



**SURVIVING  
ECONOMIC  
ABUSE**

For banks, building societies and mortgage providers

# Supporting customers experiencing economic abuse

Building safety

In partnership with



One in five UK adults has experienced economic abuse by a current or former partner. Over a third didn't tell anyone at the time<sup>1</sup>. The mission of Surviving Economic Abuse is to raise awareness of and transform responses to economic abuse.

If you work in a bank or building society, this information is for you. It may help you to understand what economic abuse is, know how recognise it in the context of domestic violence, and know what you can do to support victim-survivors.

## Understanding economic abuse

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**“Money doesn't make you happy but without money, there's nowhere to go. That's why, for me, economic abuse is the greatest form of control.”**

Domestic abuse takes many forms. Some abusers repeatedly dictate their partner's choices and control their everyday actions, becoming violent or threatening to become violent if their demands are refused.

Abusers may interfere (through control, exploitation and sabotage) with their partner's access to money and finances, as well as those things that money can buy (such as food, clothing, transportation and a place to live). This is **economic abuse**, and it is designed to limit someone's freedom.

This type of abuse can create economic instability and / or make one partner dependent on the other, which can prevent victims from leaving and rebuilding their lives.

## The role of banks and building societies

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If you are concerned that a customer you are supporting may be experiencing economic abuse, you might wonder what you should do.

Banks and building societies can play a key role in helping to prevent economic abuse. Your involvement can be critical in supporting people to recover and achieve economic safety if they have experienced economic abuse. Noticing the signs and acting on them can have a huge impact on someone's safety and economic stability.

It might be daunting to talk about economic abuse, but remember that you aren't there to solve everything. By simply talking to the customer about the issue and what the bank can do, you are playing a crucial role to help them achieve economic safety.

## Look out for warning signs

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There are some key signs to look for, that may help identify that a customer is vulnerable to economic abuse or already a victim.

Look out for customers who:

- remain silent while another party does all the talking
- instruct you to speak to their partner
- seem to be taking instructions from their partner
- appear withdrawn, fearful, distressed or scared
- do not understand or are not aware of recently completed transactions or loans in their name
- ask questions about the other account holder's behaviour or activities
- have income paid into their partner's account rather than their own
- have concerns about protecting their personal privacy or safety, or the security of their account/s
- withdraw a large, unusual or uncharacteristic amount of cash when accompanied by their partner
- want to close down a joint bank account, or close a personal account when opening a joint account
- 'spoil' an application form (perhaps for the opportunity for a call from the bank and a chance to say what is happening)
- indicate their mail is no longer being delivered to their home
- tell you about an intervention order or similar, and have safety concerns

Also look out for third parties who present a form carrying the customer's signature that is otherwise completed in different handwriting.

**"He controlled what I wore, what I ate and drank, who I saw, who I spoke to, our bank accounts, my credit card, how much sleep I had. He tracked and traced my every move. I was so brainwashed at the end of the relationship; I didn't know who I was anymore."**

## How to respond

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If a customer is a victim of economic abuse, there is a lot the bank can do to support them.

It may be very daunting for someone who has experienced economic abuse to talk about what has happened to them. If a customer approaches you to share this information, it is important to respond in a way that is understanding and lets them know that the bank is there to support them.

The [Financial Services Vulnerability Taskforce](#) and the UK Finance [Financial Abuse Code of Practice](#) have set out the ways in which banks and building societies should respond to vulnerable customers. This includes those who have experienced economic abuse.

The guidance advises responding to vulnerable customers in the following ways:

### Respond with empathy

You may be the first person that someone who has experienced economic abuse shares their story with. Offer a supportive response that is sensitive to the issues the customer may be experiencing and encourages them to share their story with you and seek support.

Many banks and building societies offer training on economic abuse for staff, and the training can help you to respond appropriately to customers.

## **Invite the customer to speak privately about the issue**

If you are not already speaking in private with the customer, offer to move the conversation to somewhere quiet where they cannot be overheard.

## **Be flexible**

Many banks and building societies have policies on supporting vulnerable customers, including customers facing economic abuse. Find out if yours has a policy like this.

Many policies specify ways in which normal procedures can be altered to better support vulnerable customers. It may be that you can offer a vulnerable customer a longer appointment, or that you can move deadlines to give them more time to make financial decisions, for example.

## **Don't ask the customer to repeat their story**

It can be difficult for people experiencing economic abuse to share their story, let alone share it more than once. With the customer's consent, note their story securely on their file so that they do not need to repeat it to other staff members, and inform other relevant departments.

## **Offer specialist help**

Refer the customer to specialist services, including external sources of help relevant to their situation (for example, a domestic abuse organisation, specialist debt services or independent legal advice). Specialist services can support them with information to help them make financial decisions.

## **Consider speaking to the customer's family or friends**

The customer may ask you to speak to a friend or relative on their behalf. Consider doing this if it would provide support for the customer. However, it is important to be aware that sometimes family members

may also be implicated, especially when intimate partner violence is taking place in the context of honour-based abuse. If the customer has a family member or friend with them, try to make sure that they are able to speak freely in front of this person. If you have any concerns, it is best to speak directly to the customer or suggest that you call back at a time when they are alone.

## **Alert the police**

If you have reason to believe that a customer may be in immediate danger of fraud or other criminal activity in relation to their bank account, alert the police. Be aware that alerting the police may in some cases put victims of economic abuse at risk of further harm. Speak to the customer about whether they would like you to involve the police.

## **Supporting the customer to regain control of their finances**

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There are a number of ways that you can support customers facing economic abuse to regain control of their finances. You can help them maximise their economic resources and de-link their finances from the abuser.

**Only support a customer to take the following actions if it is safe for them to do so and they are sure that it would not lead to further harm from the abuser.**

## **Help the customer to secure their account**

If someone else might have access to their PIN or online banking passwords, support the customer to change these. Issue a new card and PIN to a new address if it may not be safe at the address you have on file for them.

Can you send statements and other letters to a different address, too? If a customer has

left their home due to the risk of immediate danger, they might prefer to use the address of a refuge or safe house with a PO Box, or they might prefer to have letters sent to a bank branch to collect.

### Control who can access their account

The customer may need you to remove the abuser's access to their account, or may wish to give access to someone they trust.

### Help them manage joint accounts

If the customer has a joint account with the abuser, they may wish to freeze the account. Alert the customer to the fact that reversing this requires the consent of both parties. Find out if there is a court order in place against the abuser – by law, activity on the account must be suspended if this is the case.

### Support them to open a new bank account

The customer may not have a bank account in their sole name. Opening an account independent of the abuser is an important step to help them reach economic safety.

**If you are opening an account for a customer who has previously held a joint account with the abuser, be careful not to link the accounts as this may make the customer's details visible to the abuser.**

The customer may not have access to the documents usually required to prove their identity (such as a passport, driving licence or birth certificate). Can you accept alternative documents, such as a letter from a refuge, social worker or local authority? Can you offer the customer a basic or fee-free account?

### Support the customer with information about their finances

The customer may not previously have had access to their own accounts and information about their finances. You can support them with information about

- assets and liabilities in their name
- other accounts in their name
- information about the payments going into and coming out of their account.

Are you also able to help them change how they manage their payments, if they wish to, and access their credit report to find out about liabilities they may have with other financial providers?

### Help them manage credit cards, mortgages and other debts

If the abuser is a cardholder for a credit card in the customer's name, the customer may wish to remove the abuser's access to prevent them from spending any more.

If the customer has a mortgage with your bank, speak to them about any changes they may wish to make to their mortgage (including whether they need correspondence to go to a different address if they will continue to have a joint mortgage with the abuser).

Are there specialist services that you can support the customer to access, including debt advice services? Are you able to offer more flexibility than usual in how the customer pays back their debts, such as a payment holiday?

**“Advocacy is so important, especially when you are fearing homelessness and losing the children. I found a senior person in the bank who advocated on my behalf from within. His advice made a huge difference.”**

## Other things you can do

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### Review your bank's policy on supporting vulnerable customers

There may be other ways in which your employer has committed to supporting vulnerable customers.

### Speak to the vulnerable customer team

Your bank may also have a team dedicated to supporting customers in financial difficulty. Speak to them to find out more about how you can support customers who have experienced economic abuse.

### Review policies

Do your bank's policies and procedures inadvertently put customers who have experienced economic abuse at risk? For example, if it is not possible to de-link profiles on a joint product, this could put some customers at risk. If a customer is fleeing abuse and updates their address for safety purposes, it is important that the abuser does not see that information, which can happen in error when profiles are linked.

### Request training on economic abuse

Speak to your organisation about whether training on economic abuse could be provided. Surviving Economic Abuse offers specialist training and consultancy to banks and building societies on economic abuse. Please get in touch if you would like to find out more or book training.

### Request advice from the National Advice service for Banks and Building societies

Run by Surviving Economic Abuse, the [advice service](#) is a telephone service for banks and building societies offering advice on matters related to economic abuse.

## Further support

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We have more information that you may find helpful to understand more about economic abuse.

Visit [www.survivingeconomicabuse.org/resources](http://www.survivingeconomicabuse.org/resources) for information including:

- What is economic abuse?
- Spotting the signs of economic abuse

If one of your customers is experiencing economic abuse, they are not alone. We have information at [www.survivingeconomicabuse.org/resources](http://www.survivingeconomicabuse.org/resources) that can support them to take steps towards safety and begin to regain control of their finances, including:

- Steps you can take towards economic safety
- Organisations that can help
- Grants and financial help

## References

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1. Sharp-Jeffs, N. (2015) Money Matters: Research into the extent and nature of financial abuse within intimate relationships in the UK London: The Co-operative Bank/Refuge\*

\*Financial abuse is a sub-category of economic abuse. It involves the control, exploitation or sabotage of economic resources (not 'just' money and finances but housing, transport etc.) more broadly. As such, the scale of the issue is likely to be underestimated. There are no national statistics on the scale of economic abuse.

