



# **Guidance on Dealing with Unacceptable Customer Behaviour**

**APRIL 2008**

## CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
1. Introduction	3
2. Policy Statement	4
3. Definition of Unacceptable Customer Behaviour	4
4. Roles and Responsibilities	5
5. Guidance on How to Prevent Incidents	7
6. Dealing with Incidents of Unacceptable Behaviour	8
7. Reporting Incidents and Follow-up Action	9

Annex A - Incident Report Form

Annex B - Proforma Warning Letter

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) recognises the potential for verbal abuse, threatening behaviour or physical assault from customers and the detrimental effect this can have on staff. Such behaviour by customers is totally unacceptable. The personal safety of staff is of paramount importance and therefore staff are instructed not to accept or tolerate any level of violent, abusive or threatening behaviour that is directed towards them.
- 1.2 EONI recognises its legal and moral responsibility to reduce risks to the health and safety of staff to the lowest practicable level. They have a duty of care (under the Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978) to take reasonable precautions to protect employees. There is a statutory duty to ensure, so far as it is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (NI) 2000, places a clear responsibility on employers to ensure all work processes are assessed for risks.
- 1.3 Staff have a responsibility to take all reasonable steps to ensure that incidents of abuse are kept to a minimum. A safe and secure working environment is necessary for our staff to work in and for our customers to conduct their business. There is a need for clear instructions and guidance for all staff.
- 1.4 Prevention of unacceptable customer behaviour is preferable to intervention at a later stage and personal safety takes priority over damage to property.
- 1.5 The purpose of this guidance is therefore to:-
- Set out EONI's policy on dealing with Unacceptable Customer Behaviour;
  - Provide clear information on roles and responsibilities of staff;
  - Provide instructions and procedures for staff on the prevention of incidents and on the action to take when incidents arise;
  - Set out the procedures for reporting incidents.
- 1.7 It is the responsibility of EONI managers to ensure that this guidance is fully implemented. If it is not possible for any reason, to implement any aspect of the policy, the manager must immediately inform their Assistant Chief Electoral Officer (ACEO) who will, where appropriate, discuss the issue with the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO).
- 1.8 EONI is committed to ensuring appropriate reasonable adjustments are made to allow equality of access in both bringing and dealing with incidents of unacceptable customer behaviour including, where appropriate, interpreter support, specialist transport costs and advocacy services.

## 2 POLICY STATEMENT

**“EONI recognises the right for staff and customers to be able to conduct their business in a safe and non-threatening environment. Our aim is to protect staff in Headquarters and Area Office premises and, to this end, no unacceptable customer behaviour will be tolerated.”**

### 2.1 Why do we need this policy?

Although the vast majority of contacts between customers and EONI staff are conducted in a polite and courteous way it is recognised that confrontational situations can arise. It is important that the right environment exists to encourage good behaviour and staff are protected from those customers who might use unacceptable behaviour against them.

Staff and their customers have a responsibility to treat each other with consideration, courtesy and respect. A separate Complaints Procedure is available to customers who are dissatisfied with the service provided to them by EONI and its staff. Forms are available in a range of alternative formats and may be accessed on our website [www.eoni.org.uk](http://www.eoni.org.uk).

### 2.2 All EONI offices will be maintained to a good standard and the following standard features will be installed to ensure a safe working environment:

- Clear Customer Signage
- Escape Routes
- Alarm Buttons
- Closed Circuit Television/Audio recording system

### 2.3 Risk assessments will be carried out on an annual basis, as part of a health and safety audit, in consultation with trade union representatives. The main purpose will be to assess the level of risk and determine whether any additional security measures to those listed above are required.

## 3 DEFINITION OF UNACCEPTABLE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR

### 3.1 Unacceptable Customer Behaviour is any incident which may include:

- any act of written or verbal abuse, including those of a discriminatory nature;
- threatening behaviour;
- intimidation;
- serious or persistent harassment;
- an actual or attempted physical assault;
- damage to property;
- behaviour that causes staff to feel upset, threatened, frightened or physically at risk and is directed at them because of their work in EONI.

- 3.2 This also applies to incidents that take place outside the workplace, including non-working hours, providing that it can be directly connected to any member of staff's work in EONI.
- 3.3 A Serious Incident is when:
- an actual assault occurs causing injuries that require medical attention and/or time off work;
  - an attempted serious assault occurs which may have involved offensive weapons of any kind;
  - any person is placed in a state of fear and alarm or distress
  - sectarian or racially abusive language is used
  - there is significant damage to property (repair costs likely to exceed £50 will normally be regarded as significant).
- 3.4 Any serious incident will be reported to the PSNI. This may be done through pressing the alarm button while an incident is occurring or telephoning PSNI following an incident. No attempt is to be made to carry out any form of internal investigation until any PSNI action or investigation has been completed. Any material evidence is to be left where it is and untouched until considered by the police.
- 3.5 If a manager is unsure as to whether any incident falls into the Serious Incident category they **MUST IMMEDIATELY** seek advice from their ACEO or, if not available, the CEO.

#### **4. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

- 4.1 All managers and staff have a responsibility to ensure the health and safety of persons in their workplace. Under Health & Safety legislation, staff have to take reasonable care of their own health & safety and that of others who may be affected by their acts or omissions.
- 4.2 Everyone must accept reasonable responsibility for their own safety and that of their colleagues and familiarise themselves with and follow the procedures set out in this document.
- 4.3 ACEO's should:
- satisfy themselves that the contents and procedures detailed in this document are proactively applied and managed by each Area Electoral Officer and Heads of Business Unit.
  - ensure that recommendations following investigations, as a result of unacceptable behaviour, are promptly implemented.
  - support staff in the immediate aftermath of an incident involving violence or abuse.
  - encourage staff to avail of the services of Staff Welfare Unit.

#### 4.4 Area Officers/Heads of Business Unit should:

- immediately report any serious incident to their ACEO and to the PSNI;
- ensure that the contents detailed in this document are proactively applied and managed by each office within their area of responsibility;
- ensure that they routinely assess risks within their premises or working environment and take steps to ensure that the risk is reduced to the lowest possible level and otherwise controlled and managed;
- ensure that incident forms are completed by staff, and forwarded to their ACEO manager where appropriate.

#### 4.6 Responsibilities of all staff:

- accept reasonable responsibility for their own safety and that of their colleagues.
- familiarise themselves with and follow the procedures set out in this guide.
- participate in all training that is made available to them.
- apply measures that are identified through risk assessment.
- report all incidents of unacceptable customer behaviour to their line manager.
- record details of all incidents on the Incident Reporting Form (Annex A) and pass to ACEO through their line manager.

#### 4.7 Role of the Police

A close working relationship is necessary between the Police and EONI Premises Officers in order to successfully deal with violent or abusive customers. Regular meetings (at least once a year) with Police will act as a forum to address areas of concern. If a violent or abusive customer has committed an offence, the Police will investigate the incident. EONI will provide support and advice for staff involved in incidents and Police investigations.

#### 4.8 Role of Trade Union Side

NIPSA have agreed to represent all staff including any non-union members who wish to use their services on health and safety issues. The management of health and safety should be routinely discussed at consultation meetings between Management and local Trade Union Side. NIPSA representatives must be informed whenever a threat has been issued to staff. EONI and NIPSA will share information about the threat received and will work together with the aim of achieving a joint assessment and where possible, an agreed outcome.

## 5 GUIDANCE ON HOW TO PREVENT INCIDENTS

### 5.1 Be Prepared:

- There should be two members of staff present in Area Offices during opening hours. It may therefore be necessary for Area Officers to make arrangements to ensure that no member of staff is left alone;
- Where there is the potential for an incident to develop, one to one meetings with customers in closed offices, particularly with no glass windows/door panels, should be avoided;
- Managers and staff should routinely carry out informal risk assessments of their working environment;
- Ensure access systems/door locks are activated to prevent customers entering staff areas.
- Ensure that you know where the escape routes are. These must be kept clear of clutter at all times.
- Keep reception areas clear of any items that could be used as a weapon.

### 5.2 DO

- Treat all members of the public courteously and impartially, in a professional and polite manner;
- Recognise that some customers have disabilities which may influence their behaviour and that this should be taken into account in your dealings with them;
- Be patient, listen carefully to what customers say and ensure that you allow extra time if required for people with low literacy and those who do not have English as their first language, including those who use sign language;
- Explain things clearly and simply, do not use abbreviations or jargon, to avoid possible misunderstandings e.g. the systems involved, why certain action is being taken;
- Be honest and frank – if you are not sure the information you are giving is accurate, CHECK and inform the customer you are doing so;
- Refer to your line manager if a customer rejects your explanation;
- Always keep calm – do not allow yourself to be provoked;
- Tell your manager if you have reason to believe a customer is potentially violent.

### 5.3 DON'T

- Give information which could be misleading, always make sure that the customer understands what you are saying;
- Interview a customer who appears to be under the influence of drugs/alcohol;
- Keep a person waiting longer than necessary;
- Provoke a customer through words or actions;
- Retaliate by words or actions.

## 6 DEALING WITH INCIDENTS OF UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR

6.1 In order to ensure that incidents which arise can be dealt with effectively, it is vitally important that the name and address of a customer is initially taken regardless of the nature of their query.

6.2 When an incident begins to develop, and provided staff do not feel threatened or at risk, they should in the first instance:

- Request the customer to change his/her behaviour and warn them that they must treat the member of staff with due respect and courtesy if they wish their query to be dealt with;
- If the unacceptable behaviour continues, you may wish to refer the customer to the Area Officer or SO Manager where possible;
- If an incident develops do not allow yourself to get into a confrontation with the customer. Attempt to draw the conversation to a close and ask them to leave the office;
- If you are or feel at serious risk, press the nearest alarm button and leave the office if the customer will not do so.

6.3 REMEMBER:

- Call for assistance immediately if a customer becomes aggressive and make sure you can get away quickly if necessary;
- Your main aim is to escape danger, so make sure you know where the escape routes are;
- Do not attempt to confront or restrain any assailant;
- Do not attempt to protect personal belongings or office property;
- Whilst you should try to help colleagues in distress, this should not be at the expense of your own safety.

- 6.4 The member of staff who pressed the alarm button or contacted the PSNI, should meet with the police when they arrive and guide them to scene of the incident, providing information and co-operating fully.

**In Summary:**

- **If customer moderates their behaviour, deal with their query.**
- **If customer continues to be abusive, direct them to leave the office.**
- **If customer refuses to leave, tell them you will contact the Police.**
- **If the customer still refuses to leave, press the alarm button.**

## **7 FOLLOW-UP ACTION**

- 7.1 All incidents should be recorded using the form at Annex A and forwarded to the appropriate ACEO within 2 days through Area Officers/Line Managers. However, where a serious incident occurs (Section 3.3 refers) the ACEO should be telephoned immediately, which may be at home if the serious incident has occurred outside working hours – TRIM Record 2007/015484 contains appropriate contact information. A form should be completed on returning to the office.
- 7.2 Following investigation, action that may be taken against customers, depending on the nature and severity, are:
- Issue of a warning letter (See Appendix B)

This will be issued by the appropriate ACEO. A warning letter may be appropriate depending on the severity of the incident of unacceptable customer behaviour.
  - Banning the customer from one or more office premises

This is an important protective measure which is taken if there is a serious concern about the safety of staff or damage to EONI property. This action is designed to safeguard staff and a decision to ban a customer will only be taken by the CEO.
- 7.3 Where appropriate, a risk assessment will be undertaken by a health and safety adviser following a serious incident. The completed report will be provided to the ACEO so that any recommended action is taken.

**ELECTORAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**UNACCEPTABLE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR INCIDENT REPORT**

**PART A**

**STAFF NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**POST/GRADE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Customer/Incident Details**

**Name:** .....

**Address:** .....

.....

**Male:**  **Female:**  **On the Electoral Register:** Y/N

Time of Incident Day:  Date:  Time:

Were the Police called to the incident ? **Y/N**

Name of Attending Officer to the incident: \_\_\_\_\_

Were you satisfied with the response time of the Police? **Y/N**

If No: Please state response time in minutes:

.....

**Details of the incident (including any damage to property):**

Was there any injuries to staff?      Yes          No   

Details of Injuries: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Comments:

---

---

---

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Line Manager's Signature:**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PASS TO ACEO**

**UNACCEPTABLE CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR INCIDENT REPORT**

**PART B (to be completed by ACEO)**

**Date Received :** \_\_\_\_\_

**Currently under PSNI Investigation: Yes/No**

**Follow-up Action:**

1. Further action required: Yes/No
2. Warning Letter: Yes/No  
If yes, date letter issued to customer \_\_\_\_\_
3. Recommended Ban from EONI Premises: Yes/No  
If yes, refer to CEO for approval.  
Date letter issued to customer \_\_\_\_\_

**Comments:**

**Completed by:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_(ACEO)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

WRITTEN WARNING

Dear XXX

I am writing to inform you that I have received a complaint about your behaviour when you attended the XXX Area Electoral Office on XXX (Date).

I must inform you that EONI expects all customers to behave in a respectful and courteous manner and we will not tolerate any form of threatening behaviour, physical or verbal abuse.

Should I receive any further complaints about your behaviour, my staff will be unable to deal with your query unless you telephone beforehand to arrange an appointment. The police are likely to be contacted if any further incidents arise.

I sincerely hope that I will not have to take such action and would therefore strongly urge you to think carefully about your future behaviour.

Yours sincerely

(NAME)

Assistant Chief Electoral Officer