

Dealing with abusive communications

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| Author | Corporate office |
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# Introduction

1. This guide provides advice on responding to any form of abusive, threatening or malicious communications or contact received by someone as a result of their work for NICE.
2. It applies to all NICE staff and the following groups of people working for or on behalf of NICE:

* non-executive directors
* independent advisory committee members
* panel members and appeal panel members
* agency workers and contractors on temporary contracts
* secondees (people seconded to NICE from other organisations).

1. It should be read in conjunction with the policy on managing unreasonable or persistent enquirer contact that outlines how we will deal with unreasonable or persistent contact from people who make enquiries about our work.

# Background

1. Our guidance is developed by independent committees to ensure that our recommendations are unbiased and objective, and that the evidence is interpreted in a way that is relevant to health and social care delivery in England. The committees include people from the NHS, commissioners and providers of social care, local authorities, academia, relevant industries, organisations that represent people who use services and carers, and the general public.
2. The credibility of our guidance depends on the committees making decisions using a process that is transparent and contestable. This means we publish the details of the people who have sat on the committee along with their interests and explain the available evidence and how the contributions of experts and the views of people who responded to consultation have been taken into account.
3. While we recognise that people may not always agree with our guidance, everyone working for and on behalf of NICE should expect to be treated with dignity and respect. We will take appropriate action to support anyone who is being subjected to personal abuse or threatening communications as a result of their work for NICE. This includes trolling, stalking and harassment via any social media platform such as review sites, chatrooms, forums and blogs as well as more widely recognised platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. It also includes any unacceptable behaviour or abuse that takes place in person, by phone, face to face or via correspondence.

# Organisational support from NICE

1. We will:

* ensure advisory committee/panel members are advised of this document on their appointment and how to respond if they are the subject of abuse or inappropriate communications either online or through other formats
* take appropriate action to protect those working for or on behalf of NICE from abuse and threats, which may include supporting an individual who is seeking assistance from a social media company to block inappropriate content
* where appropriate, consider removing the details of individuals working on contentious guidance from the public domain and, if this information is requested under the Freedom of Information Act, consider if any exemptions may apply
* ensure the line manager (staff) or project team (committee members) keep in regular touch anyone who has reported inappropriate contact to check they are getting support
* centrally collate (by the corporate office) any reports of inappropriate contact which will help monitor any recurring issues and help inform our response
* support any police investigation by providing emails and any other evidence held on NICE IT systems
* where appropriate signpost staff to access NICE’s Employee Assistance Programme
* use our policy on managing unreasonable or persistent enquirer contact for any instances of unreasonable or persistent contact from people who make enquiries about our work
* in extreme and persistent cases, consider seeking an injunction to help protect an individual who is being targeted specifically and seriously on account of their NICE work by identifiable individuals or organisations where this is proportionate and helpful
* ensure that lessons are learned from recorded incidents and arrangements to manage situations.

# Advice for individuals working for or on behalf of NICE

1. If you are in receipt of inappropriate communications through social media or other formats, as a result of your work for or on behalf of NICE, you should:

* not engage with or respond to the unacceptable behaviour or abuse
* firstly, report it to your line manager (for staff) or for committee members to a member of the project team (usually the project manager or relevant Associate Director). If possible, please include a screenshot of the message/ communication so if it gets deleted later there will still be a record of what was said. The line manager/member of the project team will then forward the information to the associate director of external communications, via ([pressoffice@nice.org.uk](mailto:pressoffice@nice.org.uk)) for advice on handling, copying in the enquiry handling team ([nice@nice.org.uk](mailto:nice@nice.org.uk)) and the corporate governance and risk manager ([elaine.repton@nice.org.uk](mailto:elaine.repton@nice.org.uk)).

1. The associate director of external communications may recommend un-following, blocking or muting the people sending abusive messages, or reporting the post(s) to the social media company who have processes in place for such situations and may be able to simply remove the content or even close down the person's account in some cases. (Helpful sites are: [www.facebook.com/help](https://www.facebook.com/help/1753719584844061?helpref=hc_global_nav); [report abuse on Twitter](https://help.twitter.com/en/safety-and-security/report-abusive-behavior); [report abuse on Instagram](https://mashable.com/article/how-to-report-abuse-comments-on-instagram)).
2. In some cases, the communications team may recommend reporting it to the Police, especially where your safety may be at risk, or an offence of 'harassment' and 'malicious communications' may have been committed.  However, in a situation where you feel your safety is at risk, you should contact the police without delay.
3. If you are involved in a particularly contentious piece of work and/or you have received inappropriate communications, you may want to:

* review privacy settings on social media and professional network sites and consider making your account private or limiting access (prior to and following publication of particularly contentious guidance)
* avoid online public forums as these provide no opportunity for limiting who can read or comment on a post, and individual users are unable to take action themselves, as they can in exchanges with “friends”, to block users or remove offensive posts
* be particularly cautious around unsolicited texts and emails and choose not to respond. Enquiries from journalists should be forwarded to the media team on [pressoffice@nice.org.uk](mailto:pressoffice@nice.org.uk), others can be forwarded to [nice@nice.org.uk](mailto:nice@nice.org.uk).

# Related policies

* Policy on managing unreasonable or persistent enquirer contact
* Social media guide for NICE staff

# Further information

* further advice on keeping safe online is available from the [Metropolitan Police](https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/har/harassment-on-social-media/)
* [Get Safe Online](https://www.getsafeonline.org/) provides factual and easy-to-understand information on personal online safety
* National charities, such as [The Samaritans](https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIvsWjtJeP5gIVjLTtCh3c9ADbEAAYASAAEgIcNfD_BwE), who are experts in providing a range of support to callers
* https://www.herts.police.uk/Information-and-services/Advice/Online-safety/Trolling-and-cyberbullying
* <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/cyberaware/home>
* <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/cyber-online-crime>

# Appendix A - Version control

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| **Version** | **Date** | **Author** | **Replaces** | **Amendments** |
| 1 | Nov 2021 | Corporate governance manager | N/a |  |