

Customer Conduct Policy

Purpose

At Northumbrian Water we're proud of our work in providing affordable and accessible services to our customers, and of being one of the leading companies across the water industry. We are proud to play an important role in the communities we serve and we're passionate about providing an unrivalled experience for all our customers.

We set ourselves high standards and work hard to ensure a customer-centric culture that supports making this happen, and so we understand that customers may get upset or frustrated if they feel standards are not met or when things go wrong. We completely respect that customers have the right to voice any concerns and, if necessary, choose to make a [complaint through our official channels](#) – that way we can continuously learn and improve the services we offer.

We do expect customers to act with courtesy and respect when interacting with our employees, in the same way we expect our people to do the same. Occasionally though, the behaviour or actions of individual customers or members of the public make it very difficult for us to help them and there are times where our people face inappropriate, abusive, threatening and even violent behaviour, which is unacceptable.

We take a zero-tolerance approach when it comes to violence or discriminatory behaviour directed at our people or those working on our behalf.

This policy outlines how we recognise when a customer's behaviour (or that of members of the public) is unacceptable and it provides guidance on the actions we will take, to protect our people from harm and/or distress when carrying out their duties. It also ensures we take a consistent and fair approach to anyone who acts in an unacceptable way towards our people.

This policy also applies to Northumbrian Water employees who are also customers, and any unacceptable behaviour from our people will be addressed through appropriate human resource channels and policies.

Key principles

We will not tolerate unacceptable behaviour directed towards our people during any form of interaction, including:

- During a phone or video call.
- Face to face.
- In an email or letter.
- Online incl. messaging platforms, web chat, social media; and
- Any other form of communication.

Our definition of unacceptable behaviour includes:

- Any form of physical violence or unwanted physical contact, assault, aggression, or abusive behaviour.
- Harassment or repeated unwanted contact.

- Threats of physical violence, aggression or harassment.
- Use of inappropriate language, verbal or written, which may cause our people to feel scared, upset, humiliated, intimidated, threatened, offended, or distressed. This could include:
 - Creating a hostile, degrading or offensive interaction.
 - Using a bullying tone or language or making threats.
 - Using inappropriate religious, cultural or racial comments or insults.
 - Using language which is designed to insult or degrade.
 - Making bi-phobic, homophobic or transphobic comments.
 - Making sexist or derogatory remarks.
 - Making unsubstantiated allegations that individuals have committed criminal offences.
 - Discrimination against any protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Unreasonable Demands

Customers can occasionally make unreasonable demands on our resources by the scale of the service they expect. This includes:

- Repeatedly demanding a response within an unreasonable timescale.
- Insisting on speaking to a particular employee even when it isn't possible.
- Refusing to accept that Northumbrian Water cannot provide a particular service or action a particular issue.
- Refusing to leave our premises or working areas, or blocking access to them, until they have a particular answer or resolution.
- Repeatedly changing the exact nature of the complaint or issue they are raising/ raising unrelated concerns.

Taking action

Managing Inappropriate, Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour

Our experienced employees in customer-facing roles know how to manage contact with frustrated or angry customers or members of the public, allowing them the time and space to be heard and share any concerns. They will listen, show empathy, and will manage concerns and frustrations with understanding and patience, in line with our values.

However, if the voicing of the frustrations or complaint progresses into unacceptable behaviour or language being directed at an employee personally, or where inappropriate conduct by the customer makes the employee feel uncomfortable, they will do the following:

- Politely and respectfully ask the customer or member of the public to stop behaving in this way or using this kind of language, in line with this Customer Conduct policy.
- If this type of behaviour continues and/or turns violent, our employee will end the conversation and safely remove themselves from the situation.
- New legislation under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 provides greater protection for customer-facing employees. This means harsher sentencing for those who commit assaults against public-facing workers.
- In cases of persistent inappropriate, abusive, threatening or violent behaviour and/or harassment, we will take the appropriate steps to protect our people – and this may include only communicating in writing, rather than through telephone, social media, or face-to-face contact. If we feel we need to take such action, we will always tell the customer in writing what action we're taking, and why.

- We may refer specific cases or repeat offenders to the police, if appropriate. Any actual or threat of physical harm or violence is unacceptable, will not be tolerated, and will always be reported.
- We will provide any evidence, such as video footage, audio recordings, written information, or comments / posts made on social media to assist in any police investigation.
- We want our people to be able to serve all our customers, comfortable in the knowledge that they are fully protected against inappropriate, abusive, threatening or violent behaviour and/or harassment. The vast majority of our customers are extremely respectful of our hard-working employees, and we acknowledge and are grateful for that.

Managing Unreasonable Demands

Where we consider continued communications on a wide range of issues to be excessive, we may tell the customer that only a certain number of issues will be considered in a given period and ask them to focus their requests accordingly.

Where a customer repeatedly demands a response on an issue on which they have already been given a clear answer, we may stop responding to enquiries/complaints from that customer.

We will always tell the customer in writing what action we are taking and why.

Who this policy applies to

This policy applies to all Northumbrian Water customers or any members of the public who engage with our employees or any external parties or contractors working on our behalf.

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