



## **BOROUGH COUNCIL OF KING'S LYNN AND WEST NORFOLK**

### **POLICY ON UNREASONABLY PERSISTENT COMPLAINANTS**

#### **UNACCEPTABLE COMPLAINTS POLICY**

This policy sets out our approach to the relatively few complainants whose actions or behaviour we consider to be unacceptable. We aim to deal fairly, honestly, consistently and appropriately with all complainants, but we retain the right to restrict or change access to our services where we consider a complainant's actions to be unacceptable. Our aim in doing this is to ensure that other complainants and our staff do not suffer any disadvantage from complainants who act in an unacceptable manner.

This policy will not affect anyone's rights under the Data Protection Act 1998 or the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

#### **DEFINING UNACCEPTABLE ACTIONS**

People may act out of character when under stress and we do not view behaviour as unacceptable just because a complainant is forceful or determined. However, the actions of complainants who are angry, demanding or persistent may result in unreasonable demands on workloads and behaviour towards staff. Such actions have been grouped under three headings:

##### **1. Unreasonable Persistence**

Examples include:

- Refusing to specify the grounds of a complaint, despite offers of assistance with this from the authority's staff.
- Refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved.
- Refusing to accept that issues are not within the remit of a complaints procedure despite having been provided with information about the procedure's scope.
- Insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice.

- Making what appear to be groundless complaints about the staff dealing with the complaints, and seeking to have them replaced.
- Changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds and/or denying statements he or she made at an earlier stage.
- Introducing trivial or irrelevant new information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or raising large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions and insisting they are all fully answered.
- Electronically recording meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of the other persons involved.
- Adopting a 'scattergun' approach: pursuing a complaint or complaints with the authority and, at the same time, with a Member of Parliament/a councillor/the authority's independent auditor/the Standards Board/local police/solicitors/the Ombudsman.
- Making unnecessarily excessive demands on the time and resources of staff whilst a complaint is being looked into, by for example excessive telephoning or sending emails to numerous council staff, writing lengthy complex letters every few days and expecting immediate responses.
- Submitting repeat complaints, after complaints processes have been completed, essentially about the same issues, with additions/variations which the complainant insists make these 'new' complaints which should be put through the full complaints procedure.
- Refusing to accept the decision – repeatedly arguing the point and complaining about the decision.
- Combinations of some or all of these.

When we find a complainant to be unreasonably persistent, we will tell them why and ask them to change their behaviour. If the behaviour continues, we will take action to restrict the complainant's contact with the Council. Any such restrictions will be appropriate and proportionate after consideration by the appropriate Executive Director. The most likely options would be:-

- a) *requesting contact in a particular form (eg by letter only)*
- b) *requiring contact to take place with a named member of staff and by prior appointment*
- c) *restricting telephone calls to specific days and times; and /or*
- d) *asking the complainant to enter into an agreement about their contact.*
- e) *where a) to d) fail to stem unacceptable behaviour to advise the complainant that all further correspondence and complaints on or closely related to the same subject will be read and filed without acknowledgement and no further response will be sent by officers of the Council.*

## **2. Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour**

The Council recognises that customers who feel dissatisfied with the service they have received may feel angry about their treatment. However, the Council has a duty of care towards the safety and welfare of its staff.

Examples of unacceptable behaviour include any action or series of actions which are perceived by the staff member to be abusive, threatening or offensive whether they are delivered verbally or in writing or a combination of the two. This includes not only behaviour directed at them, but also their families or associates. If a staff member feels threatened by a complainant they should report their fears, and the reason for them, to their line manager. The line manager will record the details and as part of the action arising from his/her investigation will consider:-

- *Writing to the perpetrator requiring no repetition of the behaviour and, if necessary, setting conditions and restrictions for further contact with staff.*
- *Whether to report the matter to the Police.*

If dealing with such behaviour in a telephone conversation, the staff member should tell the complainant that they will terminate the call if the behaviour continues. If despite this warning the behaviour continues, the contact should be terminated and a note placed on the case file recording the circumstances of the termination. Staff will respond to repeated calls in the same way.

Repeated calls may be deemed to be harassment, which, after consultation with the Executive Director, may be reported to the Police.

## **3. Unreasonable Demands**

Complainants may make unreasonable demands through the amount of information they seek, the nature and scale of service they expect or the number of approaches they make. What amounts to unreasonable demands will depend on the circumstances surrounding the behaviour and the seriousness of the issues raised by the complainant.

Examples, might include demanding responses within an unreasonable timescale, insisting on speaking to or seeing a particular member of staff, continual phone calls or letters.

We consider these demands to be unreasonable if they start to impact substantially on the work of staff, such as taking up an excessive amount of staff time to the disadvantage of other customers or services. Actions falling within this category will be dealt with as set out in “Unreasonable Persistence” above.

#### **4. Implementation of the Policy**

In cases where this becomes necessary, we will write to the complainant saying why we believe their behaviour is unacceptable, what action we are taking and the duration thereof.

We will also tell them how to challenge the decision if they disagree with it and to whom such an appeal should be addressed.

Where a complainant continues to behave in an unacceptable fashion, the Executive Director may authorise staff to terminate contact with the complainant on the subject of the complaint(s) and discontinue any further investigation. Any further contacts regarding the complaint in writing will be read and placed on file without acknowledgement. Telephone calls will be terminated and logged.

In taking the action described above, it is emphasised that this policy will only be used as a last resort and after all other reasonable measures have been taken to resolve complaints following the appropriate procedure. Judgement and discretion will need to be applied to ensure that contacts from the complainant about matters other than the complaint are not ignored and that as a result there is a failure to respond to a request for service or other information.

New complaints from customers who have been regarded as unreasonable persistent complainants will be treated on their merits.

Withdrawal of any action taken under this policy must be undertaken in consultation with the Executive Director who authorised it.

#### **5. Appeals Procedure**

A complainant can appeal a decision to restrict contact. A senior member of staff who was not involved in the original decision will consider the appeal. They will then advise the complainant in writing that either the original decision has been upheld or if a different course of action has been agreed.