

Tackling Violence in the NHS



A UNISON Branch Guide

This guide has been produced for branches and health and safety reps and should be read alongside the **NHS Violence Prevention Reduction Standard**. Although the standard is for the NHS in England, the principles and advice may be applicable to branches in devolved administrations.

Scale of violence in the NHS

Each year, across the NHS around 14% - 15% of staff report that they have experienced physical violence or aggression from patients, relatives or members of the public. That is over 200,000 staff every year across the UK.

The rates are worse for certain occupational groups and services: 33% of ambulance staff and 20% of mental health and learning disability trusts' staff report such abuse.

UNISON's annual "your life at work" survey also reports on violence that members experience at work in the NHS. In 2025, 19% of members who responded had experienced violence in their workplace, with a staggering 33% reporting multiple incidents.

A joint survey in 2025 by UNISON and the Nursing Times gathered data specific to nurses and midwives. It found that one in six of those surveyed reported increased violence whilst carrying out their

roles. 88% of members reported that attacks came from patients, service users, or their relatives. There are harrowing stories of nurses being punched, kicked, bitten, and slapped and even one stabbing.

Violence or aggression are never part of the job! Every staff member should feel safe at work and should be protected by their employer.

Impact of violence

Violence and aggression comes in many forms including physical and verbal assaults. Incidents leave people with physical and psychological injuries, leading to time off, isolation from the workplace, loss of confidence, people quitting their jobs, PTSD and other significant long-term psychiatric conditions.

In 2022, Liverpool John Moores university calculated the cost of Violence in the NHS in England both in the community and in the workplace:

- £921 million in costs from community violence
- £1.36 billion in costs from violence towards NHS staff.
- £283.7 million in costs for medical treatment and rehabilitation

[Read the full report here.](#)

Costs of violence to the NHS in England in 2021/22



Methodological report and costing tool development

Jones L and Quigg Z



What can branches do?

It's vital that members know that they can safely and anonymously approach their UNISON branch should they experience violence or aggression, have been threatened, or feel their safety is in any way at risk.

That's why it is so important that every branch has a trained health and safety rep in place. If your branch does not have one, let members know about the opportunity. Training and paid time off are available for members taking on union roles: unison.org.uk/health-safety-rep

Resources for current activists and reps

Current reps can familiarise themselves with the resources and additional information available on our [website](#).

Order or download our violence at work posters and distribute throughout the workplace so that members understand the support available to them.

Persuade your employer to sign up to UNISON's 'End Violence at Work Charter':

www.unison.org.uk/end-violence-work-charter/

You can also familiarise yourself with relevant standards, legislation and materials such as:

1. NHS Violence Reduction Standard

An updated Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard was made available in 2024 and aims to help safeguard NHS staff against violence and aggression.

The standard provides an agreed framework under which UNISON branches and UNISON health and safety reps can play their part in making workplaces safer for staff and patients.

You can read the standard here: www.england.nhs.uk/publication/violence-prevention-and-reduction-standard/

2. Legislation

The five relevant parts of health and safety legislation that extends to violence at work are:

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASAWA)

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999

Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR)

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977

Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996

3. UNISON's campaign against violence

UNISON's campaigning work has made a real difference in protecting NHS staff from violence and abuse.

As part of the recommendations from the 2022 NHS pay deal, the NHS Social Partnership Forum was asked to look at ways to prevent & reduce violence in the NHS. UNISON had a lead role in producing the report for the SPF, outlining our recommendations which the government accepted in April 2025.

The recommendations included making the Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard

mandatory, allowing for inspection and improvement through the Care Quality Commission, more consistent messaging about the impact of violence, and a better digital reporting system to encourage a reporting culture.

Read the report in full here:

www.socialpartnershipforum.org/publications/ways-tackle-and-reduce-violence-against-nhs-staff

UNISON will continue to campaign against violence in the NHS by:

- Getting accurate data on the levels of violence NHS staff face.
- Ensuring managers are trained and understand their responsibilities to work in partnership with health and safety reps.
- Ensuring staff are trained and supported to deal with challenging situations – including de-escalation and restraint.
- Ensuring staff get quality physical and psychological support if they are assaulted at work.
- Ensuring offenders who assault staff are prosecuted.

Find out more about our campaign here: www.unison.org.uk/NoNHSviolence

Consulting on workplace violence with the employer:

At every stage, the Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard requires either engagement or consultation with trade unions. It is essential that every branch has a health and safety rep who can participate in any such consultation with the employer.

Branch committees should discuss their priorities for reduction and prevention of violence. The following are areas to focus on during a workplace violence assessment:

1. Preventative measures before an incident

- How many trained health and safety reps are present in the workplace?
- Are there known issues with staffing levels or work environments?
- What measures are needed for community and ambulance staff working environments?
- Are workplace violence risk assessments in place? If not, ask the employer to complete one and get involved
- Are staff and managers trained on violence, including procedures for staff in the event of an incident?
- How can the branch work in partnership with the employer to set out strong cultural position against violence and aggression?
- What measures will ensure all staff understand the reporting process for violent incidents, including threats and verbal abuse?

2. Response measures taken during an incident of violence or aggression

- Are roles clear within each department and workplace?
- At what point will Trust security or the police be called to an incident?
- Is the workplace covered by CCTV?
- Have incidents happened before, how well did the plans work in operation and what was learned to improve responses?

3. Support for staff following an incident

- Are staff kept informed during an investigation?
- What lessons are learned from an investigation to prevent reoccurrence?
- What physical and/or mental support is offered to staff through the employer?
- Where appropriate, prosecution of perpetrators is encouraged using the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018

A case study in addressing workplace violence

In 2024, staff in the autism unit in a large mental health trust reported frequent incidents of violent and abusive behaviour from service users. Many felt unsafe, especially those working away from the main unit.

The UNISON branch at the trust dealt with the matter swiftly, professionally and discreetly, earning praise for its collaborative approach. In particular, much of this success was thanks to the work of an outstanding activist who worked tirelessly to resolve the issue and also helped train up other reps in the branch.

The trust used a “no barrier policy” to working with health and safety reps to great effect. UNISON’s leading health and safety activist at the trust also sat on the employer’s health and safety committee. This allowed them to persistently raise staff concerns from both sides of the table which helped expediate solutions.