**Human Resources**

**Framework for Supporting Staff Experiencing Domestic Abuse**

University of Birmingham

Framework for Supporting Staff Experiencing Domestic Abuse

# 1. Introduction

1.1The Framework for Supporting Staff Experiencing Domestic Abuse has been developed as part of the University’s commitment to providing an inclusive and supportive environment for all staff and in recognition of the fact that a significant number of our staff are likely to be affected by domestic abuse at any given time.

1.2 The purpose of the Framework is to establish how the University as an employer can provide workplace support for staff experiencing domestic abuse. In particular it aims to:

* help raise awareness of domestic abuse and the forms it can take
* provide information for staff experiencing domestic abuse on the ways in which the University can support them
* provide guidance for managers on their responsibilities if a member of

staff is affected by domestic abuse

1.3 The guidance in the Framework is intended to complement support from specialist domestic abuse support agencies. Further details of external support and other domestic abuse resources are available here: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/domesticabuse>

# 2. Domestic abuse

2.1 Domestic abuse is abuse which takes place between two adults who are personally connected to each other in some way. This can include people who are (or have previously been) married, in civil partnerships, a relationship, or have a child together; or who are relatives, such as parent and an adult child, or adult child and parent.

2.2 Whilst the Framework uses terms such as ‘victims of domestic abuse’ and ‘survivors of domestic abuse’ to describe individuals experiencing domestic abuse, not everyone who experiences domestic abuse will use those terms to describe themselves.

2.3 Domestic abuse is not limited to physical violence. It is a range of damaging behaviour which includes:

* **Verbal abuse** - Belittling, insulting, or demeaning someone with words, alone or in front of others
* **Physical violence** - Any type of violence against a person, such as pushing, hitting, punching, kicking, choking or using weapons
* **Controlling behaviour** - Attempting to restrict who someone sees or talks to and preventing them socialising with friends or family
* **Gaslighting** - Persistently undermining or manipulating someone, so that they doubt their own perceptions or become convinced that they are the problem
* **Financial and economic abuse** - Taking control of someone’s finances, denying them access to money and limiting their financial independence. Preventing someone’s ability to work and be financially independent, such as hiding money or bank cards needed for travel, ruining work clothes, making the victim purposefully late or causing injury and harm that leads to sickness absence.
* **Sexual abuse** – Rape and sexual assault, pressuring someone into sex, unwanted touching and groping
* **Online and digital abuse** - Insulting or threatening someone via social media, messaging or email; sharing or threatening to share intimate photos
* **Stalking** - Persistent and unwanted attention that makes someone feel pestered, scared, anxious or harassed, such as unwanted communication, using threats, following a person and spying on them
* **Coercive control** – A pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten the victim
* **Female Genital Mutilation** **(FGM)** – Enforcing procedures to partially or fully remove the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons
* **Forced Marriage** - When one or both spouses do not consent to the marriage and duress is involved. Duress can include physical, psychological, financial, sexual and emotional pressure.
* **‘Honour’ crimes and honour-based abuse** - When a crime or incident occurs ostensibly to protect or defend the honour of the family and/or community. There may be multiple perpetrators from the immediate family, extended family or the wider community.

2.4 People of all backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities and socio-economic groups can be affected by domestic abuse. Victims can be women, men, trans people and people of all gender identities. Abuse can occur in opposite and same-sex relationships. On average, two thirds of victims of domestic abuse are women, with female victims at higher risk of experiencing repeat victimisation or being seriously injured or killed by their abuser. (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ‘Workplace support for victims of domestic

abuse’, January 2021). Pregnancy is a common point at which abusive behaviour can emerge or escalate. Men experiencing domestic abuse can face additional barriers to accessing help and support, such as embarrassment and fear of stigmatisation.

2.5 A range of intersecting factors can further impact on the type of abuse individuals experience and their ability to access help. For example, disclosing abuse can also mean an individual having to disclose their sexual orientation, or revealing a relationship that family or friends do not know about. For individuals disclosing domestic abuse involving close family members, such as parents or siblings, this may also mean becoming estranged from their family or wider community.

2.6 The impact of domestic abuse on victims (and any children they have) is significant and wide ranging. People experiencing abuse may be seriously physically and/or psychologically injured by the abuser, causing long-term physical and mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders can also result from domestic abuse. Economically, abuse can cause unemployment, diminished skills and employment prospects, debt and poverty.

2.7 Domestic abuse frequently continues when the victim has left their abuser, as the abuser seeks to maintain control, and the risk of serious physical assault is at its highest in the period during and immediately after leaving an abusive relationship. Post-separation abuse, such as stalking, harassment, physical, emotional and economic abuse is also common, and necessitates victims of abuse needing ongoing support.

# 3. Support for staff experiencing domestic abuse

3.1 The workplace can offer an opportunity for staff experiencing domestic abuse to safely access support and remaining in work (and the financial independence that it brings), is vital for victims and survivors of domestic abuse and their recovery.

3.2 Abusers will often restrict and monitor their victim’s access to phones and the internet and control who they can see and where they can go. The workplace can offer an opportunity for victims of domestic abuse to safely seek help and support away from their abuser.

3.3 If staff seek support from the University – such as via their line manager or a member of HR (including Workplace Wellbeing staff) – they will be treated in a compassionate, non-judgemental manner. With the staff member’s agreement, a meeting will be held between them, their line manager and a HR representative to identify and agree what workplace support the member of staff needs.

3.4 Workplace support can take a number of forms. It could include:

* Providing time, space and privacy during working hours for staff to contact domestic abuse support services, solicitors, banks, make housing arrangements etc, through access to a private office and use of University telephones, computers and email accounts
* ‘Safe leave’ arrangements that enable staff to attend appointments related to their situation during working hours, with no loss of earnings and without having to use their annual leave
* Offering financial support, such as changing the accounts salary is paid into and, in certain circumstances such as to help fund leaving an abuser, offering advances in salary
* Temporary or permanent changes to working times and patterns
* Relocation of their place of work
* Treating unplanned absences/timekeeping sympathetically (e.g. not automatically triggering absence management processes)
* Changes to specific duties, for example to avoid potential contact with an abuser in a customer-facing role
* Working with Campus Security and Campus Police to support safety on campus
* Agreeing a protocol to be followed if the abuser phones or comes into the workplace
* Ensuring that the staff member does not work alone or in an isolated area
* Changing telephone numbers/email addresses as needed and not having these or other personal details published in public-facing forums
* Providing additional security measures, such as locks or alarms

3.5 These examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but are indicative of support that can be offered to staff. In having these discussions, it is recognised that the member of staff may need to try different approaches before finding one that works for them and that leaving an abusive situation can take time. It is also recognised that the abusive behaviour will not necessarily end when the member of staff leaves their abuser and that longer-term workplace support may be needed.

3.6 Workplace support is one element of helping individuals experiencing domestic abuse. It ideally should sit alongside support from specialist domestic abuse organisations. The University’s [domestic abuse intranet site](https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/domesticabuse) includes a wide range of resources for staff experiencing domestic abuse, including details of a diverse range of specialist agencies that support victims of abuse. The University trade unions can also be approached for support.

3.7 The University [Employee Assistance Programme (EAP),](https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/wellbeing/workhealth/employee-assistance-programme-eap-and-citizens-advice.aspx) provided by Health Assured, can also provide counselling services and legal advice to staff experiencing domestic abuse on a confidential basis.

# 4. Confidentiality

4.1 Where staff disclose to the University that they are experiencing domestic abuse this will be treated as sensitive personal information under GDPR.

4.2 In many cases actions to support the member of staff can be enacted without other staff needing to know the reason for these actions. Where it is necessary to disclose information to other staff (e.g. for safety reasons, such as where there is a risk of the abuser coming into the workplace), this will only be done with the staff member’s permission, excepting circumstances outlined in 5.3.

4.3 There are some circumstances in which confidentiality cannot be assured. These are where there are concerns about children or vulnerable adults, or where the University needs to act to protect the safety of employees.

# 5 Recognising signs of domestic abuse

5.1 There may be occasions where a manager or member of staff is concerned that a colleague could be experiencing domestic abuse. Signs of domestic abuse can include:

* Change in the person’s working patterns: for example, frequent absence, lateness or needing to leave work early or, alternatively, spending an increased amount of time at work
* Reduced quality and quantity of work: missing deadlines or a drop in usual performance standards
* Change in the use of the phone/email: for example, a large number of personal calls/texts, avoiding calls or a strong reaction to calls/texts/emails
* Changes in behaviour: for example, becoming very quiet, anxious, frightened, tearful, aggressive, distracted or depressed
* Conduct out of character with previous employment history
* Partner or an ex-partner exerting unusual amount of control or demands over their work schedule
* Visible bruising, single or repeated injuries with unlikely explanations
* Using make up to hide injuries
* Changes in or unusual clothing choices, such as clothes that do not suit the weather but which may be used to hide injuries

5.2 Clearly the above examples could be indicative of issues that do not relate to domestic abuse. Whilst this is a very sensitive issue, advice from domestic abuse agencies is always to ask a question rather than ignore concerns. The open questions below can be helpful in starting a conversation:

* How are you doing at the moment? Are there any issues you would like to discuss with me?
* I have noticed recently that you are not yourself. Is anything the matter?
* Are there any problems or reasons that may be contributing to your frequent sickness absence/under-performance at work?
* Is everything alright at home?

5.3 If the member of staff discloses that they are experiencing domestic abuse, line managers should offer support as set out in section 4. Colleagues with concerns should encourage the member of staff to make use of the support outlined in this document.

# 6. Perpetrators of domestic abuse

6.1 Where a member staff discloses domestic abuse and the alleged perpetrator is another University employee, the specific details of how this situation is managed will form part of the discussions under section 4. In such situations the University will always prioritise its legal duty to provide a safe working environment for its staff and to ensure the safety of the member of staff.

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| **Policy/procedure name** | Framework for Supporting Staff Experiencing Domestic  Abuse |
| **Version no.** | v.1 |
| **Last reviewed** | March 2022 |
| **Human Resources –**  **Strategy & Projects** | Susan Squire (owner) |

6.2 Should a member of staff be cautioned or convicted of a criminal offence relating to domestic abuse, the University will consider whether it is appropriate to instigate internal procedures in line with the relevant University policies.