

Bridgend County Borough Council



Unreasonable Behaviour or Vexatious Complainant Policy

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1. Policy objective

- 1.1 This policy and procedure sets out an agreed understanding of what is considered unacceptable customer complaint behaviour or vexatious complainants when dealing with officers and Elected Members of Bridgend County Borough Council. It applies to all members of the public (customers) in their interaction with the Council.
- 1.2 The Council is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to making our services of a high quality and as accessible as possible.
- 1.3 Most of the contact that the Council has with customers is positive. However, there may be occasions when customers act in an unreasonable or unacceptable manner. In some cases the frequency and the nature of their contact with the Council can hinder the consideration of their own or other people's enquiries. In some instances the sheer number or nature of their inquiries lead them to be considered as 'persistent' or 'vexatious' in their dealings with staff.
- 1.4 This policy explains the Councils:
 - Definition of unreasonable customer behaviour
 - Definition of vexatious request
 - Process for dealing with customers who behave in an unreasonable way
 - Process for dealing with vexatious requests
- 1.5 This policy should only be used in exceptional circumstances after all reasonable measures have been taken to try to resolve the complaints under the council's corporate complaints procedures.

2. Definitions

Unreasonable Customer Conduct

- 2.1 It is difficult to produce a comprehensive list of the actions that would be deemed unreasonable customer conduct. Ultimately it will be a matter for the Council's Complaints Officer and Monitoring Officer to decide whether a particular customer's actions or behaviour are inappropriate, having regard to the circumstances of each case. Examples of conduct which may be considered unreasonable are listed below but the list is not exhaustive:
 - Acts or threats of violence or aggression by an individual toward staff, Elected Members or any third party. Where the behaviour is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff the Council may report the matter to the police or consider taking legal action. In such cases, the Council may not give the complainant prior warning;
 - Persistent failure to show respect in dealings with staff or Elected Members, or acting in a threatening or abusive way. Examples of such behaviour include shouting, verbal abuse, unsubstantiated allegations, derogatory remarks, inflammatory statements;

- Malicious, unwarranted or defamatory comments or making remarks which are related to any protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010;
- Hindering objective consideration of an enquiry or operation of a service by the nature or frequency of contact with the Authority;
- Attempting to pursue any matter, having exhausted all stages of the corporate or other statutory complaints procedure. This will include where the substance of a complaint is the same as that originally made;
- Contacting the Council through different routes about the same issue in a persistent manner. This may include other parties, such as Elected Members or the Ombudsman;
- Excessive demands on the time and resources of officers with the expectation of an immediate response;
- Being unable to identify the precise issue a customer wants the Council to deal with or investigate despite the Council having taken reasonable steps to assist the Customer with this task;
- Focusing on a trivial matter to an extent which is out of proportion to its significance and continue to focus on this point. It is recognised that determining what is 'trivial' can be subjective and careful judgments will be used in applying this criteria;
- Changing the substance of a complaint or continually raising new issues or seeking to prolong contact;

Vexatious requests

2.2 The Council defines this as any request which is likely to cause distress or disruption, without any proper or justified cause. Examples would include:

- High volume of correspondence, or combining requests with accusations and complaints;
- Requests for information that has already been provided, or to reconsider issues that have already been dealt with;
- When compliance with the request would impose significant burden on the Council in terms of expense and negatively impact on the Council's ability to provide service to others.

3. Strategy for dealing with Unreasonable behaviour or vexatious requests

3.1 If an officer of the Council is of the opinion that a customer's actions or behaviour are unreasonable or to classify a request as vexatious, they shall, in the first instance discuss this with their line manager in order to consider any informal steps that can be followed to resolve the concerns. Every effort will be made to satisfy the request or resolve the issue that has been made. For complaints, this will include exhausting both stages of the Council's complaints procedure.

3.2 In the event that no informal steps are appropriate or informal attempts to resolve the concerns do not work, the Directorate will note the comments, and a decision to classify a customer's behaviour as unreasonable or a request as vexatious, will be considered by an Appropriate Officer (as defined in 3.3 below) on an individual basis in consultation with the Monitoring Officer. Each case will be viewed individually and decided on its merits. However, a customer may be deemed to have unreasonable behaviour or be vexatious if previous or current contact with them shows that they meet the criteria, dependent upon degree.

3.3 The “Appropriate Officer” to determine the action to be taken will depend upon the circumstances of each case provided that no officer may undertake the role of “Authorising Officer” if he/she has had an involvement in the complaint. This may be a Group Manager, Head of Service or Complaints Officer acting on behalf of the Chief Executive.

3.4 The Appropriate Officer in consultation with the Monitoring Officer will determine what action to take including:

- (a) Restricting the manner in which the customer may contact the Council;
- (b) The times at which the customer may contact the Council;
- (c) Restrict contact through a designated officer;
- (d) Notify the customer that the Council has responded fully to the points raised and has tried to resolve the complaint but there is nothing more to add and continuing contact will serve no useful purpose and advise them to contact the Ombudsman;
- (e) Withdraw contact with the customer either in person, by telephone, by email or any combination of these, provided at least one form of contact is maintained. The Council shall not, without the consent of the Monitoring Officer, withdraw or not provide any services to which the customer or his/her family are entitled to receive;
- (f) Inform the customer that the Council reserves the right to pass the matter to the Council’s legal services which may result in legal action against the customer;
- (g) Removal from the Council offices by a senior manager or the police if the behaviour is considered to be a public nuisance offence; and
- (h) Other suitable options will be considered in light of the customer’s circumstances.

3.5 The Appropriate Officer will write to the customer to:

- (a) Detail the action that will be taken and why as outlined at paragraph 3.4;
- (b) Explain what this means in terms of contact with the Council;
- (c) Advise how long any restrictions will be in place and when they will be reviewed;
- (d) Enclose a copy of this policy.

3.6 The Monitoring Officer shall maintain a central register of decisions relating to the above.

4. Review

4.1 Any restriction imposed shall be subject to a regular review and the timing of such reviews will be notified to the customer. Reviews will be based on the individual circumstances of the case but could typically be for a period of 6 months, dependent on the severity of the situation.

5. Social Media

5.1 The Council will remove, without notice, offensive or abusive posts from its social media channels. Additionally, the Council reserves the right to take any action it considers necessary where derogatory comments are made about officers of the Council.

6. New complaints

- 6.1** New complaints from individuals whose behaviour has previously been deemed unreasonable or their complaints vexatious will be treated on their merits. Restrictions imposed in respect of an earlier complaint will not automatically apply to a new matter. An Appropriate Officer will decide if any restrictions which have been applied before are still appropriate and if necessary in relation to the new complaint or request.
- 6.2** However, persistent unreasonable behaviour, or exceptionally unreasonable behaviour may result in a refusal of future contact on any matter.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

- 7.1** Information will be presented quarterly to the Cabinet and Corporate Management Board with details of customers who have been categorised as vexatious or have unreasonable behaviour.