

GRAY MATTER HR

MANAGER ESSENTIALS TOOLKIT

Seven practical tools for the people issues that cannot wait. Use them to pause, ask better questions and take a fair next step.

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Reviewed 10 September 2026 | graymatterhr.co.uk

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

A CLEARER FIRST STEP

Choose the tool that matches the situation. Write on the page, record the action and set a review point. The checklists help a manager structure their thinking; they do not decide the outcome.

- ☐ Pause if the facts are unclear or the outcome would be difficult to reverse.
- ☐ Use your organisation's policies and check who has authority to decide.
- ☐ Keep notes factual, proportionate and appropriately confidential.
- ☐ Get HR or specialist advice where a red flag appears.

IMPORTANT BOUNDARY

These resources provide general guidance for employers in Great Britain. Employment law and the right process depend on the facts, your policies and the people involved. They are not legal advice. Employment law differs in Northern Ireland.

MANAGER TOOL 01

THE FIRST 24 HOURS OF AN ER ISSUE

A calm first-response checklist to protect people, evidence and a fair process before decisions are made.

BEST FOR A complaint, allegation, conflict, conduct concern or unexpected people issue	TIME 10-15 minutes	REVIEWED 10 September 2026
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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- There is an immediate safety or wellbeing risk.
- The issue may involve discrimination, harassment, whistleblowing, safeguarding, criminal conduct or a serious data breach.
- You are involved, have reached a conclusion, or cannot act impartially.
- You are considering suspension, dismissal or another action with serious consequences.

1. STABILISE THE SITUATION

- ☐ Check whether anyone needs immediate support, medical help or protection from further harm.
- ☐ Separate people or change duties only where necessary and proportionate. Do not treat this as punishment.
- ☐ Explain that the concern will be taken seriously and handled as privately as possible. Do not promise absolute confidentiality.
- ☐ Do not promise an outcome, name a sanction or say the allegation is proven.

2. CAPTURE THE ESSENTIALS

- ☐ Record who raised the issue, when and the words they used as accurately as possible.
- ☐ Note what is alleged, when, where, who was present and whether it is ongoing.
- ☐ Secure relevant documents, messages, CCTV or system records before they can be lost.
- ☐ Separate what you observed from what somebody told you.

What happened?	Who may have first-hand information?
What needs preserving today?	Who owns the next step and when?

3. TRIAGE - DO NOT INVESTIGATE YET

- ☐ Check the relevant policy and any reporting or safeguarding route.
- ☐ Choose an appropriate owner and consider whether an independent manager is needed.

- ☐ Consider when the person complained about should be told and whether early disclosure could affect evidence or safety.
- ☐ Set the next contact point, even if there may be no substantive update.

Named owner	Next action
Due date	Who needs an update and when

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

[acas.org.uk/raising-and-dealing-with-problems-at-work](https://www.acas.org.uk/raising-and-dealing-with-problems-at-work)

MANAGER TOOL 02

DIFFICULT CONVERSATION PLANNER

Plan a direct, fair conversation that focuses on facts, impact and a useful next step.

BEST FOR

Early concerns about behaviour, relationships, attendance or performance

TIME

10 minutes before the meeting

REVIEWED

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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- The concern is serious enough that a formal process may be required.
- The employee has raised discrimination, bullying, whistleblowing, health or disability concerns.
- You cannot describe the concern using specific facts and examples.

1. GET CLEAR BEFORE YOU SPEAK

What have I personally observed or verified?

What is the impact?

What assumption or bias might I be bringing?

What would a useful outcome look like?

2. PLAN A NEUTRAL OPENING

- ☐ Try: I wanted to talk about [specific situation]. I have noticed [fact]. The impact has been [impact]. I would like to understand your perspective.
- ☐ Choose a private setting and allow enough time.
- ☐ Use recent, specific examples. Avoid labels, gossip, always and never.
- ☐ Be clear whether this is informal or part of a formal process.

3. MAKE IT TWO-WAY

How do you see the situation?

Is anything affecting your work that I should understand?

What support or clarity would help?

What do you think needs to happen next?

4. CLOSE WITH CLARITY

- [] Summarise the concern and the employee's response without changing their meaning.
- [] Agree specific actions, support, owners and a realistic review date.
- [] Make a proportionate factual note and share any agreed record.

Agreed action	Support and owner
Review date	How progress will be measured

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

acas.org.uk/acas-guide-to-challenging-conversations-and-how-to-manage-them

MANAGER TOOL 03

PERFORMANCE CONCERN MEETING RECORD

A structured note for an early performance conversation, with clear expectations, support and review points.

BEST FOR An informal capability or performance discussion before a formal route	TIME During and immediately after the meeting	REVIEWED 10 September 2026
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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- The issue may be conduct rather than capability, or the distinction is unclear.
- Health, disability, pregnancy, family leave or another protected matter may be relevant.
- A formal warning or dismissal could be an outcome.

MEETING DETAILS

Employee and manager	Date and time
Purpose explained as informal/formal	Relevant policy or process

THE CONCERN

Expected standard or objective	Specific examples and dates
Impact on work, customers or colleagues	Evidence referred to

EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE

Employee's explanation in their own words	Barriers, workload or unclear expectations
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Health, disability or support issue raised	What the employee believes would help
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IMPROVEMENT PLAN

- ☐ Make objectives specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound.
- ☐ Confirm support, training, equipment or management time.
- ☐ Explain how progress will be measured and how often feedback will be given.
- ☐ State what may happen if improvement is not achieved, using the organisation's procedure.

Required improvement and measure	Support and owner
Deadline	Review date

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

acas.org.uk/performance-management

MANAGER TOOL 04

WORKPLACE INVESTIGATION QUESTION PROMPTS

Neutral prompts to establish what happened, test evidence fairly and avoid leading a witness.

BEST FOR

A manager appointed to investigate a disciplinary complaint or grievance

TIME

Use to plan each interview

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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- You are a witness, decision-maker or otherwise not independent.
- The matter involves safeguarding, suspected criminal conduct, whistleblowing or serious wellbeing risk.
- You have no written terms of reference or clear allegation.

OPEN THE MEETING

- [] Explain your role, the purpose, how notes will be handled and what happens next.
- [] Confirm that no decision has been made and ask the person to use their own words.

Please describe what happened from the beginning.

What did you see, hear or do yourself?

BUILD THE CHRONOLOGY

When and where did this happen?

Who was present before, during and after?

What happened immediately before and after?

When did you first tell someone or make a record?

TEST THE DETAIL FAIRLY

How do you know that?

Did you observe that or were you told?

What evidence may support or challenge this?

What are you unsure about or unable to remember?

CLOSE WITHOUT GAPS

- [] Ask about other witnesses and evidence that may not support the account.
- [] Summarise key points and explain how the person can check the meeting note.
- [] Do not ask the witness to agree with your theory or promise absolute confidentiality.

Anything else that matters?

Who else has first-hand information?

Support needed after the meeting

Next step explained

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

acas.org.uk/investigations-for-discipline-and-grievance-step-by-step

MANAGER TOOL 05

ABSENCE AND ADJUSTMENTS DISCUSSION GUIDE

A respectful framework for discussing health-related absence, barriers at work and adjustments to try.

BEST FOR A welfare, return-to-work or attendance review where health may be relevant	TIME 15 minutes to prepare	REVIEWED 10 September 2026
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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- The employee may be disabled and formal attendance action is being considered.
- You need medical information but do not have informed consent or a clear reason.
- There is an immediate safety, mental health or safeguarding concern.

BEFORE THE DISCUSSION

- [] Review the absence record and separate disability-related absence where appropriate.
- [] Read the absence and reasonable adjustments policies and check what has already been agreed.
- [] Choose a private setting and explain the supportive purpose.

UNDERSTAND IMPACT, NOT UNNECESSARY MEDICAL DETAIL

How are you, and is now a suitable time to talk?	How does your health affect you at work?
Which tasks, environments or patterns create a barrier?	What has helped before?

EXPLORE OPTIONS TOGETHER

- [] Consider hours, breaks, location, duties, equipment, communication or supervision.
- [] Consider a phased return, treatment time, adjusted triggers or separate disability-absence records.
- [] Use occupational health advice where it would answer a specific question and consent is in place.
- [] Assess effectiveness, practicality, cost, disruption and safety without assumptions.

AGREE, RECORD AND REVIEW

- [] Confirm agreed adjustments in writing and keep health information appropriately restricted.
- [] If an adjustment is not agreed, explain why and explore reasonable alternatives.

Adjustment to try	Owner and start date
Review date	What success will look like

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments

MANAGER TOOL 06

FLEXIBLE WORKING DECISION CHECKLIST

A step-by-step check for handling a statutory request reasonably, consistently and on time.

BEST FOR A statutory request to change hours, times, days or place of work in Great Britain	TIME From receipt to written outcome	REVIEWED 10 September 2026
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PAUSE AND GET ADVICE IF...

- The request may also be a reasonable adjustment or relate to discrimination, pregnancy or family leave.
- You are considering refusal and have not tested alternatives with the employee.
- The two-month decision period, including appeal, may expire before the process finishes.

1. LOG AND VALIDATE

- ☐ Record the date received. Statutory requests can be made from day one of employment.
- ☐ Check the request is in writing and includes the required details.
- ☐ Check whether two statutory requests have already been made in the last 12 months.
- ☐ Calculate the two-month deadline, including any appeal, unless an extension is agreed.

2. DISCUSS AND EXPLORE

- ☐ Meet promptly unless the request can be agreed in full without a meeting.
- ☐ Start with what may be possible, not with defending the current arrangement.
- ☐ Discuss benefits, operational concerns, alternatives and a possible trial period.
- ☐ Consult the employee before refusing.

Requested pattern	Potential benefits
Specific operational concern	Alternative or trial considered

3. DECIDE AND CONFIRM

- ☐ Apply the policy consistently and consider the request on its own facts.
- ☐ If refusing, connect the evidence to a permitted statutory business reason.
- ☐ Check separately whether the change could be a reasonable adjustment.
- ☐ Confirm the decision in writing and offer an appeal in line with good practice and policy.

Decision and reason	Evidence
Effective date	Appeal route and deadline

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

[gov.uk/flexible-working](https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working) and [acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-flexible-working-requests](https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-flexible-working-requests)

MANAGER TOOL 07

DO I NEED HR SUPPORT? QUICK RISK CHECKER

A two-minute triage tool to spot when a manager should pause and get HR advice before acting.

BEST FOR Any people decision that feels sensitive, unusual or difficult to reverse	TIME 2 minutes	REVIEWED 10 September 2026
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TICK EVERY STATEMENT THAT APPLIES

- ☐ I am considering dismissal, suspension, a warning, withholding pay or a major contractual change.
- ☐ The employee mentioned discrimination, harassment, bullying, victimisation or whistleblowing.
- ☐ Health, disability, neurodiversity, pregnancy, family leave or caring may be relevant.
- ☐ There is a safety, safeguarding, criminal, fraud or serious data concern.
- ☐ A grievance, representation request or challenge to fairness has been raised.
- ☐ Facts are disputed, evidence may disappear, or key witnesses have not been spoken to.
- ☐ Similar cases were handled differently, or a senior leader wants a particular outcome.
- ☐ I am involved, emotionally invested or may not appear impartial.
- ☐ A deadline, appeal, consultation duty or statutory process may apply.
- ☐ The decision would be difficult to explain to the employee or an independent reviewer.

READ YOUR RESULT

- ☐ Any red-flag issue: Pause and obtain HR or specialist advice promptly.
- ☐ Two or more other ticks: Get HR input before choosing the route or communicating an outcome.
- ☐ One tick: Check policy, record your reasoning and consider a quick HR sense-check.
- ☐ No ticks: You may manage locally, but keep a factual note and ask for help if things change.

PREPARE A USEFUL HR HANDOVER

What happened and when	What evidence exists
What has already been said or done	Immediate risk and approaching deadline

OFFICIAL GUIDANCE

acas.org.uk/raising-and-dealing-with-problems-at-work