



People, Performance and Development Committee  
17 July 2015

## **Abuse, Violence and Assaults in the Workplace**

### **Purpose of the report:**

This report outlines the work which is planned in relation to assaults, violence and threats in the workplace and asks the committee to endorse and support the approach taken to review and develop our management of these issues.

### **Recommendations:**

It is recommended that committee endorses and supports the following approach:

- a) The key message that the council will not tolerate abuse of our staff is re-established;
- b) Reporting and management of incidents is reviewed to identify improvements needed;
- c) Services make sure that risk management policies are properly applied and embedded into culture;
- d) Restorative practice in frontline services is introduced and applied when dealing with difficult behaviours; and
- e) Portfolio holders sponsor any campaigns or related activity in relevant service areas.

### **Introduction:**

1. The Council does not tolerate assaults, violence, abuse or any forms of unacceptable behaviour towards its staff. This includes incidents of physical or verbal abuse, and violent, aggressive and threatening behaviour by people who use our service towards our employees or each other.
2. Our employees frequently work with people in challenging circumstances and with challenging behaviours. We equip our staff with the necessary skills to deal with violent and aggressive behaviour

and support them in taking positive actions to manage situations where this occurs.

3. We are committed to minimising the risk of abuse and aggressive behaviour against our staff, whilst acting in the course of their duties. It is recognised that, as well as any physical injury, the effect on mental well-being can be equally if not more serious.
4. We define abusive, aggressive or violent behaviour as any which produces damaging or hurtful physical and/or emotional impacts on others. This could include:
  - Verbal abuse, including shouting, swearing and name calling
  - Pushing, spitting, biting, scratching, punching
  - Direct threats to property, family or friends
  - Ignoring
  - Assault - resulting in injury or not
  - Assault - using a weapon or other instrument including broken bottles, hypodermic needles etc.
  - Sexual assault
  - Injury caused by pets e.g. dogs
  - Social identity abuse eg racial, sexual, religious, homophobic
5. Trade unions and staff have reported concerns about the increasing frequency of incidents and concerns that a 'culture of acceptance' could develop; .i.e. being assaulted is 'part and parcel' of the work. Our recent independent audit of quality management systems highlighted the need to improve the guidance on this issue.

## Our Values, Approach and Responsibilities

### How our values support this approach

6. Surrey County Council expects all employees and, where possible, people who use our services, to conduct themselves according to the organisational values:

**Respect** – Ensuring all workplace cultures have a strong foundation of mutual respect, fairness and dignity. Staff feel a strong sense of safety and support in any situation and respect is widely promoted and expected in all environments.

**Responsible** – Reporting all situations at the earliest opportunity, including those that you witness or become aware of. Proactively assessing and managing risk, informing people who use our services of the behaviour expected of them and work positively with individuals to achieve those behaviours.

**Listening** – All staff concerns are listened to and taken seriously and not broadly absorbed into a culture of "acceptance". All parties affected are able to access early support and poor, unacceptable behaviour is made clear to people who use our services.



**Trust** – All staff are able to carry out their duties in the knowledge they will be fully supported in a difficult situation. Staff feel enabled and empowered to effectively deal with a situation “in the moment” in a fair, balanced and fully supported way.

### Introducing a restorative approach

7. Whilst we require formal reporting of all incidents, the attempts to resolve situations will have their basis in restorative practice i.e. early, informally-led, facilitated conversations, which are ongoing and designed to repair damaged relationships or change behaviour over time and in a supportive, non-punitive way. Our staff will work positively with individuals to manage behaviours, improve relationships and resolve problems. We will support them to act in a fair and supportive way by:

**Reducing** risk by taking immediate action to manage the impact of aggressive or violent behaviour where this occurs.

**Removing** our staff from unsafe or abusive situations.

**Restoring** relationships through conversation (explaining what behaviour is acceptable), compassion and action.

### Clear roles and responsibilities

8. On 18 May 2015, a Leadership Commitment Statement of responsibilities was presented to the Statutory Responsibilities Network (SRN) leadership group, who advised:
- the SRN was very supportive that we need clarity and an unequivocal leadership message;
  - we develop visible notices to put around all of our buildings and workplaces;
  - we ensure employees are clear that they should report and record incidences and that they are supported;
  - we review recorded incidents and understand their reasons and any trends;
  - we develop this approach with our partners in the public sector and get them signed up to this, e.g. borough and district councils, health, police, etc;
  - we introduce a supportive of the restorative approach so that people are held accountable but not unnecessarily criminalised.
9. The Leadership Commitment Statement also recommends a set of individual responsibilities, from frontline staff to senior leaders, to make sure there are clear expectations around management of these issues. (see Appendix A). Members are asked to support this agenda as part of their leadership role and we will report back to committee following our review and action planning to seek their endorsement and support of our plan.

**Conclusions:**

- 10. Good staff welfare and wellbeing is critical in delivering safe and reliable services and ensures good continuity and retention. This project will try to ensure all workplaces have a strong culture of promoting values and acceptable behaviours and managing situations quickly in a restorative way. This will improve working conditions and environment directly and grow the Council's reputation as a best practice employer of choice.

**Financial and value for money implications**

- 11. None

**Equalities and Diversity Implications**

- 12. The Equality Impact Assessment will be completed as part of the project scoping exercise to inform the project and, in particular, highlight areas of concern where high proportions of frontline staff are women and BME staff, who are most vulnerable to sexual harassment and racially abusive incidents.

**Risk Management Implications**

- 13. Non financial risks include unsafe working environments presenting a risk to: reputation; employee relations; recruitment and retention; and legal challenge.
- 14. Financial risks include recruitment and retention problems and legal challenge, which can create additional costs of recruitment, legal awards and poor business continuity.

**Next steps:**

- 15. A Project Manager has been identified to support the project lead and produce a range of actions to ensure we deliver the key message of reduce, remove and restore. A project plan is currently being developed, which will include: analysis of data to identify hotspots and trends; joint working with services and external partners to promote a common approach; engagement and promotion materials; review of policy implementation and areas for improvement, e.g. training; and measures where Members can assist in the promotion of the safety of our staff.

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**Sources/background papers:** None

## Specific Responsibilities in the Leadership Commitment Statement

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### Staff will:

- Report incidents so that others can learn from these.
- Carry out appropriate risk assessments.
- Take all reasonable steps, to ensure their own and their colleagues' health and safety.
- Remove themselves from abuse and aggression as soon as practicable.
- Where possible, will deal and resolve situations “in the moment”.
- Be alert to any escalating situation your colleagues may be dealing with. Be prepared to render help in any way it is safe to do so.
- Follow the guidance provided and participate in training given, to become fully skilled in restorative practice.

### Trade Union representatives will:

- Support this policy and its implementation.
- Work with management to ensure that the working environment is safe and that safe working methods are introduced.
- Encourage their members to follow management guidelines in dealing with situations which may result in abuse or aggression.

### Supervisors will:

- Carry out appropriate risk assessments.
- Support their staff in decisions and reasonable action taken.
- Ensure incidents are recorded as soon as its practical to do so.
- Allow adequate recovery time for their staff.
- Keep their manager informed of incidents.
- Assist in team briefing and training when necessary.
- Draw attention to the Employee Assistance programme support for staff.
- Ensure they and their colleagues are fully skilled in restorative practice, in dealing with situations.

### Managers will:

- Carry out risk assessments for all vulnerable categories of front line jobs and introduce safe working practices and procedures to minimise the risks identified e.g. ensuring practices do not aggravate people who use our services.
- Create where possible, a preventative and respectful environment, based on our values.
- Be as supportive as possible of decisions taken by their staff in the first instance.
- Ensure they are in possession of all the facts when asked to intervene.
- Not make exceptions to following a consistent approach, unless warranted.
- Reassess the risks and control measures required, after incidents.

- Team brief and train staff, as required. Monitor the effectiveness of training.
- Be responsible for staff welfare, safety and support.

### **Senior managers will:**

- Ensure effective risk management systems and reporting are in place.
- Promote where possible, a preventative and respectful environment, based on our values.
- Promote and re-energise local policy commitments and best practice, where it already exists.
- Empower and enable staff to be able to effectively deal with abusive or aggressive situations.
- Provide restorative practice skills training for front line staff and their managers, to ensure a consistent approach to dealing with abusive, violent or aggressive people.
- Work with partners to ensure that information on people who use our services is shared.
- Require staff to report incidents, re-drawing the boundaries of what is unacceptable and to monitor patterns and take steps to reduce risk.
- Reinforce our support for staff who deal with abuse and violence by signs and the inclusion of statements in appropriate correspondence and literature. Signs and statements will be balanced i.e. identifying the behaviour people who use our services can expect from the council, the local environment and the response we expect from people who use our services. For example people who use our services can be informed that :

“You have the right to expect the best service from the Council and we will try to provide that service politely and respectfully. In return we ask the same from you. We reserve the right to ask anyone who abuses us, verbally or physically, to leave the premises. We also reserve the right to withdraw our services, if the situation allows. Abusive phone calls may be terminated. We will support staff who are subjected to aggression or violence and, where appropriate pursue legal action against perpetrators.”

- Take action needed against perpetrators including prosecution if needed.
- Ensure support mechanisms are in place to support staff e.g. supervision and counselling.

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