



European Parliament
Directorate-General for
PERSONNEL

PRACTICAL TIPS AND ADVICE FOR
ACCREDITED PARLIAMENTARY ASSISTANTS ON

PREVENTING CONFLICT AND HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE





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This brochure is your guide to fostering a positive and respectful atmosphere in your working environment. Learn how in your role as an Accredited Parliamentary Assistant (APA) you can actively contribute to preventing conflict in the workplace. Also, should you ever feel that you are a victim of inappropriate behaviour within the European Parliament (EP), this brochure outlines the services and procedures available to help you handle the situation.

This brochure updates and replaces the “Preventing conflict and harassment in the workplace: zero harassment” brochure, which was endorsed by the Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints concerning Members.

YOUR WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The environment in which you work is built on a triangular contractual relationship. You have been selected on the basis of mutual trust by a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) to join their office, while your formal contract has been concluded directly with the European Parliament (for more information please consult the leaflet "Your job as an Accredited Parliamentary Assistant", published by DG PERS).

On the one hand, your employer is the European Parliament, and therefore, as a staff member, you enjoy the rights and obligations set out in the Staff Regulations.

On the other hand, you are part of your MEP's team and your role is to support them in fulfilling their mandate at the European Parliament. This means that your MEP is

your line manager, who is fully and solely responsible for organising the work in their office.

As an APA and therefore part of Parliament's staff, you can legitimately expect to be treated with professionalism, dignity and respect when carrying out your work. You also have the right to benefit from protection against harassment; Parliament, as the formal employer, has a duty of care and protection towards you in this regard. In order to promote a workplace environment free of harassment, it is important to focus on the prevention of conflict and on fostering a positive working environment.

PREVENTING CONFLICT

Very often psychological harassment has its roots in, and develops from, an open or hidden conflict; therefore, preventing conflict may help to avoid being trapped in a situation of psychological harassment. However, be aware that most of the time sexual harassment is not connected to a situation of conflict.

PREVENTING CONFLICT STARTS WITH A TRULY PROFESSIONAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The European Parliament provides a stimulating international environment; as people have different backgrounds and habits, it is essential to be professional and respectful in order to contribute to a good working atmosphere. In a professional working environment, there is usually less conflict and divergences tend to be solved in a cooperative manner.

Admittedly, many things that affect our working environment are beyond our control. However, it is important that each member of the team knows that there are ways in which they can definitely contribute to building good working relationships with the MEP and with fellow APAs and ultimately to the positive working atmosphere of the whole team.

Moreover, working in an environment that is pleasant and stimulating has significant benefits for the health and well-being of the whole team - and thereby on its performance.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR MEP

As an APA, your relationship with your MEP is your most important working relationship so it makes sense to invest time and effort into building a cooperative relationship. A healthy, respectful, professional relationship with your MEP, as the manager, built on mutual trust, will provide a solid foundation in times of stress and will have a beneficial effect on motivation.

Here are some tips for creating a positive and professional atmosphere in the office:

- **Be clear about roles** - Ask the MEP from the outset about your roles and responsibilities, their expectations from you, whether they can provide a (non-exhaustive) job description, how the work is organised in the team, what the working methods are, and what values the MEP wants the team to respect.
- **Check the standard APAs' duties** - Your role is to carry out those tasks your MEP judges will help in the exercise of their mandate¹; if you have a job description be aware that it is likely to be a non-exhaustive one; even APAs hired mostly as advisers should be prepared, for example, to manage the MEP's agenda and travel plans, or even, occasionally, to prepare coffee for visitors; asking the MEP about their expectations can help prevent potential disappointment and avoid future issues; whilst some flexibility may be required in the office, tasks related to assisting a MEP in their private arrangements outside the office should remain exceptional².
- **Be dependable** - Keep commitments and respect deadlines. Give regular updates to the MEP about the progress of work, ask for feedback and inform them in good time if there are any issues .
- **Address any workload and working time issues promptly and have clear boundaries** - Your MEP is likely to be very busy and may have high expectations of your availability. Try to discuss how communication should take place outside working hours and what your availability is likely to be before becoming overwhelmed. Systematically being requested to be available outside normal working hours is not permissible. However, if your MEP requests, you should nonetheless be available for unexpected and urgent tasks on an occasional basis.
- **Make sure instructions are understood** - If there are doubts about what a task given by the MEP entails or if certain instructions are contradictory, ask for clarification; if appropriate, discuss with fellow APAs.

1 Article 29(2) of Implementing Measures for the Statute for Members of the European Parliament. In addition, a list of sample duties and tasks performed by APAs is available in the leaflet "Your job as an Accredited Parliamentary Assistant".

2 Members may need support from their APAs regarding installation in Brussels at the beginning of their mandate, and the Brussels Expat Welcome Desk (<https://www.commissioner.brussels/en/i-am-an-expat>) can be very helpful with those issues.

- **Discuss progress and problems** - It is always good to discuss the progress of ongoing tasks and projects. If the MEP gives feedback, take it seriously and be open to finding solutions and to working towards meeting the MEP's requirements. If the MEP does not mention whether the work has been correctly carried out, feel free to ask for feedback. In the end, it is for the MEP to decide on how they wish to proceed, so respect these choices and preferences.
- **Clarify competences within the team** - If there is uncertainty about the distribution of tasks among the team members, raise the question with the MEP in a spirit of good cooperation between the team members - rather than in a spirit of rivalry.
- **Follow the rules on leave and teleworking** - discuss your plans with your MEP and fellow APAs before making the formal request. Make sure the correct information is encoded in the system.
- **Inform promptly about any absence** - If you do not feel well enough to work and are taking sick leave, always promptly and in writing inform the MEP about the period of your sick leave and send sick leave certificate to the Medical Leave Service. To the extent possible, give a short update to the MEP and team members about the status of the projects and clarify which tasks are of priority during your absence. Doing so should minimise any disruption and ensure continuity. The MEP is entitled to ask Parliament's Medical Leave Service to check if sick leave is justified; upon confirmation, the MEP should not question it further.
- **Discuss any inappropriate behaviour as soon as possible** - The MEP is the manager and often has very stressful days. Nevertheless, it is never acceptable to be shouted at or be on the receiving end of rude language or insults. If you perceive any behaviour by your MEP as inappropriate or offensive, you could try to raise the issue with them at the first appropriate opportunity, in a calm and constructive manner. They might not have intended to behave inappropriately and a discussion could clarify matters.
- **If needed, seek help** from the services available in the EP (further information below).

All APAs, whether new to the EP or not, are required to follow a mandatory training, covering financial rules, compliance, conduct, whistleblowing and harassment. APAs have to complete the mandatory training within six months of the start of their contract, otherwise, they will not be able to do any other training courses until it is done. It is also highly recommended that APAs carry out training on good

communication, self-awareness and emotional intelligence in the workplace.

YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE TEAM

Conflict may arise not only in the relationship with your MEP but also with other members in a team. Beware that harassment may develop not only in a hierarchical relationship (even if a position of power is more likely to lead to such a situation), but also between peers.

Building good working relationships starts with leading by example. When you show respect, trust, and encouragement, others are more likely to mirror that behaviour. Use positive language, express appreciation for your colleagues' efforts, and do not hesitate to ask for help when needed—while also being ready to lend a hand when necessary.

Working in a team always brings about certain challenges - communicate with team members about the distribution of tasks and try to ensure that you are all on the same page. If there are contradictions as to how the tasks are understood, clarify this with the team member concerned, if necessary, with the MEP. It might be a good idea to put the distribution of tasks in writing and to schedule regular meetings to discuss progress.

As the office space is likely to be shared, be considerate of colleagues' needs. Find out how colleagues prefer to work and respect their boundaries. Listening to music might be more productive for one team member, but others might have a completely different working style. Try to clarify each other's preferences from the start so that small issues do not build tension and affect the office climate.

Make sure that you create together with colleagues an environment where everyone feels at ease to express their needs, including yourself, and where ways to address those needs are explored by all those involved. This will make life easier as well.

Keep positive attitudes and remember that we are all different. Try to look for positives and intentionally choose to focus on colleagues' good qualities, instead of dwelling on the negatives.

If you perceive any team members' behaviour as inappropriate or offensive, address it with them as soon as possible - the earlier the better. They might not have intended to behave inappropriately and discussing it can clarify the matter while setting clear boundaries. If the issue isn't resolved, raise it with the MEP, who is ultimately responsible for ensuring a respectful and professional environment within his team.

If you encounter a conflict within your team, remember that you can reach out, in complete confidentiality, to one of the confidential counsellors or to the Mediation Service. You can find more details under the section “Ask for guidance or help from the services in the EP”.

GOOD COMMUNICATION HELPS AVOID CONFLICT

Use every opportunity to communicate with the MEP and colleagues. No matter how long you have all been working together, misunderstandings can still occur, so all the team needs to communicate on a regular basis.

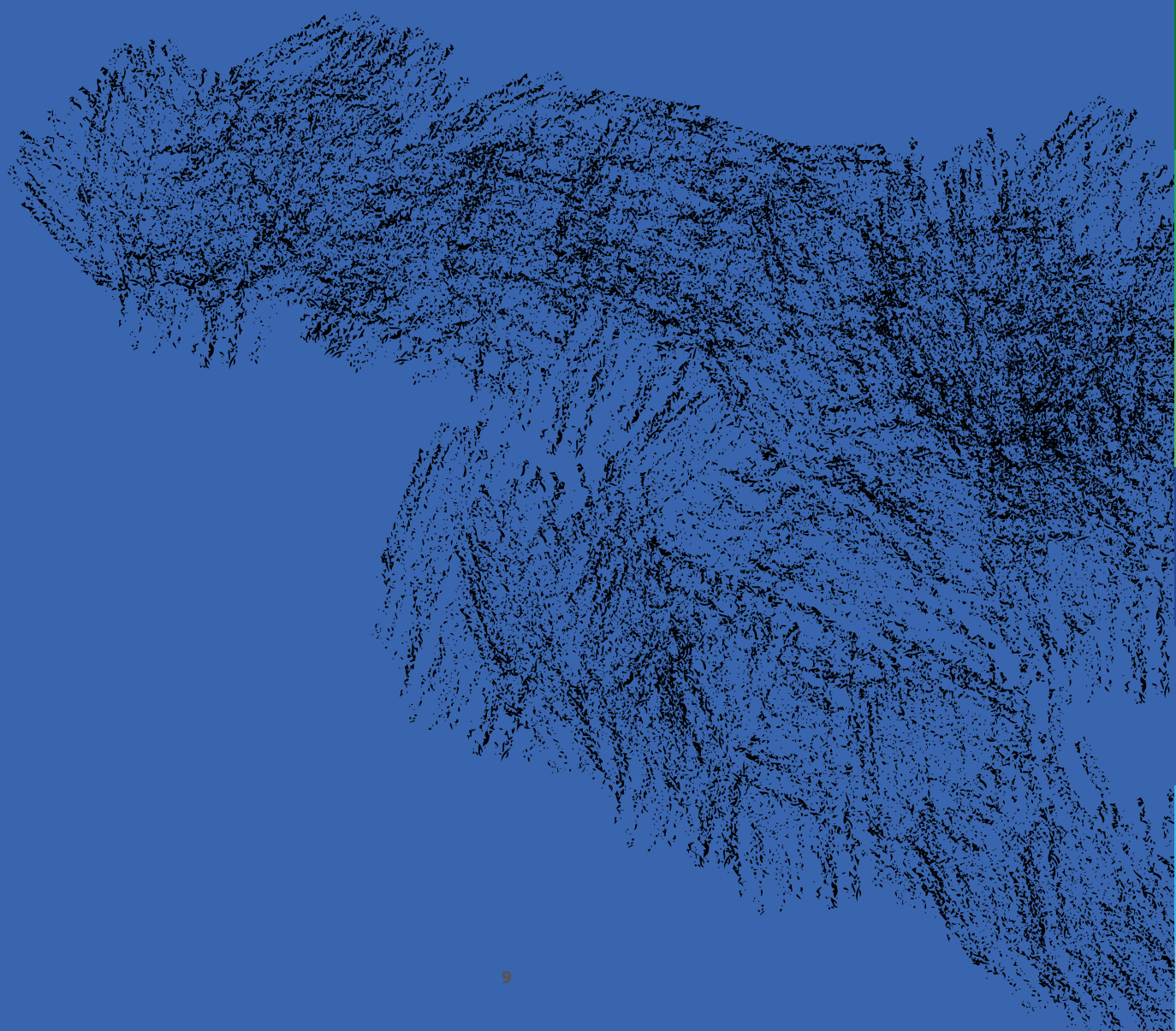
The key to good communication at work is to be clear and open, while remaining respectful and tolerant towards others. If there are issues, be it with the MEP, fellow APAs, or other colleagues, do not avoid them in the hope that they will be resolved on their own. Conflictual situations tend to get only worse with time when not properly addressed. Be concise and clear, find the right moment to approach the person in private, and address them head-on while explaining concerns. Speak to all concerned and try to find a solution that is acceptable to all.

Always use polite and civilised language when speaking with the MEP, team members and colleagues outside the team. The working environment of the EP is highly multicultural and as such, it brings many challenges related to communication and working styles. When in doubt, remain conservative in the language used; mutual respect is always appropriate, irrespective of nationality and political affiliation. When appropriate, remind others to be respectful too.

When it comes to communication through social media, be particularly cautious. Make sure you are familiar with your statutory obligations. Always exercise caution when posting, especially if it is related to work or the MEP. If you are unsure about what is appropriate to share, check whether your team has guidelines or consult your MEP for guidance. When in doubt, it is best not to publish.

FIVE BEHAVIOURAL TIPS FOR A BETTER WORKPLACE

- **Refrain from gossiping** – nothing affects work reputation and consequently relationships as much as gossiping about colleagues or the MEP. If you have to mention colleagues when they are not present, only speak in the way that you would like others to speak about you.
- **Avoid aggressive language** – never be rude or insulting towards others! Before reacting, try to take a deep breath and think about the impact that angry words may have.
- **Do not blame or criticise** – if things go wrong put some energy into trying to find a solution instead of looking for a person to blame or openly criticise. Work on creating allies not enemies.
- **Stay polite and collegial** – Don't talk down to a colleague or use sarcasm. Always phrase requests in a respectful and appreciative way. Do not hesitate to thank or congratulate colleagues for things that they have done well.
- **Avoid shouting** - keep a hold on emotions and never shout at colleagues or the MEP. If needed, take some time to cool down before reacting.



WHAT EXACTLY IS HARASSMENT?

Parliament strives to maintain a harmonious work climate and takes all appropriate measures to ensure that every staff member is treated with dignity and respect and works in an environment free from discrimination, harassment and abuse of authority.

All inappropriate behaviour must be avoided. However, beware that not all conflicts amount to harassment. The legal definition of harassment is very precise. The Staff Regulations define two types of harassment: psychological harassment and sexual harassment.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT?

*«**Psychological harassment** means any improper conduct that takes place over a period, is repetitive or systematic and involves physical behaviour, spoken or written language, gestures or other acts that are intentional and that may undermine the personality, dignity or physical or psychological integrity of any person» - Article 12a(3) of the Staff regulations.*

Psychological harassment always involves persistent and repetitive actions and has serious impact on the victim in terms of physical and mental health. It is important to remember that, for a behaviour to be qualified as harassment, it is not necessary that it was committed with the intention to harm the other.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT CAN TAKE VARIOUS FORMS (NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST):

- offensive or degrading comments, bullying, antagonism, pressure, offensive behaviour, even refusal to communicate;
- insults relating to your staff's personal or professional competence;
- (false) accusations;
- abusing or threatening remarks, both oral and written;
- belittling your staff's contributions and achievements;
- isolating, setting apart, excluding, rejecting, ignoring, disparaging or humiliating a staff member;
- impairing your staff's social relations;
- stalking;
- not allocating tasks corresponding to the job description;
- systematically having an excessive workload;
- constant availability outside working hours or while on leave;
- having to perform private tasks for the Member on a regular basis.

Psychological harassment can have a serious impact on the victim in terms of physical and mental health.

WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

«**Sexual harassment** means conduct relating to sex which is unwanted by the person to whom it is directed and which has the purpose or effect of offending that person or creating an intimidating, hostile, offensive or disturbing environment. Sexual harassment shall be treated as discrimination based on gender» - Article 12a(4) of the Staff regulations.

The following behaviour may constitute sexual harassment (non-exhaustive list):

- promises of some kind of reward (favourable career moves, etc.) in return for sexual favours, or threats of reprisals if such requests are turned down;
- repetition of coarse or suggestive remarks, or sexual innuendo; use of crude or obscene language and gestures;
- remarks, spoken or written, regarding sex or the sexual life of someone;
- repeated initiation of unwanted conversations of a sexual nature;
- repeated and exaggerated compliments on the appearance of a staff member;
- unwanted physical contact, rubbing against someone, unwanted kisses;
- acts of voyeurism or exhibitionism;
- use of pornographic material.

Depending on the type of behaviour, no repetition is necessary for it to qualify as sexual harassment. Unlike psychological harassment, sexual harassment, in principle, does not have to take place over a period of time, or to be repetitive or systematic.

In order to be considered sexual harassment, behaviour must be “unwanted”. Even if there is a power imbalance or pressure, you should still try to make it clear when attention is unwanted.

Remember only “yes” means “yes”.

MANAGERIAL RIGHTS AND DUTIES

Exercising managerial rights and duties, such as the ones listed below, does not generally constitute harassment:

- allocating work and requiring performance to job standards;
- following up on work absences; coordinating and approving annual leave absences;
- explaining expectations or desired improvements;
- using a commanding style.

However, these actions could qualify as harassment if they are repetitively or systematically carried out in a manner that is offensive, humiliating or embarrassing rather than constructive and sensitive.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN HARASSMENT AND CONFLICT

A conflict usually takes place at just one point in time following a disagreement between two persons and in which neither moves from their position. Each party tries to defend their position and the situation may deteriorate.

In cases of psychological harassment, there is often a relationship of subordination and power. This is typically the case in a MEP/APA relationship. The victims usually have no way to defend themselves and often remain isolated and quiet. Psychological harassment tends to be systematic, may last for months and, in general, only gets worse if not properly addressed.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN HARASSMENT AND INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

Inappropriate behaviour must always be avoided; however, not all inappropriate behaviour constitutes harassment. Isolated incidents do not, in themselves, constitute psychological harassment, which typically takes the form of abusive behaviour over an extended period of time. However, in the case of sexual harassment, a single incident could already qualify as such.

WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG

Often, conflictual relationships and the feeling of being harassed can lead to psychological suffering and even physical symptoms.

If you witness or have been subject to inappropriate behaviour or psychological or sexual harassment, do not remain silent.

IF YOU ARE SUBJECT TO INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

If you perceive any behaviour by your MEP as inappropriate or offensive, and you feel safe to do so, you may raise the issue with them at the first opportunity, in a calm and constructive manner. They might not have intended to behave inappropriately and this would clarify matters.

If the issue concerns a team member and you are not successful in solving it with the person directly, raise it with your MEP, who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that each staff member behaves correctly towards the others within the team. If the person concerned is not a member of your MEP's team, you may nonetheless ask your MEP for guidance.

If you are unable to resolve the issue, do not wait for it to escalate before reaching out for help.

IF YOU WITNESS INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

If you see another person behaving in a way that you consider to be inappropriate, you could consider the following:

- discreetly check with the victim that they are okay;
- offer to act as a witness if a formal procedure is initiated;
- if you feel safe to do so, speak privately to the person responsible.

If you are a witness in a formal harassment procedure, your identity will be kept confidential.

ASK FOR GUIDANCE OR HELP FROM THE SERVICES IN THE EP

If the situation does not improve after speaking with the MEP or if you cannot or do not want to go to your MEP, you can confidentially:

- Obtain further training¹
- Consult Mind Matters – EP's mental health programme ,
- Contact a doctor, psychologist or social worker in the Medical Service²;
- Contact one of the confidential counsellors³;
- Contact the Mediation Service ⁴;
- Contact the Director-General for Personnel or their Article 24 advisor;
- Contact the secretariat of the Advisory Committee on harassment and its prevention at the workplace, for a complaint against a member of staff but only for procedural advice; or
- Contact the secretariat⁵ of the Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints concerning Members of the European Parliament, for a complaint against a Member of the European Parliament but only for procedural advice.

Confidential guidance and support may help you decide whether or not to start a formal procedure for harassment; seeking advice does not automatically trigger any official procedure.

1 Contact learn.EP@europarl.europa.eu.

2 See the information on the Mind matters programme on the Intranet.

3 Contact EPConfidentialCounsellors@europarl.europa.eu or see the EP Intranet.

4 Contact mediation@europarl.europa.eu or see the EP Intranet.

5 Contact harassmentMEPs@europarl.europa.eu.

NETWORK OF CONFIDENTIAL COUNSELLORS

Since 2018, the European Parliament has a network of confidential counsellors whose aim is to support and provide advice to Members and all categories of staff in cases of conflict and/or potential harassment.

The confidential counsellors will treat any details communicated to them with the utmost confidentiality and act with the utmost discretion. They will listen non-judgmentally and can advise on the resources available and the relevant procedures. A staff member suffering from a situation at work will then be better informed before deciding on the next steps in relation to their specific circumstances.

Confidential counsellors carry out their tasks on an independent and voluntary basis as this role is in addition to their normal duties. The confidential counsellors must attend a mandatory training before taking up their duties.

The confidential counsellors do not act as “mediators” as there is a Mediation service available.

MEDIATION SERVICE FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is an inevitable part of human interactions, but when addressed early and effectively, it can lead to meaningful improvements in relationships and work processes.

Mediation is the most effective way to manage conflict. It is **available to all** in Parliament for any **inter-personal conflict**. Mediation is not appropriate for cases of serious misconduct like physical or sexual violence, harassment or fraud, in particular, when there is an open formal procedure concerning that situation.

If you encounter a conflict within your team, whether it involves yourself or your colleagues, the Mediation Service is available to assist you in resolving the issue **confidentially and constructively**. Mediation is led by a neutral and impartial mediator and consists of three key stages:

- Each participant involved in the conflict has an **individual meeting** with the mediator separately. This allows individuals to express and clarify their perspectives, needs, and concerns in a safe and confidential setting.

- When everyone is ready, a **joint meeting** is scheduled. The mediator facilitates the discussion, ensuring that all participants listen to and understand each other's viewpoints. The goal is to collaboratively develop solutions that are fair and sustainable, leading to a mediation agreement that all parties are willing to uphold.
- Around six weeks after the mediation, a **follow-up meeting** is arranged to review the effectiveness of the agreement. This session is used to assess progress and make any necessary adjustments.

Mediation is highly successful and offers several benefits:

- **Saves time and energy:** Avoids the inefficiencies and stress associated with unresolved conflict.
- **Reduces risks:** Minimises the potential for conflicts escalating into serious issues, such as harassment complaints.
- **Enhances team dynamics:** Improves relationships and overall team wellbeing, leading to increased efficiency and a better work environment.

For assistance, you can reach the Mediation Service by email at mediation@europarl.europa.eu or by phone, using the contact details available on EP Intranet.

THE FORMAL HARASSMENT PROCEDURE IN PARLIAMENT

Initiating a harassment procedure should not be taken lightly. However, if your attempts to solve a problematic situation fail, you have the right to seek advice on the procedure from the appropriate harassment committee. The EP currently has two committees dealing with cases of harassment. Even though their role is similar, as they are both responsible for dealing with formal harassment complaints, their procedure differs:

- **Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints concerning Members of the European Parliament** deals with harassment complaints against MEPs lodged by APAs, staff members, trainees, political groups staff, or seconded national experts;
- **Advisory Committee on harassment and its prevention at the workplace** deals with cases of harassment between all staff members. This also applies to cases between two APAs or between APAs and any other staff member.

If you want to lodge a complaint concerning an MEP with the Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints concerning Members, the procedure is as follows:

- An APA lodges a request for assistance under Article 24 of the Staff Regulations to the Director-General for Personnel, who informs the Committee; if necessary, the Director-General for Personnel may adopt protection measures;
- The Director-General for Personnel asks the competent service in the Secretariat to carry out a preliminary study into the alleged facts;
- If there is sufficient first evidence to establish a *prima facie* case for harassment, the Committee starts an investigation;
- Before hearing the APA, the Committee informs the MEP and provides them with a summary of the allegations made against them, accompanied by non-confidential evidence; the Committee will give reasonable time to the Member concerned to respond;
- The Committee then invites, separately, the APA to present their case and hears the MEP and any witnesses it finds appropriate;

- Once the investigation is concluded, the Committee forwards its opinion to the President who makes a final decision on the existence of harassment and, if applicable, decides on sanctions against the Member under the Rules of Procedure;
- In the light of the President's decision, the AIPN takes a final decision on the request for assistance.

If you want to lodge a complaint concerning a staff member or another APA, the procedure is slightly different:

- The APA launches a complaint of psychological or sexual harassment against another APA/staff member with the Advisory Committee on harassment and its prevention at the workplace;
- The Committee hears an APA who considers themselves a victim of such harassment;
- If there is sufficient evidence, the Committee launches an investigation;
- The APA has a right to present evidence and suggest witnesses;
- The Committee invites the APA/staff member against whom the complaint is launched to put their case and present evidence;
- The Committee might make recommendations to management on how to resolve the issue, and if the problem persists, forwards its findings and proposals for action to be taken to the Secretary-General who then takes a decision on the subsequent steps.

Alternatively, you can seek advice on making a request for assistance under Article 24 of the Staff Regulations from the advisor to the Director-General for Personnel.

The Committees work with full autonomy, independence and confidentiality and their deliberations are secret. All persons involved (including the complainant) should respect the confidentiality of proceedings and take all appropriate measures to ensure that the procedure advances without delay. This procedure is of an administrative nature and may be subject to judicial review.

The composition of the Advisory Committee dealing with harassment complaints concerning MEPs is available on the intranet. You can contact the secretariat at harassmentMEPs@europarl.europa.eu.

The composition of the Advisory Committee on harassment and its prevention at the workplace is available on the intranet.

Each staff member of the European Parliament, including Accredited Parliamentary Assistants, has the right to be treated with dignity, respect, impartiality and courtesy by his or her superiors, including Members of the European Parliament, and all colleagues.