

# Preventing Harm, Promoting Dignity: A Framework for Preventing Workplace Aggression

Roberta Fida, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and  
Organisational Psychology, Aston Business School, UK



# Why prevention matters

---

Workplace aggression: 'Behaviour by an individual or individuals within or outside an organization that is intended to physically or psychologically harm a worker or workers and occurs in a work-related context' (Schat & Kelloway, 2004, p. 191).

Workplace aggression: umbrella term including a broad range of behaviours from milder forms of incivility to more severe forms of physical violence (Cao et al., 2023; Hershcovis, 2011)

Workplace aggression is **widespread** and **costly**:

- 1 in 4 UK employees experience conflict or abuse each year (CIPD, 2024)
- In the NHS, ~17% report bullying from colleagues and ~25% from patients/public (NHS, 2025)
- Estimated cost of bullying to NHS England: £2.281bn annually (Kline & Lewis, 2019)
- Beyond individual harm — organisational, reputational, and societal costs

# The Workplace Aggression Prevention Project

---

Policies set the foundation for legal accountability, organisational responses, and preventative measures (ILO, 2024). How they conceptualise and operationalise prevention strategies remains underexplored.

## Aim

- How is aggression defined?
- What strategies are proposed for assessing, monitoring, and preventing workplace aggression?
- To what extent are perpetrators, targets and bystanders considered in prevention strategies?
- How do policies address cyber forms of workplace aggression?

## Method

- Eight-step **policy mapping** methodology (Bowen et al., 2022; Burris et al., 2010). Screening of national and advisory documents related to bullying, harassment, violence, and aggression.
- **UK Sources:** Legislation.gov.uk, Overton, HSE, HSENI, ACAS.

## Steering group

- HSE, ILO, NHS Scotland, Welsh Government, Unison, Police forces

# Overview of the screening result

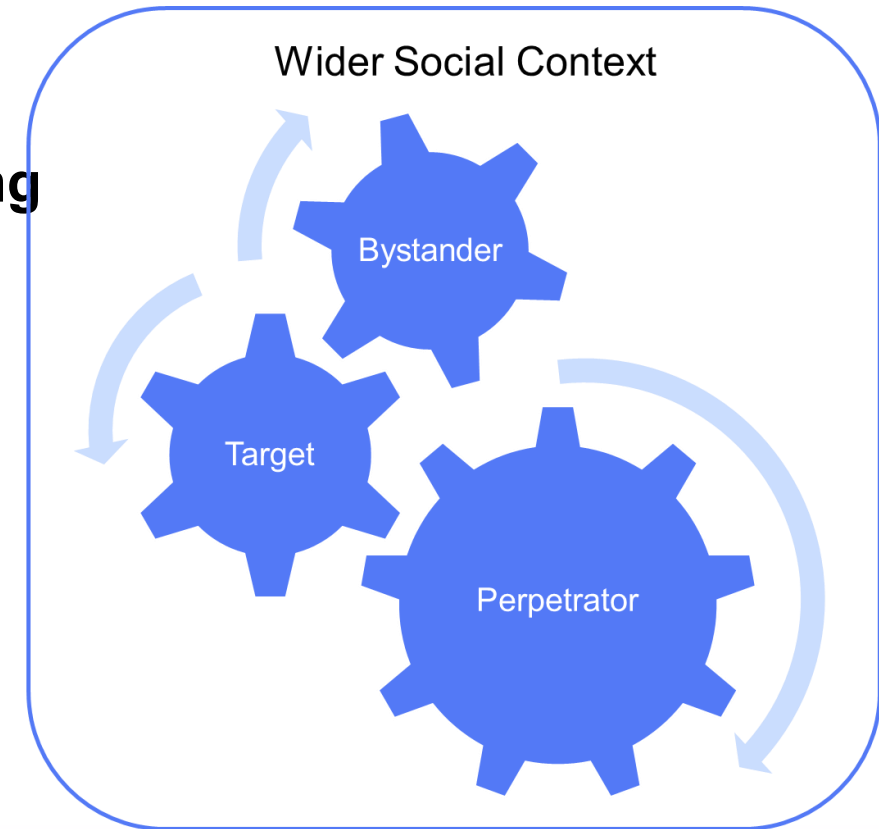
---

- **UK policy mapping**
  - from 8,413 retrieved documents to 57 documents included in the policy mapping
- **Italy policy mapping**
  - from 3,072 retrieved documents to 6 documents included in the policy mapping
- **EU policy mapping**
  - from 5,776 retrieved documents to 18 documents included in the policy mapping



# Policy Mapping Results - UK

- Six gaps identified:
  - **Definitional Gaps and Ambiguities**
  - **Workplace Aggression in Remote and Homeworking Contexts**
  - **Bystanders Overlooked**
  - **Insufficient Tools for Monitoring**
  - **Prevention without Definition**
  - **Overemphasis on Secondary Prevention**



# From Insight to Action: Prevention Framework

## Three Prevention Levels × Three Actor Roles

A matrix-based approach

Actor	<b>Primary Prevention</b> <i>Measures to reduce the risk and occurrence of workplace aggression</i>	<b>Secondary Prevention</b> <i>Measures to address and mitigate the consequences of workplace aggression and minimise the risk of escalation or reoffending</i>	<b>Tertiary Prevention</b> <i>Measures to help employees recover from the prolonged consequences of workplace aggression and reduce the risk of perpetrators from recidivism</i>
<b>Perpetrator</b> Those who engage in workplace aggression.	Reduce the risk of an individual <u>becoming a perpetrator</u> .	Reduce the <u>risk of repetition and escalation</u> of negative acts in individuals identified as at risk of engaging in workplace aggression.	Reduce the risk of perpetrators from <u>recidivism</u> .
<b>Target</b> Those workplace aggression is directly or indirectly aimed at.	Reduce the risk of an individual <u>becoming a target</u> .	<u>Address and mitigate</u> the consequences of direct exposure for targets.	Address and mitigate the <u>long-term consequences</u> of direct exposure for targets
<b>Bystander</b> Those who witness workplace aggression.	Increase the likelihood of an individual <u>taking appropriate actions</u> when witnessing workplace aggression.	<u>Address and mitigate</u> the consequences of indirect exposure for bystanders.	Address and mitigate the <u>long-term consequences</u> of indirect exposure for bystanders.

# Some examples of measures for prevention

	Primary:	Secondary:	Tertiary:
Perpetrator:	e.g. policies, employee responsibility, training (de-escalation, diversity), zero-tolerance culture, risk assessment (organisational culture, management styles, psychosocial risks).	e.g. early feedback and behavioural coaching, structured supervision and support, mediation, formal actions (formal complaints, legal action, disciplinary action), diversity training.	e.g. rehabilitation, formal actions (legal action, disciplinary action, termination of employment), monitoring and feedback
Target:	e.g. policies and codes of conducts; training (stress management, interpersonal conflict management and de-escalation) and reporting systems, safety alarms.	e.g. policies, reporting systems, employee support (debriefs, time off work, OH, employee assistance programme), early mediation and resolution routes.	e.g. support (counselling, rehabilitation, emotional support), occupational health and return-to-work policies.
Bystander:	e.g. training (recognising and reporting workplace aggression, de-escalation, interpersonal skills) and reporting systems.	e.g. training (responding to workplace aggression), support (counselling, employee assistance programme), reporting	e.g. support (counselling, rehabilitation, emotional support), occupational health and return-to-work policies.

# Why a Multi-Actor Framework Matters

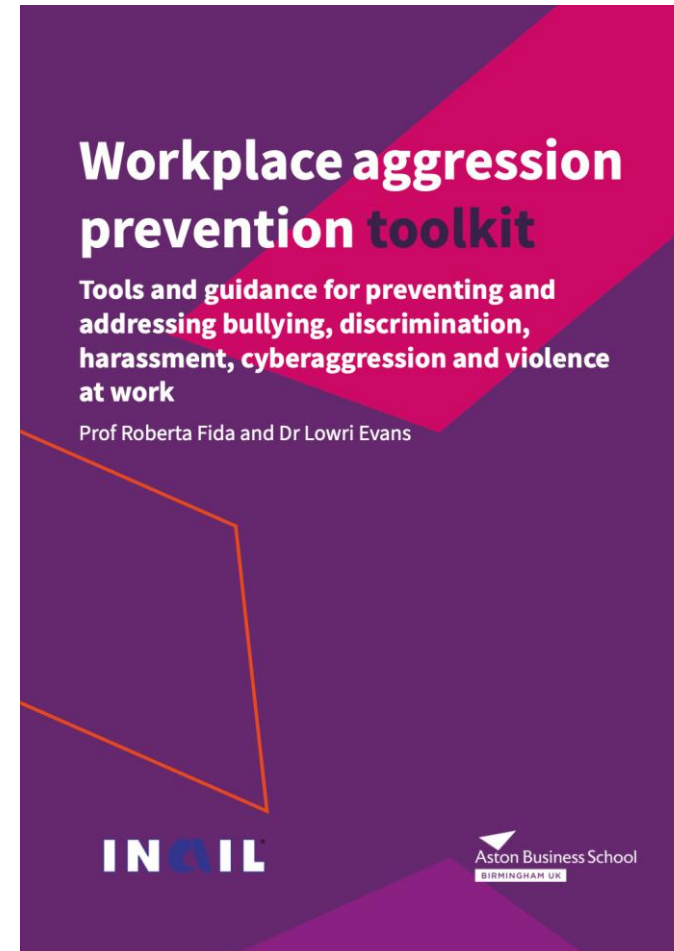
---

- This framework emphasises that prevention is not a one-off intervention or a single policy document.
- It requires a systemic and inclusive approach that:
  - recognises aggression as a product of organisational systems as much as individual behaviours;
  - empowers all actors—perpetrators, targets, and bystanders—to play a role in prevention; and
  - integrates interventions across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels rather than focusing narrowly on post-incident grievance.
- By adopting this comprehensive framework, policymakers and employers can move beyond fragmented and reactive approaches, ensuring that prevention is embedded into everyday workplace practices.



# Workplace aggression Toolkit + Dashboard

- **Impact** and **knowledge transfer** of policy mapping research
- **Tools** and **guidance** for preventing and dealing with workplace aggression
- Worked with organisations to refine and polish toolkit
- Toolkit contains
  - Definitions
  - Legal framework
  - Measuring and monitoring
  - Prevention framework
  - Prevention measures
  - Case studies



## Case Study 8: Secondary Prevention

At a mid-sized creative agency, leadership had invested in several primary prevention strategies to build a respectful and psychologically safe workplace. These included revising the code of conduct, delivering mandatory training on inclusive communication, and updating the onboarding process to reinforce company values.

Despite these efforts, signs of workplace aggression began to emerge within one of the agency's project teams. Junior staff reported feeling intimidated during team meetings by a high-performing senior designer. His sharp tone and public criticism created a climate of fear and withdrawal, with several employees describing a growing "walking on eggshells" atmosphere. However, no formal complaints were filed.

Leadership quickly realised that while values and training provide a foundation, they are not enough on their own. What was now needed were secondary prevention strategies: timely, targeted interventions that address issues as they arise before they escalate into serious incidents or cause lasting harm.

Yet the agency faced several challenges:

- How can they intervene constructively without alienating or undermining high-performing staff?
- How can managers confidently identify and escalate concerns without waiting for a formal complaint?
- How do they balance performance with psychological safety, particularly when the person involved holds status or influence?

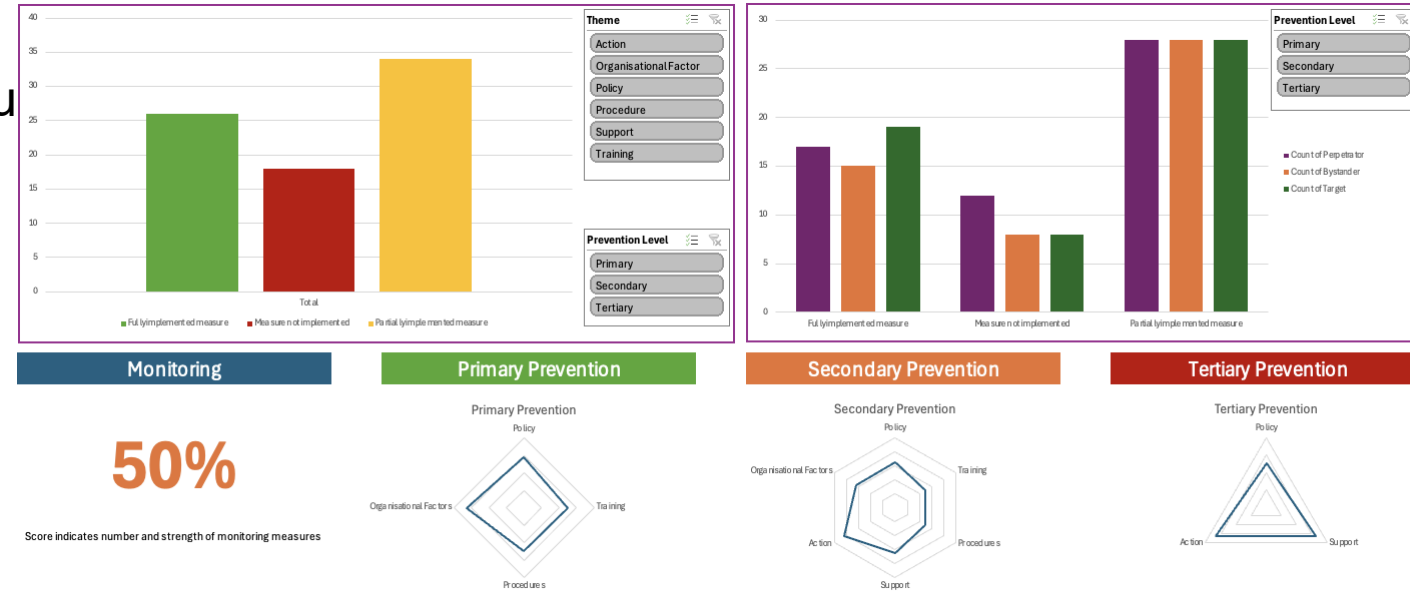
The agency now seeks to build a more robust system for recognising and addressing early warning signs of aggression. They want a process that allows for confidential escalation, equips managers with the skills to act early, and maintains fairness and trust across the team.

**Practical Question:** What tools, processes, or capabilities could help managers and employees identify and respond to early signs of workplace aggression? When the person exhibiting harmful behaviour is a senior or high-status employee, what additional safeguards or reporting pathways should be in place?

**Reflective Question:** When primary prevention is in place but not sufficient, how does your organisation respond? Do your current secondary prevention strategies allow early issues to be addressed constructively without undermining trust, performance, or team cohesion?

# Dashboard

- **Assess** current approaches towards workplace aggression prevention within your organisation.
- **Identify** gaps in your existing policies, support systems, and reporting mechanisms.
- **Visualise** existing strategies for workplace aggression prevention.
- **Inform** the development of tailored prevention and intervention strategies that reflect your specific organisational context.



# Dashboard

- Provide an **assessment** and a **visual overview** of your organisation's current and potential approach to preventing workplace aggression
- Four key tabs
  - **Monitoring**
  - **Primary Prevention**
  - **Secondary Prevention**
  - **Tertiary Prevention**
- Reflect on your organisation's current context, practices, and measures in place
- Once these tabs are completed, the tool's dashboard will generate a visual summary, showing how your organisation performs across the four thematic areas

## PART A: Tell us a bit about your organisation

Q1	Organisation name	Aston University
Q2	How big is your organisation?	Large (>250 employees)
Q3	Is your organisation within one of the following sectors?	No
Q4	Does your organisation have any customer/client facing roles e.g. receptionist, customer assistants, health and social care workers?	Yes
Q5	What working arrangements are in place for your staff?	Online only
Q6	Has your organisation recently or is it currently undergoing major change?	Yes
Q7	Does your organisation have any lone workers i.e. those who work alone without close or direct supervision e.g. deliver drivers, security staff, health workers, cleaners and retail staff?	Yes

Action	Is this active in your organisation?	Notes
Policies - Any document that addresses the following forms of workplace aggression. Select all that apply.		
Policies that address workplace bullying	Yes - Not widely adopted or implemented	
Policies that address workplace sexual harassment	Yes - Widely adopted or implemented	
Policies that address workplace violence and assault	Yes - Not widely adopted or implemented	
Policies that address cyberaggression	Yes - Widely adopted or implemented	
Policies that address workplace discrimination and/or harassment	Yes - Not widely adopted or implemented	
Domestic abuse policy	No	

# Call to Action: A Shared Responsibility

---

## “Prevention is everyone’s job.”

- Prevention requires cross-sector collaboration — policy, leadership, HR, regulators
- Codes of conduct should include explicit prevention responsibilities but they are not enough
- Training, reporting, and cultural systems must reinforce ethical behaviour daily
- Prevention is measurable, monitorable, and improvable
- The framework aligns **systems** to sustain safety.



Request your copy of the  
toolkit and dashboard!





[r.fida@aston.ac.uk](mailto:r.fida@aston.ac.uk)

