Councillor Harassment, Bullying and Intimidation Support Policy

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Introduction

Meriden Parish Council believes that everyone should be able to work in an environment free from harassment, bullying or intimidation and all Parish Councillors should 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 complements the Dignity at Work Policy and the Vexatious Requests Policy and is specifically focused upon harassment, bullying or intimidation of Parish Councillors by third parties. Meriden Parish Council will not tolerate harassment, bullying or intimidation of its Councillors.

Purpose

This policy will provide support and guidance on what to do if a Parish Councillor experiences harassment, bullying or intimidation by a third party. A third party can include a resident of the parish, a member of the public, suppliers, contractors or consultants. Meriden Parish Council will take appropriate action if any Parish Councillors are harassed, bullied or intimidated by third parties whilst carrying out the duties of a Parish Councillor.

Definitions of Harassment, Bullying and Intimidation

In the UK, the terms ‘harassment’, ‘bullying’ and ‘intimidation’ are often used interchangeably as the experience for victims can overlap.

Harassment

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 indicates that someone’s actions amount to harassment when they make the victim feel distressed, humiliated, threatened or fearful of further violence. The main goal of harassment is to persuade victims either not to do something that they are entitled or required to do or to do something that they are not obliged to do. Harassment occurs when a person is subject to uninvited conduct that violates their dignity, in connection with a protected characteristic or behaviour that creates a hostile, humiliating, degrading or similarly offensive environment in relation to a protected characteristic.

Bullying

Bullying is behaviour that leaves the victim feeling threatened, humiliated, vulnerable or otherwise upset. Bullying is offensive, malicious or insulting behaviour, and/or an abuse or misuse of power that undermines or humiliates the person on the receiving end. It does not need to be connected to a protected characteristic.

Public Intimidation

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association defines intimidation as a form of harassment. Public intimidation is defined as “words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life”. This includes actions of abuse, harassment and intimidation such as: verbal abuse; physical attacks; being stalked followed or loitered around; threats of harm; distribution

of misinformation; character assassination; inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media; and other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety.

General Advice on Handling Harassment, Bullying and Intimidation

Harassment, bullying or intimidation can be triggered by particular events, like Councils' decisions, elections, or a misunderstanding of the role and responsibilities of Councils and Councillors. Perpetrators can be anyone; they may be angry residents, disgruntled members of the public, or activists on a specific issue. However, the most important determining factor in deciding how to respond to harassment, bullying or intimidation is the impact it has on you as a Councillor. Regardless of what others may think, if it is having an effect on you, then no matter who the perpetrator is or the rationale behind the aggression, it is sufficient enough for you to take action.

It is normal that individual Councillor's resilience to abuse will vary. Some Councillors report having an extremely high tolerance to abuse due to past experiences and length of service. However, there is no expectation that Councillors should have to accept or tolerate abusive behaviour and not dealing these issues can increase a risk to a Councillor's safety at a later date. Seeking support to handle these issues should be a personal decision and Councillors should not be dissuaded from following their instinct to seek support and protection.

To support Councillors to handle harassment, bullying or intimidation, the following SHIELD principles have been devised. These principles provide Councillors with a basic framework on which to base their engagement with the public to reduce the risks and handle incidents if they do occur. These principles are:

Safeguard – protect yourself online and in person by proactively setting out a zero tolerance policy to abuse, threats and intimidation.
Help – ensure you are safe before you take further action and get help if needed. If the threat is immediate call 999.
Inform – if it is safe to do so, say that you consider the communication or action to be intimidating, threatening or abusive and challenge poor behaviour.
Evidence – gather evidence of abuse, intimidatory or threatening communications by keeping recordings, emails, details of witnesses etc.
Let People Know – report the incident to the appropriate person and the police if necessary.
Decide – determine whether you wish to continue interacting with the person and if not, take steps to end communication and consider options to inhibit them from approaching you in person.

Engaging with Residents with Additional Needs

Some residents seeking a Councillor's help may have additional needs, language barriers or behaviours which are unfamiliar. It is important that all residents are able to seek advice from their Parish Councillor. Some residents may need adjustments to be made to allow them fair and equal opportunity to engage with you as their local representative. Advice on supporting people with additional needs is available from a

number of organisations both locally and nationally. However, you should keep in mind that aggression or threats made against you are not acceptable under any circumstances and should be reported in the usual way.

Practical Advice on Handling Harassment, Bullying or Intimidation

The best way to handle threats and other intimidatory behaviours depends on the way they have been expressed by the perpetrator. Threats to kill, rape, serious violence or assault, damage to property should be reported to the police.

Online Intimidation

Actions of harassment, bullying or intimidation are often delivered online on social media platforms or over email. Some Councillors may avoid using social media out of fear of being threatened or abused, but this also prevents Councillors from using a very effective tool for Parish communication. One way of dealing with online intimidation on social media is to delete, block and report abusive posts and users.

Remove Personal Information from the Public Domain

Perpetrators are often unknown to Councillors or are individuals with which they have had limited contact in the past. These individuals will seek to acquire information about Councillors and their routines in order to deliver their threats. Be careful about personal information posted online. This advice includes information posted on social media platforms but also on other websites. You can perform an internet search of your name to see what information about you is already in the public domain and remove it where possible.

Councillors in England can apply for a dispensation from their Monitoring Officer to keep their address private on the public interests register.

Additionally, it is advisable to delete from social media any personal details such as personal home number, date of birth, home address, vehicle details and or details about family members. Councillors are advised to avoid posting on social media regular “check-ins” that can help perpetrators map out a Councillor’s routine.

Send a Clear Message

Councillors experiencing offensive, threatening, intimidating, racist, homophobic, sexist or other discriminatory and derogatory remarks are advised to keep calm and inform the perpetrator that their conduct is inappropriate, if it safe to do so. Councillors in this position are within their rights to bring phone calls, meetings, online communications or discussions to an end. Be firm, clear and stop engaging with the perpetrator.

Keep Records

It is advised that events of harassment, bullying or intimidation are written in a diary as soon as possible after the event. Councillors’ records should include the event, date, time and a list of possible witnesses. They will be useful to make the Council aware of any potential threats and patterns of intimidation and also to report to the police if it is needed. Verbal communications and phone calls can be easily recorded with recording machines or mobile phones. Threats on social media or email can be

saved or screen-shotted. Instances of stalking can be recorded with CCTV footage or with photographs, but only if Councillors feel safe to do so.

In all cases, if it is safe, Councillors are advised to take note of the name of the perpetrator, their contact details (if known) and description.

Practice Self-care

Experiencing psychological abuse, physical abuse and intimidation can have significant emotional consequences for Councillors, their family and friends. It is important that family and friends also receive support to work through any emotional needs that arise from Councillor's experience of abuse and intimidation. Talking to family and friends about feelings and experiences is a good way of dealing with the emotional consequences of psychological abuse. Speaking with other Councillors may also help as they will be able to give different perspectives and ideas on how to improve feelings of safety.

If Councillors feel their well-being is being affected, it may be appropriate to contact their local GP and mental health services or seek professional therapy, although there is a cost associated with seeking non-NHS therapies.

Share

Even if this is the first or only incident, other Councillors may have been the subject of intimidation as well. By sharing, Councillors will be contributing to creating a collective record that can help improve the safety of other Councillors and may facilitate taking future action if it is required. People experience things differently and have different thresholds. Just because a colleague isn't affected by something doesn't mean it's not an issue and you should seek independent advice if you are concerned.

If you feel unsafe, communicate and report the incident to the police and the Parish Council.

Meriden Parish Council Response to Harassment, Bullying or Intimidation

Meriden Parish Council will not tolerate any harassment, bullying or intimidation of Parish Councillors whilst carrying out their duties. All Councillors have a right to perform their role free from abuse and aggressive behaviour. Being a Parish Councillor is not a paid role and Councillors give their time freely to help improve the environment of Meriden for its residents, and as such deserve to be treated with respect.

Public Meetings

No one has the right to disrupt a public Parish Council meeting. Any incidents of harassment, bullying or intimidation that take place in a public meeting can be dealt with by a number of measures as follows:

- Depending upon the severity of the behaviour, the member of the public will be informed their comments are not appropriate and to not reiterate any comments that can be interpreted as harassment, bullying or intimidation of a Parish Councillor.
- If a warning is issued to moderate behaviour or not repeat comments and the behaviour continues, an instruction to leave the meeting immediately will be given.

- Depending upon the severity of the behaviour, the member of public may be asked to immediately leave the meeting, without being given a warning to moderate their behaviour. For online meetings, the member of the public will be removed from the remote meeting and will not be re-admitted.
- If a member of a public refuses to leave the meeting, the police will be immediately called.
- The police may also be called for any incidents of harassment, bullying or intimidation of a Parish Councillor, or disruption of a public meeting, if the Council feels the behaviour is severe or warrants police intervention.
- The public do not have a legal right to speak at a Parish Council meeting and the Chair may end the public session immediately.
- The Chair may move to adjourn or close the Parish Council meeting immediately.
- A recording of the meeting will be retained where a Councillor has been subject to harassment, bullying or intimidation.
- A Parish Councillor may choose to pursue a legal case of slander against a member of public where false spoken statements have been made that damage the reputation of a Councillor.

Emails/Correspondence to the Parish Council

Any incidents of harassment, bullying or intimidation that take place via emails or correspondence will be dealt with as follows:

- The sender will be informed the Parish Council does not tolerate harassment, bullying or intimidation of its Parish Councillors.
- Should the behaviour continue, the Parish Council will advise it will not respond to further emails/correspondence regarding the matter and enact its Vexatious Requests policy.
- A copy of all correspondence will be retained where a Councillor has been subject to harassment, bullying or intimidation.
- A Parish Councillor may choose to pursue a legal case of libel against a member of public where written spoken statements have been made that damage the reputation of a Councillor.

Parish Council Social Media

Any incidents of harassment, bullying or intimidation that take place on social media will be dealt with as follows:

- The sender will be blocked from the Parish Council's Facebook page and other social media platforms the Parish Council operates.
- The sender's comments will be reported to an administrator for other social media platforms outside of the Parish Council's control.
- A screenshot of the comments will be captured and retained.

The Parish Council will fully co-operate with any police investigation where a Councillor reports an incident of harassment, bullying or intimidation to the police.