

1. Managing Unacceptable Customer Actions – Staff Guidance

1.1 Purpose and Scope

1.1.1 This guidance note is designed to help employees manage situations in which they may be subjected to unacceptable actions from council service users.

1.1.2 For this guidance, any individual in receipt of a service that is being provided is considered a customer.

1.1.3 The guidance should be read in conjunction with the

- The flowcharts that support this documentation x 3
- Feedback policy (complaints)
- Lone worker policy
- Dealing with Complaints of Bullying and Harassment at Work.

1.1.4 The flowcharts appended to this guidance set out the key steps that employees should follow in managing unacceptable customer actions.

2 What behaviour might be considered as unacceptable or unreasonable?

2.1 Unacceptable actions directed towards council staff may for example, include the following:

- Aggressive or abusive behaviour (examples include threats including threats to self-harm or harm members of the public or staff, physical violence, personal verbal abuse, derogatory remarks and rudeness, inflammatory statements, and unsubstantiated allegations)
- Persistently making the same complaint, despite the matter having been fully addressed or investigated under the feedback policy, or seeking an unrealistic outcome with intent to persist until the desired outcome is achieved.
- Repeating complaints about a previous or historical matter that cannot be undone or remedied.
- Repeatedly changing the nature or focus of a complaint or the desired outcome, part way through an investigation or after a formal response has been provided.

3 What measures are in place to prevent unacceptable actions

3.1 Clear standards are in place to ensure that services meet the expectations of our customers and are delivered in a manner that is professional, courteous and timely.

3.2 The councils feedback policy provides details on how service users can exercise their right to register a complaint where they consider that those expectations have not been met.

3.3 The procedure aims to ensure that complaints are handled efficiently and effectively and, wherever possible, resolved to the customer's satisfaction. The expectation is that effective management of customer complaints will reduce the likelihood of unacceptable actions towards the council's staff.

3.4 In registering a complaint, customers may become frustrated or upset. Aggressive or abusive behaviour is clearly unacceptable; however, an attempt to understand the issue from the customer's perspective and show empathy may help in trying to diffuse a potentially escalating situation.

3.5 If attempts to diffuse the situation or requests for the individual to modify their actions fail, it would be appropriate to terminate the interview or telephone conversation.

3.6 The customer should be advised that their complaint will be addressed but that their actions must be modified during any future contact with the council.

4 Strategies to be used to diffuse a situation where a customer becomes abusive or aggressive?

4.1 Any or all, of the following strategies could be used:

- Acknowledge the customer's disappointment with the service they have received.
- Reassure the customer that their complaint will be addressed.
- Explain the complaints procedure and how their complaint will be handled.
- Confirm what steps will be taken and the timescales the customer can expect.
- Advise the customer that their actions are unacceptable and must stop.
- Remain calm and in control of the situation.
- If safe to do so alert other members of staff.

5 When would it be appropriate to terminate an interview/telephone conversation with a customer?

5.1 If a customer is behaving in an aggressive, abusive manner or makes threat of self-harm to themselves or others and fails to modify their actions when requested, it would be appropriate to politely terminate the interview/telephone call.

5.2 If you feel there is a risk to personal safety or the safety of others it would be appropriate to terminate the interview immediately and remove yourself from the in-person situation.

6 Will I be disciplined for terminating a customer interview or telephone conversation?

6.1 If you feel threatened or uncomfortable when involved in a one-to-one interview or telephone conversation with a customer, then you have the right to decide to advise the customer that their actions are unacceptable and end the interview/call if their actions continue. You will not be disciplined for doing so, but you should report the matter to your line manager and log either a low level and/or health and safety incident as soon as possible.

7 I have been threatened /assaulted by a customer and I want to press charges.

7.1 Where a customer has been threatening and/or violent towards an employee, the council will support that employee in reporting the matter to the Police if they wish to do so.

8 What strategies can be put in place to deal with any future contact from customers who repeatedly display unacceptable actions?

8.1 The Unacceptable Customer Actions Policy sets out several strategies that can be used to deal with future contact with customer who display unacceptable actions these are:

9 Written Correspondence

9.1 When contact is in writing customers may need to be advised that:

- Their action is unacceptable and why, for example language is considered offensive, unnecessary, and unhelpful.
- They will be asked to refrain from behaving in an unacceptable way, highlighting what that behaviour is.
- There will be no further exchange of correspondence on the matter if they persist with these actions.
- We may take other action considered appropriate within the scope of the Managing Unacceptable Customer Actions Policy.
- They may also be informed that future contact may mean we will read their letter/email and will only respond if a new issue is raised that we have not responded to before.

10 Verbal/Face to Face Interaction

10.1 Where a customer repeatedly phones, visits the office, sends irrelevant documentation and/ or repeatedly raises the same issues, the following actions may be taken:

- Only take telephone calls from the complainant at set times on set days or arrange for only one officer to be the nominated contact for calls or correspondence from the customer in the future.

- Require the customer to make an appointment to see a nominated contact before visiting the office.
- Limit access, such as requiring the customer to contact the council in writing or telephone only.
- Return any documents to the customer, by signed for mail.
- Take other action considered appropriate within the scope of the Managing Unacceptable Customer Actions Policy.

10.2 In the majority of cases, the customer should always be advised of the action that is being taken and the reasons for that course of action, although it is accepted that this is not always possible as to do so as it may result in an escalation of unacceptable actions which may put staff in harm's way. It is important to note that the customer may be vulnerable and we may need to be flexible when using this policy or they are of no fixed address.

11 I have done all I can to resolve a complaint, but the customer is not satisfied and insists further action be taken, what can I do?

- Where the complaints procedure has been exhausted and the customer continues to dispute the decision relating to their complaint, the Managing Unacceptable Customer Actions Policy should be used.
- The customer may be advised that no future phone calls will be accepted, or interviews granted in relation to his/her complaint and that any future contact on the issue must be in writing.
- Any subsequent correspondence received will be reviewed and kept on file and only acknowledged or responded to if the customer has provided significant new information relating to the complaint.
- The customer should be referred to the formal feedback policy or to the Local Government and Social care Ombudsman if the complaint has been through our feedback process.

12 Will abusive or aggressive customers be banned from council premises?

12.1 Decisions to restrict contact will only be taken after careful consideration of the situation by the Determination Team.

12.2 Wherever possible, the customer will be given the opportunity to modify their actions before a decision to restrict contact is taken, except where threats are made to inflict actual bodily harm on staff or the customer commit acts of violence to the Council premises. These actions will result in an instant ban.

13 To whom should I report Unacceptable Actions?

13.1 Unacceptable actions by a customer should always be reported to your line manager. The employee, supported by their line manager, should complete either a low-level incident form or Health and Safety Incident form on Minerva. Alerts are sent to member of the determination team following logging of these forms.

13.2 Where relevant a health and safety investigation will take place before determination is made. The determination team will use the Managing Unacceptable Customer Actions Policy and Employee Guidance, information held on our systems including listening to any recording of calls or any other evidence that is provided to inform their investigation into a customer's actions before deciding on course of action.

13.3 Any incidents will be recorded on the Customer Information Register (CIR) on Minerva, and on the CRM system, and where appropriate bespoke systems used within services, along with details of the customer contact and action taken. Details of the investigation are kept in a restricted area within the CIR in Minerva

13.4 In all cases of threats of, or actual violence, including self-harm threats, staff should always complete a Health and Safety Incident form in Minerva for the council's Health and Safety officer in line with incident reporting procedures.

14 What training does the council provide to assist employees to manage unacceptable actions?

14.1 The council provides a range of training options which may help staff to anticipate difficult situations, prevent them from arising or escalating if possible and diffuse them when they occur.

14.2 The following training courses can be found in the learning pool and can help you when dealing with the impact of unacceptable customer actions.

- Mental Health Awareness
- Mind Fitness
- Health and Wellbeing
- Hate Crime
- Mental Health

14.3 The Council will also provide bi-annual training on dealing with unacceptable actions, having difficult conversations and resilience to those staff who job role involves dealing with customers day to day.

14.4 The council's Health and Safety officer can also provide advice on conducting risk assessments particularly for members of staff who meet with customers outside of council offices and/or work alone.

14.5 The Customer Strategy and Services Lead can also provide coaching in dealing with these types of situations. Staff who feel that additional training, above what is offered, would assist them in managing unacceptable actions should discuss the matter with their line manager as part of their regular one to one meeting.

15 Other Positive Changes

15.1 We have refreshed our notices in reception. These now say.

- *“Threatening or violent actions towards our staff is unacceptable, against the law and can now result in tougher penalties.*
- *Anyone behaving disrespectfully to staff or customers will be asked to leave and prevented from returning.*
- *We will report any instances to the police, and you could be charged”.*

15.2 Customer Services staff now have access to 3 x body cameras for daily use and are to be always worn by staff in reception. The body cameras are only activated in the event of an incident and all staff have had training in alerting the customer that we are activating the body cameras and how to deploy them.

15.3 Customer services are also using a “Low Level Incident form” to report any low-level incidences, offences such as use of bad or inappropriate language etc. This is also being used to log positive actions from any customers who are known to normally behave in unacceptable ways to present a balanced picture.

15.4 This “Low Level Incident form will be rolled out across the Council once the new policy is adopted.

15.5 Several flow charts have been created in consultation with staff for ease of reference.(see appendices)

15.6 Once the policy has been adopted a leaflet, will be made available for customers about this policy.

15.7 Following advice from the Data Protection Officer discussions are underway in relation to what an appeals process may look like and if it is felt one is required.

15.8 Following a meeting with the police they are happy to be sent this policy/guidance to advise before formal adoption.