



**National Telephone Responders Training &  
Safeguarding Guidelines  
(August 2024)**

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## **BACKGROUND**

This document has been prepared by the National Telephone Sub-Committee in response to the recommendation by Conference 2021 that more comprehensive information be included in a training document to be stored in the document library and be freely available to all responders.

It was also recommended by Conference 2021 that this information include guidance on how to handle malicious calls and take into account the safeguarding of members.

We recognise that each Helpline has existing procedures and training in place.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a generic guide across Helplines and specifically to include guidance on handling and reporting malicious calls and guidance on safeguarding policy and procedure for Helplines as requested by Conference.

## **NOTE ON TERMS USED**

The term 'Responder' includes 'Operators' (Scottish Helpline) and Volunteers (London Helpline).

## WELCOME

Hello and welcome fellow AA friends.

Thank you for becoming a telephone service responder. It really is the frontline for 12-Step work which is at the core of AA's traditions and is the most valuable and rewarding service that many of us have ever done. If you are sober and an active AA member, you have what it takes to pass the message of recovery, to gain the trust of a still-suffering alcoholic sufficient to enable them to try AA. Your own experience is your best asset.

The main function of the service is to connect a newcomer with AA via a 12<sup>th</sup> Step contact or directly to a meeting. You are the first point of contact for the caller. Whilst it is necessary for the responder to talk with the caller using their sober and pre-sober experience, the idea is to gain the trust of the caller to the point where they will accept a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call or attend a meeting themselves. It is vitally important that we continue to provide this service for the suffering alcoholic and the continuation of AA.

You are not alone. This training guide contains the essential information needed to handle a phone call including the people to contact when support is needed as the telephone service is a shared effort. Don't take everything on your shoulders. Training will be given before you are allotted a shift or added to the standby responder list with on-shift training given as and when needed.

So – enjoy, and we hope that you give and receive much from your experience with the telephone service. Once again, many thanks for your service - without you the telephone service would not be available to the caller in need.

## Requirements for Responders

1. Telephone responders must have a minimum of 1-year continuous sobriety
2. Anyone on the Disclosure & Barring Service barred list is not eligible for phone service, under Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 or Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) act 2007
3. Telephone responders have a requirement to give the following information: Full name, address and email. This information to be held by the TLO in accordance with GDPR requirements.
4. Telephone responders to be current members of AA as a self-regulated group and recommended by their Home Group Secretary, GSR or Treasurer (see *Figure 1*)
5. To have had training which includes knowledge and understanding of safeguarding and reporting procedures prior to undertaking duty (see *Figure 2*)
6. To receive support and reporting guidance re safeguarding whilst on duty. (see figure 3).
7. The General Service Board has taken legal advice on safeguarding and has been advised that Responders should, as a matter of best practice, though not required by law, undertake a basic DBS check (England & Wales), PVG check (Scotland) as a prudent safeguarding measure.

Figure 1: Safeguarding Selection Criteria Helpline Responder/Operator

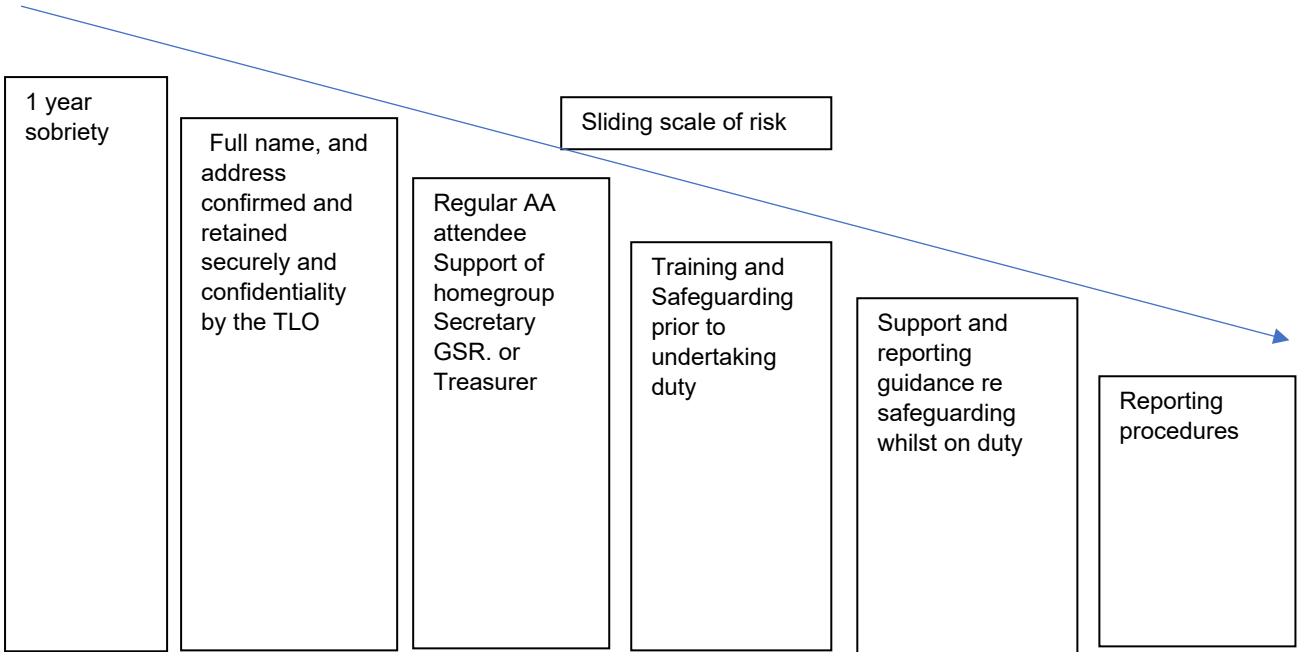
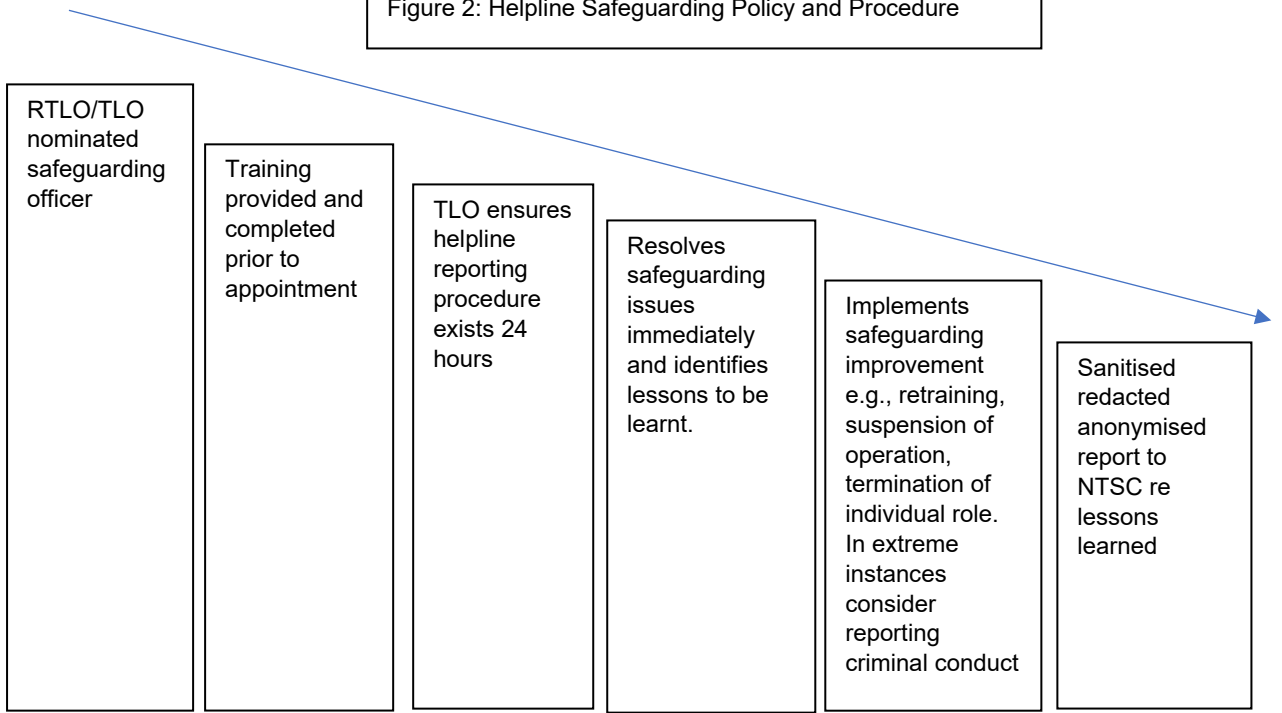


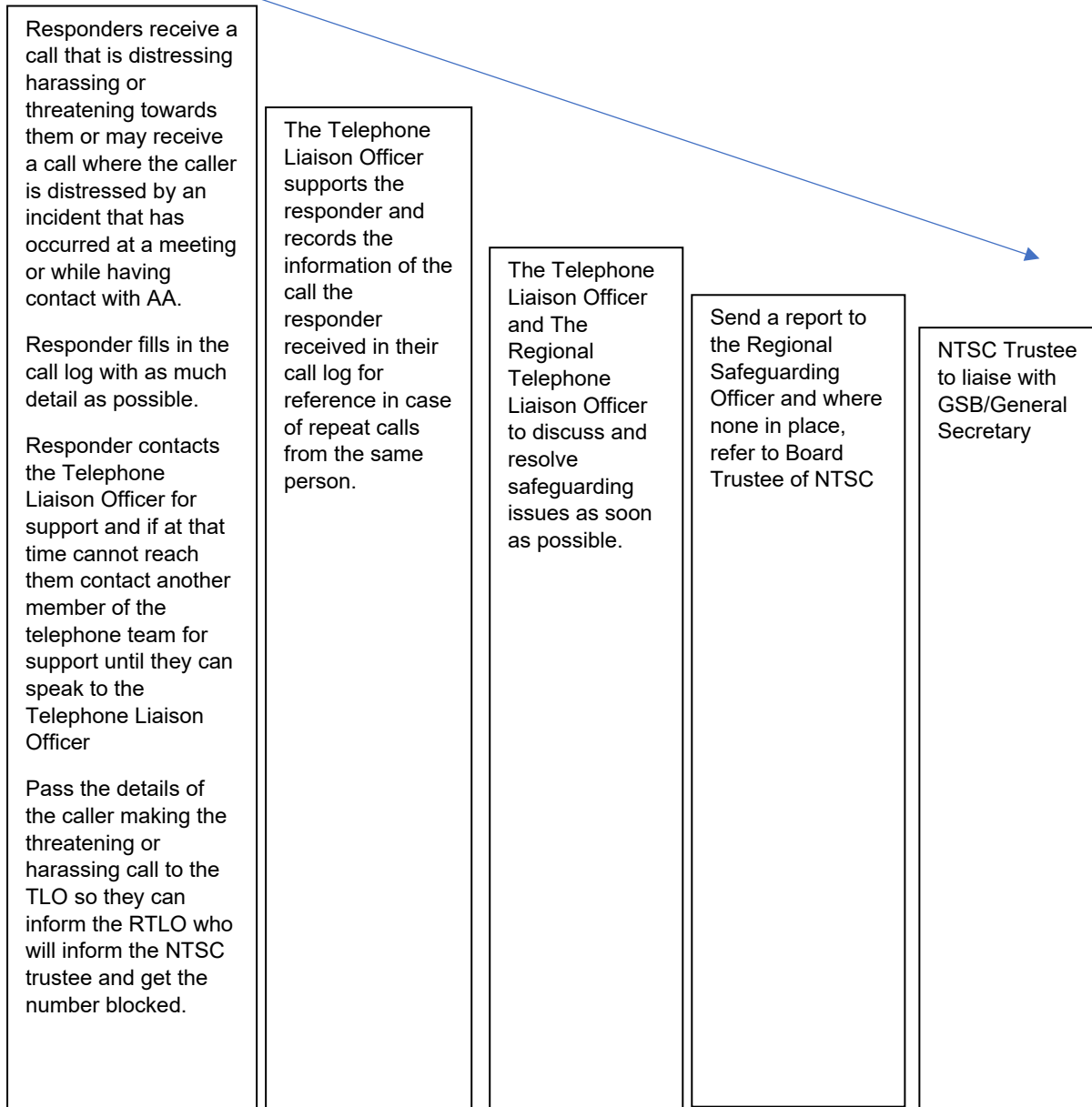
Figure 2: Helpline Safeguarding Policy and Procedure



Safeguarding Risks: High

Process to reduce Risk

Figure 3: Call Reporting Procedures



## GDPR

In line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Principles.

Personal data will:

- Be obtained fairly and lawfully and in a transparent way
- Collected only for valid purposes that are clearly explained and not used in any way that is incompatible with those purposes
- Relevant to the purposes collected for and limited only to those purposes
- Be accurate and kept up to date
- Kept only as long as necessary for the purposes it was collected for
- Kept securely

The definition of 'Processing' is obtaining, using, holding, amending, disclosing, destroying and deleting personal data. This includes paper based personal data as well as that kept on computer.

Type of information kept and stored.

Personal data on application form

- Name
- Email Address
- Home Address
- Telephone number
- Home Group
- Signature
- Home group officer (Secretary, GSR, or Treasurer) signature & telephone number

Before personal information is collected, we must ensure that we only request the minimum information to fulfil the task required. Personal sensitive information will not be used apart from the exact purpose for which permission was given.

Personal information that can identify the individual must be handled in a way that ensures appropriate security, including protection against unlawful or unauthorised processing, access, loss, destruction, or damage. Personal information can be kept for example on a secure USB stick or a secure cloud drive. The information will be deleted or shredded. after the end of service

Don't leave the details of a 12 Step on a voicemail or send them by text, email or WhatsApp. You need to speak directly with the 12 Stepper, not any other member of their household. If you get a voicemail when contacting 12 Steppers, leave your name, number and the message " we have a 12 Step for your area, are you available to take it/ please call us back". Do not say you're calling from AA.

## PREPARING FOR AND ANSWERING CALLS

1. Responders should be ready to start their shift on time with all the relevant information to hand.
2. The aim is to answer calls within 10 seconds.
3. Have pen and Call Log Form to hand.
4. Jot down information as you speak, checking any phone numbers.
5. Make a note of the type of caller, reason for calling and action taken.
6. Retain your notes securely for a month in case of any queries then destroy them confidentially.
7. All calls to be logged on the call log form.
8. The responder's role is to pass on the caller's details to a 12<sup>th</sup> stepper, keeping the call brief (max 5-10 min), taking the necessary details and keeping the line free for other callers.
9. Remember that you may be answering national calls via the 0800 number.

### Calls from:

#### The Suffering Alcoholic

1. Answer the call with "Hello my name is how can I help you? (Or as agreed locally).
2. Does the caller have a drinking problem? (ask - is it for yourself?)
3. Is this your first call to AA?
4. Is the caller still drinking or having difficulty speaking or remembering when their last drink was?
5. If the caller is a minor (under 18) **go to page 10 of this guide.**
6. Establish where they are calling from including the **postcode**.
7. Briefly explain what we do and ask if we may put them in touch with a local member who can speak at greater length in confidence. Confirm their name, phone number and post code.
8. If the caller is out of area, pass on their number and postcode to the relevant helpline (see Specific Calls p.9)
9. If they would like you to pass on their details, ensure you have all relevant information to pass on.
10. Ask the caller what the best time for them to be called.
11. Assure the caller that help will be forthcoming and that a local member will be in touch at the earliest possible opportunity. Do not promise that the call or contact will be immediate or from a particular person.
12. Inform the caller that the return call may be from an anonymised phone and if needed to set their phone to accept the call.
13. We never give a caller our personal phone number or the number of a member under any circumstances.
14. If the caller does not want a 12-step call, advise them of the meetings available in their area.



## Friends & Family:

1. Thank them for calling and explain that we don't discuss another person's drinking with a third party even if they are family or friend as this may deter them from contacting us.
2. Suggest instead that the family member or friend try to persuade the alcoholic to talk to us themselves.
3. If the alcoholic is with the caller and verbally agrees to have a 12-step call, then you can proceed to take the information.
4. Offer the caller the Al-Anon number, briefly explaining who they are if the caller has not heard of them.

## Existing AA members:

1. If a member is seeking a meeting give the details from the AA website.
2. Never give out a member's telephone number.
3. If a member calls with a safeguarding issue refer them to the local Safety officer **and** the TLO. **Inform the TLO of the call**

## Media Enquiries:

Calls from the press, radio and TV regarding requests for speakers or any other requests should always be referred to the General Service

Office in York.

Website: [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)  
Address: PO Box1, 10 Toft Green, York, YO1 7NJ  
Telephone: 01904 644026  
Email (out of hours) [trustee.nat5@gsogb.org.uk](mailto:trustee.nat5@gsogb.org.uk) (Tom Fox)

## Hospitals, Clinics, Doctors, Courts, Probation, Prisons, Social Workers, Church:

1. Explain that you cannot give information out but will take their details and contact the relevant Liaison Officer.
2. If they are out of area, pass their request onto the relevant Intergroup

## School Contacts:

1. Take the teachers name, home and school telephone number and pass the information to the PI Liaison Officer.
2. If the caller is out of area pass the request on to the relevant Intergroup

**Other:** Sometimes you may get a call from people who want to send information. Give them the General Service Office address.

## SPECIFIC CALLS

### Out of Area Calls

1. Calls to the 0800 from mobiles may be routed to any of the Helplines in Great Britain.
2. When you receive a call from outside your geographic area, take the caller details as you would normally, and then call the Helpline closest to the caller's area and pass on the caller details to the callers local Responder/Operator.
3. You may give the caller the number for their local area, however if the caller is not an existing member, treat this call in the same way as a call from someone in your own Helpline area and pass it on to the other Helpline.
4. If the local helpline for the caller cannot be reached immediately, try again later. Failing that, pass the details on to the next responder on shift. If the helpline still cannot be reached, tell your TLO or Shift Co-ordinator who will contact the TLO of the helpline concerned. Failing that, the RTLO is the 12-stepper of last resort.
5. If you reach a local Helpline's voicemail it is acceptable to leave a message asking them to return your call. **DO NOT LEAVE** a still suffering alcoholic's contact details. Any local helpline's voicemail should clearly identify that it is an A.A. number and for which area.

### Medical Issues

1. AA has no opinion on outside issues, and we **never** give medical advice – we are not qualified to do so. We are **not** a counselling service
2. Sometimes sharing our own medical experiences can be mistaken for the giving of advice so be wary of sharing your own medical details and history.
3. Advise the caller to contact their GP or to dial 111.
4. Calling the emergency services should be the last resort of responders/operators if worried about a caller. However, where the life of a caller, or others, is apparently at risk, we should notify the emergency services and dial 999.

### Suicidal Callers

1. We are **not a counselling service** or trained in providing emotional support and so should aim to get the suicidal caller in touch with help as soon as possible. Do not try to offer advice or try to talk the caller out of anything.
2. Give the Samaritans number and suggest they call it
3. As before, calling the emergency services should be the last resort of responders/operators if worried about a caller. However, where the life of a caller, or others, is apparently at risk, we should notify the emergency services and dial 999.  
Although such calls are few in number, they can be distressing.
4. Keep a note of time of call and other relevant details e.g., name of caller using the call log form.
5. Report all calls of this nature to your Safeguarding Officer (or Shift Manager or TLO) as soon as possible. They are there to support you.

## Caller in Potential distress

If during a call you hear background noises which sound like the caller is in distress. Ask them:

“Do you feel unsafe? As I can hear *(then say what you can hear in the background)*.”

Would you like me to call you help? just reply Yes, or No.”

Sometimes you don't have the time to consult with the TLO/RTLO, but instead use your instinct to call the relevant authorities (you have already asked for their postcode).

## Nuisance/Malicious/Abusive Calls

Types of Calls:

1. Sexually abusive.
2. Threatening.
3. Persistent and repetitive calling.
4. Persistent silent callers.

Recommended Action:

1. Inform the caller that the line is monitored, and calls of this nature will be treated seriously and reported. Then immediately hang up.
2. Persistent callers: Do not engage in conversation; ignore and hang up.
3. Keep a note of time of call and other relevant details e.g., name of caller.
4. Report all calls of this nature to your Safeguarding Officer (or Shift Manager or TLO) as soon as possible. They are there to support you.

## Nuisance/Persistent/Abusive calls from prisoners:

Do not engage in conversation, immediately hang up. Report the call to your TLO who can, if necessary, temporarily block the number and will contact the Intergroup Prison Liaison Officer.

## Calls from Minors

We want to help minors who think they have a drink problem, but we must respect the law. The fellowship defines minors as young people under the age of 18 and The General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous advises that we should not 12<sup>th</sup> Step minors (under 18) without the written consent of their parents or guardians. However, minors do have the right to make their own informed decisions and if a caller is under 18 then we recommend following the procedure below and **NOT** entering into a more detailed discussion:

- 1) “Are your parents (or guardian) aware that you are looking for help with your drinking?”
- 2) If ‘yes’, “Would they be prepared to go to a meeting with you?”
- 3) If ‘yes’, direct them to the AA website for a list of Open Meetings in their area and where they can access AA literature.

- 4) If the parents or guardian are not aware, ask the minor “Is this something you can discuss with them?”

If the minor doesn't want a parent or guardian to help them, then:

- a) ask them whether there is another adult that they trust and who could take them to an open meeting.
- b) If 'yes', direct them to the AA website for a list of Open Meetings in their area and where they can access AA literature.
- c) If 'no', direct them to the website for literature.

Log call as a 'Call from Minor' and report to your Safeguarding Officer (or Shift Manager or TLO) as soon as possible. They are there to support you.

## **Complaint Calls**

1. Thankfully these calls are rare, however if a caller has a complaint about a member of AA, keep a note of the time of the call, name of caller and nature of the complaint. Let the caller know that their complaint will be handled as per our complaint procedure.
2. Report all calls of this nature to your TLO or RTLO as soon as possible.
3. RTLO's will pass details of the complaint to the Regional Safeguarding Officer or if not available to the Board Trustee of the NTSC as soon as possible who will pass to the GSB/General Secretary to take appropriate action.
4. If a complaint is received about a responder, then the responder will be appraised of the situation and an action plan put in place to resolve the issue. In most cases, additional training and/or re-training will be the preferred resolution path. In rare cases, the issue may be of such a serious nature that requires immediate protection of individuals or AA as a whole and the responder may be temporarily removed from service until a review of the situation has been made. A report, and if needed an action plan, will then be made available to those concerned. If a responder has acted inappropriately, been removed from service and moves to another area, it is up to the TLO & the local helpline, from which the responder was removed to consider informing neighbouring helplines.

## **HELPFUL REMINDERS**

1. Be ready at the start of your shift with all information sources, pen, and paper to hand in a quiet and private environment.
2. The aim is to answer calls within 10 seconds.
3. Answer the call with “Hello my name is how can I help you? (Or as agreed locally). A smile will reflect in your voice.
4. Remember that you will be regarded as speaking for AA as a whole - try to think/say 'WE' rather than 'I'.
5. Do not give callers yours or any members private number.
6. Avoid a very lengthy call - others may be trying to get through and we are not a chat line. A good rule of thumb is that a call is either heading towards sobriety (a

meeting or a 12 Step) or it should be brought to a close. 5 to 10 minutes per call is usually sufficient.

7. Remember that we are representing AA as a whole and not our personal beliefs and opinions.
8. Don't leave the details of a 12 Step on a voicemail or send them by text, email or WhatsApp. You need to speak directly with the 12 Stepper, not any other member of their household.
9. If you get a voicemail when contacting 12 Steppers, leave your name, number and the message "we have a 12 Step for your area, are you available to take it/ please call us back". Do not say you're calling from AA.

## **DO's and DON'T's**

### **DO**

**BE PATIENT ..... WE DON'T GET ANGRY WITH AN ANGRY CALLER**

**BE FIRM ..... WE STICK TO WHAT THE TELEPHONE SERVICE OFFERS  
WE ARE NOT COUNSELLORS**

**BE QUICK..... WE DON'T SHARE OUR ENTIRE STORY, JUST BITS FOR  
IDENTIFICATION (FOR MINORS, REFER TO 'CALLS FROM  
MINORS')**

**CONTACT YOUR TLO AND/OR LOCAL SAFEGUARDING OFFICER IF YOU  
HAVE ANY SAFEGUARDING CONCERNS**

**BE PLEASANT.... WE ARE THE VOICE OF AA**

### **DON'T**

**ARGUE ..... WE DON'T PUT PEOPLE RIGHT**

**ADVISE..... WE NEVER OFFER ANY MEDICAL ADVICE**

**EVER ATTEND THE HOME OF A CALLER OR HAVE PHONE CONTACT  
INCLUDING MESSAGING OR VIDEO CALL OUTSIDE OF PHONE SERVICE**