

# **Violent Assaults on Public Service Staff in Scotland**

## **- Follow up Survey October 2007**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In September 2006 UNISON Scotland published the most comprehensive survey of violence, both physical and verbal, against public service workers in Scotland (<http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/safety/violencesurvey2006.pdf>). This report highlighted not only the very high level of violent incidents but also major weaknesses in the reporting and monitoring of incidents by public service organisations in Scotland.

As a follow up to the 2006 Report, UNISON has carried out a further survey of all health boards and local authorities in Scotland, under the Freedom of Information Act.

An analysis of the figures received shows an even higher level of assaults compared with last year's figures, across the two services, with health, in particular, showing an increase of over 2,000 over the year. Local Government appears, on the figures provided, to have dropped by approximately 400.

The recording of incidents has become clearer in the health service, following the amalgamation of NHS Trusts into Area Health Boards, although some still report under the new Divisions. Reporting in local authorities is if anything worse.

### **2. EMERGENCY WORKERS ACT (SCOTLAND) ACT, 2006**

Since the previous report was published in August 2006, UNISON Scotland has continued to pursue the Scottish Executive (now Scottish Government) to broaden the scope of the Emergency Workers Act to include other public service workers, such as social workers, housing staff, traffic wardens, community health and mental health workers who were recognised in our 2006 survey as being the most likely to be assaulted in the course of their employment.

There will be further representations to Parliament in the near future, and if necessary, a private members' bill will be introduced to either amend the 2006 Act or to introduce a further bill to protect all public service workers against violent attacks.

The number of people charged under the Emergency Workers' Act from May 2005 to July 2007 had risen to 1001, with 866 of them having gone to court proceedings. In the main the alleged assaults took place in major towns and cities across the Central Belt, with Glasgow and Edinburgh having the most at 199 and 88 respectively, but more rural areas, such as Selkirk, also had high numbers (42).

### **3. SITUATION IN ENGLAND AND WALES**

During the year, a Bill was published for England and Wales, to outlaw attacks on public sector workers. The Emergency Workers (Obstruction) Act 2006 now makes it an offence to obstruct or hinder persons who provide emergency services and for connected purposes. The terms of this Act are much narrower than the Scottish Act and are very precise on what can or cannot constitute an Emergency Worker.

### **4. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION SURVEY**

The 2007 survey was again sent to all local authorities and health boards in Scotland, asking for details on the number of assaults on workers during the past year, broken down by job title or department.

We received data from 29 local authorities and from all 14 Area Health Boards. Three local authorities who did not supply information asked for clarification on the information required and for more time to respond.

One said that the information was not readily available and would be too expensive to compile. One authority said that the information was not available at present, but was being compiled for a meeting of the Council's Resource Committee at the end of November, when the information would be placed on their website.

The quality of information which was supplied was if anything, more inconsistent than that submitted to the previous year's request. Some could only send information from one department. One, who last year sent in figures minus the Education Department, supplied only statistics relating to the Education Department this year. Very few of the responses could separate teaching staff from support staff, but again, education had the highest number of assaults, both physical and verbal, than any of the other departments. Social and community workers and traffic wardens also had high levels of assaults, as in previous years.

Again, due to the inconsistency of reporting, it was very difficult to compare like with like, but the overall result was that the level of assaults reported was over 2000 more than last year, with 25,157 for 2006/7 as opposed to 23,272 the previous year. These figures are also distorted, however, as the time periods referred to were different in many cases.

The Health Service had by far the biggest number, at 18,860 for the current figures, as opposed to 16,601 for the previous year. Local Government had fallen slightly from 6,672 in 2005/6 to 6,297 for the current year.

Whatever the figures, and however they are collated, it is still clear that there is an unacceptable level of violence being perpetrated against public sector staff in Scotland.

### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The main conclusion to be drawn from this report is that, particularly in local government, it is still impossible to make accurate, credible assessments of the situation in Scotland. The Scottish Government must make it a priority to put stronger reporting mechanisms in place, so that accurate monitoring of the problem can be introduced. If public

authorities cannot collate the statistics properly, then they are clearly not monitoring or taking appropriate action to minimise the risk to staff.

**5. NEXT STEPS**

UNISON will continue to press the government to improve the standard of reporting, particularly in local government, but also across the NHS, through all means available.

A message needs to be sent from this Conference, that such levels of violence are unacceptable to our members and must be tackled.

Safety Reps must continue to put pressure on their employers to introduce preventative measures to reduce violence in the workplace, by insisting upon risk assessments for all tasks carried out by our members, particularly where there is a potential for violence. They must also press their employers to encourage reporting of all assaults, and ensure that they collate the relevant statistics which should be monitored in Health & Safety Committees.

The Scottish Government should extend the scope of the Emergency Workers Act to cover a wider range of public service workers.

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