

GUIDANCE SHEET – 005

Dealing with verbal abuse over the telephone.

The issue:

The Health and Safety Executive's definition of work-related violence is, 'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work', it therefore explicitly includes verbal abuse. Employees who deal with members of the public, including via the telephone are vulnerable to verbal abuse. This guidance document looks at what can be done to manage verbal abuse over the telephone and how to deal with the effects.

The effects of verbal abuse can be severe, if call handlers are subject to abusive calls it can lead to poor morale, high staff turnover, increased levels of stress and an associated increase in sickness.

There are no clear criteria as to what constitutes an abusive call, as some call handlers may feel less threatened than others by callers shouting, swearing and making insulting and aggressive comments. Individuals may also vary over time as to how they cope with these kinds of calls and how long it takes them to recover.

Caerphilly County Borough Council and its managers have a responsibility to ensure that a risk assessment is undertaken where employees deal with the public over the telephone to enable the risk of verbal abuse to be minimised and the effects controlled.

What do I need to know?

Stage 1 - Find out if there is a problem.

The first step in risk assessment is to identify the hazard. You may feel that verbal abuse via the telephone is not an issue in your section, but your staff might not agree.

Ask your staff.

Find out which types of phone calls lead to verbal abuse, for example there might be a certain time of the day, week or month where more complaints are received. There might be a particular issue with a new service leading to more abusive phone calls or a certain group of staff might be receiving more calls because of the nature of their work.

Keep records.

Every time a staff member has been subject to verbal abuse, ensure that a violence at work report form is filled out correctly and a copy sent to your Directorate Health and Safety Officer for possible inclusion on the violence at work database. Ensure when you fill out the form that the incident is analysed to ensure that any lessons that could be learned are acted upon. Using real information gathered from previous incidents will help to target areas of improvement in procedures or areas of possible training.

Stage 2 – Deciding what action to take

Speaking with staff members and looking at past records of verbal abuse will help to identify what needs to be done. Action to be taken can be considered under the following categories.

- Training
- Procedures
- Support

Training

Training is not a substitute for a safe system of work but is an essential part of any strategy to manage a risk. Training call handlers so they are fully competent to take calls from the public is the first step in

avoiding abusive calls. This includes training existing staff in any new services or initiatives. Of particular importance is training staff in the procedures for dealing with complaints. Customers are less likely to become frustrated if their calls are taken efficiently and all their questions answered satisfactorily. Similarly staff are likely to be more confident dealing with complaints if they have a clear procedure to follow. At induction, newly recruited staff should be made aware of some of the common reasons for verbal abuse, and they should be trained how to handle abusive callers. This should include the procedures for passing those calls to more experienced colleagues or supervisors or for terminating the call. The planning and organisation of training should be done in consultation with employees. Call handlers should also be consulted about the information on the risk of verbal abuse and the procedure for dealing with it. The training and information may include the following advice.

- Try not to panic or put the receiver down immediately.
- Try not to lose your temper or be tempted to react with a similar response.
- Try not to take the remarks personally and become upset.
- Be patient as the abuse may stop shortly.
- If the caller does not calm down, clearly advise them that unless they are able to continue the discussion in a civil manner, the call will be terminated.
- If the caller is not satisfied with the answers to their questions, offer to pass them to a colleague or a supervisor, or to take their number and return the call when further investigations have been made.
- If, despite a warning, behaviour does not improve, then you may terminate the call. Call handlers must be assured that terminating a call will not be viewed by managers as a lack of ability nor will they be penalised for terminating such calls
- Take a short break or speak to a colleague or supervisor about the call if this would help you to recover.
- All calls of this nature should be logged with your supervisor.
- Listening to the recording of the abusive call with a more experienced colleague or supervisor may help you identify alternative ways of dealing with similar calls in the future.

Special training will need to be aimed at the supervisors to ensure they are able to deal with staff who have received abusive calls. They must react sensitively and understand that different people react in different ways to verbal abuse.

Procedures

As described above clear procedures are required for:

- Dealing with queries likely to be raised by the public, especially complaints procedure this should minimise the likelihood of callers becoming abusive.
- Dealing with abusive callers, (which should be based on the training received above), including giving a warning that the call will be terminated unless the caller refrains from being abusive and clear steps to follow before a call is terminated.
- Referring a call to a supervisor or more experienced staff member.
- Supervisors to follow once they have taken over a call.
- Recording and investigating all incidents of verbal abuse. All incidents must be reported no matter how minor, and call handlers should be actively encouraged to report incidents.

Ensure that staff are involved in the creation of these procedures, they are more likely to follow the procedures if they have been involved in their creation.

Support

Different call handlers will react differently to abusive calls, some may wish to talk through the experience with their supervisor or colleague, others may need time to recover on their own. Allow the call handler who has just taken an abusive call time to recover. In extreme cases the call handler may require counselling. Ensure that staff are made aware of the employee stress help line and are provided with the number to call should they wish to.

Stage 3 – Implementing the Action

Ensure procedures are followed, incidents are recorded and investigated and training is kept up to date.

Step 4 – Review

Check on a regular basis how well the arrangements are working. Consult staff on their effectiveness and if necessary go back to stage 1 and 2 to see if there is anything else that could be done.

The legal position:

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974 Employers have a legal duty to ensure as far as is reasonably practicable the health, safety and welfare of their employees.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires employers to assess and control the risks to their employees, including the risk of violence via verbal abuse.

Contacts

In the event of you needing advice/further information on verbal abuse or other forms of violence at work contact either the Corporate Health and Safety Officer or your Directorate Health and Safety Officer as detailed below:

Corporate Health and Safety Unit – 01443 873708
Education/Leisure – 01443 864865
Environment – 01443 873765
Chief Executives – 01443 864339
Social Services – 01443 864823

Further information can be found in the following links:

Violence at Work, A Guide for Employers:
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg69.pdf>