



Petworth Town Council

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE FOR USE IN COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE COUNCIL (NOT FOR COMPLAINTS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS)

Before the Meeting

1. The complainant should be asked to put the complaint about the council's procedures or administration in writing to the clerk.
2. If the complainant does not wish to put the complaint to the clerk, he or she should be advised to address it to the chairman of the council.
3. The clerk shall acknowledge receipt of the complaint and advise the complainant when the matter will be considered by a hearing of the council or by a hearing of the committee established for the purposes of hearing complaints.
4. The complainant shall be invited to attend a meeting at a mutually agreed time and to bring with them a representative if they wish.
5. Seven clear working days prior to the meeting, the complainant shall provide the council with copies of any documentation or other evidence relied on. The council shall provide the complainant with copies of any documentation upon which they wish to rely at the meeting and shall do so promptly, allowing the claimant the opportunity to read the material in good time for the meeting.

At the Meeting

6. The council shall consider whether the circumstances of the meeting warrant the exclusion of the public and the press prior to the meeting.
7. The chairman should introduce everyone and explain the procedure.
8. The complainant (or representative) should outline the grounds for complaint and, thereafter, questions may be asked by (i) the clerk; and then (ii), members.



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9. The clerk will have an opportunity to explain the council's position and questions may be asked by the complainant.

10. The council (through the clerk) and the complainant should be offered the opportunity to summarise their position.

11. The complainant should be asked to leave the room while members decide whether or not the grounds for the complaint have been made. If a point of clarification is necessary, the complainant shall be invited back.

12. The complainant should be given the opportunity to wait for the decision but if the decision is unlikely to be finalised on that day they should be advised when the decision is likely to be made and when it is likely to be communicated to them.

After the Meeting

16. The decision should be confirmed in writing within seven working days together with details of any action to be taken.

17. Any decision on a complaint shall be , when resolved, at the next appropriate full council meeting.



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COMPLAINING TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN (LGO)

1. Although the LGO has no jurisdiction in respect of parish councils, it might be useful for parish councils to know something about the jurisdiction of the LGO so that they can assist members of the public (including, perhaps councillors) to complain to the LGO where appropriate. The legislation is contained within sections 26 and 27 of the Local Government Act 1974 ('the Act'). The key points to remember are:

□□ Town and Parish Councils are unable to lodge complaints as a public body (section 27(1) of the Act) about another local authority or public body defined at section 25 of the Act but this does not prevent individual councillors from making complaints about another local authority or public body in their personal capacity. In their official capacity, if so requested by member(s) of the public, a parish councillor could represent them in making complaints. Please note:-

□□ complaints must be made in writing;

□□ complaints must be made within 12 months of notice of the matters which are subject to the complaint;

□□ complainants must first give the authority in question notice of the complaint and give them an adequate opportunity to investigate and reply to the complaint. This usually entails exhausting that authority's complaints procedure;

□□ the Ombudsman may not investigate matters which are or have been subject to a right of appeal; and

□□ the Ombudsman may not investigate matters where the complainant has or has had a remedy by way of court proceedings.

2. The most common application of the Ombudsman's lack of jurisdiction where the subject matter of the complaint is subject to a right of appeal or court proceedings is in respect of judicial review. Many councils claim that the Ombudsman does not have jurisdiction in certain cases due to the availability of judicial review. In these circumstances the Ombudsman can rely on section 26(6) of the Act which states that:-

'A Local Commissioner may conduct an investigation notwithstanding the existence of such a right or remedy if satisfied that in the particular circumstances it is not reasonable to expect the person affected to resort or have resorted to it.'



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Member conduct

A complaint relating to a member's failure to comply with a council's code of conduct must be submitted to the district council.

Employee conduct

There is no statutory scheme for complaints about Town Council employees. Any such complaints should be dealt with through the internal disciplinary process.

Complaints Procedures for Local Councils

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) has produced excellent guidance on the subject of complaints procedures. A copy of the full guidance may be obtained via the following internet link:

<http://www.lgo.org.uk/publications/guidance-notes>

Much of the guidance is aimed at higher level authorities and is not directly applicable to local councils but, nevertheless, much of it is extremely useful and this Note draws heavily on the advice given.

The first task is to determine exactly what a complaint is. The LGO offers the following definition of a complaint:

- 'A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the council's action or lack of action or about the standard of a service, whether the action was taken or the service provided by the council itself or a person or body acting on behalf of the council.'
- A good complaints system is:
 - well publicised and easy to use;
 - helpful and receptive;
 - not adversarial;
 - fair and objective;
 - based on clear procedures and defined responsibilities;
 - quick, thorough, rigorous and consistent;
 - decisive and capable of putting things right where necessary;
 - sensitive to the special needs and circumstances of the complainant;



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□□adequately resourced;
□□fully supported by councillors and officers; and
□□regularly analysed to spot patterns of complaint and lessons for service improvement.

Confidentiality

- The LGO advises that the identity of a complainant should only be made known to those who need to consider a complaint.

Stages

LPC has a 3-stage complaints procedure whereby issues are resolved by:

□□front line staff - the clerk; then
□□chairman; and then
□□council.

- It may be that the clerk (or other nominated officer) at the meeting represents the position of the council. If the clerk (or other nominated officer) puts forward justification for the action or procedure complained of, he or she should not advise the council or committee, as they need to determine the matter themselves.
- At all times, the rules of natural justice will apply. In other words, all parties should be treated fairly and the process should be reasonable, accessible and transparent.