

ETIQUETTE
FOR
COBH-HEADS
AND OLD FOLKS

2019
Draft Proposal

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YMCA Cobh
Cobh Youth Service / Chill on the Hill

What am I reading?

This booklet contains parallel sets of guidelines, one for the young people of Cobh (*Cobh-heads*) and another for the older community in Cobh (*Old Folks*), which may encourage more harmonious relationships between the two groups.

The guidelines were derived from reports collected from students of YMCA Cobh's STEP programme and older youth from the Cobh Youth Service (Chill on the Hill). These reports described episodes of unjust or disrespectful treatment of young people by the older community.

It is important to understand that although the guidelines apply broadly to the Cobh community, there was no broad consultation in the community; the guidelines are drawn only from the perspective of the authors of this booklet.

It follows that the objective of its publications is to propose, for public discussion, some constructive resolutions to tensions between youth and the older community. For this reason, this booklet is the 2019 draft proposal for a notional set of comprehensive and widely community-ratified guidelines.

General

for Cobh-Heads

Small acts of kindness or courtesy demonstrate your consideration and respect to members of the community. Be careful of the people around you and offer your assistance where it may be useful, e.g. open doors for people who have their hands full or give up your seat on the bus to the elderly or to pregnant women.

It is not always easy to tell if assistance will be willingly accepted so, it is always wise to first ask if in any doubt.

Acts of kindness can also be directed towards the 'community'. You might pick up litter or move obstacles on footpaths so that passers-by can pass freely. Being 'community-minded' benefits everyone, including yourself.

for Old Folks

Acts of kindness or courtesy from young people should be encouraged – they are gifts offered in respect and should be responded to gratefully.

It is psychologically damaging to a young person if you respond to their kind intentions with suspicion or hostility. Such a response will not only discourage any further acts of kindness but will also send a clear message of rejection that indicates that the young person has no place in 'polite society'. You will signal an expectation that their future lies in crime, deceit and opportunism.

for Old Folks

Similarly, do not exclude young people from common acts of politeness and kindness. They are not children and deserve to be shown the same courtesies as other adults. Be especially aware of situations where the exclusion is publicly visible, e.g. it is denigrating for a young person to be the only person in a queue to not be addressed politely.

As an elder, your role is to set an example for the younger generation. If you are discourteous to young people, it is not reasonable to expect respectful behaviour from them.



Gossip

for Cobh-Heads

Try to remember that you can never be sure that gossip is true and entirely accurate, even if the source is someone close or reliable.

Regardless of whether information is true or false, before passing the information to anyone else, you need to consider how it may affect the people involved. Consider how you may feel if the gossip was about you and remember that once gossip is spread, it can never be taken back (especially on-line).

for Old Folks

Gossip is important aspect of social interaction and plays an important role in activating the community's support for individuals and families.

However, it is important to be careful about disseminating any information about young people that they may not wish others in the town to know. Information given to your peers can often be passed to their children or young people who may not use it compassionately or kindly.

for Old Folks

For example, if a young person is being bullied, you should not casually mention anything that is potentially embarrassing (such as their sexual or medical history) as this may supply more material that can be used by bullies.

The sensitivity of information can be difficult to ascertain so it is always wise to ask if young people consider particular details of their lives to be private.



Service Counters and Tills

for Cobh-Heads

Before visiting a service counter or till, it is always useful get some information about the problem you are trying to address by asking someone you trust or checking online, e.g. ask your mother about how you open a bank account. Government or larger organisations often have easily understood online guides that contain specific information that will help you prepare for a visit, or complete online solutions.

Counter staff are there to help you but they do not necessarily have any control over your situation. They are also often given the unpleasant job of having to give bad news.

for Counter Staff

Young people are less likely to have experience in negotiating commercial and institutional procedures and may require more assistance and more of your patience – this educational role can be irksome but is an important aspect of service and it is your responsibility.

Do not react to inexperience with irritation. Instead, it would be far more productive to provide information on your organisation's procedures and how their specific problem can be more effectively addressed. For example, you could explain that a telephone fault report form needs to be filled so that a technician has written details on what to fix, where to go and who to contact. You could then say that, for future reference, the repair is most efficiently done by filling out the online form.

for Cobh-Heads

As always, try to be respectful, considerate and polite. Ask for help and information rather than demanding they fix your problem.

Help them help you. Try to be as organised as possible by finding out what information and documents you need to have before the visit, and have the information in an easily presentable form, e.g. if you have a been overcharged on your phone bill, you may need hard copies of the affected bills, bank statements showing the corresponding transactions and some personal identification.

Think about how you can clearly communicate your problem without too much detail. Counter staff are much more likely to be pleasant and helpful if they can see that you have put some effort into trying to make their jobs easier.

Listen carefully to what staff are telling you. Organisations can have strange or complicated procedures that you will need to follow. The staff do not create these procedures and are faced with the difficulties of having to explain them so try to make their jobs as easy as possible.

Service counters are a workplace. Except for some exceptions such as public bars, service counters are not appropriate places to socialise or engage in activities that may disrupt the staff, clients or customers.

Try not to take things too personally. Counter staff may not be patient or courteous to anyone, or you may have caught them on a bad day. Sometimes, you have to be content with unpleasant experiences.

for Counter Staff

By taking the time to explain your procedures, you are providing a view of how organisations operate, which will inform future interactions with your organisation and others.

Additional effort spent informing and educating young people is likely to be rewarded on subsequent visits to service counters (yours and others) when they will be better prepared and more conversant. Word also travels quickly: young people will inform their peers of what they have understood and your organisation will develop a reputation for being approachable and safe.



Health and Medical



for Old Folks

If a young person is suffering from an acute health problem or from a medical emergency, it is your moral obligation to offer assistance. It is irresponsible to ignore them or to dismiss their complaints as untruthful or exaggerated.

Moral judgements regarding the cause of the problem should not have any bearing on your actions, e.g. you should not be more reluctant to act if the problem is self-inflicted, if it results from crime, drug or alcohol consumption, or from any other cause that you are morally opposed to.

Small Shop

for Cobh-Heads

You are entering a shop that someone has carefully stocked and decorated. It is often their livelihood – and you need to be respectful of this. Small businesses do not usually have expensive insurance policies and are naturally protective of their shop and contents.

It is a sign of respect to politely greet and acknowledge staff when entering and leaving a shop.

Pay attention to signs and try not to handle anything you are not considering buying.

for Shop Staff

Similarly to their elders, young people often browse in shops as a leisure activity. This is not a crime and they should not be treated as a nuisance without reason. They will be your future customers so it is in your interest to be kind.

It is important to be polite and civil to young people so that they do not feel excluded. Greet them in the same manner and with the same tone of voice as with your other customers. Do not single out particular young people only by their age, or by the way they look or dress.

for Cobh-Heads

If you would like to more closely inspect an item, it is respectful to ask staff for help – even if they may direct you to 'help yourself'. It is customary to only flip through books or magazines. You should never open product packaging or try on a garment without asking shop staff.

It is not respectful to remain in a shop for more than fifteen or twenty minutes without buying anything. If staff repeatedly offer assistance, you should take the hint.

Ask the staff for assistance if you are unsure.

Do not hang around directly in front of shops. A shopfront is an important part of how a shop promotes itself to passers-by. You should not block the shopfront or any signage for any significant length of time.



for Shop Staff

Unless given clear cause to do so, you should not assume that they are intending to steal, loiter or 'make mischief'. Although there will be customers (young or otherwise) who may not respect your space or property, it is unfair and insulting to the young people who are respectful for you to assume the worst. Furthermore, what you may consider to be disrespectful behaviour could be a lack of confidence and knowledge of the rules of shopping.

Do not be too quick to jump to conclusions and, if you suspect that a young person is stealing or damaging goods, approach the situation with carefully worded questions rather than by abrupt accusations.

It is not always easy to determine how long we can remain in a shop without buying something and young people can find this even more difficult, especially if they have not previously negotiated such situations with their parents.

One or two polite offers of assistance will usually convey the message that the time has come – they will remember this on their next visit and will inform their friends.

A young person who is unsure about how to negotiate a situation in your shop may approach with questions e.g. can I touch the fruit to check if they are ripe? It is important to answer such questions patiently and with good humour as a cross response may mean that young people take liberties in the future rather than asking.

Large Shops and Supermarkets*

for Cobh-Heads

There is more flexibility in large supermarkets and shops. You are usually able to browse for longer times and there is no pressure to make a purchase.

However, it is important to remember that the staff have a responsibility to protect and to keep order in their stock and so they are unlikely to respond kindly to anything that makes their jobs more difficult, e.g. customer that move stock around or create a mess that the staff need to clean up.

for Shop Staff

The guidelines for small shops apply here.

* This section only applies to large shops that are owned and operated by corporations, e.g. Aldi, Lidl, SuperValu. The guidelines for small shops apply for franchises or licensed dealerships, which operate similarly to small businesses.

for Cobh-Heads

It is often acceptable to handle stock more than in a small shop but you should not do anything that will make stock unfit for sale, e.g. opening packaging or leaving anything refrigerated outside the refrigerated shelves.

If in any doubt, apply the small shop guidelines.



Cafés (and Restaurants)

for Cobh-Heads

What is considered polite behaviour at cafés can change according to many things, including the type of café, what you have ordered, how busy it is and how many tables are available. It is not always easy to work a café out so you should keep an eye out for signs. Ask staff if you are unsure, and observe what other patrons are doing.

It is improper to occupy tables at cafés unless you have ordered food or drink. You should expect to be asked for your order.

for Café Staff

Young people who are learning to negotiate social situations independently may have difficulties 'reading' the rules that apply in different cafés. They can feel awkward or unsure of how to act by themselves. Unpleasant experiences in this period of development can be internalised as contempt, inadequacy or shame.

However, it can help to have clear signage, e.g. 'table service only' or, 'place your order at the counter'. Try to be clear about procedures (e.g. 'Here is the menu. I'll be back in five minutes') and provide direction if required (e.g. 'Could we move your group to a more suitable table?').

for Cobh-Heads

You should not stay for too long, especially if there are few available tables, e.g. it is certainly not polite to take up a table at a small, busy café for the entire day after ordering only one drink. If in doubt, ask staff if it is OK for you to stay longer or observe how long other patrons are staying.

Always be polite and considerate to waiting staff who are 'paid to be nice' and often have to endure the bad behaviour and rudeness of patrons of all ages.

You should never consume your own food or drink from outside the café. Do not play with the salt, pepper, sugar or other condiments – this is an activity reserved for toddlers.

Cafés are spaces for small meetings and quiet conversations. Avoid meetings of more than three or four people, and keep the volume of your conversations low enough for other patrons to have their own quiet conversations (even when there are no other customers).

It is not easy to turn a profit from running a café – rents are high and wages are expensive. Try to be aware of how you may affect the café's bottom line. Your cup of coffee may be turning away patrons who are looking for a full meal. If a place is busy, don't spend two hours on a cup of tea.

for Café Staff

Once again, it is important to be cordial, patient and good humoured with young people who may be in the process of trying to understand good social behaviour. Intimidation, reprimands and accusations are a last resort.

Even though it may initially seem an insurmountable task for you to be 'educating' all youth, young people learn quickly and inform their peers. Try to find the time to explain things and do so with directness, e.g. if a group is noisy, tell them to quieten down as they are disturbing the other customers and preventing new ones from coming.

Public Spaces

for Cobh-Heads

Although public spaces are for everybody's use, they are not for your use only and should be respectfully shared.

Try to avoid 'taking over' a park, beach or shopfront and do not block footpaths, passageways or entrances. This can include behaviour that may seem harmless to you but is uncomfortable for other members of the community, e.g. talking loudly or across the street in the town centre. Large gatherings of hooded people at night are certainly intimidating to the general community.

In general, try to be aware of how you may be affecting people around public spaces, especially in commercial and residential areas where people are trying to work, shop, sleep and get on with their lives.

for Old Folks

It is well-known that Cobh has a shortage of spaces where young people are able to meet and socialise and that often, young people have no option but to gather in public spaces. Because of this, some tolerance from the community is required.

Unfortunately, the issue of large youth gatherings in public places has become an emotive one and community members can seek to disperse harmless gatherings that are judged to be 'up to no good'.

for Cobh-Heads

If you must take over a public space, you can ask nearby residents or business owners if you will be affecting them. If meeting on the street, make eye contact and greet passers-by politely to make them feel more comfortable. These small gestures can even work in situations where passers-by are feeling threatened, such as on winter nights when you are hooded and meeting in large groups.

A clean town shows and fosters pride in its residents. Cleanliness invites visitors and makes them feel welcome. At the very minimum, as members of the community, it is your responsibility to clean up after yourself at all times. Use garbage bins or take your litter home if there are no available bins. If you are meeting in a large group, scan the area before leaving and dispose of any litter you can see even if it is not yours. Do not assume that paid council workers will clean public areas as this job is often left to community volunteer groups such as Tidy Towns.

Special care needs to be taken when drugs and alcohol are involved as they lessen your awareness of your surroundings and how you may be affecting the nearby community.

It is well-known that Cobh has a shortage of spaces where young people are able to meet and socialise and that often, young people have no option but to have large gatherings in public spaces.

Thinks of some solutions to this problem – what would you like to be available? Talk about it with your friends and approach local councillors with your ideas.

for Old Folks

Your perception of gatherings may be more objective if you considered them in a more positive way, e.g. you could try thinking about them as occasions where young people have stepped away from their computer screens to walk, socialise, to improve their mental health and to get some fresh air.

However, if they are in the way, they will usually disperse if asked.

If you have any solutions to this problem that would work for everybody, consult your peers and approach local councillors with your ideas.



An Garda Síochána

for Cobh-Heads

The gardaí have a vital community role which can be difficult, unpleasant and dangerous. They can appear to be brash or aggressive, especially when outnumbered, or confronted with threatening or emotionally volatile situations. Sometimes the law may force gardaí to do things they do not believe in or may not be happy about.

It is important to know your rights but you should not try to make their jobs more difficult by being uncooperative. If you have done nothing wrong, there will not be a problem.

for Gardaí

The gardaí, particularly their juvenile liaison officers, play a valuable role guiding the future of young people. However, care is required as adversarial interactions with youth, even in minor encounters, can have wide-ranging consequences on a young person's developing self-image and how they are perceived by their peers and within their community.

Whilst statistics and anecdotal evidence can be convincing, it is important to interact with young people as valued members of the communities rather than as 'crimes waiting to happen'. Predictive or pre-emptive actions may seem to be an effective measure for preventing disruptions to public order before they happen but can have adverse effects if innocent people

for Cobh-Heads

If you are approached by the gardaí, try not to react emotionally: they have a job to do and you are helping them. Be polite and answer their questions as directly as possible. It is normal to feel nervous when questioned but once the gardaí sense that you are open and co-operative, they are unlikely to be confrontational or provocative.

More information about your rights when interacting with the gardaí can be found in Know Your Rights: Criminal Justice and Garda Powers, published by The Irish Council for Civil Liberties (<https://iccl.ie/>). If you feel that you have been badly or unfairly treated, you can file a complaint with the Garda Ombudsman (<https://www.gardaombudsman.ie/>).



for Gardaí

are falsely accused. A young person who is unfairly singled-out is unlikely to develop a respectful and trusting relationship to the gardaí and the law.

Young people can be tense in the presence of the gardaí and so, the initial tone of approach is critical in determining the following exchange. If possible, approach young people in a friendly, congenial and polite manner. Show curiosity and express concern for their well-being and for the welfare of the surrounding community. Explain how these concerns are represented in the law and what behaviours may result in legal breaches.

Although gardaí have the power to perform body searches without consent, this should be limited to bona-fide situations where there is a suspicion of a crime. If a search is necessary, gardaí are obliged to clearly inform the subject of why it is required.

Clear explanations of rights, procedure and legal obligations can be very helpful to clarify your role and duties as law enforcer (rather than law makers) and to diffuse potentially confrontational situations.

If it is deemed necessary to take a person to the garda station without arrest, it is important to inform them that they do not have to comply.

LGBTI/ Queer* Culture

for Queer Cobh-Heads

The wide acceptance of queer culture has been a major progressive development in mainstream society. However, it is easy to forget that it is a relatively new development and that many people remain uncomfortable with the culture, especially if they have not had much contact with the queer community.

for Other Folk

Young people who identify as being queer or lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/intersex (LGBTI) are especially vulnerable. They are much more likely to be affected by physical and psychological injury resulting from vilification, discrimination and hate crime, and as a group, have considerably higher rates of psychological illness, self-harm and suicide.

Regardless of whether you are sympathetic to queer culture, you should have regard for this vulnerability.

* 'Queer' is used here as an inclusive term which refers to anyone who is not heterosexual, or who has a gender identity that is different from their sex at birth.

for Queer Cobh-Heads

It is important to remember that acceptance is a two-way street. Your acceptance in the general community can be impeded if you dismiss this discomfort, especially when there is a genuine attempt to be accepting.

Queer pride can be rousing but its impassioned expression can be alien or confronting to the general community who may not be informed of its politics. Try not go on 'crusades' about queer rights unless there are clear signs of discrimination, disrespect or hostility.

Don't be the political-correctness police. Politically-correct terminology changes often and it is not easy for people outside the queer community to keep up with current developments. Forgive small transgressions in speech. It is more important to adhere to the tolerant, accepting spirit of political correctness than to its details.

for Other Folk

Expressions of your disapproval of queer relationships or culture will not 'change the minds' of young people but will certainly intensify their feelings of social isolation and will be detrimental to their psychological health.

Avoid cat calls, name-calling or disparaging humour, and if you are a parent, you should be actively discouraging these practices in your children.

Today, queer culture is very much part of mainstream society and members of the queer community are also members of your community. You should therefore treat queer young people in the same way as any other adult in the community – and with the same respect.

The process of 'coming out' is a time when young people are particularly vulnerable as they need to remake many of their relationships to the people and community around them. In this process, some of these relationships can end, which brings grief and weakens support networks, e.g. parents can disown and evict their queer children.

In the same manner as with other periods of increased vulnerability (e.g. deaths or divorce), you can make this time easier by being supportive, accepting and forgiving. Do not deny or dismiss their claims to being queer – young people need to be trusted to work out their own sexuality.

When conversing with queer people that you do not know well, do not make comments or jokes that point out differences in their relationships. Until recently, queer people have been ostracised by general society and queer culture remains sensitive to this exclusion.

for Other Folk

However, do not be overly anxious about offending queer people unintentionally. Although they will appreciate efforts to understand the queer perspective, expressions of your goodwill are more important than being rigorously politically-correct. If you have had unpleasant encounters with militant queer people in the past, try not to let these colour future engagements – this more confrontational, activist element is not representative of the queer community in day-to-day life.

Even though it may seem initially awkward, you should refer to a transgender person by their preferred gender pronoun i.e. a transgender woman should be referred to as “her” and a transgender man as “him”.



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This booklet was collaboratively written by Elizabeth Woods, Kevin Leong, Peter Nash, James Bilson and Kate Damery with the students of the YMCA Cobh STEP Programme and the older youths from Cobh Youth Services (Chill on the Hill).

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This booklet can be displayed on street frontage and counters as an indication of in-principle agreement with its contents. Its display signals a safe and welcoming space for young people in similar agreement.

YMCA Cobh
Cobh Youth Service / Chill on the Hill
