**STRATFIELD SAYE PARISH COUNCIL**

**Vexatious Complaints Policy**

**1 Introduction**

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 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’.

1.2 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 1998 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 the Clerk and Councillors. The difficulty in handling such complainants is that they are time consuming and wasteful of recourses in terms of Clerk and Councillor’s 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. 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.

1.6 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:
 a. unreasonable complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes; and/or
 b. reasonable complaints in an unreasonable, aggressive or rude 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 Councillors 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. Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council may also be informed that a constituent has been designated as an 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 Stratfield Saye 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. 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 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, 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 complainant may:**
 • have insufficient or no grounds for their complaint and be making the complaint only to annoy (or for reasons that he or she does 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 Parish 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 Parish 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 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, in relation to their complaint by use of foul or inappropriate
 language or by the use of offensive and racist language or publish their
 complaints in other forms of media.
 • 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.
 • 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 the Council has explained is unrealistic
 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/or an
 irreversible decision or incident.
 • combine some or all of these features.

**4. Imposing Restrictions**

4.1 Stratfield Saye 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
 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 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 Clerk is being harassed by the complainant they may choose at any time

to pass any contact to the Chairman or Vice Chairman of the Council to deal with.

4.4 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 inform the complainant in writing of what procedures have been put in place and for what period.

4.5 Any restriction that is imposed on the complainant’s contact with Stratfield Saye Parish Council will be appropriate and proportionate and the complainant will be advised of the period of time over which any 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 at the next Full Parish Council Meeting.

4.6 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
 Councillors and insisting they only correspond by postal letter.

• banning the complainant from speaking at Parish Council Meetings
 • 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 Parish Council will not respond to or
 acknowledge any further contact from them on the specific topic of that complaint.

4.7 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 has been taken.
 • the duration of that action.

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

4.8 Where a complainant continues to behave in a way that is unacceptable, the
 Clerk, in consultation with the Chairman of the Council, 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 the Clerk or Councillors, 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 of the Parish Council 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
 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 Parish Council’s contact with him or her,
 will be recorded and notified to all Parish Councillors .

**6 Review**

6.1 Once the duration of the action taken under this policy has expired, the status of a complainant judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious will be reviewed by the Clerk and the Chairman of the Parish Council at 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 recognised as
 abusive, vexatious or persistent, or any other person who so aids the
 complainant.
 • when the restrictions came into force and ends
 • what the restrictions are
 • when the person and Parish Council were advised.

7.2 The Full Parish Council will be provided with a regular report giving information about members of the public who have been treated as vexatious/persistent as per this policy.

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