

Lancashire County Council Occupational Health and Safety Management System Corporate Guidance

Dealing with Abusive Phone Calls

Lancashire County Council will not tolerate their staff being the subject of verbal abuse. This guidance is to assist and offer advice in the handling of abusive phone calls.

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Definition

An abusive phone call is one where the caller goes beyond expressing anger about a concern and begins verbally attacking the person handling the call. This may include threats against the individual or their family, swearing, racial abuse, or homophobic comments.

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Unacceptable Behaviour

There will be occasions when a caller uses unacceptable behaviour when calling the authority. The call could be abusive, threatening, offensive or potentially violent. It is thought that these will be very infrequent; however, they are not to be tolerated.

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Dealing with the call

Acknowledge the caller with your normal greeting "*Good morning XXXX team, Bethany speaking, how may I help you?*"

- Listen carefully to the caller; try to focus on what the problem may be.
- Do not interrupt; let the caller get their story out, or let them air their concern.
- Try to note down any key information that is given.
- Stay calm and remain patient and courteous at all times (you are just a voice at the end of the phone; you're not the real target, but you do represent the authority).

- Try to empathise with the caller; use open and closed questions to establish the facts.
- Write down carefully any key information given.
- Repeat some of the details that you have noted down, to show you were listening and you are genuinely trying to help.
- Try not to jump to conclusions.
- Try to see things from their point of view. Be aware of how cultural, ethical or other personal aspects may cloud your view.
- Choose language that shows you are interested *"I can see why you feel that way, I would be annoyed if that happened to me ."*

If the caller is upset or unhappy, often an apology will smooth the way. It may not be your fault directly. If the service we provide has given cause for complaint, an apology is warranted. This will demonstrate your empathy towards them.

If you are unable to resolve their concern at first point of contact or if the complaint is complicated, ask them to put it in writing and send it directly to you. Advise that if you are unable to resolve their concern, you will escalate it to your manager or the service area that deals with their concern and that you will keep them informed. If you discuss this option with the customer, you should explain to them that it will help you to understand their complaint and try to resolve it quickly.

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Termination of the call

Despite your best efforts in following the steps above, the caller may continue with their unacceptable behaviour. You will need to let them know that their behaviour is unacceptable. You are required to give them a polite warning, for example:

"Please don't speak to me like that I am trying to help you"; "could you please lower your voice" "if you can't speak to me without swearing, I will have to end this call."

If the caller continues with unacceptable behaviour, you will need to remind them that it is unacceptable, for example:

"I find your language; comments unacceptable; if you wish me to continue in helping you, you will need stop, if you can't, then I will terminate this call."

It is hoped that with two warnings and your reasonable attitude, the caller will take heed and curb their behaviour. However, they may continue with unacceptable language. At this juncture, if you have seen no improvement in their attitude, you can make the decision to terminate the call.

"I have warned you that your language, comments are unacceptable and I am now terminating this call."

Lancashire County Council does not want to expose you to this type of behaviour. It would be reasonable to follow the steps above, where you have control over how long you tolerate the unacceptable behaviour, whilst giving the caller a couple of opportunities to become reasonable. There may be occasions when the caller needs four or five warnings to bring them back to sensible behaviour. This may be spread over the length of the call and be in short bursts. You are the person in control. If you feel comfortable dealing with the call, even though the caller slips back into unacceptable behaviour, then continue assisting with the call. Remember however, you are not expected to tolerate unacceptable, abusive threatening or offensive telephone calls.

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Further Action

Support should be made available to the employee following the incident. This may be from the line or service manager being available to discuss the call and debrief the employee. This could be an offer of further assistance, via supervision or personal development interviews or 1-2-1's if required. If the employee requires additional assistance, then an alternative support service i.e. counselling service, should be considered.

If a caller persistently uses abusive threatening or offensive language, then there are a number of measures which the authority can follow. The caller will be asked to enter into an agreement about their behaviour in future contact with Lancashire County Council. They may be limited to various times or dates when their calls will be answered, restricted to contact in written form, or only by contact with a nominated officer. Their phone calls may be recorded and used in prosecutions at a later date.

In certain cases, Lancashire County Council may consider referring the complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, before the complaints process has been exhausted, or advise the complainant that it cannot assist them further and inform them of their right to approach the Local Government Ombudsman themselves.

In accordance with Lancashire County Council's Prevention of Violence at Work guidance, employees who are subjected to such behaviour, must record the incident and report it to their line manager. This can be done using the Low Level Incident Form or as a full Incident Report on Oracle. The most appropriate method of reporting verbal abuse can be determined by a number of factors including the abused employee's preference, the nature of the verbal abuse, the severity, the frequency and the environment. of how to proceed should also be considered

In extreme cases where the behaviour threatens the safety and welfare of staff, the matter will be reported to the Police and legal action will be considered. The complainant will not be given any prior warning in such cases.

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