

Technical factsheet

Unlawful discrimination

This factsheet is part of a suite of employment factsheets and a pro forma contract and statement of terms and conditions that are updated regularly. These are:

The contract of employment
The standard statement of terms and conditions
Working time
Age discrimination
Dealing with sickness
Managing performance
Disciplinary and dismissal procedures
Unlawful discrimination
Redundancy
Settlement offers
Family-friendly rights
Employment status: workers

Please note: this factsheet does not cover age discrimination, which is the subject of [Technical factsheet: age discrimination](#).

Employment law recognises the right of an individual worker to be treated equally with others regardless of certain personal attributes that should be irrelevant in decision-making. These are known as 'protected characteristics', and include such matters as sex and race; they are detailed further below.

The word 'discrimination' here means 'unfavourable treatment'. As a matter of course, we will often have to 'discriminate' or make choices at work, which may be adverse to an employee or worker. The fact that an employer decides to employ one candidate rather than another, or decides to promote one member of staff rather than another, is a form of 'discrimination', since the employer is making a decision that is favourable to one person and unfavourable to another. A legitimate commercial judgment made on good grounds is, of course, lawful. The law around unlawful discrimination tries to prevent employers making choices that are detrimental to someone at work for reasons that are deemed to amount to unacceptable and unjustifiable prejudice.

Unlawful discrimination was a feature of our law before it was affected by our membership of the European Union, and it is thought unlikely that there will be a great deal of change as a result of Brexit. There are some small reforms that many people believe may be introduced and this is indicated below at the relevant point.

Why do we have a law about equality of opportunity?

- It has an important role in protecting the dignity of the individual worker.
- It tries to correct the disadvantages that have been and are being suffered by certain groups.
- It tries to overcome the failure of the market by bringing down barriers against certain commonly excluded or marginalised groups.

General principles

Anti-discrimination legislation has a number of features that makes it more stringent and wider than standard employment protection:

- There is no qualifying period of employment required before the worker can take advantage of the protection; it operates from the start of recruitment onwards.
- All forms of discrimination allow for unlimited damages and, in addition, the legal costs for employers involved in defending these complicated claims tend to be high.
- There is a reversed burden of proof; this means that the applicant only needs to demonstrate what is known as a 'prima facie case'. This means that they have to show sufficient evidence to satisfy the court that the decision is suspicious and appears, on the face of it, to be potentially unlawful. Once the applicant does this,

the burden shifts to the employer to show that, in taking the decision or action in question, there was no unlawful discrimination or, where applicable, there was a legitimate justification. Proving a negative is always a challenge and this means that employers will have to document their decisions carefully.

- A discrimination action is often interesting enough to the general public to generate unwelcome publicity for the employer.
- The law applies to all employees, workers (including casual and agency workers) and to contractors who provide their work personally, as well as ex-employees (for example, where a failure to give a reference is claimed to be victimisation), and also to job applicants.

The Equality Act 2010 places all anti-discrimination provisions under a single consolidated statute. The act also reformed the law in a number of areas and reference is made to this in the relevant sections. The act can be viewed at bit.ly/ea-2010. Further details on understanding the matters laid out below can be found at bit.ly/ehrc-def.

‘Protected characteristics’

Just because a decision seems unfair does not necessarily mean that it is unlawful. In order to be so, any unfavourable treatment needs to be ‘because of’ certain protected characteristics. Unfavourable treatment will be unlawful if it is because of the following characteristics:

- sex or married status (including pregnancy and childbirth)
- race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origin
- disability
- gender reassignment, including transexual, gender-fluid or non-binary persons
- sexual orientation
- religion
- age.

There is also a separate provision that prevents discrimination against part-time workers and those on fixed-term contracts. Part-timers’ treatment and terms and conditions should be equalised with full-timers, and the same applies to fixed-term employees (other than the fact that their contract is set to run for a specific period, rather than being permanent).

Employers cannot continue to renew fixed-term contracts indefinitely. Once a fixed-term employee has been on contract(s) that have run continuously for four years, the employer must make that employee permanent.

It had been proposed to introduce 'caste' as a protected characteristic in recent legislation, but the UK government recently announced that it would not be enacting this and would instead rely on case law, which has already found that discrimination because of caste is a form of race discrimination. The caste system is practised by some people of South Asian origin and is a hereditary class system based on the granting of fixed rights depending on birth.

What acts are discriminatory?

In all cases, the legislation provides for four main kinds of discrimination and a fifth more restricted type.

1. **Direct discrimination:** adverse treatment specifically 'because of', ie causally related to, one of the protected characteristics – for example, the person's sex (including pregnancy), race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origin, disability, gender reassignment, age or sexual orientation.
2. **Indirect discrimination:** where the employer uses a provision, criterion or practice that has an adverse impact on one or more of these protected groups and which cannot be objectively justified. For example, a required level of English to qualify for a job might discriminate against people for whom English is a second language; they may have learned the language late and not have such a high degree of proficiency. A stringent health check is likely to discriminate against those with a disability, and some dress codes may discriminate against certain religions.

A recent case involved a successful indirect discrimination claim by a Sikh worker against an agency that recruited hotel workers who would not put him on their books as they had a 'no beards' policy ([Sethi v Elements Personnel Services Ltd 2020](#)). The tribunal found that the agency had made no attempt to address the issue with their clients and to explore with them whether the rules could be modified for faith-based reasons, and it could not justify its stance.

At present, there is concern around some employers considering imposing a requirement on all staff to be vaccinated against Covid-19; some staff may have worries about products used in the vaccine-making process or because of a belief-based objection to the practice of vaccination itself. The employer faces the difficult challenge of assessing the genuineness and reasonableness of their concerns against the health and safety of their other employees and customers and the future of the business. There has been a recent interesting tribunal case on this point, [Allette v Scarsdale Grange Nursing Home](#), in which it was decided that a care home assistant was fairly dismissed when she refused to get a vaccination without a medical or religious objection. There had been an outbreak at the home, a number of residents had died, and the insurance company had stated that it was unwilling to cover the home for any liability arising from employment of unvaccinated staff. This is only a tribunal case and not binding, and is very much decided on its facts, but gives some guidance on their likely approach.

The question in all cases will be: can that requirement or criterion be justified in that it is a 'proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim'? The employer will need to show that it needs to impose this in the context of the genuine requirements of the job and the needs of the business.

Sometimes the justification is cost based, and the recent case of [Heskett v Secretary of State for Justice 2020](#) shows that the employer will need to demonstrate a wider purpose than pure cost savings. Here, a reduction in pay increments was indirectly discriminatory on grounds of age, but it was justified in the context of the protection of pay overall for probation officers and the future of the service, given the budget cuts it had sustained.

3. **Discrimination based on association or perception:** it is still safest to assume that only direct discrimination and harassment claims can be brought under this heading, but there has been some suggestion to the contrary in one or two recent cases – for example, [Follows v Nationwide Building Society](#).
 - Where unfavourable treatment of the worker is not based on their particular protected characteristic – for example, disability or age or race – but is because of their *association* with another person who does have those

particular characteristics, that treatment will be unlawful. An example might be a worker who is harassed by the employer because of the time they are spending away from work caring for an elderly relative or a disabled child. This will be a form of direct discrimination because of the worker's association with someone who is disabled.

- The perception discrimination provisions make it unlawful to treat someone unfavourably because it **is perceived** that they are, for example, gay or Muslim even though, in fact, they are not; the unfavourable treatment takes place 'as if' they were within that protected group. An example might be that a worker is subjected to homophobic abuse on the basis that they are gay when in fact they are straight, or an application from a prospective employee is rejected because their name makes them 'sound' like a person of African or Asian descent, when they are not.
- Do bear in mind that, where a worker is 'associated' with someone who is disabled – for example, is caring for a disabled child or spouse – there is no requirement for the employer to make reasonable adjustments in relation to that worker in order to accommodate the fact that they are caring for a disabled person, although many organisations would choose to make such adjustments. However, such a person must never be subject to either harassment or direct discrimination, which means that absence management action taken by the employer against such a person must be consistent with the treatment of any other employee with the same level of absence.

4. **Victimisation:** less favourable treatment meted out to any person related in some way to the use of this legislation, or to supporting someone who sought to use it – for example, because a person has brought unlawful discrimination proceedings, or assisted another person to do so. A good example of this is a refusal of a job reference, which the applicant suspects is because they have previously raised grievances relating to discrimination in the workplace.

5. **Harassment:** unwanted conduct violating the dignity of an individual in the workplace and causing a hostile and intimidating atmosphere for them, and which takes place because of a protected characteristic. The key is that the actions or comments are viewed as demeaning and unacceptable to the recipient, and it is reasonable to expect them to have that effect. Please see later for more detail on this important area.

The width, seriousness and complexity of such cases means that it will be essential to show a **thorough paper trail** for all decisions that have a potential unlawful discrimination element, and employers will have to be ready to provide a good explanation for such decisions.

How does this apply in employment?

An employer must not unlawfully discriminate against someone:

- in the arrangements they make for the purpose of determining who should be offered that employment
- in the terms on which they offer the person that employment
- by refusing or deliberately omitting to offer that employment
- in the way they afford access to that person to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, or to any other benefits, facilities or services, or by refusing or deliberately omitting to afford access to them
- by dismissing them, or subjecting them to any other detriment.

Vicarious liability

This is a key principle in discrimination law, since the actions and decisions that are unlawful will often be taken by fellow employees of the complainant, rather than by the employer itself. The Equality Act provides that anything done by an individual in the course of their employment must be treated as also done by the employer, unless the employer can show that it took all reasonable steps to prevent the employee from doing that thing, or from doing anything of that description.

Where a potentially discriminatory act has taken place, it will be important for an employer to show that it had clear, well-understood policies in place that were not in themselves discriminatory, that it dealt promptly and effectively with any complaints and that the workplace is not one where unlawful discrimination is tolerated or condoned. It is a particularly important issue in relation to harassment, which is discussed below.

Positive action

For many years it has been lawful for employers to take 'positive action' to reduce the effect of discrimination on the makeup of the workforce, where an employer has a particularly low proportion of a particular group. In practice, this is most likely to be in relation to one sex, age group or a racial group, either:

- in one department or part of the business compared with the rest of the organisation, or
- in the business, compared with the proportion of that group in the wider community.

The employer is entitled to attempt to redress that balance by, for example:

- placing job advertisements in particular parts of the press/online
- using employment agencies where such groups may be concentrated
- aiming recruitment or training schemes at school leavers from particular groups
- encouraging these employees to apply for promotion or training opportunities
- providing special training for promotion or skills to this group.

These provisions are aimed at encouraging participation and upskilling members of unrepresented groups. Ultimately, however, decision-making around recruitment, promotion or training must be fair and not discriminate unlawfully.

Positive discrimination

The Equality Act introduced a limited ability for employers to discriminate positively. This is specifically in the area of recruitment and promotion. The employer is entitled to take a protected characteristic into account when deciding whom to recruit or promote where people with this characteristic are at a disadvantage or are underrepresented in its workforce. This is quite limited, as it applies only where the candidates are otherwise equally qualified, and it is not lawful to have some kind of blanket rule of treating candidates with a particular characteristic more favourably than others. It tends only to be

useful where particular types of standardised posts are being offered, eg police constables, and all candidates are broadly equally qualified for the role.

However, in February 2019 Cheshire Police was found to have unlawfully discriminated against a white male applicant who was not appointed in favour of candidates with protected characteristics ([Furlong v Chief Constable of Cheshire Police 2019](#)). The force's argument that all those who had passed the entrance tests were 'equal' was not sufficient to allow them to use this exception.

It is suggested by commentators that the provision permitting positive discrimination may be removed from our law following Brexit, and in practice it appears difficult for an employer to successfully defend positive discrimination under the current provisions.

There are some older provisions, however, which have always constituted a type of lawful positive discrimination. The protection of pregnant women gives them particular status within the workplace; they have a right to paid leave, to return to their original job following maternity leave and a right to first choice of any suitable alternative on redundancy. These rights are set to be extended, and all details relating to this area are included in [Technical factsheet: redundancy](#).

People with disabilities also have additional protection in that the employer is required to make reasonable adjustments to the job or to the equipment or premises to 'level the playing field' with their able-bodied colleagues. Workers with disabilities also have a right to reasonable adjustments, which means that the employer will in most cases have to at least consider redeploying them ahead of others in redundancy situations, although they will be behind women, who are specifically protected for reasons relating to maternity.

Harassment

It is unlawful to harass a worker because they possess, or are perceived to possess, any of the protected characteristics, or because they are associated with someone who does. The principle of vicarious liability (see above) means that the employer has an obligation to take all reasonable steps to ensure that such harassment does not take place and to

support the worker if it does. If this is not done, the employer may be vicariously liable for the harassment.

In the case of [Kaur and Rehman v Capita Retail Finance Services Ltd & Woodhouse 2019](#), a manager (W) was found to have made unpleasant and discriminatory remarks directed at two team members of Asian origin. Capita carried out an immediate investigation and suspended W, and the complaint of harassment against it was dismissed. The judge said 'Capita did not just have comprehensive policies in place. It communicated them, trained all employees on them and updated that training annually.' It is interesting to note that this case was unusual in that the employees were successful in obtaining damages personally against the manager; W was required to pay more than £2,600 to them for injured feelings and for creating a hostile working environment.

In addition, in the recent case of [Allay \(UK\) v Gehen](#), the employment appeal tribunal held that the employer had not taken reasonable steps to prevent P's harassment of the claimant of which at least three other employees, including two managers, were aware. The tribunal accepted that while the employer could establish that training was delivered to all employees concerned two years earlier, it had nonetheless become 'stale' and 'ineffective'. The employer had not taken all reasonable steps to prevent the harassment from occurring. The tribunal indicated that it would have been a reasonable step to give refresher training. In particular, the way in which P had sought to justify the comments as no more than 'banter', and the behaviour of three other employees in failing to report the harassment to HR, clearly indicated that refresher training was necessary.

The potential damages for employers in this area can be high; even in an isolated example of severe harassment, the employer will have to demonstrate that it has a well-enforced and well-understood harassment policy, and that it takes such matters very seriously. This potential vicarious liability of an employer for acts of harassment by an employee towards a fellow employee usually extends to work-related social activities but not purely private social engagements.

The approach to the definition of sexual harassment has changed, which has the effect of simplifying and widening it. The general harassment provisions apply to age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Obviously, it is unlawful for A to harass B by engaging in conduct 'related to' one of these protected characteristics where the

conduct has the purpose or effect of violating B's dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for B. This would cover a situation where B was being harassed because he was gay, but it also covers any situation where the conduct is 'related' to that characteristic. This means that the law also covers a situation where offensive remarks were made to C about, for example, B's disability or sexual orientation and C is upset by them. Indeed, it could also cover general racist or sexist comments made by A to B within earshot of C. C could make a claim of harassment based on upset that they are suffering, even though the conduct or remarks are not aimed at them.

Third-party harassment

A worker may suffer harassment at the hands of a third party who is not a fellow employee, such as a visitor, customer or contractor. There were previously provisions in the Equality Act 2010 which made employers vicariously liable for the actions of third parties such as visitors or clients who were guilty of harassment of staff, unless they took reasonable action to prevent it. These were removed, controversially, and case law is now confused on the extent of the employer's liability for this. It is likely that this provision will be reintroduced in some form in the future, and this may be part of the new Employment Act.

However, it has always been understood that it is wise for employers to try to protect workers from such harassment, and it is widely accepted that there is a general duty of care to do so, and it is certainly good practice. Where a worker complains to an employer about their treatment by a third party, the employer should respond accordingly, taking whatever reasonable steps they deem necessary to reduce or eliminate the impact of this harassment. This is always done best in collaboration with the worker. Of course, there can be no liability if the employer was not alerted to the behaviour and was not aware of it.

Genuine occupational requirements

The Equality Act applies a general occupational requirement defence to all protected characteristics. This means that if a person is able to show that, having regard to the nature or context of the work, it is an occupational requirement to have a particular characteristic and that applying that requirement is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim of the employer, then it will be lawful. For example, only female staff may be

recruited where the job involves close personal contact with women, and vice versa for men; or the authenticity of a dramatic performance may require an actor of colour. In both cases, the recruiter will argue that this characteristic is a genuine occupational requirement and will reject candidates who do not have that characteristic. In a recent case that attracted some publicity ([Kinlay v Bronte Film and Television 2021](#)), a production company argued that it could not cast a female actor who had appeared in the first series of the TV drama, *Strike*, but who was pregnant by the time of the second series. They argued that her pregnancy would confuse audiences as it was not part of the story and it was a qualification for the role not to be visibly pregnant. The tribunal was unconvinced and was not persuaded that the production company had properly considered how the matter could have been dealt with, either during or post-production, so as to conceal her pregnancy from the audience.

There is also provision to deal with organised religions and organisations that have a religious ethos. This is a strict provision and does not allow generalised discrimination by those bodies. They will have to show that the post in question is either for a minister of religion or is one of the small number of lay posts that exist to promote and represent a religion. It certainly would not apply to support posts such as administrators etc, but only to those positions where the religious ethos is fundamental to the work.

THE PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS IN DETAIL

Sex discrimination

This is the oldest form of unlawful discrimination and it was introduced in the mid-1970s. It renders unlawful any unfavourable treatment because of the person's sex, ie because the person is male or female.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy-related discrimination amounts to direct unlawful sex discrimination. It is also unfair dismissal to dismiss any woman by reason of pregnancy, no matter how long she has worked. It is unlawful to treat a woman less favourably in any other way on the grounds that she is pregnant or that she is exercising or seeking to exercise, or has exercised, or sought to exercise, her statutory right to maternity leave. Dismissal of a woman on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity is automatic unfair dismissal from day one of employment; there is no requirement for any continuous service. Therefore, a

woman in this position will have both unfair dismissal rights and a claim for sex discrimination.

Returning part time

Any refusal to allow a woman to return part time following maternity leave will have to be justified by the employer, and the protection is stronger than that provided under the flexible working provisions (covered in [Technical factsheet: family-friendly rights](#)). As we note in the factsheet, actions for unlawful discrimination are becoming a real threat for employers refusing or failing to consider flexible working requests. It will be more difficult for larger organisations to justify a refusal than for small ones, as larger employers usually have more scope to reorganise hours or to find an alternative position that can be worked part time. An unjustified refusal will be sex discrimination.

The employer has to be able to show that the job simply cannot be done part time and that it has no other similar roles that could be performed in that way that it could offer. It is usually advisable for the employer to be able to produce examples to explain why a job cannot be done in this way, and this will often revolve around the demands of customers, tight deadlines, unpredictable spikes in work, burden of work in small teams etc, demonstrating how difficult it is to accommodate such a change in that particular role.

Race discrimination

It is unlawful to treat someone unfavourably because of their race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origin. Employers will be well advised to look at the make-up of their organisation and consider what barriers exist for people of colour who are working and seeking advancement in their careers.

Disability discrimination

It is unlawful to discriminate against a person who qualifies as disabled. Every employer has an additional obligation to make reasonable adjustments to 'level the playing field' for disabled workers or job applicants. Where a disability leads to sickness absence, the impact of this is examined in [Technical factsheet: dealing with sickness](#). The definition of disability is restated here:

Who qualifies as disabled?

This definition goes far beyond the traditional perception of disability.

- Under the Equality Act 2010, a disabled person is someone who has 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.
- In order for the disability to be seen to be substantial, it must have lasted, or be predicted to last, at least one year or the rest of the person's life.
- It covers any normal physically related illness or impairment that has a substantial effect on the person – for example, heart conditions, angina, epilepsy and diabetes type 1 and possibly type 2 in certain circumstances.
- It covers mental conditions ranging from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder to anxiety disorders; reactive and clinical depression is also regarded as a disability. The employee will be required to produce clear medical evidence of their condition and the impact it has on their day-to-day life, rather than just on their work.
- It can cover disorders that recur, although the person may not suffer any symptoms in between attacks, such as serious asthma and epilepsy.
- Learning difficulties such as dyslexia are now recognised as a disability, and autism has been the subject of a number of recent cases.
- There are some conditions that are automatically regarded as disabilities, even though the worker may not currently be suffering any or many symptoms; these are HIV/Aids, multiple sclerosis and cancer.

Some conditions are expressly excluded, including alcoholism, voyeurism and kleptomania.

What activities must be affected?

It is not only activities at work that must be affected. In order to satisfy the definition, it is essential that the worker should have substantial difficulties in their everyday life, which may include work but will normally affect their home life also.

When does this legislation apply?

- **Recruitment:** at this stage, an applicant may reveal that they have a disability. There are restrictions on what questions an employer can ask at the recruitment stage. Any further enquiries about the disability, either before or during the

interview, should be restricted to those medical conditions that directly affect either the assessment process or the ability to do the job itself. For example, if an employee has a sight problem that is likely to affect any assessment tests, they might have to sit during selection, and if it might affect their ability to do the job itself, it will be acceptable to further discuss the implications prior to or at the interview. If a candidate has a mobility problem but the job is sedentary and there is a straightforward interview for the role, it may not be appropriate to discuss the disability unless and until the candidate is selected for the job. At that point, the employer may consider seeking further medical information in order to be able to fulfil its health and safety duties and deal with other practical issues. The idea is that a disability that is irrelevant to job suitability or to assessment for the post should not be considered as part of the recruitment process.

If, as a result of the interview and further investigations, the employer concludes that, for disability-related reasons, it is not possible for that applicant to perform the role, even if reasonable adjustments have been considered, then it is lawful not to recruit. However, the decision needs to be clearly justified and taken with proper medical information, and it is critical to carefully document each stage of the decision-making process.

There is no positive duty on a job applicant to reveal a disability. Therefore, if they start work for the employer and then the employer becomes aware of it, the employer must consider the situation on its merits. Except in circumstances where safety is clearly potentially compromised (for example, epilepsy in a machine shop), if the employment has been continuing for some time without any problems it will be difficult to argue that the disability is a justification for dismissal. It will just have to action any reasonable adjustments that might be necessary, and the employment will continue.

Candidates should not be required to complete health questionnaires or undergo medicals until they have been selected for the role.

- **During employment:** a worker may develop a disability during employment. Once this happens, as above, the employer will need to determine the extent of the disability, with medical reports if necessary, and decide whether reasonable adjustments are possible, and, if not, whether the employment can continue.
- **Redundancy:** employers need to be careful in conducting redundancy selection procedures, to ensure that they do not include factors that have an adverse effect on disabled workers in comparison with other staff. For example, absences related to disabilities should not be included in the marking process, and allowance should be made in marking for performance where a disability has an impact on matters such as speed of work. Where a disabled person is made redundant, the requirement to make reasonable adjustments means that they should be seriously considered for any redeployment that may be available if alternative work is available, subject to the rights of women for maternity-related reasons.

Gender reassignment

Discrimination on the grounds that someone has been, or will be, in the process of gender reassignment/undergoing a sex change is unlawful. To be protected from gender reassignment discrimination, you do not need to have undergone any specific treatment or surgery to change from your birth sex to your preferred gender. This is because changing your physiological or other gender attributes is a personal process rather than a medical one.

You can be at any stage in the transition process – from proposing to reassign your gender, to undergoing a process to reassign your gender, or having completed it.

The Equality Act says that you must not be discriminated against because:

- of your gender reassignment as a transsexual. Some may prefer the description transgender person or trans male or female. A wide range of people are included in the terms ‘trans’ or ‘transgender’ but you are not protected as transgender unless you propose to change your gender or have done so. For example, a group of men attending a party who put on fancy dress as women are not transsexual so when they are attending a party they not protected from discrimination

- someone thinks you are transsexual, for example because you occasionally cross-dress or are gender variant (this is known as discrimination by perception)
- you are connected to a transsexual person, or someone wrongly thought to be transsexual (this is known as discrimination by association). In the recent decision of [Taylor v JLR](#), an employment tribunal confirmed that this also included protection for gender-fluid and non-binary people.

However, most of these cases at the moment have tended to be either about harassment or toilet facilities. The employer must be careful to ensure that a hostile working environment does not grow up around a transsexual person and that it permits use of the assigned sex facilities once any operative procedures are complete. On sick leave, treatment of a gender reassignment case will be compared with those who are absent because of sickness or injury, in order to determine whether there has been less favourable treatment.

The Gender Recognition Act 2004 was passed to give transsexual people legal recognition in their acquired gender. Legal recognition follows the issue of a full gender recognition certificate by a gender recognition panel. The panel has to be satisfied that the applicant:

- has, or has had, gender dysphoria
- has lived in the acquired gender throughout the preceding two years
- intends to continue to live in the acquired gender until death.

When a certificate is issued, the person is entitled to a new birth certificate reflecting the acquired gender. For all purposes they will be legally regarded as being of their acquired gender.

Consultation on reforming the law has been taking place, and in December 2021 a House of Commons Committee Report recommended various changes to the current law, including reducing the cost for a certificate, and expressing its dismay at the government's failure to respond to a consultation that closed in mid-October 2018. We await developments on this.

Sexual orientation

Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, ie unfavourable treatment on the grounds of homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexuality, is unlawful.

The cases have largely been on the subject of homophobic abuse and the extent to which employers have been responsible for encouraging it or permitting it, or failing to have a policy dealing with it. The main issue for employers to be aware of here is the fact that they may be vicariously liable for harassment where they have permitted or condoned 'banter' of a homophobic nature. It is critical that employers take action to tackle any such issue within their workforce and show that they have well understood and clearly enforced policies on harassment; otherwise, there may be potential liability to the affected worker.

Religion

It is unlawful to discriminate against workers because of religion or similar belief. The law applies, as do all the discrimination rules, to recruitment, terms and conditions, promotion, transfers, dismissals and training, and therefore both to current, prospective and former workers.

The employer must not discriminate directly by, for example, refusing to recruit or dismissing a person on the grounds of their religion or belief, or applying some rule or procedure to them, such as a dress code, which is indirectly discriminatory unless it can be justified. Workers must not be harassed or victimised because of their religion. Two cases relating to this are discussed in the section on indirect discrimination above.

The law covers any religion, religious belief or philosophical belief; this is a deeply held 'weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour' that it is worthy of respect in a democratic society. (The Acas guidance states that paganism and humanism are covered.) The law has been amended to encompass atheists, and recent cases have indicated that spiritualism, environmentalism and beliefs about animal rights are also potentially covered, with recent cases granting protection to ethical veganism ([Casamitjana v The League Against Cruel Sports 2020](#)) and gender-critical beliefs ([Maya Forstater v CGD Europe and Others 2021](#)).

Where a worker makes a request based on some religious observance – for example, provision of a prayer room, particular dress, time off to go to mosque, Friday afternoons off, particular holidays or extended holidays – the employer should listen carefully, consider the consequences for the business and grant them if practicable. If it is not possible, then they should fully explain to the employee why, on good business grounds, their request cannot be granted, and this should always be documented.

Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 2014

This act applies to England, Scotland and Wales, and is aimed at helping people who have been convicted of a criminal offence and who have not reoffended since. It has made changes to the law as from 10 March 2014.

Under the new system, rehabilitation periods for community orders and custodial sentences comprise the period of the sentence plus an additional specified period, rather than all rehabilitation periods starting from the date of conviction as before. So, for example, an adult offender sentenced to two-and-a-half years' custody, who would previously have had to declare their criminal conviction for 10 years from the date of conviction, will now have to disclose their conviction for the period of the sentence plus a further four years (giving a total rehabilitation period of 6.5 years). The details of the various time periods can be viewed in a [Ministry of Justice press release](#).

Once a conviction is 'spent', the convicted person does not have to reveal it or admit its existence in most circumstances. However, there are some exceptions relating to employment and these are listed in the exceptions order to the Act. The two main exceptions relate to working with children or with the elderly or sick people, but admissions to certain professions are also covered, including accountancy. If a person wants to apply for such a position, they are required to reveal all convictions, both spent and unspent, and they may be taken into account for the purposes of recruitment. The firm should state clearly on any application for or at recruitment that the position is exempted and full disclosure is required.

CLAIMS OF UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION

Tribunal fees and limitation periods

Tribunal fees, which stood at a total of £1,200 per claim for unlawful discrimination, were abolished in July 2017, and there is currently no charge for making a claim before a UK [employment tribunal](#). This has led to a significant increase in cases being taken year on year. In discrimination cases, claims must be lodged within three months (minus one day) of the act or acts of discrimination about which you are complaining. Where there has been continuing discrimination or a series of acts of discrimination, the date from which the time limit starts to run will differ. It can be difficult to determine the correct time limit if the case involves a series of linked acts or separate distinct acts, and it is always advisable to seek legal advice on this complicated matter.

Pre-claim conciliation

However, pre-claim conciliation is still a requirement. There is no charge for this but it requires every potential claimant to be approached by Acas, which will offer to try to settle their claim prior to it being lodged. Only when Acas has contacted both parties, and is satisfied that either or both are not prepared to consider a settlement, or negotiations do not yield agreement, will it issue a claim number to allow the claim to proceed. Otherwise, Acas will do its best to reach a settlement before any claim can be lodged; current figures indicate that Acas is dealing with around 140,000 early conciliation matters per annum.

Damages

Where a claim for unlawful discrimination is successful, there is no limit on the potential damages that can be awarded. That said, the figures produced annually by the Ministry of Justice indicate that, unless the figure is skewed by a particularly large claim, the average discrimination award tends to be between £10,000 and £25,000, depending on the type of claim, with age discrimination tending to result in lower awards; the others are quite similar, although disability discrimination awards can be slightly higher. The component parts are as follows:

- financial loss incurred because of the unlawful discrimination
- injury to feelings; this is hurt or distress suffered because of the discrimination
- personal injury, such as stress or depression, that the employee can demonstrate

was caused by the discrimination

- aggravated damages; this is compensation the tribunal can order the employer to pay if it concludes that they have behaved in a particularly malicious or insulting way towards the worker. This could be either during the period when the discrimination took place or during the defence of the tribunal claim. Aggravated damages are not available in Scotland but the injury to feelings award can include compensation for these types of behaviour; this equates to one-half of the award, with a minimum award of £100 and a maximum of £5,000.
- interest on all the above payments.

More details on tribunal procedure and rules can be found in the [Employment Tribunal Rules of Procedure](#).

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