

**GUIDANCE FOR
FIRST CONTACT OFFICERS ON THE
DIGNITY AT WORK POLICY**

The Council recognises that there may be difficulties in raising the issue of bullying or harassment, particularly if:-

- the immediate line manager is doing the harassing;
- the employee is too embarrassed or reluctant to raise the matter with their line manager, or feels the manager may lack the skills, knowledge or sensitivity to deal with complaints of harassment;
- the employee finds the prospect of using the formal complaints procedures intimidating.

It is important that such potential difficulties are overcome, and allegations of bullying and harassment raised and acted upon. To help ensure this, each Department and Employee Group will have available suitably trained nominated First Contact Officers to provide confidential advice as to the courses of action available under the Dignity at Work Policy.

First Contact Officers play an important role in the Dignity at Work Procedure.
It is their responsibility to provide guidance and support to employees who
are feeling bullied or harassed

Your role is to:

- arrange an initial meeting with the employee who feels they are being bullied or harassed at work. This will be in a quiet, comfortable location that is acceptable to the complainant.
- provide sympathetic and confidential advice on the options available, and how they work, so that the complainant can make an informed decision about how they wish to proceed.
- assure the complainant that no action will be taken unless he/she requests them to do so (unless they are told something of such a serious nature – for example where someone's safety is at risk or a crime has been committed - that they are duty bound to report it)
- channel the complaint to the appropriate manager or trade union representative for action if the employee decides to take the matter further

It is not the role of the First Contact Officer:

- to take sides in a dispute
- make decisions on behalf of the person making a complaint
- investigate complaints of harassment or bullying or be involved in the investigation

What do I do when an employee contacts me to ask for help?

- Clarify whether they are contacting you in your First Contact Officer role or in your other role as an HR Advisor or T.U. Rep. Make sure you explain the differences in the two roles. Decide which role it's best for you to adopt in each case. It may be necessary for you to refer an individual to another First Contact officer.
- Take down basic information about the complainant – including their name, job title, service area and a contact telephone number
- Agree to meet with the employee as soon as reasonably possible, subject to service requirements for both of you.

Where should I meet the employee?

- Ask where the employee would feel comfortable meeting you. If you make a suggestion, always check that they are happy with it.
- Ideally the meeting should be:-
 - away from the complainant's place of work
 - somewhere comfortable where you can chat in confidence
 - in a Council building. Never visit an employee at home. If you are having difficulties finding an appropriate location, speak to a Corporate HR or Unison, and they may be able to provide a room.

What should I do before the meeting?

- Ask your line manager for permission to meet an employee in your role as First Contact Officer. You should not disclose any details of the employee that you are meeting or the circumstances, but you should be clear with your line manager how long you intend to be away from the workplace.
- Ensure that you are familiar with the Dignity at Work Policy
- Get a First Contact Officer pack of information together to take with you. (a copy of the Dignity at Work policy, the flowchart, any other relevant policies, Mediation leaflet etc)

What do I do at the meeting

1. Introduce yourself.
2. Explain what your role as a First Contact Officer is – and what it is not. Check that the employee understands this, and is still happy to proceed.
3. Establish a time limit for the meeting at the outset – it is envisaged that an hour would be appropriate.
4. Reassure the employee that any discussions are strictly confidential (unless you are told something of such a serious nature – for example where someone's safety is at risk - that you are duty bound to report it).
5. Also make it clear that any decisions are to be made by the employee – you are only there to support and advise.
6. At all times listen to what the employee has to say, keep calm and do not take sides.
7. It is useful to take notes, but you are not there to take down all the facts – the Investigators will do that in due course if appropriate. Also, remember that copies of your notes may be requested at a later stage by the complainant or as part of the evidence if the case progresses.
8. Provide a copy of the Dignity at Work Policy if the employee does not already have one.
9. Ask the individual to think about what outcome(s) they want. Clearly explain the different options available to the employee under the Dignity at Work Policy and ask them to think about the pros and cons of those options for themselves.
10. Explain that employees may obtain assistance from a trade union representative or another colleague at any point in the process.
11. Provide information on alternative sources of support where necessary – for example, the Council's mediation service, or the counselling service which is available through the Occupational Health Unit (employees can access this directly without needing to inform their manager).
12. At the end of the meeting, check that the employee has all the information that they need to make their decision. Check that they have your contact details in case they have any further queries.

Remember – you are there to listen and advise. It is not your responsibility to solve the employee's problems or investigate the complaint. If, at any stage, you are unsure about something, contact Corporate HR for assistance (telephone 0161 253 5721).