



## HANDLING AGGRESSION AT WORK POLICY

You should not have to accept that the threat of aggression is part of the job. However, we do have to recognise that the potential for flash points in every day life seems to be on the increase. As Parish Council staff, we regularly come across members of the public who, for a variety of reasons/pressures, can become verbally abusive or, in exceptional cases, physically violent. Regrettably, but inevitably, incidents will occur but these are rare.

These incidents can be distressing for you and we need to be clear about not only what we can do to avoid such situations but also how to deal with them when they do occur. This booklet has been prepared to give you that guidance. It has been written to help you. Please read it carefully.

### WHAT IS AGGRESSION (VIOLENCE) AT WORK?

Aggression to staff is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as *“any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his or her employment”*.

Verbal abuse and threats are the most common types of incidents. The definition of aggression varies and may include verbal abuse, racial and sexual harassment as well as threatening behaviour and physical attacks on persons. To help understanding, Cranleigh has now chosen to refer to its policy in this area as “Handling Aggression” rather than “Violence”.

### WHO IS AT RISK?

Research confirms that the greater the contact with the public, the greater the risk of aggression. Working alone after normal working hours can also be a hazard.

Although the incidents may be greater in some geographical areas, aggression can and does occur in any community, it is not a gender problem either; women are at no more risk than men. Indeed, men may be at greater risk as they are more inclined to confront potentially violent situations.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Often reports are not made because staff feel they are unnecessarily making a fuss, that accepting, particularly verbal, abuse is part of the job or are worried about appearing unprofessional or ineffective. This is most certainly **not** the case.

Unless a comprehensive record of incidents is available, it is difficult for the Council to assess the risks involved and put effective control measures in place. Sometimes lack of reporting, for whatever reason, may allow aggression to continue or escalate – and may put other colleagues unwittingly at further, and possibly, greater risk.

## **Handling Aggression**

### **A POLICY FOR SAFEGUARDING STAFF**

The Council recognises the potential for aggression, whether physical, verbal, racial or intimidatory, to staff during the course of their work and regards the problem as one that requires special consideration within the overall framework of its Health and Safety at Work Policy. The Council understands that the risk to staff of incidents of aggression cannot be eliminated but undertakes to do everything that is reasonably practicable to reduce the level of risk by:

- identifying the categories of staff at risk; and
- recognising that aggression occurs when the employee perceives that they have been a victim;
- identifying the hazard categories of potential aggression;
- identifying and implementing appropriate control measures, so far as is reasonably practicable;
- developing and continuously reviewing risks faced by staff and ensuring that appropriate safe working procedures are adopted;
- making available training for staff to recognise threatening situations, in diffusing aggressive behaviour and in handling such situations when they occur;
- maintaining a reporting procedure of incidents of aggression;
- monitoring those reports to identify problem areas to provide feedback to staff and to implement necessary changes and improvements;
- supporting staff that are victims of aggressive incidents and taking appropriate action against those responsible for such incidents;
- providing appropriate protective equipment to staff where identified as necessary.

### **CRANLEIGH PARISH COUNCIL'S DUTY TO STAFF**

Cranleigh Parish Council has a duty to ensure the health and safety of staff, so far as is reasonably practicable, whilst at work – wherever that work takes place.

In respect of the threat of aggression, risk assessments have been carried out and measures put into place to reduce the risk to the health and safety of staff from aggression.

In cases of aggression where it has not been possible to prevent instances of aggression, Cranleigh Parish Council will investigate every reported incident, take action against the aggressor, after agreement with affected staff and provide appropriate support to employees and, where necessary, their family. The key is, however, to report such incidents to the Clerk or the Chairman of the Council.

Possible action that Cranleigh Parish Council may take against an aggressor can include:

- Writing to an aggressor. Most aggression towards staff takes the form of verbal abuse. Writing swiftly after an incident and advising that abusive behaviour will not be tolerated and that such abusive behaviour actually prevents staff and the Council from assisting customers with their problems has proved to be remarkably effective – often positively acknowledged.
- Imposing conditions on aggressors so that they cannot just attend Council Offices – they will only be dealt with by structured appointments.
- We will encourage and support staff to report incidents to the Police for further criminal investigation.
- In extreme cases, taking Civil action to obtain a legal injunction to exclude aggressors from any Council property.

## **STAFF DUTY TO CRANLEIGH PARISH COUNCIL**

When safe systems of work have been agreed and tried in practice, it is responsibility not to put yourself, your colleagues or your workplace in danger and to co-operate in all health and safety matters recommended by the Council. If you deliberately ignore procedures and policies for health and safety you might be considered negligent should an incident occur. You must also report incidents, problems and shortcomings in arrangements to control risks of violence and aggression.

### **PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

Your first task must be to avoid the risk of aggression in the work situation. You should keep your work environment, and the work procedures that you follow, under review in case they may, unwittingly, increase the potential for aggression.

Alert the Clerk or Chairman of the Council to any changes that you feel would reduce the level of risk for you and other staff. Also, be aware of the way that you deal with people. Good interpersonal skills, communicating verbally and non-verbally that you are interested in the points being made by the person that you are dealing with and that you will help in some way - even if it is not a matter that you can deal with directly, will help to calm a potentially difficult situation.

Please take special note, that Cranleigh Parish Council does **not** expect you to take undue risks. If other forms of prevention do not seem to be working and you feel threatened or ill at ease in a situation, **make your excuses and leave**.

If necessary, arrange for the Police to be called. Trust your instincts.

If the incident concerns a telephone call, you should inform the caller that you will not tolerate verbal abuse. If they persist, you should put the phone down.

In both cases, even if no actual physical harm has been done, you should report the incident as soon as possible after the event so that there is more chance of remembering and recording exact words and recollections of sequences of events. The report should be as full as possible, names and addresses of witnesses, where applicable, should be included. It is very important to provide an address if you are aware of it.

### **WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE ASSAULTED**

If you are assaulted, move away from the situation immediately and call for assistance. Decide if the situation requires you to call the Police immediately.

Report the incident to the Clerk or Chairman of the Council as soon as possible.

Where physical intimidation takes place or threats are made, the Police may well be able to take action. This can only happen, however, when the details of any incident are reported to them. Cranleigh Parish Council encourages staff to report any such incident to the Police.

Write a full account of the incident giving all relevant facts but avoiding subjective comment. Do this as soon as possible while it is fresh in your mind.

If there are witnesses, request statements from them; again, these should be factual, concise and as objective as possible.

## **FOLLOW UP PROCEDURE IN CASES OF ASSAULT**

If the Clerk or Chairman of the Council receives a report of an assault it should be investigated, analysed and recorded to see whether action could be taken to avoid repetition.

In the event of actual bodily harm, a medical statement should be obtained as soon as possible.

If the member of staff has not already reported the incident to the police, a decision should be made by the Clerk or Chairman of the Council. Police should be called. **Notifying the Police is standard practice and a requirement in the event of violent attack.**

If the Police are involved but decide not to bring a criminal prosecution, the member of staff should decide whether or not to bring a private prosecution. They should first seek professional advice.

## **ONGOING SUPPORT**

Victims may need help and the Council will do all it reasonably can to support staff in this situation.

Talking to colleagues can derive much comfort. In turn, colleagues should be sensitive to the victim's feelings and give them support.

## **COMPENSATION**

The following courses of action are open to you if you have been subject to assault in the course of their duties:

- seek advice from the Council about compensation under their conditions of employment;
- seek compensation from the assailant(s) in the civil court;
- seek compensation in the criminal courts following a successful police or private prosecution of the assailant;
- apply to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board.

## **COUNCIL ASSISTANCE IN LEGAL ACTION**

The decision to seek compensation from a third party would be for the individual concerned. Cranleigh Parish Council cannot give a commitment to provide legal assistance.

## **ADDITIONAL ADVICE**

### **WHAT TO DO**

When you are frightened, ask yourself:

- Is this person's anger or hostility directed at me, the Council or themselves? Is it a form of distress?
- Am I in danger? If **you** think you are, leave and get help immediately.
- Am I the best person to deal with this? If you find particular situations difficult, perhaps someone else could handle this situation more effectively. This is not a cop-out.

## **HOW TO BEHAVE IF YOU ARE INVOLVED IN AN AGGRESSIVE INCIDENT.**

It is not possible to give rigid guidelines of how to behave but the following pointers may help.

First of all, minimise the threat by taking precautions, such as:

- Ensure your colleagues have access to your diary schedule so they know where you are. (Please also read Lone Working Procedures.)
- For a pre-determined appointment, be punctual - keeping people waiting escalates their 'angst'.
- If possible, don't even deal with someone who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Make another appointment or call for assistance from a colleague.
- Do not respond aggressively, as this may well increase the chance of further aggression. Staying calm is not easy because anger does tend to excite anger in others - take a deep breath, keep your voice even and try to help - body language, voice and response can help defuse a potentially aggressive situation.
- Do speak gently, slowly and clearly.
- Do not argue or be enticed into further argument.
- Do not hide behind your authority, status or jargon. Instead tell them who you are, ask the person their name and discuss what you want them to do.
- Do try to talk things through as reasonable adults in order to diffuse the situation. Always be aware that your first duty is to protect yourself.
- Ask yourself if you are the best person to deal with the problem - a colleague joining or taking over may add a helpful approach to the problem.
- Do trust your own instincts if you feel uneasy.
- Do not ignore the warning, act on it.

Body language is very important.

- Do not use an aggressive stance (such as crossed arms, hands on hips, a wagging finger or a raised arm), which may challenge and confront. This is likely to increase aggression.
- Do not stand too close or above the person. As long as you have ensured you have an escape route, it is generally considered better to sit down and let them stand.
- Do not put a hand on someone who is angry.

A person on the brink of physical aggression has three possible choices - either to attack, retreat, or compromise. Your aim should be to guide towards the second and third actions.

- Do encourage the person to move, take a walk around the block or come with you to see another member of staff, etc.
- Do offer a compromise such as talking through their frustrations or problems, although never offer a promise that you cannot keep.

If the threat of violence is imminent:

- Do try to avoid potentially dangerous locations such as the tops of stairs, restricted spaces or places where furniture or other objects can be used as weapons.
- Do keep your eye on escape routes and keep yourself between the aggressor and the door.
- Do not turn your back. If you are leaving, move gradually backwards. Ensure you have the means of escape from the situation. In an interview room, alarms are fitted - ensure you know where they are and that you can reach the cord or button.

If you are dealing with an actively aggressive person:

- Do not remain alone.
- Do keep a comfortable distance between yourself and the person.
- Do not enter their personal space.
- Do keep a desk or other barrier between you and the aggressor.
- Do be prepared to move quickly, violent people may strike suddenly. Legally, you may only use the minimum reasonable force to restrain someone or you could find yourself charged with assault.

## Handling Abusive telephone calls

1. If you get an abusive or threatening phone call, do not respond to it. The caller wants a strong reaction from you.
2. Put the receiver next to the phone and move away. Return some minutes later and hang up.
3. You may want to make a record of when you receive the calls so you can see if there is a pattern
4. Dialling 1471 may help to see from what number the call was made.
5. Report the incident to the Clerk or the Chairman of the Council

## Travelling Tips

Going by car:

- Keep your vehicle in good working order by regular servicing to reduce the risk of breakdowns. Join an emergency breakdown service; some of these companies now issue members with mobile phones so you do not have to leave the car to call for help.
- Keep change and a mobile phone in the car so you can call for help.
- Know where you are going and how to get there. Plan your route in advance and carry with you any maps or instructions you need to find your destination.
- If you do get lost, only ask for directions at a well-lit public place; e.g. a petrol station.
- Travel by main roads and well-lit streets.
- Keep the car locked when you are driving and windows up, especially in towns where you might have to stop at junctions or traffic lights.
- Never leave valuable items on the passenger seat - handbags, for example. Visible valuables encourage snatch thieves. Lock valuables in the boot when you leave your car to go to the appointment.
- Lock your car whenever you leave it, even if you are just going into the service station to pay for petrol.
- When you park during the day, ask yourself what the area or car park will be like if you return to your car after dark.
- Always park your car in the direction of escape; this avoids the need to manoeuvre if you need to leave in a hurry.
- Do not stop for people who flag you down. If you think they need help, drive to a phone and call for help on their behalf.
- If you feel threatened by other drivers, drive to the nearest police station, ambulance station or fire station. Failing this, go to a well-lit and populated petrol station.
- If you are prevented from moving off, keep the engine running, make sure the doors are locked and make as much noise as possible. Your car is fitted with a horn - use it.

## Breakdowns on motorways

- Put the hazard warning lights on and pull on to the hard shoulder.
- If possible, coast until you reach the nearest telephone. These phones are located every 1000 metres, so you should never have to walk more than 500 metres to reach the nearest. Every 100 metres there are marker posts pointing to where the nearest phone lies.
- If you carry a warning triangle place it **at least** 100 metres behind your car - too close does not give other drivers enough warning.
- Simply lift the emergency phone, no money is needed, you will be connected to the police control room.
- When using the phone, face the traffic so you can see anyone approaching. If you are a lone woman, tell the control room.

- Tell the control room staff what is wrong and if you are a member of a breakdown organisation, have your card ready so you can tell them your registration number. If you cannot remember the car's registration number note it down too, before you walk to the phone.
- Back at your car, lock it and wait on the embankment. If an unmarked car stops, get back in your car and lock it. Only open the window a little if somebody wants to talk to you.

### **Non - motorway breakdowns**

- Turn on the hazard warning lights.
- Assess whether it is safer to stay in the car or get out.
- If you carry a warning triangle, put it 30 metres behind the car on the same side of the road as the car.
- If somebody appears, get back in the car, lock it and talk to them through a partly opened window, ask them to get the police.
- If you have to leave the car, make sure you know how to find it again.
- It is useful to have a torch and a warm coat in the car and remember to take your personal alarm with you and keep it in your hand.

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