



## **Back our essential workers: Service with Respect campaign**

### **APPG on Customer Service Meeting, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021**

**This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on Zoom**

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair (Conservative, Shipley)
- Andrew Lewer MP, Officer (Conservative, Northampton South)
- Chris Stephens MP (SNP, Glasgow South West)
- Bob Blackman MP (Conservative, Harrow East)
- James Daly MP (Conservative, Bury North)
- Alex Wheeler – member of staff to Philip Davies MP
- Emma Evans – member of staff to Chris Evans MP
- Stine Holm – parliamentary assistant to Liz Twist MP
- Cait Moloney – member of staff to Grahame Morris MP
- Caroline Snowden – member of staff to Sara Britcliffe MP
- Matthew Spencer – member of staff to Dr Lisa Cameron MP
- Member of staff for Margaret Ferrier MP
- Sian Jones – Head of Communications, TSSA
- Robin Jenks – Policy Advisor, TSSA
- Ged Nichols – General Secretary, Accord
- Jim Fielding – Assistant General Secretary, Accord
- Graham Ritchie – Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS
- Sophie Pavlovic - Strategic Partnership Manager, CPS
- Nicola Harris – Head of Customer Journey Management, O2
- Sally Ainsworth – Head of Service Recovery, United Utilities
- Joanna Causon – Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service
- David Dagger - Marketing and Communications Director at the Institute of Customer Service
- Anne Stoddart – Client Relationship Director at the Institute of Customer Service
- Kelsey Pienaar – Executive Assistant at the Institute of Customer Service
- Oliver Hazell – Senior Account Manager at Cavendish Advocacy
- Chloé Bester – Monitoring Assistant at Cavendish Advocacy

Philip Davies MP opened the session by thanking all in attendance. He explained that the discussion would look at the abuse of frontline customer service professionals brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Davies mentioned an upcoming debate in Parliament on the 7 June which would also discuss the abuse of frontline workers, noting also a tabled amendment to specifically implement an offence against abuse of retail workers to the Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Bill.

After this, Mr Davies opened the floor to Joanna Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service.

#### **Contributions from invited speakers**

##### **Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service**

- Gave an update on the 'Service with Respect' campaign's latest research, including the impact that abuse & hostility towards customer service staff in all sectors is having on the wider economy.
- Noted that abuse and hostility towards customer service workers is unacceptable and that this could potentially lead to customer service workers seeking employment in other sectors due to the abuse and hostility that they currently face in their customer facing roles.



**Robin Jenks, Policy Advisor, TSSA**

- Introduced the TSSA as the representative of a wide array of those working in the rail sector, including customer service staff.
- Discussed the assaults and abuses of staff pre-Covid. Stated that in 2019/20, 882 workforce assaults on staff lead to injury or shock and trauma. These assaults were focused on station staff, noting a rising level of assaults on station staff, with on board traincrew, not drivers, seeing a consistent level of incidents.
- Noted that whilst there were 882 workforce assaults leading to injury or shock, the number of incidents recorded was actually 4,555.
- Referenced the BTP Annual Report 2019/20, which found that rail staff accounted for 26% of all hate crime victims in 2019/20.
- Moved on to discuss the experience of Covid-19 for customer service staff. Clarified that Covid-19 lockdown data began being collected at the end of the 2019/20 Financial Year, with the latest information (Q3, March 2021) showing that the proportion of assaults on railway staff has increased.
- Suggested that the reasons for assaults and abuse are usually ticket disputes, alcohol misuse, rough sleepers, and this now included passengers being non-compliant with Covid-19 measures, particularly passengers using the threat of a “weaponised cough” against station and train staff.

**Sian, Head of Communications, TSSA**

- Shared the case study of Belly Mujinga, who, following an alleged spitting incident in March 2020 at Victoria Station, died from coronavirus.
- Stated that Belly Mujinga’s story raised safety questions for customer service staff regarding exposure to risk, PPE, workplace practices, reporting arrangements, access to CCTV and health records.
- Shared another case study where an individual had used the coronavirus pandemic and spitting as a means of assault in response to being asked to show their ticket to a member of staff.
- Mentioned the establishment of the Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF), which intends to minimise potential harm to frontline staff.
- Stressed that enforcement is an issue on the railway, rhetorically asking whose responsibility it is to police coronavirus measures. Suggested that it is actually the role of British Police, rather than rail staff who do not have the proper training to deal with this.

**Ged Nichols, General Secretary, Accord**

- Introduced Accord, which is a trade union representing financial institutions.
- Stated that UK Finance had submitted evidence into the Home Affairs Committee’s inquiry into abuse, where they reported an 80% increase in staff abuse in 2020, compared to 2019.
- Said the Employers Group and Accord would like any new offence to protect customer service workers to include bank and building society staff.
- Noted the level of abuse focused on call centre workers is relatively high, and with the pandemic call centre workers working from home do not have the support network to deal or process such abuse.

**Nicola Harris, Head of Customer Journey Management, O2**

- Shared that O2 are also seeing an increase in abuse in their voice/chat channels.
- Mentioned it is much harder to establish a support network around workers when they are working from home.

**Graham Ritchie, Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS**

- Clarified that when a case is referred to the CPS for sentencing, the CPS consider whether there is sufficient evidence to support a prosecution and if prosecution would be in the public interest.
- Noted the CPS’ standpoint is that abuse against customer service staff is unacceptable, as at the time of service, the worker was serving the public interest. This understanding of the worker supports sentencing.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked how many instances of abuse in the rail industry have led to prosecution, assuming that with trains and train stations there should be sufficient CCTV to provide enough evidence for prosecution.

**Robin Jenks, Policy Advisor, TSSA**

- Answered that it is currently not known how many cases of abuse in the rail industry have led to prosecution.



**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked the CPS how more abusive customers could be prosecuted when they abuse customer service staff and what more could be done by the CPS to support this.

**Graham Ritchie, Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS**

- Added that the CPS does not have the oversight of all reported cases or the level of prosecution, as CPS only has understanding of cases referred to them.
- Reiterated that it is in the public interest to prosecute cases of customer service abuse as the worker at the time was in public service.

**Sian, Head of Communications, TSSA**

- Agreed that stations are some of the best observed points with the amount of CCTV footage.
- Also stressed that stations and train operators have good procedures in place for reporting instances of abuse, but noted that these procedures need to be followed, which is currently not the case.
- Also noted that speed is vital when reporting abuse as the more time passes between the incident and the reporting of the incident, the more evidence is lost.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked the CPS what an aggravating factor added to a sentence.

**Graham Ritchie, Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS**

- Noted that an aggravating factor could increase the severity or culpability when someone is being prosecuted, to potentially include a custodial sentence.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked Accord how many instances of abuse in the financial industry have led to prosecution.

**Ged Nichols, General Secretary, Accord**

- Could not recall any instance of prosecution of abusive customers towards banking service staff.
- Urged employers and employees to report instances of abuse and hostility whenever they were faced with such incidents.

**Sally Ainsworth, Head of Service Recovery, United Utilities**

- Shared that this type of verbal abuse to call centre staff is the same in the utilities sector.
- Mentioned weekly cases of abuse, with some so aggressive that police reports were filed.
- Also shared that field staff are experiencing verbal and physical attacks, with one instance of a worker fitting a meter being assaulted by an unhappy neighbour. There were 4 similar examples for May 2021.

**Philip Davies, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked the CPS what Government can do to help prosecutions of abusive customers. Asked whether a standalone offence for being abusive to a customer service worker would be helpful?

**Graham Ritchie, Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS**

- Said there is a need for more cases to be reported, processed and passed on to the CPS.
- Noted that the Emergency Workers Offence has allowed for stronger and lengthier sentencing of perpetrators.
- Also noted that abuse of a customer service worker was already classed as an aggravating factor in prosecutions.
- Suggested that a standalone offence may not actually increase prosecutions, but would increase awareness.

**Sally Ainsworth, Head of Service Recovery, United Utilities**

- Said that across United Utilities' call centres there were experiences of abusive calls.
- Shared that there is currently a system in place whereby calls are being recorded, to identify abusive callers. Repeat abusive callers are noted.
- Stated that none of these abusive cases have led to prosecution.
- Also mentioned instances of routine staff experiencing violence, such as glass bottles being thrown at them or assaulted whilst conducting routine check-ups.



- Stated that United Utilities have had to introduce a respite code, which allows workers to take some time to recover and process abuse should they experience it.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Welcomed Sally's point and acknowledged that these case studies reflect the cross-sector nature of the problem.

**Nicola Harris, Head of Customer Journey Management, O2**

- Mentioned that the outsourcing of their call centres has convoluted the process of reporting instances of abuse.
- Mentioned the trend of "steaming", whereby gangs go into stores to steal samples on display, such as iPhones. Also noted the need to increase security in stores when a new product is being released to protect staff in stores further.
- Called for an offence to focus on such instances of theft and accompanying abuse.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked the CPS if verbal abuse over the phone can be prosecuted in any way.

**Graham Ritchie, Deputy Director, Strategy & Policy, CPS**

- Said that abuse over the phone can only be prosecuted if a crime is committed, such as a hate crime.

**Ged Nichols, General Secretary, Accord**

- Mentioned that bank and building society staff had experienced hate/race abuse on phone calls.

**Nicola Harris, Head of Customer Journey Management, O2**

- Added that O2's contact centres experience some vile verbal abuse including hate/race abuse on a regular basis.

**Robin Jenks, Policy Advisor, TSSA**

- Mentioned that in the railway, there is work being done in relation to assaults. For instance, the RSSB has a dedicated industry group to highlight and investigate the issue. It has identified issues with violence avoidance training, with the support of the TSSA and the other railway unions, it has been promoting a mental health survey looking at exposure to psychological hazards and the prevalence of mental ill health.
- Also noted an increasing number of front line staff in some train operators using body cameras.
- Shared the example of RSSB embarking on a project under the title of Identifying Measures to Prevent Customer-On-Staff Work-Related Violence in the UK Rail Industry.

**Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service**

- Stated that 160 organisations have signed up to the Service with Respect campaign. These organisations are cross-sector, emphasising the cross-sector nature of the issue that is abuse of and hostility towards customer service staff.
- Thanked everyone for attending and noted the need to continue working to ensure customer service workers were as protected as possible.

**Philip Davies MP, Chair of the Customer Service APPG**

- Asked attendees that if they have any good ideas on how to better change the law to please get in contact.
- Stressed this is an ongoing dialogue.
- Emphasised that the Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Bill is a vehicle to deliver the aims of the Service with Respect campaign and to protect customer service workers.
- Thanked everyone for their attendance and their contributions.

**Ends at 10:27am**