



Complaints Policy

Introduction

The following Code of Practice in Handling Complaints is based on a model code promoted by the National Association of Local Councils.

These paragraphs can be given out to members of the public on request.

Local Councils as corporate bodies are not subject to the jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman and there are no provisions for another body to which complaints can be referred. Therefore, it is recommended for transparency in local government, and for the benefit of good local administration, that a standard procedure is adopted for considering complaints.

Aylesham Parish Council will do its utmost to settle complaints in the interests of maintaining the good reputation of the Council, and to ensure that the complainant feels their grievance has been fully considered, taken seriously, and acted upon accordingly.

Information for the Complainant

It is hoped that any complaints can be satisfactorily resolved at a local level, but complainants should keep in mind that even if a complaint is upheld, the Council does not have the authority to formally discipline a Councillor for breach of the Code of Members Conduct.

For complaints about Councillors, the complainant is welcome and encouraged to contact the Chief Executive Officer to discuss matters informally prior to deciding whether to officially register a complaint. All Councillors are required to observe and act within the parameters of the Members Model Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer acts for the Standards Committee of Dover District Council which has responsibility for all Parish Councillors. Complaints in respect of Councillors and for breaches of the Model Code of Conduct should be directed to the Monitoring Officer.

The provisions of UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000 must be considered in dealing with all complaints.

What is deemed not to be a complaint?

- Disputing a decision of the Council
- Comments either commendatory or critical where the complainant does not wish to take the matter further.
- Matters relating to formal consultation exercises such as planning and licensing applications and local plans.
- Concerns regarding matters which are the responsibility of another body.
- Criticisms of a policy adopted by the Council.

Other bodies have responsibility for certain types of complaint. These are summarised below:

- Alleged financial irregularity - Local electors have a statutory right to object to a Council's audit of accounts (s.16 Audit Commission Act 1998)
- Alleged criminal activity - The Police

Procedure

All complaints will be deemed to be 'Informal Complaints' unless a written complaint expressly states, 'Formal Complaint'.

Councillors should not investigate complaints independently or engage directly in complaint handling outside of this procedure. All complaints concerning Council services, staff, officers or governance matters should be directed through the Chief Executive Officer, or where the complaint relates to the Chief Executive Officer, through the Chair of the Council, in accordance with the Council's Member and Officer Protocol.

Informal Complaints

Complaints may be given orally or in writing to any Officer or Councillor but are to be dealt with by the Chief Executive Officer. Where the complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer, the complaint should be notified to the Chair of the Council.

The complainant should be offered a copy of the Council's Complaints Procedure for Handling Complaints at this stage.

It is hoped that the complaint can be dealt with at an informal local level in consultation with the employee to whom it refers. The response should be given to the complainant within 5 working days. If an employee is found to have been at fault during the investigation, this may lead to action under the Disciplinary processes.

If after receiving the response, the complainant remains unhappy, they can escalate the matter to a Formal Complaint.

In the event of a seemingly vexatious or malicious complaint from a member of the public, the Council should consider taking legal advice before writing any letters to the complainant and refer to the Council's Vexatious Complaints Policy.

Formal Complaints

If the complainant feels very strongly about a matter, they may lodge a Formal Complaint with the Council, and this should be submitted in writing to the Chief Executive Officer. Where the complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer, the complaint should be notified to the Chair of the Council.

The letter must state that a Formal Complaint is being made and include the following information:

- Name, address, and telephone number of the complainant.
- Who is the complaint about or the full nature of what the complaint is about.
- How the issue has affected the complainant.
- Copies of any relevant documents.
- Details of third parties and their involvement.
- What the complainant believes would resolve the complaint.

Receipt of the letter will be acknowledged within 3 working days and the complainant advised that the Chief Executive Officer will investigate the complaint, who will then respond within 10 working days. The complainant should be offered a copy of the Council's Code of Practice for Handling Complaints and a meeting with the complainant may be considered appropriate at this stage. The Council expects staff to respond positively and professionally to any complaint they receive and act in accordance with the process. Staff should give appropriate assistance and information to an investigation into a complaint. If it is considered that any member of staff might

have acted inappropriately then they will be informed of this and that this will be investigated further, if necessary, as an investigator under the Disciplinary processes.

Complaints Panel

If the complainant feels that the matter has not been resolved fully after lodging a Formal Complaint to the

Chief Executive Officer, then they may request in writing that a Complaints Panel be convened to consider the complaint.

On receipt of the written complaint, the Chief Executive Officer will acknowledge the letter and advise that the Complaints Panel will call a meeting to discuss the complaint within 15 working days of receipt of the letter.

The Complaints Panel comprises the Chair, the Vice Chair of Council, and the Chair of the Finance, Audit & Personnel Committee (or Committee member should the Chair/Vice Chair of the Council also be the Committee Chair). The Chief Executive Officer will also be in attendance to represent the Council. If any of the aforementioned are involved in the complaint investigation they will be excluded from the Complaints Panel and another Councillor may be delegated in their place.

The complainant will be notified of the date of the meeting and asked for their comments, evidence, and documentation in writing prior to the meeting. They, or their representative, will be able to address the Complaints Panel however must leave the room whilst the Complaints Panel considers the complaint and its decision and response. The Complaints Panel must establish at its meeting whether there is a factual basis to the complaint and, if so, what action should then be taken.

Once a decision has been made the complainant will be advised in writing of the recommendations of the Complaints Panel within 5 working days.

The Council may defer dealing with any complaint if it is of the opinion that issues arise on which further advice is necessary. The complainant will be advised in writing of this delay. The advice will be considered, and the complaint dealt with at the next appropriate meeting.

Appeals

The Council will appoint a separate Appeal Panel to whom a complainant may appeal against the decision of the Complaints Panel. The membership of the Appeal Panel will not include any member of the Complaints Panel, nor any Councillor involved in the original complaint. The Chief Executive Officer will be in attendance to represent the Council.

Requests to refer the decision of the Complaints Panel to the Appeal Panel must be made in writing to either the Chief Executive Officer or Chair of the Council within 10 working days of receipt of the decision letter.

An appeal hearing will be arranged within 20 working days of receipt of the appeal letter. A meeting of the Appeal Panel will convene to investigate the whole complaint again. The Appeal Panel must follow the same procedure outlined in this document.

The Chair will respond in writing within 15 working days. This decision is final and there is no further right of appeal. However, where all parties agree that there would be some merit in referring the matter to a third party for advice, conciliation or arbitration, arrangements will then be made to find a mutually acceptable third party.

Recording of Complaints

For future reference, continual service improvement and in the interests of transparency, complaints dealt with under this procedure will be recorded by the Chief Executive Officer. The name of the complainant will be reported only if they have given their consent to be mentioned. The record should note the nature of the complaint, the reasons for the decisions made and what actions might need to be taken in the future (if any).

- End of Policy -

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