

# MANAGING UNACCEPTABLE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR

## EMPLOYEE GUIDANCE

### **Purpose and Scope**

This Guidance Note is designed to help employees manage situations in which they may be subjected to unacceptable behaviour from council service users. For the purpose of the guidance, any individual to whom a service is being provided is considered a customer and in this regard the principles will equally apply to council employees receiving a service from other employees or service partners.

The guidance should be read in conjunction with the councils Unacceptable Actions Policy, Personal Safety at Work Procedure and Employee Guidance, the Complaints Handling Procedure and Policy and Procedure for Dealing with Complaints of Bullying and Harassment at Work. Employees working in a school environment should also refer to the Safe Environment at School Policy.

The flowcharts appended to this document set out the key steps that employees should follow in managing unacceptable customer behaviour.

### **What behaviour might be considered as unacceptable or unreasonable?**

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

- Aggressive or abusive behaviour (examples include threats, 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 / investigated under the complaints procedure, 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

### **What behaviour by colleagues could be considered as unacceptable or unreasonable?**

The Council's Code of Practice on Promoting Appropriate Working Relationships and Behaviour provides an extensive list of examples of unacceptable behaviour that in extreme cases may extend to bullying and harassment and other intimidating, threatening actions that contravenes anti – discrimination legislation.

### **What measures are in place to prevent unacceptable behaviour or violence at work?**

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

council's Complaints Handling Procedure provides the means by which service users can exercise their right to register a complaint where they consider that those expectations have not been met. 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 behaviour towards the council's staff.

The council's [Personal Safety at Work Policy](#) also provides guidance for employees on preventative and protective measures that they can adopt to ensure their safety when interacting with customers whether on council premises or in the community. This includes work with vulnerable client groups and/ or lone working.

The councils [Code of Practice – Promoting Appropriate Working Relationships and Behaviours](#) also sets out clear standards of expected performance and behaviour to ensure that all employees are treated with dignity and respect at work. The code of practice is supported by the [Policy and Procedure for Dealing with Complaints of Bullying and Harassment at Work](#).

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.

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

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

### **What strategies could be employed to diffuse a situation where a customer becomes abusive or aggressive?**

In line with the council's Unacceptable Actions Policy, Complaints Handling Procedure and Personal Safety at Work Procedure, the following strategies could be employed:

- 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 behaviour is unacceptable and must stop.
- Remain calm and in control of the situation.

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

If a customer is behaving in an aggressive or abusive manner and fails to modify their behaviour when requested, it would be appropriate to politely terminate the

interview/telephone call however, if there is a risk to personal safety or the safety of others it would be appropriate to terminate the interview/telephone call immediately.

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

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 behaviour is unacceptable and end the interview/call if that behaviour continues. You will not be disciplined for doing so, but you should report the matter to your line manager as soon as possible.

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

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.

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

The Unacceptable Actions Policy sets out a number of strategies that can be invoked to deal with future contact with known aggressive or abusive customers:

Written Correspondence

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

- Their language is considered offensive, unnecessary and unhelpful
- They must refrain from using such language
- There will be no further exchange of correspondence on the matter if they persist with this behaviour

They may also be informed that future contact may require to be channelled through a third party.

Verbal/Face to Face Interaction

Where a complainant 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 complainant in the future
- Require the complainant to make an appointment to see a nominated council contact before visiting the office
- Limit access and require the complainant to contact the office in writing only
- Return any documents to the complainant, or in extreme cases, advise the complainant that further irrelevant documents will be destroyed
- Take other action considered appropriate within the scope of the unacceptable actions Policy

In any event, the complainant should always be advised of that action that is to be taken and the reasons for that course of action.

**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 complainant continues to dispute the decision relating to their complaint, the Unacceptable Actions Policy should be invoked.

The complainant 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 complainant has provided significant new information relating to the complaint.

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

Decisions to restrict contact will only be taken after careful consideration of the situation by the appropriate Head of Service. Wherever possible, the complainant will be given the opportunity to modify their behaviour or action before a decision to restrict contact is taken.

**To whom should I report unacceptable behaviour?**

Unacceptable behaviour by a customer should be reported to your line manager. When an employee handling a complaint considers the complainant's behaviour to be unacceptable, the complaint should be referred to the service Group Designated Complaints Officer who will determine if this is the case.

Again the Unacceptable Actions Policy should be followed when investigating the complainant's behaviour. Any incidents of unacceptable action should be recorded on the CRM system, along with details of the customer contact, details of any witnesses and any further action taken.

In the case of incidents of violence, both an incident report form and violent incident report form should be completed and returned to the council's Health and Safety Unit in line with [incident reporting procedures](#).

In reporting unacceptable behaviour by a colleague, the Policy and Procedure for Dealing with Complaints of Bullying and Harassment promotes prompt and informal resolution of complaints wherever possible but also provides employees with access to formal procedures to resolve complaints if necessary.

**What training does the council provide to assist employees to manage unacceptable behaviour?**

The council provides a range of training options which may help employees to anticipate difficult situations, prevent them from arising or escalating if possible and diffuse them when they occur. Details of the following half-day training courses can be found in the [Learning Zone](#).

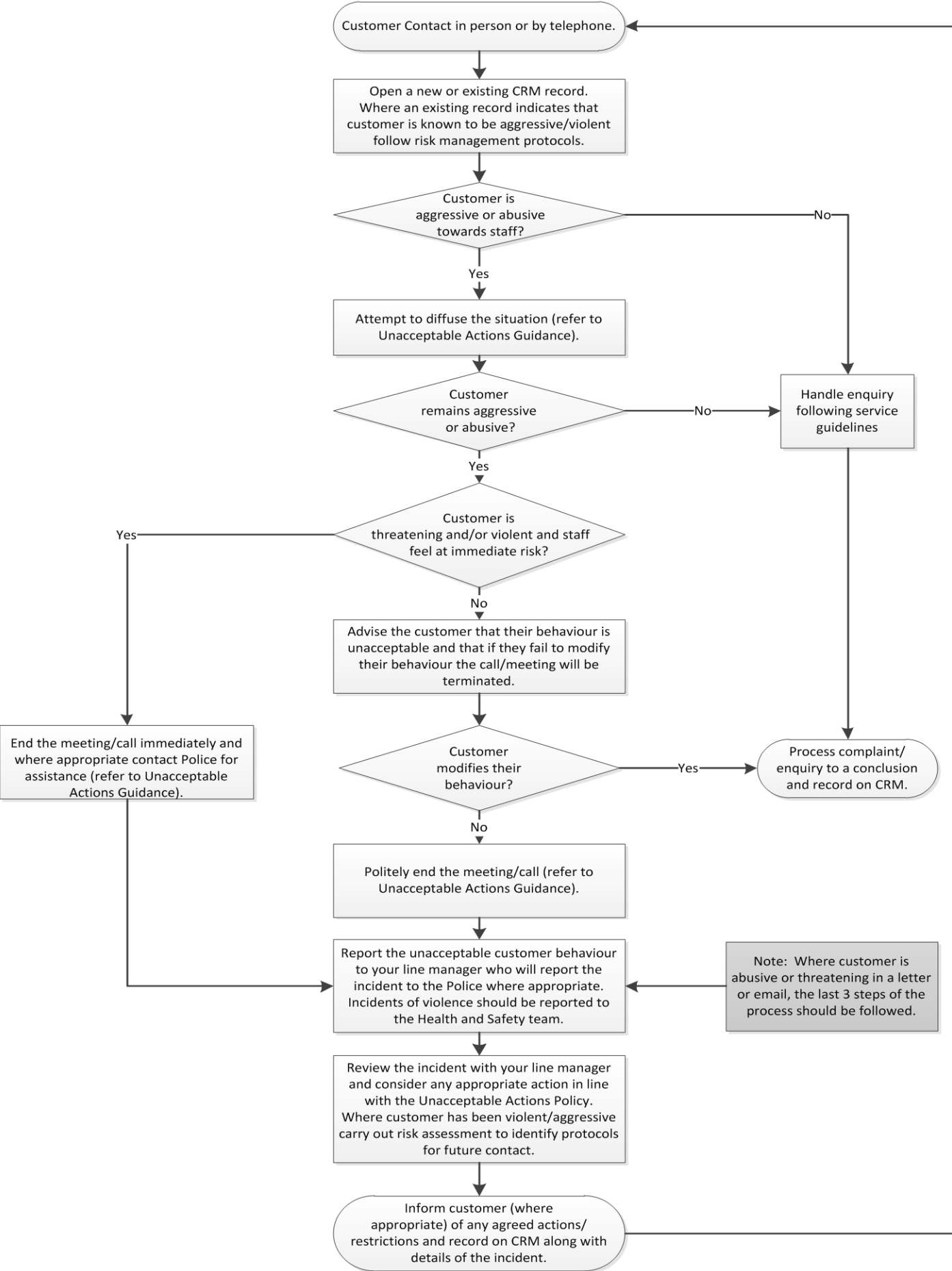
- Dealing with sensitive conversations
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Assertiveness
- Managing Positive Relationships at Work
- Personal Safety Awareness

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

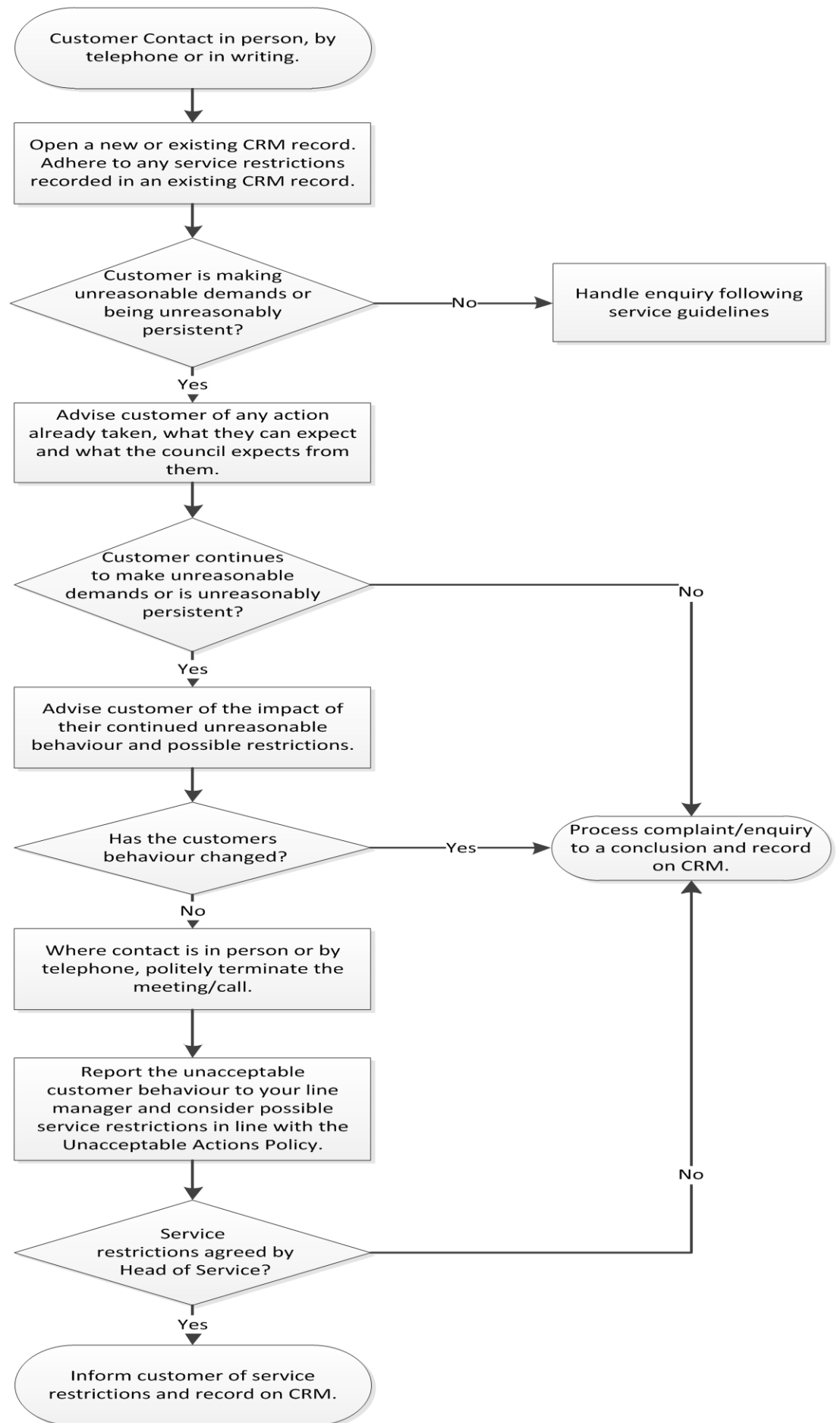
Employees who feel that additional training would assist them in managing difficult situations and unacceptable behaviour should discuss the matter with their line manager.

HR Policy & Advice  
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# Aggressive or Abusive Customer Behaviour



# Unreasonable Customer Demands/Persistence



## **UNACCEPTABLE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR**

### **EMPLOYEE TRAINING AND SUPPORT MEASURES**

#### **Managing Positive Relationships at Work**

Learn how to manage yourself as well as the challenging people and situations you encounter at work.

#### **Personal Safety Awareness**

Pre-dominantly for staff who deal with difficult customers and/or situations. Session helps identify personal safety considerations, discusses verbal & non communication and includes a brief demonstration of personal safety techniques. The sessions are delivered by Lothian & Borders Police.

#### **Dealing with Sensitive Conversations**

To increase and enhance participants awareness and knowledge of how to manage sensitive conversations

By the end of this session, participants should have a clear understanding of:

- What is a difficult/sensitive conversation
- How to prepare for the conversation
- The skills required for dealing with a sensitive situation
- A framework for having sensitive conversations with others

#### **Assertiveness**

This session will help you understand the difference between aggressive, passive and assertive behaviour. You will discover techniques on how to become assertive and discuss ways on how to apply this knowledge at work and at home.

#### **Stress-Less**

- Understand the nature of stress
- Understand the impact of stress
- Understand coping strategies to help deal with stress

#### **Service Specific Training**

- Social Policy and Housing - Training in Lone Working
- Other bespoke training interventions

#### **Other Measures**

- Counselling Service provided by council's Occupational Health Providers
- Healthy Working Lives Programme
- Unacceptable Actions Policy
- The 'West Lothian Way'