Great Tey Parish Council

Unreasonable Behaviour, Harassment and Vexatious Complaints Policy

1. Purpose and Scope:

Great Tey Parish Council is committed to a safe, respectful, and professional environment for its Clerk, Councillors, contractors, volunteers, and members of the public. The Council adopts a zero-tolerance approach to harassment, bullying, intimidation, threats, and personal abuse connected with Council business, whether in person, in writing, at meetings or online.

The Council welcomes lawful scrutiny, robust criticism, legitimate complaints, and disagreement with its decisions. This policy concerns unreasonable conduct, not the fact that someone has complained or expressed an unpopular opinion. It supplements, and does not replace, the Council's adopted Complaints Policy, Anti Bullying & Harassment Policy, Code of Conduct for Members and Standing Orders. Where a matter falls within one of those procedures, that procedure takes precedence.

2. Unacceptable Behaviour:

Behaviour that may justify action under this policy includes:

- Threatening, aggressive, abusive, discriminatory, bullying, or intimidating behaviour towards any person involved in Council business.
- Repeated, excessive or abusive correspondence that unreasonably obstructs Council work, including demands for immediate or disproportionate responses.
- Repeatedly pursuing an issue already considered and answered, without significant new evidence, in a manner that becomes unreasonable.
- Deliberate disruption of meetings, persistent personal attacks, or refusal to follow reasonable meeting directions.
- Targeted harassment of Council representatives outside meetings or working hours in connection with their Council duties.

Each situation will be assessed on its facts and context. A single serious incident may warrant immediate protective action; repeated contact alone does not automatically amount to harassment or vexatious conduct.

3. Social Media, Personal Accounts and Privacy:

Harassment, bullying, intimidation, threats, and targeted personal abuse will not be tolerated on official Parish Council pages, parish, or community groups, privately administered pages, personal social media accounts, messaging services, or other online platforms. The platform used, or whether an account is public or private, does not diminish the seriousness of the conduct.

The Council particularly condemns the malicious or intimidating publication or circulation of personal details, including residential addresses or location of address, personal contact information, whereabouts, or family information, where this constitutes harassment, intimidation or creates a credible risk to safety. Encouraging others to engage in targeted abuse is equally unacceptable.

The Council may preserve relevant evidence, report content to platform operators, seek legal advice, establish proportionate contact arrangements, or refer serious incidents to the Police. This policy does not prohibit lawful criticism, discussion or sharing of information merely because it concerns Council matters.

4. Public Participation and Meeting Conduct:

Members of the public may make representations, answer questions, and give evidence on agenda business during the public participation period, in accordance with Standing Order 3. The session is limited to 15 minutes unless extended by the Chair; each speaker is limited to two minutes. Speakers must raise their hand, address comments to the Chair and speak one at a time. Questions do not require an immediate response or initiate a debate.

Harassment, threats, personal abuse, persistent interruption, and obstruction of Council business are unacceptable. Under Standing Order 2, where any person obstructs business or behaves offensively or improperly, the Chair shall first request that they moderate or improve their conduct. If that request is disregarded, the Chair or any Councillor may move that the person be no longer heard or be excluded. If seconded, the motion shall be voted on without discussion. If the resolution is ignored, the Chair may take further reasonable steps to restore order or progress business, including temporarily suspending or closing the meeting.

Where violence, credible threats or an immediate safety risk arise, appropriate emergency action may be taken and the Police contacted. Nothing in this policy restricts lawful attendance, observation, recording or reporting of public meetings, subject to Standing Orders 3(l) and 3(m) and applicable law.

5. Warnings, Restrictions and Serious Incidents:

Where practicable, the Clerk will explain the behaviour causing concern, request that it stops and issue a written warning identifying the possible consequences. Before formal restrictions are imposed, the Council will consider the evidence, any explanation offered, reasonable adjustments and whether a less restrictive response would be effective.

The Full Council must approve any formal restrictions on contact or correspondence. However, the Clerk may take temporary action where there is an immediate safety concern, subject to review by the Council as soon as possible. Measures include requiring correspondence through one nominated contact, specifying a reasonable frequency or method of contact, arranging witnessed meetings, or declining to revisit an issue already fully answered unless material new information is provided.

The person concerned will receive written reasons, the scope and duration of any restriction, a review date and information on how to request reconsideration. Restrictions will be targeted and must not prevent access to statutory rights, urgent service matters, or genuinely new complaints. The Council will not impose a blanket prohibition on all contact.

6. Fairness, Review and Records:

Restrictions will ordinarily be reviewed after three months and may be varied, lifted, or extended only where justified. A person may request reconsideration in writing, identifying any relevant evidence or circumstances. Wherever practicable, councillors not involved in the original decision will consider the request; conflicts of interest must be managed appropriately.

The Council will maintain proportionate confidential records of incidents, correspondence, screenshots, decisions, and review dates, in accordance with its data protection and retention arrangements. Reasonable adjustments will be considered under the Equality Act 2010. Statutory information requests and data protection rights will be managed under the applicable legislation and procedures, independently of any contact restrictions.

7. Relationship with Existing Council Policies:

Complaints about Council administration, procedures or employee service are dealt with under the Complaints Policy 2026. Its informal and formal stages, acknowledgement and response targets, and independent review arrangements remain unchanged. A complaint must not be rejected solely because a person is subject to contact restrictions under this policy.

Bullying or harassment involving staff, contractors or workplace matters is managed under the Anti Bullying & Harassment Policy 2026, including its reporting, investigation, grievance, disciplinary, and protection-against-victimisation provisions. This policy provides additional arrangements for managing unreasonable external contact; it does not replace employment procedures.

Allegations that a Councillor has breached the Code of Conduct for Members 2026 must be referred to the Monitoring Officer at Colchester City Council under the Council's adopted arrangements. The Parish Council will not determine a Code of Conduct breach under this policy. Appropriate interim safety or contact arrangements may be considered without prejudging an allegation.

Meeting conduct shall be governed by the Council's adopted Standing Orders, particularly Standing Orders 2 and 3 on disorderly conduct and public participation. Where meeting procedures are concerned, the Standing Orders take precedence over this policy. Complaints about financial irregularities, criminal matters and statutory information rights must follow the relevant legal processes.

Where the same incident raises issues under more than one policy, the Council will identify the correct procedure for each issue, avoid duplicate investigations where practicable, and ensure that no restriction removes access to a legitimate complaint or statutory process.

8. Adoption and Review:

This policy will be reviewed annually, or earlier, following a material change in law, guidance, or Council arrangements.