SLCC
For Local Council Professionals

GUIDANCE NOTE: Complaint Handling

We have an unhappy member of the public who wishes to complain about the handling of a matter and see the clerk disciplined. Should I treat this as a matter for committee?

No. The first point to make is that this matter should be handled as a complaint against the Council. This means applying the provisions of the Council's complaints procedure. If no such policy or procedure exists, it pays to act as if there were one, and investigate the complaint fully and promptly. If a round-table meeting helps to glean more information, then it is OK to have one with the complainant - but it is not a witch-hunt or a disciplinary process. Disciplinary matters should be considered separately, without the involvement of the complainant, and in accordance with procedure.

It may be that the outcome of the investigation of the complaint is an acknowledgement that errors were made. If so, the Council can say sorry and learn from the experience, counselling the clerk as necessary. But ultimately the Council will have to reach a balanced judgement, taking account of the clerk's contractual obligations (including time set aside for council business) and work priorities.

Parish councils are excused the rigors of Ombudsman investigations, so really it is a case of having sensible, business-like processes in place to consider the public's concerns (except for those rare cases which might involve the auditor).

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