Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council

Policy on Managing Abusive, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints and Complainants

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1. Introduction

Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly, consistently, and in a timely manner. The Parish Council normally places no restrictions on how complainants may contact the Council. However, behaviour that is abusive, offensive, threatening, or unreasonably persistent will not be tolerated. Examples include:

- Using abusive or foul language on the telephone
- Using abusive or foul language during face-to-face contact
- Sending excessive volumes of emails or letters
- Leaving multiple voicemails
- Repeatedly contacting the Council about the same issue

The Parish Council has a duty to protect councillors, employees and volunteers from unacceptable behaviour. Where a complainant behaves in a manner considered unreasonably persistent or vexatious, this Policy will be invoked.

Most complaints are handled straightforwardly, but a small minority may impede investigations or place significant demands on Parish Council resources. This policy sets out how such cases will be managed.

Raising legitimate concerns, challenging outcomes, or highlighting missed timescales will **not** in itself make a complainant vexatious. This policy also applies to complaints made to parish councillors acting in their official capacity.

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2. Aim of the Policy

The aim of this policy is to ensure that all complainants are dealt with in a way that is demonstrably fair, reasonable, and consistent. It explains how Highcliffe and Walkford

Parish Council determines when a complainant is unreasonably persistent or vexatious and sets out the actions that may be taken in these circumstances.

This policy is intended for councillors, staff, and members of the public.

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3. Definitions

Highcliffe and Walkford Parish Council adopts the Local Government Ombudsman's definitions of "unreasonable complainant behaviour" and "unreasonable persistent complaints".

A complainant may be regarded as unreasonably persistent or vexatious when the frequency, nature, or manner of their contact hinders the Council's ability to consider their own—or other people's—complaints.

The terms may apply independently or jointly.

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4. Examples of Unreasonably Persistent or Vexatious Behaviour

The following examples (not exhaustive) illustrate behaviour that may lead to a complainant being designated as vexatious or unreasonably persistent:

- Persistently making complaints without grounds, or solely to cause annoyance
- Refusing to clearly state the grounds of a complaint
- Refusing to co-operate with the investigation process while still demanding resolution
- Insisting issues outside the Council's remit are dealt with as complaints
- Refusing to accept that certain matters cannot be investigated or influenced by the Council
- Insisting on processes incompatible with proper administration (e.g., refusing written records)
- Making unfounded accusations against staff and seeking to have them replaced
- Making excessive contact about a specific complaint
- Demanding immediate or disproportionate responses
- Harassing or verbally abusing councillors or staff
- Raising new issues mid-investigation
- Introducing irrelevant or trivial information and expecting consideration

- Changing the basis of a complaint without justification
- Denying previous statements
- Recording meetings without permission
- Pursuing the complaint simultaneously with multiple bodies ("scattergun approach")
- Refusing to accept a final decision
- Repeatedly re-submitting the same complaint with minor variations
- Approaching the Council via multiple routes about the same matter
- Pursuing outcomes that are impossible or unreasonable
- Refusing to accept factual evidence
- Challenging historic, irreversible decisions

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5. Managing Unreasonably Persistent or Vexatious Complainants

Before acting under this policy, the Parish Clerk will ensure that the complaint has been properly investigated under the Parish Council's Complaints Procedure.

If concerning behaviours arise, the Parish Clerk will consult with:

- The Chair of the Parish Council
- The Vice-Chair (or another appropriate councillor if necessary)

The Clerk will provide sufficient information for them to determine whether the behaviour meets the criteria.

5.1 Initial Warning

If agreed, the Parish Clerk will warn the complainant—by phone, email, or in writing—that their behaviour is causing concern and must change. The possible future actions will be explained.

5.2 Reminder

If behaviour continues, the Clerk will issue a reminder notice advising that contact with the Council may be restricted.

5.3 Imposing Restrictions

If behaviour persists, the Clerk and Chair (and any delegated councillors) will determine appropriate restrictions. The complainant will be informed in writing.

Restrictions will be proportionate, normally lasting **3–6 months**, with review for extensions.

5.4 Types of Restrictions

Restrictions may include:

- Only permitting contact via a third party (e.g., solicitor, councillor)
- Requiring correspondence only by post
- Limiting or banning access to Council buildings
- Requiring all communication through a single named officer
- Limiting phone calls to specified days/times
- Requiring meetings to occur with a witness present
- Informing the complainant that no further responses will be provided on the matter

5.5 Serious Misconduct

Where behaviour threatens the safety or wellbeing of councillors or staff, the Parish Council may contact the Police or take legal action without prior notice.

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6. New Complaints From Restricted Complainants

New complaints will be assessed on their merits. Restrictions will be reviewed to determine whether they remain appropriate.

A blanket ban on dealing with new, genuine service requests will **not** be applied.

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7. Review Process

The Clerk will review the complainant's status every three months and notify them if decisions are changed or extended.

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8. Record Keeping

The Clerk will retain records including:

- Name and address of individuals designated as vexatious/persistent
- Dates restrictions began and will end

- Details of restrictions applied
- Copies of communications with the complainant

An annual summary will be provided to the relevant Parish Council committee.