

Preventing Workplace Aggression

**Why UK policy needs a multi-actor approach
to prevention**



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How to Cite this Brief

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Further Reading

Fida, R., Evans, L. et al., (2026). Preventing Workplace Aggression through a Multi-Actor Perspective: Bridging the Gap Between Evidence and Public Policies. *Evidence & Policy*.

This policy brief summarises key findings and recommendations from the full Evidence & Policy article.

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Why this research matters

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Workplace aggression remains a major challenge for UK organisations, affecting employee well-being, retention, productivity and organisational performance.

1 in 4

Employees experience conflict, abuse or aggression at work

15%

Employees report workplace bullying

£2.28bn

Annual cost of bullying to NHS England

At a Glance

- **Policy area:** Workplace aggression, bullying, violence and harassment, occupational health and safety, employee well-being.
- **Why this research was done:** UK policy guidance does not clearly show how workplace aggression should be prevented.
- **What was done:** We mapped UK statutory and guidance documents to examine definitions, monitoring and prevention.

About the Study

8,413 documents screened

57 policy and guidance documents reviewed

We examined how workplace aggression is:

- Defined
- Monitored
- Prevented
- Addressed across targets, perpetrators and bystanders

Key Message

- Despite extensive policy activity, important gaps remain in how workplace aggression is defined, monitored and prevented.
- These gaps may limit organisations' ability to create safe, respectful and healthy workplaces.

Why Act Now?

- **Work is changing:** Hybrid and digital working create new risks
- **The costs are high:** Aggression affects wellbeing, retention and productivity.
- **Prevention works:** Evidence can help organisations act earlier.

Six Challenges for Effective Prevention

Although UK policy provides important protections and guidance, our review identified six recurring challenges that may limit the effectiveness of workplace aggression prevention.

Taken together, these challenges suggest that current approaches are often:

- Reactive rather than preventive
- Focused on incidents rather than systems
- Centred on targets rather than all actors involved
- Poorly adapted to modern forms of work
- Difficult to monitor and evaluate consistently

No single challenge can be addressed in isolation. Building safer workplaces requires a comprehensive approach that addresses all six pieces of the puzzle.



Understanding the Six Challenges

1. DEFINITIONAL GAPS

Why it matters: Without shared definitions, employers may interpret duties differently and employees may be unsure whether their experiences are formally protected.

UK policy documents do not define workplace aggression consistently. Bullying, harassment and violence are sometimes defined differently across guidance, and definitions do not always align with current evidence. For example, some guidance treats bullying as a possible single incident, while other guidance defines it as repeated behaviour over time. This can make it difficult for employers to understand their responsibilities and for employees to know whether their experiences fall within formal protections.

2. WORKPLACE AGGRESSION IN REMOTE CONTEXTS

Why it matters: New ways of working create new risks that are not fully reflected in current policy.

UK policies still give limited attention to workplace aggression in remote, hybrid and digital work settings. While research increasingly recognises cyberaggression, including online harassment, cyberbullying, exclusion from digital communication and misuse of workplace platforms, most policy documents only mention these risks briefly. As work becomes more digitally mediated, this creates a growing gap between how people work and how they are protected.

3. BYSTANDERS OVERLOOKED

Why it matters: Bystanders can make a difference in prevention, but organisations need to understand what shapes their response.

Witnesses can influence whether aggression is challenged, reported, ignored, normalised or allowed to escalate. Yet most UK policies give little attention to the conditions that help bystanders act safely, such as confidence, trust in reporting systems, psychological safety and power dynamics. This leaves an important prevention resource underdeveloped.

4. INSUFFICIENT TOOLS FOR MONITORING

Why it matters: Organisations cannot prevent what they cannot accurately diagnose.

Policy documents often encourage monitoring but give limited practical direction on how aggression should be measured. Many approaches rely on self-labelling questions, such as whether someone has been “bullied”, which employees may interpret differently. Behavioural measures are more useful because they ask about specific experiences, for example: “How often has someone shouted at you in a work-related situation?”

5. PREVENTION WITHOUT DEFINITION

Why it matters: Without a clear prevention model, organisations may mistake symbolic compliance for real change.

Many UK policy documents refer to prevention but do not explain what it should involve in practice. Recommendations such as zero tolerance, codes of conduct or staff training are often presented without clarifying who they target, how they should work or how they should be embedded in everyday organisational practice.

6. OVEREMPHASIS ON SECONDARY PREVENTION

Why it matters: Effective prevention must act before harm occurs and address all actors involved.

Where policies provide concrete guidance, they mainly focus on what happens after aggression has occurred, such as grievance procedures, mediation or wellbeing support. Primary prevention is much less developed. To prevent aggression before it emerges, policies need to address perpetrators, targets and bystanders, as well as the organisational conditions that shape behaviour.

Recommendations: From Reaction to Prevention

To close the policy–practice gap, policymakers and employers should:

1. Clarify definitions

Develop a cross-government workplace aggression framework that adopts common definitions of bullying, harassment, violence, and cyberaggression.

2. Broaden policy scope

Explicitly cover digital aggression and homeworking risks and the role of bystanders.

3. Rebalance prevention

Move beyond grievance systems towards proactive prevention.

4. Strengthen monitoring

Use behavioural tools and include bystander perspectives in reporting, assessment and evaluation.

5. Move beyond symbolic policies

Ensure codes of conduct are embedded through leadership accountability, performance management and culture change.

6. Empower and support bystanders

Provide safe reporting routes, training and support for constructive bystander action.

7. Use a multi-actor framework

Address perpetrators, targets and bystanders across all stages of prevention

Cost of Inaction

Workplace aggression carries significant costs for organisations, including higher sickness absence, staff turnover, reduced productivity and increased legal and reputational risks. In some sectors, it may also compromise service quality and safety.

Prevention is often less costly than responding to harm after it occurs.

Workplace aggression is not just a well-being issue.

It is associated with higher sickness absence, staff turnover, reduced productivity, lower engagement and increased organisational costs. In some sectors, it can also affect service quality and safety.

Preventing workplace aggression should be viewed as a workforce, organisational and societal priority.

A Multi-Level Multi-Actor Prevention Framework

Workplace aggression is relational. It involves **perpetrators, targets and bystanders**, and is shaped by the wider organisational context.

Effective prevention therefore needs to act across:

Actors: perpetrators, targets and bystanders

Prevention levels: primary, secondary and tertiary

Systems: culture, leadership, policies and everyday practice

This framework helps organisations move from reactive case management to proactive, coordinated prevention.

	Primary prevention: <i>Prevent aggression before it occurs</i>	Secondary prevention: <i>Intervene early to prevent escalation and wider harm</i>	Tertiary prevention: <i>Reduce harm and prevent recurrence</i>
Perpetrator Those who engage in workplace aggression	Reduce the risk of an individual becoming a perpetrator	Identify and address problematic behaviours before they escalate	Reduce the risk of recidivism
Target Those who experience workplace aggression	Reduce vulnerability to workplace aggression and increase awareness of rights and support	Detect and respond to early signs of aggression and harm	Support recovery, well-being and return to work following aggression
Bystander Those who witness workplace aggression	Increase confidence, capability and willingness to intervene constructively	Support safe reporting, intervention and early response	Support those affected by witnessing aggression and promote organisational learning

Examples of prevention in practice

 PREVENT Primary Prevention Stop aggression before it occurs	 Perpetrators • Clear statutory definitions • Psychosocial risk assessments • Behavioural standards and consistent enforcement • Leadership development	 Targets • Clear statutory definitions • Psychosocial risk assessments • Behavioural standards and consistent enforcement • Leadership development	 Bystanders • Clear statutory definitions • Psychosocial risk assessments • Behavioural standards and consistent enforcement • Leadership development
 INTERVENE EARLY Secondary Prevention Detect and respond before harm is escalated	 Perpetrators • Standards for investigation and disciplinary action • Structured supervision • Mediation and training	 Targets • Confidential reporting • Formal and Informal resolution routes • Occupational Health support	 Bystanders • Early reporting mechanisms • Witness well-being check-ins • Inclusion in resolution processes
 RECOVER & LEARN Tertiary Prevention Reduce harm and prevent recurrence	 Perpetrators • Clear sanction frameworks • Monitored reintegration • Behavioural goals and review • Disciplinary action	 Targets • Return-to-work plans • Long-term counselling • Employment safeguards • Restorative dialogue	 Bystanders • Recognition of witness harm in guidance • Access to well-being services • Organisational learning reviews

Research-informed principles for prevention

The evidence points to six principles that should guide future policy and organisational action.

1. Prevention is more effective than reaction

Workplace aggression should be addressed before harm occurs, not only after complaints are made.

2. Workplace aggression is multi-actor

Effective prevention must consider perpetrators, targets and bystanders, rather than focusing on targets alone.

3. Organisational factors matter

Aggression is shaped by culture, leadership, workload, power dynamics and accountability systems, not only by individual behaviour.

4. Reporting systems must be trusted

Employees need to believe that concerns will be taken seriously, handled fairly and addressed without retaliation.

5. Bystanders are a prevention resource

Witnesses can help interrupt harm, but only when they feel safe, supported and equipped to act.

6. Prevention requires continuous learning

Organisations need to monitor risks, evaluate actions and adapt prevention strategies over time.

Workplace aggression can be prevented.

It is not only an individual problem but a systemic organisational risk. Effective prevention requires action across perpetrators, targets and bystanders, before, during and after harm occurs.

Find Out More

Access free resources, including the Workplace Aggression Prevention Toolkit, organisational diagnostic dashboard, practical guidance and infographics at:

www.improveworkplace.co.uk

Explore evidence-based tools to help assess risks, identify gaps and strengthen workplace aggression prevention.

Project Lead

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