

**STOKE FERRY PARISH COUNCIL**  
**BULLYING & HARASSMENT POLICY**

**Adopted September 2021**

**Next Review September 2025**

**Introduction**

All staff should be able to work in an environment free from harassment and bullying and be treated with dignity and respect regardless of gender, sexual orientation, transgender status, marital or family status, colour, race, nationality, ethnic or national origins, creed, culture, religion or belief, age, or disability.

This policy and procedure provide guidance on what to do if you are concerned about bullying or harassment and what to expect if you raise concerns. It applies to all staff, Councillors, and contractors.

**Policy**

The Council does not tolerate bullying or harassment in the workplace. This is the case for work-related events that take place within or outside of normal working hours; on Council property or elsewhere, whether the conduct is a one-off act or repeated course of conduct, and whether done purposefully or not.

The Council does not tolerate retaliation against, or victimisation of, any person involved in bringing a complaint of harassment or bullying. Retaliation or victimisation will also constitute a disciplinary offence, which may in appropriate circumstances lead to dismissal. You should also be aware that if a court or tribunal finds that you have bullied or harassed someone, in some circumstances the treatment may amount to a crime punishable by a fine or imprisonment.

The Council will take appropriate action if any of our staff/councillors are bullied or harassed by staff, councillors, members of the public or suppliers.

**All Councillors will be expected to operate to the standards set in the ‘Bullying and Harassment Policy’, a failure to do so would be considered a breach of the ‘Code of Conduct’.**

**What type of treatment amounts to bullying or harassment?**

Bullying is offensive, intimidating, threatening, malicious or insulting behaviour, and/or an abuse or misuse of power that undermines, humiliates, denigrates, or injures the person on the receiving end.

Harassment is unwanted conduct related to relevant ‘protected characteristics’, (which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual) and are sex, gender reassignment, race (which includes colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins), disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief and age. Harassment amounts to unlawful discrimination if it relates to a ‘protected characteristic’.

Examples of bullying and harassment maybe:

- Deliberate or unintentional
- Between two individuals or a group
- Verbal abuse or offensive comments, jokes or pranks related to age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage, civil partnership, pregnancy, maternity, race, religion, belief, sex, or sexual orientation
- Lewd or suggestive comments
- Obvious or insidious
- Persistent or an isolated incident
- Deliberate exclusion from conversations or work activities
- Withholding information, a person needs to do their job
- Practical jokes, initiation ceremonies or inappropriate birthday rituals
- Physical abuse such as hitting, pushing, or jostling
- Rifling through, hiding, or damaging personal property
- Subjecting a person to humiliation or ridicule, belittling their efforts, often in front of others
- Face to face, in writing, by email, telephone or social media
- Overbearing supervision and abusing a position of power
- Deliberately undermining a competent worker by overloading and constant criticism
- Preventing individuals from progressing by intentionally blocking promotion or training opportunities

### **THIS IS NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST**

It is important to recognise that conduct which one person may find acceptable; another may find totally unacceptable. All employees must, therefore, treat their colleagues with respect and appropriate sensitivity.

Bullying does not include appropriate criticism of an employee's behaviour or proper performance management.

Incidents of harassment may also constitute a criminal offence and may therefore need to be reported to the Police.

## **Responsibilities**

### **Employee Responsibilities**

- To behave in accordance with the Code of Conduct<sup>1</sup> and treat colleagues with dignity and respect.
- Discourage bullying and harassment by making it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable and supporting colleagues who suffer such treatment.
- Challenge inappropriate behaviour early and report as appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> All employees will be expected to operate to the standards set in the 'Bullying and Harassment Policy', a failure to do so would be considered a breach of the 'Code of Conduct'.

## **Councillor Responsibilities**

Councillors must take all reasonable steps to ensure the working environment is free from bullying and harassment by:

- Acting as a positive role model
- Being aware of work situations where there is a potential for bullying and harassment and to guard against it
- Ensuring all employees are aware of the standards of behaviour and conduct expected of them.
- Treating all complaints seriously, with sensitivity to the feelings and perceptions of all those involved.
- Dealing with any issues raised fairly and confidentially
- Taking steps to ensure that employees who bring complaints, or support others to do so, are not treated less favourably
- Taking immediate action if bullying and/or harassment is suspected or identified
- Being familiar with policy and provide advice on procedure
- Any adverse comments made via the media and social media or outside of the Council in any form regarding staff or fellow councillors will be dealt with robustly.
- To behave in accordance with the Code of Conduct<sup>2</sup> and treat colleagues with dignity and respect.

It is not only the Councillor's perception of what behaviour is acceptable which defines harassment. The recipients view of the behaviour is important and if the recipient feels that they have been harassed the complaint must be taken seriously and actioned.

### **Reporting concerns**

#### What you should do if you witness an incident you believe to be harassment or bullying

If you witness such behaviour you should report the incident in confidence to the Clerk or a Nominated Councillor. The Nominated Councillor will have experience in dealing with such matters and/or undergone any necessary training to enable them to act fairly and professionally. If the 'Nominated Councillor' is the perpetrator then the matter will be passed to the Chair of the Council. Such reports will be taken seriously and will be treated in strict confidence as far as it is possible to do so.

#### 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)

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<sup>2</sup> All Councillors will be expected to operate to the standards set in the 'Bullying and Harassment Policy', a failure to do so would be considered a breach of the 'Code of Conduct'.

If you are being bullied or harassed by someone with whom you come into contact at work, please raise this with the Clerk or a Nominated Councillor in the first instance. They will then decide how best to deal with the situation, in consultation with you.

### 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 Code of Conduct<sup>3</sup> breaches will be investigated by the Monitoring Officer.

If the Nominated Councillor, the Chair or the Monitoring Officer are compromised in any way, the complaint should then be dealt with by a Monitoring Officer from another District/Borough Council.

#### **Informal resolution**

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 our policy and must stop. Alternatively, you may wish to ask the Clerk, a colleague, or another councillor to put this on your behalf or to be with you when confronting the perpetrator(s).

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 manager, you should raise the issue with the Chair of the Council. The Chair (or another appropriate individual) will discuss with you the option of trying to resolve the situation informally by:

- Telling the alleged perpetrator(s), without prejudging the matter, that there has been a complaint that their behaviour is having an adverse effect on a member of staff.
- That such behaviour is contrary to our policy.
- That for employees, the continuation of such behaviour could amount to a serious disciplinary offence.

It may be possible to have the conversation with the alleged perpetrator without revealing your name, if this is what you want. They will also stress that the conversation is confidential.

However, by its nature bullying and harassment may make the employee feel embarrassed, worried about damaging their reputation or the working environment and fearful of not being taken seriously and subsequent reprisals. In these situations, the Chair of the Council, a colleague, or a Trade Union Representative can make an initial approach.

If your complaint is resolved informally, the alleged perpetrator(s) will not usually be subject to disciplinary sanctions. However, in exceptional circumstances (such as a serious allegation of harassment or in cases where a problem has happened before) the Council

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<sup>3</sup> All Councillors/Employees will be expected to operate to the standards set in the 'Bullying and Harassment Policy', a failure to do so would be considered a breach of the 'Code of Conduct'.

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.

Where appropriate, mediation may be offered. Mediation is a voluntary, private, and confidential process to resolve disagreements. The aim of mediation is, with the agreement of all parties, to bring people together in an informal, neutral setting to enhance communication and understanding to bring about effective resolution at the earliest stage possible.

### **Raising a formal complaint...**

If informal resolution is unsuccessful or inappropriate, you can make a formal complaint about the harassment or bullying to the Clerk or the Chair of the Council. A formal complaint may ultimately lead to disciplinary action against the perpetrator(s) where they are employed.

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

- The name of the alleged perpetrator(s),
- The nature of the harassment or bullying,
- The dates and times the harassment or bullying occurred
- The names of any witnesses and
- Any action taken by you to resolve the matter informally

#### ... against a councillor

The Clerk or the Chair of the Council will appoint someone to investigate your complaint. Formal concerns regarding potential breaches of Code of Conduct<sup>4</sup> will be investigated by the Monitoring Officer who will have the power to act.

#### ... against a colleague or contractor

The alleged perpetrator(s) would need to be told your name and the details of your complaint for the issue to be investigated properly. However, we 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 separate you whilst the matter is being investigated.

#### ... against a member of the public or supplier

We will investigate the complaint as far as possible by contacting the member of public or the supplier's employer and asking for a response to the allegations.

### **During the investigation**

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<sup>4</sup> All Councillors/Employees will be expected to operate to the standards set in the 'Bullying and Harassment Policy', a failure to do so would be considered a breach of the 'Code of Conduct'.

Investigations will be carried out promptly, sensitively and, as far as possible, confidentially. If, after an investigation, we decide that an employee/councillor has harassed or bullied another employee/councillor, then the employee/councillor may be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

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 better understand your complaint. Whilst there is no Statutory right to be accompanied at investigation meetings, the Council recognises that allowing this represents good practice and will allow a work colleague, councillor or union representative to attend with you at the meeting.

### **Hearing**

After the investigation, a panel will meet with you in a Grievance Hearing (following the Grievance Procedure) to consider the complaint and the findings of the investigation. At the meeting you may be accompanied by a fellow worker, councillor, or a trade union official.

After the meeting, 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.

### **Victimisation**

Employees and others who make allegations of bullying or harassment in good faith will not be treated less favourably as a result.

### **False allegations**

If the Council believes a false and/or malicious allegation has been made it will be investigated under the Disciplinary Procedure. Such an allegation, if upheld could constitute gross misconduct.

### **Disclosure and confidentiality**

We will treat personal data collected during this process in accordance with the data protection policy. Information about how data is used and the basis for processing data is provided in the employee privacy notice.

### **Use of the disciplinary procedure**

Harassment and bullying constitute serious misconduct. 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 might have been committed, we will instigate our disciplinary procedure. Any employee/councillor found to have harassed or bullied a colleague/councillor will be liable to disciplinary action up to and including summary dismissal.

This procedure represents part of the Contract of Employment of an Employee, and its standards of behaviour are those expected of Councillors as per the Code of Conduct.

— policy ends here —

## Notes

### 1. Protected characteristics

A 'protected characteristic' is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and marriage and civil partnership. It is unlawful to discriminate against an individual because of any of the protected characteristics.

Discrimination includes treating people differently because of a protected characteristic. Harassment is unwanted conduct related to a 'protected characteristic'. Employees can complain of harassment even if the behaviour in question is not directed at them. This is because the complainant does not actually need to possess the relevant protected characteristic. An employee can complain of unlawful harassment if they are related to someone with a protected characteristic, or because a colleague believes they have a protected characteristic.

### 2. Legal risks

An employee does not need to be employed to make a discrimination claim at a tribunal.

- Job applicants who believe they have not been appointed because of a 'protected characteristic' can make a claim.
- New or established employees who are dismissed because of a health condition can make a discrimination claim at a tribunal.
- An employee in their probationary period may claim discrimination if their employment has been ended for no credible reason.
- An employee subjected to harassment can make a discrimination claim at a tribunal.
- An employee asked to retire can make a discrimination claim at a tribunal.

Successful unfair dismissal claims are limited to a compensation cap, whereas those for unlawful discrimination have no cap.

A positive employment culture, and swift action if conduct falls beneath acceptable standards will help mitigate the risks. An unhealthy culture will make it difficult to defend claims.

The time to defend and the cost of defending tribunal claims can be significant, irrespective of the outcome.

### 3. Culture and behaviour

Modern day workforces are eclectic, and a positive culture throughout the council enables staff with different backgrounds and beliefs to share ideas and shape how the council achieves what councillors decide for the community.

Different people find different things acceptable. It may not be obvious that some behaviour would be unwelcome or could offend a person. Those in positions of 'power' over an employee may not always understand how words or actions are received. An employee may not always find it easy to communicate how they really feel. 'Banter' that on the face of it is reciprocated may nonetheless be unwelcomed and damaging. Others who overhear comments, or learn of them third hand, will form judgements about the culture.

Whilst both staff and councillors jointly determine what the working culture is like, 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. Examples of unacceptable behaviour at work include (but are not limited to):

- physical conduct ranging from touching to sexual advances and serious assault;
- the offer of rewards for going along with sexual advances, e.g. promotion, access to training;
- suggestions that refusing sexual advances will adversely affect aspects relating to employment (such as pay, promotion, training, work opportunities, or any other condition of employment or development);
- comments about a person's appearance;
- jokes or comments of a sexual or racial nature or about an individual's age, disability, sexual orientation or religion;
- questions about a person's sex life;
- unwanted nicknames, especially related to a person's age, race or disability;
- the use of obscene gestures;
- excluding an individual for a non-work reason
- treating an employee differently because they have, or are perceived to have, a 'protected characteristic' or are associated with someone who does;
- the open display of pictures or objects with sexual or racial overtones, even if not directed at any particular person;
- spreading malicious rumours or insulting someone;
- picking on someone or setting them up to fail;
- making threats or comments about someone's job security without good reason;
- ridiculing someone;
- isolation or non-cooperation at work; and
- excluding someone from social activities.

#### 4. During the investigation

Employers have 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. 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's important to consider their wellbeing and mental health.

Ensure that you regularly communicate with both parties.

#### 5. Victimisation

All employees have the right to raise genuine concerns without the fear of reprisals. If the aggrieved (or a witness) is treated differently / less favourably because they have raised a complaint, then this is victimisation. This would include isolating someone because they have made a complaint, cancelled a planned training event, or giving them a heavier or more difficult workload. Victimisation can lead to a claim to an employment tribunal.

#### 6. False allegations

If an employee makes an allegation that they know to be untrue, or gives evidence that they know to be untrue, the council should consider the matter under the disciplinary procedure. Such an allegation would be potentially Gross Misconduct.

#### 7. Complaints against councillors

Following the Ledbury case, the law is clear that any formal complaint regarding a breach of the Code of Conduct<sup>5</sup> must be referred to the Monitoring Officer for investigation. During the investigation, it is critical to ensure that where an employee of the council has made the complaint, that the council agrees with the employee reasonable measures 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 to whom the complaint has been made etc.

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