/or vexatious complainants

The Council will take steps to protect its staff from members of the public who are behaving in a way which is considered abusive and/or vexatious. This may include physical or verbal abuse and could include the following (however, this list is not exhaustive):

- Speaking to members of staff in a derogatory manner which causes offence.
- Swearing, either verbally or in writing, despite being asked to refrain from using such language.
- Using threatening language towards Council staff, thereby provoking fear.
- Repeatedly contacting a member of staff regarding the same matter which has already been addressed.

### **3. MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT BEHAVIOUR**

3.1 This policy may be invoked if Bodmin Town Council considers that a complainant has behaved in a manner which is deemed unreasonable (see above). The Council may take any actions against a complainant that it considers to be reasonable and proportionate in the circumstances.

3.2 Types of actions the Council may take:

- Where the complainant tries to reopen an issue that has already been considered through one of the Council's complaint procedures, they will be informed in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.
- Where a decision on the complaint has been made, the complainant should be informed that future correspondence will be read and placed on file, but not acknowledged, unless it contains important new information.

- Limiting the complainant to one type of contact (e.g., telephone, letter, email, etc.).
- Placing limits on the number and duration of contacts with staff per week or month.
- Requiring contact to take place with a named member of staff and informing the complainant that, if they do not keep to these arrangements, any further correspondence that does not highlight any significantly new matters will not necessarily be acknowledged or responded to but will be kept on file.
- Assigning one officer to read the complainant's correspondence, to ensure appropriate action is taken.
- Offering a restricted timeslot of specific dates and times for necessary calls.
- Requiring any face-to-face contacts to take place in the presence of a witness and in a suitable location.

#### **4. MATTERS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT BEFORE TAKING ACTION**

4.1 Before taking a decision to invoke this policy, consideration should be given to whether any further action is necessary, such as:

- Consideration about whether it is appropriate to convene a meeting with the complainant and a senior officer to seek a mutually agreeable resolution.
- If it is known or suspected that the complainant has any special educational needs, then consider offering an independent advocate who may assist the complainant in their communication with Bodmin Town Council.
- Where more than one department is being contacted by the complainant, agree a cross-departmental approach, and designate a lead officer to co-ordinate the Council's response.

4.2 Staff must be satisfied before taking any action as defined by this policy that the complainant's individual circumstances have been considered, including such issues as age, disability, gender, race and religion or belief.

#### **5. IMPOSING RESTRICTIONS**

5.1 In the first instance, the relevant officer, in consultation with the Town Clerk / Deputy Town Clerk, will communicate to the complainant either by phone or in writing to explain why their behaviour is causing concern, and ask them to change this behaviour. The relevant officer will explain what actions Bodmin Town Council may take if the behaviour does not change.

5.2 If the complainant continues with the unreasonable behaviour, the relevant officer will consult with the Town Clerk / Deputy Town Clerk about whether it is necessary to take appropriate action by invoking this policy.

5.3 When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a complainant, the relevant officer will contact the complainant in writing (and/or as appropriate) to explain:

- why this decision has been taken
- what action the Council will be taking
- the duration of that action
- the review process for this policy

- the right of the complainant to contact the Local Government Ombudsman about the fact that they have been treated as a persistent/vexatious complainant.

5.4 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 how long the restriction will be in place for. In most cases, restrictions will apply for between three and six months but, in exceptional cases, this period may be extended. In such cases, the restrictions would be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

5.5 If the complainant continues to behave in such a way that is deemed unacceptable then the relevant officer, in consultation with the Town Clerk / Deputy Town Clerk, may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and cease any investigation into his / her complaint.

5.6 Where the behaviour is so extreme or it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, the Council will consider other options, for example reporting the matter to the Police or taking legal action. In such cases, the Council may not give the complainant any warning of that action.

## **6. NEW COMPLAINTS FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN TREATED AS BEING ABUSIVE, VEXATIOUS AND/OR UNREASONABLY PERSISTENT COMPLAINANTS**

6.1 Any new complaints received from complainants who have had restrictions imposed upon them under the terms of this policy will be treated on their merits. Bodmin Town Council does not support a blanket ban on genuine complaints simply because restrictions may be imposed upon that complainant.

## **7. REVIEW**

7.1 The relevant officer will review any restrictions which are imposed upon the complainant after three months and at the end of every subsequent three months within the period during which the restrictions are to apply.

7.2 Should the decision be taken to extend the period of restriction, the complainant will be advised in writing of how Bodmin Town Council intends to go about this and that the decision to restrict contact will be put in place for a further specified period (e.g., six months). The outcome of any subsequent review will be communicated to the complainant, outlining whether the restrictions will continue to apply and, if so, why.

7.3 If, at the end of the restricted period, it is considered that the complainant's behaviour is no longer deemed to be unreasonable, the Council will confirm this in writing, advising that the restrictions have now been lifted.

## **8. CEASING CONTACT WITH A COMPLAINANT**

8.1 There may be occasions when the relationship between Bodmin Town Council and unreasonably persistent or vexatious complainants breaks down completely. This may even be the case while complaints are under investigation and there is little prospect of achieving a satisfactory outcome. In such circumstances, there may be little purpose in following all the stages of the complaint procedure. Where this occurs, the Council will advise the complainant that they may approach the Local Government and Social

Care Ombudsman, who may be prepared to consider a complaint before the procedure has run its course.

## **9. RECORD KEEPING**

9.1 The relevant officer will keep a record of all complainants who have been treated as being unreasonably persistent, abusive and/or vexatious in accordance with this policy, in line with all relevant internal and external data protection policies and regulations. This will include details of why the policy was invoked, what restrictions were imposed, and for how long.