ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Staff Governance Committee
DATE	22 April 2024
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Zero Tolerance Update and Action Plan
REPORT NUMBER	CORS/24/111
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Andy MacDonald
CHIEF OFFICER	Lindsay MacInnes & Lucy McKenzie (Interim Chief Officers - People & Citizen Services)
REPORT AUTHOR	Sandie Scott
TERMS OF REFERENCE	2.5

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report has been prepared to provide an update to Staff Governance Committee around progress and activities in relation to development of a Zero Tolerance approach of violent, aggressive and/or abusive behaviour towards staff.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

2.1 note the content of the report and the progress made to date, including staff development and the overall action plan developed;

2.2 note the discrete activity being progressed by the Education Service in collaboration with Trade Unions to formulate an Action Plan to be presented at Education and Children's Services Committee in April 2024;

2.3 instruct the Chief Officer – People and Citizen Services to combine the three closely linked policies, procedures and approaches relating to Zero Tolerance, Violence and Aggression, and Unacceptable Actions into a single policy. This is with the exception of pupil behaviour in schools as this is governed by national policy and guidance, and report back to Committee for approval of the final policy; and

2.4 approve the described approach in forming a pledge to encompass the spirit of mutual respect.

3 CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Aberdeen City Council's vision is for Aberdeen as a place where all people can prosper. This means all people being able to access our services,

regardless of their background and circumstances, so that we help all people, families, businesses and communities to do well, succeed and flourish in every aspect.

3.1.2   The We CARE charter sets out what all citizens can expect when they engage with us as a council.

3.1.3   We have Equality Outcomes as part of our Public Sector Equality Duty that commits us as a Service Provider, Employer and Education Authority to improve safety and belonging for all our employees and citizens.

3.1.4   It is therefore important that we provide clarity and reassurance for citizens, employees and Elected Members on how we handle violent, aggressive and/or abusive behaviour from anyone making verbal, written or physical contact with Aberdeen City Council.

3.1.5   There are currently three corporate documents which provide guidance and support for employees on violent, aggressive and/or abusive behaviour from citizens:

- **Zero Tolerance** – encourages employees to take immediate action when they are made to feel threatened or uncomfortable.

- **Violence and Aggression**– handling unacceptable physical or verbal abuse from citizens.

- **Unacceptable Actions** – managing contact from citizens after experiencing unreasonable or unacceptable behaviour.

3.1.6   Additionally, there is the Corporate Voice Recording Policy, approved by Committee in 2008, to support employees within the Customer Contact Centre to maintain excellent customer service and ensure they are supported in managing challenging citizen behaviour effectively. This Policy has recently

been updated and refreshed, with the approval and support of Chief Officer – Governance and Trade Union colleagues under delegated powers, to reflect the implementation of a new Contact Centre call handling system. It now incorporates guidance around the legal right of the citizen to record calls they make to Aberdeen City Council, when made for personal use only, and how employees can respond as this happens on occasion. This policy will signpost to the proposed new single policy and guidance set out in this report, when it becomes available, for any instances of challenging behaviour from citizens during calls.

3.1.7   Video and face to face recording without knowledge between members of staff and citizens has been highlighted as a concern. This is not specifically included in the Corporate Voice Recording Policy and will be explored further.

3.1.8   New guidance was recently published by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman with the Unacceptable Actions Policy being replaced with an Engagement Policy and a focus on promoting positive interactions.

3.2   **Summary of Proposed Changes**

3.2.1   It is proposed to introduce a new single policy which incorporates guidance previously provided within the three separate policies. This new policy will incorporate the new Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) guidance and bring a focus on encouraging positive relationships with citizens.

3.2.2   The aim of combining all existing guidance into one policy is to make it easier for employees to find information relating to challenging behaviour and set clear expectations for citizens when they make verbal, written or physical contact with the Council.

3.2.3   The new policy will also incorporate guidance for Elected Members in similar circumstances and sets out clear expectations for those using our services.
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3.2.4   It is also proposed to develop a holistic action plan for preventing violence, aggression and/or abuse against employees, including introducing a bespoke pledge for Aberdeen City Council. The pledge seeks to further engage with employees and citizens to consider the language best to express this e.g. Zero Tolerance, Mutual Respect, 'It's not ok,' etc. It also aims to build an awareness raising campaign so that citizens are clear on the consequences of showing violent, aggressive or abusive behaviour toward employees.

3.3   **Consultation and Engagement to date on the proposed approach**

3.3.1   Initial engagement undertaken with employees who had experienced violence and aggression in the workplace highlighted a need for improvement in three key areas:

- *Reactive Support*: how we support employees when incidents occur, how incidents are reported, and how behaviour is addressed.

- *Proactive Support*: how we prevent incidents occurring and focus on cultures and environments.

- *Management* – this relates to development of leadership and management skills so that managers and colleagues are equipped to deal with incidents in the most effective way possible.

3.3.2 During engagement with Trade Union Colleagues, it was proposed to combine the Zero Tolerance, Violence and Aggression, and Engagement Policies into one procedure rather than a policy. This draft was presented to Trade Unions who were supportive of the combined approach and requested maintaining a policy approach as opposed to changing to procedures.

3.3.3 Trade Union colleagues also raised concerns in relation to how this policy connects to pupil behaviour in schools and requested further clarity around guidance in that area. This feedback is being taken forward through the development of a shared Action Plan which has been co-created by the Education Service in collaboration with Trade Unions.

3.3.4 It is hoped that the Action Plan will take account of the National Behaviour Plan (anticipated in the coming weeks) which will clarify updated national policy. There may be a need for further changes to be made to the Action Plan should the National Plan not be published in advance of the Committee meeting in April. Given that the content of the National Plan is currently unknown, the proposals within this report exclude pupil behaviour in schools at present.

3.4 Tackling violence and aggression: an action plan

3.4.1 To address the issues identified by employees during initial engagement, it is proposed to follow our change management approach to drive culture change so that we:

- *Proactive Support*: Create an environment that promotes positive interactions and relationships between citizens and employees, and clarify for citizens what boundaries are in place to protect employees and what steps will be taken if they exhibit behaviours that make employees feel threatened or are violent or aggressive.

- *Reactive Support:* Ensure that employees are confident and competent in handling potentially challenging situations, are able to access support and resources for their development and wellbeing when they need it.

- *Management*: equip our managers with the clarity, skills and resources to support their employees when incidents occur.

3.4.2 The ACC Approach to Change Management provides a structured action plan to follow to achieve culture change. Our action plan for tackling violence and aggression is presented under each of these seven pillars.

Executive Sponsorship	Communications	Training	Voice	Empowering Managers	Co-creation	Measurement
Create active and visible executive engagement	Communicate the business reasons of the change and how the change will impact employees	People feel knowledgeable, capable and confident to transition to the future state	People share their views and ideas through established reliable channels, digital and face-to-face	Engage managers and supervisors to guide employees through changes, reinforce and role model behaviours at a local level	People are collectively designing solutions to issues or challenges	Measuring if our changes are having the desired impact towards solving problems and achieving our business objectives

3.5 Executive Sponsorship

3.5.1 Executive sponsorship of a campaign is important because it shows that leaders support and are committed to its objectives. Executive sponsorship also helps to align the campaign with the organisation's vision, values, and strategic priorities, and to secure the necessary resources and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, executive sponsorship can enhance the credibility and visibility of the campaign and motivate and inspire employees to participate and adhere to the campaign's principles and practices.

3.5.2 The rationale for a pledge relating to this policy is to visibly demonstrate the organisation's commitment to creating a safe and respectful work environment for all employees, and to communicate its expectations of appropriate behaviour from citizens and stakeholders. A pledge can serve as a reminder of the support and resources available to employees who experience or witness violence and aggression, and the consequences for those who violate the policy. A pledge can encourage employees to report and address any incidents they encounter and give reassurance that their report will be listened to and acted upon.

3.5.3 It is therefore proposed to facilitate executive sponsorship on our commitment to protecting our employees from violence and aggression by introducing a "Zero Tolerance" (or similar) Pledge.

3.5.4 There are a number of general 'Zero Tolerance'-type pledges that already exist externally to Aberdeen City Council. It is worth noting that many of these pledges have broad statements and are not necessarily suited to a Local Government context.

3.5.5 It is critical that any pledge achieves its intended aims and that we consider any unintended consequences. Language around 'zero tolerance' can be problematic within a local authority context for several reasons.

3.5.6 Firstly, it may imply that the Council is unwilling or unable to accommodate the needs and circumstances of its citizens, especially those who are vulnerable or facing challenges in their lives. Some citizens may be unable to communicate or behave appropriately. A 'zero tolerance' approach may alienate or stigmatize these citizens and prevent them from accessing the services they need.

3.5.7 Second, it may undermine the trust and confidence that the public has in the Council as a democratic and accountable institution and damage its reputation and relationships with its stakeholders.

3.5.8 Third, a 'zero tolerance' pledge may suggest that the Council is intolerant of dissent, criticism, or feedback, and that it does not value the diversity and inclusion of its communities. Therefore, it is important to use language that reflects the Council's commitment to creating a safe and respectful work environment for its staff; encourages positive interactions; and also acknowledges the complexity and diversity of its citizens and their needs. More appropriate language could be *'it's not ok*, *'mutual respect,'* or '*help us to do our best for you*', '*what are our boundaries?*' '*we are committed to creating an environment of safety and belonging for all'*, '*be kind'* etc.

3.5.9 It should be noted that by adopting a zero tolerance approach and implementing restrictions of contact with citizens who have been aggressive or violent towards staff, that this does not prevent citizens from accessing essential services that the Council provide.

3.5.10 See 'Voice' (section 3.8) for suggestions on how we progress this and gain employee and citizen buy in.

3.6 Communications

3.6.1 A poster campaign is a useful way to inform and educate citizens about the Council's expectations and standards of behaviour when interacting with employees, the consequences of breaching them, and the impact it has on employee well-being and service delivery. It also serves to remind employees of their rights to work in a safe and respectful environment, and the support available if they experience violence or aggression, and reinforce that the Council is committed to preventing and addressing violence and aggression in the workplace.

3.6.2 It is therefore proposed to increase roll-out of a poster campaign. A 'Zero Tolerance' poster is currently in use in Council public facing buildings, such as the Customer Service Centre, Community Hubs and libraries, and has been refreshed to promote positive interactions between staff and citizens. The updated example poster is provided in Appendix A.

3.6.3 It is proposed to increase visibility of the policy and pledge through our digital platforms - externally, via social medially and the website; and internally via the intranet and our internal employee networks to ensure frontline employees are aware of support and reporting mechanisms.

3.7 Training

3.7.1 We have over three hundred employees in our Frontline Customer Services job family – these employees provide frontline customer services for the public, which typically involves a high level of direct interaction with citizens on a day-to-day basis. This means they are often more at risk of encountering violence and aggression in the workplace.

3.7.2 Training for these employees is important in preventing violence and aggression. It teaches employees how to de-escalate possible disputes, empathise with the trauma behind difficult behaviour, communicate effectively, manage their own emotions, follow relevant policies and procedures, and keep themselves and others safe.

3.7.3 By providing training for staff, the Council can ensure that they have the skills and confidence to handle challenging citizen interactions, reduce the risk of injury and distress, and improve the quality-of-service delivery.

3.7.4 There are a range of courses already available:

- <u>Violence and Aggression - Phone Rage</u>

- <u>Conflict Management</u>

- <u>Level 2 Conflict Management</u>

- <u>Trauma Informed</u>

3.7.4.1 Spotlight on: Trauma and Challenging Behaviours

Trauma is an emotional response to a distressing or life-threatening event that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Trauma can have lasting effects on a person's mental, physical, and emotional health, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, and more. This can present in our citizens as:

- Difficulty trusting others, especially authority figures, and may perceive the Council as threatening or hostile.

- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or following instructions, and may miss appointments, deadlines, or payments.

- Being easily triggered by loud noises, certain words, or specific locations, and may react with fear, anger, or panic.

- Avoiding or withdrawing from contact with the Council, or conversely, seeking excessive reassurance or support from the Council staff.

- Acting impulsively, aggressively, or self-destructively, and not complying with the Council's rules or regulations.

These behaviours are not intentional or malicious, but rather adaptive responses to cope with the trauma they have endured. Therefore, it is important for employees to be trauma informed and skilled, and to respond to these behaviours with empathy, respect, and understanding.

Aberdeen City Council are using training resources from the National Trauma Training programme to create trauma informed and skilled practice within the organisation. NHS Education for Scotland (NES) created this programme to be used by every member of the Scottish Workforce so that they can understand the role they play in responding to people affected by trauma.

3.7.5 Bespoke training interventions are also available where required and are often more effective at meeting the unique needs of a service or the service users who may pose a higher level of risk to employees. For example, Public Office Training has been delivered by Police Scotland to meet training requirements for employees operating from the Customer Service Centre. Training has also been provided by GREC and coordinated via the Scottish Refugee Council for supporting Ukrainian refugees. See Appendix B.

3.8 **Voice and Co-Creation**

3.9 It is proposed that additional engagement and consultation be conducted to gather feedback on the proposed campaign. This will help evaluate its effectiveness, increase employee awareness and understanding, and create a dialogue between employees and managers.

3.9.1 Additional employee engagement is also required to assess the visibility, accessibility and effectiveness of current reporting tools for violent, abusive or aggressive behaviour.

3.9.2 Citizen feedback on the campaign would also help us understand how the campaign affects their perception and experience of our services, and to assess its relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency.

3.10 Empowering Managers

3.10.1 Managers play a vital role in supporting employees after incidents of violence and aggression. They can help employees cope with the emotional impact of such incidents, create a safe work environment, prevent escalation of violence, and foster a culture of learning and improvement.

3.10.2 Managers play a key role in ensuring that any incidents of unacceptable actions, violence, aggression or challenging behaviour are reported into the Health & Safety System, and that Service Managers and Chief Officers are monitoring and managing incidents in their area.

3.10.3 There is a requirement for risk assessments to be undertaken across all service areas where employees may experience challenging behaviour. It is important that these are carried out consistently, results recorded, and action taken.

3.10.4 It is therefore proposed that we engage our Leadership Forum of over six hundred leaders and managers in the Council to raise awareness of the campaign and their responsibilities and signpost them to resources and training so that they can better support their employees with the behavioural skills required for dealing with difficult situations.

3.11 Measurement

3.11.1 It is proposed that we centrally monitor incidents of violence and aggression to identify trends and hotspots that need further investigation to see what additional mitigating actions can be taken to reduce incidents. And also, that we measure frequency of incidents over time to see whether the proposed campaign is making an impact. It is proposed that we continue to report the results of this to Staff Governance Committee.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Any costs associated with additional training required would be covered by the Corporate Training Budget.

4.2 Any costs associated with a promotional campaign would be covered by People and Citizen Services.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Incidents of aggressive, violent or abusive behaviour can give rise to criminal or civil legal action.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

7. RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk	If we do not promote a safe environment for our staff and citizens, then there is risk that we do not meet our strategic objectives.	The risk is mitigated through robust processes and procedures such as risk assessments, management of unacceptable actions and proactive communication around zero tolerance approach when interacting with the Council.	Low	No- in this instance we want to avoid risks in this area rather than tolerate.
Compliance	As employers, The Council has duties under Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. Although not specifically identified, there is a requirement to ensure the safety of employees in respect of harm caused by violent or aggressive behaviour from service users.	Assessments are carried out to identify any risks to the safety of employees and mitigating actions are put in place to sufficiently reduce the risk of unacceptable actions towards employees whilst at work. This includes providing training to employees on dealing with unacceptable behaviours,	Low	Yes

		sharing information on service users where required to reduce the risk to employees, making reasonable adjustments to working practices where necessary and provide debriefing and support after an incident occurs.		
Operational	The effects of unacceptable actions in the workplace can impact considerably both on staff and other citizens. If unaddressed, this can potentially lead to poor morale, increased staff turnover, absence and litigation, making it more difficult to recruit.	There are robust supporting policies in place, which are easily accessible to provide guidance to managers and staff around how to manage challenging behaviours. Debriefing, and support is provided to impacted individuals where necessary, after an incident occurs.	Low	No- as above
Financial	Without clear processes in place, there is a risk of injury and claims being made to/against the organisation. Should inadequate policy provision be in place this could be detrimental when considering such claims.	The risk is mitigated through robust processes and procedures such as risk assessments and the combined policy itself provides the clarity to citizens and staff as to what is acceptable.	Low	Yes
Reputational	If unacceptable actions are unchallenged this can lead to a poor	There are robust supporting policies in place, which are easily	Low	No - averse to risk in this area

	image for the organisation.	accessible to provide guidance to managers and staff around how to manage challenging behaviours.		and so want to exceed this RAS in this area.
Environment / Climate	There are no associated environment/climate related risks.	Not applicable	Not applicable	Yes

8. OUTCOMES

COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2024-2025	
	Impact of Report
Local Outcome Improvement Plan	
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	The proposals within this report support the Prosperous Place Theme within the LOIP. Aberdeen City Council's vision is for Aberdeen as a place where all people can prosper. This means all people being able to access our services, regardless of their background and circumstances, so that we help all people, families, businesses and communities to do well, succeed and flourish in every aspect.

9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	New Integrated Impact Assessment has been completed.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required
Other	None.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 Violence and aggression procedure - replaced the Violence and Abuse Towards Employees Policy

10.2 Unacceptable Actions Guidance

10.3 Corporate Voice Recording Policy

11. APPENDICES

11.1 Appendix A – Zero Tolerance poster
Appendix B – Bespoke Training Intervention to support Ukrainian Resettlement

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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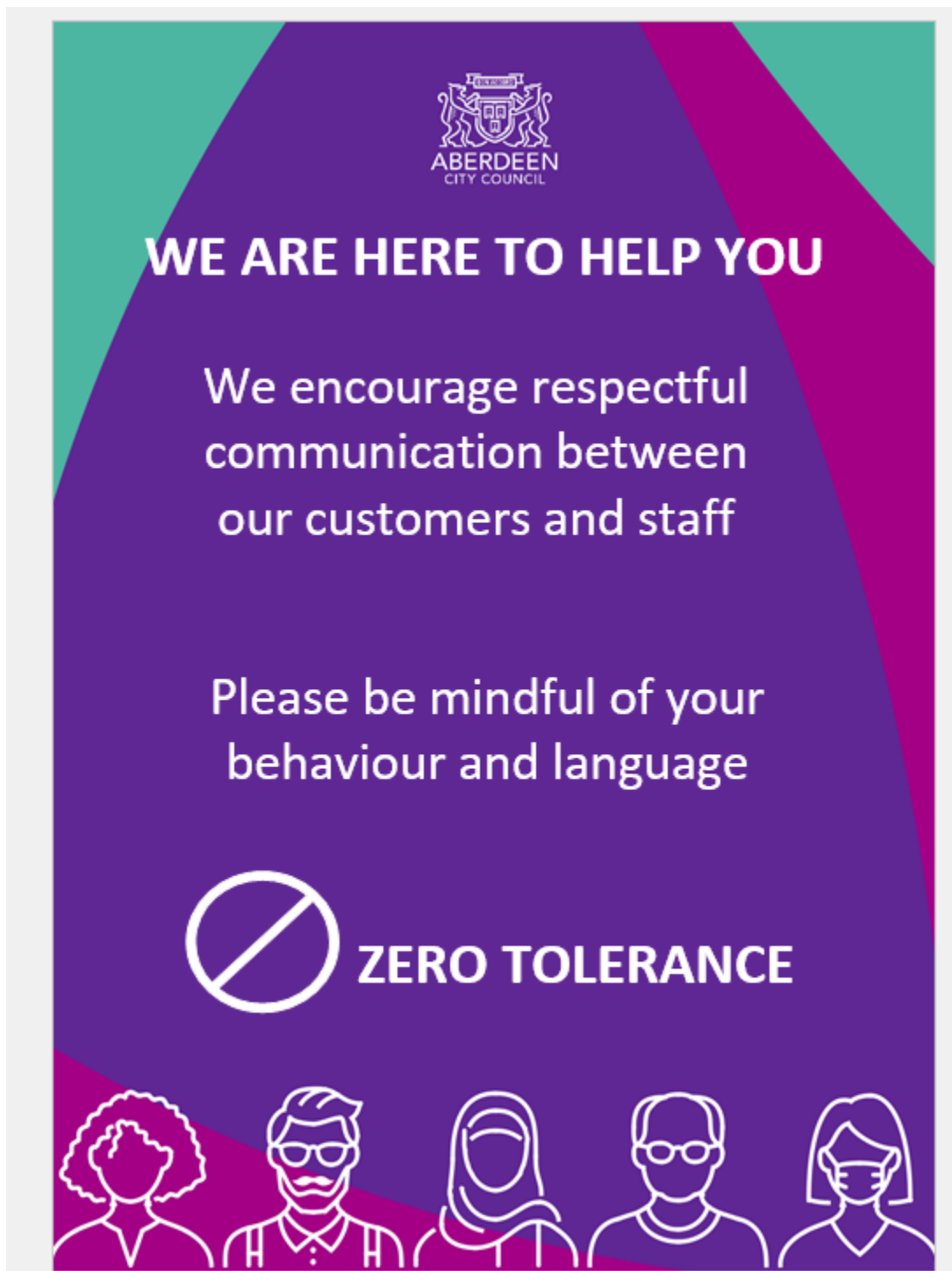
Appendix B – Bespoke Training Intervention to support Ukrainian Resettlement

A specific and tailored example of a training intervention to foster an environment of safety, belonging and inclusion is the development of training for staff assisting Ukrainian resettlement in March 2023. In partnership with Grampian Regional Equality Council and the Scottish Refugee Council, we sourced training provided by two Ukrainian lawyers and mediators. The trainers had a deep understanding of the Ukrainian context, particularly the impacts of the war and displacement on mental health and social adjustment.

The training program was designed to assist staff involved in supporting refugees and focused on the culture, behaviours and emotional awareness. It consisted of education sessions, divided into modules with the following themes:

- The theory of conflicts (understanding of conflict's nature, the evolution of conflict, how to work with interests and needs, using a negotiation approach in situations with potential for conflict

- Emotional awareness (understanding own and other's emotions, self-regulation, empathetic approach, social intelligence)

- Non-violent communication (dealing with toxic communication)

- Cultural differences (strategies of behaviour in Ukrainian and Scottish communities, working with Ukrainians who have war trauma)

These would in turn provide attendees with practical skills on how to:

- Identify and cope with their own and others' emotions and needs

- Increase emotional awareness and stress resilience

- Work on the prevention of conflicts

- Build peaceful communication.

The participants were from the Housing and Resettlement teams within ACC, who work directly to provide accommodation and support services.

The workshop achieved its objectives of enhancing the participants' knowledge and skills on the following topics:

- Emotional intelligence: the participants learned how to recognize, understand, and manage their own and others' emotions, especially in stressful and conflict situations. They also learned how to use empathy and active listening to build rapport and trust with the refugees.

- Conflict resolution: the participants learned how to identify the sources, types, and stages of conflict, and how to apply different strategies and techniques to resolve them peacefully and effectively. They also learned how to use the WINA model (What, Interests, Needs, Agreement) to structure a constructive dialogue and reach a mutually beneficial outcome.

- Cultural differences: the participants learned how to appreciate and respect the cultural diversity and similarities between the UK and Ukraine, and how to avoid stereotypes and prejudices. They also learned how to use non-violent communication to express their feelings and needs, and to request and offer feedback.

- Effect of trauma: the participants learned how to recognize and understand the signs and symptoms of trauma, and how to support the refugees who have experienced trauma as a result of the war and displacement. They also learned how to practice self-care and seek professional help when needed.