MEPPERSHALL
PARISH COUNCIL

DIGNITY AT WORK POLICY

*As adopted at a meeting of Meppershall Parish Council on **12th January 2026***

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DOCUMENT CONTROL

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1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

1.1. Meppershall Parish Council (MPC) believes that civility and respect are important in the working environment, and expect all councillors, officers and the public to be polite and courteous when working for, and with the Council.

1.2. MPC is committed to creating a working environment where all council employees, councillors, contractors and others who come into contact with us in the course of our work, are treated with dignity, respect and courtesy. We aim to create a workplace where there is zero tolerance for harassment and bullying

1.3. MPC has signed up to the Civility Pledge, as a commitment to civility and respect in our work, and politeness and courtesy in behaviour, speech, and in the written word.

1.4. MPC recognises that there is a continuum where unaddressed issues have the potential to escalate and become larger, more complex issues and this policy sets out how concerns will be managed. However, the emphasis of this policy is on resolution and mediation where appropriate, rather than an adversarial process.

1.5. This document:

1.5.1. explains how MPC will respond to complaints of bullying or harassment.

1.5.2. ensures that MPC respond sensitively and promptly; and,

1.5.3. supports employees in ensuring their behaviour does not amount to bullying and/or harassment by giving examples.

2. SCOPE

2.1. This policy covers bullying and harassment of and by clerks and all employees engaged to work for MPC. Should agency staff, or contractors have a complaint connected to their engagement with MPC this should be raised with their nominated contact within MPC, or the Chair of The Council, in the first instance. Should the complaint be about the Chair of The Council the complaint should be raised with the Vice-Chair.

2.2. Agency staff, or contractors are equally expected to treat council colleagues, and other representatives and stakeholders with dignity and respect, and the Council may terminate a contract, without notice, where there is firm evidence of harassment or bullying.

2.3. Complaints about other employment matters will be managed under the Council's grievance policy.

2.4. It is noted that the management of a situation may differ depending on who the allegations relate to (e.g. employees, contractor, councillor), however, the Council will take appropriate action if any of its employees are bullied or harassed by employees, councillors, members of the public, suppliers or contractors.

3. THE POSITION ON BULLYING AND HARRASSMENT

3.1. All staff and council representatives are entitled to dignity, respect and courtesy within the workplace and to not experience any form of discrimination. MPC will not tolerate bullying

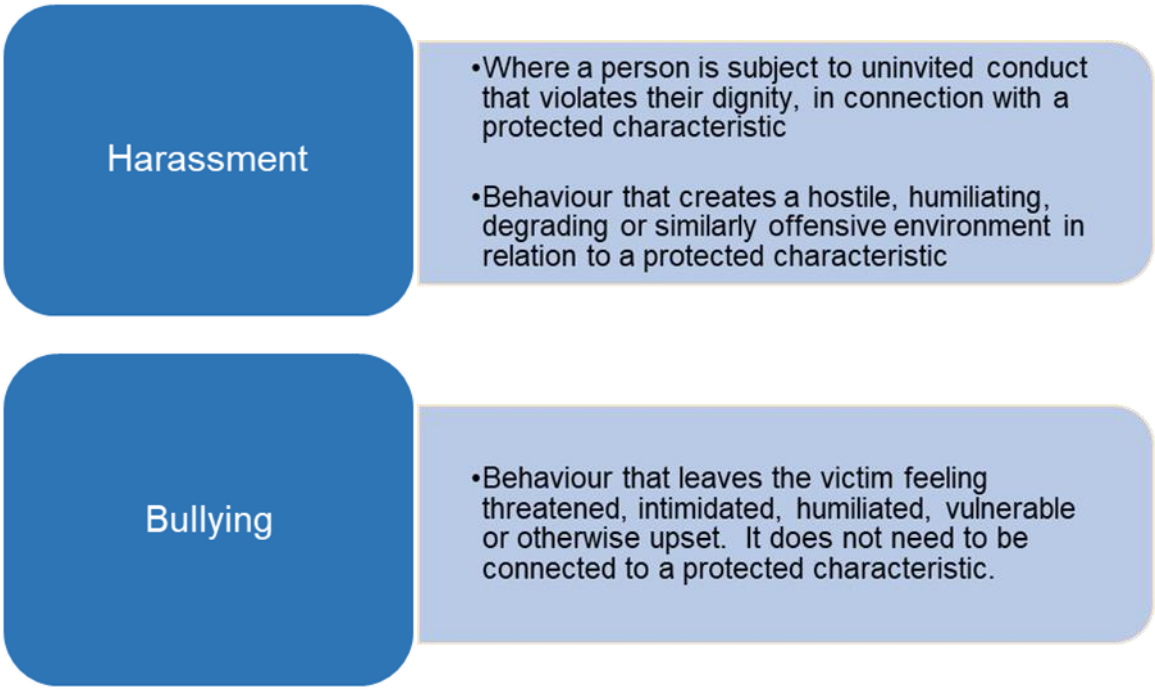
or harassment in our workplace or at work-related events outside of the workplace, whether the conduct is a one-off act or repeated course of conduct, and whether harm is intended or not. Neither will we tolerate retaliation against, or victimisation of, any person involved in bringing a complaint of harassment or bullying. You should also be aware that, if you have bullied or harassed someone (e.g. physical violence, harassment), in some circumstances the treatment may be reported to the Police for investigation.

3.2. MPC expect all representatives of the Council to treat each other with respect and uphold the values of the Code of Conduct, Civility and Respect pledge, Equal Opportunities policy, and all other policies and procedures set by the Council.

3.3. MPC expect all representatives of the Council to demonstrate respect by listening and paying attention to others, having consideration for other people's feelings, following protocols and rules, showing appreciation and thanks, and being kind.

3.4. Allegations of bullying and harassment will be treated seriously. Investigations will be carried out promptly, sensitively and, as far as possible, confidentially. Please refer to the MPC Grievance policy for further details regarding the process. Employees and others who make allegations of bullying or harassment in good faith will not be treated less favourably as a result.

3.5. False accusations of harassment or bullying can have a serious effect on innocent individuals. Staff and others have a responsibility not to make false allegations. While we will assume initially that all complaints of bullying and harassment are made in good faith, in the event that allegations are found to be malicious or vexatious the person raising the complaint will be subject to action under the Council's disciplinary procedure.



4. WHAT TYPE OF TREATMENT AMOUNTS TO BULLYING OR HARASSMENT

4.1. 'Bullying' or 'harassment' are phrases that apply to treatment from one person (or a group of people) to another that is unwanted and that has the effect of violating that person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment for that person.

4.2. Examples of bullying and harassment include (this is not an exhaustive list):

- 4.2.1. Unwelcome sexual advances
- 4.2.2. The offer of rewards for going along with sexual advances e.g. promotion, access to training
- 4.2.3. Threats for rejecting sexual advances
- 4.2.4. Demeaning comments about a person's appearance
- 4.2.5. Verbal abuse or offensive comments, including jokes or pranks related to age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion, belief, sex or sexual orientation
- 4.2.6. Unwanted nicknames, especially related to a person's age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion, belief, sex or sexual orientation
- 4.2.7. Spreading malicious rumours or insulting someone
- 4.2.8. Lewd or suggestive comments or gestures
- 4.2.9. Deliberate exclusion from conversations, work activities or social activities.
- 4.2.10. Withholding information a person needs in order to do their job
- 4.2.11. Practical jokes, initiation ceremonies or inappropriate birthday rituals
- 4.2.12. Rifling through, hiding or damaging personal property
- 4.2.13. Displaying pictures or objects with sexual or racial overtones, even if not directed at any particular person
- 4.2.14. Isolation or non-cooperation at work
- 4.2.15. Subjecting a person to humiliation or ridicule, belittling their efforts, whether directly and / or in front of others
- 4.2.16. The use of obscene gestures
- 4.2.17. Abusing a position of power

4.3. Physical conduct ranging from unwelcome touching to serious assault and physical abuse such as hitting, pushing or jostling are considered criminal offences that must be reported to your line manager or councillor. MPC will then support the complainant with appropriate action.

4.4. Bullying and harassment can occur through verbal and face to face interactions. It can also take place through sharing inappropriate or offensive content in writing or via email and other electronic communications and social media.

4.5. It is important to recognise that conduct which one person may find acceptable, another may find totally unacceptable and behaviour could be harassment when the person had no

intention to offend. We all have the right to determine what offends us. Some behaviour will be clear to any reasonable person that it is likely to offend – for example unwelcome sexual advances. Other examples may be less clear, however, you should be aware that harassment will occur if behaviour continues after the recipient has advised you that the behaviour is unacceptable to them.

4.6. Harassment can also occur where the unwanted behaviour relates to a perceived characteristic (such as offensive jokes or comments based on the assumption someone is gay, even if they are not) or due to their association with someone else (such as harassment related to their partner having a disability for example). For further information please see MPC's Equality and Diversity Policy.

4.7. All employees must, therefore, treat their colleagues with respect and appropriate sensitivity and should feel able to challenge behaviour that they find offensive even if it is not directed at them.

> It is important to recognise that bullying does not include appropriate criticism of an employee's behaviour or effective, robust performance management. Constructive and fair feedback about your behaviour or performance from your manager or colleagues/Councillors is not bullying. It is part of normal employment and management routines, and cannot be interpreted as anything different.

5. VICTIMISATION

5.1. Victimisation is subjecting a person to a detriment because they have, in good faith, complained (whether formally or otherwise) that someone has been bullying or harassing them or someone else, or supported someone to make a complaint or given evidence in relation to a complaint. This would include isolating someone because they have made a complaint or giving them a heavier or more difficult workload.

5.2. Provided that you act in good faith, i.e. you genuinely believe that what you are saying is true, you have a right not to be victimised for making a complaint or doing anything in relation to a complaint of bullying or harassment and the Council will take appropriate action to deal with any alleged victimisation, which will include disciplinary action against anyone found to have victimised you.

5.3. Making a complaint that you know to be untrue, or giving evidence that you know to be untrue, will lead to disciplinary action being taken against you.

6. REPORTING CONCERNS

6.1. What you should do if you feel you are being bullied or harassed by a member of the public or supplier (as opposed to a colleague)?

If you are being bullied or harassed by someone with whom you come into contact at work, please raise this with your line manager in the first instance or, with the Clerk/or a

councillor. Any such report will be taken seriously, and MPC will decide how best to deal with the situation, in consultation with you.

6.2. What you should do if you feel you are being bullied or harassed by a councillor?

If you are being bullied or harassed by a councillor, please raise this with the Clerk or the Chair of The Council in the first instance. They will then decide how best to deal with the situation, in consultation with you. There are two possible avenues for you, informal or formal. The Informal Resolution is described below. Formal concerns regarding potential breaches of The Councillors Code of Conduct must be investigated by the Monitoring Officer.

The Council will consider reasonable measures to protect your health and safety. Such measures may include a temporary change in duties or change of work location, not attending meetings with the person about whom the complaint has been made etc.

6.3. What you should do if you witness an incident you believe to harassment or bullying?

If you witness such behaviour you should report the incident in confidence to the Clerk or a councillor. Such reports will be taken seriously and will be treated in strict confidence as far as it is possible to do so

6.4. What you should do if you are being bullied or harassed by another member of staff?

If you are being bullied or harassed by a colleague or contractor, there are two possible avenues for you, informal or formal. These are described in sections 7 and 8 below.

7. INFORMAL RESOLUTION

7.1. If you are being bullied or harassed, you may be able to resolve the situation yourself by explaining clearly to the perpetrator(s) that their behaviour is unacceptable, contrary to the Council's policy and must stop. Alternatively, you may wish to ask the Clerk, a colleague or a councillor to say this on your behalf or to be with you when explaining clearly to the perpetrator(s) that their behaviour is unacceptable.

7.2. If the above approach does not work or if you do not want to try to resolve the situation in this way, or if you are being bullied by your own line manager, you should raise the issue with the Chair of The Council. (If your concern relates to the chair, you should raise it with the Vice - Chair). The Chair (or another appropriate person) will discuss with you the option of trying to resolve the situation informally by telling the alleged perpetrator, without prejudicing the matter, that:

- 7.2.1. there has been a complaint that their behaviour is having an adverse effect on a member of the Council staff,
- 7.2.2. such behaviour is contrary to our policy,
- 7.2.3. for employees, the continuation of such behaviour will amount to a serious disciplinary offence.

7.3. It may be possible for this conversation to take place with the alleged perpetrator without revealing your name, if this is what you want. The person dealing with it will also stress that the conversation is confidential.

7.4. In certain circumstances we may be able to involve a neutral third party (a mediator) to facilitate a resolution of the problem. The Chair (or another appropriate person) will discuss this with you if it is appropriate.

7.5. If your complaint is resolved informally, the alleged perpetrator(s) will not usually be subject to disciplinary sanctions. However, in exceptional circumstances (such as extremely serious allegation or in cases where a problem has happened before) we may decide to investigate further and take more formal action notwithstanding that you raised the matter informally. We will consult with you before taking this step.

8. RAISING A FORMAL COMPLAINT

8.1. If informal resolution is unsuccessful or inappropriate, you can make a formal complaint about bullying and harassment through the Council's grievance procedure. You should raise your complaint with the Clerk or the Chair of The Council. A formal complaint may lead to disciplinary action against the perpetrator(s) where they are employed.

8.2. The Clerk or the Chair of the Council will appoint someone to investigate your complaint in line with the grievance policy. You will need to co-operate with the investigation and provide the following details (if not already provided):

8.2.1. The name of the alleged perpetrator(s),

8.2.2. The nature of the harassment or bullying,

8.2.3. The dates and times the harassment or bullying occurred,

8.2.4. The names of any witnesses and

8.2.5. Any action taken by you to resolve the matter informally.

8.3. The alleged perpetrator(s) would normally need to be told your name and the details of your grievance in order for the issue to be investigated properly. However, MPC will carry out the investigation as confidentially and sensitively as possible. Where you and the alleged perpetrator(s) work in proximity to each other, we will consider whether it is appropriate to make temporary adjustments to working arrangements whilst the matter is being investigated.

8.4. Where your complaint relates to potential breaches of The Council's Code of Conduct, these will need to be investigated by the Monitoring Officer appointed by central Bedfordshire Council. MPC will consider any adjustments to support you in your work and to manage the relationship with the Councillor the allegations relate to, while the investigation proceeds.

8.5. Investigations will be carried out promptly (without unreasonable delay), sensitively and, as far as possible, confidentially. When carrying out any investigations, MPC will ensure that individuals' personal data is handled in accordance with the data protection policy.

8.6. The Council will consider how to protect your health and wellbeing whilst the investigation is taking place and discuss this with you. Depending on the nature of the allegations, the Investigator may want to meet with you to understand better your compliant (see the grievance policy for further information, and details of your right to be accompanied).

8.7. After the investigation, a panel will meet with you to consider the complaint and the findings of the investigation in accordance with the grievance procedure. At the meeting you may be accompanied by a fellow worker or a trade union official.

8.8. Following the conclusion of the hearing the panel will write to you to inform you of the decision and to notify you of your right to appeal if you are dissatisfied with the outcome. You should put your appeal in writing explaining the reasons why you are dissatisfied with the decision. Your appeal will be heard under the appeal process that is described in the grievance procedure.

9. THE USE OF THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURE

9.1. If at any stage from the point at which a complaint is raised, we believe there is a case to answer and a disciplinary offence has been committed, we will instigate our disciplinary procedure. We will keep you informed of the outcome.

APPENDIX A – GUIDANCE NOTES ON USE OF THIS POLICY

The Dignity at Work Policy will replaces previous 'Bullying and Harassment' policies, to create a policy that is focussed on encompassing behaviours beyond simply bullying and harassment, and zero tolerance with the aim of dealing with concerns before they escalate. It is important that any commitment made in the policy is applied in practice.

Notes:

1. **Protected Characteristics (as defined by the Equality Act 2010)**
   - Age
   - Disability
   - Gender
   - Gender reassignment
   - Marriage and civil partnership
   - Pregnancy and maternity
   - Race
   - Religion and belief
   - Sexual orientation

   The Council is committed to protect the following additional characteristics:

   - Diagnosis of a mental illness
   - Those living with HIV and other blood borne viruses

   Examples of harassment related to a protected characteristic could include;

   - Making assumptions about someone's ability due to their age, or denying development opportunities to someone based on their age. This could also include assumptions about their lifestyle or making inappropriate jokes related to age.
   - Refusing to treat a person as their new gender, or disclosing information about their gender identity could be harassment on the grounds of gender reassignment.
   - Pregnancy/Maternity harassment could include refusing opportunities due to pregnancy or maternity leave, or inappropriate touching and invasion of personal space such as unwanted touching of a pregnant person's stomach.

2. **Culture and behaviour**

   We work in eclectic communities and working environments, and a positive culture within The Council enables employees with different backgrounds and beliefs to share ideas and shape how The Council achieves its objectives for their community.

   It is important to recognise that different individuals may find different behaviours bullying or harassing so while there is not always intent to offend or cause harm that does not mean that the effect of the behaviour has not caused harm or offence.

It can take people a period of time to decide to raise their concerns, as they worry about consequences (perhaps from peers by complaining about a colleague who is popular, or they fear victimisation from the perpetrator or others). The Council should consider whether there are opportunities (such as 121s to offer opportunity to reflect on relationships/morale) to identify issues earlier and address negative behaviours. Individuals can often mention concerns they are experiencing but not want to take it further. The Council should remind the complainant that it has a zero tolerance to bullying and harassment and remind them of the policy in place to address concerns. If the allegations mentioned are significant, The Council may want to suggest that it will need to investigate further, even if a 'grievance' is not raised, so as to ensure that any concerns and risks are managed, and The Council is meeting its responsibilities and duty of care as an employer.

Whilst both staff and councillors jointly determine the working culture, councillors are key in demonstrating what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. This is apparent from how councillors behave with each other in council meetings and also in how standards of behaviour are applied through the use of informal discussion and formal policies.

3. Responsibilities

All staff and representatives of The Council are responsible for their own behaviour in the workplace and for taking steps to revise unacceptable behaviour and appropriately challenge that of others.

Leaders – councillors, clerks, chief officers, managers - are responsible for ensuring that these standards of treating people with civility, respect and courtesy are upheld, both through their own example, and by communicating and promoting these expectations to all employees. They are also responsible for ensuring that concerns raised are treated seriously and addressed in line with this policy in a timely manner.

4. During the investigation

Employers have a duty of care to provide a safe place of work. If a complaint is made, discuss how to manage working relationships whilst the allegation is being investigated and until the outcome is disclosed. This is as much for the protection of the alleged perpetrator as for the aggrieved.

Consider whether a neutral person should be offered as a 'listening ear' for both parties in the investigation. This could be a councillor or nominated manager who is not involved in the investigation or allegations and can be a point of check in as raising, or being subject to allegations can be stressful.

Offer other support that may be appropriate to the situation such as signposting to support groups, time off for counselling etc. If you have suspended a staff member, your duty of care continues and it is important to consider their wellbeing and mental health.

Ensure that you communicate regularly with both parties.

The investigation and any subsequent hearing should be completed in accordance with the grievance policy which sets out a process for dealing with concerns. You should ensure that the

grievance policy adopted adheres to any local policies and procedures, with consideration of any timescales and escalation routes in your locally adopted policy.

5. Confidentiality

It may be possible for concerns to be raised with the perpetrator without disclosing the name of the complainant however in a small council it is likely that it will be clear that the accused will know where the accusation has come from. The Council representative (clerk/councillor) speaking to the alleged perpetrator must be clear that the discussion is confidential and the individual would be at risk of formal disciplinary action if there is any sort of victimisation or retaliation for the individual raising their concern.

During any formal investigation it may be necessary to disclose the nature of the allegations and where they came from to ensure a fair and balanced investigation and process. This should be discussed with the person raising the concerns to understand any issues and how they may be mitigated. In some situations it may be appropriate to provide anonymised witness statements however this would be a last resort, and could compromise the fairness of the process. Where there is a genuine fear of consequences and this may need to be considered, it is recommended that professional advice is sought. For the same reason it can be difficult for a council to consider an anonymous complaint, however if the concerns are significant and compromise The Council in their duty of care to employees, then consideration of how the deal with the matter may be required.

6. Complaints against Councillors

Following the Ledbury case, the law is clear that any formal complaint about a councillor regarding a breach of the code of conduct must be referred to the Monitoring Officer for investigation (either by the complainant, or The Council with agreement of the complainant). During the investigation, it is critical to ensure that where an employee of the Council has made the complaint, that the Council agrees reasonable measures with the employee to protect their health and safety. Such measures may include a temporary change in duties, change of work location, not attending meetings with the person about whom the complaint has been made etc.

Careful consideration is required where a grievance is raised against the Council as a whole due to lack of support related to councillor behaviours. The specific allegations will need to be considered to determine whether the allegations can be addressed by the Council, or require exploration of the Councillors behaviour in order to respond, in which case the Monitoring Officer may be required to investigate the alleged behaviours of a/any councillors where this may relate to the Code of Conduct. It is a matter of fact whether the complaint is against the Council and can therefore be dealt with by the Council's grievance procedure or against a councillor and can only be dealt with by the Monitoring Officer.