Call Handling Policy
Zero-Tolerance of Abusive Calls

1. Purpose

This policy outlines how NIPSA manages telephone communications and protects staff from verbal abuse, threats, and harassment. It reflects the union's duty of care under Northern Ireland workplace legislation and its commitment to providing respectful, professional services to members and the public.

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2. Scope

This policy applies to:

- All NIPSA staff and representatives, handling telephone calls.
- All members, employers and members of the public who contact the union by phone.

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3. Legislative Context (Northern Ireland)

This policy is informed by relevant NI legislation, including:

- **Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978** – duty to protect employees from risks to health, including psychological harm from abuse.
- **Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997** – prohibits harassment, threatening behaviour, and conduct causing alarm or distress.
- **Malicious Communications Act 1988** (applies UK-wide) – criminalises sending threatening, abusive, or grossly offensive messages.
- **The Communications Act 2003** – prohibits threatening, abusive, or aggressive communications via telephone systems.

Severe threats or harassment may be reported to the **PSNI**.

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4. Definitions

4.1 Telephone Abuse

Telephone abuse includes, but is not limited to:

- Swearing, insults, or degrading comments.

- Raising voice, shouting, or aggressive tone.
- Threats of harm, legal threats meant to intimidate, or reputational threats.
- Sectarian, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or other discriminatory remarks.
- Repeated nuisance calling or attempts to intimidate.
- Any behaviour that causes fear, alarm, or distress to staff.

4.2 Distressed vs. Abusive Behaviour

- **Distressed behaviour** may involve upset or frustration; staff will respond with empathy.
- **Abusive behaviour** is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

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5. Staff Call Handling Procedures

5.1 Professional Standards

Staff must:

- Answer calls promptly and courteously.
- Maintain a calm, neutral, and supportive tone.
- Use active listening and ensure clarity in information given.
- Escalate complex issues to Line Managers or relevant officials when required.

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6. Managing Abusive Calls

6.1 Issuing a Warning

If a caller becomes abusive:

1. **State the issue clearly**
   "I am here to help, but I cannot continue this call if you use abusive or aggressive language."

2. **Give an opportunity to correct behaviour.**

6.2 Ending the Call

If the caller continues to be abusive after a clear warning:

- The staff member is authorised to end the call immediately.
  "As you have continued to use abusive language, I am ending this call now."

Staff must hang up promptly and safely.

6.3 Immediate Termination Without Warning

A call may be ended immediately if:

- The caller threatens violence.
- Sectarian or discriminatory abuse is used.
- The caller is shouting, issuing threats, or causing distress.

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7. Recording and Reporting

7.1 Telephone Incident Log

All abusive calls must be documented with:

- Date and time.
- Caller details (if known).
- Description of the abusive behaviour.
- Action taken (warning issued, call ended).
- Any recommendation for follow-up.

7.2 Escalation

Serious incidents may be:

- Referred to senior officials.
- Followed by a written warning to the member.
- Result in restricted communication (e.g., written correspondence only).
- Reported to the PSNI if threats or harassment meet criminal thresholds.

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8. Member Access Restrictions

The union may restrict or withdraw telephone access from individuals who repeatedly breach this policy. Alternative communication methods (e.g., email or written correspondence) may be required.

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9. Staff Support

After handling an abusive call, staff are entitled to:

- A pause or break to recover.
- Support from a Line manager.
- Access to the employee counselling service.

Line Managers must ensure staff feel safe, supported, and protected.

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10. Communicating the Zero-Tolerance Policy

NIPSA will publicise this policy by:

- Including it on the NIPSA website.
- Including messaging in call greetings or hold messages where appropriate.

Example:
“Our union has a zero-tolerance policy for abusive behaviour toward staff. We appreciate your respectful communication.”

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11. Review

This policy will be reviewed every **12 months** or sooner if:

- Legislation changes
- Union operations change, or
- Incident trends indicate a need for revision.