

# RAN Advice Forum Report

## “Managing aggression by service users at the end of their tether”

June 21, 2024

### Introduction

1 The topic for this Forum emerged from a conversation between colleagues at the end of our March Forum, when it became clear that some of our member organisations had recently experienced very unpleasant incidents with desperate service users. They felt that these were likely to become more frequent as the cost of living crisis continued and statutory services struggled to cope with the demand on them. People would be coming to our organisations as a last refuge and we would not always be able to give them what they wanted or needed.

### The Presentations

2 We had two speakers - Kate Stonehouse from Reading Mencap and Sergeant Betsy Palmer from the Thames Valley Police. Kate has worked with Reading Mencap for about 12 years in a number of different roles, including in the information and advice service. Before that she was a Thames Valley Police Officer, and she has also worked for the police as a civilian training manager. Betsy is a Neighbourhood Sergeant for the North and West of Reading.

3 Kate spoke about the things that member organisations could do to minimise the risks to their staff and volunteers. Her key points were as follows:

- Redo your risk assessment, with the problem of potential aggression at the front of your minds
- Think about:
  - What advice are you giving? To whom?
  - How are you presenting your services?
  - How are you using your building?
  - Are your staff or volunteers going to see people in their homes? What risks are they exposed to there?
  - How do your staff and volunteers feel about the risk of service-user aggression?
  - How does aggression by one service user affect other service users who may be waiting to be seen?
- The physical environment you work in may not be ideal - no security staff, service users being seen privately, in individual rooms - but there are things you can do to reduce the risks involved:
  - Use door bells that film the service-user calling. It can help service users to manage their anger if they know they've been filmed
  - Have cameras in the waiting areas and in interview rooms, though you would have to balance this against the need for privacy and confidentiality
  - Set out the interview rooms so that the service user is furthest from the door, and the staff member or volunteer can get out quickly if a crisis arises

- Manage the expectations of those coming for help, some of whom may be living in terrible crisis situations which are not going to change any time soon - “We will do our very best to help you, but we may not be able to solve your problem”
- Look at how you triage service users. If you are triaging on the phone - how do you do it, and how effective is it?
- Tell service users what they can do if they feel angry and upset - “You can take a break and leave the interview room for a while”
- Your staff and volunteers are likely to have higher levels of anxiety in the present climate - not least from problems in their own lives. Reading Mencap have paid for a staff welfare service from [www.cicwellbeing.com](http://www.cicwellbeing.com) so that staff and volunteers know they have somewhere to go for help if the pressures get too much.
- Involve in Bracknell - [www.involve.community](http://www.involve.community) - runs de-escalation courses, which colleagues have found helpful.
- However, notices along the lines of ‘We will not tolerate aggression towards our staff’ are not likely to be helpful.
- Remember you have finite resources, particularly if you are a small local charity. Sometimes it may not be possible to reduce the risks of working with a particular service user to an acceptable level. In those cases you have to send the service user back to the statutory services.

4 Betsy explained that there were three different ways you could contact the police for help - ringing 999, ringing 101, and emailing the neighbourhood team. Each is appropriate for different problems, and each has its own strengths and drawbacks:

- Ringing 999 - use this if you have an immediate crisis with a service user. However, the call will go to a control centre and will then be passed to a response team. If your call is top priority a patrol car will be sent to you. But calls are graded by risk, and if another incident being reported at the same time is assessed as more risky, the patrol car will go there. So there could be a significant delay before you get the help you need.
- Ringing 101 - use this to report a crime. However, you could find yourself being put on hold for a long time.
- Emailing your neighbourhood team. Use this to get advice on preventing problems arising, or in dealing with a service user who is regularly upsetting staff. Someone from the neighbourhood team will come out to your offices and talk through problems with you. They may be able to help in a number of ways:
  - Providing panic alarms, window locks or door locks
  - Visiting the service user in their home, to find out more about the situation that is leading them to come for advice regularly and be difficult, and perhaps find ways to ameliorate that situation. One way to do this is through a civil agreement with the individual which sets out the unacceptable behaviour. If the individual then behaves in that way again it gives the police some leverage over the individual without turning it into a crime.
  - The neighbourhood teams are not large - typically 3 or 4 PCs and a similar number of Police Community Support Officers - and numbers of staff have been cut in recent years. However, numbers are now increasing again.
  - The contact details for the different neighbourhood teams are as follows:
    - [ReadingNorthWestSector@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:ReadingNorthWestSector@thamesvalley.police.uk) – Tilehurst/Southcote
    - [NHPTReadingNorth@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingNorth@thamesvalley.police.uk) - Caversham

- [NHPTReadingAbbeyOuter&Battle@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingAbbeyOuter&Battle@thamesvalley.police.uk) – Oxford Road
- [NHPTReadingAbbeyInner@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingAbbeyInner@thamesvalley.police.uk) – Town Centre
- [NHPTReadingEastReading@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingEastReading@thamesvalley.police.uk) – East Reading
- [NHPTReadingSouthReading@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingSouthReading@thamesvalley.police.uk) - Whitley
- [NHPTReadingMinster&Katesgrove@thamesvalley.police.uk](mailto:NHPTReadingMinster&Katesgrove@thamesvalley.police.uk) – Katesgrove and Coley

## Discussion Groups

- 5 We broke into four groups to discuss two questions:
- What incidents of aggression have you experienced and how have you handled them?
  - What would you try to do differently in the future?

### A Past experiences

- 6 The key points emerging were as follows:
- The frequency of aggressive incidents varies widely from organisation to organisation - for some it's rare, for others it's pretty much every day
  - Some aggression comes not from the service user themselves but from friends or parents
  - Some arises as a consequence of inappropriate referrals, often from the Council, where not enough has been done to manage the service user's expectations of the help they are likely to be given.
  - The situation can be very different, and therefore need different approaches depending on whether it's face-to-face or over the phone, and if face-to-face whether it's by appointment, a drop-in, or a home visit. Using interpreters over the phone can be tricky - some telephone interpreters have simply hung up because the service user has been so aggressive
  - Key triggers are:
    - Past trauma the service user has experienced. Their tolerance levels can be much lower if they have suffered trauma
    - The innate stress of the service user's situation
    - Service users who have stopped taking their medication
    - Service users who have problems with drugs or alcohol, where it can often be difficult to understand what they are trying to say
    - Service users with unrealistic expectations of what the organisation can do to solve their problem
  - Some organisations will not let a service user in if they are aggressive.
  - Some organisations have cameras strategically placed to record any aggression. Others routinely film interactions.
  - Others have glass in the doors to interview rooms so staff outside can see what is going on, which reduces the risk of aggression.

### B Future management

- 7 The key points emerging were as follows:
- There are a range of actions organisations can take:
    - Before incidents arise - to try and reduce their frequency and severity

- During incidents - to try and take the heat out of the situation
- After incidents - to support the staff and volunteers involved
- Before incidents:
  - Develop a Critical Incident Policy - anticipating aggression and disruption, with advice on how to be prepared and what to do should this arise
  - Set clear expectations - high expectations of behaviour and low tolerance of any form of aggression. Have a user charter and enforce it.
  - Have a Lone Working Policy so that where service users are visited at home, where they are often more relaxed, proper arrangements are made to ensure the safety of staff. Some organisations use 'PeopleSafe' - [www.peoplesafe.co.uk](http://www.peoplesafe.co.uk) - which checks workers in and out of a situation, when they are working out of the office.
  - Educate organisations who refer clients to you about what you can and do do and what you can't and don't do
  - Be clear in your public communications about the services you offer
  - Have processes and policies in place to help staff and volunteers to know what works, and train everyone in these. Training is often most effective if it is based around case studies, or staff share their actual experiences and trainees discuss what they would do
  - Recognise that there are stages of anger just like there are stages of grief, and that underlying emotion can build up while a service user is waiting for the actual meeting
  - The role of the Receptionist is key - they need to be well informed and sensitive in how they respond to service users
  - Sometimes just listening to service users is all that is needed - allowing them to unburden themselves, when they may not have anyone else to talk to at home. Sometimes privacy isn't as much of an issue for a service user as simply getting their problems heard.
  - Where possible, set up links with organisations providing interpreters. However, recognise that interpreters can appear uncaring to the service user because they are simply translating and have to appear neutral. That can make the service user angry.
  - Having cameras in place can make service-users suspicious
- During incidents:
  - Actively listen to the service user to understand clearly what's upsetting them
  - Use de-escalation techniques
  - Help the service user direct their anger as energy to solve their issues
  - Change the dynamic - for example, the supervisor popping in with a 'code word' type question or message (eg "your nursery rang, can you take a call?")
- After incidents:
  - Debrief the staff member or volunteer involved to allow them to decompress
  - Provide supportive supervision
  - Remind staff and volunteers that you don't 'set the weather', and that it is important to retain boundaries - you are 'helpers' and there is a danger of trying to over-deliver and losing professional or volunteer boundaries
  - Record the incident and the issues involved to help you plan future services

- Final points:
  - Share information between organisations about potentially dangerous individuals who are in Reading
  - If you are referring someone to another voluntary organisation, phone them first to explain the client's needs and check that the referral is appropriate.
  - Some public services are passing on difficult people to voluntary organisations without any warnings or support, and RAN should push back against this on behalf of its members.
  - The good news about even aggressive service users is that they are motivated to try and solve their issues. What about those that have become so discouraged that they have stopped seeking help?

## **Conclusion**

8 Richard Harrison closed the Forum by thanking our speakers, the group rapporteurs and everyone else for contributing their ideas and experience.

**Richard Harrison**  
**July 2024**