Unreasonably Persistent or Vexatious Complaints and Correspondence Policy

Version 1.0 – Adopted by Council on 13 October 2026.
Policy adopted by Council on:
Min ref: 9.5., page 64-2026
For review in September 2029 or sooner if legislation, relevant guidance, or Council's procedure change.

1. Introduction

Ruskington Parish Council is committed to dealing fairly, openly and proportionately with complaints, concerns and correspondence from residents, parishioners and other members of the public.
The Council recognises that people have a legitimate right to question its decisions, challenge its actions, make complaints and express dissatisfaction with the services it provides. The Council will not regard a complaint as vexatious simply because it is critical of the Council, a Councillor or an employee, because it is persistent, or because the complainant disagrees with the outcome of an investigation.
However, a small proportion of correspondence and complaints may become unreasonable, persistent, abusive, intimidating or vexatious. Such behaviour can place a disproportionate demand upon the Council's limited resources, interfere with the Council's ability to conduct its democratic business and, in serious cases, adversely affect the wellbeing of Councillors and employees.
This policy establishes how Ruskington Parish Council will identify and manage such behaviour while continuing to ensure that legitimate concerns are properly considered.
The policy applies to correspondence and complaints received from any individual or organisation, whether or not they are resident within the parish.

2. Respectful behaviour

The Council expects all correspondence and interactions with its Councillors and employees to be conducted reasonably and respectfully.
The Council will not tolerate bullying, harassment, intimidation, threats, personal abuse or deliberately offensive behaviour directed towards Councillors, employees or other individuals acting on behalf of the Council.
This applies to behaviour occurring:

- in written correspondence;
- by email or other electronic communication;
- by telephone;
- at Council or committee meetings;
- at public events or other Council activities;
- through social media or other public communications; or
- through contact with current or former Councillors or employees where the purpose or effect is to intimidate, harass or undermine them in connection with Council business.

The Council will distinguish between robust criticism, disagreement or legitimate challenge and behaviour which is abusive, intimidating or unreasonable.

3. Bullying and harassment

The Council considers bullying to include a pattern of offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviour which has the purpose or effect of causing emotional or physical harm and/or undermining an individual or group.

Examples may include behaviour which:

- repeatedly personally attacks an individual rather than addressing the substantive issue;
- is intended to intimidate or humiliate;
- makes repeated unfounded allegations about an individual's honesty, integrity or conduct;
- deliberately attempts to undermine an employee or Councillor in the performance of their Council duties;
- creates an unreasonable or disproportionate workload;
- continues after the person has been asked to modify their behaviour; or
- causes significant and avoidable distress to Councillors or employees.

Not every unpleasant, angry or strongly worded communication will amount to bullying or harassment. The Council will consider the circumstances and overall pattern of behaviour.

---

4. Defining unreasonable, persistent or vexatious complaints and correspondence

There is no single characteristic which automatically makes a complaint or correspondent unreasonable or vexatious.

The Council will consider the circumstances of each case and, where appropriate, the cumulative effect of the person's behaviour.

Behaviour may be considered unreasonable, persistently unreasonable or vexatious where it includes one or more of the following:

4.1 Repetition and persistence

- repeatedly raising substantially the same complaint or issue after it has been properly considered and responded to;
- repeatedly demanding a different answer to a question which has already been answered;
- continuing to pursue an issue without providing any substantive new information or evidence;
- submitting multiple complaints about substantially the same matter through different routes;
- repeatedly changing or expanding the complaint after the Council has responded to the original issue;
- making frequent or simultaneous requests which have the effect of placing a disproportionate administrative burden upon the Council.

4.2 Unreasonable demands or expectations

- insisting upon an outcome which the Council has explained is outside its powers or responsibilities;
- demanding action which is disproportionate to the nature of the issue;
- requiring an unreasonable amount of Councillor or officer time;
- insisting that individual Councillors or employees respond personally when the matter properly falls within the responsibility of the Council or its appointed officers;
- not meeting demands to provide substantive evidence to any claims(s) as made in writing, and
- repeatedly demanding immediate responses where no reasonable urgency exists.

4.3 Abusive, intimidating or harassing behaviour

- threatening, abusive, insulting or intimidating language;
- personal attacks on Councillors or employees;
- repeated allegations of dishonesty, corruption or misconduct without credible supporting evidence;
- behaviour intended to humiliate, frighten or intimidate an individual;
- deliberately contacting or copying large numbers of people in an attempt to embarrass, pressure or intimidate the Council or an individual;
- attempts to interfere with or undermine the Council's democratic or employment processes through personal attacks or intimidation.

4.4 Refusal to accept reasonable explanations

- refusing to accept that an issue falls outside the Council's legal powers or responsibilities;

- refusing to accept a decision which has been properly made, without identifying a substantive reason for reconsideration;
- refusing to accept information which has been reasonably provided;
- repeatedly asserting that an investigation has not taken place when the Council has provided a substantive response explaining the investigation undertaken.

4.5 Attempts to create disproportionate workload

- correspondence which is unusually frequent, lengthy or repetitive in circumstances where the additional material does not advance the substantive issue;
- correspondence deliberately timed or structured so as to create unnecessary disruption;
- making multiple requests which individually may appear reasonable but collectively create a disproportionate administrative burden;
- behaviour which materially interferes with the Clerk, RFO, other employees or Councillors carrying out their normal duties or the Council conducting its democratic business.

4.6. Making unfounded allegations

- Accusing Council staff, councillors, or contractors of misconduct without evidence.

4.7. Not meeting deadlines

- Not providing substantive evidence to any claim(s) as made in writing within the requested timeframe.

4.8 Attempts to undermine individuals

The Council may consider behaviour unreasonable where there is a sustained pattern of correspondence or other conduct apparently directed towards undermining, discrediting, humiliating or intimidating a particular Councillor or employee rather than addressing a substantive Council matter.
The Council will take particular care before reaching such a conclusion and will distinguish legitimate complaints about the conduct of Councillors or employees from personal attacks.

---

5. Legitimate complaints and new evidence

This policy must not be used to prevent legitimate scrutiny of the Council.
A complaint will not be considered vexatious merely because:

- the complainant disagrees with a Council decision;
- the complainant has previously complained about the Council;
- the complaint is strongly worded but remains reasonable;
- the complainant has made several legitimate complaints about different matters;
- the complaint is inconvenient or requires work by Councillors or employees;
- the complaint is made by a persistent critic of the Council;
- the complainant is pursuing a matter which the Council would prefer not to discuss; or
- the complainant provides genuinely new and relevant information or evidence.

Where genuinely new substantive evidence is provided, the Council will consider whether that evidence warrants further consideration regardless of whether the person has previously been designated as an unreasonable or vexatious correspondent.
The Council will also take reasonable account of any circumstances which may affect a person's ability to communicate or engage with the Council.

---

6. Matters outside this policy

This policy does not replace or override other procedures which apply to particular types of complaint or allegation.
Where appropriate, the Council will direct matters to the relevant procedure, including:

- complaints concerning an alleged breach of the Councillor Code of Conduct, which may need to be referred to the relevant Monitoring Officer;
- employee conduct or disciplinary matters, which will be dealt with under the Council's Complaints Policy and/or employment procedures;
- allegations of criminal conduct, which may need to be referred to the police or another appropriate authority;

- Freedom of Information or Environmental Information requests, which will be dealt with under the applicable legislation and Council procedures;
- Data Protection or Subject Access Requests, which will be dealt with under the applicable data protection legislation;
- complaints concerning a specific service which should first be dealt with through the Council's normal complaints procedure; and
- matters which fall within the responsibility of another public authority.

A person must not be designated as vexatious simply because they have used one of these alternative procedures.

7. Initial response and warning

Where the Clerk considers that a person's behaviour may meet the criteria in this policy, the Clerk should, where appropriate, consult the Chair of the Council.

Depending upon the circumstances, the Clerk or Chair may write to the person explaining:

1. which aspects of their behaviour are causing concern;
2. why the behaviour is considered unreasonable or disproportionate;
3. the effect that the behaviour is having on the Council, its employees or Councillors; and
4. what change in behaviour is requested.

The correspondence should normally provide the person with an opportunity to modify their behaviour before formal action is considered.

An initial warning will not necessarily be appropriate where the behaviour is particularly serious, threatening, abusive or otherwise requires immediate action.

8. Formal consideration

If the behaviour continues, or where the circumstances are sufficiently serious to warrant immediate consideration, the matter may be referred for formal consideration.

The Clerk should prepare a report setting out:

- the nature of the complaint or correspondence;
- the relevant history;
- the behaviour which is considered unreasonable, persistent or vexatious;
- the relevant criteria within this policy;
- any previous warnings or requests to modify behaviour;
- any substantive new evidence provided;
- the impact upon the Council, its employees or Councillors;
- the administrative workload or resources involved, where this can reasonably be established; and
- the proposed action.

Where reasonably practicable, the report should include a record or summary of relevant correspondence, telephone calls, meetings or other communications.

The identity of complainants and the contents of correspondence should be handled in accordance with the Council's confidentiality and data protection obligations.

9. Decision-making

The decision to designate a person or a particular course of correspondence as unreasonable, persistently unreasonable or vexatious should normally be made by Full Council.

Where appropriate, the matter may be considered in a confidential session where discussion involves confidential employee information, personal information or other information which the Council is legally entitled or required to consider confidentially.

The Council should consider whether the proposed action is:

- reasonable;
- proportionate;
- necessary;
- supported by the evidence;
- consistent with this policy; and

- limited to what is necessary to manage the particular behaviour.

The Council should record the reasons for its decision.

The Council should avoid making a finding that a person is "vexatious" simply because a complaint is unfounded or unsuccessful. The focus should be on the person's behaviour, its persistence and/or its disproportionate impact.

10. Possible sanctions and restrictions

Where a person has been formally designated as an unreasonable, persistently unreasonable or vexatious correspondent, the Council may impose proportionate restrictions.

Depending upon the circumstances, these may include:

10.1 Single point of contact

The person may be required to communicate only with one nominated member of staff or Councillor. Where possible, correspondence should be directed through the Clerk rather than individual Councillors or employees.

10.2 Restriction on repeated correspondence

The Council may decide that further correspondence concerning a matter which has already been properly answered will not receive a further substantive response unless genuinely new information or evidence is provided.

10.3 Restriction on frequency of correspondence

Where appropriate, the Council may limit the frequency or method of correspondence for a defined period.

10.4 Restriction on contact with individual employees or Councillors

Where correspondence is being directed repeatedly at a particular employee or Councillor in a manner which is unreasonable, abusive or intimidating, the Council may require future correspondence to be directed through the Clerk or another nominated person.

10.5 Defined period of restricted communication

In serious cases, the Council may determine that correspondence on matters already addressed will not receive a substantive response for a defined period, normally not exceeding six months, unless genuinely new and substantive information is provided or the matter concerns a new issue requiring a response. Restrictions should be proportionate to the behaviour and should not prevent a person from raising a genuinely new and substantive matter concerning the Council.

11. Notification of a decision

Where formal restrictions are imposed, the Clerk will write to the correspondent explaining:

- that the Council has considered the matter under this policy;
- the reasons for the decision;
- the behaviour or correspondence which led to the decision;
- the restrictions being imposed;
- the period for which the restrictions will apply;
- how genuinely new or substantive matters should be submitted; and
- when the decision will next be reviewed.

A copy of this policy should normally be provided or made available to the correspondent.

12. Review of restrictions

Any formal restriction imposed under this policy should be reviewed after an appropriate period and normally within six months.

The review should consider:

- whether the behaviour has changed;
- whether the restrictions remain necessary;
- whether the person has complied with the restrictions;
- whether any genuinely new matters have arisen;

- whether there is evidence that normal communication can resume; and
- whether a less restrictive approach is appropriate.

Where behaviour has improved, the Council should normally return the person's correspondence to the ordinary complaints or correspondence process.
Where unreasonable behaviour continues, the Council may extend the restrictions for a further defined period.
Any continuing restriction should be reviewed at least annually.
The outcome of the review should be communicated to the correspondent.

13. New complaints during a restriction

A restriction under this policy does not prevent a person from raising a genuinely new complaint or concern.
Where a new matter is raised, the Clerk will determine whether it:

1. is genuinely new and requires consideration;
2. is substantially the same matter already dealt with;
3. should be referred to another procedure or authority; or
4. forms part of the behaviour already addressed under this policy.

Where necessary, the matter may be referred to the Chair of the Council for determination.

14. Non-parish residents

The Council will apply this policy to non-parish residents in the same manner as parish residents where their correspondence concerns Ruskington Parish Council or matters within the Council's responsibility.
The Council will not impose restrictions solely because a person does not live within the parish.
Where a non-resident's correspondence is determined to be unreasonable, persistently unreasonable or vexatious, the same proportionate restrictions may be applied.

15. Multiple complainants raising the same issue

The Council recognises that more than one person may legitimately raise concerns about the same matter.
The fact that several people complain about an issue does not, in itself, make the complaints vexatious.
Where a number of individuals are making substantially identical representations about the same matter, the Clerk may prepare a standard response explaining the Council's position.
Where no individual sanction is being imposed, the Clerk may use such a standard response without requiring separate Council approval for every identical communication.
Where an individual raises a genuinely distinct or substantive point, that point should be considered separately.

16. Freedom of Information and information requests

Requests for information will be dealt with in accordance with the relevant statutory requirements.
Where a person makes repeated or apparently excessive information requests, the Council will consider whether the matter should be dealt with under the applicable Freedom of Information, Environmental Information or Data Protection provisions rather than solely under this policy.
Nothing in this policy removes any statutory right of access to information.

17. Records and confidentiality

The Council will maintain an appropriate record of:

- warnings issued under this policy;
- formal decisions;
- reasons for decisions;
- restrictions imposed;
- review dates;
- review outcomes; and

- significant correspondence relevant to the decision.

Records will be retained and handled in accordance with the Council's document retention, confidentiality and data protection requirements.

Information about a person being subject to this policy will not be disclosed more widely than is reasonably necessary for the Council to administer the policy or comply with its legal obligations.

18. Councillors and employees

This policy is intended to protect both the Council as a corporate body and the individuals who work for or represent it.

Where the behaviour relates specifically to an employee, the Clerk, as the relevant line manager, should ensure that appropriate support is provided.

Where the behaviour relates specifically to the Clerk or another employee and creates an employment or welfare issue, the matter may also be referred to the Human Resources Committee.

Where the behaviour relates to a Councillor, the Chair of the Council should consider whether the matter should also be addressed under the Council's Code of Conduct or other relevant procedure.

Nothing in this policy prevents a Councillor or employee from raising a separate complaint concerning harassment, bullying or other inappropriate behaviour through the appropriate procedure.

19. Relationship with the Council's Complaints Procedure

This policy should be read alongside the Council's Complaints Procedure.

The existence of a vexatious or unreasonable behaviour issue does not automatically bring a legitimate complaint to an end.

Where possible, the Council should first determine the substantive complaint and then address unreasonable or persistent behaviour separately.

Where the behaviour makes it impossible or disproportionate to continue corresponding about a matter which has already been properly considered, the Council may impose the restrictions described in this policy.

20. Reasonable Adjustments

The Council will ensure that reasonable adjustments are considered where a complainant may be vulnerable or have protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010

21. Review of this policy

This policy will be reviewed by the Human Resources Committee and submitted to Full Council for approval at appropriate intervals and at least every three years.

The Council may review the policy sooner if legislation, relevant guidance or Council procedures change.