Policy Liaison Group
Workplace Wellbeing

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Bullying in the workplace

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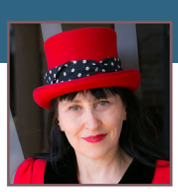
Westminster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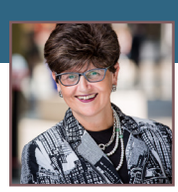
Dr Clive Boddy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Tracy Boylin


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Introduction

Workplace bullying and harassment remain pervasive and damaging forces in UK employment, threatening not only individual wellbeing but also organisational culture and national productivity. Evidence continues to show that many workers face conflict and harm at work, with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic employees significantly more likely to experience racial discrimination, harassment, and bullying (BITC, 2019). This roundtable brought together legal experts, whistleblowers, academics, and workplace leaders to examine the cultural, structural, and legal factors that sustain these behaviours, and to identify practical solutions. Taking place alongside proposed amendments to the Employment Rights Bill, particularly regarding non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), the discussion focused on how law, policy, and practice must evolve to create safer, fairer workplaces, especially for those in marginalised or precarious positions.

Participants explored the systemic roots of workplace bullying, from toxic leadership and power imbalances to the failure of formal redress mechanisms. They highlighted how traditional grievance processes often deepen trauma and called for more human-centred, restorative alternatives. This session forms part of the PLG on Workplace Wellbeing's broader effort to develop a framework that reflects lived experience and embed care, dignity, and psychological safety at work.

Key takeaways

Bullying is widespread, often invisible, and deeply harmful

- Bullying is not always loud or overt; it can be subtle, corrosive, and psychological in nature. Tactics include micromanagement, exclusion, humiliation, and coercive silence.
- While 23% of UK employees report bullying (Community Trade Union, 2023), sector-specific studies show significantly higher rates, up to 35% in financial services and 39% in hospitality.
- Bullying has measurable impacts on mental health, with links to burnout, depression, and suicide.

Corporate psychopathy is driving organisational toxicity

- Over half of workplace bullying cases may be attributable to "corporate psychopaths" - charismatic, manipulative individuals who thrive in power structures while inflicting harm below.
- These individuals often manipulate hiring processes and evade accountability. "Those above them think they're stars. Those below think they're devils in suits."
- Current vetting and selection processes are insufficient to identify or prevent such individuals from ascending to leadership roles.
- Vetting should go beyond CVs, "ask people who've worked under them: would you do so again, even for double the pay?"

Legal protections exist, but are inaccessible or inadequate

- Current employment law lacks clarity and accessibility. Many valid claims fail due to tight timelines (3 months for most claims) or financial barriers to legal counsel.
- Bullying cases often fall outside traditional discrimination protections unless linked to a protected characteristic.
- "The whistleblowing legislation is complex and unfit for purpose... Employment tribunals have a backlog of two years. Lives are in limbo."
- Regulators like the Financial Conduct Authority are beginning to treat bullying as "non-financial misconduct" with serious career consequences, but broader regulatory reach is limited.

Current grievance procedures often re-traumatise

- Grievance procedures are seen as adversarial, slow, and bureaucratic, more likely to re-traumatise victims than resolve conflicts.
- HR often acts defensively to protect institutions rather than individuals: “There’s nothing human about a grievance process.”
- An innovative alternative, The Healing Process, was highlighted. It centres on restorative justice, co-created with whistleblowers, and is now used in NHS Scotland.
- “People said it gave them back their self-worth. That’s what HR should be doing.”

Marginalised workers are disproportionately impacted

- Young women, disabled workers, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience bullying and less likely to report it safely.
- Freelancers and those in precarious employment, especially in creative industries, often have no HR support or protections. “Employment law doesn't apply to self-employed workers.”
- “Informal hiring structures perpetuate silence.” As many as three quarters of creative workers obtained their last role through informal contracts.
- Without formal employment structures, it's clear that these issues will continue to grow, and people will continue to keep their head down.

Issues raised

Lack of enforcement and quality control in investigations

The current system relies heavily on employers or outsourced third parties to investigate bullying complaints. Investigations often lack rigour, impartiality, and consistency. “I’ve seen decisions that bear no relation to the facts.” Regulators like the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) lack resources or statutory backing to intervene meaningfully. There is a dangerous over-reliance on “soft regulation” that allows organisations to police themselves, with varying, and often insufficient, outcomes.

The use and abuse of NDAs

The roundtable echoed widespread concern about the continued misuse of NDAs to silence victims of harassment and bullying. Although the government’s July 2025 announcement limits NDA use, gaps remain. Several attendees stressed that NDAs often prevent patterns of abuse from being revealed and contribute to a culture of fear. “They started as trade secret tools. Now they’re silence contracts.” Victims often feel forced into signing NDAs without understanding their rights or long-term consequences.

Whistleblower retaliation and personal cost

Despite legal protections, whistleblowers remain at high risk of retaliation. Several testimonies illustrated the profound personal and professional cost, including loss of livelihood, health deterioration, and prolonged legal battles. “Access to employment law advice is virtually non-existent for ordinary workers” Even when vindicated, whistleblowers are often isolated and unsupported. This systemic failure deters future reporting and perpetuates harm.

Recommendations

- Reform grievance procedures to include restorative, trauma-informed approaches that promote resolution and healing.
- Mandate proper vetting and emotional intelligence screening for leadership roles, especially in high-pressure sectors.
- Expand the remit and resourcing of the HSE and EHRC to enforce anti-bullying protections effectively.
- Ban NDAs for bullying and harassment by default, allowing opt-in only with strict safeguards and independent legal advice.
- Require annual reporting of NDAs in organisational accounts – including a standardised ratio (e.g. NDAs per 100 employees) as a potential red flag for toxic leadership.
- Enable a national league table of NDA use, if deemed useful, to promote transparency and accountability in organisational culture.
- Mandate that all NDAs are authorised by a Board member, ensuring trustees and directors maintain oversight and governance obligations.
- Enhance whistleblower protections, including anonymity safeguards, expedited tribunal processes, and compensation for retaliation.
- Embed psychological safety and anti-bullying training (i.e. humane, compassionate treatment of colleagues / employees) in induction processes and management development programmes.
- Require sectoral regulators (e.g. FCA, SRA) to publish clear standards and disciplinary actions for bullying as “non-financial misconduct.”
- Support freelancers and gig economy workers with access to independent reporting bodies and dispute resolution services.

Links

- Clive R. Boddy and Louise Boulter, 'HRM's Response to Workplace Bullying: Complacent, Complicit and Compounding', 2024
- UNISON, 'Tackling bullying at work'
- Baroness Smith of Llanfaes' Amendment to the Employment Rights Bill
- Gov.uk, 'Ban on controversial NDAs silencing abuse'
- Jonathan Lord, Saad Baset, Tracy Boylin, Rebecca Foreman 'The Healing Process : A no blame approach to resolving workplace disputes'

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

To get involved, please contact
secretariat@plgworkplacewellbeing.org