



*working with the community*

Somerton Town Council  
Policy Document  
Dignity at Work  
Bullying and Harassment Policy

**Adopted:** February 2015

**Readopted Date:** January 2021

**Review Date:** February 2024

# Dignity at Work Bullying and Harassment Policy

## 1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Statement: In support of our value to respect others, Somerton Town Council will not tolerate bullying or harassment by, or of, any of its employees, officials, members, contractors, visitors to the Council or members of the public from the community which we serve. The Council is committed to the elimination of any form of intimidation in the workplace.

The policy reflects the spirit in which the Council intends to undertake all of its business and outlines the specific procedures available to all employees in order to protect them from bullying and harassment. It should be read in conjunction with the Council's Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures, the Elected Members Code of Conduct and the Member and Employee Protocol.

The Council will issue this policy to all employees as part of their induction and to all Members as part of their Welcome Pack. The Council may also wish to share this policy with contractors, visitors and members of the public.

## 2. DEFINITIONS

### Bullying

"Bullying may be characterised as a pattern of offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviour, an abuse of this use of power or authority which tends to undermine an individual or a group of individuals, gradually eroding their confidence and capability, which may cause them to suffer stress."

### Harassment

Harassment is "unwanted conduct that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment." This usually covers, but is not

limited to, harassment on the grounds of sex, marital status, sexual orientation, race, colour, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, belief, disability or age.

These definitions are derived from the ACAS guidance on the topic.

Bullying and harassment are behaviours which are unwanted by the recipient. Bullying is typically a one-off incident whereas harassment is generally evidenced by a pattern of conduct. Bullying and Harassment in the workplace can lead to poor morale, low productivity and poor performance, sickness absence, mental health issues, lack of respect for others, staffing turnover, damage to the Council's reputation and ultimately, legal proceedings against the Council incurring payment of legal fees and potentially unlimited compensation.

Examples of unacceptable behaviour are as follows: (this list is not exhaustive):

Spreading malicious rumours, insulting someone, ridiculing or demeaning someone, exclusion or victimisation, unfair treatment, overbearing supervision or other misuse of position or power, unwelcome sexual advances, making threats about job security, making threats of physical violence against a person or their family, deliberately undermining a competent worker by overloading work and/or constant criticism, blaming a person for others' mistakes, preventing an individual's promotion or training opportunities.

Bullying and harassment may occur face-to-face, in meetings, through written communication, including electronic communication such as e-mail or on social media, by telephone or through automatic supervision methods. It may occur on or off work premises, during work hours or non-work time.

### **3 PENALTIES**

Bullying and harassment by any employed persons can be considered examples of gross misconduct which will be dealt with through the Disciplinary Procedure at Gross Misconduct level and may result in summary dismissal from the council.

If elected Members are bullying or harassing employees, contractors, fellow councillors or others, then a referral through the Standards process in place at the time reported as a contravention of the Member's Code of Conduct could be an appropriate measure.

If an employee is experiencing bullying or harassment from a third party, the Council will act reasonably in upholding its duty of care towards its own employees.

In extreme cases harassment can constitute a criminal offence and the Council should take appropriate legal advice if such a matter arises.

Where the Council reasonably believes that Members have been bullying or harassing another person(s) whilst undertaking Council activities the range of sanctions available to the Council is limited and must be reasonable, proportionate and not intended to be punitive. In some cases counselling or training in appropriate skill areas e.g. inter-personal communication, assertiveness, chairing of meetings etc. may be more appropriate than a penalty.

Sanctions may include; admonishment, issuing an apology or giving an undertaking not to repeat the behaviour, removal of opportunities to further harass/bully such as removal from a committee(s) where direct contact with the employee or decision-making about that employee will take place, or removing the right to representation on any outside bodies where there will be contact with the employee who has raised the complaint. A referral under the Code of Conduct to the relevant reviewing body is usually an appropriate step

and there may be further disciplinary sanctions available as a result of the Standards Committee (England) or Ombudsman (Wales) reviewing the evidence under the Code in place at the time.

A referral to the Police under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 may also be appropriate in more extreme cases.

This list is not exhaustive.

False or malicious allegations of harassment or bullying which damage the reputation of a fellow employee/Member will not be tolerated and will be dealt with as serious misconduct under the Disciplinary Procedure or a referral to the Standards process.

#### **4 LEGAL POSITION**

Councils have a duty of care towards all their workers and liability under common law arising out of the Employment Rights Act 1996 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

If an employer fails to act reasonably with regard to this duty of care by allowing bullying or harassment to continue unchallenged an employee may decide to resign and claim 'constructive dismissal' at an Employment Tribunal.

Under the Equality Act 2010 bullying or harassment related to one of the protected characteristics covered by the Act (age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, pregnancy/maternity, sex, sexual orientation, race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, disability) can be considered unlawful discrimination which could lead to an Employment Tribunal claim for discrimination against the Council as an employer and the perpetrator(s) as individually named Respondents.

In addition, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and Protection from Harassment Act 1997 created a criminal offence of harassment with a fine and/or prison sentence as a penalty and a right to damages for the victim. A harasser may be personally liable to pay damages if a victim complains to an Employment Tribunal on the grounds of discrimination.

The 1997 Act was originally designed to assist in stalking situations but case law has demonstrated that it can be relevant to employment disputes, for instance; employers can be held vicariously liable for harassment in the workplace, that the conduct is viewed as 'serious', or 'oppressive and unacceptable', that a 'course of conduct' needs to be established but that this can link incidents which are separated by long time periods and that damages for personal injury and distress can be awarded under the Act.

#### **5. PROCESS FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT**

##### **5.1 Informal approach:**

Anyone - employee, contractor, member or visitor - who feels they are being bullied or harassed are encouraged to try to resolve the problem informally, in the first instance. It may be sufficient to explain to the person(s) involved in the unwanted behaviour, or via an intermediary, that their conduct is unacceptable, offensive or causing discomfort.

##### **5.2 Formal approach:**

Employees: Where the employee feels unable to resolve the matter informally or where an informal approach has not resolved the issue, any complaint about harassment or bullying can be raised under the aegis of the Grievance Procedure.

Others: Any other party to the Council, other than an employee, who feels they are being bullied or harassed should raise their complaint in writing with the Chair of the Council if they feel unable to resolve the matter informally or where an informal notification to the alleged perpetrator has been unsuccessful at eliminating the problem. The complaint should then be investigated and a meeting held to discuss the facts and recommend the way forward.

A member of the public who feels they have been bullied or harassed by any Members or officers of the Council should use the Council's official Complaints Procedure. It is important that the Officer(s) or Member(s) being complained about do not prevent the Council operating impartially in its investigation and decision-making in this regard.

## **6. RESPONSIBILITIES**

All parties to the Council have a responsibility to ensure that their conduct towards others does not harass or bully or in any way demean the dignity of others. If unacceptable behaviour is observed then each individual can challenge the perpetrator and ask them to stop. There needs to be agreement about how "robust people management" and "bullying" differ; effective management of performance will usually include feedback based on objective evidence, delivered by a committee specifically designated and often trained to manage and appraise staff, with dialogue occurring on a face to face basis in confidential surroundings.

Bullying is more likely to be complained about when individual Members criticise staff, often without objective evidence, without the mandate from the corporate body of the Council and in environments which are open to the public or other employees or by way of blogs, social media comments, or in public.

The Council undertakes to share its policy with all Members and workers and requests that each party signs to demonstrate acceptance of its terms. All new Members and employees will be provided with a copy of this policy.

A review of the policy shall be undertaken each year (or as appropriate) and necessary amendments will be undertaken by the Town Clerk and reported to the full Council for approval. The Council will undertake to ensure that its Members and workers are trained in the processes required by this policy as deemed appropriate.

## **7. USEFUL CONTACTS**

ACAS [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk) Tel: 0845 7 47 47 47

Local Government Ombudsman for Wales [www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk](http://www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk)  
T el: 0300 790 0203

Equalities and Human Rights Commission [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

SLCC [www.slcc.co.uk](http://www.slcc.co.uk)

DirectGov website [www.GOV.uk](http://www.GOV.uk)