

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Staff Governance Committee
DATE	16 June 2025
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Citizen Interaction Policy
REPORT NUMBER	CORS/25/156
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Andy MacDonald, Executive Director for Corporate Services
CHIEF OFFICER	Isla Newcombe, CO People and Citizen Services
REPORT AUTHOR	Lucy McKenzie, Citizen Services Manager
TERMS OF REFERENCE	2.5

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report follows on from a report to Staff Governance Committee on 22 April 2024 (CORS/24/111), where the Chief Officer – People and Citizen Services was instructed to combine 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.
- 1.2 It was agreed that the final policy would be brought to Committee for approval.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:

- 2.1 approves the implementation of the Citizen Interaction Policy and notes the accompanying procedure, which together promote positive citizen engagement, promotes employee and elected member safety, and provide clear guidelines for managing challenging citizen interactions;
- 2.2 instructs the Chief Officer – People and Citizen Services to make the Citizen Interaction Policy and supporting Managing Citizen Interaction Procedures are easily accessible to employees, managers and elected members; and
- 2.3 instructs the Chief Officer – People and Citizen Services to publish the Citizen Interaction Policy, Zero Tolerance Pledge and Managing Citizen Interaction Procedure externally on the Council's website.

3 CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Background

- 3.1.1 Since the previous Committee decision, research, engagement, and collaboration has been conducted to develop a Citizen Interaction Policy (Appendix A), drawing on case studies and best practices as recommended by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. The policy enforces zero tolerance for violence, aggression, and abuse towards employees, promoting mutual respect between employees and citizens.
- 3.1.2 The new single policy incorporates guidance previously provided within the three separate approaches and policies. The aim of combining all existing guidance into one policy is to make it easier for employees to find information relating to challenging behaviour.
- 3.1.3 The policy applies to all those working on behalf of the council, including agency workers, volunteers, and elected members, who interact with citizens. The policy applies to all those working on behalf of the council, (including agency workers, volunteers, and elected members, who interact with citizens. The policy also details the responsibilities of the Council, elected members, managers, and employees in ensuring safe and respectful interactions.
- 3.1.4 The Citizen Interaction Policy aims to ensure that Aberdeen City Council provides clear and accessible services to all citizens while maintaining a safe working environment for employees. The updated policy now includes guidelines on addressing social media harassment, along with information on available support for affected employees.
- 3.1.5 The policy now includes guidance for Elected Members on handling difficult constituent interactions. Ensuring the safety of elected members and candidates is a national priority. While the initiative Operation Ford addresses harassment or intimidation connected to an elected member's official duties, the Council's Citizen Interaction Policy provides guidelines around other unacceptable actions they may face.
- 3.1.6 The proposed approach towards unacceptable behaviour from a child or young person has been outlined in accordance with the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) principles.
- 3.1.7 A supporting 'Managing Citizen Interaction Procedure' has also been developed for reference alongside the policy. The procedure provides more detailed guidance around how to manage challenging citizen interactions, including zero tolerance incidents.

3.2 Summary of the Citizen Interaction Policy

- 3.2.1 This new policy incorporates the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) guidance including a focus on encouraging positive relationships with citizens. There is an emphasis that employees should aim to defuse and de-escalate situations where possible.
- 3.2.2 The policy outlines what citizens can expect when receiving services through the We CARE Charter and Commitments. It also outlines what the Council

expects from citizens in return. It emphasises positive engagement and provides procedures for when interactions become challenging or a 'zero tolerance' approach needs to be taken. This includes how we handle violent, aggressive and/or abusive behaviour from citizens making verbal, written or physical contact with us.

- 3.2.3 Citizen interaction also includes online comments about Aberdeen City Council or individual employees, whether shared publicly or in a forum or way that means they are not private, even when they are not shared directly with the Council.
- 3.2.4 All members of the community have the right to fair and equal access to Council services and this policy does not interfere with the need to ensure that any service provided is accessible to all on an equal basis. We recognise that some citizens may find it challenging to interact with the Council and reasonable adjustments should be considered. Some of our citizens will also come into contact with the Council at difficult times in their lives or when experiencing challenging circumstances, and this may impact on their behaviour. At the same time, our employees are entitled to be treated with respect as they carry out their roles and it is important to recognise situations that are unacceptable or inappropriate in a professional environment.
- 3.2.5 While we strive for positive interactions, there may be instances where the behaviour or actions of individuals using our services necessitate action to protect our employees and our ability to provide services. This includes zero-tolerance incidents and also other scenarios such as excessive contact and unreasonable demands on our services.
- 3.2.6 The policy signposts to associated procedures and documentation to guide employees in managing citizen interactions, including social media harassment and interactions with children and young people.
- 3.2.7 It should be noted that by adopting a zero tolerance approach and implementing restrictions of contact with citizens where necessary, this does not prevent citizens from accessing essential services that the Council provide. This includes submitting complaints under our Complaints Handling Procedure.

3.3 Consultation and Engagement to date

- 3.3.1 The policy has been consulted on with all relevant Clusters and has been approved by the Council's Policy Group. Engagement with elected members has taken place through the Members Working Group.
- 3.3.2 The policy has been shared and discussed with Trade Union colleagues, and the feedback has been positive. Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) have advised that while they are reassured that the policy offers appropriate protections for teachers in relation to social media harassment and issues arising from interactions with parents and carers, it explicitly excludes interactions with children and young people in schools. It has been agreed

that a similar exercise to consolidate guidance will be undertaken within Education in relation to children and young people in the school setting. This will support Education employees in navigating the supporting procedures when physical and verbal abuse occurs. Once drafted, the proposed guidance will be shared with the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (LNCT) for ratification and to raise awareness among teaching colleagues.

- 3.3.3 The guidance around handling situations involving children and young people has been discussed with Youth Participation Groups to ensure that our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 are met.

3.4 Next Steps

- 3.4.1 It is proposed that the Citizen Engagement Policy, Zero Tolerance Pledge (Appendix B) and sections of the Managing Citizen Interaction Procedure relating to this policy will be published externally on our website.
- 3.4.2 The new policy and pledge will be published and promoted internally through our digital platforms – the intranet, the Customer Academy and our internal employee networks to ensure employees are aware of available support and reporting mechanisms.
- 3.4.3 A direct link to the guidance will be published on the Elected Member Information and Development home page on the intranet to ensure the guidance is easily accessible to all Elected Members. Engagement will continue through the Members Working Group and ongoing awareness sessions related to Operation Ford.
- 3.4.4 An awareness raising campaign will run to inform and educate citizens about the Citizen Interaction Policy. This includes the Council's zero tolerance expectations and standards of behaviour when interacting with our employees and our elected members. Updated Zero Tolerance posters (Appendix C) will be displayed in public facing Council buildings such as the Customer Service Centre, Community Hubs and school receptions, 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.
- 3.4.5 The awareness campaign will also serve to remind employees of their rights to work in a safe and respectful environment and reinforce that the Council is committed to preventing and addressing violence and aggression in the workplace. The campaign will remind employees and managers of the support and resources available to individuals who experience or witness zero tolerance incidents, and the consequences for those who violate the policy.
- 3.4.6 The awareness campaign will encourage employees to report and address any incidents they encounter and give reassurance that their report will be listened to and acted upon. It will also signpost to the training and support available.

- 3.4.7 It is proposed that we engage our Leadership Forum of over 600 leaders and managers in the Council to raise awareness of the policy and their responsibilities, including risk assessments and incident reporting. We will signpost to resources and training as outlined in the policy and supporting procedures, so that they can better support their employees with the behavioural skills required for dealing with difficult situations.
- 3.4.8 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.
- 3.4.9 We will monitor incidents of violence and aggression to measure the impact of the awareness campaign and identify any trends that need further investigation.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Any costs associated with training required would be covered by the Corporate Training Budget.
- 4.2 Any costs associated with a promotional campaign would be covered by the People and Citizen Services revenue budget.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Incidents of aggressive, violent or abusive behaviour can give rise to criminal or civil legal action. This Policy will assist the Council meet its obligations under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.

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,	The risk is mitigated through robust processes and procedures	Low	No- in this instance we want

	then there is risk that we do not meet our strategic objectives.	such as risk assessments, management of unacceptable actions and proactive communication around zero tolerance approach when interacting with the Council.		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, 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.	Low	Yes

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 image for the organisation.	There are robust supporting policies in place, which are easily accessible to provide guidance to managers and staff around how to manage challenging behaviours.	Low	No - averse to risk in this area 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

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2023-2024</u>	
	Impact of Report
<u>Local Outcome Improvement Plan</u>	
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 [Zero Tolerance Update and Action Plan Report \(CORS/24/1111\)](#)

11. APPENDICES

11.1 Appendix A – Citizen Interaction Policy

11.2 Appendix B – Zero Tolerance Pledge

11.3 Appendix C – Zero Tolerance Poster

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