



**London Borough
of Hounslow**

Policy on managing complainant behaviour

June 2025

1. Introduction

Staff at Hounslow manage several complaints at any one time, aiming to use their time and resources to deliver the best outcome for our residents. The Council acknowledges that residents and members of the public may have reason to feel upset, aggrieved or frustrated when contacting the Council, and the Council is committed to dealing with all residents fairly, honestly and providing a high-quality service at all times. However, in some instances, complainants may behave in an unreasonable manner. This can include behaviour that is aggressive, rude or abusive, or places unreasonable demands on Council staff or Councillors.

Unreasonable behaviour from complainants can, because of the nature or frequency of their contact with the Council, hinder the Council's consideration of their own, or other people's, complaints. Such behaviour can also cause stress and upset to staff. In these cases, the Council may restrict the complainant's contact with the Council.

This policy sets out the Council's approach to managing unreasonable behaviour from residents who would like to complain. The guidance within this policy should assist staff and residents in determining what type of complainant behaviour is deemed unacceptable and unreasonable, and how such behaviour should be managed to ensure consistency and impartiality towards complainants. This policy can also be shared with complainants to help manage their expectations and behaviour and enable positive interactions with the Council while the substance of their complaint is addressed.

This policy is therefore intended for use by Council staff, members of the public, Councillors, complainants, and external bodies.

The approach within this policy acknowledges residents' right to be heard and treated fairly and appropriately, whilst protecting the wellbeing of staff and the integrity of our processes.

2. What the policy is for (purpose)

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Clearly define what behaviours are deemed as unreasonable and abusive amongst complainants to the Council, including behaviour that is unreasonably persistent
- Give a consistent approach to assessing, managing and communicating unacceptable and unreasonable behaviour to complainants
- Ensure our staff and Councillors are not subject to unnecessary stress due to the unacceptable behaviour of others

3. What the policy is designed to achieve (aims)

This policy has been created and developed to provide a consistent and fair approach to managing unreasonable behaviour. This includes how unacceptable and unreasonable behaviour will be assessed and communicated. It has been designed to prioritise positive interactions and resolutions between the complainant and Council or Councillor, and also to manage expectations between the complainant and Council or Councillor if unreasonable behaviour by the complainant has been identified.

The policy has also been designed to consider the complainant's circumstances. This includes the consideration of individual needs and the requirement to have due regard for the complainant's medical condition or communication needs and any vulnerability such as mental health issues and learning disabilities. The approach within this policy encourages Council staff and Councillors to deal with unreasonable behaviour fairly, effectively, and appropriately.

The policy follows guidance published by the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman Service on the management of unreasonable complainant behaviour.

4. Who the policy affects (scope)

This policy is relevant for:

- All members of the public who make a complaint to the Council – it explains to the complainant how their behaviour may be deemed as unreasonable or abusive to the Council, and how the Council may respond to such behaviour
- Advocates or representatives acting on behalf of complainants
- All Council staff and Councillors who might be dealing with a complainant who is behaving unreasonably – this policy informs staff and Councillors how they should approach the application of this policy

5. Policy/Policy Provisions

5.1. Behaviours that are considered unreasonable

The policy covers 'unreasonable complaint behaviour' which may include one or more isolated incidents, as well as 'unreasonably persistent behaviour', which is usually a build-up of incidents or behaviour over a longer period. Not all behaviours are listed here, and Guidance note 1 gives a more detailed list for staff.

Unreasonable Behaviour

Unreasonable behaviour can be considered unreasonable either as a single incident or as a continuous pattern. Once a complainant's behaviour has been considered unreasonable, we will explain why it is and request their behaviour is changed to encourage positive interactions with the Council.

Examples of unreasonable behaviour can include, but is not limited to, some or all of the following examples:

- Refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wanting their complaint to be resolved
- Making excessive demands on the time and resources of staff with lengthy telephone calls or face-to-face interactions, emails to numerous Council staff or detailed letters every few days, and expecting immediate responses
- Submitting frequent 'new' complaints whilst current complaints are being investigated, placing disproportionate pressure on service and the Complaints team
- Adopting an excessively 'scattergun' approach. For example, pursuing a complaint or complaints not only with the Council, but simultaneously with a Member of

Parliament, other Councils, elected Councillors, the Council's independent auditor, the Standards Board, the Police, solicitors, the Local Government Ombudsman and the Housing Ombudsman

- Refusing to accept the outcome of the complaint process after a conclusion has been reached and having exhausted the Council's complaints policy, repeatedly arguing the point, complaining about the outcome, or denying that an adequate response has been given
- Persisting in seeking an outcome which the Complaint's team have explained is unrealistic for legal or policy (or other valid) reasons
- Complaining about or challenging an issue based on a historic or irreversible decision or incident.
- Making serious allegations against the Council or others without any evidence
- Contacting Council employees using their personal details or social media presence

Unreasonably Persistent Behaviour

Levels of contact will be considered unreasonably persistent when the amount of time spent managing it impacts our ability to process the complaint or limits the service we can give to other people.

Examples of this type of contact can include, but is not limited to:

- Repeated contact whilst a complaint is being progressed or after it is closed
- Lengthy telephone calls repeating the same points for discussion
- Excessive face-to-face interactions repeating the same points for discussion
- High volumes of information provided by email, online forms or post where the information repeats what has already been given
- Persistently approaching the Council through different routes about the same issue
- Copying Council employees into emails with other parties where this is not necessary

Aggressive, Abusive or Harassing Behaviour

The Council acknowledges that sometimes complainants may be upset, angry, or anxious about the issues raised in their complaint. The Council will always try to help, but aggressive, abusive or harassing behaviour towards Council employees and Councillors will not be accepted.

Examples of this type of behaviour can include, but is not limited to:

- Behaviour or language (verbal or written) that cause employees to feel offended, afraid, threatened or abused
- Derogatory or discriminatory remarks; including racist, sexist, disablist, homophobic, or transphobic comments
- A threat directed at any Council employee, the Council itself, or any other person present at the time of the contact
- Swearing – although swearing on its own will not usually make for aggressive or abusive behaviour, it can be considered unreasonable if it is abusive, threatening or unnecessarily persistent or vulgar
- Making inflammatory statements
- Raising unsubstantiated allegations

If staff have any concerns regarding personal safety, then they should refer to the separate Health and Safety guidance which can be used in conjunction with this policy.

If experiencing verbal abuse, threats or acts of aggression or physical attacks, staff are obliged to raise this with their managers, and record it via the 'Report an Incident' form on the Council's intranet which notifies Health and Safety colleagues. Consideration should be given by managers to reporting matters to the police.

5.2. Applying the Policy

Before taking any action under this policy, Council staff must ensure that any complaint is being or has been investigated policy, that communications with the complainant have been adequate and that the complainant is not providing new information that may affect the Council's view on the complaint.

At each stage of this process there should be consideration to the complainant's individual circumstances to ensure that any restrictions are appropriate and fair and any reasonable adjustments are made accordingly.

Before a decision to limit the complainant's contact with the Council is made, the member of staff seeking to apply the policy must ensure an informal and second warning has been made and complete a checklist to ensure that all residents are treated consistently and appropriately.

If the behaviour of the complainant is extreme or it threatens the immediate safety of staff, the relevant Head of Service and Head of Resident Experience and Improvement will proceed directly to imposing restrictions without any warnings. This could include options including police involvement or other appropriate enforcement action.

Informal Warning

If a Council officer considers the behaviour of a complainant to fall within the scope of this policy, their manager must be notified and provided with sufficient evidence and examples of the behaviour concerned. It is responsibility of this manager to provide the complainant with an informal warning.

This warning should be used as an opportunity to de-escalate the situation and is recommended that this be done over the telephone or in person. It should also focus on identifying solutions to resolve this behaviour and improve the relationship between the Council and the complainant.

It must include the following information:

- How the complainant's behaviour is perceived to be unreasonable through this policy
- Reference and a link to this policy
- What might happen should the complainant not improve their behaviour
- Request that their behaviour improves
- Whether the complainant requires any additional adjustments or specific communication needs to be aware of, such as a disability which may put the person at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with persons who are not disabled

If the informal warning is provided verbally, then the manager must summarise and confirm the conversation in a follow up email to the complainant.

Second Warning

Where there is no improvement in the complainant's behaviour following the initial warning, a second formal warning will be provided in writing by the Council's Customer Relations Lead. This stage provides another opportunity for de-escalation and positive outcomes, allowing the complainant to explain their perspective to the Customer Relations Lead.

The second warning is valid for 12 months.

Invoking the Policy

If after the second warning the complainant's behaviour does not improve then the Council will decide to restrict the complainant's contact to the Council. The extent of the restriction will be decided on a case-by-case basis, but restriction periods can be either 3 months, 6 months or 12 months.

The complainant will be notified of the decision to impose a restriction in writing, including the following information:

- A copy of the policy
- Why the decision has been taken
- The extent of the restriction(s)
- The duration of the restriction(s)
- The review process of the restriction(s)
- Process to appeal the decision
- Any agreed reasonable adjustments

Guidance note 2 can be referred to by Council staff for more detail on the process of issuing warnings and invoking the policy.

5.3. Imposing restrictions

Restrictions will be tailored to deal with the individual circumstances of the complainant and may include the following:

- Preventing the complainant from making contact by telephone except through a third party. For example, their solicitor, Councillor, or friend acting on their behalf
- Requiring contact to take place with one named member of staff only
- Placing limits on the number and duration of contacts with staff per week or month
- Requiring any personal contact to take place in the presence of an appropriate witness
- Preventing the complainant from sending emails to individuals and/or all Council officers and insisting they only correspond by letter or diverting emails to a specific internal mailbox
- Preventing the complainant from accessing any Council building except by appointment
- Where a decision on the complaint has been made, the complainant should be informed that future correspondence about the complaint will be read and placed on file, but not acknowledged or responded to
- Where the complainant tries to reopen an issue that has already been considered through the Council's complaints procedure, they will be informed in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed

In extreme cases such as physical violence or harassment towards an employee, actions could include involving the police, taking legal action and ending direct contact with the complainant.

Complainants who come under this policy will be informed of any restrictions that apply to them in writing.

5.4. Recording the decision

Notes about any informal and formal warnings will be recorded on the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system as well as any service specific systems. Once the decision to restrict contact with the Council has been agreed, details of the restrictions will be logged on this system. Any Council services that have direct contact with the complainant will also be directly informed of any restrictions.

The Customer Relations Team will note the final decision and place written copies of the decision, and any written correspondence to the complainant, in a central file to be retained for future reference.

The managed behaviour status on the CRM system will include when this status will be reviewed and when it is due to end. This will typically be between 3 and 12 months from the initial decision. However, the exact review date will depend on the nature of the behaviour. Note that reviewing the unreasonable status on a complainant does not mean the resident is automatically removed of this status. Sufficient justification is necessary to make a decision in this review.

5.5. Right of Appeal

When a complainant is sent a letter alerting them of a restriction imposed on them, the letter will also include guidance and information about their right of appeal against the decision.

All appeals must be made in writing (via email or letter). Any requests for reasonable adjustments at this stage will be considered.

If the complainant chooses to appeal the Council's decision of restricted contact, the appeal will be reviewed by the Head of Resident Experience and Improvement with a Senior manager from the service area most impacted by this behaviour. Any potential conflict of interest and earlier involvement in the case will be considered when deciding who will be involved in the appeal.

The Council's final response to the appeal will be communicated to the complainant in writing (via email or letter).

5.6. New complaints from complainants with restrictions

Any complaints about new issues from complainants with restrictions under this policy will be considered on their own merits. The Council does not support a "blanket policy" of ignoring genuine service requests or complaints where they are founded. The Customer Relations Lead or a Senior Customer Relations Officer will review all new correspondence and decide whether the new complaint is justified.

5.7. Review and withdrawal of restrictions

Once a complainant has had a restriction placed on their contact through this policy, this can be withdrawn through a successful appeal or following improvement of behaviour at a review which will be carried out towards the end of the restriction period.

The relevant Heads of Service, the Head of Resident Experience and Improvement and the Customer Relations Lead will collectively review complainants who have restrictions placed on their contact and decide whether the withdrawal is justified.

Once the unreasonable status has been withdrawn from a complainant, they will be notified in writing of this.

5.8. Record keeping

Adequate records will be kept through the Council's CRM system. This will include the following:

- The name and address of each complainant who has been issued warnings through this policy
- The name and address of each complainant who has been marked with an unreasonable status through this policy and what restrictions are in place for them
- When the restrictions came into effect and when they end
- When the restrictions are due for review
- The name and address of each complainant who has historic warnings and restrictions through this policy
- When a decision is taken not to put a further complaint from this complainant through the Council's complaints procedure

Adequate information will also be kept through the Council's shared drive. This may include the following:

- Any correspondence with the complainant who has or who have had this policy applied to them
- When a decision is taken not to apply this policy when a Council officer or Councillor asks for this to be done. This may be either through the appeals process or through insufficient justification and evidence for the application of the policy.
- When a decision is taken to make an exception to the policy once it has been applied
- When a decision is taken not to respond to further correspondence from the complainant, making sure any further correspondence is checked to pick up any relevant new information

Any information provided by complainants including personal or sensitive data such as medical information, will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 as stated in our [privacy notice](#).

7. Equalities and Human Rights considerations

The Council has considered the relevance of the proposal to the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, in particular for those with the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation and the Human Rights Act 1998 and completed a relevance test above. The assessment concluded that Equalities Duties are not engaged by this proposal. The proposal is also compatible with Human Rights Articles and as the report does not have any significant bearing on the substantive equality duty it is not considered necessary to undertake a comprehensive Equality Analysis.

7. Review

This policy was agreed and finalised in June 2025

A review will be conducted within 6 months by December 2025

8. Other relevant policies and useful resources

[Complaints policy](#)

[Adult Social Care – Statutory Complaints Policy](#)

[Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#)

[Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#)

[Local Government Ombudsman Guidance](#)

[Housing Ombudsman Guidance](#)

[Children's Social Care - Statutory Complaints Policy](#)

Appendix 1: Process to manage complainant behaviour

