

# Partnership on Health And Safety in Scotland

## Protecting workers who serve the Public

### 1 Introduction

1.1 This paper has been submitted to inform PHASS members of the ongoing partnership between the STUC and the Scottish Executive (SE) in relation to working raising awareness of issues surrounding verbal and physical abuse of staff who serve the public and to invite members to consider four main objectives in respect of:

- Addressing the lack of research available on which to base an objective assessment of the level of the problem in respect of occupation, gender, ethnicity or age, in particular that of young workers who, based on anecdotal evidence appear to be more vulnerable
- Addressing the lack of research available into what constitutes best practice in risk assessment, reporting procedures and training
- Assisting in promotion of campaign objectives in difficult to reach workplaces, such as betting shops
- Building on the success of the partnership campaign and supporting the last stage of the three year awareness campaign and promoting its messages within their own structures

1.2 A short explanation of the background to the campaign and some of the issues covered is set out below. Events or other initiatives referred to throughout the document can be viewed on the Scottish Executive Campaign website [www.infoscotland.com/violenceatwork](http://www.infoscotland.com/violenceatwork) Other resources can be sourced as follows:

1.3 Report of initial work to assess the level of the problem in Scotland – Protecting Workers serving the Public: When the Customer isn't Right  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/09/19899/42674](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/09/19899/42674)

1.4 Scottish Executive Steering Group website –  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/criminal/protectingPSWs/PSWfrontpage#a1](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/criminal/protectingPSWs/PSWfrontpage#a1)

### 2 Background

2.1 The Scottish Executive / STUC partnership to implement the recommendations of the report 'Protecting Public Service Workers: When the Customer **isn't** Right' seeks to raise awareness of the unacceptability of verbal and physical abuse of staff as well as encourage workers and their employers to recognise the issue and put in place robust measures to deal with it effectively. Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that many regard such violence as 'part of the job' and do not report all but the most serious of incidents. As a result there is little information on which to base effective preventative measures due to an inaccurate picture of the level of the problem.

2.2 The STUC/SE partnership which is wide ranging in its remit covers those who work with the public in any capacity whether it be in the emergency services or the public or private sector. To date work has been carried out with the Health sector, fire and rescue services, transport (both rail and bus), retail, local authorities and their respective trade

unions as well as a number of smaller, individual businesses and voluntary organisations who have limited resources to deal with the issue. Work is in hand to promote campaign messages through and work with call and contact centres and voluntary organisations amongst others.

2.3 Evidence gathered during the compilation of the report and since in relevant sectors demonstrates that although verbal threats and abuse are an everyday occurrence for many, few steps have been taken to deal with it effectively and there are few examples of the promotion and sharing of good practice within sectors themselves or externally. Existing procedures have not always brought about positive solutions due to a variety of reasons, including staff being generally unaware of their existence, not having faith in the system or, as already mentioned, seeing this as 'part of the job'.

### **3 Lack of Research – extent of issue**

3.1 Despite extensive efforts the team working on the partnership have not been able to identify consistent methods of collation of the number of incidents other than in the rail industry which provide detailed information on which to base effective risk assessments. Even when such assaults result in legal prosecutions existing databases do not differentiate between locations when relevant details are collated.

3.2 A recent survey of social work departments carried out this year into the statistics that are collected regarding assaults on staff and what is done with them concluded that there is a wide disparity between the types of incidents considered reportable by different local authorities. The statistics generated also appear to be used solely for organisational comparison rather than for meaningful analysis or risk assessment. Only three respondents to the survey were able to provide statistics for specific posts in the organisation rather than departmental totals. It is difficult to see therefore how this could enable a satisfactory outcome in terms of reducing future incidents.

3.3 Other than independent post awareness campaign research for the Scottish Executive, there appears to be little other research available which will provide any meaningful aid to identifying the level of the problem or demonstrate the willingness or ability to share good practice that has developed in some areas. An investigation through the partnership involving the Health and Safety Executive elicited two known examples of research into the issue in relation to young workers, both of these having been carried out by Dr Claire Mayhew, of the Australian Institute of Criminology (Canberra) in respect of the fast food industry and the Health Service.

### **4 What constitutes 'Better Practice'**

4.1 Following two conferences called for the purpose in October 2005 and March of this year it would appear that whether a workplace is in the public or private sector has little impact on whether or not staff working within or their managers are able to share good practice or reporting mechanisms. Recent campaign investigations into local authorities have demonstrated as mentioned earlier that the issue is seen as an organisational one which needs to be recorded for statistical purposes rather than reviewing and strengthening existing policies and procedures.

4.2 In the private sector for different reasons it is equally challenging to convince employers that there is a problem; public image and the damage the perception that they have violent customers could bring is a major concern. However, there is a strong business case for tackling the issue effectively and associated increases in productivity.

### **5 Hard to Reach Workplaces**

5.1 Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME's) do of course encounter their fair share of verbal and physical abuse and some of the reluctance experienced at the beginning of the campaign to adopt measures to tackle this now appears to be evaporating as more individual businesses contact us for information and campaign materials. Some of this unwillingness was and remains due to stated beliefs that there is little that can be done, that this is 'part of the job', or that large resources are required to deal with it. There is clearly a great deal of work to be done to counter these opinions and ensure that the many resources available through the SE and its agencies and the trade unions to are up to date and pertinent.

5.2 However, there are other small workplaces not classified as SME's which are vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse and workers in this sector have some harrowing and often distressing stories of how they 'survive' at work.

5.3 Betting shops are usually small units of large corporate organisations throughout Scotland which often operate with one or two staff on duty. Community, an affiliate of the STUC, is the trade union which represents betting shop workers and they have agreed to attend to provide a presentation on the difficulties encountered in convincing area / regional managers of the need to set up robust reporting systems and effective measures to manage the problem.

5.4 Community, with the support of the STUC and the Scottish Executive partnership campaign, has formulated packs for members to encourage them to keep their own diaries in the absence of bona fide procedures in the workplace.

5.5 Whilst this paper does not intend to address the wider Health and Safety rights of workers in these sectors, there appears to be ample anecdotal evidence to confirm this and PHASS members may wish to consider further.

## **6 The Future**

6.1 As explained earlier the three year awareness campaign to promote the unacceptability of abusing workers who serve the public verbal or physically is now in its final stage and is due to conclude in March 2007.

6.2 Independent evaluation indicates that this has had a major impact on the public and of those interviewed who work in a public facing occupation, 38% claimed to have suffered verbal abuse by a member of the public in the last 12 months with 10% stating they had been physically assaulted.

6.3 Whilst decisions will require to be reached in the very near future on how to maintain the momentum created by the campaign and use the knowledge and skills it has produced, PHASS members may wish to individually or collectively consider how to influence the future development of materials and promotion of the overall objectives of the campaign.