

City of York Council – Dealing with Abusive or Vexatious Customers

Policy statement

The Council aims to deliver excellent service in a manner which is respectful to its customers. Council staff and Members equally have the right to be treated with respect. The effective administration of the Council cannot be allowed to be curtailed through customer's actions nor will the Council tolerate behaviour which might impact on the health and well being of its staff. The Council wishes to be open about the steps it will take to manage these situations Accordingly the Council has published the following procedures.

Introduction

1. On very rare occasions the City Council may need to restrict the way we allow individual customers to communicate with us. This may be because a customer has behaved in an abusive, harassing or aggressive way towards a member of staff, or it may be because a customer's actions **seriously** impede effective public administration. An example of this may be a customer who, repeatedly sends aggressive e-mails about an issue, perhaps to numerous members of staff, over an ongoing period of time.
2. Behaviour which is abusive, aggressive or which seriously impedes effective public administration is unacceptable. These procedures set out how such unacceptable behaviour should be addressed.
3. On occasions the activities of a customer may amount to a criminal offence of harassment. If this may be the case then advice can be sought from legal services who will consider whether the case ought to be referred for police investigation or some other legal action. This should be a last resort. Most cases should be capable of being addressed within these procedures.

4. These procedures will predominantly be relevant to customers who make contact by e-mail but are equally applicable to other forms of contact.

Specific categories of Customer

It is important to stress that this policy is expected to cover very few individual cases. It is not intended to deal with the vast majority of customer contact, many thousands of individual cases, which often may be difficult to deal with. Staff are trained to deal with complex and difficult issues and will continue to do so. This policy is intended to deal with the very small minority of occasional cases of extreme behaviour which may threaten the health and wellbeing of staff/members.

5. Some customers may contact the Council at times of great stress and on occasions their behaviour may at times be inappropriate, particularly on the telephone. It is not intended that these procedures should be used to deal with incidents of this kind. Staff are trained to deal with such issues and manage any difficulties customers may be experiencing.
6. The Council also has dealings with people who have mental health or other problems which can affect their behaviour. Such problems do not make unacceptable behaviour acceptable. However, where staff are aware that they are dealing with a customer who has such problems and are aware that they are receiving support services then efforts will be made to involve support workers in securing a solution.
7. Some customers may wish to make a complaint about the Council. All complaints are handled within the Council's complaints procedures. In some cases this may mean escalating the complaint within those procedures or referring the complainant directly to the Ombudsman.

Process for restricting contact

8. In a very small number of cases the Council may consider it necessary to restrict the ways in which a customer can contact the Council.
9. Unacceptable behaviour should normally be addressed in the first instance with a polite warning given by the staff member dealing with the contact.
10. If unacceptable behaviour continues then it may be necessary to take some more formal action. This may include restricting the number of people that the individual is allowed to contact and/or to restrict the volume, type or times of contact that the Council will accept.
11. In the most serious cases the Council may decide to prevent a Customer from using a particular access channel to the Council such as telephone or e-mail. In these circumstances the Council will have to ensure that the Customer is still able to contact the Council through other means.
12. It is not essential that the Council has put in place other measures to restrict contact before reaching that stage but use of such measures must have been considered.
13. A decision to implement restricted contact must be approved by the Director of Customer and Business Support Services (Ian Floyd) or the Assistant Director Governance and ICT (Andy Docherty). If authorised to do so, the Council's ICT team will make arrangements to ensure that any e-mail sent to a Council e-mail address is automatically forwarded to the relevant contact person or, where appropriate, blocked from the Council's systems.
14. Any restrictions on contact should be confirmed in writing by the authorising officer who will explain, who the customer can contact, how and when. The reasons for the action should also be explained. If the customer then continues to make contact with people outside these arrangements they should be reminded of the appropriate way of contact and the call or correspondence passed to the correct person. Any representations made by the

Customer will be considered by the authorising Officer in considering whether the restriction should be maintained.

Recording and review of restrictions

15. A confidential central log of those who have restricted contact with the Council will be maintained and reviewed every six months by the Director of Customer and Business Support Services. Services who have requested a block must also advise the authorising officer if circumstances have changed justifying a lifting of existing restrictions.

Contact with elected Members

16. A decision to restrict e-mail contact will impact on the Customer's ability to make direct contact with their Ward Councillors. Where this is known to be an issue consideration must be given to making appropriate alternative arrangements to ensure that the customer is able to make contact with their Councillors. Ward Councillors should be consulted on those arrangements.