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# WOODHAM FERRERS AND BICKNACRE PARISH COUNCIL A QUALITY COUNCIL

ESSEX 'VILLAGE OF THE YEAR' - RUNNERS UP 2009

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## POLICY FOR DEALING WITH HABITUAL OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS

### PREAMBLE

Following the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act, the public and press have a right to make requests for information held or owned by the Parish Council. Such requests will be processed using our Freedom of Information Policy and Complaints Procedure as appropriate.

However, there may be occasions where the requests for information, complaints or grievances may be deemed vexatious or habitual (see definition below). These may involve cases where there are:

- serial requests for information, serial complaints or serial grievances about different matters – received by letter, email or voicemail/messages;
- requests, complaints or grievances that regularly focus on a trivial matter to an extent which is out of proportion to its significance and continue to focus on such points;
- grievances that are constantly reiterated which are without substance and have no foundation;

If their persistence adversely affects our ability to do our work and provide a service to others, the Council may need to address such behaviour by restricting, suspending or terminating contact with our offices and staff.

We do not expect staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour by complainants which causes or may cause undue stress.

The Council recognises that it is important to distinguish between people who make a number of complaints because they genuinely believe things have gone wrong, and people who are simply being difficult. We acknowledge that complainants will often be frustrated and aggrieved and it is therefore important to consider the merits of their case rather than their attitude.

### Definition of a Habitual or Vexatious Complainant

Complainants (and/or anyone acting on their behalf) may be deemed to be habitual or vexatious where previous or current contact with them shows that they meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. Persist in pursuing a complaint/grievance where the Council's Complaints or Freedom of Information Procedure has been fully and properly implemented and exhausted.
2. Persistently change the substance of a complaint/grievance or continually raise new issues or seek to prolong contact by continually raising further concerns or questions upon receipt of a response whilst the complaint/grievance is being addressed.
3. Are repeatedly unwilling to accept documented evidence given as being factual or deny receipt of an adequate response in spite of correspondence specifically answering their questions or do not accept that facts can sometimes be difficult to verify when a long period of time has elapsed.

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4. Repeatedly do not clearly identify the precise issues which they wish to raise despite reasonable efforts of the Council to address their concerns, and/or where the concerns identified are not within the remit of the Council.
5. Regularly focus 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 a trivial matter can be subjective and careful judgement will be used in applying this criteria.
6. Have threatened or used physical violence towards staff at any time - this will, in itself, cause personal contact with the complainant and/or their representatives to be discontinued and the complaint will, thereafter, only be continued through written communication received by post. All such incidences will be documented. Woodham Ferrers & Bicknacre Parish Council has determined that any complainant who threatens or uses actual physical violence towards staff will be regarded as a vexatious complainant and will receive written confirmation that this is the case and will inform the complainant of the action that will be taken.
7. Have, in the course of addressing a registered complaint or grievance, had an excessive number of contacts with the Council - placing unreasonable demands on staff. For the purposes of determining an excessive number, the contact may be in person, by telephone, letter, e-mail, voice messages or fax. Discretion will be used in determining the precise of number of excessive contacts applicable under this section, using judgement based on the specific circumstances of each individual case.
8. Have harassed or been personally abusive or verbally aggressive on more than one occasion towards staff dealing with the complaint/grievance. Staff recognise, however, that complainants may sometimes act out of character in times of stress, anxiety or distress and will make reasonable allowances for this. However all instances of harassment, abusive or verbally aggressive behaviour will be documented.
9. Have harassed or been personally abusive or verbally aggressive on more than one occasion towards other Members of the Council (Councillors) whether this has been on a face-to-face contact or at public meetings.
10. Are known to have recorded meetings or face-to-face/telephone conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of other parties involved and/or have impersonated any member of staff or Councillors with the objective of soliciting information for whatever purpose.
11. Make unreasonable requests or demands and fail to accept that these may be unreasonable.
12. Seeking to coerce, intimidate or threaten staff, Councillors or other people involved, whether by use of language, tone of voice or behaviour including body language

## ACTIONS

Where complaints have been identified as habitual or vexatious in accordance with the criteria set out above the Clerk, being the Executive Officer of the Council, in liaison with the Chairman of the Council, will determine what action to take. The Clerk will implement such action and will notify the complainant(s), that their complaint/grievance is considered as vexatious and the action that will be taken. For completeness, this notification will be copied to all Councillors and may be copied to any

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others already involved. A record will be kept, for future reference, of the reasons why a complaint has been classified as habitual or vexatious.

The Clerk may decide to deal with habitual or vexatious complaints in one or more of the following ways:

1. In letter, setting out a code of commitment and responsibilities for the parties involved if Woodham Ferrers & Bicknacre Parish Council is to continue processing the complaint/grievance. If these terms are contravened, consideration will then be given to implementing other action as indicated below.
2. Decline contact with the complainant, either in person, by telephone, by fax, by letter, by e-mail or any combination of these, provided that one form of contact is maintained which will be by conventional post (letter).
3. Notify the complainant, in writing that the Council has responded to the points raised and has tried to resolve the complaint/grievance but that there is nothing more to add and continuing contact on the matter will serve no useful purpose. The complainant will also be notified that the correspondence is at an end, advising the complainant that they are being treated as a persistent or vexatious complainant and as such the Council does not intend to engage in further correspondence dealing with the complaint.
4. Inform the complainant that the Council reserves the right to seek legal advice on unreasonable or vexatious complaints/grievances and behaviour.
5. Temporarily suspend or permanently suspend all contact with the complainant, in connection with the issues relating to the complaint or grievance being considered habitual and/or vexatious.

### **Restricting Contact**

Any restrictions will be appropriate and proportionate to the nature of the complainant's contacts with the council at that time. The following are examples of the types of restriction which may be used:

- Placing time limits on telephone conversations and personal contacts;
- Restricting the number of telephone calls that will be taken (for example one call on one specified morning/afternoon of any week);
- Limiting the complainant to one medium of contact (telephone, letter, e-mail etc);
- Requiring the complainant to communicate only with a named employee only;
- If a complaint is currently going through the council's complaints procedure, asking the complainant to enter into a written agreement about their future conduct if the complaint is to be progressed;
- Requiring any personal contacts to take place in the presence of a witness;

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- Closing the investigation into a complaint;
- Refusing to register and process further complaints providing the complainant with acknowledgements only of further letters, faxes, or e-mails received after a particular point;
- Banning a complainant from some or all of the Council's premises;
- Involving the police in cases where we believe the complainant has committed a criminal offence (for example, harassment, assault on staff or criminal damage), where assault is threatened, or where the complainant refuses repeated requests to leave council premises.

Where this policy is applied, the complainant will be told in writing why a decision has been made to restrict future contact, the restricted contact arrangements, the length of time that these restrictions will be in place and what they can do to have the decision reviewed.

There should never be a blanket ban for an unspecified period of time.

We will try to maintain one form of contact which will be by way of conventional post (letter). In extreme situations, we will tell the complainant in writing that their name is on a 'no personal contact' list contained in the council's Awareness Register. This means that they must restrict contact with our office to either written communication received by letter or through a nominated third party advocate known and declared to be acting on their behalf.

In deciding which restrictions are appropriate, careful consideration will be given to balancing the rights of the individual with the need to ensure other residents and our employees do not suffer any disadvantage or undue stress and the resources of the council are used as effectively as possible. When it is deemed that it is appropriate to include a complainant on the Awareness Register, the form attached at Appendix 1 will be completed.

All information held on the Awareness Register will be reviewed every twelve months as part of the evaluation and review process for the effectiveness of the policy.

There is no right to appeal a decision so members of the public should observe common dignity, courtesy, respect and consideration to those to whom the complaint or grievances are addressed prior to engaging upon a habitual or vexatious complaint/grievance. The basic principle of treat others as you would be expect them to treat you applies.

### **Threatening and Abusive Complainants and Harassment**

Woodham Ferrers & Bicknacre Parish Council believes that harassment is totally unacceptable. The Council will work to prevent any form of harassment from happening in the first instance and where it has already occurred, will work to prevent it from happening again.

Harassment is a term that is generally used to define unwelcome and unwarranted behaviour that affects the dignity of an individual or group of individuals. Harassment may also include the following:

- actions characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating that attempts to undermine or injure an individual or group of individuals.

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- Actions characterised as discrimination/victimisation in any act of inappropriate differential treatment, intentional or otherwise, direct or indirect, which is based on an individual's identity.

If staff are subjected to any threatening or abusive complaints the Council's Step Away Policy is immediately implemented in order to protect staff.

### **Step Away Policy**

Where there is abusive or aggressive behaviour which produces damaging or hurtful effects, physically or emotionally on the staff which includes, but not exclusively, verbal abuse (including name calling), bullying, shouting or swearing or threat of any of these behaviours the staff are to step away from the situation.

This can mean terminating a conversation whether it is face to face or by telephone, advising that the conversation is being terminated, and in the case of such behaviour in a face-to-face contact in the office activation of the silent panic alarm which is linked directly to the police.

### **Legal Position**

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 Section 14(1), public authorities do not have to comply with vexatious requests. The Council also has a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of its employees.

This policy and guidance aims to meet the objectives set out in the Council's general policy in respect of Health & Safety at Work and its Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy. The above Policy and guidance together with the organisation and arrangements for carrying it out are part of the Council's principles relating to its application of Health & Safety policies. Particular attention is paid in this document to the provision of systems of work, and a working environment, that is safe and without risks to health. Within this framework the Council affirms its intention to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of its employees against abuse and violence arising from or during the course of their work activities.

*Adopted by Parish Council: 6<sup>th</sup> April 2010*

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**Restricted Contact Awareness Register  
Database Entry Request**

*To be completed by The Clerk*

Details of complainant to be placed on register

<b>Last name:</b>	<b>First Name:</b>
<b>Also known as:</b>	<b>Contact details:</b>

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**Details of application:**

**Describe the reason why you consider the complainant should be added to the register. Include information on**

- **The length of time you/colleagues have been in contact with the complainant**
- **The amount of correspondence exchanged**
- **The nature of the complaint(s)**
- **The steps that have already been taken to resolve the situation**

**Attach copies of any relevant documentation**

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**Name and contact details of officer(s) dealing with complainant:**

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<b>Signed:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<b>Chairman of the Council:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	
<b>Nature of contact restriction:</b>	

**For Office use only:**

<b>Awareness Register reference number:</b>	
<b>Date entered onto Awareness Register:</b>	<b>By:</b>

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*Note: All entries on the Register will be reviewed after 12 months and the entry deleted if it is no longer necessary to retain the information for legal or operational reason*

**REVIEWED AND AGREED AT THE PC MEETING OF 5<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2011**

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