

Carefully defining boundaries

How to deal with persistent and transgressive complaint behaviour
A guide for government complaint handlers.



nationale ombudsman

Persistent and challenging behaviour complaint behaviour

Handling complaints is often not a problem. However, complaint handlers sometimes face challenges. This can be the case, for instance, when a citizen keeps calling or writing about a complaint that has already been dealt with. This is called persistent complaint behaviour. Or perhaps you experienced verbal abuse or harassment while handling a complaint. This falls under transgressive behaviour.

When and how do you define your boundaries when dealing with this kind of complaint behaviour? What do and don't you do for this citizen? Whatever it is, it is important that you look at the situation from different angles. And that you discuss the matter with colleagues or your supervisor. After all, you want to look at the situation openly and assess it carefully before you decide to set boundaries.

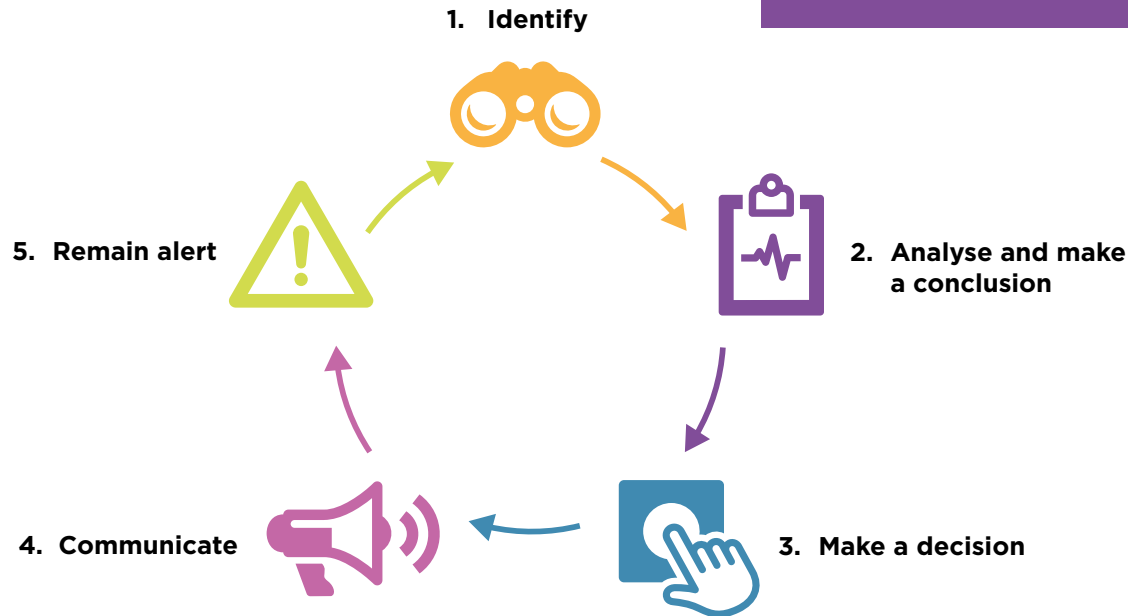
This guide will help you to make that assessment and addresses both persistent and transgressive complaint behaviour. You can come to a carefully reasoned decision in five steps and then determine your course of action. The citizen's situation, your own actions and those of the organisation are always kept in mind in this process. This is how you carefully define boundaries.

The five steps to carefully defining boundaries

It is not easy to decide what you will and will not do for the citizen if their complaint behaviour is persistent or transgressive. You want to help the citizen and at the same time ensure that you can continue to do your work as a complaint handler. Examining and describing the situation step by step will help. By following the five steps you can act and define boundaries carefully.

The five steps to carefully defining boundaries

- > By carefully defining boundaries, you:
- immerse yourself in the citizen's perspective;
 - critically look at your own role;
 - clearly communicate what the citizen can and cannot expect.



Before getting started with the steps

Complaint behaviour is a broad concept. This guide primarily deals with the complaint behaviour of a citizen whose complaint is being handled. In other words, the behaviour before, during and after the complaint handling process. In this we make a distinction between persistent and transgressive complaint behaviour.

Look at this guide along with the standards and values of your organisation and the agreements made about them. This is particularly important when it comes to transgressive complaint behaviour. You may then also have to follow the aggression protocol.

The nature of transgressive behaviour may sometimes be such that immediate action is required. Threatening behaviour is an example of such behaviour. You must then determine, together with your supervisor, what steps should be taken. This may be reporting it to the police, for example.

Step 1 – Identify



Objective: Determine what behaviour you are dealing with by describing the facts objectively.

Describe the situation and list the noteworthy features of the contact. Look at the situation with an open mind and do not rush to pass judgment. This step will help you carefully determine what you are dealing with. You can use the questions below for your description.

Useful questions

What behaviour do you see in the citizen? What stands out? What do you see and notice, about yourself and the citizen? And what are you struggling with? What is being said to you, for instance? And is the citizen crossing your boundaries? Are you experiencing aggression or pressure? Describe the situation, including the subject matter that the citizen keeps contacting you about. And: discuss your experience with your colleagues.

Example of identifying

Province X is frequently being called by Mr A. The complaint handler makes a note of the facts:

“Mr A has contacted us 21 times in six months time. He complains about things that he encounters on a provincial road, for example, the size of newly planted trees. But also about the limited number of waste bins and rest areas. The telephone calls are very time consuming for me. I’ve noticed that I become tense when the gentleman calls. He did have a justifiable point once, to which we responded. But the gentleman kept complaining about matters that we can’t do anything about. He also indicated that we don’t take him seriously. He is not offensive, but he is persistent. He is not satisfied with what we do for him. He often asks to speak to someone else, after which he is also dissatisfied with colleagues’ helpfulness.”

Step 2 – Analyse & make a conclusion



Objective: Understanding the citizen's behaviour and your own actions.

In the analysis, you will delve into the following areas of the situation: interaction, process, and time and outcome. You can draw a conclusion from these analyses. This conclusion will provide an understanding of the type of complaint behaviour of the citizen. And also whether you have enough reasons to limit contact with this citizen.

Analysis of interaction

Closely examine the file. What is an issue for the citizen? How do you respond? And how do your colleagues respond; also prior to the complaint? Can you imagine why the citizen is so persistent or angry? Does he feel heard? Has he exhibited similar behaviour before?

Analysis of process

Were you complete and did you include everything? Was your own service provision satisfactory? Was anything neglected? Were previous agreements clear enough? Do you meet the requirements of professional complaint handling?

Analysis of time and outcome

How much time does the situation take? What can you achieve or still achieve by handling the complaint? How many colleagues are working on the complaint? Are priorities being compromised? Are the time and manpower in proportion to the outcome of the complaint handling?

Example of analysing

Mrs B frequently approaches municipality Y.

The complaint handler analyses how the process went:

"It is clear that Mrs B is angry. She says that she was not granted a licence and as a result she misses out on income. She thinks this is unfair and has often filed a complaint about this. I speak to her as many as four times a week. This has been going on for three months. It is clear to me that Mrs B is concerned because there is uncertainty about her income. The procedure regarding the licence went smoothly; our decision was correct. This was explained to her calmly on several occasions. We also helped her with her income issue. She was designated a contact person for this purpose. We did everything that can be reasonably expected of us. Mrs B is unable to resign herself to our decision about the licence. She continues to file complaints and make phone calls about this. Despite the fact that the outcome remains unchanged. Persistent complaint behaviour is therefore evident."

Step 3 – Make a decision



Objective: Making a careful decision on how and when the citizen may still contact you.

Based on the analysis, you will make a decision on whether and how you will continue dealing with the complaint. And whether you will limit contact with the citizen. If this is the case, you must make it clear why you are doing this. Describe what the specific impact will be for the citizen, for you and for the organisation. Involve the right people promptly.

You can eventually come to these decisions:

You continue handling the complaint

You may not have been complete, for instance. Or procedural errors were made. These could be reasons to continue handling the complaint. Decide how you want to do that.

You terminate contact about a specific complaint

You have concluded that there is persistent complaint behaviour. Based on your analysis, you have reasons not to respond again because the outcome will not change, for instance. You also decide on matters for which the citizen may still contact you.

You temporarily stop all complaint handling

You have concluded that there is transgressive complaint behaviour. There is unacceptable behaviour. This could be a reason to temporarily stop all complaint handling. Also consider what this means for the other services that your organisation provides to this citizen. Where necessary, coordinate with other departments.

Describe what behaviour you as an organisation find unacceptable. Is the citizen disrespectful or do they cross the law, for instance? In this case, adhere to the organisation's aggression protocol.

Step 4 – Communicate



Objective: Clear and transparent communication of the decision.

When making a decision to define boundaries, it is important to carefully inform the citizen and your colleagues. Clearly inform the citizen what they can or cannot still expect of you. Important: do this in writing and have the message signed by the person with final responsibility in the organisation. In this way, there can be no discussion about the contents and it is clear that the organisation takes responsibility. It is, after all, a critical decision.

In the case of persistent complaint behaviour

Send a letter and explain what you have already done in the complaints procedure. Clearly state the complaints and give the reasons for no longer responding to this specific complaint.

In the case of transgressive complaint behaviour

Always first send a letter of warning in which you state specifically what behaviour is unacceptable. Consider inviting the citizen for a meeting on discipline; this will give the citizen the opportunity to change their behaviour. Also explain what will happen if this behaviour occurs again.

What if the behaviour does not change after the warning? You must then send a letter stating that this behaviour will not be accepted and you will stop all complaint handling for a certain period of time; state specifically how long this period will be. And also mention who will initiate contact after this period has expired.

Example of information in writing

An administration body will disclose the decision in the case of persistent complaint behaviour:

"In recent months, you have emailed us more than 40 times about your complaint. You disagree with the course of action regarding the reimbursement of a grant. You have also complained about the way in which we handled your complaint. You have also called us on numerous occasions about this recently. In previous letters, we have explained to you why we consider your complaint unfounded. In these letters we said that (...). We also addressed your questions. Your most recent emails once again make it clear that you disagree with our response. We conclude that we have addressed all your complaints and acted with due care. We continue to disagree with you. This means that, as of now, we will no longer provide a content-related response to your messages on the reimbursement of the grant. This also means that our staff members will no longer discuss this with you. Of course, our services will remain available to you if and when you have any other complaint about our organisation."

Step 5 – Remain alert



Objective: Remain consistent in your actions and contact with the citizen.

After communicating the decision, it is important to remain alert to the behaviour of the citizen, your own behaviour and that of everyone involved within the organisation. Remain consistent in implementing the boundaries.

Repetition of the same complaint

If the citizen continues to complain about a matter despite the fact that you have communicated that you will no longer respond to it, then don't respond. After all, you made it clear. However, do record any contact and inform your colleagues.

New complaint

A citizen who previously complained persistently may have a new complaint. Deal with any new complaints from this citizen. The citizen may need you. As a government agency employee, you are obligated to deal with new complaints. Be sure to remain alert if the citizen starts talking about the previous specific complaint when handling new complaints. In that case, refer to the letter in which you state that you will no longer respond to that complaint.

Transgressive complaint behaviour

If a citizen has been guilty of transgressive complaint behaviour, remain alert as to whether they continue to show this behaviour. Ensure that the temporary measure is correctly and consistently implemented. Also by other colleagues. Remain alert to repetition of the behaviour even after the temporary measure has been lifted. If this happens, it may again be necessary to stop the complaint handling for a certain period of time.



“There are always two sides to a complaint. Always examine both sides. Look at what motivates the citizen and what they need. And also critically look at your own actions. Communicate transparently and indicate clearly what you will and will not do for the citizen. That’s a decent way to proceed.”

Reinier van Zutphen, National ombudsman

Additional information






The National ombudsman provides public sector authorities with practical tools to improve their handling of complaints. This includes free workshops on Professional Handling of Complaints and Carefully Defining Boundaries. For more information, go to <http://www.nationaleombudsman.nl/professionals> or call 070 - 3563 550.

The National ombudsman is an independent organisation that advocates for the interests of citizens and helps governmental authorities improve their services. Reinier van Zutphen is the National ombudsman.

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