Managing difficult behaviour from customers

Many of the basic principles of good practice for complaint handling are particularly important when dealing with inappropriate or unreasonable behaviour by complainants.

Early resolution
- Speedy resolution gets people "out of the loop". Front-line staff should be encouraged to close complaints that are resolvable quickly.
- Entrenched behaviours often have roots in delay in getting answers at the outset.

Speedy escalation
- Where a problem cannot be resolved quickly, proactive decisions to escalate will give a positive message to the complainant that we are taking the concerns seriously, and prevent staff wasting time trying to find local resolution.
- Sometimes, an offer of an early meeting with a senior manager will enable resolution – however, if this comes only after the complainant has demanded this and fought to get it, it is unlikely to have the same result.

It is okay to prioritise
- It goes against the grain to suggest that faster services are provided to those who "shout loudest", but from a pragmatic management position, unless these sort of cases are handled quickly, the time and resource they take up results in other complainants suffering.

Identify potential problems quickly
Key warning signals to look out for include:

- When an individual seems to see their life's meaning in terms of their grievance and quest for reparation
- Large volumes of excitable and overly emphasised communications
- When the focus on the initial grievance is lost and there is a multiplication of grievances directed towards helpers, legal fraternity, courts, other complaints agencies, councillors, MPs, the media, staff in other groups, staff in other partner organisations
- There is increased disorganisation of the complainant's efforts to further their cause
- There is a sense of victimisation, and associated conspiracy
- Outcomes being sought keep changing
- Desire for total vindication and vengeance
- Nature of grievance constantly changes
- Difficulty defining the grievance

Treat people individually

- Be alert to people's individual needs and circumstances. Make sure that there are no barriers preventing them from understanding and presenting their concerns effectively.
- Consider signposting them to relevant advocacy, support and advice services – this can help both the complainant and the staff dealing with them.
- Consider whether they have particular communication needs, or respond best to particular types of communication.
- There appears to be some correlation between inappropriate or unreasonable behaviour and mental health problems. Mental health problems for a small minority of people may make them more prone to extreme response to situations. Take advice from mental health professionals about the best way to work successfully with individuals, and consider the potential impact actions may have on their welfare.
- Also consider the possible impact of things such as drug or alcohol abuse, learning disabilities, or other things which might require a different response, and take advice from the relevant professionals in these areas.

Consider impact on others we have a duty of care towards

- We need to balance the rights of the individual pursuing the complaint against the rights of other people we have a duty of care towards. This may mean obtaining agreement to share information, putting in place support for other people, or in extreme circumstances considering refusal to continue with the complaint investigation because of its likely detrimental impact on others.
- The sooner the possible impact can be established the better, and plans put into place to safeguard the welfare of others.

Early consideration of staff support needs

- Line managers need to give active early consideration to how staff can be supported to manage difficult cases from the outset. This should include consideration of both the time commitment working these cases will require, and the emotional and psychological impact these can have on the individuals and teams concerned.
- An important factor for line managers, senior operational managers and Customer Champions to consider is the need to have a consistent and clear agreed approach to communication across all those staff likely to have contact with individuals.
- It is also important for line managers to recognise that staff may become "worn out", and that the situation should be regularly reviewed to consider transfer of difficult cases to "share out" the impact within the organisation.
- There will be some parts of the council which will be more likely to experience these high impact cases than others – for example, staff who specialise in handling complaints, or staff working in imposed services where there is a high likelihood of disagreement, such as child protection, or trading standards. Particular care and consideration should be given to how staff are supported in these posts.
- We do not tolerate behaviour by complainants which is abusive, offensive or threatening, and can take action to protect staff from that behaviour.

Relevant Health and Safety and Staff Care support resources:

Key council policy, procedure and practice guidance for line managers to be familiar with include:

- [Health and Safety at Work](#)
- [Lone Working and Personal Safety Code of Practice](#)
- [Accident Investigation Guidance](#)
- [Corporate Stress Policy](#)
- [Corporate Risk Assessment Policy and Guidance](#)
- [Staff Care Support and Counselling](#)

Staff should be encouraged to report all incidents and these should be recorded on the Accident Reporting System to enable Groups to identify the extent of the risk and for effective measures to be developed.

If you need further advice or assistance, please contact your Group Health and Safety Officer/Advisor.

Other useful documents
See the *Reasonable and appropriate use of our complaints procedure* in the [Complaints Handling toolkit](#) on the Intranet.

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