



Policy on Unacceptable Behavior by Customers

1. Introduction

1.1 Most complainants who use the complaints procedure behave in appropriate ways but some are angry and upset. A very small minority make complaints that are vexatious, in that they persist unreasonably with their complaints, or make complaints in order to make life difficult for the organisation rather than genuinely to resolve a grievance. This may involve:

- Making serial complaints about different or similar matters;
- Continuing to raise the same or similar matters over and over again;
- Being abusive to staff.

1.2 This policy addresses these issues and covers customers who make service enquiries as well as complaints.

1.3 This policy sets out Valleys To Coast's (V2C's) approach to the relatively few complainants whose actions or behaviour are considered unacceptable. The term complainant includes anyone acting on behalf of a complainant or who contacts the V2C offices or staff in connection with a complaint.

2. Policy Statement

In dealing with our customers we aim:

- 2.1 To make it clear to all complainants, both at initial contact and throughout their dealings, what V2C can or cannot do in relation to their complaint. In doing so, the aim is to be open and not raise hopes or expectations that cannot be met.
- 2.2 To deal fairly, honestly, consistently and appropriately with all complainants, including those whose actions are considered unacceptable. V2C believes that all complainants have the right to be heard, understood and respected. It is also considered that V2C staff have the same rights.
- 2.3 To provide a service that is accessible to all complainants. However, where it is considered that complainant actions are unacceptable, the right to restrict or change access to the V2C service is retained.

- 2.4 To ensure that other complainants and V2C staff do not suffer any disadvantage from complainants who act in an unacceptable manner.

3. Unacceptable behaviour

- 3.1 People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. There may have been upsetting or distressing circumstances leading up to a complaint being made.

V2C does not view behaviour as unacceptable just because a claimant is forceful or determined. In fact, it is accepted that being persistent can be a positive advantage when pursuing a complaint.

However, the actions of complainants who are angry, demanding or persistent may result in unreasonable demands or unacceptable behaviour towards V2C staff. It is these actions that are considered unacceptable and ones that this policy aims to manage.

V2C has grouped these actions under three broad headings:

3.1.1 Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour

- (i) Violence is not restricted to acts of aggression that may result in physical harm. It also includes behaviour or language (whether oral or written) that may cause staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused.
- (ii) Examples of behaviours grouped under this heading include threats, physical violence, personal verbal abuse, derogatory remarks and rudeness. It is also considered that inflammatory statements and unsubstantiated allegations can be abusive behaviour.
- (iii) We expect our staff to be treated courteously and with respect. Violence or abuse towards staff is unacceptable. V2C staff understand the difference between aggression and anger. The anger felt by many complainants involves the subject matter of their complaint. However, it is not acceptable when anger escalates into aggression directed towards V2C staff.

3.1.2 Unreasonable Demands

- (i) Complainants may make what are considered to be unreasonable demands of V2C through the amount of information they seek, the nature and scale of service they expect or the number of approaches they make.

What amounts to unreasonable demands will always depend on the circumstances surrounding the behaviour and the seriousness of the issues raised by the complainant.

- (ii) Examples of actions grouped under this heading include demanding responses within an unreasonable time-scale, insisting on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff, continual phone calls or letters, repeatedly changing the substance of the complaint or raising unrelated concerns.
- (iii) These demands are considered unacceptable and unreasonable if they start to impact substantially on the work of the office, such as taking up an excessive amount of staff time to the disadvantage of other complainants or functions.

3.1.3 Unreasonable Persistence

- (i) It is recognised that some complainants will not or cannot accept that V2C is unable to assist them further or provide a level of service other than that provided already.

Complainants may persist in disagreeing with the action or decision taken in relation to their complaint or contact the office persistently about the same issue.

- (ii) Examples of actions grouped under this heading include persistent refusal to accept a decision made in relation to a complaint, persistent refusal to accept explanations relating to what V2C can or cannot do and continuing to pursue a complaint without presenting any new information.

The way in which these complainants approach V2C may be entirely reasonable, but it is their persistent behaviour in continuing to do so that is not.

- (iii) The actions of persistent complainants are considered to be unacceptable when they take up what V2C regard as being a disproportionate amount of time and resources.

4. Implementation Procedures

- 4.1 There are relatively few complainants whose actions are considered by V2C to be unacceptable. How these actions are managed depends on their nature and extent.

If it adversely affects V2C's ability to do its work and provide a service to others, complainant contact with the office may need to be restricted in order to manage the unacceptable action. The aim will be to do this in a way, wherever possible, that allows a complaint to progress to completion through the complaints process.

Contact in person, by telephone, letter or electronically or by any combination of these may be restricted. Effort will be made to try to maintain at least one form of contact. In extreme situations, the complainant will be told in writing that their name is on a 'no personal contact' list. This means that they must restrict contact with V2C either through written communication or through a third party.

- 4.2 The threat or use of physical violence, verbal abuse or harassment towards V2C staff is likely to result in the ending of all direct contact with the complainant. Incidents may be reported to the police. This will always be the case if physical violence is used or threatened.
- 4.3 V2C will not deal with correspondence that is abusive to staff or contains allegations that lack substantive evidence. When this happens the complainant will be told that their language is considered offensive, unnecessary and unhelpful. They will be asked to stop using such language and V2C will state that there will be no response to their correspondence if they do not stop. V2C may require future contact to be through a third party.
- 4.4 V2C will end telephone calls if the caller is considered aggressive, abusive or offensive. The staff member taking the call has the right to make this decision, tell the caller that the behaviour is unacceptable and end the call if the behaviour does not stop.
- 4.5 Where a complainant repeatedly phones, visits the office, sends irrelevant documents or raises the same issues, V2C may:
 - decide to only take telephone calls from the complainant at set times on set days or put an arrangement in place for only one member of staff to deal with calls or correspondence from the complainant in the future;
 - require the complainant to make an appointment to see a named member of staff before visiting the office or that the complainant contacts the office in writing only;
 - return the documents to the complainant or, in extreme cases, advise the complainant that further irrelevant documents will be destroyed;
 - take other action that we consider appropriate. V2C will, however, always tell the complainant what action is being taken and why.
- 4.6 Where a complainant continues to correspond on a wide range of issues, and this action is considered excessive, then the complainant will be told that only a certain number of issues will be considered in a given period and asked to limit or focus their requests accordingly.
- 4.7 Complainant action may be considered unreasonably persistent if all internal review mechanisms have been exhausted and the complainant continues to dispute V2C's decision relating to their complaint.

The complainant will be told that no future phone calls will be accepted or interviews granted concerning this complaint. Any future contact by the complainant on this issue must be in writing. Future correspondence is read and filed, but only acknowledged or responded to if the complainant provides significant new information relating to the complaint.

5. Responsibilities

- 5.1 V2C staff who directly experience aggressive or abusive behaviour from a complainant have the authority to deal immediately with that behaviour in a manner they consider appropriate to the situation and in line with this policy.
- 5.2 With the exception of such immediate decisions taken at the time of an incident, decisions to restrict contact with V2C are only taken after careful consideration of the situation by a more senior member of staff. Wherever possible, we give a complainant the opportunity to modify their behaviour or action before a decision is taken.

Complainants are told in writing why a decision has been made to restrict future contact, the restricted contact arrangements and, if relevant, the length of time that these restrictions will be in place.

- 5.3 A complainant can appeal a decision to restrict contact. A senior member of staff who was not involved in the original decision considers the appeal. They advise the complainant in writing that either the restricted contact arrangements still apply or a different course of action has been agreed.

6. Monitoring

- 6.1 V2C records all incidents of unacceptable actions by complainants. Where it is decided to restrict complainant contact, an entry noting this is made in the relevant file and on appropriate computer records.
- 6.2 A decision to restrict complainant contact may be reconsidered if the complainant demonstrates a more acceptable approach. The Complaints Officer reviews the status of all complainants with restricted contact arrangements on a regular basis.

7. Review

Copies of this Policy are available free of charge on request.

The Policy will be reviewed regularly and in any event at no more than three yearly intervals.

- ✓ V2C recognises the importance of listening to, and dealing positively with, complaints about its services. Any complaints received will be dealt with in accordance with V2C's Concerns and Complaints policy.
- ✓ In operating this policy V2C will comply with the requirements laid down in the following:
 - V2C's Equality and Diversity Policy.
 - V2C's Confidentiality and Access to Information Policy
- ✓ V2C recognises the importance of offering tenants a wide range of opportunities to be involved in the management of its housing, including the formulation of housing-related policies and the delivery of housing-related services.