HAS 'Respect in the workplace' initiative

Workbook

Foreword from HASLT: Not just 'part of the job'

As a leadership team, the safety and wellbeing of all HAS colleagues is one of our most important responsibilities.

We were concerned to hear that people had experienced an increase in challenging, unpleasant and even abusive interactions in the course of their work with members of the public during the pandemic. People also told us that they felt less able to manage these difficult situations, and less able to access support from their teams, due to more remote working. Many colleagues have since told us that this has been an issue of concern for some time.

In addition, some people said that they had also experienced challenging and disrespectful behaviour from their own colleagues. **This is never acceptable.** As a leadership team, we will not tolerate any form of bullying, harassment or discrimination between colleagues.

We commissioned this work to find out more about your experiences and how we can support colleagues to feel more confident about how to manage potentially difficult situations. We want to make sure people can access the right support and how we can all support each other.

We have listened carefully to your feedback and would like to thank everyone who spoke up and shared their experiences. We have heard many people describe difficult conversations as 'just part of the job'. There is no doubt that our work can be challenging. As a directorate, HAS colleagues are skilled and committed to supporting people in a way that recognises their circumstances and finding solutions that suits them.

We often support people when they, or a family member, are experiencing significant change in their life. For people reaching out to us for assistance for the first time, the way we work and the way we do things may be unfamiliar and daunting. People may be worried about the future, or be managing a range of challenges, all contributing to anxiety, stress and frustration. However, this is not an excuse for poor behaviour: **everyone has a right to be treated with respect.**

As part of our commitment to this initiative, we will send a strong message to the broader community that abuse of NYCC colleagues will not be tolerated. Even in the most difficult of conversations, there is a line. The resources in this kit will help you to know where that line is, and what to do if you feel unsafe, or when a person's behaviour is inappropriate.

We also know that a culture of respect will not happen because of these resources alone. This kit should be used along with the County Council's Behaviour Framework and related policies so colleagues and teams are clear on the behaviours we can expect from each other. This includes making time to talk within our teams and to reflect on our own practice and behaviour. Only by working together will we create a workplace that is respectful, and where we are all respected.

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Our aim

The Health and Adult Services (HAS) directorate is committed to a workplace culture that is based on respect. Whether working alongside colleagues or with members of the North Yorkshire public, every member of staff has a right to feel SAFE, VALUED and RESPECTED.

Background

This initiative was started in response to feedback from colleagues who had experienced challenging or abusive conversations and interactions with the public in the course of their work. Some colleagues raised that managing such conversations was more difficult as a result of working from home. However, others noted this was an issue before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The HAS Senior Leadership Team asked that this be explored through the HAS Organisational Development Working Group to better understand the experiences colleagues were facing and how people could be best supported in their work.

Time was dedicated to exploring this topic as part of the HAS Connected lunchtime sessions in November 2020 and again in May 2021. During these conversations, colleagues also shared experiences of being treated disrespectfully by other colleagues in subtle and overt ways.

Taking this into consideration, the Organisational Development Working Group agreed that this initiative should look at the unifying theme of respect, and in particular creating a culture of respect across the directorate.

About this initiative

This initiative is not intended to replace any existing North Yorkshire County Council or Health and Adult Services policies, procedures or guidelines. Rather it is intended to draw on key points from all policies to contribute to a more respectful, safe culture for all.

This initiative seeks to:

- understand where disrespectful interactions are taking place and why

- provide clarity on the expectations during difficult or abusive conversations

- highlight techniques on how to manage difficult or abusive conversations

- outline methods to support colleagues resilience and recovery

- raise awareness of the related policy and processes

Fundamentally, this initiative seeks to promote and reinforce a culture across Health and Adult Services where colleagues and members of the public offer and experience mutual respect.
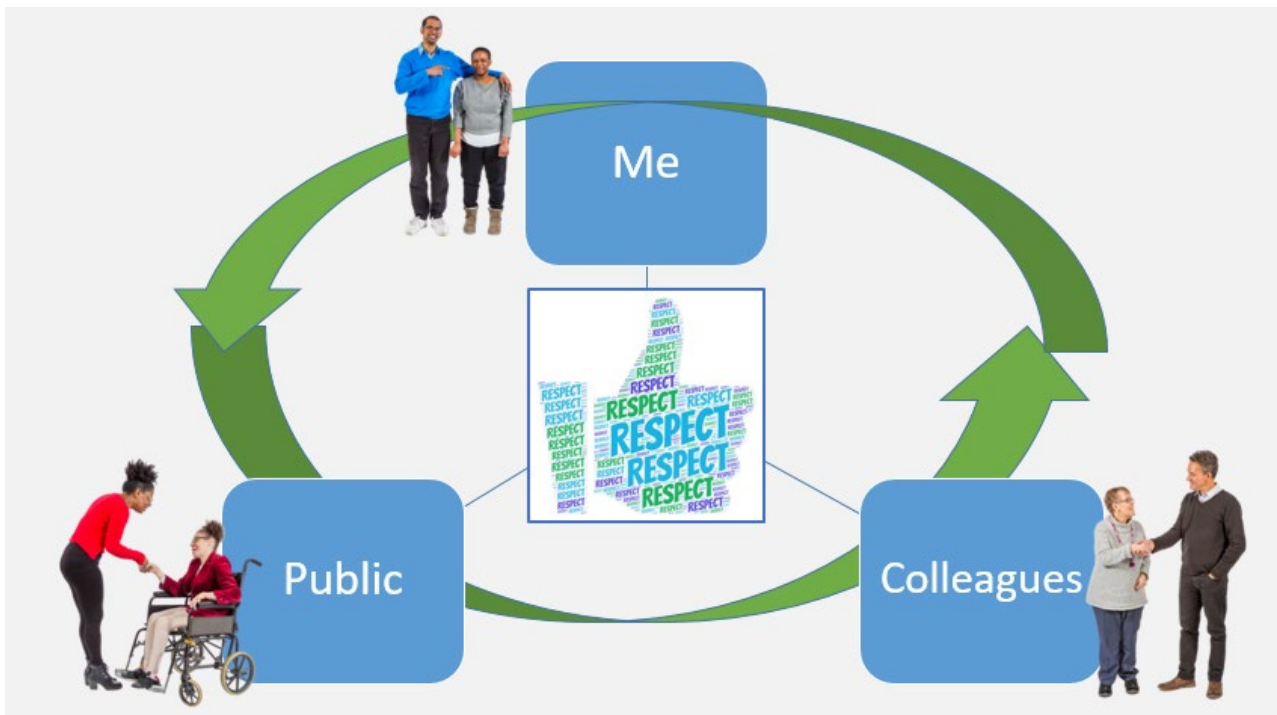
Whoever we are, we are all entitled to be treated with respect and should respect others.

Respect Working Group

Following the discussions at HAS Connected, a number of colleagues volunteered to be part of a Respect Working Group. Working remotely, and representing different teams across the directorate, colleagues contributed their experiences of difficult conversations, and gave feedback and suggestions around language, resilience, preparing for and managing difficult situations and Top Tips on best approaches for supporting colleagues.

We are grateful to everyone who volunteered and got involved for your time, ideas and energy. This work could not have happened without you and is all the richer and for your contributions.

Thank you all.

What do we mean by respect?

If we are trying to work towards a culture of respect, it is useful to think about what we mean.

There are different definitions of 'respect' in the dictionary. Most are about the way that we view or treat other people or things:

- to treat or regard with deference, esteem or honour
- to recognise and follow agreed rules
- to refrain from harassing or obstructing and act in a positive way towards others
- to acknowledge a person or thing's unique value

These definitions are useful as a starting point. However, respect is also about how we feel. We will usually know if we feel respected or disrespected by other people, even if we can't find the words to describe it. Because of this we asked HAS colleagues to tell us some words that they associate with being respectful. This is what they told us.

Respect is...

We also asked colleagues to tell us some words that they associate with disrespectful behaviour...
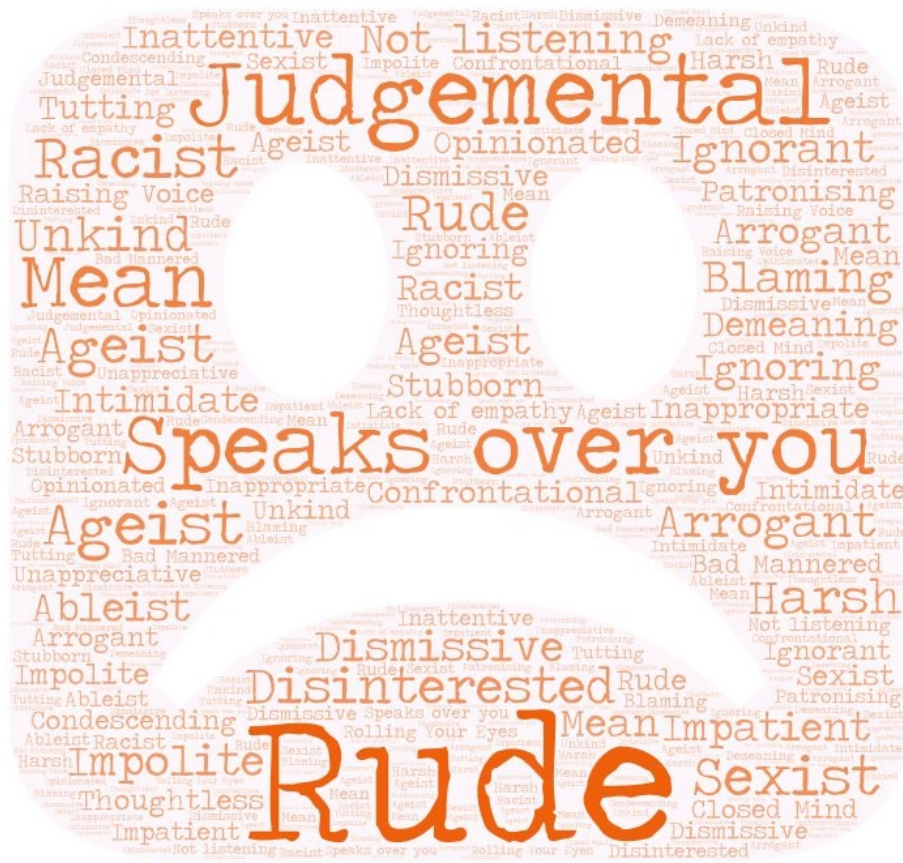
Finally we asked people to tell us words that they associate with abusive behaviours...

Your notes:

Whatever words you feel are most appropriate, remember:

- All colleagues should treat members of the public with respect.

- All colleagues should treat each other with respect.

- In turn, all colleagues have a right to be treated with respect.

Health and Adult Services: one team, many faces

Over 2000 people work across the HAS directorate. We have many teams and many different roles working with the people of North Yorkshire. This includes frontline services, and community based teams, those working from local offices and countywide colleagues based at County Hall.

Each of us works in different ways to support the people of North Yorkshire to lead healthier, longer more independent lives. Colleagues across different teams told us that they had experienced disrespectful or abusive behaviour in different ways.

'Part of the job'

Some public health and adult social care colleagues have said that dealing with unreasonable behaviours from people is 'part of the job'. **This is not true.**

Although HAS colleagues often work with people experiencing difficult, stressful situations or those managing big life changes, this should always be done in a respectful way. Colleagues are not expected to tolerate unreasonable behaviours of this sort, whether that be in person, in writing, on social media or during telephone calls.

Equally, when a colleague faces unreasonable, offensive, intimidating, humiliating or threatening actions from another colleague, this amounts to workplace bullying and will not be tolerated.

What is unreasonable behaviour?

The NYCC *Dealing with Unacceptable Behaviour towards Staff and Unreasonably Persistent Complainants procedure* says the legal definition of harassment is:

> "*Unwanted conduct that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment, having regard to all the circumstances and the perception of the victim*."

It also notes that personal harassment can be defined as '*uninvited and unwanted actions or behaviour ... which causes others offence or embarrassment.*' Some examples of unacceptable behaviour are given as:

The Councils Resolving Issues at Work Policy quotes the following examples which could be raised by colleagues under the framework of the RIAW policy to address unreasonable behaviour:

- Relationships at work (with colleagues/manager)
- Equalities e.g. discrimination
- Harassment and bullying Health and Safety
- Terms and conditions of employment

This initiative will identify the most common forms of unreasonable behaviours being experienced by colleagues; techniques on how to recognise these behaviours, and what to do if it happens to you or someone you know.

The following are examples of experiences of unreasonable behaviour colleagues shared with us:

Interactions with the public

- You overhear a colleague in the office having a difficult phone conversation with a member of the public. They are visibly upset.
- A person reacts badly to a review outcome over the phone with you and refuses to accept the decision. They ask to speak with a manager, which is not possible due to working from home.
- Someone in your team gets negative comments about the Council and personal comments about them from a member of the public on their personal Facebook page. They realise the comments are from someone from a case at work who was unhappy about an outcome.
- An older member of the public uses old fashioned and offensive language to describe a colleague in a Council building, which other people waiting can hear. When challenged, they become angry and say they can say what they like.
- During an online video assessment a member of the public says 'what would you know, you don't understand because you live in a posh house' pointing to items in your room.
- A colleague is struggling to manage a serial complainant. They have very strong, negative views about the Council and do not seem to listen to any of the answers given despite multiple attempts. The colleague becomes stressed when the person is mentioned and feels anxious about further contact.
- You are part of a team reviewing the death of a person in care. Despite no evidence of poor practice, the person's family are very angry and are threatening to go to the media.
- A review indicates that a person is not eligible for services. You meet one-to-one with a family member to share this information, but they react badly and won't accept the outcome. They bang on the table in an intimidating way. You feel there is a risk of a physical confrontation.

Interactions with colleagues

- A disagreement about how to proceed with a project leads to an email exchange between two colleagues which escalates, with both bringing up previous issues to make a point.
- A manager gives an unwelcome complimentary comment about a member of their team's appearance during a meeting with external partners.
- Whilst delivering a presentation, the presenter's manager jumps in regularly without asking and talks over the top of them, making them feel undermined.
- Someone asks a colleague how their IVF treatment is progressing at a meeting in front of other people.
- During an online meeting, a colleague is clearly working on other things and not paying attention.
- After a move to a new role, you hand over organisation of an external meeting to a colleague including minute taking. On review you see that they have missed key details in the notes. When you raise this with them, they are resentful and say they know what they are doing and it is not your job anymore.
- You have been asked to coordinate an important report requiring input from different colleagues. The deadline for contributions passes but you have not received any feedback.

De-escalation

What do we mean by de-escalation? Think of it as calming or defusing a heated situation, managing a difficult conversation. Colleagues have shared their tips for de-escalating situations.

People told us that colleagues need to have escalation and de-escalation techniques to manage difficult situations.

Because of this we have said that we will:
- Review existing guidelines and policies on escalation and de-escalation
- Ensure they are appropriate, clear and well known.
- Develop e-learning on de-escalation techniques

What approaches do you use to de-escalate difficult calls, interactions and situations

- Reflect back what I think I'm hearing
- Be clear about what comments or words are not okay
- Acknowledge the position of the person – '*that sounds difficult*' or '*I hear what you're saying*'
- Keep your voice calm and steady – reduce volume of your own voice as people become louder
- Offer to take a break [from the call] and come back in five minutes.
- If people are offensive/shouting, terminate call and advise information will be sent in the post
- Let person rant for a period of time, acknowledge their feeling and end call
- [It can be] difficult to differentiate between people wanting to talk (not abusive) and constant repetition of same issues
- [Be aware that] wording in emails can be interpreted in different ways, (use of words/language)
- Write bullet points for information to be imparted before making phone call
- Important to be able to read the person you are talking to and developing relationships
- Use of behaviour contracts
- Capture the frequency and length of calls
- Escalate to team manager/service manager
- Different approaches for different interactions:
  - **Email** – type a reply, DO NOT PRESS SEND [straightaway] - use 'Draft' (that little box on the left of your Outlook settings – a great 'friend' to have!) and then save until the following day when the situation hopefully appears in a different light.
  - **Phone** – listen but terminate the call if ... out of control and unable to make progress / improve or rectify the situation in question.
  - **In person** – adopt a neutral face and listen but stop the conversation and suggest reconvening at a later time. Go away and reflect from all sides of the situation, make some notes

- - **Letter** – rare these days but take time to read a few times and make notes against each point raised.
- Calmness in approaches
- Soft speaking
- Ask to speak in 10-15 minutes to calm situation and follow up
- Listen clearly and reflect back what's happened to show you've heard
- [Use] body language – eye contact
- Empathise
- Together come to a pass – solution – way forward
- Remain calm and listen. Give the individual the opportunity to speak. Be firm but fair and if abusive or inappropriate language is used, feel empowered to state that such language / behaviour will not be tolerated.
- Ask what outcomes they are wanting. Be honest about what you can achieve and manage their expectations. If you state you are going to do something make sure you do it and follow it up.
- Remain calm – try not to be defensive in your approach
- Allow the person to talk without interrupting and although you may not agree with their point of view, ensure they have the opportunity to give it and feel listened to.
- If it is a planned call, agree beforehand the purpose of the call so expectations are managed. (i.e. what will be discussed and what won't be discussed)
- If it is [an] unplanned call, interaction or situation – start by explaining the purpose of speaking with each other.
- If the call, situation or interaction is becoming a difficult and the person you are speaking with becomes aggressive, suggest ending the contact and re-scheduling.
- Be fair whilst at the same time empathising with their situation however abusive or threatening language / behaviour will not be tolerated.
- Try to stay calm. Try to focus on breathing to stop heart pounding adrenaline rush etc but [not in a way caller will hear!] so just thinking about breathing BUT also try to focus on what is being said and listen carefully. Try not to interrupt but let caller run down a bit first though some listening noises – uh, huh, ok, I see – can indicate active listening.
- Remember that it probably … isn't about [you] but a situation or process. Try to really listen and not get defensive (fight mode). Once caller has wound down a bit, try to use a gap to summarise what you've understood e.g. "I can hear that you are upset / angry because… is that right?" and "have I understood you correctly"
- If you get agreement then move into trying to resolve. If something that you can resolve with an apology and action to fix e.g. *"I will get someone from correct department to call"* then fine but [do not] promise anything out of your control e.g. exactly when someone will call.
- If not fixable in way they want, explain as clearly and simply as possible why not – policy etc. Explain how they can challenge – if they can - and do anything appropriate to assist.
- If appropriate follow up after a few days to check sorted.
- This assumes that they are not being abusive. If they are, then explain that you are willing to listen but they need to not use abusive language or you will put the phone down. Offer to give them 5 minutes to calm down and to ring them back (so not cost to them).
- Face to face interactions are different – generally take to a quiet space though … not alone.

- If someone on a telephone call becomes irate or angry I stay calm and let them speak and then I wait and will offer my help and support when is needed.
- I find interrupting may make them [angrier] so it's best to stay quiet and let them have their say. If they continue to be abrupt and start swearing then I will advise I will terminate the call if they continue I will release the call. I would always warn someone when releasing a call.
- [I try to understand] their needs and … put myself in the customers' shoes to understand the upset and anger they are feeling.

You can see a summary of top tips and guidance in the below document.

📄 PDF
Respect Initiative - Top Tips for Managi

Related resources and other useful tools

Learning Zone packages include:

- Skills Boosters-Handling Difficult Conversations (9 minute video)
- Having a difficult conversation (2 hour webinar)
- The Secret Language of Leadership-Difficult Situations (full day course aimed at managers)

How to Deal With Difficult Customers - businessnewsdaily.com

Taking care of YOU Toolkit | Intranet: North Yorkshire County Council

Looking out for each other

📄 PDF
Respect Initiative - Supporting each oth

Making a report

To protect staff in the workplace, North Yorkshire County Council has a Health & Safety reporting system called B-Safe. This is a reporting tool for accident and incidents.

In the last 6 months of 2020 there were only 3 incidents relating to abuse of colleagues reported for the whole of HAS. We know this does not reflect the real picture of all incidents that occur and need to use this initiative to encourage colleagues to report incidents so we have a clear picture of what staff are dealing with.

Therefore it is important that all incidents, no matter how minor, are reported to managers so the appropriate support can be given, including a de-escalation of the incident and any appropriate actions can be put in place.

For more information on B-Safe Health and Safety Reporting and to register visit: nyccintranet/news/health-safety-reporting-changing-0

Supporting policies and processes

NYCC has policies in place to cover management of unreasonable behaviour.

Managers have a duty of care to colleagues to ensure they are aware of these policies and guideline and where to find them:

- **NYCC Behaviours Framework** http://nyccintranet/policies/behaviours-framework

 This framework lays out what the Council expects in terms of acceptable behaviours in the workplace and applies to all colleagues. It reflects the council's 2020 North Yorkshire values and leadership principles. It details 6 behaviours which are seen as key to the daily work of all colleagues.

- **Personal safety :** nyccintranet/content/personal-safety-lone-working-violence-and-aggression This link takes you to the health and safety area of the intranet and the specific guidance on dealing with all aspects of personal safety, including lone working, incidents of violence and aggression. It includes the Alertcom system and guidance.

- **Harassment to Staff in the workplace:** nyccintranet/policies/resolving-issues-work-guidance This is also known as the Resolving Issues at Work policy and provides a framework for colleagues to raise issues they are not happy with at work. This includes bullying and harassment.

- **Complaints Procedure:** Dealing with Unacceptable Behaviour Towards Staff and Unreasonably Persistent Complainants: nyccintranet/policies/complaints-procedure-dealing-unacceptable-behaviour-towards-staff-and-unreasonably   This procedure and guidance includes defining what constitutes unacceptable behaviour with guidance on what to do in these circumstances.

- **Guidance for Employees: Internet Harassment:** nyccintranet/policies/guidance-employees-internet-harassment   This is intended to give advice on dealing with internet harassment, stalking and cyber bullying and is part of the Councils social media guidance. It talks you through what to do if you feel threatened by an incident of internet harassment.

Support for colleagues is also available through *Health Assured*, the County Council's Employee Assistance Programme. This provides a 24-hour confidential counselling service, and an online health portal providing instant and unlimited access to videos, factsheets, personal coaching and health assessment tools.

The Looking After You page on the Intranet was borne out of support for colleagues during the COVID pandemic and is still very relevant, it contains tips and guidance on a variety of support mechanisms or resources colleagues can access. This includes Wellbeing Wednesdays which covers a different topic each week.