

Public Document Pack

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET PANEL ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

MONDAY, 9TH NOVEMBER, 2020

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

Please find attached supplementary papers relating to the above meeting, as follows:

Agenda No	Item
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- | | |
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| 5. | <u>INTRODUCTION BY THE JOINT CHAIRS OF THE CABINET PANEL ON
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT</u>
(Pages 3 - 40) |
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The Joint Chairs of the Cabinet Panel on Community Engagement and Cooperative Development will introduce the aims and objectives for this meeting.

Please find attached the following documents:

- NHDC Communications Strategy 2019-2023
- Social Media Strategy and Policy 2018
- Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy

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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2019 – 2023



1. INTRODUCTION

Communications is at the heart of everything the Council does. This strategy outlines how we will plan and manage our communications activities over the next five years. It sets out our approach to communicating with residents, partners, businesses, with staff and Councillors. The corporate Communications Strategy is relevant to all service areas and functions of the Council.

The Council has achieved 3.6 million of savings since 2014/15 and we have had to radically rethink how we can continue to deliver quality services, while facing an uncertain financial future. Embedding commercialisation into the organisation's culture is now fundamental to our future strategy, as well as considering further opportunities to make efficiencies.

Meanwhile, the way in which residents want to communicate with us has also changed, with digital communications continuing to evolve and grow in importance. Our approach will always be inclusive, using a range of channels to reach as many residents as possible, however we are now at a stage where we need to put more resource and thought into our proactive digital communications activities.

This revised communications strategy reflects the changing landscape that we operate in. In uncertain financial times and with huge challenges ahead for local government, the role of communications in explaining what we stand for, how we will deliver services and provide value for money is critical.

The Communications Strategy supports the Council's corporate objectives which are set out in the Corporate Plan which can be found here: www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-data-and-performance/corporate-plan

We will focus our efforts on communicating how the Council is delivering on those objectives and on projects which fall under those objectives e.g. the Local Plan, regeneration of Churchgate Centre, Green Space Strategy and the completion of the North Hertfordshire Museum and Hitchin Town Hall project. By communicating about what the Council stands for and how we deliver on our priorities and policies, we can successfully build on our organisational reputation.

Aside from communicating strategic messages, we won't forget the basics and will ensure we provide effective information on the core services that people value the most, including waste and recycling, parks and open spaces, street cleaning and housing services.

We will also ensure that our Communications operate within legal boundaries and consider the seven principles of the Government's Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity (2011). The principles state that:

Publicity should:

- Be lawful
- Be cost-effective
- Be objective
- Be even-handed
- Be appropriate
- Have regard to equality and diversity
- Be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity

2. BACKGROUND

The 2017 District Wide Survey (DWS) of North Hertfordshire residents, carried out in September and October, showed there has been a decrease in overall satisfaction with the Council from 82% in 2015 to 75% in 2017. More recently, issues with the new waste and recycling contract and introduction of a charge for collection of garden waste have undoubtedly had an impact on the reputation of the Council. Although things are now a lot better, the reputational effect will take some time to resolve.

As part of the DWS, residents were also asked how well informed they feel about a range of issues. Only around four in ten residents feel informed about how to get involved in local decision making (39%), what the Council spends its money on (39%) and how well NHDC is performing (41%). There have been significant drops in how well informed residents feel about these measures since 2015.

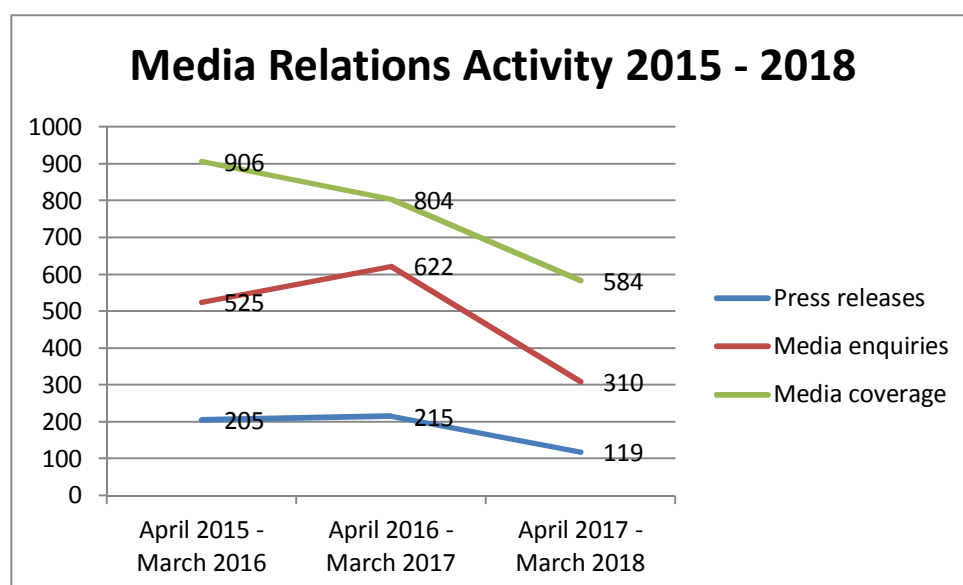
The District Wide Survey also found that those who have seen a copy of the residents magazine 'Outlook' are significantly more likely than those who have not, to be satisfied with the Council overall (77% cf. 69%). This suggests that the more informed people feel about the work of the Council, the more satisfied they are.

This research is valuable to help with understanding where we need to focus on building our communications efforts – namely around building on our reputation with residents and ensuring we are reaching as wide an audience as possible with our messages.

3, REVIEW OF LAST STRATEGY PERIOD 2014-2018

Media Relations: In 2015 we developed a media relations protocol which sets out how we work with the media and what they can expect from us. This is published on our website: www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/customer-services/publications-and-consultations/media-relations-protocol

In the last three years we have seen a significant decline in the amount of media enquiries and media coverage which we receive, as can be seen by the graph below.



The decline in coverage is due in part to one of our key publications, the Midweek Mercury no longer being in circulation and also less interest from the Comet in some of our stories.

The number of press releases being issued has also dropped significantly. The main reason for this is that due to pressure on finances, the Council can no longer do all of the activities which it used to. For example due to lack of resource, we no longer put on as many of the

play activities we used to e.g. Play Rangers, or events such as Community reassurance events, or waste roadshows and Waste electrical recycling events.

Also of note is that while the Comet does still have good circulation locally, there are large areas of the district which aren't covered by the distribution of the Comet or the Royston Crow, and not everyone will read their local newspaper. While the local press remain important to the Council, we can no longer be as reliant on them to help communicate our messages and we therefore need to be concentrating our efforts on reaching residents by different mechanisms.

Social media: In recent years, we have seen a marked shift in how residents communicate and interact with the Council, with interaction with our social media channels constantly increasing. We now have almost 10,000 followers on Twitter and over 1,500 on Facebook. We have developed a social media strategy and social media policy (attached as Appendix B) which sets out our approach to managing social media and also gives the public an overview of how we manage and respond to contact on social media. The policy will be published on our website. We also introduced Hootsuite – software to help us effectively manage our presence on social media and capture useful analytics data.

Website: In 2015 we redeveloped the Council's website, deleting approximately one-third of the content, simplifying the language and making the layout easier to navigate. We have also worked on developing our online offer, so that people can readily pay for, apply for, or report a problem with a service. During this strategy period, responsibility for the website was transferred to Communications from IT, given its vital role as a communications channel.

New Channels: In Autumn 2018 we introduced two new digital channels to help communicate our messages to a wider audience. NH Now, is the Council's new digital magazine, which will be published three times a year at alternate times to Outlook magazine and promoted page by page via social media. @NorthHerts is the Council's new e-bulletin service. Subscribers can receive email alerts on topics of interest to them including waste and recycling, events, North Hertfordshire Museum, jobs and careers and Active North Herts. The e-alerts system will allow us to communicate messages in a timely manner without being tied to a particular publication schedule.

Internal Communications: The Council's quarterly staff magazine and monthly corporate cascade briefing were replaced in 2016 with a single monthly magazine for staff, which is sent via email to all staff. Over 200 people view the magazine each month, with 2,185 page

views for the October edition. To improve visibility of senior management, monthly staff briefings were also introduced in January 2018.

Corporate Identity: Corporate identity guidelines were produced and distributed to all staff in October 2014. The document covers use of logos and the look and feel of all of our communications including emails, letters, presentations etc. It also contains advice on language to ensure it is professional and consistent across the organisation. These will be reviewed and refreshed during the next strategy period.

3. OUR COMMUNICATIONS PRINCIPLES

Our communications will be:

- Honest, accurate and transparent
- Carried out in line with relevant legislation and the Council's own communications protocols and guidance
- Accessible and tailored to meet the needs of a wide cross-section of the community
- Delivered using multiple channels e.g. media, social media, web, print
- Two-way
- Cost-effective
- Developed in line with our corporate style and identity guidelines

4. OUR COMMUNICATION AIMS

- To enhance the reputation of the Council by proactively positioning ourselves as a community leader, promoting both the work of the Council and celebrating everything that makes North Hertfordshire a great place to live, work and prosper.
- To ensure that the information we communicate is timely, accurate, responsive and relevant to the audience we are communicating to.
- To maintain a strong and consistent brand identity for the Council
- To strive for balanced reporting about the Council's policies, decisions and procedures
- To retain a committed and motivated workforce by implementing a programme of effective internal communications

5. AUDIENCES

Our key audiences include:

- North Hertfordshire residents
- Those working in / visitors to the District
- Community groups including charities and voluntary organisations
- Local businesses and potential investors, including BIDS and LEPs
- Councillors
- Council staff
- Town and Parish Councils
- Neighbouring district authorities and Hertfordshire County Council
- Partner organisations e.g. Herts Constabulary, Herts Fire and Rescue Service
- Housing Associations e.g. settle, Howard Cottage
- Central Government departments
- Print, online and broadcast media
- Social media influencers

6. OUR STRATEGIC APPROACH FOR 2019 – 2023

There are two core themes to the Communications Strategy approach:

- **Positive and Proactive**
- **Digital First**

Positive and Proactive

Our core objective for the next five years is to focus on improving our reputation and restoring public confidence in the Council. In order to do this we need to position ourselves as community champions, promoting and celebrating all that is good about North Hertfordshire, the people, community groups, businesses and place, as well as our own work.

Over the last year, much of the work of the communications team has focused on managing the Council's reputation with regards the new waste and recycling contract. A core component of this strategy is to re-focus our effort on delivering positive and engaging communications, across a range of channels. We will do this by:

Changing the narrative: In our new digital magazine, NH Now, we adopt a new tone – focusing on great community stories, celebrating what is great about North Herts, the people, the parks and open spaces, the towns and villages. We will also adopt this approach across other channels e.g. on social media we will engage with community groups and promote the places and people that make North Herts a great place. We will maintain a proactive PR calendar, which focuses on engaging content which can be repurposed across a range of channels. As part of this work we will continue to work alongside the Council's Economic Development Officer to identify opportunities for promoting North Hertfordshire to businesses and visitors.

While there is clearly an important place for traditional corporate communications and to inform residents about our work and performance, given the decline in satisfaction levels among residents and the decline of traditional print media, we also need to think of new ways of being seen as a positive community leader.

Developing campaigns – We will develop campaigns around specific themes and focus our communications efforts on those areas. For example, we could look at campaigns around priorities for the Council such as channel shift, health and well-being and environmental issues such as reducing use of plastics.

Entering into awards – We will proactively seek out opportunities across the Council for entering into awards. The Communications team will assist service areas by offering help with writing award entries and promoting achievements if shortlisted, or if we win. We have in the past had some success, particularly with waste and green space awards, but there is scope to expand this across other services

Working with the media – There is clearly still a place for working with the local press as opinion influencers and we will continue to maintain good working relationships with them. As part of the Strategy we will also pursue opportunities for opinion pieces, for example in the Local Government trade press or in service specific trade press. The Council has an opportunity using these sorts of pieces to position itself as a thought leader on local and national issues. We will also organise regular media training for Cabinet members to ensure they are equipped with the skills needed to act as spokesmen for the Council.

Photo Rangers: We have recently recruited Photo Rangers – officers in the Council who are willing to take photos while out and about in the district that we can use in our social media and traditional communications activity. The aim of this initiative is to show the breadth of what the Council does and also show off the best parts of the district. We hope

that this initiative will also get Council staff engaged, wanting to show off the great work they do. This could also potentially be expanded to include NHDC Councillors if there is interest.

Developing our filming offer - One area which could have a positive effect on the Council's image and reputation as well as generate income, is to develop our filming offer. In particular, Hitchin town centre is fast becoming a popular location for filming, however there are also our parks and open spaces and other properties such as Hitchin Town Hall which have the potential to be used for filming. As part of the Strategy we will build up a location library i.e. pictures of assets which location managers can readily access online when looking for a venue. We will also develop a filming policy and an indicative schedule of charges for filming.

Developing our consultation offer - Although the consultation strategy is covered separately, it is worth mentioning here, as the way the Council consults (or is perceived to consult) has also had a significant impact on its reputation in recent years. 2017 DWS results found that 41% of people disagree that the Council makes an effort to find out what local people want and 32% of people disagree that the Council fully involves or consults residents on important issues. While there are numerous reasons for these results, such as the decision to introduce a charge of garden waste, they prove an important barometer of public opinion.

One area under consideration to help improve our consultation activity is the expansion of the Council's Citizens Panel – a group of people willing to take part in surveys which we carry out. There is scope for building membership to the panel and using them more regularly, consulting them in a light-touch way on issues affecting them, to help people feel engaged with the Council. Membership of the panel could then be promoted via our usual communications channels. There may well also be other mechanisms we can look at, including digital focus groups and offering advice on wording and structure of consultations for service specific consultations.

Digital First

We will continue to utilise a range of channels to reach a wide audience, however in line with our channel shift strategy and with how many people now expect to receive communications, we will always try and adopt a 'digital first' approach.

A growing number of our residents use social media and expect to engage with us – both in terms of service requests and general communications. Social media will continue to

signpost residents to the council's website where additional information and advice will be hosted and services can be accessed or requests raised.

We will enhance our digital communications by:

Extending our range of channels - Work on this has already started with the introduction of the new NH Now digital magazine in October 2018 and the introduction of the e-bulletin service, @NorthHerts. Both channels will allow us to reach new audiences and in particular, the e-bulletin service will mean we can adopt a very flexible and timely approach to sending messages out. We will focus on building our subscriber base for @NorthHerts and building awareness of NH Now through targeted social media activity.

Devise engaging content: In the world of digital communication we cannot just rely on a simple piece of written communication to get our messages across. We will be building on the types of content we can offer, including videos, animations, infographics etc.

Improving engagement on social media: Our new Social Media Strategy sets out how we manage social media and during this Strategy period, the importance of social media will grow further. As well as engaging with customers who now want to use social media for their service requests etc, we intend to build positive engagement by developing specific campaigns on social media and encourage people to have a two-way conversation with us.

We already receive positive engagement around some of our social media activity e.g. we put together a calendar of summer activities which were going on in North Hertfordshire (not just Council activities) and this was well received. We have also promoted similar activities in the past including recycling tips at Christmas and fly-tipping campaigns. These themed proactive posts work very well and so we will look at expanding that side of our social media, as well as devising campaigns and engaging multi-media content.

Enhancing our website offer – we will introduce a Find My Nearest facility on the website and expand and refine our e-forms. We will also consider introducing options such as web chat and AI technology, through our corporate channel shift project. We will also consider the introduction of website advertising to help generate income, as long as this does not compromise the integrity of the content on the site.

Putting in place appropriate resource: To ensure we are maximising the opportunities available to us from our digital channels, we have secured temporary Strategic Priorities funding for our e-news bulletin service, our digital magazine and a new Digital Media and Engagement Officer.

7. EVALUATING OUR COMMUNICATIONS

The Communications Strategy is expected to help enable the following outcomes:

- Well informed and engaged residents who feel listened to and respected
- Recognition and improved perception of the Council and its services among residents and our other key audiences
- Pride in North Hertfordshire as a place to live, work and visit

We evaluate our communications in a number of ways:

Media monitoring - We operate a media monitoring system which records all press releases, media enquiries and media coverage for the Council. We monitor both the quantity and quality of media coverage. For example we consider an item's tone and the Council's share of voice in any coverage. Media monitoring reports are regularly presented to Senior Management Team.

Social media monitoring - We use social media monitoring software 'Hootsuite' to manage our presence on social media and to provide useful analytics data. This information is currently reported to Senior Management Team and a monthly summary is also provided in What the Media Says – a round up of media coverage, distributed to all Councillors and senior management. It is also proposed to include information on social media interactions alongside the Customer Service Manager's reports to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Comments, compliments and complaints.

Website analytics - We use Google Analytics to record and analyse visitor traffic across the NHDC website, intranet and additional sub-sites. Analytics data is used to monitor demand and usage of content and provide reports for service areas. This can be used to adjust or update content to ensure it fully meets the needs of visiting users.

We use Google analytics to monitor the performance of our website.

Reputation surveys - The District Wide Survey measures overall satisfaction with the Council as well as trends in how well informed people feel about the Council. It also tracks satisfaction with the Council's Outlook magazine. We will continue to use the results of the survey to identify changing trends in customer behaviour and aspirations so that we can adapt our communications accordingly.

We conduct a survey of staff every two years which includes a section on our internal communications. We will use the results of the survey to gain feedback on the effectiveness of our communications and identify emerging channels.

Benchmarking data and sharing best practice - We subscribe to a national local authority communications group which provides a forum for sharing best practice and annual benchmarking data. It is a useful forum for testing ideas and understanding the local government communications landscape. The Communications Manager also regularly attends a Hertfordshire communications group for all 10 districts and Herts County Council. The purpose of the group is to identify any cross-county communications issues, share best practice and identify joint working opportunities.

8. CONTACT OFFICER

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North Hertfordshire District Council

Social Media Strategy

2018-2021

DATE: September 2018

1 Executive Summary

1.1 Social media is a powerful means of informing and listening to residents across the district, and as such plays an increasingly important role for the Council. It is therefore important that it is managed well from within the organisation, and to set out our objectives and expectations to the public to ensure it is successful. This strategy sets out how the Council currently uses social media, and proposes potential new arrangements to improve its outcomes.

2 Introduction

2.1 Social media networks offer the ability to reach a large number of people almost instantaneously, which makes them an invaluable communications tool.

2.2 They are a useful means of informing residents and customers about Council news, projects, services and events. By building a base of followers through frequent publishing of news and updates, it becomes possible to reach a far larger number of people that would be possible relying on either traditional print media, or visitors to the website.

2.3 Social media also has the advantage of reaching people who may not usually engage with their local authorities, and having no restrictions when it comes to timing: updates can be published at any time, multiple times, in order to reach the widest possible audience. The sites are also generally free to use.

2.4 Social media is managed by the North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) Communications team and certain officers in the Customer Service Centre through an online software package called Hootsuite.

3 Objectives for using Social Media

- 3.1 To give residents a convenient digital way of being able to stay informed about the work of the Council and a means of getting in touch.
- 3.2 To be an informative, helpful and friendly online presence.
- 3.3 To deal with customer queries in a timely manner.
- 3.4 To share information about events and opportunities in the district.
- 3.5 To champion North Hertfordshire as a place to live and work.
- 3.6 To provide updates on services when they are disrupted or during an emergency situation.

4 Current Situation

4.1 NHDC has a corporate presence on the following social media platforms:

Social network	Date joined	Main activities
Twitter	2009	News, promotional activities, customer interaction
Facebook	2014	News, promotional activities, customer interaction
YouTube	2010	Video and audio file hosting
Flickr	2010	Photo sharing
Instagram	2018	Photo sharing, promotional activities
LinkedIn	2015	Job vacancy publicity

4.2 Facebook and Twitter

The bulk of our focus currently lies with Twitter and Facebook, two of the most popular social networks worldwide. We have nearly 10,000 followers on Twitter and are approaching 1,500 likes on Facebook. We actively engage with residents and other users on these networks by posting links to news updates, community events, and regional and national social awareness campaigns. We also respond to individual customer queries on these channels where possible.

4.3 Analytics data allow us to measure the success of our posts in terms of the number of views they receive and their click-through rates. We can also track engagement levels, for example those people who have commented on or liked our posts. We are also able to track sentiment of posts. This analytical data in turn allows us to judge when future posts should be scheduled to reach the largest possible audience and helps us tailor future messages according to what our followers are most interested in.

4.4 Flickr, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn

The other social networks we have a presence on allow us to broadcast information, but with no expectation of individual interaction or customer service.

- 4.5 Flickr is a photo sharing site aimed at photography enthusiasts and professionals. In the past we used to post photos to Flickr as a means of promoting the district as a vibrant and attractive place to live and work. In particular we used it to show the progress in the construction works for Hitchin Town Hall and Museum. However, Flickr's decline as a social media force has meant we no longer actively use it.
- 4.6 Instagram is a photo and video sharing social network, and is particularly popular among young people. Since February 2018 we have been experimenting with using Instagram instead of Flickr as a means of sharing images to promote the district. We have quickly grown a base of over 500 followers, though it is difficult to quantify the impact our posts have as yet.
- 4.7 YouTube is a well known and widely used video sharing website. Though NHDC has had an account for several years, it has not published a great deal there, due to the time and cost required in developing good quality video content. Recently the audio recordings of the Local Plan Examination hearings were uploaded there as an easy solution to making them publicly available. The communications team are also actively looking at opportunities to create or share video content so that we can improve our digital offer to residents.
- 4.8 LinkedIn is a business professional social networking site, and is one of the most popular services for job hunting. NHDC's profile page sets out who we are and what we do, and we regularly post updates promoting vacancies currently available.
- 4.9 Certain NHDC services such as the North Herts Museum and Herts Careline, also maintain their own social media profiles. This is done with the agreement of the Communications team, who determine if there is a legitimate case for a new social media presence, and that levels of resourcing have been fully considered. A policy on use of social media by staff for work purposes can be found on the Council's Intranet.
- 4.10 In general, it is preferable for the main corporate social media accounts to act on behalf of other services and publish their messages, to ensure engagement is properly managed and resourcing is available. It is accepted however, that there are some circumstances which make a distinct social media presence

desirable.

4.11 In the case of the services in the table below, they already operate or promote themselves to the public at arm's length from the Council, or work in an area more akin to a commercial environment and therefore benefit from a more independent presence online. The Communications team support these services by offering advice and guidance when needed, and sharing their content on the main corporate accounts.

Service	Social networks
North Herts Museum	Twitter Facebook Instagram
Herts Careline	Twitter Facebook
Hitchin Town Hall	Facebook Instagram

5 Management and Development of Social Media

5.1 Management of initial response and assigning enquiries

5.2 Currently the Communications team lead on all engagement on social media – publishing all general outbound messages, and assigning all inbound enquiries and messages to its own team or to the Customer Service Centre if the query relates to a straightforward customer service enquiry.

5.3 Generally this arrangement works well, as by assigning messages, it can easily be seen that one person is dealing with a particular message, however as volumes of enquiries increase, both teams need to ensure they have enough resource that can be dedicated to dealing with enquiries.

5.4 If volumes of straightforward customer enquiries increase, it may make sense in the longer term for the Customer Services team to take the lead on assigning queries, however often posts have a potential wider reputational impact and therefore it makes sense currently for the Communications team to do so.

5.5 When responding to individual customer enquiries on social media, it is common practice among organisations for the responder to sign or initial their reply (e.g. adding “^GM” at the end) so that the customer is assured that their query is being handled by a real person. It also improves accountability by making it easy to see who participated in any customer interaction. Though NHDC does not currently initial its responses, it is a positive course of action which should improve customer satisfaction on social media, and should therefore be implemented or trialled.

5.6 Dealing with comments on other Facebook groups

5.7 As an organisation we have a corporate page on Facebook rather than an individual profile. Therefore we are unable to monitor or respond to comments made about North Hertfordshire District Council on other pages or groups e.g. ‘We are from Hitchin, Hertfordshire’. Unfortunately on occasion inaccurate information is circulated via these sites and there is little we can do to correct this. We could set up individual profiles to do so, however the resource involved

in monitoring them would be extremely time intensive. We should therefore only respond to queries directly posted on our own social media pages.

5.8 Monitoring and reporting interaction with customers on social media

5.9 Customer feedback through normal channels (e.g. telephone calls) is monitored and recorded by the Customer Service team for reporting purposes, and categorised in to comments, compliments and complaints (also known as the 3Cs). Social media is not generally included as part of this activity as a matter of course, largely for logistical reasons; the sheer quantity of comments and interactions would make it extremely time-consuming to compile and analyse the data. It is also partly due to the conversational and informal nature of social media: users discussing or mentioning NHDC do not always expect or require a response. They may discuss their customer experience of NHDC in a positive or negative way, but social media is an open space for public discussion – very different from raising a complaint (or comment or compliment) directly with the Council.

5.10 Customers can of course interact directly with NHDC on social media to raise a specific issue; however this is dealt with quickly and informally where possible. Queries of a personal nature may be moved to a more appropriate channel, where it would be treated as a standard customer service query or a 3Cs interaction. Queries received through social media are not currently subject to response time targets in the same way as other channels.

5.11 Interaction with users on social media is monitored instead through regular dashboard reporting to SMT. These includes key data such as engagement (replies, likes, etc.), mentions, tags (each post is assigned a tag, such as Waste, Grounds Maintenance, Council Tax, etc.) and follower numbers.

5.12 Factors to consider when evaluating a new social network

5.13 Social media is a continually growing and evolving environment, as new networking sites take off in popularity while others decline. As such it would be difficult, if not futile, to set out any hard and fast rules for when NHDC should look at creating a new presence on a social network.

5.14 In general however, the following can be considered as useful questions to ask if joining a new social network is being contemplated:

- Is there likely to be a regular flow of content to publish to justify creating the presence?
- Does the social network have a sufficient number of users to make it worth spending the time and effort in maintaining a presence there?
- Is it particularly popular among an audience with whom the Council wishes to increase engagement e.g. young people, older people?
- Is it possible to monitor the reach of posts published on the site, to determine how widely viewed they are?
- Can messages drafted for an existing social network be easily adapted to fit the new site, in order to minimise the extra work required to publish posts?
- Could the site be used to communicate updates during an emergency situation or a period of service disruption?

5.15 Policy for publication on website

5.16 It is common for organisations to publish a social media policy or code of practice on their website in order to set out clearly how that organisation uses social media, what users can expect from it, and what it expects from users in return.

5.17 The aim of the policy is to help avoid unpleasant or unacceptable treatment of staff, and to protect the organisation's reputation. From NHDC's perspective it is important to clarify how we aim to help anyone who contacts us via social media, but also that it may not always be possible or suitable to do so.

5.18 A policy for the NHDC website is attached to this strategy in section 6. It sets out:

- How to find our social media channels
- What we use social media for
- When we monitor social media
- How to contact us
- What we view as unacceptable behaviour
- How we deal with unacceptable behaviour

6 Social media policy for use on website

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 We can be found on the following social media networks:

- [Follow us on Twitter](#)
- [Like us on Facebook](#)
- [Follow us on Instagram](#)
- [Follow us on LinkedIn](#)

6.1.2 We post messages about the services we provide to over 125,000 residents, as well as information about events and opportunities in the district.

6.1.3 Our aim is to raise awareness of all that the Council and North Hertfordshire have to offer.

6.1.4 We monitor our social media pages between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday. We do not monitor or respond to posts outside of normal office working hours.

6.2 Contacting us

6.2.1 We try and reply to every customer query and message we receive but, due to high volumes, this is not always possible. Due to very high volumes, we do not respond to all comments made on our social media platforms, only to those where residents are asking us to deal with a service request or asking a customer service query.

6.2.2 We aim to initially respond to questions and requests for service within one working day. On some occasions during busy periods this may not be possible, but we will respond to you as soon as we can.

6.2.3 For general enquiries we recommend you contact us via our website's Do It Online portal which you can find at www.north-herts.gov.uk or using our customer service centre 01462 474000 (open 9am-5pm Monday to Friday).

- 6.2.4 In an emergency and outside of office hours, please use our [emergency contact details](#).
- 6.2.5 During an emergency or during times of significant service disruption, it is our policy to post all latest service or situation updates on our website and this would be the main channel of communication that we direct customers to for information. In this scenario we may post messages outside of our normal hours, but it is unlikely we will be able to reply to individual queries, as resources to man social media channels would be limited and may need to be diverted to other contact channels. In these instances we reserve the right to direct customers to other channels to complete their service request or query, as this will often be the most efficient and quickest way of speaking to us.
- 6.2.6 If your enquiry needs further investigation or is of a sensitive nature, we may direct you to other, more suitable contact channels. This is done so that your enquiry can be answered by the most appropriate officer, as well as to ensure your data is properly handled.

6.3 Our social media policy and process

- 6.3.1 Our social media accounts are managed by real people. We strive to be helpful and understand you may have frustrations with our services or those of our contractors and partners. We encourage public debate and people are free to share their views about the Council. We have no intention of stifling discussion about us as an organisation. However, we ask that you are respectful. Abuse will not be tolerated.
- 6.3.2 The vast majority of people who use social media do so with tolerance and respect, however a small minority can spoil it for everyone. This policy aims to protect our employees, councillors and residents from unacceptable use of social media. Unacceptable behaviour includes (but is not limited to) abusive or bad language, degrading remarks, or attempts to provoke or upset other users. We reserve the right to take action in relation to social media posts or messages which:
- are abusive, harassing or threatening
 - use sexist, racist or other unacceptable language which are intended to cause concern / harm

- are defamatory or libellous
- may be in contempt of court
- break any other law or incite someone else to break the law
- contain inappropriate material (including images or video)
- are spam.

6.3.3 In the event of unacceptable behaviour we will follow a set process:

- Firstly we will record the name and handle of the account, the date, social media post and why it is unacceptable
- We will delete or hide any posts which we view to be offensive. Following this we will usually issue a written warning, after consulting with the Communications Manager and/or the relevant Service Director. This will usually be by means of a private direct social media message in the first instance with a link to our social media policy
- If unacceptable behaviour continues or is extreme, the Council will consider blocking the user from interacting with us on social media. After 12 months the owner of the account can appeal the decision to block. Any decision to reverse the block will be made in conjunction with the Chief Executive. We reserve the right to block any user from interacting with us on social media at any time.
- If we block any social media user the Communications team will record the decision and make the Chief Executive aware. We may also report the matter to the Police where behaviour amounts to abuse or harassment or a criminal offence is suspected.

6.3.4 This policy adheres to the principles set out in the Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy Statement, published on the Complaints page of the NHDC website. The policy states:

- All customers will be dealt with in a fair, honest and consistent way.
- Services are accessible to all customers. However we may restrict or change access to services when a customer behaves in an unacceptable way.
- We will make sure that the physical and emotional safety of customers, visitors and Council employees is not at risk from any customer who behaves in an unacceptable way.

- We will alert the Police if it is considered that there is an immediate danger to staff or customers.

6.3.5 Queries on this policy should be directed to pressoffice@north-herts.gov.uk.



North Hertfordshire District Council Comments, Compliments and Complaints Policy and Procedure

September 2019

To be reviewed September 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy sets out how the Council determines and deals with complaints from its customers. It also covers how the Council is very willing to receive comments and compliments, which can help to improve services and highlight areas of good practice.

Developments in social media and access channels make this policy rather more detailed than previous versions and customers are encouraged to read this before making a complaint to fully understand the process.

Submitting a complaint, or indeed a comment or compliment can be simplified as follows:

A complaint, comment or compliment can be made in writing (via the website e-form, email, hard copy complaint form or letter) or by telephone or in person. The Council would encourage customers to use the website e-form as this will help to ensure that all the relevant information is captured.

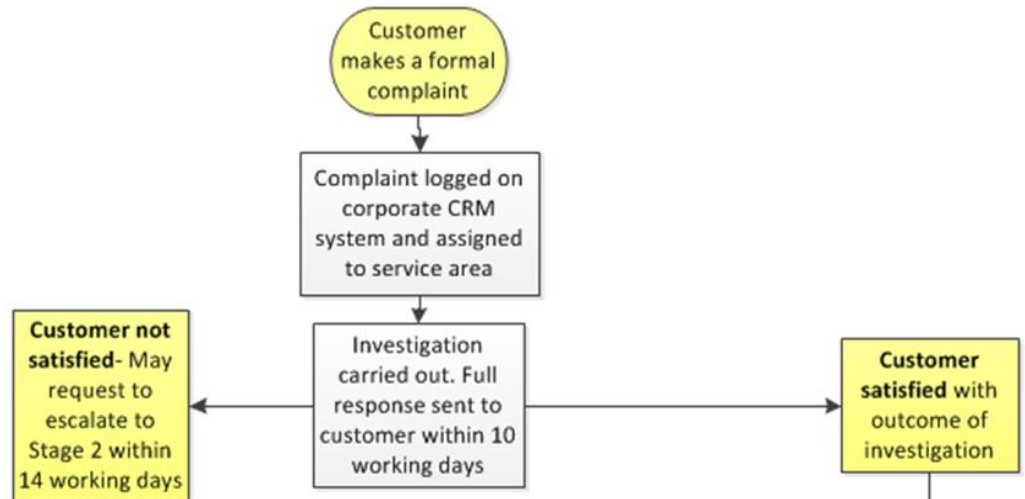
This stage 1 complaint will then be allocated to an investigating manager who will respond to you within ten working days. This will either be with a full response, or an explanation on why more time is required.

If you are not satisfied with the outcome of the stage 1 complaint, you can make a stage 2 complaint, which if accepted will be further investigated by a more senior manager, who has had no previous dealings with the complaint.

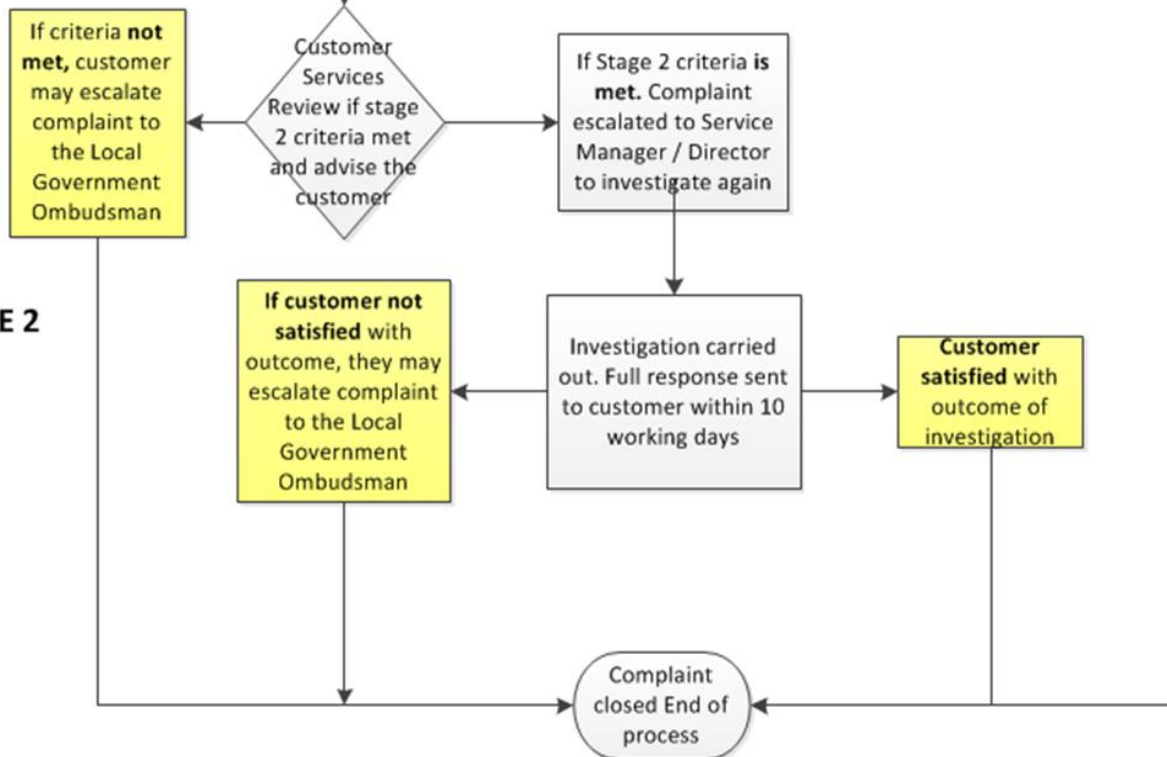
If, following a stage 2 investigation, you remain dissatisfied; a further complaint can be made to the Local Government Ombudsman.

The process can be summarised in the flow chart on the following page.

STAGE 1



STAGE 2



1. Introduction

- 1.1 At North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) we endeavour to provide high quality services to our customers, however, we recognise that on occasion, despite our best efforts things can go wrong. By welcoming feedback through our Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3Cs) procedures we can try to remedy situations that have gone wrong and continue to improve our services as well as learn from examples of positive feedback about things that have been done well.
- 1.2 To enable us to effectively capture, monitor and act on feedback we have a 3Cs system which has previously been accredited to ISO 10002:2004. Although we no longer undertake this accreditation we continue to work to the standards set by the British Standards Institute in their Complaints Management System Standard ISO 10002:2004.
- 1.3 All Council employees receive training on the 3Cs process as part of the corporate induction and have access to a range of information and guidance to support effective handling of 3Cs. Whilst we welcome feedback on all aspects of 3Cs this policy and procedure is mainly focussed on complaint handling and shall apply to complaint handling for all services within NHDC unless it is overridden by legislative requirements.

2. Comments and Compliments

- 2.1 Comments and compliments are welcomed so that we can learn from examples of where things have worked well and to recognise when Council staff and contractors provide exceptional levels of service.
- 2.2 Additionally, comments which may be identifying opportunities to make changes to services or processes can help us understand our customers views on matters and provide valuable customer insight into our services.
- 2.3 All customer feedback whether it is a comment, compliment or complaint is recorded on a central database (CRM system) and passed on to the relevant service manager for review and to deal with as appropriate.
- 2.4 Data relating to comments, compliments and complaints will be reported at high level without disclosing any personal details to senior management and Councillors. All data held within the CRM system will be kept in accordance with our data retention schedules.

3. Complaints

3.1 What is a complaint?

- 3.2 A complaint can sometimes be difficult to determine, as a guide we define a complaint as being a specific expression of dissatisfaction with the quality of a service provided by the Council, usually falling under one of the following categories:

1. We have failed to do something we should have
 2. We have done something badly or in the wrong way
 3. A customer feels they have been treated unfairly or discourteously
- 3.3 Occasionally something may be originally received as a complaint when it needs to be dealt with in a different way. In these cases the appropriate reporting process will be followed, some examples are included below:

3.4 Examples of what is not covered by our Complaints Policy

The list below is not exhaustive but gives examples of things that are not dealt with as complaints.

- Disagreement with a policy decision; we will still welcome this feedback but will record it as a comment and it will be dealt with outside of the complaints policy. You can also discuss this with your local Councillor.
- A missed bin would be processed as a request for service by our contractor. However repeated (justified) missed bins or failure to deal with an issue correctly could lead to a complaint.
- Challenging a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN), a procedure for challenging a PCN along with an external appeals process is already in place.
- A Highways fault report (i.e. a faulty street light) would need to follow the Highways fault reporting process managed by Hertfordshire County Council.
- A complaint relating to another organisation, we are not able to consider these within our policy; however we will signpost customers to contact organisations directly.
- Planning objections, a separate process exists for planning objections to be submitted.

4. How to make a complaint

- 4.1 A complaint can be made in writing (via the website e-form, email, hard copy complaint form or letter) or by telephone or in person. We encourage complaints to be made in writing wherever possible so we can ensure we have a clear understanding of the complaint; however we may contact you to discuss and clarify details of the complaint if we feel that will assist with the investigation process. We will respond to complaints in writing wherever possible so that there is a record of the outcome. We will not usually consider complaints regarding matters that are over 12 months old unless there is a compelling reason to do so.
- 4.2 We can provide information on how to complain in different languages and formats and can provide assistance to people who find writing difficult.

- 4.3 To ensure that we can capture all of the relevant and correct information we do not accept anonymous complaints. We also do not accept complaints from third parties except in circumstances where the customer has a disability and / or a representative acting on their behalf, in these circumstances customer service staff will provide appropriate assistance. We will not usually handle letters in the paper through our 3Cs process, however if you have supplied contact details we may try and contact you directly to follow up on your comments if appropriate to do so. Similarly comments made on social media will not automatically be handled through our 3Cs process as detailed in 7.3.
- 4.4 Complaints regarding contractors who provide services on our behalf should wherever possible be directed to the contractors in the first instance. This allows the contractor the opportunity to resolve the matter quickly and avoids potential duplication. The customer may chose not to deal with the contractor directly in which case we must accept handle the matter through our own complaints process, likewise if the matter is not satisfactorily resolved by the contractor then the customer may escalate the complaint to be handled through our process. Contractor feedback is monitored through regular contract management meetings,

4.5 Our complaints process is set out below

We will always seek to resolve a complaint or an issue as quickly as possible. Sometimes issues are raised as complaints in the hope of getting an immediate response, however if we know we will be able to resolve an issue quickly for you then we may deal with as a service issue, so we can provide an earlier resolution. An example of this could be a missed bin which if it is not an ongoing problem can be resolved quickly with a phone call to our contractors.

Stage 1

- Once a formal complaint is received it will be recorded on our Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and an acknowledgment with a reference number will be sent to you within two working days.
- Details of your complaint will be sent to an appropriate officer to investigate. If your complaint concerns a member of staff, then that staff member would not be the investigating officer. A complaint about a member of staff may be referred to Human Resources for a separate internal investigation if appropriate; details of any action resulting from an HR investigation would be confidential.
- We may need to contact you to discuss the complaint or obtain further information to ensure that we fully understand the complaint and can investigate it thoroughly.
- We aim to respond to 80% of complaints within 10 working days. This takes into account the fact that some complaints can be very complex and take longer to complete.

- If we are not able to fully respond to your complaint within 10 days then we will contact you to provide you with an update and advise when we expect to provide a full response.
- If you are dissatisfied with the Stage 1 response, you **may** have the right to escalate the complaint to Stage 2 of the process. We will review complaints under Stage 2 of the process only if one or more of the following circumstances is applicable:
 1. The complaint has not been fully understood or investigated thoroughly due to a misunderstanding of the original complaint.
 2. That all points raised in the complaint have not been fully responded to.
 3. You have not had a response to the Stage 1 complaint within the prescribed timescales and have not had an indication as to when a response can be expected.

To request a review under Stage 2 you should contact the Customer Service Centre within 14 days of our response to you, advising why you are dissatisfied with the complaint outcome. A complaint can only be escalated to Stage 2 if it has been through Stage 1 of the process and meets one or more of the criteria for escalation. Details of how to request this will also be included in your Stage 1 outcome letter.

If your complaint does not meet the criteria to escalate to a Stage 2 but you are dissatisfied with our response then you may wish to refer your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, details can be found in section 5 of this document.

4.6 Stage 2

- If your complaint is escalated to Stage 2, an acknowledgment with a reference number will be sent to you within two working days.
- Your complaint will be reviewed by a Senior Manager who will not have investigated the complaint at Stage 1.
- We may need to contact you to discuss the complaint or obtain further information to ensure that we fully understand the complaint and can investigate it thoroughly.
- We aim to investigate and respond to you fully about your complaint within 10 working days. If this is not possible we will contact you to provide you with an update and advise when we expect to provide a full response.
- If you are still dissatisfied with our response once your complaint has been through our process, then you may wish to refer your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, details can be found in section 5 of this document.

5. The Local Government Ombudsman

- 5.1 The Local Government Ombudsman can investigate complaints about the council, however in most cases before they will investigate a complaint, the council must have had the chance to put things right first. The Ombudsman will not usually consider complaints that are over 12 months old unless there is a compelling reason to do so.

The Local Government Ombudsman
PO Box 4771
Coventry
CV4 0EH
www.lgo.org.uk
Telephone: 0300 061 0614

6. Unreasonable Complainant Policy

- 6.1 We have a duty to make sure that public money is spent wisely and achieves value for complainants and the wider public. In a very small number of cases despite exhausting our complaints policy and possibly that of the LGO, a complainant may continue to pursue a complaint unreasonably.
- 6.2 While we do not normally limit the contact complainants have with us, in some cases it is necessary to do so because the nature or frequency of a complainant's contact hinders our ability to consider their and other customers' complaints. We refer to these as serial, persistent or vexatious complainants, which can be defined as a complaint where it is readily apparent that the customer is pursuing a complaint which is entirely without merit and made with the intention of causing inconvenience, harassment or expense to the organisation (further examples can be found at Appendix A – Procedure and Policy statement).
- 6.3 We have a clear policy in place which sets out how staff should deal with unreasonable complainant behaviour. This includes that contact could be limited, restricted or in some cases stopped altogether.

Further information on the Policy can be found on the complaints section of our website.

7. Complaints about Councillors

- 7.1 A complaint about a Councillor should be directed to the Monitoring Officer at North Hertfordshire District Council. This can be done in the following ways;
- Completing our online form [Making a Complaint Against a Councillor Form](#)
 - By telephone 01462 474578
 - By email: monitoring.officer@north-herts.gov.uk

- In writing: The Monitoring Officer, Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3JF

7.2 Complaints made to Councillors

Councillors cannot make formal complaints on behalf of constituents as this would be considered a third party complaint as covered in section 4. However they are able to provide guidance on how a complaint can be made to the Council through the established 3Cs process.

Councillors can refer matters on behalf of a constituent to officers of the Council to be looked into; however, it can only be treated as a formal complaint once the Council has discussed the matter with the constituent directly and agreed the formal route with them and established that they wish the Councillor to act as an advocate for them

Councillors can also discuss matters of policy with constituents however policy matters are not usually covered by the complaints policy because policy decisions have been made through a democratic process.

7.3 Social media comments

We recognise that social media is a platform used by many of our customers and as such have a separate policy covering this.

We proactively use social media to engage with our residents and our Customer Services team respond to specific requests for service made via our own social media pages.

We also recognise that many comments made on social media are general expressions of opinion or public discussion and mostly informal in nature. For that reason we will not usually handle them through our formal 3Cs process. That is not to suggest that we do not take social media comments seriously, more that we understand that the users of social media do not usually expect their comments to be processed in a formal manner and often such comments are of a general nature and not about a specific incident that the Council can investigate. However if a comment clearly fits within our 3Cs criteria we will contact you directly to follow up and handle the matter through our formal process as appropriate. Requests for service will be processed in the same way as if received via other channels, for example a missed bin report would be reported to our contractors for resolution in the first instance. However ongoing or unresolved issues may be treated as a complaint.

We are able to report through our Social media platform on the volumes, types and sentiment of interactions on our social media pages and this information will be used in conjunction with our standard 3Cs reports.

7.4 Community Trigger

The introduction of a Community Trigger on 20 October 2014 means that if a resident, or group of residents, are experiencing anti social behaviour (ASB), and feel that appropriate action is not being taken, they have the right to request a review of their case. The case review is called the 'community trigger'.

Any victim of ASB or someone acting on their behalf such as a carer, family member, MP or local councillor in North Hertfordshire can use the community trigger to request a review of their case, providing they meet the trigger threshold:

- Three reports from an individual about separate incidents in six months or;
- Three individuals have separately reported similar incidents in six months.

The Community Trigger is separate from the Complaints Policy; further details including the process for activating the Community Trigger can be found on our website.

7.5 Performance Monitoring and Reporting

Key complaints data specifically relating to volumes and performance is collated and analysed on an ongoing basis. This data is reported regularly to departmental and senior management teams as well as twice a year to the Councils Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the reports are published on our website.

Appendix A - Procedure and Policy statement for Managing Unreasonable Customer Contact and Complainant Behaviour

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and to providing a high standard of service to those who make complaints. We also have a duty to make sure that public money is spent wisely and achieves value for complainants and the wider public.

Whilst we do not normally limit the contact customers have with us, in some cases it is necessary to do so either because the nature or frequency of a customers contact with the Council hinders our ability to provide services and the consideration of their, and other peoples complaints or concerns. We refer to these as serial, unreasonably persistent customers or vexatious complainants.

Some customers may have justified concerns or complaints but pursue them in inappropriate ways, others may pursue matters which appear to have no substance or have already been investigated and determined. The contact may be amicable but still place heavy demands on staff time or it may be emotionally charged and distressing for all concerned.

Examples of unreasonable actions and behaviours

- Continuing to pursue a complaint even though the Council's complaint procedure has been fully exhausted and / or refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process.
- Refusal to accept a decision, repeatedly arguing points with no new or relevant evidence being provided.
- Refusal to accept that certain issues are not within the remit of our complaints procedure (i.e. third party matters outside of the Councils remit) despite having been provided with full information about the procedures scope.
- Making what appear to be groundless or vexatious complaints about the staff member dealing with the complaint.
- Excessive number of contacts with staff regarding the complaint which have a negative effect on the Councils ability to deal with the complaint effectively.
- Excessive demands on the time and resources of staff with lengthy phone calls, emails to numerous staff or detailed letters, not necessarily related to a formal complaint

Where the level of contact is unreasonable or the nature is considered vexatious we will act to limit contact. The decision to restrict access is taken by a Senior Manager. Any restrictions imposed will be appropriate and proportionate and will be reviewed at appropriate intervals.

The options most likely to be considered by the Council are;

- Requesting contact in a particular form e.g. by letter only
- Requiring contact to take place via a specified officer
- Asking the customer to enter into an agreement about their future contact with the Council.
- Terminating contact with a complainant

Considerations prior to taking action

Whether the consideration of a complaint has concluded it may be appropriate to end all communication regarding the issue and refer the complainant to the Ombudsman.

Any action to restrict access could have serious consequences for the individual so before action is taken we should be satisfied that:

- The complaint has been or is being investigated properly
- Any decision reached is the right one
- Communications with the complainant have been adequate
- The complainant is not now providing any significant new information that might affect the outcome of the complaint.

Case Review

Before action is taken to restrict access the case must be reviewed by a Service Director or the Chief Executive. If a decision is made to limit or restrict access to services the complainant will be notified in writing with an explanation of:

- Why the decision has been taken
- What it means in terms of contact with the Council
- How long the restriction will be in place and when it will be reviewed.
- A copy of the letter sent to the complainant should be sent to the Customer Service Manager for attaching to the customer record on the CRM.

If a restriction is in place then ongoing correspondence / contact will be reviewed and considered .If it is simply a continuation of previous matters then receipt should be acknowledged and a record / copy placed on file but a response will not be provided. Any new matters will be treated as such.

Any restrictions should be for a specified period of time with a review date, unless there are good grounds to extend the restrictions they should be lifted at the end of the review period.

If a complainant wishes to request a review of a decision to limit their access to the Council they should request this in writing.