

Domestic Violence and the importance of collective responsibility

During this pandemic the government's message to survivors of domestic abuse is encapsulated in the hashtag #youarenotalone.

An important message, and never more so than at the moment when we are experiencing a sharp rise in the number of domestic abuse cases. My team and I have also noticed the manifestation of this message in practice, with increasing incidents of early police intervention in cases. The cross over between family and criminal law has certainly amplified since lockdown in March.

Another element to the message is that those experiencing abuse have the opportunity to be heard and that those around them have the requisite awareness and understanding to know when someone needs help and how to offer it.

Employers have the opportunity to play a significant role in offering that support and understanding, and to make a real difference to those living with abuse. However, this can be difficult to do in practice. Difficulties in identifying those who need help, and providing support, will likely have been exacerbated by the number of people now working from home. Employers need to know what support to offer and how to ensure that their employees are aware of it and it is properly signposted.

From 9 June to 9 September 2020 the government launched a review into support for survivors of domestic abuse in the workplace. They put out a 'call to evidence' asking stakeholders to respond with information that would shape guidance 'to ensure survivors of domestic abuse are given the support they deserve within the workplace, whether that is an outlet for reporting abuse, financial assistance or as a source of emotional support.'

Withers LLP London's Family and Employment Law teams worked together in response to the government's request reflecting upon how to identify an employee who may need attention, the role that the employer can play in providing the requisite support, and also in ensuring that the employers equip themselves and their staff to deal with the difficult situations that may arise; providing access to suitable training, resources and guidance.

In June 2020 CIPD carried out a *COVID-19 Working Lives survey* which suggested that just under a quarter (24%) of employees were aware of their employer having a policy or support in place on domestic abuse. CIPD recommends employers have a clear policy in place that outlines the framework of support available, and that they ensure that employees are aware of that policy. In September 2020, together with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), they put together a Guide for employers for Managing and Supporting Employees experiencing Domestic Abuse.

Raising awareness that domestic abuse affects people regardless of status, class, gender, income bracket or educational background helps to ensure that employers are not making assumptions as to who might need support. It is important to make domestic abuse a part of the conversation, to remove any stigma and encourage collective responsibility. Employers should ensure staff involved in domestic abuse issues are clear when an issue needs to be escalated or reported. For example, if it raises safeguarding issues, and when it does not and also that staff involved in domestic abuse issues are properly supported.

There is much to be learned about what domestic abuse can look like and how you can help; increasing education, awareness and understanding are crucial to offering the right support in the right way.

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