**Managing Unreasonable Telephone Calls**

**Guidance Notes May 2021**

Our aim is to deal fairly, respectfully and consistently with all members of the public who call MVDC, in line with our Values. This includes those whose behaviour we consider to be unreasonable.

We aim to provide accessible services for customers. However, we retain the right to manage a person’s contact with a service where it is considered that person’s behaviour or actions are unreasonable.

We understand that people can act out of character in times of stress or when they are upset or unhappy with a situation. It is important that we still offer the best service that we can, even in difficult circumstances. However sometimes when people are angry, demanding or persistent it can result in unreasonable demands on a service or unacceptable behaviour towards employees.

Things to consider:

* It is not unreasonable for customers to raise legitimate queries or criticisms of the handling of their request, enquiry or complaint.
* The same conduct may be unreasonable in one set of circumstances but not in another - the behaviour has to be put in context before deciding what action to take; e.g. is the complainant's distress in reasonable proportion to the loss/wrong suffered?
* It may be necessary to consider the circumstances of the customer - do they have a disability, health issues, language/comprehension difficulties etc…which may make it difficult for them to request a service?
* Unreasonable behaviour does not mean that the customer does not have a valid point, or is not making a reasonable service request
* A loud tone of voice may not be shouting; the customer may be hard of hearing, it may be just how they speak or there may be background noise that is causing them to raise their voice

**What is unreasonable behaviour?**

There are broadly two categories:

**1) Aggressive or abusive behaviour**This is the use of language or behaviour that may cause employees to feel afraid, threatened or abused. Examples include threats, verbal abuse, rudeness and the use of insulting and offensive remarks. Inflammatory statements and unsubstantiated allegations can also be considered to be abusive behaviour.

In line with our Values, we expect staff to treat everyone with respect and we also expect customers to treat our staff in the same way. We understand and accept that people can often be angry or upset due to a particular situation or circumstances, but when this escalates into aggressive or abusive behaviour towards employees then it is unacceptable.

We have a zero tolerance approach with regard to racist, sexist, homophobic or other prejudicial behaviour directed towards any member of staff or MVDC contractors.

**2) Unreasonable Persistence and Demands**We recognise that some people cannot, or will not accept a decision taken, or an explanation / information given by the council. In some cases customers will not accept that we are unable to provide a level of service other than that already provided to them. They may then persistently complain or continually contact the council about a particular issue.

Examples of this behaviour include a continual refusal to accept a decision or explanation, a repeated refusal to follow an appropriate course of action (e.g. the complaints procedure or a legal appeals procedure) and constant contact with a service or particular employee (by either telephone, email, letter or personal visits) about the same issues without presenting new information. It can also include contacting multiple officers about a particular issue i.e. adopting a ‘scattergun’ approach.

We consider such actions to be unreasonable because they take up a disproportionate amount of time and resources, which could be used for the benefit of delivering services to other members of the public.

**Managing unreasonable behaviour**

Customers should be treated with respect at all times and have a right to access our services. We recognise that a person’s behaviour may be affected by their personal circumstances and we will take this into account when deciding what action to take.

**Listen**

1. Remain calm and respectful throughout the conversation. If the other person raises their voice, keep yours low and calm.
2. Listen – allow the person to talk about the issue in their own words and express their dissatisfaction. Don’t interrupt as sometimes a person just wants to ‘let off steam’ but use verbal nods to show you are listening such as “Ah”, “I see” “right”. Try not to let the venting go on for too long (2/3 minutes is optimum, beyond that it can do more harm than good)
3. Lead the person back to the point of the conversation if they go off track e.g. “So, the issue is...”

**Check understanding**

1. Show that you understand the issue at hand – paraphrase and summarise what the person has said by picking out key points and using key words to mirror those used by the customer.
2. Avoid using jargon and complicated language and make sure that the person understands what they have been told.
3. Avoid arguing with the customer. They are explaining how they feel.
4. Don’t be afraid to ask for clarification so that you fully understand the whole issue

**Acknowledge and Empathise**

1. Acknowledge the person’s feelings and any anger (even if you think they are being unreasonable). e.g. “I understand that this situation is frustrating for you”.
2. Empathise with a person’s situation e.g. “I am sorry that you had such an upsetting experience”. Using the word ‘sorry’ in this context is not an admission of guilt

**Move forward**

1. Talk about what you can do, not what you can’t
2. Give clear and valid reasons why requests cannot be met.
3. Be clear and direct about what you can do, how long it will take and what it will involve.
4. Manage expectations. Be honest - if it is going to take 10 days to do something then say so. Don’t give false hope as the customer will only call back even more angry that you have let them down
5. Explain any available avenues of review and appeal if necessary

**Terminating a call**

A person should always be given an opportunity to change their behaviour, so in the first instance you should clearly explain that you find their language or behaviour unacceptable and give them the chance to remedy this. See tips below.

Termination should be a last resort. However, if the behaviour continues, you are empowered to:

* end telephone calls if the caller is considered aggressive, abusive or offensive. Before doing so you must clearly explain why you are ending the call. Make a note of what has happened and make your line manager aware
* report any threats of physical violence, verbal abuse / harassment or persistent correspondence to your line manager and via the ‘Accident and Incident Report Form on Molly.

Depending on what has happened, resulting action may be any of the following:

* it may be decided to channel contact through a named member of staff (usually a manager or occasionally the Customer Care Officer)
* the customer may be advised that they may only contact the council by a specific method e.g. in writing. Such action will be decided by the relevant manager on a case by case basis.
* it may be decided to add the customer to the Clients of Concern register. There is a separate process for this.

**How to terminate:**

1. I can hear that you are upset/angry about the situation. However, please do not swear/shout. Please can you stop and I will try to help you
2. Advise that if they continue to swear/shout that you will terminate the call e.g. “I want to hear your side of the story. However, I will have to end this conversation if you do not stop swearing/shouting”
3. If they continue to swear/shout after warning. “ I am happy to talk about this issue but not while you are speaking to me in that way. I am afraid that I am now going to end the call as your swearing/shouting is making me feel uncomfortable. Please call back later so that we can help you with your enquiry”.
4. If a call has been particularly upsetting please ask for help from colleagues or your line manager. You may need to take a short break or go for a walk. You may also wish to discuss alternative ways of handling such a call in the future.

**Racist, sexist, homophobic or other prejudicial behaviour**

Any such behaviour should be reported to your line manager immediately and an ‘Accident and Incident Report Form’ should be completed as soon as practicable.

**Learning and Improvement**

Most (though not all) of our calls are recorded for training and monitoring purposes. Call recordings are held for 6 weeks before being deleted. Listening to a call can be a useful training tool in these circumstances and it may be helpful for the member of staff and their line manager to do this to see if it could have been handled differently. If you require a copy of a call recording, your manager can raise a servicedesk request for this to be retrieved.

**Further Advice**

For further advice on how to deal with difficult customers, please speak to your line manager or to the Customer Care Officer/Manager.

Protection against violence at work guidance can be found on Molly under Health and Safety and [here](https://molevalleydc-my.sharepoint.com/%3Aw%3A/r/personal/admin_molevalleydc_onmicrosoft_com/_layouts/15/guestaccess.aspx?e=ZO4gC9&share=ETanqkIUqqtGr6rRwbaT470Bg8bzf9qepI9jXGkZ5HQZ1Q).

**Training**

Training courses on managing conflict and aggression and managing telephone aggression are available through Surrey Learn.