

Support in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse - Acas response

9 September 2020

This is the Acas Council response to the [government consultation on support in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse](#) which aims to give survivors of domestic abuse the support they deserve in the workplace.

Acas Council response

1. Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the BEIS consultation on support in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse.

2. Acas is a statutory, non-departmental public body with a duty to improve employment relations in Great Britain. In 2019 to 2020, Acas handled approximately 800,000 calls from individuals and employers to our national helpline and our website received nearly 15 million visits from people seeking advice and support.

During the year we provided conciliation in more than 550 collective disputes and also received nearly 140,000 early conciliation notifications. Around 50,000 people attended our training events on a wide range of workplace-related topics.

Acas has considerable practical experience of the dynamics of the workplace and of issues experienced by workers and employers.

3. Acas welcomes the government's recognition of the need to support workers who are experiencing domestic abuse. There is an important role for employers to play in recognising the issue, destigmatising it and providing a safe environment. Employers have a duty of care towards employees, offering them the advice and support they need, including around workplace adjustments to help manage their situation.

Employers also have a duty of care towards employees who may be perpetrators of abuse, for instance in supporting them to seek help to address their behaviours. Tackling the issue proactively can help to improve staff wellbeing, productivity and retention.

4. Acas believes that employers should raise awareness of this issue and should consider introducing a domestic abuse policy, designed in consultation with employees and any representatives. Having resources available and signposting to support agencies for both survivors and perpetrators will help demonstrate the organisation and management's commitment to taking the issue seriously.

Staff should regularly be made aware of any policy and be able to access it via different channels. This is particularly important for those working from home, on furlough or any long-term leave, as they are likely to find it more difficult to access such information safely.

A policy should also be reinforced through effective training for staff and managers on the signs and symptoms of domestic abuse, how to respond, and where to seek further help.

5. Domestic abuse remains a largely hidden issue. Acas recognises that not all employees will feel comfortable talking to their employers about their experiences in this respect, and likewise, domestic abuse is a highly sensitive issue many employers may find difficult to tackle.

However, Acas believes that it is crucial that employers create an environment where workers feel able to speak up without fear of judgement. Where possible, having nominated, trained individuals as an initial point of contact for support and advice can be beneficial in creating a culture of transparency. Line managers also play a vital role and should be skilled and confident in facilitating sensitive conversations. They should recognise the need to tailor support according to an individual's needs, such as offering flexibility in working hours or patterns.

Careful consideration should be given as to how to conduct discussions safely if the individual is at home, for example, via emails and texts where video or phone calls might not be possible. It is important to recognise that managers and those supporting victims may be affected themselves and should be given adequate support throughout.

6. The workplace may provide something of a refuge for people who experience threatening or abusive behaviours at home. This factor has been brought into stark relief during the current pandemic, with many individuals moving to homeworking – [Refuge, a charity providing specialist domestic abuse services, has received a record high of more than 40,000 calls and contacts to its helpline since the beginning of lockdown.](#)

Acas believes that the first step for employers during this time must be to provide a safe work space for those at risk from domestic abuse. Where this is not possible, employers should seek to put in place other measures to reduce the risks posed to the individual, some examples of which are mentioned below.

7. There are an additional number of ways that employers may be able to support those affected by domestic abuse. More work is needed on the impact of these strategies, but they may include:

- using existing staff networks to provide a safe space for workers and to promote awareness across the organisation
- introducing confidential reporting channels
- agreeing a code word or hand signal to alert others of domestic abuse and or immediate risk
- use of special leave arrangements to support the wellbeing of individuals, including for instance in attending appointments

8. Acas notes that there are a number of useful resources for employers. For example, the [Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse \(EIDA\)](#) is a network of over 370 large and small businesses taking action on domestic abuse and sharing best practice.

There is also existing guidance for employers, including a [toolkit created in 2018 by Business in the Community \(BITC\) and Public Health England \(PHE\)](#), and we are aware that the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) are in the process of updating their [joint guidance on managing and supporting employees experiencing domestic abuse](#) (PDF, 932KB, 15 pages) in light of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Acas is currently reviewing the scope to produce new guidance on our website on this subject. We would welcome working with the government and other stakeholders, including specialist bodies, in developing this. We would also be happy to support any future awareness-raising campaigns and initiatives.