



Back our essential workers: Service with Respect campaign

APPG on Customer Service Extraordinary General Meeting, 25th February 2021

This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on Zoom

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair (Conservative, Shipley)
- Chris Evans MP, Co-Chair (Labour, Islwyn)
- Liz Twist MP (Labour, Blaydon)
- Huw Merriman MP (Conservative, Bexhill and Battle)
- Margaret Ferrier MP (Independent, Rutherglen and Hamilton West)
- Chris Stephens MP (SNP, Glasgow South West)
- Selaine Saxby MP (Conservative, North Devon)
- Steven Bonnar MP (SNP, Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)
- Lord Lipsey (Labour)
- Roberta Kiro Singh – research assistant to Dr Lisa Cameron MP
- Tom Donnelly – member of staff to Bill Esterson MP
- Paul Buckley – member of staff to Sara Britcliffe MP
- Emma Evans – member of staff to Chris Evans MP
- Alexandra Wheeler – member of staff to Philip Davies MP
- Stine Holm – parliamentary assistant to Liz Twist MP
- Henk van Hulle – Customer Service Director at Post Office
- Heather Smith – MD Direct Insurance at LV
- Caroline Jackson – Head of Public Affairs at LV
- Carla Thomas – Director for Business Customer Service at Openreach
- Tara Mullen – Consultant at Octopus Energy
- Helen Clayton – Corporate Crime & Security Manager at Sainsbury's
- Jo Moran - Head of Customer and Central Operations at Marks & Spencer
- Anthony Thomas – Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK
- Emma Enos – Head of Renewals at Admiral Group UK
- Anne Stoddart – Commercial Director at the Institute of Customer Service
- David Dagger - Marketing and Communications Director at the Institute of Customer Service
- Joanna Causon – Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service
- Kelsey Pienaar – Executive Assistant at the Institute of Customer Service
- Gareth Morgan – Director at Cavendish Advocacy
- Oliver Hazell – Senior Account Manager at Cavendish Advocacy
- Chloé Bester – Monitoring Assistant at Cavendish Advocacy

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

He then proceeded to the election of Bill Esterson MP as an additional Officer to the APPG. All elected members present at the meeting voted virtually via email. Mr Esterson MP was duly elected to be an additional Officer of the APPG.

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

- Introduced the 'Service with Respect' campaign and outlined the aims of the campaign.
- Shared the latest research commissioned by the Institute which illustrated an increase in abuse of customer service staff. Also mentioned that customer service staff believe this abuse will get worse over time.

Lord Lipsey

- Asked if the data can be circulated among Parliamentarians.

Jo Moran, Head of Customer and Central Operations at Marks & Spencer

- Mentioned that Marks & Spencer's food stores have remained open throughout the pandemic.
- Noted that Marks & Spencer did not see the same level of abuse as other stores, but have experienced an increase in abuse of workers.
- Pointed out that abuse particularly centred around Covid-19 regulations, for example, when asking customers to wear face masks and to adhere to social distancing rules.
- Also noted that the abuse was not limited to store fronts, also impacting deliveries.
- Said abuse was also seen online, through "keyboard warriors".
- Stated that Marks & Spencer's reporting of abuse has improved throughout the pandemic, with better liaison with police.
- Mentioned that training to deal with abuse has also been introduced internally.
- Explained that all measures implemented thus far have made an impact, however, have not been able to eradicate abuse towards staff from customers.
- Called on police to better address abuse claims.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG

- Reminded the audience that part of the campaign is to call for a stronger sentencing against frontline worker abuse.

Anthony Thomas, Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK

- Stated that Admiral Group are supportive of the Institute's Service with Respect campaign.
- Said Admiral Group are not without abusive customers, but noted that three policies have helped with frustrations: stay at home refunds, supporting key workers by waving their excess, and waving the unemployment fee and premium for those who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Emma Enos, Head of Renewals at Admiral Group UK

- Observed that there are less people on the road due to the pandemic, thus claims frequencies have decreased. Consequently, customer frustration accompanying claims have decreased too.
- Looking to the future, noted that the business will see different customer experiences from before the pandemic. Admiral Group are preparing their staff for this reality.

Anthony Thomas, Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK

- Said the business has started to shape an abuse policy, which would see consistently abusive customers not being invited for renewal.
- Stated the business have brought in external training for staff to better deal with customer abuse and threats.
- Also stated that the business have introduced stress awareness to better support staff in dealing with customer frustration brought on by the pandemic.

Emma Enos, Head of Renewals at Admiral Group UK

- Noted that the business are working with the regulator to better create a system that keeps customers at the centre without tolerating abuse.

Helen Clayton, Corporate Crime & Security Manager at Sainsbury's

- Observed that violence and abuse has increased over the last 3 years.
- Referred to surveys taken within the business, which showed that there has been a huge increase in verbal abuse of staff.



- Shared some instances of aggression towards workers. She mentioned an increase in the use of the term “knife” in threats to frontline workers.
- Stated there is a need for a more efficient means to report abuse of workers to the police.
- Also mentioned that she would like to see a shift in the police’s view of retail abuse to be more understanding.
- Supported the call to implement a law addressing the abuse of frontline workers.

Chris Evans MP, Co-Chair of the APPG

- Asked what protections are in place for lone workers, for example delivery drivers.
- Asked if there is a specific number for reporting abuse against frontline workers.

Jo Moran, Head of Customer and Central Operations at Marks & Spencer

- Stressed that with the continuing shift towards online shopping, courier companies will need to invest more time and resources into supporting their workers in their claims of abuse.
- Stated that Marks & Spencer have been working with delivery services to make sure all delivery drivers have a phone separate to the one that they are tracking their deliveries with, so they are able to call the police if necessary.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG

- Asked Helen Clayton to explain the variance in police services across the country in responding to instances of abuse.

Helen Clayton, Corporate Crime & Security Manager at Sainsbury’s

- Mentioned that shoplifting instances have partially been degraded by the media.
- Stated that when communicating with police forces, these forces are in favour of reporting all instances of abuse.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive, ICS

- Noted that instances of abuse are not isolated to retail, but have also been observed in a whole range of other sectors of the economy, such as transport, engineers in the field (utility companies) and contact centres.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG

- Agreed that abuse is also not isolated to chain stores, pointing to corner shops where staff do not have a brand and departments to support them in their claims of abuse.

Margaret Ferrier MP

- Agreed that there is a need to find a more efficient means to report claims of abuse.
- Suggested that police have become a reporting service rather than a protection service.
- Mentioned that online abuse tends to be verbal, whereas in-person abuse is verbal and physical. She suggested there is a need to keep these separate when addressing the problem of worker abuse.
- Also mentioned customer’s frustration with call centres, whereby unreputable companies create a negative connotation of companies calling consumers by harassing individuals.

Emma Enos, Head of Renewals at Admiral Group UK

- Stated that Admiral Group operate on the principle that calls are only made when necessary.

Chris Stephens MP

- Raised the issue of social media abuse. He then asked what kind of work is being done to address this aspect of worker abuse.
- Suggested that it would be interesting to see statistics around Government and local Government’s experiences with abuse. He stated this may be a means by which to motivate Government involvement.
- Stressed that frontline workers include more than just shop workers.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG

- Agreed that more workers are now working in an isolated environment, and therefore need the necessary support to handle customer abuse.



Liz Twist MP

- Stated that it is easy to focus on the abuse of shop workers as the abuse can be generally felt by others.
- Asked how to better support workers who are receiving abuse virtually and do not have an in-person support network.

Anthony Thomas, Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK

- Noted the pandemic has been a transition for workers, as previously Admiral Group was an office-based organisation, which was environment in which abuse could be anticipated through body language and other physical indicators.
- Stated that the business is working to create a framework under which abuse can be detected and dealt with in light of new working conditions.

Liz Twist MP

- Asked what the role of trade unions was in supporting workers in dealing with such abuse and hostility.

Emma Enos, Head of Renewals at Admiral Group UK

- Responded that Admiral Group are working with external organisations to ensure training and support for their workers.

Carla Thomas, Director for Business Customer Service at Openreach

- Shared that in one month last year, Openreach saw more incidents of abuse than the whole previous year. Stressed that often these workers, mainly engineers, were working alone on the streets.
- Mentioned that ironically these engineers had placed themselves in the frontline to establish vaccine centres and better connect the country throughout the pandemic, but in trying to better connect the country, these engineers were opening themselves up to abuse.

Heather Smith, MD Direct Insurance at LV

- Noted that abuse is often communicated online through anonymous identities.

Helen Clayton, Corporate Crime & Security Manager at Sainsbury's

- Agreed with Ms Smith about the prevalence of anonymous online abuse.

Liz Twist MP

- Regarding abuse online and on social media, asked if the Institute of Customer Service are involved with the Online Harms Bill and White Paper and whether the Bill or White Paper could offer further protection to workers.

Philip Davies MP

- Welcomed Ms Twist's suggestion regarding the Online Harms Bill and White Paper.
- Agreed that there is a need to streamline reporting instances of abuse and see better responsiveness to such reporting.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive, ICS

- Pointed out that the pandemic has highlighted the necessity of customer service and customer service staff to keep the country going.
- Shared that the Institute will be publishing new statistics on customer service staff abuse with the media next week.
- Thanked Parliamentarians for the time and effort they are spending on the issue and committed to supporting the drive to protect all customer service professionals across all sectors.

Written contributions from attendees

Henk van Hulle, Customer Service Director at Post Office

- Asked how businesses are dealing with bullying on social media channels.
- Noted that at Post Office's contact centres, staff were suffering insults from customers.



Anthony Thomas, Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK

- Mentioned that Admiral Group have seen content on their social media channels that fits the bill of “keyboard warriors”.
- Stated there have also been instances where customers have taken note of a full name, looked the staff member up on social media and commented on their looks whilst on the phone. In response to this, Admiral Group now allow staff only to share a single name.

Heather Smith, MD Direct Insurance at LV

- Added that abuse on social media is getting worse.
- Admitted that blocking abusive social media users is one solution, as well as reporting these users to the platforms where the abuse is happening as well.

Henk van Hulle, Customer Service Director at Post Office

- Noted that regarding reporting to the police, Post Office have a group policy in place and colleague training on how to report instances of abuse.
- Added that the Post Office focus specifically on which data law enforcement agencies are required to expedite the process.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive, ICS

- Told participants that the Institute is running a series of workshops to address abuse, whether it is online or offline as well as working with all parties to support workers.

Margaret Ferrier MP

- Asked if guidelines had been brought in to deal with callers telling call centre members that they are suicidal.

Anthony Thomas, Head of Customer Assurance at Admiral Group UK

- Responded that Admiral Group have guidelines in place to support such customers and support involved staff afterwards.

Helen Clayton, Corporate Crime & Security Manager at Sainsbury’s

- Suggested a cross-sector conversation on violence and aggression may be appropriate, to share commonalities and mitigation approaches. She gave the example of Sainsbury’s beneficial meeting with Great Western trains to compare notes.

Philip Davies MP as Chair thanked speakers and parliamentarians for attending the meeting and committed to following up on the discussions raised by all participants.

Ends at 10:30am