



APPG on Customer Service: Worker Abuse

Tuesday 18th January 2022

This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on Zoom

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Co-Chair (Conservative, Shipley)
- Liz Twist MP, Officer (Labour, Blaydon)
- Andrew Fellows – Senior Parliamentary Assistant to Andrew Lewer MP
- Emma Evans – Office of Chris Evans MP
- Jo Causon - CEO, Institute of Customer Service
- Anne Stoddart – Commercial Director, Institute of Customer Service
- Shona Gilbert – Client Relationship Director, Institute of Customer Service
- Nick Read – CEO, Post Office
- Richard Braham – Head of Stakeholders & Public Affairs, West Coast Partnerships
- David Whitehouse – Director of Safety and Security, Avanti West Coast
- Amanda Hines – Head of Customer Experience Transformation, Avanti West Coast
- Mike Han – Public Affairs Executive, Avanti West Coast
- Michael Gauterin – MD Customer Service, Enterprise, BT
- Warren Grigg – Customer Experience Manager, Avanti West Coast
- Laura McCormack – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, The Booksellers Association
- Kenneth Pritchard - Head of Parliamentary Relations, Post Office
- Linsey Matthews - Customer Services Advocate at British Gas
- Oliver Hazell – Account Director, Cavendish Advocacy
- Alexia D’Rosario – Account Executive, Cavendish Advocacy

Philip Davies MP opened the session by thanking all in attendance. He explained the discussion would look at the growing issue of worker abuse, identifying the huge increase of harassment and hostility across numerous sectors that needed to be addressed. He noted how this issue is particularly highlighted in customer service roles at this time of year, especially with the comedown from the Christmas period. He noted recent discussions with ministers about further protecting customer service workers from abuse and the need to continue pushing for a specific offence to protect customer service workers across all sectors. He also gave a brief recap on the progress of the Sentencing Bill and what was coming up in parliamentary process for this Bill.

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

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Summarised the latest results from the Service with Respect Survey
- She focused on the challenges that many customer service staff are facing across the board in regard to abuse and the knock-on effects these are having.
- Specifically on their mental health and wellbeing but also the numbers of staff looking for new roles as a result of this pressure.

Contributions from speakers and attendees

Nick Read – CEO, Post Office

- Noted that every constituency across the UK has a Post Office.
- Commented that Post Office staff were key workers and were vital during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- Noted concerns from postmasters about shielding and the balance that needed to be struck during the pandemic between protecting staff and serving customers.
- Said there had been an escalation of abuse of staff during COVID-19. This was especially apparent when staff were reminding customers of COVID-19 guidance whilst keeping Post Offices open.
- He said the Post Office had encouraged reporting of incidents of abuse by staff and the updates the Post Office had made to their guidance and support to protect staff.



- Noted the pandemic had heightened the intensity of aggression towards staff and that supporting postmasters had been difficult.
- Noted that pressures coming on peoples' finances with energy bill increases would likely cause more abuse from customers.
- Supported the call for a deterrent offence in law to change mindsets.

David Whitehouse - Director of Safety and Security, Avanti West Coast

- Noted the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic had seen a focus on protecting staff and customers.
- Noted the organisation had witnessed 1,000 cases of abuse and that two staff each day were being abused by customers at the organisation.
- Called on the need for the public to change their behaviours.
- Commented on the need to balance a safe and secure environment with one that complies with regulations.
- Noted that staff were regularly abused by customers when staff asked customers to follow COVID-19 rules.
- Noted that Avanti was the first train operator to get their staff wearing body-worn technology to help them protect themselves and evidence abuse.
- Said an alcoholism rise among customers was also not helping instances of customers abusing staff.
- Noted Christmas markets and football fans on Saturdays was spiking abuse instances in certain geographies.
- Wanted front-line staff to be made more aware of the work going on by organisations, the Institute and supportive MPs to help protect them as they were on the front line suffering abuse and needed to know they were not alone.
- Called for a wider deterrent from Government to help protect staff.

Linsey Matthews - Customer Services Advocate at British Gas

- Noted that the tolerance levels of customers have decreased significantly since the start of the pandemic. She noted that when the pandemic was in its formative stages, people had far more patience for those in public facing customer service roles, despite this decreasingly swiftly.
- This is both in contact centres and in the field, as well as visiting customers at home. Delays are often to blame for aggression towards staff, resulting in verbal and physical abuse.
- She recognised that this is a cross industry issue, that must be accepted by Government. Policies are in place at British Gas for staff to protect them from harm.
- Many staff have felt isolated working from home, as they don't have close contact with their teams to share the load of stress or harassment. The circumstances of the pandemic have transformed the way companies must look after their staff.

Joanna Causon, Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service

- Emphasised that an open letter had been signed in December 2021, by over 75 senior business leaders and Parliamentarians, all highlighting the continuing abuse and hostility towards customer service staff as part of the Institute's Service with Respect campaign.

Michael Gauterin – MD Customer Service, Enterprise, BT

- Every single frontline worker is exposed to abuse, so the need for further action is required desperately.
- Despite improvements to networks and customer service, consumers are still verbally attacking staff to an even greater extent to when the pandemic started.

Laura McCormack – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, The Booksellers Association

- Noticed that most retailers suffer abuse for refusing to sell products to members of the public. Alongside this, many bookshops face violence for products that they are selling – usually books that are politically divisive.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked Mr Read whether the issue of encouraging customers to wear face masks had been a contributor to abuse faced by staff? He questioned whether the attitude of customers had changed, or has the way in which companies are dealing with the pandemic precautions changed?



Nick Read – CEO, Post Office

- Both consumers and companies' attitudes have changed. At the start of the pandemic customers wanted shops to establish routines and precautions that would protect them – these were never enforced, only ever given as guidance.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked David Whitehouse whether his experience had been similar in the rail sector.

David Whitehouse – Director of Safety and Security, Avanti West Coast

- Highlighted that the ability to enforce passengers to wear face coverings was particularly challenging during the pandemic, due to the issues around getting police to the incident.
- As passengers have returned, they are policing themselves and one another. A lot of conflict between travellers have arisen.
- Typically, commuters are more compliant to wear masks compared to those coming back on a Saturday night from social events.

Jo Causon – CEO, Institute of Customer Service

- Staff are often unlikely to report their abuse, due to a sense that nothing will change as a result. However, as previously mentioned, the transformation forced by the pandemic means that this has become more visible and 'heightened' on companies' agendas. More still needs to be done on reporting though and the police and CPS need to ensure this is followed through.

David Whitehouse – Director of Safety and Security, Avanti West Coast

- Explained that staff often feel more support when companies follow up with their issues and claim. This builds a relationship and understanding with public facing staff.

Linsey Matthews - Customer services Advocate at British Gas

- Previously, customer service staff felt like British Gas was not doing enough to prevent abuse or going far enough to reprimand customers for it.
- A tighter and stronger zero tolerance policy has now been implemented by British Gas.

Jo Causon – CEO, Institute of Customer Service

- Thanked all for attending.

Ends at 10:27am