

Chard Town Council Vexatious and/or Persistent Complaints Policy



Aims

This policy is about the management of abusive, persistent and/or vexatious complaints. It sets out how Chard Town Council ('the Council') will deal with complaints 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 as a whole suffer no detriment. This policy applies to all areas of the Council.

It is considered that all complainants have the right to have their concerns examined in line with the Council's Complaints Protocol. In most cases, dealing with complaints will be a straightforward process; however, in a minority of cases, the complainant may act in a manner that is deemed unacceptable. The complainant may act in a way that is considered abusive, unreasonably persistent, or vexatious and by doing so it 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.

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

Review Statement

This policy has been prepared considering prevailing legislation and recognised good practice. New legislation requirements or changes in current legislation may necessitate the review of this document. The Council will continue to review this policy on a regular basis.

Equality

In putting the procedure into practice, no aspect will discriminate on the grounds of race, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, age, religion, politics, marital status, disability, politics, caste and / or union membership, or any other grounds likely to place any particular employee at a disadvantage.

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Definition of Persistent or Vexatious Complaints

It should be noted that raising a complaint about a Council service does not in itself constitute unreasonably persistent behaviour and neither do complainants who escalate through all stages of the relevant Complaints Protocol, or those who express criticism about the complaints process itself.

The Council has adopted the Local Government 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".

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) also describes **Dealing with vexatious requests (section 14)** in line with section 14(1) of FOIA

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi/freedom-of-information-and-environmental-information-regulations/section-14-dealing-with-vexatious-requests/>

and

At a glance

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/foi/guide-to-managing-an-foi-request/vexatious-and-repeated-requests/>

When can we refuse a request as vexatious?

When can we refuse a request because it is repeated?

What if we want to refuse a request as vexatious or repeated?

The below list is not exhaustive; however, examples of unreasonably persistent behaviour include:

- 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 the Complaints Protocol.
- Insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted Complaints Protocol or with good practice.

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- Making unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues raised and seeking to have them replaced.
- Changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds.
- Denying or changing statements the complainant 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 falsified documents from themselves or others.
- Adopting a 'scatter gun' approach i.e., 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 with lengthy phone calls, emails to numerous council staff, or detailed letters every few days, and expecting immediate responses.
- Submitting repeat complaints with minor additions/variations, which the complainant insists make these 'new' complaints.
- Refusing to accept the decision and/or repeatedly arguing points with no new evidence.
- Conducting a campaign against the Council's Officers that may potentially amount to being defamatory in nature.

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 a member 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 which provokes fear.
- Repeatedly contacting a member of staff regarding the same matter which has already been addressed.

Managing Unreasonable Behaviour

This policy may be invoked if the 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 unreasonable and disproportionate in the circumstances.

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Types of actions the Council may take:

- Where the complainant tries to reopen an issue that has already been considered through the Council's Complaints Protocol, 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 and responded to but will be kept on file.
- Assigning one officer to read the complainant's correspondence, in order to ensure appropriate action is taken.
- Offering a restricted time slot for necessary calls to specified dates and times.
- Requiring any face-to-face contacts to take place in the presence of a witness and in a suitable location.

Considerations

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

- Whether it is appropriate to convene a meeting with the complainant and a senior officer in order to seek a mutually agreeable resolution.
- If it is known or suspected that the complainant has any special needs, whether it is appropriate to offer an independent advocate who may assist the complainant with their communication with the Council.
- Where more than one service is being contacted by the complainant, agree a whole Council approach and designate a lead officer to coordinate the Council's response.

Staff must be satisfied before taking any action as defined by this policy that the complainant's individual circumstances have been taken into account including any characteristics in the Equality section of this policy.

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Imposing Restrictions

In the first instance this will be taken to the Town Clerk who 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 Town Clerk will also explain what actions the Council may take if the behaviour does not change.

If the complainant continues with the unreasonable behaviour the Town Clerk will consider whether it is necessary to take appropriate action by invoking this policy.

When the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a complainant, the Corporate Management Team 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 of this policy

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 for. In most cases restrictions will apply for between three and six months but in exceptional cases may be extended. In such cases the restrictions would be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

If the complainant continues to behave in a way which is deemed unacceptable then the Complaints Panel in consultation with the Town Clerk may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and cease any investigation into their complaint.

Where the behaviour is 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 prior warning of that action.

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New Complaints

Any new complaints received from complainants who have come under this policy will be treated on their own merit. The Council does not support a blanket ban on genuine complaints simply because restrictions may be imposed upon that complainant.

Review

The Town Clerk in consultation with the Complaints Panel 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 policy is to apply.

Should the decision be taken to extend the period of restriction, the complainant will be advised in writing how the Council plans 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 if the restrictions will continue to apply and if so why.

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.

Record Keeping

The Council will keep a record of all complainants who have been treated as being unreasonably persistent, abusive and/or vexatious in accordance with this policy and data protection policies. This will include details of why the policy was invoked, what restrictions were imposed and for what period of time.