

	RUGELEY TOWN COUNCIL	
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Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Draft

Date Created	Date Adopted	Date last Reviewed	Next Review Date
January 2023			

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

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 and ways of responding to these situations.

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'.

This policy intends to assist in identifying and managing persons who seek to be disruptive to the Town Council, elected Members and members of staff through pursuing an unreasonable course of conduct.

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 both officer and Member 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.

The 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 them to be labelled vexatious or unreasonably persistent.

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.

Habitual or Vexatious Complainants

For the purpose of this policy the following definition of habitual or vexatious complainants will be used:

The repeated and/or obsessive pursuit of:

- unreasonable complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes
- reasonable complaints in an unreasonable manner

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. Where complaints continue and have been identified as habitual or vexatious in accordance with the criteria set out in Section 3, the Finance and Management

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

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.

The Clerk, as proper officer and on behalf of the Town Council, will notify the complainant in writing of the reasons why their complaint has been treated as habitual or vexatious and the action that will be taken. Cannock Chase District Council will also be informed that a constituent has been designated as a habitual or vexatious complainant.

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.

Definitions

Rugeley Town Council defines unreasonably persistent and vexatious complainants as those complainants who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with the Town Council, hinder the Town 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.

Examples include the way in which, or frequency with which, complainants raise their complaint with staff or how complainants respond when informed of the Town Council's decision about the complaint.

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 Council to investigate, change or influence.

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

- Insist on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaint's 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 Town 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, e-mails, or other social media communications)
- 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
- 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 expects this to be considered and commented on
- Change the substance or basis of the complaint without reasonable justification whilst the complaint is being addressed
- Deny statements they made at an earlier stage in the complaint process
- Electronically record meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of the other person(s) involved
- Adopts an excessively 'scattergun' approach, for instance, pursuing a complaint or complaints not only with the Town Council, but at the same time with, for example, a Member of Parliament, other Councils, elected Members of this and other Councils, the Town Council's Independent Auditor, the Monitoring Officer, the Police 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

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

- 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 Town Council through different routes about the same issue
- Persist in seeking an outcome which Town 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

Imposing Restrictions

Rugeley Town Council will ensure that the complaint is being, or has been, investigated properly according to the adopted complaints procedure.

In the first instance the Clerk will consult with the Finance and Management Committee 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.

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 Town Council in future will be restricted. The Clerk will make this decision in consultation with the Finance and Management Committee and inform the complainant in writing of what procedures have been put in place and for what period.

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

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

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

- 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 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 Rugeley Town 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 will be identified who will read future correspondence)

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

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

Where a complainant continues to behave in a way that is unacceptable, the Clerk, in consultation with the Finance and Management Committee may decide to refuse all contact with the complainant and stop any investigation into his or her complaint. 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.

New Complaints (from complainants who are treated as abusive, vexatious, or persistent)

New complaints from people who have come under this policy will be treated on their merits. The Clerk and the Finance and Management Committee 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. The fact that a complainant is judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious and any restrictions imposed on Council's contact with him or her, will be recorded and notified to those who need to know within the Council.

Review

Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints Policy

Rugeley Town Council

The status of a complainant judged to be unreasonably persistent or vexatious will be reviewed by the Clerk, and the Finance and Management Committee after three months, and at the end of every subsequent three months within the period during which the policy is to apply.

The complainant will be informed of the result of this review if the decision to apply this policy has been changed or extended.

Record Keeping

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 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

The Council will be provided with an annual report giving information about members of the public who have been treated as vexatious/persistent as per this policy.

Item 140
Misappropriation of Council Funding 2017/2018

Background

At the Finance and Management Committee meeting on 28th September 2022, Cllrs were advised that a Freedom of Information (FOI) request had been received relating to the theft of Council funds. It was agreed to engage Breakthrough Communications to offer professional FOI and data protection advice on this matter.

The FOI request requested a report which contains 'references to personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences' (as defined by Data Protection Act 2018 section 11) that information is exempted from disclosure by the Freedom of Information Act 2000 section 40(2) as its processing would be unlawful (or unfair) and disclosure would contravene principle (a) of the UK GDPR, the document was thus exempted in its entirety.

The follow up report did not contain 'references to personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences'. It did contain some personal data; this report was supplied to the requester with the personal data redacted out to satisfy Freedom of Information Act 2000 section 40(2).

Current Situation

The Town Council have received a request to have an agenda item on Full Council to consider various questions around the misappropriation of funds. Cllrs are reminded that the Town Council is a body corporate, and any decisions taken by the Council should be observed by all individual councillors.

Following the comments of the member of public with the FOI request and the member of public attending the December Full Council meeting, Councillors are asked to note the following:

A claim was made under the Councils Insurance Policy which was rejected by the insurance company.

The figures of funds recovered by the council are:

£8,121.52 was recovered from the sale of the house

£1,730.00 was recovered from the sale of horse box

£55,534.40 was received from the pension

£17,005.48 is the outstanding debt agreed by HM Courts and Tribunals Service

£135,423.45 was written off by the Council following advice from External Auditors.

In order to understand the extent of the fraud, bank statements and financial transactions were followed from 2015 – 2018 which included the time before the theft, the time of the theft and the time when bank accounts were changing.

A whistle blower policy was brought in by the Town Council following a recommendation in the independent report.

Copies of the Financial Regulations over the years are available on request to follow the changes made at each stage.

This agenda item is for information. If there are further questions we are happy to take them away and provide a written response to them.