

HORAM PARISH COUNCIL

VEXATIOUS COMPLAINTS, CORRESPONDENCE, BEHAVIOUR OR PERSONS

ADOPTED SEPTEMBER 2024

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

**"NO PERSONS OR GROUP OF PERSONS ARE EXCLUDED IF FOUND TO BE IN
BREACH OF THE WORDING/INTENTION/CRITERIA OF HPC VEXATIOUS POLICY"**

1. Introduction

This policy identifies situations where:

- a person acting individually or as part of a group or a group of persons, may be considered to be complaining or corresponding habitually or vexatiously.

The following clauses form the Parish Council's policy for ways of responding to These situations.

- 1.1 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". Examples are provided in 3.
- 1.2 This policy intends to assist in identifying and managing persons who are or 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 1998, and reference to the Complaints Procedure is, where relevant, also to be interpreted as a request under those Acts.
- 1.4 Habitual or vexatious complaints or correspondence can be a problem for Council staff and members in particular because they are time consuming and wasteful of Officer and Member time. While the Council endeavours to respond with patience and sympathy to the needs of all correspondents and/or complainants there are occasions when there is nothing further that can reasonably be done to assist or to rectify a real or perceived problem.
- 1.5 Raising legitimate queries or criticisms of an action or complaints procedure as it progresses are not justifications for a person being regarded as a vexatious or an unreasonably persistent complainant. Similarly, the fact that a complainant is unhappy with the outcome of a response to correspondence/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.
- 1.6 The aim of this policy is to contribute to dealing with all correspondence and complaints in a demonstrably consistent, fair and reasonable manner

2. Habitual or Vexatious Correspondents or Complainants

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

- A) unreasonable correspondence/complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes; and/or
- B) reasonable correspondence/complaints in an unreasonable manner.

Some examples of 'habitual' or 'vexatious' correspondents/complainants can be found in Section 3.

- 2.2. Prior to implementing the restrictions described in 4, the Council will send a summary of this policy to the correspondent/complainant.
- 2.3. Where correspondence/complaints have been identified as habitual or vexatious, in accordance with the criteria set out in Section 3, the Full Parish Council (in Exempt session) will agree whether to treat the complainant as habitual or vexatious and the appropriate course of action will be taken. Section 4 details the options available for dealing with habitual or vexatious correspondence or complaints.
- 2.4. The Clerk, on behalf of the Parish Council, will notify correspondents/complainants in writing of the reasons why their correspondence/complaint has been treated as habitual or vexatious and the action that will be taken. The Monitoring Officer for Wealden District Council will also be informed that a constituent has been designated as a habitual or vexatious correspondent/complainant.
- 2.5. The status of the correspondent/complainant will be kept under review; if a correspondent/complainant subsequently demonstrates a more reasonable approach, then their status will be reviewed.

3. Definitions

- 3.1. Horam Parish Council defines unreasonably persistent and vexatious correspondence/complainants as those correspondents/complainants who, because of the frequency or nature of their contact with the Council, hinder the Council's consideration of their or other people's correspondence/complaints or hinder the proper/required work of the Parish Council, its' Officers or Members. The description 'unreasonably persistent' and 'vexatious' may apply separately or jointly to a particular correspondent/complainant.
- 3.2. Examples include the way in which, or frequency with which, complainants raise correspondence or their complaints with staff, or how correspondents/complainants respond when informed of the Council's decision about the correspondence/complaint.
- 3.3. Features of an unreasonably persistent and/or vexatious correspondence/complainant 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 correspondent/complainant may:
 - have insufficient or no grounds for their correspondence/complaint and be making the observation/complaint only to annoy (or for reasons that he or she does not admit or make obvious).
 - refuse to specify the background to correspondence/grounds of a complaint despite offers of assistance
 - refuse to co-operate with the response to their correspondence/complaints investigation process while still wishing their correspondence to be replied to/complaint to be resolved.

- refuse to accept that issues are not within the remit of the Parish Council or its' complaints policy and procedures despite having been provided with information about the scope of the policy and procedure or the remit of the Parish Council.
- refuse to accept that issues are not within the power of the Council to investigate, change or influence.
- insist on the correspondence/complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaint's procedure or with good Parish Council practice (e.g. insisting that there must not be any written record of the correspondence/complaint).
- makes what appears to be groundless comments/complaints about the staff dealing with the correspondence/complaints and seek to have them dismissed or replaced.
- makes an unreasonable number of contacts with the Council, by any means in relation to a specific topic(s), subject(s) or complaint(s).
- persistent and unreasonable demands or expectations of staff and/or the complaints process/Parish Council procedures after the unreasonableness has been explained to the correspondent/complainant (an example of this could be a correspondent/complainant who insists on immediate responses to questions, frequent and/or complex letters, faxes, telephone calls or e-mails).
- verbally abuse, or otherwise seek to intimidate staff or members dealing with their correspondence/complaint, in relation to their correspondence/complaint by use of foul or inappropriate language, or by the use of offensive and racist language, or publish their correspondence/complaint(s) in other forms of media (including social media).
- -raise subsidiary or new issues whilst a complaint/correspondence is being addressed that were not part of the complaint/correspondence at the start of the complaint/correspondence process. - introduce trivial or irrelevant new information whilst the complaint is being investigated/correspondence dealt with 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.
- 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 correspondence, 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.

- refuses to accept the response to correspondence and/or 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.
- makes the same complaint repeatedly, perhaps with minor differences, after the complaint's procedure has been concluded and insist that the minor differences make these 'new' complaints which should be put through the full complaint's procedure.
- persistently approach the Council through repeated correspondence, different routes or other persons about the same issue.
- persists in seeking an outcome which the Council has explained is unrealistic for legal or policy (or other valid) reasons.
- complains about or challenge an issue based on a historic and/or an irreversible decision or incident.

4 Imposing Restrictions

4.1. When a correspondent/complainant is suspected of being vexatious or habitual:

4.1.1 The Parish Council will ensure that correspondence is replied to as accurately and fully as Parish Council records and policies allow and/or the complaint is being, or has been, investigated properly according to the adopted complaints procedure.

4.1.2 In the first instance the Clerk will consult with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Council and seek agreement of the Parish Council (in Exempt session) prior to issuing a warning to the complainant. The Clerk will contact the complainant in writing to explain why this behaviour is causing concern, ask them to change this behaviour, and outline the actions that the Council may take if they do not comply.

4.1.3 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 and Vice-Chairman of the Council and inform the complainant in writing of what procedures have been put in place and for what period of time.

4.1.4 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 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 by Full

Council (in Exempt session) on a quarterly basis, or (in Exempt session) at the next Full Council Meeting; whichever is the sooner.

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

i - banning the complainant from making contact by telephone except through a third party e.g. a solicitor, a Councillor or, in certain cases, through a friend acting on their behalf.

ii - banning the complainant from sending emails to individuals and/or all Council Officers, and insisting they only correspond by postal letter.

iii - requiring contact to take place with one named member of staff or Councillor only.

iv - 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.

v - letting the complainant know that the Parish Council will not respond to or acknowledge any further contact from them on the specific topic of that correspondence/complaint (in this case, a designated member of staff or Councillor will be identified who will read future correspondence).

4.1.6 When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a correspondent/complainant, the Clerk will contact the complainant in writing to explain:

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

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

4.1.8 Where a complainant continues to behave in a way that is unacceptable, the Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Council and the Full Council may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and stop any outstanding response to correspondence or investigation into his or her complaint.

4.1.9 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 correspondence/complaints from people who have previously been identified as vexatious or habitual under this policy will be treated on their merits. The Clerk, the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Parish Council in conjunction with the Full Council (in Exempt session) will decide whether any restrictions that

have been applied before are still appropriate and necessary in relation to the new complaint. A blanket policy is not supported, nor is ignoring genuine service requests or complaints where they are founded.

- 5.2. When a complainant has been found to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious, that fact, along with any restrictions imposed on the complainant regarding their contact with the Council, will be recorded and notified to the relevant parties 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 and Vice-Chairman of the Parish Council and the Full Council (in Exempt session) after three months, and again at the end of every subsequent three months within the period during which the policy is to apply, or (in Exempt session) at the next Full Council Meeting; whichever is the sooner.
- 6.2. The correspondent/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 person who is treated as vexatious or persistent, or any other person who so aids the correspondent/complainant.
 - The nature of the complaint.
 - When the restrictions came into force and will end.
 - What the restrictions are and why.
 - When the complainant and Council were advised.
- 7.2. Full Council will be provided with a regular report detailing persons who have been treated as vexatious/persistent as per this policy.

8 Contact details

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