



HOW TO DEVELOP A DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY

Think Business, Think Equality

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
KEY MESSAGES	4
WHY THIS RESOURCE FOCUSES ON WOMEN	6
WHY YOU NEED A DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY	8
DOMESTIC ABUSE IS A WORKPLACE ISSUE	8
MANAGERS AND STAFF WANT SUPPORT TO DEAL WITH DOMESTIC ABUSE AT WORK	8
IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR PEOPLE AND GOOD FOR YOUR BUSINESS	9
DEVELOPING THE POLICY	10
EXAMPLE: ABSENCE MANAGEMENT	16
EXAMPLE: FLEXIBLE WORKING	17
LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCOTLAND	18



INTRODUCTION

This guidance is part of a suite of resources for small and medium businesses who want to understand and support employees experiencing domestic abuse. You can use this alongside our other *Think Business, Think Equality* resources on domestic abuse and gender equality at work to make a positive change in your business.

This guidance sets out how to develop a domestic abuse policy and what information should be included. It explains the impact of domestic abuse on the employee and the business, and what your role is as an employer, so you can better support any employees experiencing domestic abuse.

There are two further key areas that will help you to address and support employees experiencing domestic abuse in your organisation. These are [What you need to know about domestic abuse](#) and [How to support staff experiencing domestic abuse](#). There's also a [best practice checklist](#) and a [glossary](#) that will support you to take action.

The resources are designed to be used together to enable you to better support employees and progress gender equality in the workplace. The action you take in each area will reinforce action in the others.



KEY MESSAGES

You can use these key messages to inform your domestic abuse policy, guide internal procedures, or support conversations about how your business can create a safer, more supportive workplace for staff experiencing domestic abuse.

1. Domestic abuse is a workplace issue.

It impacts attendance, performance and wellbeing, and can affect colleagues too. Employers have an important role to play in providing support and safety.

2. You have a duty of care as an employer.

Fulfilling this means taking action to support employees affected by domestic abuse and ensuring your workplace is a safe and inclusive environment.

3. Domestic abuse follows women to work.

Perpetrators may use work time, tools or spaces to monitor, harass, or isolate women, disrupting their safety, confidence and economic independence.

4. Many women don't speak up.

Stigma and fear often prevent disclosure. A clear policy and a supportive culture help build trust and make it safer to seek help.

5. A workplace policy on domestic abuse makes a difference.

It ensures consistent responses, demonstrates your commitment to staff wellbeing, and helps create a zero-tolerance workplace culture.



6. Clear reporting processes build confidence.

Your policy should set out how staff can raise concerns or disclose abuse, and what happens next, so employees know they'll be supported and taken seriously.

7. Training and communication are essential.

Making sure staff know the policy exists and that managers are confident in applying it will support implementation and build trust.

8. Victim-survivors need flexibility and understanding.

Policies like absence management or flexible working should reflect the realities of domestic abuse so victim-survivors aren't further disadvantaged.

9. Workplace perpetrators must be held accountable.

A strong policy should address how you will manage employees who perpetrate abuse, including risk assessment and disciplinary action where appropriate.

10. Confidentiality is critical.

Protecting an employee's privacy ensures their safety and encourages disclosure without fear of judgement or retaliation.



WHY THIS RESOURCE FOCUSES ON WOMEN

We recognise that both women and men experience domestic abuse and there are some similarities and differences in the effects in the workplace. However, the important difference between men and women who experience domestic abuse is the prevalence, severity, and impact of the abuse. Women experiencing domestic abuse are more likely to encounter repeated forms of abuse, for longer periods of time, and are more likely to be severely injured or killed than men who experience domestic abuse.

The focus of this guidance is women's experiences of domestic abuse, as the vast majority of victim-survivors are women, while the vast majority of perpetrators are men.

It's important to recognise and understand that domestic abuse is rooted in women's unequal status in society, and this makes domestic abuse a gendered problem.

This doesn't mean you will be treating staff differently because of their gender. When you take action to address domestic abuse and create a supportive workplace, you'll improve things for all your employees.

In this resource, the term **victim-survivor** is used to reflect that individuals experiencing domestic abuse can be both victim and survivor. Victims are often portrayed as helpless, powerless, or passive, in contrast to survivors who are active, heroic, and resourceful. However, the terms used separately don't capture the experience of violence against women or the external factors that affect women's ability to leave.



When we talk about a **perpetrator**, we're describing an individual who chooses to use abusive behaviours in order to assert power and control, usually to gain authority over their partner. It's someone who is currently committing, or has previously committed violence against women, which includes domestic abuse.

You can find definitions of all key terms used in our [Glossary of Terms](#).



WHY YOU NEED A DOMESTIC ABUSE POLICY

DOMESTIC ABUSE IS A WORKPLACE ISSUE

One in four women in Scotland will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. Domestic abuse is a workplace issue because it impacts those experiencing it, including their productivity and ability to work. This means a perpetrator doesn't necessarily need to enter the workplace or pursue staff at work to make it a workplace issue.

It can have long-term consequences, including stress, anxiety, and depression for women, and they can struggle to find appropriate support in the workplace. It can also affect victim-survivors' capacity to work with men, manage challenging situations, interact with others, or achieve career advancement and development.

The workplace is often one of the few places where a person experiencing abuse can have some independence and seek support. Having an effective workplace policy means you'll be better able to provide this support and manage the impact in your business.

MANAGERS AND STAFF WANT SUPPORT TO DEAL WITH DOMESTIC ABUSE AT WORK

Having a clear policy gives managers and staff the guidance they need, whether dealing with reports, how to make a report, or going through the reporting process. A dedicated domestic abuse policy will also help you meet your obligation to provide a duty of care for staff experiencing domestic abuse.



IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR PEOPLE AND FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Employers have a vital role to play in tackling domestic abuse. While the most important reason to take action is because it's the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense. Domestic abuse can have a profound impact on a staff member's wellbeing, safety and ability to do their job, and can also affect colleagues, team dynamics, and service delivery. By providing the right support at work, employers can make a real difference in someone's life while also helping to reduce absence, improve staff retention, and foster a safer, more inclusive workplace. Taking action on domestic abuse is part of building a fairer, more equal society - and every employer has a part to play.



DEVELOPING YOUR POLICY

Developing a workplace policy on domestic abuse will enable you to better support your staff and mitigate any impact on your business.

A domestic abuse policy will ensure that there is a shared understanding of domestic abuse and of how staff may be supported. The policy should set out who is responsible for the policy, how you will monitor the policy, and when you will review it. There are a number of key areas that your domestic abuse policy should include:

1. A DEFINITION OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Setting a clear definition will ensure that all staff understand what domestic abuse is and how it can affect the workplace. It's important to explain that while domestic abuse can affect both men and women, their experiences are different. It's also important to highlight that staff experiences of domestic abuse may vary, depending on their age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, whether or not they are disabled, and other characteristics.

Your definition domestic abuse should include information on the different forms of domestic abuse. While physical violence is commonly identified as domestic abuse, not all abusive relationships involve physical violence. Domestic abuse also encompasses emotional abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, financial abuse, and coercive control.



All forms of domestic abuse can affect women's employment, and therefore have the potential to negatively impact your business.

Our guidance [What you need to know about domestic abuse](#) contains useful information, including a definition of domestic abuse, that you can use to develop your policy.

2. THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC ABUSE ON STAFF AND THE WORKPLACE

Some staff may think that domestic abuse is not a common problem in society or that it's not relevant to the workplace. Explaining the impact domestic abuse has on victim-survivors and their colleagues clearly illustrates the scope of the problem and why, as an employer, you are committed to challenging it.

Using clear examples and describing the signs of domestic abuse can make employees aware of the possibility that it may be the cause of a number of issues that can arise in the workplace. For example, if an employee suddenly has a high number of absences without an explanation this could be a sign of domestic abuse.

You can find further information about recognising the signs in our guidance [How to support staff experiencing domestic abuse](#).



3. STAFF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Your policy should clarify the specific roles and responsibilities for different members of staff including line managers, HR (where applicable), and colleagues.

Line managers

The responsibility of line managers includes supporting employees experiencing domestic abuse and taking practical steps to ensure their safety and wellbeing. This will also reduce the impact on their team and the wider business.

HR team and/or practitioner

If your business has an HR staff member or team, they should ensure that other policies are linked to your domestic abuse policy, such as flexible working, absence management, email or internet use, and your employee code of conduct. They should review the policy regularly to check it's effective.

HR staff should also have a good understanding of how domestic abuse affects staff, and their work performance, and be able to provide advice to line managers on how best to support them.

Colleagues

Staff may witness an incident of domestic abuse or be brought into situations by perpetrators. The policy should contain information to help staff know what to do if they become aware of a situation.



For example, they should be encouraged to tell their line manager and given instructions on how best to do this. A colleague may also disclose a personal experience which occurred inside or outside of work. Employees should behave in a supportive and non-judgemental manner which can assist their colleague in gaining confidence to report the abuse they may be experiencing.

4. SUPPORTING AND PROTECTING THE SAFETY OF STAFF

Staff affected by domestic abuse typically don't disclose to their employer because they're concerned they will not be believed, or that they won't be supported. It's therefore important to make sure that staff feel safe to disclose what's happening in their lives and, when they do, they don't face a negative response.

It's good practice to have clear information on the practical support measures available in the workplace. Your policy should provide a safety-planning procedure to ensure a consistent approach to protecting the safety and wellbeing of staff. If domestic abuse is disclosed, undertaking a risk assessment can mitigate the potential risk to the staff member, and in some cases, their colleagues. It's important to note that each person's needs are different and that any measures should be agreed with the staff member first.

A list of support services and contact details can be found on [page 17-18](#).



5. MANAGING A STAFF MEMBER WHO IS PERPETRATING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Your policy should include a commitment to challenge perpetrators. This approach recognises that abusive and violent behaviour is the responsibility of the perpetrator. Staff should be aware that misconduct inside and outside of work is viewed seriously and can lead to disciplinary action being taken. In some cases, it could also lead to a criminal investigation.

Your policy should contain clear information about how you will deal with perpetrators and why it's important for creating a culture of zero tolerance towards domestic abuse in your organisation. Victim-survivors and perpetrators may both be employed by your business and it may be difficult for line managers to know what to do. It's important that this information is included in your policy.

Your policy should set out the importance of supporting victim-survivors if they disclose their experience and prioritising their needs. Health and safety law says that employers have a duty of care to support employees and a key aspect of this is being proactive about dealing with employees who use violent and/or abusive behaviour.

Your policy should include information about how to conduct a risk assessment with the victim-survivor to identify any risks the perpetrator poses to the victim-survivor and other staff in the workplace.

Your policy should also make clear that it's important to minimise the potential for the perpetrator to use work resources to find out details about their partner or ex-partner, for example a new home address or mobile number. It should also include consequences for a colleague found to be assisting an abuser in perpetrating the abuse.



6. PROTECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

Protecting confidentiality when someone discloses domestic abuse is important for ensuring that employee privacy is prioritised, and they are not adversely affected by disclosing. Some staff may want to keep the information private and not share with their colleagues. This may be because of stigma and worry that colleagues will treat them differently. In some cases, protecting confidentiality of victim-survivors is also important in ensuring their safety. If a perpetrator works in the same workplace and finds out their partner has disclosed, it could put the staff member in increased danger. Therefore, it's important for line managers to ensure that information is not shared with other staff members and that staff are aware of their responsibility in relation to confidentiality.

7. RECORD KEEPING

It's good practice to keep records of any disclosure or report of domestic abuse. It's important that the disclosure or report is clearly recorded and is kept confidential. The records should be neutral and shouldn't include any additional subjective commentary. It's possible that at some point the police may become involved and the record may be used to inform their investigation.



8. UNDERSTANDING HOW DOMESTIC ABUSE RELATES TO OTHER WORKPLACE POLICIES

It's important that your workplace policies recognise the barriers that women face at work, but they should also take into account the workplace experiences of victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Policies such as absence management, health and safety, flexible working, and internet and email use can unintentionally disadvantage victim-survivors when they don't consider their experiences of work.

EXAMPLE: ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Some businesses use absence management software, which often incorporates the 'Bradford Factor' formula that is designed to detect patterns in absences, and triggers when someone has shorter, more frequent absences. The Bradford Factor unintentionally flags victim-survivors, as a pattern of short, frequent absences that can be a sign of domestic abuse. The absence management policy should contain information on how line managers can be sensitive to this, to avoid unnecessary distress for victim-survivors and being treated unfairly.



EXAMPLE: FLEXIBLE WORKING

Your flexible working policy should make clear that it can be used to support a staff member if they're experiencing domestic abuse or stalking, including being targeted in or around the workplace. Flexible working can be an important support mechanism by enabling a change in work patterns, location, or workload for victim-survivors who may be experiencing physical or mental health issues. For example, you can make an informal or formal agreement with the victim-survivor to have different starting and finishing times, to ensure their safety when entering and leaving work.

To find out how flexible working can work for your business you can take our self-assessment test and get tailored advice and actions at www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk

9. REVIEWING THE POLICY

A policy is only as good as its implementation, therefore monitoring how the policy works in practice in your business will enable you to identify and address any inconsistencies.

You should monitor your policy for effectiveness through staff consultation. It's beneficial to capture the experience of those who have gone through the process to ensure there are no issues.



LIST OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCOTLAND

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S AID

Scotland's lead domestic abuse organisation working towards preventing domestic abuse and supporting victim-survivors.

www.womensaid.scot

Scottish Women's Aid local group directory:

www.womensaid.scot/find-nearest-wa-group

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND FORCED MARRIAGE HELPLINE

Support for anyone experiencing domestic abuse or forced marriage, as well as their family members, friends, colleagues and professionals who support them.

24hr service: 0800 027 1234

www.sdafmh.org.uk

RAPE CRISIS SCOTLAND

Scotland's national rape crisis organisation providing helpline and email support for anyone affected by sexual violence.

Helpline from 6pm-midnight:

08088 01 0302

www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland local service finder:

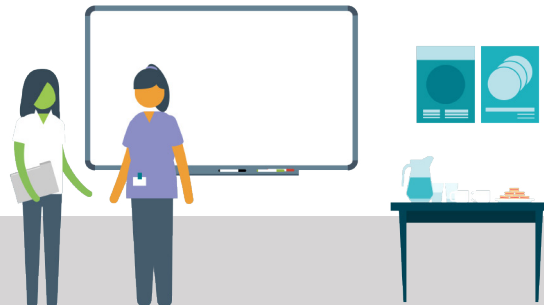
www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/find-a-service-near-you

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S RIGHTS CENTRE

Free legal information and advice for women experiencing gender based violence.

Freephone: 08088 010 789

www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk



SHAKTI WOMEN'S AID

Support and information for Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

0131 475 2399

www.shaktiedinburgh.co.uk

AMINA MUSLIM WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

Culturally-sensitive signposting and support service for Muslim and ethnic minority women.

Helpline from Mon-Fri 10am-4pm:

0808 801 0301

www.mwrc.org.uk

HEMAT GRYFFE WOMEN'S AID

Support to Asian, Black and minority ethnic women, children and young people.

Helpline (24hrs): 0141 353 0859

www.hematgryffe.org.uk

LGBT HELPLINE SCOTLAND

Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Helpline: 0800 464 7000




Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

Close the Gap
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW

0141 572 4730
info@closethegap.org.uk
www.closethegap.org.uk

 [closethegap.org.uk](https://twitter.com/closethegap)

 Close the Gap



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