

SPSO decision report

Case: 201100174, West Lothian Council
Sector: local government
Subject: policy/administration
Outcome: not upheld, no recommendations

Summary

Mr C telephoned the council's contact service centre to complain about the state of the roads and pavements. His call was transferred to the council's administration members services support team, where he firstly spoke to an officer in the team and then her manager, as he had been told his manner in speaking to the officer was considered unacceptable. He was not happy with the response he received from the manager and telephoned the administration members services support team later the same day, spoke to a different officer and was again transferred to the team manager, as his manner was once again considered to be unacceptable.

When he made a complaint about the matter, he was unhappy that the council had accepted the word of the team manager about what had been said during his telephone calls and not interviewed him or any of the other people he said had witnessed the call. The chief executive said in his letter 'behaviour which includes the use of threatening and abusive language is not acceptable at any time'. He said that, based on the evidence presented, he was satisfied that the officers concerned had conducted themselves in an appropriate manner.

We found that calls to the contact service centre are recorded but those with the administration members services support team are not. The council had offered to arrange for Mr C to listen to those calls but he had not taken up that offer. An investigation was carried out by the to establish if the staff concerned had dealt with Mr C's telephone calls in accordance with the council's communications guidelines. The guidelines set out how to deal with difficult customers and how to handle abusive telephone calls. It is clear that staff are advised to refer what they determine as difficult customers to their manager. Deciding whether someone is a difficult customer, or is being abusive, is at the discretion of the manager. The head of corporate services met with the team manager and, following that meeting, determined that she had dealt with the telephone calls in accordance with the guidelines.