



SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

MANAGING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT POLICY





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MANAGING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT POLICY

WHY WE NEED A POLICY

We aim to support everyone engaging with us to do so positively, ensuring we provide the best possible level of service to all our customers.

However, there are times when we need to take action to protect our staff or services from customer engagement that hinders our ability to provide a service or affects the well-being of our staff. This policy outlines how we identify and respond to such situations.

WHO IS COVERED BY OUR POLICY?

This policy applies to anyone who engages with any aspect of our services or acts on behalf of such a person. It also includes anyone who engages with an Elected Member or acts on their behalf.

Engagement encompasses all forms of contact, including verbal (over the phone, in person), written (letters, emails, online forms, social media, etc.), as well as interactions at Council events and committee meetings. It also covers online comments about the Council or individual staff members that are shared publicly, even if not directly shared with the Council.



SUPPORTING POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT

We are committed to fostering positive engagement with our customers and will provide clear guidance on how they can interact with us effectively. We will explain what we need from them to deliver the best possible service.

Supporting positive engagement also involves helping our customers express their concerns constructively.

To achieve this, we will ensure that:

- Our staff receive appropriate guidance to identify when additional support may be needed.
- Reasonable adjustments are made where necessary.
- Our staff are encouraged to treat all customers with kindness and compassion.
- We actively seek to defuse and de-escalate situations.
- We signpost customers to organizations that can provide independent advice and support, where appropriate.

OUR APPROACH TO MANAGING ENGAGEMENT

While we strive to support positive engagement, there are situations where we need to respond to or manage customer interactions. This may be due to the negative impact on the well-being of our staff or our ability to provide services.

We understand that customers may be upset or distressed when contacting the Council, which can lead to behaviour that is out of character. There may have been upsetting or distressing circumstances leading up to their contact with us.

We do not consider engagement unacceptable simply because a customer is forceful or determined. Whenever possible, we will seek to restore the relationship and ensure we can provide a full service. However, we must take action if the situation becomes unacceptable or results in unreasonable demands or behaviour towards our staff and others.

When managing engagement in this way, we will ensure our responses are proportionate to the behaviour and its impact on our services and staff. We will, whenever possible, clearly explain the reason for any specific decision and keep a separate documented record if that is not possible or appropriate.

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES AND RECOVERING THE RELATIONSHIP

Whenever possible, we aim to recover and maintain positive relationships with our customers.

Here are some ways we might do this:

- **Defusing and De-escalating:** Staff may suggest taking breaks if conversations become heated.
- **Scheduling Follow-ups:** If discussions become repetitive or circular, staff may arrange to continue the conversation at a later time.
- **Early Intervention:** Addressing issues early before behaviour escalates.
- **Proactive Reasonable Adjustments:** Making changes to our services to help customers manage anxiety and stress when engaging with us.
- **Manage Expectations:** By actively managing expectations, we can prevent issues from arising or escalating.

CAN WE TALK?



ACTIVELY MANAGING ENGAGEMENT

When restorative approaches are not possible, inappropriate, or have been tried and failed, we will take an active management approach. This approach aims to maintain our ability to deliver services while minimizing the impact of disruptive situations.

We will manage engagement in a way that allows issues to be resolved or services to be provided through normal processes whenever possible. Our actions will be the minimum required to solve the problem, considering personal circumstances, the seriousness of the matter, and the customer's needs.

Some examples of active management approaches include:

- **Restricting Contact:** Limiting communication to specific channels e.g., phone or email, to a generic mailbox or named person, or banning customers from council premises.
- **Limiting Contact:** Restricting the time, volume, or topics of contact.
- **Protecting Staff:** Not providing direct contact details or staff names when there is a risk of harassment.
- **Third-party Communication:** Communicating through an advocate rather than direct contact.
- **Stopping contact** by telling the customer we consider the matter closed and no further reply or acknowledgement will be made on the matter raised
- **Extreme cases** we may report matters to the police or take legal action. Customers will be informed of the actions taken and the reasons for them.

Where an active management approach has been taken, restrictions are typically reviewed at appropriate intervals while services are being provided. We may choose not to include a review if the reason for the restriction makes it inappropriate. The timing and circumstances for review will be clearly explained to anyone under restriction when it is put in place.

PROTECTING OUR STAFF AND OTHERS

We have **ZERO tolerance** for threats, violence, aggression, and abusive behaviour towards staff. This ensures their safety and well-being and that of other staff.

In these situations, staff will always take action to respond or disengage. Sometimes, the only appropriate action is to end contact immediately.

IDENTIFYING TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT WE NEED TO MANAGE

Consistency is key when managing engagement. Below are examples of when we may need to use one of the approaches mentioned above. This list is not exhaustive, and we can manage types of engagement or behaviour not listed if they are negatively impacting individuals or our ability to provide a service.

CATEGORY ONE

Violent, Aggressive, Threatening, or Abusive Behaviour

We have ZERO tolerance for this type of behaviour towards our staff, Elected Members, or representatives acting on our behalf.

- **Violent, Aggressive, or Threatening Behaviour:** Includes physical assault, threats, verbal and written abuse, harassment, inappropriate gestures or any behaviour likely to cause anxiety, stress, or fear.
- **Abusive Language:** Any language, verbal or written, that is offensive, insulting, degrading, discriminatory, or makes unfounded or slanderous allegations.
- **Harassment:** Repeatedly contacting staff, targeting them on social media, or making statements about recording interactions for public use.

CATEGORY TWO

Demands on the Council

Customer engagement becomes unacceptable when it starts to impact an employee's well-being, work or the service, taking up excessive time to the disadvantage of other customers or functions.

- **Demanding responses** within unreasonable timescales.
- **Insisting** that certain staff provide or do not provide the service to them.
- **Moving the goal posts** repeatedly changing complaints or raising unrelated concerns.

CATEGORY THREE

Levels of Contact

Excessive volume and duration of contact can cause problems. When the time spent communicating with a customer via telephone, email, written correspondence, or other electronic means affects our ability to address that issue or other customers' issues, it can prevent us from helping others and cause distress for both the employee and other customers.

- **Excessive contact** making numerous calls or sending multiple emails in a short period or prolonging discussion.
- **Repeat contact** repeatedly raising the same issues, even though responses have been given, without new information.
- **Inappropriate use of the complaints procedure** when repeated complaints seem to be intended to harass us, prevent us addressing the complaint in good time or stop us from doing our job properly.
- **Scattergun approach** sending the same correspondence to multiple employees or organisations

CATEGORY FOUR

Persistence

Unreasonable persistence is continued, incessant and unrelenting engagement that negatively impacts our employees, elected members, and services.

- **Refusing to accept** reasonable explanations, decisions we have made or that we are unable to provide further levels of service.
- **Continues to disagree** with the action or decision taken in relation to their complaint or issue.
- **Repeated contact** continuing to pursue issues without new information.
- **Raising the same matters** with different employees in the hope they will make a different decision
- **Campaigns** organizing campaigns to disrupt Council work.
- **Social Media** repeatedly targeting employees or particular issues on social media when dissatisfied with council decisions or actions.

APPROACH TO COMMUNICATING DECISIONS

- **Immediate action:** All employees have the right to end contact with a customer if they find it distressing or uncomfortable. Customers will be advised at the time of the incident if appropriate.
- **Restorative Approaches:** before taking an active management approach we will try to restore the relationship and we will give customers the opportunity to change their behaviour by:
 - Discussing their behaviour.
 - Explaining why it is concerning.
 - Asking them to change how they engage with us.
 - Explaining potential actions if behaviour does not change.
- **Active Management Approach:** following attempts to restore the relationship, if behaviour continues to be unacceptable, we may decide to actively manage engagement.

Where the decision has been taken to apply this policy to a customer, we will contact them in writing or as appropriate to explain:

- why the decision has been taken
- what action will be taken
- the duration of that action, if appropriate
- the appeal process of this policy
- if appropriate, who this information will be shared with and recorded on our Customer Relationship Management System

There may be occasions where the threat is so extreme that we may act without prior warning.



fresh
start



THE PROCESS FOR APPEALING A DECISION TO ACTIVELY MANAGE ENGAGEMENT

Customers can appeal the decision to apply the policy. Appeals will only consider arguments related to the restrictions, and will re-consider the original matters raised that caused the unacceptable behaviour in the first place.

Appeals will be considered in the following ways:

- **Immediate action by employees:** through the complaints handling procedure.
- **Decisions taken by managers:** whether restorative or active management will be considered by the Complaints Review Group.
- **Decisions taken by the Complaints Review Group:** will be considered by the Chief Executive.

Customers will be informed of the appeal outcome in writing, where appropriate. The appeal process does not apply to action taken by elected members.

Where customers remain dissatisfied with the application of the policy they make take their complaint to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Details of how to do this will be included in the appeal outcome letter.

RECORDING AND REVIEWING

The Council will record all incidents of unacceptable customer engagement. Customers personal details, correspondence and details of the measures taken will be managed and stored appropriately in line with data protection and records management principles and procedures.

The status of customers with active management arrangements will be reviewed regularly. If engagement improves, restrictions may be lifted without notification. If engagement deteriorates, measures may be reinstated, and customers will be informed

Don't take it out on our staff

**Degrading and discriminatory language
will not be tolerated. Think before you
use abusive language towards our staff.**

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CUSTOMER ADVICE AND SUPPORT SERVICE

Scottish Borders Council | Council Headquarters | Newtown St Boswells

MELROSE | TD6 0SA

tel: 01835 824000 | email: CustomerAdvice@scotborders.gov.uk

