

Defining and enabling informal workplace conflict resolution

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Executive summary

Acas commissioned The Social Agency to explore the range of informal conflict resolution practices used in workplaces. The research aimed to:

1. Define informal resolution, examine the processes that underpin it, and explore the views and experiences of managers and practitioners involved.
2. Identify how Acas can support these actors to make effective choices in using informal resolution.

The research focused on 'individual' conflict – meaning problems, issues, or disputes between individuals and their employer or manager, or between individual colleagues.

It employed a qualitative design, centred on 33 in-depth interviews with managers and practitioners experienced in informal resolution – including HR professionals, mediators, trade union representatives and Acas practitioners. It also included a rapid review of Acas evidence, as well as focus groups with a subset of participants.

Findings are summarised below, organised around the study's 4 main research questions.

How is informal resolution defined and described by managers and practitioners?

Rather than considering informal resolution in terms of distinct approaches or methods of resolution, managers and practitioners tend to frame it as an overarching ethos – that is, a common set of beliefs and ideals about how to manage conflict at work informally, with line managers in particular sometimes using terms for approaches such as 'mediation' and 'facilitation' interchangeably.

Notwithstanding the lack of a single, shared definition, participants commonly understood informal resolution as:

- seeking to resolve issues early, to avoid formal processes
- suitable for many issues, but not severe or gross misconduct
- voluntary, with parties having some agency over the process, format and outcomes
- resolving conflict through direct communication and dialogue
- aiming to create safe spaces for people to express themselves candidly without fear of it directly leading to formal sanctions

Participants considered that appropriate language is key to effective informal resolution, shaping experiences and outcomes – and felt it should ideally serve 3 purposes:

1. Help create a trusting environment, by clearly distinguishing informal from formal processes.
2. Avoid use of inflammatory terms that could inadvertently escalate the issue.
3. Enable constructive dialogue by helping parties express their feelings about the issue rather than what the other party did wrong.

Phrases like 'open and honest conversation', 'structured conversation', and 'facilitated discussion' better support informal resolution than terms like 'dispute' or 'disciplinary', as they avoid the language of conflict and sanction, and describe resolution neutrally.

Phrases like 'a quiet word' risk downplaying the time and effort involved and might suggest being told off or trivialising an issue.

More generally, the language used to describe informal conflict resolution has a tendency to be vague – for example, participants commonly used phrases such as 'nipping it in the bud' to describe the process and goals of informal resolution.

As an ethos rather than a set of distinct methods, it is difficult to disaggregate the specific processes underpinning informal resolution. How it works in practice is also shaped by the organisational setting (including size, sector, and roles present), the nature of the specific issue, and individuals' beliefs about how best to handle the situation in the circumstances. As a result, the approach taken often varies from case to case.

Nevertheless, attempts at informal resolution follow – or aim to follow – a common trajectory:

- beginning with each party having only their own perspective
- moving towards establishing a shared understanding that integrates different perspectives
- ending with mutual understanding or agreement on next steps to resolve the issue

What are managers' and practitioners' experiences of informal conflict resolution?

Experiences vary – including what managers and practitioners do to try to resolve conflicts informally, how they find the process, and the outcomes that result.

Informal conflict resolution often involves managers or practitioners having one-to-one conversations with the parties involved, as well as others such as HR, trade union representatives, or peers, to decide how best to proceed. In cases of interpersonal and multi-person conflict, it may include creating channels for parties to understand each other's perspectives, for example through a facilitated conversation. Sometimes this is part of a structured process like mediation; other times it unfolds more organically through iterative conversations. Informal resolution may also involve coaching parties to engage constructively, such as avoiding accusatory language.

Participants did not make clear associations between the type of conflict (for example, disciplinary versus grievance issues) and how informal resolution is pursued. What matters more is whether the issue is one where compromise is a possible pathway to resolution. For disputes that concern organisation-wide policies which cannot be altered (for example, maternity pay or benefits), mediation and facilitation may be unsuitable, but one-to-one conversations may help to understand concerns and explore whether clarification resolves the issue.

Participants generally reported positive experiences with informal resolution and seldom regretted trying it, though they acknowledged it can be emotionally demanding and time-consuming. Like formal processes, it does not always lead to a successful outcome, but

even when unsuccessful, informal approaches can offer benefits – such as giving parties an opportunity to improve soft skills. This, in turn, can lead to successful engagement in informal resolution in future.

What factors influence the use of informal conflict resolution?

Decisions to pursue informal conflict resolution unfold in 3 stages, each influenced by different factors.

Enablers at the stage of the initial trigger

Informal resolution may be triggered by employees raising an issue, or by managers and practitioners detecting one themselves. Either way, it is more likely to happen where:

- employees, managers and practitioners interact regularly
- workplace relationships are positive and trusting
- the organisational culture is supportive of people raising and addressing conflicts informally

Enablers at the stage of deciding to adopt an informal approach

The subsequent decision to adopt an informal approach is motivated by the belief that it will lead to a preferable outcome than defaulting to a formal process. Managers especially tend to prioritise social and personal outcomes like preserving and improving relationships and avoiding stress and discomfort. Internal practitioners, while also recognising the importance of these factors, tend to focus more on organisational outcomes, like improved efficiency and reduced costs.

Social influences are also key in decisions to adopt an informal approach – particularly for managers, who seek advice from peers, senior managers, HR and trade union representatives when deciding how to act. Organisational policies and a workplace culture encouraging informal resolution also positively influence the decision to try an informal approach.

Enablers at the stage of deciding how to resolve the conflict informally

Decisions about how to manage a conflict informally are influenced by a variety of individual and social factors – including:

- managers' and practitioners' personal beliefs about and perceptions of the conflict and the parties involved – including the perceived causes and severity of the issue and any previous approach to resolve it
- past experiences (including of managing conflict, people management, leadership and daily life)
- Acas guidance
- advice from colleagues and HR
- conversations with the parties involved

Effective informal resolution begins by building a shared understanding of the problem, before seeking a way forward. This is enabled by a variety of competencies that participants did not always clearly define. These include: active listening, empathy, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, clear communication and the ability to ask good questions.

Effective informal resolution also relies on:

- parties approaching the process in good faith and trusting in it
- addressing any power imbalances to create a safe space for communication
- timely intervention, before conflict has become entrenched

Barriers to the pursuit of informal resolution

Barriers identified largely reflect the inverse of these enablers. For instance, while trusting workplace relations support informal resolution, low-trust relationships between employees, managers and HR can significantly impede it.

Consistent with previous Acas research, a key barrier was the lack of managerial skills and confidence to engage effectively in informal resolution. This is compounded by limited access to management training, guidance and advice, as well as insufficient time and competing job demands on managers.

Further barriers include unsupportive organisational cultures, lack of senior leadership buy-in and – in some cases, related – disciplinary and grievance policies that fail to promote or prioritise informal resolution.

What are the implications for Acas guidance?

Acas could consider further strengthening efforts in the following areas, some of which are already being implemented:

- advocating the benefits of informal resolution, while being transparent that it does not suit every scenario and stressing the importance of selecting the right approach in each case
- building workplace actors' capabilities for interpreting situations and judging what is most appropriate – for example, by expanding interventions aimed at communicating the nature and value of conflict management skills, framing training and other resources around these, and supporting organisations to develop their own informal resolution approaches
- providing more resources that not only inform but also show managers and employees what informal resolution involves – for example, through videos and case studies
- fostering opportunities for managers and practitioners to identify signs of emerging conflict early, and to learn about and discuss appropriate options for resolution with peers – for example, by encouraging networking and communication about conflict within the workplace, and promoting peer-learning within and across organisations
- revisiting the language used in guidance to describe and encourage informal resolution, such as references to 'a quiet word'
- reviewing guidance on record keeping during informal conflict resolution to help employers and practitioners make more informed decisions
- strengthening awareness of Acas and its association with informal as well as formal conflict resolution, for example, by more strongly aligning Acas with concepts like 'reconciliation', which can span formal and informal resolution

1. Introduction and context

1.1. Background

Acas is committed to fostering early and informal workplace conflict resolution as part of its statutory duty to promote the improvement of industrial relations. This duty is delivered through, for example, Acas's work issuing statutory Codes of Practice, publishing guidance, and offering advice and training.

Over the past decade, [Acas's research on workplace conflict](#) has highlighted 2 main themes in the management of individual workplace conflict:

1. While employers are widely supportive of early informal resolution in principle, various factors can hinder it in practice including a lack of skills, confidence, resources, and supportive systems. Despite employers' policies often encouraging informal resolution, they rarely specify practical steps, which can leave managers uncertain of their options. Organisational culture can also lead to a tendency to use formal, risk-averse approaches by default or, alternatively, to conflict being ignored rather than addressed – resulting in trust erosion, absenteeism, presenteeism, and resignations (read for instance [Saundry et al, 2024](#) and [Urwin et al, 2024](#) – a full list of relevant Acas sources appears in Appendix 3).

2. The most significant costs of individual conflict for UK organisations arise not from tribunal claims but from the escalation of conflict in the workplace to formal disciplinary or grievance procedures, or resignation or dismissal – with peak costs occurring just before litigation ([Saundry and Urwin, 2021](#)).

These findings underscore the value of focussing on early resolution and align with Acas's emphasis on equipping all parties in the workplace to make informed choices about their options for seeking a resolution to their issue and to resolve issues informally wherever possible and appropriate.

1.2. Objectives and research questions

In December 2024, Acas commissioned The Social Agency to conduct research to understand how Acas can better support workplace actors to engage in informal conflict resolution, where appropriate. The focus here was resolution of 'individual conflict', meaning any problems, issues or disputes between individual employees and their employer or manager, or between colleagues. Collective disputes between groups of employees and their employer were not within scope of this research.

This research had 2 objectives:

1. To define what 'informal conflict resolution' looks like in the workplace, analyse the processes that support it, and explore manager and practitioner perspectives and experiences of them.
2. To identify ways for Acas to enable these actors to make appropriate and effective choices, and use of informal resolution in handling individual workplace conflict.

To achieve these objectives, the research set out to address 4 sets of research questions:

1. How is informal resolution defined and understood by managers and practitioners?

- How are informal interventions conceptualised and described by managers and practitioners? What language do they use?
- Are there terms they regard as especially helpful or inhibitive?
- How can we best disaggregate and describe the specific processes underpinning informal resolution, to make the concept useful and appealing to managers, practitioners and employees?

2. What are participants' experiences of informal workplace conflict resolution interventions?

- What early and informal interventions (for example, mediation, facilitation or coaching) have managers and practitioners tried, advised on, or supported, and what were their experiences and outcomes?
- How receptive are they to other untried approaches? How are different types of workplace conflict managed informally – such as individual, interpersonal, and complex multi-person conflicts?

3. What factors influence the use of informal resolution?

- What are the enablers and barriers that respectively encourage or deter people from pursuing informal resolution across different operating environments (for example, organisation sizes and sector) and in response to different kinds of conflict?
- What factors should be emphasised, and what types of framing used, to foster most openness to informal resolution?

4. What are the implications for Acas guidance?

- What conclusions can be drawn about the general principles, factors and language that Acas guidance might use to encourage and enable more employers to prioritise – and workplace actors to engage successfully in – the informal resolution of workplace conflict?

1.3. Methodology

The research used a qualitative methodology (described in more detail in Appendix 1), centred on 33 online, hour-long, semi-structured interviews with 18 line managers and 15 in-house and external practitioners, including HR professionals, mediators, Acas staff, and a small number of trade union representatives. All participants had experience seeking to resolve conflicts informally. Participants were also recruited from a range of organisational settings (full sample details are provided in Appendix 2). At the end of the study, 12 practitioners were reconvened in 2 online workshops to validate emerging findings and explore implications for Acas. All interviews and workshops were recorded and analysed thematically. It is important to note that the sample:

- did not include employees directly, focusing instead on managers and practitioners, with trade union representatives providing some insight into the employee perspective
- included only participants with personal experience of attempting to resolve workplace conflict informally, including through approaches such as mediation, facilitation, and one-to-one conversations

2. How is informal conflict resolution defined and understood?

In this section, we explore the research question: 'How is informal resolution defined and understood by participants?' Here we consider:

- how informal interventions were understood and described by participants, including the language that was used
- what language was regarded as conducive and inhibitive to effective informal conflict resolution
- options for disaggregating and describing specific processes underpinning informal resolution, to make the concept useful and appealing to managers and employees

To keep discussions in-scope, before exploring how participants defined and understood informal conflict resolution themselves, all interviewees were provided with a baseline definition of informal conflict resolution, as follows:

'Informal conflict resolution refers to attempts to resolve disputes or conflict at work before they have escalated to the point of a formal disciplinary or grievance process.'

2.1. How is informal conflict resolution conceptualised?

Groups understand, define and talk about informal conflict resolution in different ways.

For example, within our sample, Acas practitioners tended to make more explicit distinctions between different methods of informal resolution – conceptualising it as a spectrum of escalating actions, ranging from doing nothing, to keeping a personal record, to initiating a direct conversation, and potentially involving a third party such as a mediator – all before any formal process is initiated.

By contrast, other practitioners, and particularly line managers, tended not to conceptualise it in this way, and even used different terms, such as 'mediation' and 'facilitation', interchangeably. For them, informal conflict resolution appeared to be more an ethos, that is, a set of ideals and beliefs guiding how to approach conflict, rather than a set of methods and processes to be adopted and applied.

The research team also observed that much of the language used to refer to informal conflict resolution was vague and nebulous. For example, participants commonly used euphemistic phrases such as 'coffee chat', 'catch-up' and 'nipping it in the bud' to describe the process and goals of informal conflict resolution.

Despite these differences and ambiguities, the following 5 characteristics were commonly associated:

1. Informal conflict resolution seeks to resolve an issue or conflict early, to avoid the need for a formal process

This mirrors the baseline definition above. Participants widely perceived informal conflict resolution as a step intended to prevent a conflict from escalating, and to avoid the need for a formal process.

2. Informal conflict resolution is suitable for many types of issues, but not cases of severe or gross misconduct

Participants had tried to resolve a variety of different types of conflict informally. This included individual disciplinary, performance, and grievance issues, as well as interpersonal and multi-person disputes. Consequently, there was no evidence to suggest participants associated informal conflict resolution with specific types of conflict.

However, participants felt some conflicts were less suitable for an informal approach. For example, they perceived severe conflicts, such as those involving parties who refuse to engage with one another, or which have become very entrenched over time, as very difficult to resolve informally. Many also said cases of gross misconduct automatically demanded a formal approach.

Some participants challenged the idea that it is possible to draw a firm line between issues warranting a formal versus informal approach based on severity. For example, a line manager described a case in which an employee had, in their view, committed a serious behavioural offence warranting a formal disciplinary procedure. After speaking with the aggrieved party, however, the line manager decided to approach the issue informally, which all parties were willing to try, and which ultimately led to a successful resolution. This case highlights that judgements about the severity of issues and the appropriateness of informal conflict resolution are complex and influenced by multiple factors.

3. Informal conflict resolution is a voluntary process in which involved parties may have a say on process, format and outcomes

Participants were clear that people cannot be forced to resolve a workplace conflict informally. For example, they noted that employees may raise a formal grievance, even if others in the business would prefer to handle matters informally. They also suggested that forcing someone into informal resolution was likely to be counterproductive, for example, because parties may then not engage in it in good faith.

Furthermore, some participants believed that involved parties have more agency to shape informal conflict resolution, compared to formal processes. They noted that whereas formal procedures are set by an organisation and must align with relevant legislation, informal approaches can be much more flexible. In several cases, participants actively consulted involved parties to make decisions about what the approach would look like. These decisions included:

- whether to try an informal approach in the first place
- where they would feel most comfortable talking about an issue (for example, at the office, offsite, or remotely from home)
- when and how they would feel comfortable engaging directly with the other parties involved (for example, in a face-to-face meeting), or whether they would prefer a third party to act as an intermediary
- what a successful resolution would look like, and next steps for achieving those outcomes

Participants further believed that giving parties agency to influence the approach can make successful outcomes more likely, for example, because it can generate buy-in to and trust in the approach. This and other enabling factors are explored in more detail in sections 3 and 4.

4. Informal resolution resolves conflict through direct communication and dialogue between the parties involved

Participants felt that some degree of direct communication and dialogue between disputing parties – whether in conflicts between individual employees and their employer or manager, or inter-employee disputes between colleagues – is a key mechanism for resolving conflict informally. They believed that, in many cases, conflict at work arises due to people misunderstanding an issue and what others think and feel about it. Enabling people to communicate their perspectives and to listen to the views of others can therefore be sufficient to resolve both the issue and the associated conflict.

In practice, communication between parties was facilitated in different ways, depending on the circumstances of the context. Different practices are explored in further detail in section 3.

5. Informal conflict resolution seeks to create a safe space for people to share personal experiences and perspectives candidly, without fear of direct formal sanctions (for example, a formal written warning)

Participants acknowledged that enabling genuine, productive communication and dialogue between the parties involved can be challenging. People often find it difficult to express their views without escalating the dispute, particularly if tensions are longstanding or they lack experience resolving conflict. Factors like power dynamics between a senior and junior employee can also make 'weaker' parties less comfortable about being open and honest. Given the variety of barriers to dialogue about conflict, participants emphasised the principle that in order for informal approaches to succeed, they must create safe spaces where people feel able to express themselves openly and honestly.

Participants did this by offering those involved in the conflict choices about whether, where and how informal resolution was pursued, along with ongoing reassurance about the safety of the space. Participants believed it was important for people to feel able to speak freely without fear of direct formal consequences, such as a disciplinary warning. At the same time, they acknowledged the need to be clear from the outset that, if informal resolution is not successful, the matter may progress to a formal process.

2.2. What language supports and inhibits informal conflict resolution?

Formal and informal conflict resolution are associated with different types of language. Participants associated formal processes with a more procedural, legalistic language including the terms 'dispute', 'disciplinary' or 'grievance.' They associated informal processes with a softer, more empathetic language, for example, preferring phrases like 'misunderstanding' to 'conflict', and focussing on reflection, feelings and emotional responses.

"[In formal processes, you hear more] procedural, grievance and disciplinary type language, whereas [for informal] I'd be talking to them about reflecting, being future focused, asking them how they feel...talking a lot about feelings and emotional responses to that; about how, if this doesn't get resolved, where are we going?" (Practitioner – Acas)

"[For informal conflict resolution], I think you need to not use 'conflict' and use something a bit softer, maybe 'a misunderstanding'." (Practitioner – External, HR consultant)

Participants believed that adopting a distinct language for informal conflict resolution should ideally serve 3 purposes:

1. Contribute to the creation of a safe space, by clearly separating informal approaches from a formal process.
2. Avoid potentially inflammatory language which could inadvertently escalate the issue.
3. Enable constructive communication and dialogue between participants, by encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences and to express this in non-accusatory ways – for example, by communicating about how an issue made them feel, as opposed to what the other party did wrong.

These findings underscore the power of language to manage perceptions and influence the outcomes of informal conflict resolution.

To explore conducive and off-putting language further through a more specific lens, participants were presented with the following extract from Acas's own guidance:

'Many potential disciplinary or grievance issues can be resolved informally. A quiet word is often all that is required to resolve an issue. However, where an issue cannot be resolved informally then it may be pursued formally.'

This short passage was not intended to represent the full breadth of Acas's more detailed guidance on informal resolution. Instead, it served as a focused prompt to explore participants' views on how informal conflict resolution can be framed and communicated.

Participants criticised the phrase 'a quiet word' as vague, expressing concern that it might be interpreted and applied inconsistently. As noted in section 2.1, this was a common characteristic of much of the language associated with informal conflict resolution, including other terms and phrases used by participants, and therefore not unique to 'a quiet word'.

Some participants also felt that 'a quiet word' could be misleading, suggesting a quick or effortless resolution, whereas in practice, informal processes can require significant time and effort (read further discussion in section 3.3). Several participants also noted the phrase's potential negative connotations, including a possible sense of secrecy, being reprimanded, or addressing something trivial:

"I don't really like the phrase 'a quiet word'. It almost like implies it's a bit hush, hush, let's sweep it under the rug, when it's more about not causing any further distress to anybody involved." (Line manager)

As a result, participants suggested that alternative phrases such as 'open and honest conversation', 'structured conversation', and 'facilitated discussion' may be more appropriate ways of describing informal resolution of a workplace issue. Participants perceived these phrases as better aligned with the realities of informal processes and more reflective of an underlying ethos of open communication as a route to resolving workplace issues.

2.3. How can the processes underpinning informal resolution be disaggregated and described?

Disaggregating and describing specific processes underpinning informal resolution is difficult because of the variety of ways it unfolds in practice. Across all the cases provided by participants, only those involving mediation by a trained mediator appeared to follow a broadly standardised and predefined approach. Others varied depending on a mix of factors. These included:

- the context of the conflict or issue, including causes, who is involved, perceived severity, steps already taken to resolve the conflict, and what the involved parties want
- the organisational context, including business size, sector, and what roles people in the business play
- participants' beliefs about what steps are appropriate for informal resolution

Participants often adapted how they tried to resolve conflicts informally to the circumstances of the specific case, rather than following a predefined process. This is illustrated by the quotation below:

"I think it's [about asking]: what does each case call for? Rather than coming and saying, okay, this is mediation and this is the approach we're going to do." (Practitioner – external, third party mediator)

The fact that this quote comes from a trained mediator talking about mediation – the most standardised informal approach that emerged in this research – demonstrates the extent to which participants perceived informal resolution as being shaped by the immediate context.

Broadly speaking, participants working in larger businesses and those with unionised workforces (such as in the manufacturing sector) reported greater involvement of people in more specialised roles, such as a dedicated HR professional or a trade union representative, as well as people in more senior management positions. These individuals support informal resolution in different ways. For example, internal HR practitioners may advise line managers on company policies and best practice or take responsibility for resolving conflicts themselves, while trade union representatives can support employees to trust in the process by giving them someone to talk to and feel safe around.

In smaller, non-unionised businesses lacking a dedicated HR function, by contrast, there tended to be fewer people involved from the sidelines of the conflict; it was up to the manager to figure out the best way to proceed. This difference is important because, as is discussed in more detail in section 4.1, having trusting relationships with people to talk to about how to resolve conflicts is a key enabler of informal approaches.

Participants also sometimes disagreed about what processes were appropriate for informal conflict resolution. This was most notable with regards to record keeping. For some participants, record keeping risked parties perceiving the process as formal, undermining

efforts to create a safe space and to enable open and honest communication and dialogue. For others, record keeping was essential for laying the groundwork in case the informal approach does not work and the conflict escalates to a formal process. These differences reflect a tension between creating the conditions under which informal conflict resolution is most likely to succeed, and protecting workplace actors and the wider business in the event that informal resolution fails.

The quotation below illustrates an extreme case, in which the owner-manager of a small high street business tried to maintain the perception of an informal process, while in fact feeling compelled to document interactions as a safeguard. In this case, the manager said the employee was happy for notes to be kept.

"I [documented our conversations] because I got a bit scared - it's my business, essentially, and my reputation...You can do it in such a way that someone else thinks it's an informal chat, but also you're laying down the groundwork so you're not going to have squabbles [down the line]." (Line manager)

The next quotation underscores the perceived risks of such an approach. In the case provided by this participant, informal resolution in fact failed because the employee suspected a supposedly informal process was being misused by the company to prepare for a formal dismissal. In this case, the participant believed this was an unintended consequence of how the process was managed, rather than because the company was being deliberately disingenuous.

"[My current company] has an actual templated form which says 'informal meeting' on the top. When there's something that's informal, [but which] has a heading and a template, that kind of takes it to something else [more formal]. (Practitioner – internal, trade union representative)

This illustrates how the use of templates and official-looking forms can inadvertently undermine the intended tone and purpose of informal resolution, by signalling a level of formality that may erode trust.

While the variety of factors affecting the actual practice of informal resolution makes disaggregating specific processes difficult, it is possible to trace the basic trajectory that informal conflict resolution aspires to follow. Based on a comparison of different cases, this trajectory:

- begins with involved parties each holding only their own perspective on a conflict or issue
- moves towards establishing a shared understanding that integrates these different perspectives
- progresses towards mutual agreement on next steps to resolve the issue

The next chapter discusses participants' experiences of trying to follow this trajectory.

3. What are participants' experiences of informal workplace conflict resolution?

In this section, we explore the research question: 'What are participants' experiences of informal conflict resolution interventions?' Here we consider:

- the types of informal interventions participants had engaged in
- their openness to other, untried approaches
- how different types of workplace conflict are managed informally, if at all
- participants' experiences of informal resolution attempts and the outcomes that followed

As part of the interviews, participants were asked to describe in detail a specific instance in which they had attempted to resolve a conflict informally. These accounts were explored in depth to understand how informal conflict resolution unfolds in practice, alongside wider discussion of their experiences and perspectives.

3.1. What interventions have participants tried, and how receptive are they to untried approaches?

The attempts at informal conflict resolution described by participants typically started with a manager or practitioner trying to understand the issue from the perspective of involved parties. Participants said they did this by having one-to-one conversations with involved parties to listen to their views about the issue, what a successful outcome might look like, and preferences for moving forward.

In cases of interpersonal and multi-person conflict, participants also sought to get parties to understand each other's perspectives towards an issue. They did this by setting up channels for parties to share their perspectives, for example, via meetings facilitated or mediated by an independent third party (such as a manager or practitioner):

"[In cases where] people can't communicate with each other, but you're asked to resolve the dispute, we do that by shuttle mediation. You will not have them in the same room in person. You will have them prepare opening statements, and then you, as the mediator, will summarise the key understandings, and then you'll go back and forth, you know, to relay the information and then your aim is to bring them together actually and get them in the room at the end." (Practitioner – Acas)

Sometimes this step also involved informally coaching conflicting parties to be able to express their views in the right way, for example, by avoiding accusatory and judgemental statements and talking about how an issue made them feel.

As noted in section 2.1, participants believed that conflicts often arise at work due to people misunderstanding an issue and what others think and feel about it. This was borne out by experience, with participants describing some cases where reaching a shared understanding of the issue was all that it had taken to resolve the conflict. In other cases where shared understanding alone did not solve the issue, participants said they also used conversations to mutually agree the steps that would be taken to resolve the conflict. This could include asking parties to define their own next steps, or a manager or practitioner defining steps and asking parties to agree and commit to them.

In some cases, the conversations described above formed part of a structured, pre-defined process – for example, during mediation by a trained mediator. In other cases, the process unfolded more organically and iteratively over the course of one or more conversations. This meant that participants did not experience informal conflict resolution as a choice between distinct, pre-defined approaches. Instead, they experienced it as an evolving process, involving decisions made along the way about what to do next. As is discussed in more detail in section 4.1, these decisions are influenced by a variety of factors.

While participants sometimes reflected on decisions they wished they had made differently – such as speaking to an employee sooner – they generally found it difficult to assess their openness to approaches they had not previously used. This may be partly because, as noted above, from their perspective informal conflict resolution was not about selecting from a menu of options, but about making context-specific judgements based on what seemed most appropriate at the time.

3.2. How are different types of workplace conflict managed informally?

Participants generally did not associate different types of issues with specific informal approaches. This is likely because, in their experience, informal resolution was approached on a case-by-case basis, drawing on a common set of skills and techniques – such as active listening, clear communication, and collaborative problem-solving – rather than selecting from a set of clearly defined options. As a result, they reported handling informal conflict in broadly similar ways, both across types of issues and regardless of whether the issue had been raised by an employee (as a potential grievance) or identified by a manager (as a disciplinary matter).

That said, participants did describe placing greater emphasis on certain behaviours depending on the type of conflict. For example, in cases involving conduct and performance issues, they highlighted the importance of managers clearly communicating the business's expectations. In contrast, for inter-employee conflicts between colleagues, participants emphasised the importance of a third party remaining neutral and giving parties an equal opportunity to share their views.

Furthermore, participants identified certain types of cases as unsuitable for mediation or facilitation specifically – particularly where compromise is not possible or an appropriate basis for discussion. For example, a line manager described a case in which an issue arose because an employee was unhappy with their maternity leave offer. As this offer was calculated based on the company's policy, it could not be adjusted without deviating from the policy. The line manager used a one-to-one conversation to understand the

employee's concerns, to clarify the policy and explain why it would not be fair to others to make an exception in their case. They also explained how the employee could take the issue further (that is, by raising a formal grievance) if they felt the issue remained unresolved.

"If the policy in place is fair and I'm not going to back down on it, which could be the case, then you need to tell them that in a professional manner, and explain why the policy is in place. And if they're still not happy, they need to know their rights, how to take it further." (Line manager)

Relatedly, Acas practitioners reported that businesses sometimes approach them for mediation services for cases where mediation is not suitable. This includes cases where employers and managers are seeking to avoid having a difficult conversation about the need for an employee to improve their performance or change their behaviour, and want to use mediation as a way of getting an external third party to raise the problem with the employee for them. Similar to the maternity example above, some such cases are not about finding a compromise but instead require a manager or practitioner to communicate what is expected of employees, understand barriers to the individual achieving those standards, and to explore options for helping them to improve.

"Organisations come to us and say: 'This person's behaviour is appalling and it's starting to affect other members of the team. Can we have mediation?' And [in some cases] my response to that is, 'No, that's not appropriate for mediation. Actually, what that sounds like that needs is management'...Mediation is not a replacement for managing poor conduct." (Practitioner – Acas)

3.3. How is informal conflict resolution experienced by those involved?

Informal conflict resolution can be emotionally demanding for the parties involved. Participants acknowledged that people often find open and direct communication about conflict uncomfortable and may actively seek to avoid it. They also highlighted that talking about conflict can surface difficult emotions, either due to bad memories associated with the original event or because it triggers memories or trauma related to past experiences:

"They both got very emotional at the end...they both said it was really difficult because they'd been in previous workplaces where it wasn't dealt with very well." (Practitioner – internal, safeguarding officer)

Informal conflict resolution can also be emotionally demanding for the third parties overseeing and managing it. Participants said that, to resolve conflict informally, third parties need to remain independent and objective – something that can be difficult. For example, mediators and facilitators described the constant need to monitor and manage their own feelings towards a conflict as taxing, particularly when they had a stronger personal relationship with one party or personally disagreed with the actions of one side.

"As the manager, you are supposed to be the balanced, measured, impartial person in that room...that's a really difficult place to be...it takes a lot of self- control." (Line manager)

Informal conflict resolution can be time-consuming. Participants reflected that successfully resolving a conflict rarely happened through a single conversation. Instead, the process more commonly required a lot of time and effort – typically requiring multiple conversations to achieve resolution. The quotation below, while not representative of all cases, illustrates how much time informal approaches can sometimes take:

"You might have 10 meetings with this person informally before you've actually resolved it." (Practitioner – internal, HR)

Equally, however, some cases demonstrated the importance of recognising when an informal approach will not resolve the situation. For example, one line manager described how they had tried to resolve an issue informally for well over a year, before eventually instigating a formal procedure. In hindsight, they reflected that it should have been clear earlier that the informal approach was not working, and believed going formal sooner would have saved them a lot of time, effort and stress.

"I should have done it much earlier because, seriously, I have suffered a lot." (Line manager)

3.4. What are the outcomes of informal conflict resolution?

Participants provided numerous examples of informal approaches successfully resolving conflicts and avoiding the need for a formal process. However, as with formal conflict resolution, informal approaches do not always successfully resolve the problem and can sometimes worsen the situation. For example, some participants described cases where the initial informal process was unsuccessful and were followed by a formal process. Others presented cases in which informal attempts aggravated the situation – for example, by negatively affecting the mental health of the parties involved, ultimately leading to staff leaving the business to escape the situation.

Outcomes are influenced by the perceptions and attitudes of the parties involved, how these are managed, and the timing of the process. Participants highlighted several pivotal factors affecting whether informal resolution is likely to lead to a positive or negative outcome. These include whether or not:

- parties approach the process in good faith and trust in the process
- facilitators and mediators sufficiently address power imbalances during the process
- intervention occurs in good time, before a conflict has become deeply entrenched
- parties and facilitators recognise when informal resolution is not leading to meaningful progress and adjust the approach

The experience of informal conflict resolution can still be worthwhile, even when resolution is not achieved. Overall, participants generally reported positive experiences of informal resolution, even when they found the process difficult, or it did not resolve the issue. This was due to 2 reasons.

First, participants rarely regretted their initial decision to try and resolve a conflict informally. This was based on their enduring belief in the potential for informal approaches to avoid the need for formal processes and their associated potential negative consequences for the parties involved and the organisation (section 4.1 has further discussion of perceptions around the consequences of informal versus formal processes). In cases where resolution was unsuccessful and negative outcomes occurred, participants tended to regret how the informal process was managed (for example, allowing it to go on for too long), rather than the decision to try an informal process itself.

Second, some participants believed that informal conflict resolution can offer additional benefits for all those involved, even when resolution is not achieved. As previously noted, participants believed that conflict management is generally not a common feature of everyday life, but rather something people tend to avoid. While they acknowledged that this makes conflict resolution at work more challenging, it also led some to view informal workplace resolution as an opportunity to develop competencies not often practised elsewhere, which would be valuable in preventing and managing conflict in the future. For example, experiences of trying to resolve conflict through dialogue can build the involved parties' communication skills, as well as their emotional intelligence.

"[Informal conflict resolution] doesn't always solve the issue – sometimes you have to go down the formal route. But I think all the parties involved will still benefit from informal routes." (Line manager)

Although participants did not describe it as such, this perspective aligns with a pluralist view of workplace conflict, where conflict is seen as an unavoidable part of organisational life and can even be positive for workplace relations when managed constructively. Previous Acas research ([Hann and Nash, 2020](#)) has identified this as a minority perspective among employers. It was notable that this perspective was reflected among our sample's composition of individuals who had prior experience with informal conflict resolution and were therefore able to recognise its benefits through that experience.

4. What factors influence the use of informal workplace conflict resolution?

In this section, we explore the research question: 'What factors influence the use of informal conflict resolution?' Here we consider:

- enablers that motivate people to pursue informal conflict resolution

- barriers that deter people from pursuing informal conflict resolution
- associations between these enablers and barriers with specific operating environments

This section explores factors influencing decisions about whether and how to resolve conflict informally. Because our sample included only those with experience of informal resolution, participants tended to speak about barriers in terms of what might deter others from attempting informal approaches to resolution, rather than from personal experience.

4.1. What are the enablers to pursuing informal conflict resolution?

Decisions to pursue informal conflict resolution unfold in 3 stages, which emerged as common themes in participants' accounts of their own experiences of managing conflicts informally:

1. At the stage of the initial trigger.
2. At the stage of deciding to adopt an informal approach.
3. At the stage of deciding how to implement it.

Feedback from participants further suggests that each stage is shaped by a distinct set of enablers, which are discussed in more detail below.

Enablers at the stage of the initial trigger

Informal conflict resolution can be triggered if an employee proactively raises an issue, or if a manager or practitioner detects an issue themselves. Each route is underpinned by different enablers.

Participants suggested that employees are more likely to proactively raise issues when they:

- feel they have permission to do so
- trust that their concerns will be taken seriously
- believe they and others will be treated fairly
- feel confident that raising an issue will not automatically lead to negative or formal repercussions for them or others

Participants linked the effective handling of conflict to a workplace culture where employees trust managers and HR, and feel encouraged to raise concerns. Practical communication channels – such as one-to-one catch-ups with managers or the option to use email – are important in giving employees discreet ways to surface issues:

"I took the opportunity to chat to my assistant privately over the course of about six weeks, with various meetings throughout the day. I just threw them into the calendar because then people wouldn't interrupt us."

(Line manager)

Equally, participants noted that managers who had regular contact with their team – especially in shared physical workspaces – were better able to detect emerging issues. Familiarity, informal interactions, and proximity helped managers spot early signs of potential conflict. This was particularly evident in smaller or single-site organisations, as well as in face-to-face or hybrid settings.

"Sometimes you need a chat. Sometimes it might be a walk around the outside of the office with a coffee to get people to...vent." (Line manager)

Enablers at the stage of the decision to adopt an informal approach

The decision to adopt an informal approach is motivated by managers and practitioners believing that this will lead to a positive outcome, as compared to defaulting to a formal approach. Line managers tended to prioritise personal and social outcomes like

preserving and improving relationships with colleagues and avoiding stress and discomfort for themselves. Internal practitioners such as HR professionals, by contrast, tended to focus more on organisational outcomes, like improved efficiency and reduced costs.

While participants in our sample tended to associate these benefits with informal approaches, evidence on barriers suggests that others may view informal resolution in the opposite way – for example, as a source of stress and a risk to interpersonal relationships. These barriers are explored in more detail in section 4.2.

Conversations with the parties involved and advice from trusted sources also influence the adoption of an informal approach. Some participants decided to pursue an informal route after speaking with others inside and outside of their organisation, including colleagues, HR, trade union representatives, external practitioners and online guidance from Acas. The quote below illustrates this and highlights the value of spaces for managers in which they can share the issues they are facing and discuss them with others:

"People just start talking about things that [are] going on in their teams or things they were struggling with as a manager. And it was really interesting to hear what other people had to say. And I, you know, I had a very good colleague that had been a teacher and she brought a very interesting perspective from her 'teach first' training. And I was sort of enlightened, as I wouldn't have thought that or I wouldn't have looked at it that way." (Line manager)

Some participants based their decisions on the preferences of those involved in the conflict. This reflects the finding previously discussed in Section 2.1 – that informal conflict resolution was understood as a process that allows for input from the parties themselves.

Organisational culture and policies also influence the adoption of an informal approach. As well as being conducive to employees feeling able to proactively raise issues informally (which, as noted above, is an enabler at the initial stage of the trigger for an informal approach), participants felt that managers and employees were more likely to pursue and engage in informal conflict resolution when the organisation fostered a shared cultural support for such approaches.

This feeling was evident in organisations where senior management and HR made it clear they were open and happy for line managers to raise issues with them, to get their advice and support on how best to respond. This is illustrated by the quote below, which also again suggests the importance of creating spaces for managers to air and discuss issues they are facing:

"We have a very inclusive senior management team and that makes such a difference. I worked in another company where there was a culture of 'don't raise it, just find your own solutions, don't bring it to me', but where we are now, it's so inclusive. If I have any issues, I always raise them with my supervisor and we have a chat about how we can address those issues." (Line manager)

Finally, participants working for organisations with disciplinary and grievance policies that explicitly recommend considering resolving issues informally before initiating formal processes noted that this influenced their initial decision to pursue an informal approach.

This research did not produce any clear evidence associating these enablers with specific operating environments. However, as is discussed in Section 4.2, some participants suggested that service user-oriented workplaces and those in traditionally masculine sectors may have cultures which are not as conducive to deciding to adopt an informal approach to resolution.

Enablers at the stage of implementing an informal approach

As discussed in Section 2.3, the specific ways in which participants tried to resolve conflict informally tended to depend on their judgements about what would work best given the circumstances. Participants explained that they relied on a range of information sources and areas of expertise to make these judgements. Commonly mentioned sources included:

- their personal beliefs about and perceptions of the conflict and the parties involved
- past experiences (including managing conflict, people management, leadership and daily life)
- Acas guidance
- advice from colleagues and HR

- conversations with the parties involved

Participants also mentioned multiple capabilities which they believed underpinned a workplace actor's ability to successfully implement an informal approach. These included active listening, empathy, self-awareness, emotional intelligence and the ability to ask good questions. In keeping with the broader theme of ambiguous language, these phrases were commonly used but not always clearly defined – and overlapped in meaning. The quotations below illustrate some of the ways in which participants used these phrases.

"I would always be very conscious that you listen... I would even ask people to repeat back what they think they've heard to make sure that the ending is right. So it's all about those listening skills." (Line manager)

"Showing empathy and giving someone a safe space where they're able to voice their problem without that kind of interruption helps a lot for showing you're neutral and not one-sided." (Line manager)

"Emotional intelligence...is understanding your triggers, how in a conflict situation you might react, and what will you do to not react in that way if it's going to escalate a conflict or you know, be a negative reaction." (Practitioner – Acas)

"The skill of asking the right questions is to help people to name safely what it is that actually is bothering them so that they can find ways of moving forward." (Practitioner – external, third party mediator)

This research did not produce any clear evidence associating these enablers with specific operating environments.

4.2. What are the barriers to pursuing informal conflict resolution in the workplace?

Barriers identified in this study largely mirrored findings from previous Acas research (in section 1) – or else reflected the inverse of the enablers discussed above.

Broadly, the barriers to pursuing informal conflict resolution fall within individual, social, resource or structural dimensions, as presented below.

Individual barriers

A lack of skill and confidence is an important barrier to informal conflict resolution (Saundry et al, 2016). Participants believed that workplace actors – in particular line managers, but also employees – can lack the necessary confidence to pursue informal approaches. They attributed this to a mix of underlying factors, primarily a lack of relevant skills, knowledge and understanding. This, in turn, was linked to other factors, including:

- lack of both general management training and conflict management-specific training, particularly in smaller businesses with no dedicated HR function
- lack of first-hand experience of managing workplace conflict, particularly among first-time managers and managers promoted and hired based on technical rather than people management expertise
- a general propensity for people to seek to avoid conflict in everyday life, which further limits the development of first-hand experience, and therefore confidence

"I think there's a lot of avoidance that goes on because people are not equipped with the skills or the confidence, even as line managers, to have what you might call a difficult conversation." (Practitioner – external, third party mediator and HR consultant)

Lack of confidence can act as a barrier to informal resolution in different ways. For example, participants suggested managers may view formal procedures, such as disciplinary or grievance processes, as the more structured, clear and hence 'safer' option, thereby forgoing informal approaches – this echoes a theme that has been highlighted in other Acas research (for example, [Saundry et al, 2024](#)).

Participants also suggested that a lack of confidence can be inhibitive because it heightens (mis)perceptions of risk – for example, managers may fear making a mistake that could worsen the situation. Low confidence was also associated with negative feelings of anxiety and discomfort when dealing with conflict, further discouraging the use of informal resolution:

"Most people, unless it's their job and they're trained in it or they're experienced in it, they don't want to get involved in disputes, they want to stay clear of it." (Line manager)

As these points illustrate, if a manager or practitioner believes an informal approach is likely to lead to a negative outcome, they are unlikely to attempt it. Participants identified several perceived risks that could inhibit the use of informal resolution, including damaging relationships with colleagues, getting in trouble with senior leaders, or exacerbating the conflict. These perceptions were shaped by a range of factors, such as low confidence and concerns about how others might respond to informal attempts at resolution. Some participants noted that informal processes can feel precarious, as they often rely on mutual goodwill and voluntary engagement, rather than clear obligations or enforcement mechanisms:

"I think probably the biggest worry for me is that if it's informal, you're relying on people's goodwill and their buy-in to the process to be part of the solution rather than, you know, cracking a whip for it." (Line manager)

Anxiety and discomfort confronting conflict and addressing it informally are related barriers to pursuing informal resolution. Participants acknowledged that dealing with conflict can be a daunting process, and that informal resolution can be emotionally demanding for all parties, including facilitators (section 3.3 has further discussion). These emotions can lead people to avoid trying to resolve conflict altogether, or to pursue formal approaches which feel 'safer' by comparison:

"I guess there's the risk of feeling a bit out of your depth... with keeping things informal." (Line manager)

Social barriers

As is clear from earlier sections of this report (for example, sections 2.1, 3.4, and 4.1), informal resolution relies on mutual trust between people involved in the process. If this trust is not present – for example, because employees perceive people facilitating informal resolution as biased – then informal approaches are unlikely to succeed, as the following quotation illustrates:

"The HR company did everything in favour of the top manager because the top manager was really in with the director... it actually wasn't impartial." (Practitioner – internal, HR)

More broadly, trust is required on multiple levels for informal resolution to work effectively. The parties involved must trust the facilitators – whether they are managers, HR, or external third parties – or they may be unwilling to participate or continue with an informal attempt at resolution. At the same time, HR must trust in managers' ability to handle conflict informally and constructively; without this, HR may feel compelled to intervene and remove managerial discretion over how conflict is managed.

An unsupportive culture and lack of senior leadership buy-in can also act as barriers to informal resolution. While this research did not produce any clear evidence directly associating these barriers with specific operating environments, participants described several types of environments which, in their view, illustrated features of an unsupportive environment. These included:

- highly competitive environments, particularly in the private sector, where the focus on product and service delivery were seen by some participants as crowding out time to focus on attention to interpersonal workplace issues – echoing findings from previous Acas research ([Latreille, 2011, PDF, 807KB](#))
- traditionally masculine sectors, such as construction and manufacturing, where – according to some participants – some managers may place less priority on listening to and empathising with staff concerns
- workplaces with a strong service user focus, for example, schools – where participants felt the wellbeing of pupils tends to take precedence over that of teachers, as shown in the quote below

"Within the school, there isn't a culture of working together as a team. Senior management don't actually care...It's very much that the belief that pupils wellbeing matter more than the staff..." (Practitioner – internal, safeguarding officer)

Participants also discussed the following barriers to senior leaders promoting informal approaches:

- scepticism that the costs of informal resolution (for example, time) outweigh the benefits

- a tendency not to think proactively about how to de-escalate issues before they require formal intervention
- in cases of external mediation, an unwillingness to invite 'outsiders' to explore an organisation's problems (also check [Saundry et al, 2016](#))
- suspicion that employees may unfairly take advantage of informal processes – as illustrated in the quotation below

"The problems can sometimes be with senior leaders because they suspect that people are trying to game the system." (Practitioner – internal, HR)

Resource barriers

Lack of time deters managers and practitioners from exploring informal solutions to issues (check Latrielle, 2011). As noted in section 3.3, resolving conflicts informally can take a lot of time and energy. This can be an inhibitor particularly within organisations where the focus is on delivery of core tasks and time is not set aside in general for broader relational activities, including addressing conflict. Some participants also linked time constraints to cost pressures in the wider business:

"Downtime is not valued at an organisational level because it's all about productivity. ... And for... an organisation like the NHS, that's a really tough call, because money [is] being stripped back all the time." (Line manager)

Lack of access to free training, guidance and advice is also a barrier to informal resolution. As noted above, participants believed that a lack of access to training within organisations led to managers tending to lack the skills to pursue informal conflict resolution.

Participants noted that smaller businesses were least likely to provide access to relevant training, due to a lack of resources to pay for it:

"We're very small, so we don't really have anything like that [an HR function]. We don't have like a support system in place to deal with anything like that [conflict]. So I've never had any formal training as such." (Line manager)

While participants framed the absence of training and support as a resource issue, this may also reflect deeper questions of organisational priority. Decisions about where to allocate funding inevitably signal what is valued, and the absence of investment in informal resolution may indicate that the costs of conflict – and especially the rising [costs as conflict](#) escalates through formal procedures – are not fully recognised or appreciated. In this sense, the resource barrier may also be read as a motivational one.

Structural barriers

Finally, organisations' own disciplinary and grievance procedures can sometimes act as a barrier to informal conflict resolution where they emphasise only formal approaches and fail to signpost informal options. This theme has been highlighted in other Acas research (for example, [Saundry et al, 2024](#) and [Saundry and Wibberley, 2014, PDF, 434KB](#)).

5. What are the implications for Acas guidance?

In this section, we explore the fourth and final key research question: 'What are the implications of the research for Acas guidance?' Here we consider what conclusions can be drawn about:

- the different language options that might enable employers to prioritise, and workplace actors to engage in, informal resolution
- the general principles and factors that Acas guidance might usefully cover

Based on the research findings, Acas could consider further strengthening or expanding efforts in the following areas, some of which are already being implemented to varying degrees:

1. Advocating the benefits of informal conflict resolution (while being transparent that it does not suit every scenario and stressing the importance of selecting the right approach)

Practitioners identified a clear need for interventions that encourage and enable organisations and workplace actors to engage successfully in informal conflict resolution. They emphasised that for informal approaches to be effective, all parties must be willing to engage – meaning that advocates for it must be trusted by employers, managers and employees alike.

Different rationales for engagement are likely to resonate with different parties involved in conflict resolution. In our sample, managers tended to prioritise the social and personal benefits of informal approaches – for example, their role in preserving positive relationships with colleagues and avoiding the stress and discomfort that can be associated with a formal procedure.

HR practitioners, while also recognising these factors, generally placed greater emphasis on organisational benefits such as improved efficiency, a better working environment, and reduced costs.

Although senior leaders were not specifically included in the sample, practitioners suggested they would likely be even more strongly motivated to advocate for informal resolution by awareness of the organisational benefits it can bring.

Building on this, practitioners perceived Acas as well-positioned to play an effective advocacy role, because of its reputation for independence and impartiality among both employers and employees. By contrast, they noted that other types of organisations, for example HR consultancies, are often perceived as biased towards one side, for example, because they have a relationship with the employer as a client.

2. Building actors' capabilities for interpreting situations and judging what is most appropriate

The research found that, in most cases, informal resolution did not involve selecting and applying a pre-defined approach. Instead, it was a process that often unfolded organically based on assessments of the context and communication with involved parties and other groups, for example, HR.

Given this, Acas could consider expanding and prioritising its interventions which help develop workplace actors' capability to manage conflict informally. This could include, for example, communicating what conflict management skills are useful, framing training and other resources around these, and supporting organisations to develop and implement their own informal resolution approaches. This aligns with Acas's existing training on, for example, having difficult conversations, its [conflict management skills online course](#) and the in-depth advisory services it provides to support joint working between employers and employees to develop policies and problem-solve. In expanding such services, Acas could consider developing further training and resources targeted at:

- creating an enabling working environment for people to raise and resolve issues informally
- reading situations with emotional intelligence to determine what is most appropriate for managing conflict in a given context
- active listening and asking good questions
- coaching others to engage well in informal conflict resolution, for example, by helping them to express themselves in non-accusatory ways

3. Providing more resources that not only inform but also show managers and employees what informal resolution involves – for example, through videos and case studies

Acas's current guidance already covers many of the aspects which practitioners and line managers said were important to consider when attempting informal conflict resolution. However, the researchers observed that on the current Acas website this guidance is largely presented using text only.

Both line managers and practitioners were very supportive of Acas expanding these resources, including by:

- creating videos and more case studies which demonstrate good and poor practice for informal conflict resolution

- sharing practical resources to help in preparing for and engaging in informal conflict resolution, including 'to-do' checklists of things managers should consider in advance and conversation templates demonstrating helpful and unhelpful ways to ask questions

They believed these would be useful resources for managers and would also help give employees a better sense of what to expect, and how to behave and engage to achieve a positive outcome. These resources could be signposted, for example, as links within Acas's existing written guidance.

Practitioners noted that while some other organisations provide these resources, for example, HR consultancies and trade unions, they often need to be paid for. Moreover, they noted that some people may perceive these organisations (and, by extension, the resources they provide) as biased towards one side of the conflict, and that therefore Acas was better placed to provide trusted, authoritative resources for these purposes.

4. Fostering opportunities for managers and practitioners to raise signs of emerging conflict early, and to learn about and discuss options for resolution with peers

A common theme in the research was the importance of managers having someone to talk to about workplace issues and potential resolution approaches.

Those who influenced managers to make appropriate choices in adopting informal resolution included HR practitioners, senior managers, trade union representatives, and fellow line managers. Access to such advisers was more common in larger organisations with a dedicated HR function and in workplaces with union representation.

Given the significance of social influences in decisions about whether and how to use informal approaches, it is important for managers to have a network of trusting relationships within the workplace. This can ensure that early signs of emerging conflict are regularly identified, and appropriate approaches discussed with a view to early and informal resolution. Acas guidance and advisory support services could support this by encouraging regular communication and networking of this kind within the workplace.

Moreover, opportunities for peer-learning both within and outside the workplace can provide a safe and supportive learning environment where managers can share experiences and learn from peers about effective and ineffective approaches to informal resolution, its benefits, and where it may or may not be appropriate. Acas could consider how to further promote and encourage organisations to put such peer-learning mechanisms in place and could also offer peer-learning training options for managers to come together with peers from other organisations.

5. Revisiting the language used in Acas's guidance to describe and encourage informal resolution

Both line managers and practitioners said they often draw on Acas's written guidance to inform how they deal with conflict. Building on participants' emphasis on the importance of language in effective informal resolution, there was consensus – when asked about a specific example from Acas guidance – that the phrase 'a quiet word' carries unhelpful connotations and may be misleading to those involved. They felt this phrase:

- was particularly unhelpful for managers because it is vague, open to interpretation, and suggests a quick resolution – whereas informal conflict resolution often demands significant time and energy
- carried potentially unhelpful associations for employees – for example, appearing to trivialise a problem, suggesting an intention to keep issues hidden, or implying a 'telling off'

While Acas's guidance on informal resolution for managers already addresses some of these specific concerns – for example, by clarifying in its guidance on how to resolve a complaint of bullying or discrimination informally, that "you might need a few conversations with both employees to agree a way forward" – the phrase 'a quiet word' continues to appear elsewhere in its guidance.

Practitioners generally favoured phrases like 'an open and honest conversation' as a preferable alternative, although even this expression can be interpreted in various ways, highlighting the difficulty of finding precise and appropriate language in this context. Indeed, vagueness emerged as a feature of much of the terminology surrounding informal conflict resolution, as reflected in participants' own use of euphemisms such as 'coffee chat', 'catch up' and 'nipping it in the bud'.

Given the importance of using clear and appropriate language to frame the option of informal resolution, Acas could consider alternatives to phrases such as 'a quiet word' – for instance, in its employee-facing guidance about how to raise a problem at work and elsewhere – and more generally review the language it uses to promote, encourage and enable informal resolution.

It should be noted that while these concerns were echoed by many line managers, this research did not involve employees directly involved in conflict, so we cannot draw strong conclusions about their views.

6. Reviewing guidance on record keeping during informal conflict resolution

Keeping records of issues dealt with informally was an area of tension among participants. Some believed that record keeping meant a process was no longer informal, or at least risked creating that impression and therefore undermining engagement in the process. The research also identified cases where record keeping had derailed informal conflict resolution by causing people involved in the conflict to become mistrustful. At the same time, some participants felt that record keeping was important for both parties, with a view to the possibility that the conflict might escalate to a future formal procedure.

Given the significance of this issue and the lack of a clear consensus among participants on the role of record keeping in informal resolution, Acas could explore ways to expand its guidance on this issue to support employers, employees and other workplace actors to make informed choices around record keeping. For example, by providing guidance on potential risks and benefits of record keeping in informal contexts.

7. Strengthening awareness of Acas's role and identity to better associate it with informal as well as formal conflict resolution

Acas practitioners noted that organisations often only approach them after a conflict has escalated to the point of a formal dispute. Line managers and practitioners also commonly saw Acas's involvement as a marker of formality, even where the service offered was mediation.

To some extent, this may be unavoidable, given that parties will usually wish to resolve matters themselves in the first instance, and the prominent association of Acas with its statutory duty to offer conciliation in most employment tribunal applications. Nevertheless, it suggests an opportunity to reflect on how Acas's wider role and services are understood, and how this understanding might be broadened to encompass how Acas can support both informal and formal conflict resolution. This might involve, for example, more strongly associating Acas with concepts and words like 'reconciliation', which can span formal and informal conflict resolution.

Appendix 1: Methodology

The research consisted of 4 stages.

Stage 1 – Immersion. Basis Social conducted a rapid document review of Acas's previous research into conflict resolution (listed in Appendix 3), followed by a focus group with 6 Acas practitioners. The goal was to immerse the research team in Acas's current understanding of informal conflict resolution, to inform the design of the remainder of the research.

Stage 2 – Online interviews. Basis Social conducted 33 online interviews with line managers (18) and practitioners (15) with experience of seeking to resolve workplace conflicts informally. The practitioner sample included:

- internal practitioners working in-house within businesses – for example, HR professionals, mediators and trade union representatives
- external practitioners – for example, consultants, mediators and trade union full-time officers
- Acas practitioners covering a range of Acas services, including mediators, collective conciliators and senior business advisers

Both the line manager and practitioner sample included participants with experience of resolving conflicts in a range of organisational settings, including different business sizes and sectors. Both samples also included participants with experience of different forms of informal conflict resolution, including mediation, facilitation and one-to-one conversations. All interviewees except Acas practitioners were compensated for their time. Further detail about the sample is provided in Appendix 2.

Interviews lasted up to 60 minutes and were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide.

Interviews explored how participants defined and understood informal conflict resolution, their experiences trying to resolve conflicts informally, and their views on what could encourage and enable workplace actors to make appropriate decisions about and use of informal conflict resolution.

Stage 3 – Implications workshops. Basis Social reconvened 12 internal and external practitioners to validate emerging findings and explore implications for Acas. This was done via 2 online workshops with 6 participants each. Each workshop lasted 60 minutes and employed stimulus and a Miro board to share and iterate findings and implications with participants. Participants were compensated for their time.

Stage 4 – Analysis. Basis Social used an online qualitative data analysis platform to manage, organise and interpret the data collected. Subject to consent, all interviews and the workshops were recorded and uploaded to the platform for transcription. The entirety of the audio and video file was transcribed and then coded using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding generates codes based on the raw data, for example how conflict resolution is defined and experienced by individuals. Deductive coding starts with a predefined code frame. This study applied Acas's proprietary Behavioural Model to systematically classify barriers and enablers. The model identifies key factors influencing employer behaviours that, when poorly managed, can lead to workplace disputes:

- structural factors – how a business is set up and operates
- resource factors – the resources available to the business
- social factors – the influence of people inside and outside the business
- individual factors – individuals' knowledge, identity, values, beliefs, and feelings

Alongside this process, Basis Social conducted a moderator brainstorm to gather researcher reflections from the interviews.

A note on interpretation

The sample only included participants who had previously engaged in informal conflict resolution. Participants may have come to the study persuaded of the benefits of the informal conflict resolution. People who had not attempted informal resolution were not in scope of this research. Additional research with this group is recommended to identify additional barriers to informal resolution and provide other perspectives on the subject.

The sample did not directly include employees involved in conflicts, but rather focussed on managers and practitioners, with trade union officers and representatives included to represent the employee perspective. As the findings in this report indicate, employee consent and buy-in is key to informal conflict resolution. However, this study could only comment on drivers of this from the perspective of these participants.

Appendix 2: Sample

The tables below summarise the number and types of participants included in the research sample through interviews and focus groups.

Twelve participants from the external and internal practitioner groups were reconvened for workshops following these engagements (Appendix 1 has more details).

Table 1: Summary of groups

| Group | Count |
|------------------------|-------|
| Line managers | 18 |
| External practitioners | 6 |
| Internal practitioners | 6 |
| Acas practitioners | 9 |
| Total | 39 |

Table 2: Breakdown of practitioner sub-groups

| Practitioner type | Sub-group description | Count |
|------------------------|--|-------|
| External practitioners | Trade union full time officers | 2 |
| External practitioners | Other externals (for example, HR consultants, third-party suppliers of specialist support) | 4 |
| Internal practitioners | In-house HR | 2 |
| Internal practitioners | Trade union representatives | 2 |
| Internal practitioners | Other internal practitioners (for example, counsellor, safeguarding officer) | 2 |
| Acas practitioners | Individual interviews (conciliation, mediation and advice roles) | 3 |
| Acas practitioners | Focus group participants (conciliation, mediation and advice roles) | 6 |
| Total | All practitioners | 21 |

Appendix 3: Documents reviewed

Craig, S., Steen, B., Belcher, K., Rubback, T. and Rahim, N. (2022) [Resolving workplace disputes in SMEs – qualitative research with employers](#)

Hann, D. and Nash, D. (2020) [Disputes and their management in the workplace: a survey of British employers](#)

Latreille, P.L. (2011) [Mediation: A Thematic Review of the Acas/CIPD Evidence \(PDF, 807KB\)](#), Acas – National Archives.

Saundry, R., Adam, D., Ashman, I., Forde, C., Wibberley, G. and Wright, S. (2016) [Managing individual conflict in the contemporary British workplace](#)

Saundry, R., Fisher, V. and Kinsey, S. (2019) [Managing workplace conflict: the changing role of HR](#)

Saundry, R. and Urwin, P. (2021) [Estimating the costs of workplace conflict](#)

Saundry, R., Urwin, P., Bowyer, A., Mason, S., Kameshwara, K. and Latreille, P. (2024) [Managing Conflict at Work – Policy, Procedure and Informal Resolution](#)

Saundry, R. and Wibberley, G. (2014) [Workplace Dispute Resolution and the Management of Individual Conflict - A Thematic Analysis of Five Case Studies \(PDF, 434KB\)](#), Acas – National Archives.

Saundry, R., Wibberley, G., Wright, A. and Hollinrake, A. (2023) [Mediation and early resolution in East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust](#)

Urwin, P., Saundry, R., Saundry, F., Kameshwara, K., Bowyer, A. and Latreille, P. (2024) [Managerial capability and staff engagement ? findings from the Skilled Managers Productive Workplaces research programme](#)