



Safeguarding school support staff – the 5-phase plan to end violence and abuse at work

Introduction

Support staff in schools may be concerned about their own safety and/or that of pupils due to violent incidences that have occurred or are likely to occur. The 5-phase plan provides an organising framework to work with schools in way that engages members and builds UNISON organisation and strength, to ensure we win and sustain change to safeguard school support staff and prevent violence and abuse at work.

What do we mean by violence at work?

Language is important. The [UNISON violence at work school policy](#) includes a comprehensive definition of violence, which reflects health and safety regulations and the legal responsibilities of the employer. However, school support staff may not recognise some of the behaviours covered by the policy as “violence” or themselves as “victims”. Depending on the local issues and circumstances it may be appropriate to amend language e.g. to “challenging harmful behaviours” rather than violence and abuse.

The 5 Phase Campaign Plan

The following 5 phase plan is a template guide for a UNISON best practice organising approach to the issue of violence and abuse in schools. The approach can be adapted by organisers to any school health and safety issue. However, this organising guide does not replace more detailed health and safety advice and guidance.

The 5-phase plan is designed to build a strong and effective UNISON campaign, but some circumstances will require an immediate response. Where members reasonably believe a situation to be of serious and imminent danger, they have rights under employment law to remove themselves from that situation without fear of punishment. Always seek urgent advice from your Region (who can also contact National Health and Safety Unit) if you believe members are at serious risk of imminent danger.

Phase 1 - Research and development

Gather the information required to run a successful campaign including:

- Current branch activities and health and safety infrastructure.
- Local context (check out [Endviolenceatwork.org](https://endviolenceatwork.org)) and workplace history of incidents and risks.
- Workplace mapping. Understand UNISON's strengths and weaknesses.
- Carry out a survey to find out about local violence issues and priorities. [This template](#) can be used or ideally used to develop an online Alchemer survey. Sending the survey to members before an organising visit will generate discussion in the workplace and early awareness which will help in Phase 2.
- Identify decisions makers. Who within the school, and if necessary, above the school ultimately has the power to agree to make the change? Map out how we can influence them.
- Understand the issues. Use UNISON briefings and training to understand the employer's duty of care to staff and potential means of redress for members.
- Write up the organising and bargaining goals, identify available resource and plan an achievable timeline to implement the following phases.

Phase 2 – Base building

- Engage with members within a school, local authority, or academy trust to discuss the issue of violence and the employer's duty of care.
- Build support for the plan to win the school's commitment to a meaningful policy to end school violence.
- Emphasise the importance of high UNISON membership and ask members to nominate active members and health and safety representatives to help lead the campaign.
- Produce flyers for the Alchemer survey with a QR code – to enable the survey to be completed by members during school organising visits or member meetings.
- Encourage and support existing or newly nominated active members or health and safety representatives to recruit UNISON members and ensure all members complete the survey.
- Agree who will request a copy of the current risk assessment and relevant policies from management.
- Continue to involve, support and develop new activists / health and safety representatives through the campaign. See the Organising to Win (OtW) guide on identifying and recruiting workplace leaders and activists for further guidance.

Phase 3 – Campaign launch

- Meet with members to discuss survey responses, and whether the current risk assessments and policies are “suitable and sufficient” based on those responses.
- Agree a UNISON pledge to send to school leadership and a plan to get it signed by as many members as possible – ideally the majority of support staff. For example (but can be adapted to suit local circumstances):

We, the undersigned UNISON members, ask for a meeting with school senior leadership to discuss joint working to address issues of violence and abuse in school, starting with the following pledge:

Our school / trust understands an employer’s duty of care towards staff and acknowledges serious concerns around(priority violence issues arising from survey) Our school will urgently work with staff unions on a new / reviewed violence at work policy including:

- *Risk assessments and effective measures to remove, reduce and control risks to staff.*
- *Staff training on how to deal with threatening situations.*
- *Support pathways for victims of violence and abuse.*
- *Transparent reporting and monitoring of all incidents and partnership working with unions on violence issues.*

- A UNISON template for a school violence at work policy can be found [here](#). Give a reasonable deadline for a response.
- Prepare for the meeting to deliver the outcomes of the survey and with members ready to give testimony on issues of violence and abuse and its impact. It is important at this stage to prepare and “inoculate” members for a response from management that blames funding, short staffing, and behavioural issues following Covid lock down – but does not accept employer responsibility for addressing legitimate health and safety risks and concerns.
- Anticipate and prepare counter arguments.
- Keep members advised of UNISON activity and progress with regular communications.

Phase 4 – Bargain or escalate

The measures outlined in the pledge are not unreasonable. They only ask the school’s leadership to take seriously their duty of care towards staff and engage with UNISON on these matters. If phases 1,2 & 3 have successfully built member support for the plan and provided a

strong collective voice on the issues, the school’s leadership should readily agree to the pledge and a framework and timetable to negotiate a new policy (or review any existing policy).

If not, then the campaign should be escalated. An escalation plan should include activity inside and outside of the workplace, ordered in a way that will incrementally increase pressure on the decision makers identified in phase 1. An escalating plan provides the decision makers with every opportunity at every stage, to sign the pledge and commence meaningful negotiations.

Examples of potential escalating actions, ordered to incrementally increase pressure

These may not all be appropriate at every school, and neither is the list exhaustive. An escalation plan must be based on what has been learned through phases 1,2,3 and members’ collective strength of feeling.

Step	Inside	Outside
1	<p>New survey of staff to assess confidence in existing measures and awareness of how to raise and record concerns or incidents.</p> <p>Submit an FOI request to obtain data on violent incidents recorded.</p> <p>Place concerns based on above in writing to designated safeguarding lead and school leadership team – signed my membership.</p> <p>Seek to arrange a union health and safety inspection with the local safety representative (either existing or newly appointed).</p> <p>Support the local rep to write an inspection report and remedies requested including a timeframe.</p>	
2	<p>If no response or action has been completed with a ‘reasonable’ timeframe, take UNISON advice from region and the national health and safety unit on the potential to formalise concerns through the issuing of a Union Inspection Notice (UIN).</p>	
3	<p>Raise a collective grievance re the school’s failure to adequately respond to pledge request. Prepare member spokespeople to present testimony in any hearing.</p>	

4		Letter and meeting request to “higher decision maker” i.e. Local Authority or Academy Trust CEO / Board.
5		Engage members in letter writing campaigns. Engage with local MPs and Councillors or members of Academy Trust Board – asking for their intervention. Consider the decision makers identified in Phase 1 and analyse their key interests to identify new opportunities to influence them.
6	Having exhausted other options – take UNISON regional advice on lodging a trade dispute and consultative ballot for action.	Media and social media coverage of safety issues, dispute, and consultative ballot.
7		Complaint to Ofsted, after seeking advice from UNISON’s health & safety unit. Complaint to Health and Safety Executive, after seeking advice from UNISON’s health & safety unit.
8	Request a formal industrial action ballot.	Media and social media coverage of safety issues, dispute and ballot.

Phase 5 – Win, celebrate, review and sustain

Securing the new or improved policy is a great success, but it’s not the end. Health and safety at work is a live issue and positive change will only be sustained through active and engaged UNISON membership with trained and supported workplace health and safety representatives and branch infrastructure.

It is important to continue to develop UNISON’s health and safety infrastructure by ensuring new health and safety representatives receive training and support. It is also important that we continue to build effective UNISON health and safety committees and structures in schools and branches, and across Local Authorities and in Multi Academy Trusts.

Where a school demonstrates a serious commitment to ending violence at work they should be encouraged to sign up to the [UNISON violence at work charter](#).

Important note

It is of paramount importance to UNISON to ensure employers take health and safety seriously, to protect our members at work, and this 5-phase plan will continue to assist with this aim. However, unfortunately all too often our members are the victims of violence at work. If our members have experienced such violence and sustained injury, as long as our member was in membership at least 4 weeks before the incident took place, UNISON can also support them through our comprehensive Legal Scheme.

In this situation, to get that help members should call UNISONdirect on 08000 857857 to access legal support, as soon as possible. Our lawyers will look into the matter and consider whether our members are able to make a claim for compensation for the injuries they have sustained. Further information on the type of claims that can be brought can UNISON's [guidance for organisers on violence in schools – the legal framework](#).

Other resources

- Further “Organising to Win” (OtW) guides with more detail on one-to-one skills, workplace mapping, identifying new activists etc can be found on the OtW tile on the [Organising Space](#).
- [UNISON template violence survey](#)
- [UNISON template violence policy](#)
- [Guidance for UNISON organisers on violence in schools - the legal framework](#)
- [It's not part of the job - A health and safety guide on tackling violence at work](#)
- [Health and Safety: The Basics - A guide for new UNISON safety reps](#)
- [Health and Safety Inspections at Work - A guide for UNISON safety reps](#)
Whilst the main focus of this campaign plan is around tackling violence in the workplace, the workplace health and safety inspection may highlight other health and safety issues which should not be discounted or receive less attention. They may provide additional opportunities for organising around those issues within the workplace.
- [UNISON Health and Safety Unit website](#)
- [Violence at Work](#)
- [RAAC and building safety issues](#)
- [Health and Safety key issues](#)
- [Health and Safety knowledge base](#)