

Customer conduct

Introduction

No member of staff should be required or feel obliged to deal with any customer either face to face, over the phone or in correspondence, who is exhibiting threatening, abusive or violent behaviour. In any of these circumstances a member of staff has the right to refuse to serve that customer and should refer the customer to their immediate supervisor.

Threatening behaviour is defined as, but not limited to, threats of violence to members of staff or any other person which is, for example; sexist, racist or homophobic; including intimidating language, swearing and/or aggressive body language.

It is very important that line managers talk to staff who have been involved in any incident. Staff should be aware that there are support avenues available to them such as the Contact Officer, the Equality Officer, the HR Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). Line Managers should allocate adequate time for staff to seek support, if requested.

Customer Facing Areas

The refusal by a customer to be dealt with by any particular member of staff for any reason such as gender or ethnicity is offensive and totally unacceptable. The customer should not be given the opportunity to be dealt with by another member of staff unless the staff member specifically requests this.

In all circumstances involving potentially violent/threatening or abusive customers, the immediate supervisor should explain to the customer that their behaviour is unacceptable and the customer should be asked to apologise and/or behave in a civil manner.

Subject to the customer's behaviour improving sufficiently, and where possible an apology received, the customer should be dealt with as normal. In a Regional Office and where available, if the customer's behaviour is extremely threatening and/or abusive the immediate supervisor may offer the option of using the Post Box for submitting a passport application. This could alleviate a situation at a regional office and remove the risk of further disruption on any subsequent visit. However, this option is to be used as the supervisor's discretion and depending on the circumstances, the supervisor may choose to remove the customer from the premises without offering the Post Box facility.

If there is no improvement in behaviour, the overall Counter/Interview Office Manager (or equivalent) can make the decision to remove the customer for anti-social behaviour. The customer will be asked to leave the building and, where available, security guards will accompany the customer off the premises. In extreme cases or where no security guards are available, the Police should be called to remove the customer from the premises.

In either case, Regional Offices have the option for the Business Service Manager to refer the incident to their Regional Manager for them to write to the customer barring them from attending any passport office in future and stating that they will need to apply via the postal route.

In Interview Offices the details of such incidents will be passed to the Human Resources (HR) Service Centre to keep a central record of such occurrences. A strong warning letter should be sent by the relevant Interview Office Manager, however a customer would need to attend or re-attend an Interview Office for completion of the interview process. For a consistent approach, a letter template will be held by Interview Office Managers.

Regional Business Service Managers and Interview Office Area Managers will ensure that serious incidents are cascaded to other Regional Offices or Interview Offices so that they will be aware of any potential problem. Standard procedures exist for the recording of such incidents referred to in this note. Any situation, either minor or serious, in which any member of staff feels threatened or abused must be recorded using the standard Incident Report Forms that are held by the Counter/Office Manager.

Telephone Calls

A similar process should be followed when a telephone call becomes abusive ; an abusive phone call is received or if the call handler is exposed to **any** incident of acoustic shock. The caller should be given one warning regarding their behaviour, the call should be recorded where the facilities to do so exist, and if their behaviour fails to improve then they should refer the customer to their immediate supervisor. If unacceptable behaviour persists then the call should be terminated and any detail of the call logged. Where an abusive call is received in a Regional Office and the application relates to a First Time Adult applicant (FTA), examiners should add an iCase note in line with current guidance, alerting the Interview Officer that the applicant may potentially become abusive/ threatening at interview.

Any situation, either minor or serious, in which any member of staff feels threatened or abused must be recorded using the standard Incident Report Form. In serious cases, and where the identity is known, then this should be referred to the Regional Manager, Head of the Passport Verification Service (PVS) or Head of Network Operations so that the appropriate action can be taken.

Correspondence

Abusive correspondence, which includes threats, personal abuse (based on age, gender, race, sexuality, disability etc.) and language generally falling into the category of 'foul and abusive' in which we include swearing, should be referred to the Regional Manager, Head of PVS or Head of Network Operations for reply. This should be dealt with on the same basis that we deal with face to face and telephone customers, i.e. the customer should be given a warning and the correspondence terminated or, in serious cases, referred to the police via the Regional Manager or Head of Network Operations.

Logging of Incident Report Forms

Copies of completed Incident Report Forms should be forwarded to the appropriate HR Service Centre. Any incidents involving racial abuse or discrimination covered under equality legislation, e.g. gender, disability, religions, sexual orientation, or gender identity must be reported to the Equality and Diversity team in Head Quarters (HQ). If there has been a security breach then copies should be forwarded to the Security Team.

All Regional and Interview Offices hold advice obtained from Home Office Legal Advisors Branch for staff who may be subject to abuse or threatening behaviour from customers. This will be available on request following any such incident.

Separate guidance has been issued on the use of panic alarms. This is also held by all Regional Offices.

Deliberately failing to record incidents or encouraging others not to comply with this duty is a breach of Health and Safety regulations and will be treated as a disciplinary matter.

All incidents of abusive/threatening behaviour should also be reported immediately to PCS Branch Health and Safety representatives. Likewise, a separate record should be made of any action taken in these circumstances including advice given and any referrals made (to EAP, for example), to be signed by the individual and kept on the staff HR file.

Further Guidance

Although fortunately not a frequent occurrence, it is possible that a member of staff working in the public area may be assaulted by a member of the public. Please refer to the Security Manual for guidance on how to deal with such instances.

Training courses have been developed to support staff dealing with customers on a daily basis.