

TELEPHONE HELPLINE ESSENTIALS



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Centre

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

We have written this short guide to offer some tips about providing telephone support and advice. Throughout, we share practical examples from our experience. Finally, there is a case example to show how it can all work in practice.

We have found it important to be clear about the service you can offer via the phone. Specify the support you can provide, the opening hours of the helpline and the type and timescale of response that the caller should expect.

Will you be offering information? Advice? Counselling? A signposting service? It is also key to be sure of what you don't offer and be prepared to refer on to a more appropriate service.

Make sure staff skills and training, and your resources, match up to your offer. Consider the capacity of your team to manage a helpline and how this will be staffed.

Consider how a caller can leave a message if the helpline is busy. For example, do you have a voicemail set up?

IN OUR SERVICE:

We assess all calls initially for the type/level of support that will be required. Calls that don't match our skills and experience are signposted, we aim never to send a caller away without a plan.

Calls are assigned to a named, individual caseworker. We specify helpline hours and have a voicemail service where callers are encouraged to leave a message if they are unable to get through on the helpline or for calls out of hours.

We maintain a resource bank which is regularly updated. All staff can share information about new services and resources through a central digital noticeboard. We use a standard enquiry form and store information on a secure database.

SET UP

Some key considerations

Is the environment quiet or is there a lot of background noise?
Is your workspace comfortable? Are you sitting comfortably?

You can find useful information about providing safe and comfortable workstations on the **ACAS** website.

Consider a headset if you are going to be on the phone for a long time.



IN OUR SERVICE:

We ensure that when calls take place within an open plan office, staff are able to book private rooms to make calls. When working from home, staff ensure their environment is quiet and they won't be disturbed while on a call.

We carry out desk assessments to ensure staff have all the correct equipment. This was updated as required when the organisation moved to home working.

ADMINISTRATION

Some key considerations

Does your insurance cover you for this type of work?

[SCVO](#) is a good starting point for issues to consider around insurance.

How will you record information in line with GDPR?

Find out about GDPR requirements from the [Information Commissioner's Office](#).

Do staff need to be PVG (Protecting Vulnerable Groups) checked and registered?

Find out about the PVG scheme and disclosure at [Disclosure Scotland](#).

IN OUR SERVICE:

We ensure staff are PVG checked before beginning casework.

Relevant insurance is in place and we update our insurer on any change to/extension of activities.

We have a policy in place to manage storage and retention of data.

We make sure our databases are secure and only accessed by team members.

Callers are advised that information will be stored on our databases.

We share our privacy policy with enquirers upon contact either by directing them to our website or by emailing them a copy.

STAFF WELLBEING

Some key considerations

Do you have systems to support your staff if they are taking difficult calls?

For example will you have regular supervision or an opportunity to debrief if required?

It is important to be clear on limitations of the service and empower call-takers to set boundaries.



IN OUR SERVICE:

Support to manage challenging calls is available for our team:

- Regular supervision sessions for each member of the team.
- Opportunity to informally debrief with team members after calls.
- Case discussions with team leaders or line managers.
- Staff able to access a counselling service free of charge.
- All staff aware of the remit of the service.

CALLER WELLBEING

Some key considerations

Depending on the nature of your service, you might need to consider how to manage callers who are talking about self-harm or suicide.

Do you have an updated policy to manage child or adult protection concerns?



IN OUR SERVICE:

We enable all staff to undertake Mental Health First Aid training.

Find out more, or find a course, on the Scotland's Mental Health First Aid website.

Further training is available for those that want it, by enabling staff to undertake ASIST training.

Find out more, or find a course at Choose Life, Suicide Prevention in Scotland.

We maintain a robust safeguarding policy and ensure all staff are aware of the actions to take if they have concerns.

Several key members of the team as child protection officers and we ensure they receive the relevant training.

Find 'Child protection in Scotland' training online through the NSPCC.

We provide access to online child protection training for all staff working with children and families.

A bank of essential resources is always readily to hand e.g. Samaritans, Breathing Space, NHS 24, emergency social work number.

CASE EXAMPLE



A call was received from a parent who was looking for information about obtaining support from social work.

At the start of the call basic details such as the caller's name and contact information were taken and an enquiry form was populated with this information.

The call handler then explained the service and the support that could be provided.

The caller was encouraged to discuss their concerns in more detail to allow the call handler to establish how best to support them. It was ascertained that the enquiry was appropriate for the service. The caller was distressed during the call and was supported to express how they were feeling. They were given information about organisations that could provide a listening service out of hours if the caller began to feel overwhelmed. There was then a discussion about possible ways the call handler could offer support to resolve the caller's concerns.

After exploring the best way for the caller to receive information it was agreed that the call handler would send them an email with advice about how to request a social work assessment.

The caller was advised that their information and details of the call would be recorded on our database and they were directed to a privacy statement on our website in line with our GDPR policy.

The call handler explained when to expect the email and how the enquiry would proceed from there.

After the call, notes were recorded including any agreed actions and the date for these to be completed.

The call handler debriefed with another staff member and took a short break before answering the next enquiry on the helpline.



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