

Dealing with Difficult Behaviour

Supporting the mental health
of everyone in music

**Music
Minds
Matter**



Check Your Levels is a mental health resource for everyone in music. It offers space, tools and connections that help you:

**Turn up what's good
and turn down what's
hard about working
in music**

**Get help when you
need it**

**Support friends and
colleagues in music**

Check Your Levels is delivered by Music Minds Matter, a charity supporting the mental health of people in music, and the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine.

We bring together clinical expertise and lived experience of the music industry to provide safe support relevant to your work in music.

Check Your Levels content complements but does not replace medical and clinical advice.

You can use
Check Your Levels:

Whatever your role in music
and however long you have
worked in music

Whether you are struggling
or feeling fine at the moment
and whether you are living
with a mental health
condition or not



Check Your Levels content complements but does not replace medical and clinical advice.

This handbook provides information and guidance on how people in music can respond to difficult behaviour. You can use it alongside a Check Your Levels workshop if you attend one, or on your own. We recommend keeping hold of it and checking back for information as you need it, as well as updating your own notes over time.

How are you doing today?

When our levels are good, we typically:

Cope ok with day to day stresses

Feel connected to others

Feel we have a contribution to make, at work and in personal lives

Feel life is moving forward and we're growing

As a result we can usually keep up healthy patterns in key areas like sleeping, eating, socializing and work balance.

Research shows there are many factors that can make working in music tough at times. Managing these and getting as many as possible into the best place as possible can help our wellbeing. But we can't do it alone.

Check Your Levels looks at:

Work

Work volume, hours, pace, content
Financial wellbeing
Skills development and future planning
Your work environment and tools

You

Performance pressure
Social media and personal brand
Physical wellbeing
Recognition and reward

Relationships

Family time and support
Working relationships and conflict
Unfair treatment at work

It's important that everyone in music can:

- 1 Define what is and is not professional behaviour and acceptable in professional relationships
- 2 Recognise when their professional boundaries are disrespected and when they may be acting disrespectfully
- 3 Identify steps to immediately address difficult behaviour in work
- 4 Locate and access available emotional support when needed
- 5 Understand options for formal action when encountering difficult behaviour at work.

Things to remember:

You are not alone in dealing with these challenges, and it's okay to feel a range of emotions about them

You are not to blame for someone else's inappropriate behaviour

Taking care of yourself is a priority, not a luxury.
There are resources and people ready to support.

Why addressing difficult behaviour matters in music

- We all have the right to feel safe and respected when doing our work in music
- Research shows that music can be a high pressure and challenging sector to work in, with people in music facing special risks to their mental wellbeing
- Music is a relationship-based profession and when working relationships become difficult, it can add to the existing pressure of working in this industry
- Freelancers especially can feel vulnerable when encountering difficult behaviour – particularly if it feels like taking steps to protect and stand up for yourself could negatively impact our careers, for example by being blacklisted for future jobs
- Addressing the mental health impact of difficult behaviour allows you to regain control and prioritise your wellbeing.

Professional standards of behaviour

Whether an employee or self-employed, at all times during your work in music you have important protections under the law in relation to **health and safety** (a physically and mentally safe working environment) and **protection from discrimination**.

These provide a basic legal framework for professional standards of behaviour.

As a freelancer, you are also protected under the terms of your contract with your client.

The Creative Industry Independent Standards Authority builds on this legal framework by defining standards for conduct across the creative industries including music.

Standard 1:
Safe Working Environments

“While some work might involve high pressure situations, everyone working in the creative industries must be able to do so in a professional environment, free from exposure to psychological, sexual and physical harm.”

Standard 2:
Inclusive Working Environments

“Everyone working in the creative industries has the right to be treated fairly and without prejudice at all stages of their career.”

Standard 3:
Open and Accountable Reporting Mechanisms

“Everyone working in the creative industries should feel confident that any concerns they raise will be taken seriously, looked at fairly and with empathy, and resolved at the earliest opportunity, regardless of whether the working relationship is ongoing or has ended.”

Professional standards of behaviour include:

- Treating people fairly and respectfully
- Open and transparent communication including respectful resolution of issues and non-victimisation when issues are raised
- Terms of contract being met e.g. being paid what was agreed in the timeframe agreed
- Structuring work in ways that reduce as much pressure as possible.

Identifying difficult behaviour

'Difficult behaviour' isn't an official term but is used here to describe the full range of behaviours that could be hard to navigate in working relationships, from one-off interactions to sustained toxic environments. It can include actions that are unlawful.

Broadly, it's behaviours that don't meet standards of professional behaviour and that are therefore **disrespectful, unprofessional**, and/or **harmful** to others in a working relationship.



Difficult behaviour in music

Unfortunately, research shows difficult behaviour is common in music.*

The 2023 Musicians Census** found that amongst almost 6,000 musicians:

62%

of musicians have experienced or witnessed some form of discrimination or harassment while working as a musician

49%

witnessed some form of discrimination or harassment in music

62%

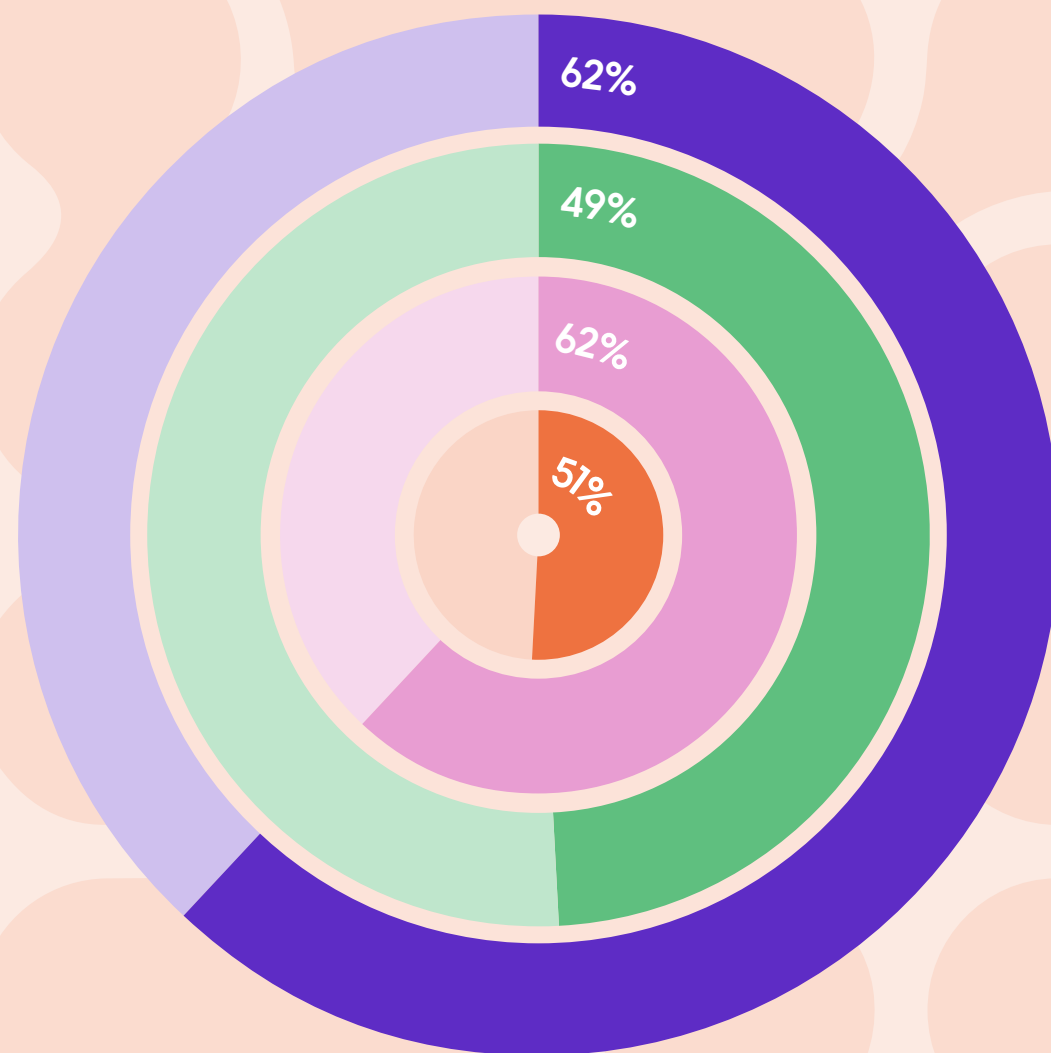
of musicians overall reporting they have experienced or witnessed discrimination in music

51 %

of musicians have experienced some form of discrimination or harassment in music

*Research by Hennekam & Bennett (2017);

** Help Musicians and the Musicians Union, 2023



Special challenges for freelancers in music

There are high levels of freelancers in music and self-employed workers in particular can be vulnerable to difficult behaviour due to the nature of short term contracts and lack of workplace protections:

- Unlike employees, freelancers may lack access to formal HR departments or grievance procedures
- The fear of losing future work opportunities can discourage freelancers from addressing problematic behaviour.

Power dynamics

Music is a relationship-based industry and power in relationships is often hierarchical, with significant power concentrated in managers, agents, or record labels etc.

These dynamics can make people in music feel unable to challenge inappropriate behaviour for fear of damaging careers. They can make individuals especially vulnerable to abuse of power i.e. situations where individuals in positions of authority or influence use their power unfairly, limiting others' ability to act freely or assert their rights.

Examples could include:

- A well-connected producer implies they could blacklist you in the industry if you refuse to work extra hours for free
- A record label delays paying you for a project, knowing you rely on the payment for your livelihood
- A senior professional dismisses your ideas in meetings but takes credit for them later
- A high-profile artist pressures you to stay silent about inappropriate behaviour because they're 'too important to the industry'
- A manager tells you that reporting harassment could cost you future opportunities.

Types of difficult behaviour

Difficult behaviour can be broadly grouped as:

1. Bullying:

Repeated, persistent behaviour that intimidates, degrades, humiliates, or undermines an individual, creating a risk to their health, safety, or wellbeing. This includes verbal abuse, exclusion, intimidation, and inappropriate criticism.

Examples:

- A manager or band leader publicly criticises your work in rehearsals to embarrass you
- A colleague spreads rumours about you in the industry to damage your reputation
- Consistently excluding you from meetings or conversations relevant to your work
- Aggressive or threatening behaviour during disagreements, such as yelling or personal insults
- Repeated microaggressions, such as mocking your appearance, abilities, or background.

2. Harassment:

Unwanted conduct related to a protected characteristic (such as age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation) that violates dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. This also includes general harassment that isn't linked to protected characteristics.

Examples:

- A client or industry professional making sexual comments or advances toward you, either in person or online
- Racist or sexist jokes made during gigs, rehearsals, or meetings
- Repeatedly being asked inappropriate personal questions that make you uncomfortable
- An agent commenting on your physical appearance and implying it affects your marketability
- Receiving unwanted messages on social media that are degrading or threatening.

3. Professional misconduct and boundary violations:

Actions that breach professional standards, contractual agreements, or workplace boundaries, such as failing to honour payment terms, taking credit for others' work, making excessive demands beyond agreed scope, or disregarding professional limitations. This includes situations where personal and professional boundaries are crossed inappropriately.

4. Discrimination:

Treating someone less favourably because of a protected characteristic, either directly or through practices that disadvantage certain groups.



Difficult behaviour and mental wellbeing

Encountering these types of behaviour can have a negative impact on people's mental wellbeing with some of the impacts being:



Stress and Anxiety:

Working in an environment with bullying or harassment can lead to chronic stress. Symptoms may include trouble sleeping, irritability, and difficulty concentrating.

Reduced Self-Worth:

Being treated disrespectfully can cause self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.

Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout:

Constant exposure to toxic behaviour can leave you feeling emotionally drained and unable to enjoy your work.

Physical Symptoms:

Stress from difficult behaviour can manifest physically, such as headaches, fatigue, or muscle tension.

Recognising the signs

Some of the signs that these issues are impact your wellbeing include:

- **Behavioural Changes:** Avoiding work-related interactions or tasks; difficulty maintaining motivation or focus on projects
- **Emotional Indicators:** Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, or tearful about situations involving difficult individuals or work situations
- **Physical Red Flags:** Persistent tiredness, changes in appetite, or frequent illnesses related to stress.

Emotional responses to difficult behaviour

- Everyone's experiences are valid and unique, informed by their own personal history and character.
- You may feel anger, sadness, or frustration – these feelings are normal
- Sharing your experience in a trusted space can be an important step toward healing.

Intent vs Impact

Sometimes difficult behaviour occurs without awareness or intent to cause harm, and the person who is doing the behaviour might not be aware of the impact that they are having. This doesn't make it acceptable behaviour. However, when it comes to addressing behaviour, considering the awareness of the person causing harm and what their intent is could help you decide how you want to address it.

It's also worth remembering that we each might, at some point in our career, accidentally cause upset without meaning to.

Responding to difficult behaviour

If you are encountering difficult behaviour in your music work, five steps to consider are:

- 1 Taking care of yourself
- 2 Dealing with it in the moment
- 3 Documenting
- 4 Taking action
- 5 Getting support



1 Taking care of yourself

Consider what you can do to manage the immediate emotions caused. Some approaches could include:

- **Taking Breaks:** stepping away from stressful environments whenever possible to recharge
- **Grounding techniques:** Simple exercises like deep breathing or mindfulness can help reduce overwhelm in the moment, these can be done anywhere e.g. toilet cubicle!
- **Prioritize sleep and nutrition:** A healthy routine supports your resilience against stress
- **Connect with support:** reach out to someone who can listen and affirm you e.g. friend, colleague, helpline
- **Engage in positive activities:** spend time on hobbies, your own music practices, or time with supportive friends to restore balance.

REFLECTION

What works for you when you feel overwhelmed?

2 Dealing with it in the moment

Prioritise your safety and trust your instincts – if you feel threatened or unsafe remove yourself immediately, whether physically (e.g. leaving a venue) or digitally (e.g. logging out of a conversation).

If you don't leave, use an assertive approach to reset your boundaries:

- Take a breath before responding so you stay calm and confident
- Use “I” statements to express your needs and expectations e.g. “I feel uncomfortable when you raise your voice. Please speak to me respectfully.”
- De-escalate if needed by closing the situation for now: “I don't feel comfortable with this, I'm going to reflect and come back to you.”; “I'm going to take a moment outside so we can continue this when we both feel calmer.”

Remember to always put your safety first, if you need to leave the situation and are not sure how to do so, say whatever makes it possible to leave, or message a trusted contact to see if they can help you exit.

3 Documenting

As soon as you can after, document what happened. This is vital as it helps you identify patterns over time- so record even smaller incidents if they don't feel right to you. These records may be useful if you decide to take formal action later (including by combining your documentation with others).

You need to include:

- Date, time, and location of the incident
- Names of those involved, including witnesses (you could ask if they would also record it for you, for example by emailing you or messaging with what they witnessed)
- Details of what was said or done (verbatim if possible)
- Keep/screenshot communication (e.g. emails, text messages, or social media interactions)
- Note down the impact on you and any steps you take e.g. calling a helpline, taking legal advice.

Remember to keep the record safe e.g. email or WhatsApp to yourself and/or a trusted friend.

Documentation Example

Your name	
Date, time and location of incident	
Name(s) of perpetrators	
Name and contact details of any witnesses (get their permission before recording their details)	
Incident Statement: describe what happened being as factual as possible – words used, behaviours displayed, tone etc.	
Actions taken: describe what actions you and/or others took at the time in response to the incident	
Impact: describe how the incident affected you – how it made you feel, impact on your mental health, any impact on your work	

Evidence: attach or include a link to any evidence – photos, screenshots, emails, social media posts and messages

4 Taking Action – Calling In (informal)

Calling-in – having an informal conversation with someone about their behaviour – can be a useful approach when:

- you feel safe (physically, emotionally and financially) to do so
- you suspect the person is not aware of the impact on you
- the person has demonstrated they may be open to feedback and learning.

Some considerations for the conversation are:

- Decide how and when to raise it based on what feels safest for you – if possible, face to face, or email if you don't feel comfortable to speak in person
- Prepare what you want to say and try to find specific examples
- Try to show curiosity and not communicate an assumed bad intent
- Be clear about what you want the other person to do differently, not just what you want them to stop doing.

Taking Action – involving a third party

If calling-in doesn't help, or isn't appropriate, consider involving a third party to help resolve it. You might need support to:

1. understand your options and
2. take action on those options.

If you want to know whether the issue you are experiencing is unlawful or not, and what steps can be taken to resolve it consider seeking legal advice or speaking to a specialist advice agency, such as:

- **Equality Advisory and Support Service (EASS)** – provides independent advice around issues related to discrimination to employees and freelancers and can advise on your rights if you think you are experiencing discrimination
- **Citizens Advice:** if you are having issues with a client or employer, you could seek information and advice from Citizen's Advice for example around non-payment of fees etc.
- **ACAS:** free advice for employees on workplace rights.

Once you understand your options, to decide what you want to do next, it could be useful to consider:

- **What you want to happen:** decide the outcome you want for example an apology or an acknowledgement through to disciplinary or legal action
- **Confidentiality:** whether you want to address the issue anonymously or not.

You can then seek the right third party to help you take your next steps:

Your employer:

If you are employed (full or part time or as a worker), you will usually start by making a report and/or complaint in line with your organisations policies, your HR team will be able to advise you.

Legal advice and support:

Many music membership bodies, including the Musicians Union, provide legal advice services to members, if you're not a member of a trade body, consider whether you can afford to join one and check what services they provide. If you have access to legal advice, access this as early as possible when issues arise.

Mediation:

For issues that can't be solved informally, mediation involves an impartial third party that supports the conversation to help find a resolution. This is a voluntary process requiring the willing participation of all parties involved. Mediation may be helpful on the basis that it would facilitate an open discussion of matters which may otherwise be too difficult to have constructively. Music Minds Matter provides a free mediation service for people in music. Mediation can help as a first step around contractual breaches or persistent interpersonal behaviour by helping both parties to understand and empathise with one another and find a solution to establish improved working relationships.

Professional bodies:

Depending on the nature of the work, the person who has caused harm may be bound by the professional standards of a membership body, these often provide a route for filing complaints.

If you're freelance, check the terms of your contract and whether there are any specific clauses around dispute resolution or ways of working and if there is anyone more senior or designated you could report the issue to.

CIISA

(Creative Industry Independent Standards Authority)

The new Creative Industry Standards Authority

Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority – Upholding and improving standards of behaviour across the creative industries is establishing a process to report bullying and harassment.

The standards aim to not only change behaviour, but also embed better accountability and reporting and greater protection from retaliation for those who report, this is especially vital for freelancers.

Future services will include:

Advice and
Assessment

Early Dispute
Resolution

Mediation

Support
navigating
criminal justice
system

For now:

Review [the standards](#)
and sign up for updates

Taking action – campaigning

Joining together with other people impacted by the same issues to change the bigger picture can be empowering and help build connections that boost your resilience, even if it doesn't result in immediate change for your own situation. Some campaigning groups in music include:

Black Lives
in Music

She Said

KeyChange

Attitude is
Everything

Pipa
(Parents and Carers in
Performing Arts)

Calling out – highlighting the behaviour of individuals or organisations on public platforms – is another approach that people sometimes collectively take to challenge difficult behaviour.

This might be a consideration when:

- there is an urgent need to prevent harm to yourself and others
- the power dynamic would make calling in unsafe for you and others
- any previous attempts to call in have been unsuccessful.

5 Getting support: your networks

Increasing your positive networks across music can contribute both to your wellbeing but also provide practical support, through enabling you to benefit from the lived experience of others who may have successfully navigated similar challenges. Some approaches to network building are:

- **Professional networks:** Join organisations like the MU, RSM, FAC, ISM etc. which provide resources and advocacy for those in the music industry
- **Peer support:** take up opportunities to build connections with peers in music that you can turn to in difficult moments and to share advice and strategies with
- **Mentorship:** seek mentors who can advise on handling difficult situations and navigating industry challenges.

REFLECTION

What support networks do you already have and where would you like to build these up?

Getting support-professional help

If the issues you are encountering are impacting your wellbeing, prioritising time to get professional support is important. Some routes to try are:

- In the moment support to decompress from helplines – Music Minds Matter, CALM, Mind, Shout and Samaritans
- Therapy – having a confidential space to help you cope with the immediate situation and develop strategies to protect yourself emotionally – if you are employed, check what mental health support is provided, if any, through your employer and its key to know anything you share in therapy provided through an employer will be confidential and not shared with your employer; if you're freelance, Music Minds Matter may be able to provide access to free counselling.

Useful things to remember

Difficult behaviour can be overwhelming but try to separate out:

Emotional response: recognising your responses are valid, prioritising self-care and turning to friends, peers and professional support.

Direct response: stating your boundaries and expectations is not aggressive, its assertive and enables you and everybody else to know where they stand.

Follow up response: documentation is your best friend even if you feel you don't want to take action right now, and whether you are freelance or employed there are routes to escalate.

Why these solutions matter

- Taking action and building networks can prevent the recurrence of difficult behaviour
- Addressing the emotional impact and strengthening boundaries helps protect your mental health and self-worth
- You are not alone – find your options. Formal procedures and support networks exist to help you navigate these situations
- Evidence shows that institutional responses (like reporting) are most effective when paired with individual resilience and community support*
- Therefore, having supportive colleagues, mentors, or organisations in your corner can make a huge difference when dealing with difficult behaviour!

*(Strong & Raine, 2018)

Digital and remote situations

Unprofessional emails or messages:

Pause before responding, take time to craft a measured, professional reply, ask for a second opinion on the message and your response, save and document all correspondence.

Online harassment:

Block or mute individuals who engage in abusive behaviour, take and save screenshots, report harassment to platform moderators or administrators and keep a record of your reports.

Long-Term Self-Care Strategies

As well as dealing with incidents as they occur, it's vital for everyone in music to take care of their wellbeing long-term.

- **Set and reassess boundaries:** use each difficult experience as an opportunity to clarify what is and isn't acceptable to you professionally
- **Recognise your progress:** acknowledge your strength in taking action, whether through formal reporting or personal growth
- **Prioritise balance:** make time for activities and relationships outside of work to help keep perspective.



Ria's experience

Reflect on the example below, which is a typical 'difficult behaviour' musicians tell us they might experience, then consider what steps an individual could take in this situation.

Ria is a freelance musician who has been hired to perform at a high-profile event. During rehearsals, the event organiser frequently interrupts her with dismissive comments, such as, "I thought you would adjust faster," or "Let's hope you don't mess this up on the big night." When Ria asks for clarification on a song arrangement, the organiser rolls their eyes and responds, "Just figure it out – it's your job, isn't it?" This all happens in front of other performers and crew. Ria worries that addressing the issue directly might harm her reputation and lead to fewer bookings in the future.

What behaviours in this scenario cross professional boundaries?

How might Ria feel as a result of this behaviour?

What immediate steps could Ria take to address the behaviour in the moment?

What follow up actions could Ria take around this situation?

Creating an Action Plan

Thinking ahead to the difficult behaviour you might encounter, and how you want to handle it, can help you be prepared, and potentially help limit the emotional and practical impact on you. It's about putting your wellbeing first and empowering you to handle challenging situations in a way that feels right and authentic for you.

Take a moment to look at the Action Plan template and begin to create your own personalised plan.

Action Plan – Guidance

My advice network: List here the names and contact details of any advice services you could use if you face difficult behaviour; this includes any provided through trade bodies you are a member of, such as legal advice services or mediation services.

Tip: finding your membership details now and noting those here, might help you access help faster when you need it.

My support network: List here the names of colleagues, mentors, connections and friends you might turn to if you faced difficult behaviour for advice and support

My professional boundaries: It can be helpful to keep a list of what your own boundaries are with your music work, which you can add to throughout your career, reviewing that as you enter new work relationships and environments e.g. *"I will not start work without a signed agreement in place."*

If/Then Plan: Reflecting on how you want to handle difficult behaviour before it occurs can help you feel empowered to respond confidently in the moment – review the examples and add any that feel relevant to you e.g. *“If someone raises their voice at me, I will calmly state, ‘I need to step away and continue this conversation later.’”*

Support Info

If you need help, you should contact your GP or call:

NHS (England)	111
NHS Direct (Wales)	0845 46 47
NHS 24 (Scotland)	111

or your relevant **HSC organisation** (Northern Ireland)

If it's an emergency or you or someone you know is at imminent risk of harm or in acute distress, you can call 999 or go to your local A&E department.

You can also get support from:

Music Minds Matter	0808 802 8008
Samaritans (National Number)	116 123
Samaritans (Welsh line)	0300 123 3011
Samaritans (Northern Irish line)	028 9066 4422
Mind	0300 123 3393

References

Hennekam, S., & Bennett, D. (2017). *Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries: Tolerance, Culture, and the Need for Change*.

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[Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority – Upholding and improving standards of behaviour across the creative industries](#)

musicmindsmatter.org.uk



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