

GPRC Guidance on what constitutes ‘bringing the Party into disrepute’

Responsible body:	Green Party Regional Council
Approved by:	Green Party Regional Council
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The concept of bringing the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) into disrepute is specifically mentioned in several places on the GPEW Code of Conduct, but it is not further defined. This document is an attempt to provide guidance on this issue, in particular to assist colleagues who are involved in the disciplinary processes of the party who may need to assess the merits of a complaint that a member is bringing the party into disrepute. Standing Orders for Party Discipline, clause 3.13, states that ‘the GPRC handbook shall provide examples of what constitutes “bringing the party into disrepute”, in order to provide guidance to those involved in the disputes and complaints process. The handbook shall also provide examples of what constitutes a breach of the Code of Conduct to be investigated by the Disciplinary Committee as opposed to a minor infringement which may be dealt with via other channels, in order to provide guidance to those involved in the disputes and complaints process. This information shall also be made accessible to members on the relevant complaints section of the members’ site.’

Defining ‘disrepute’ is not straightforward, especially in the context of a political party where robust criticism of our own activities is sometimes needed, and where robust criticism of other political parties will also take place. It is probably not contentious to say that all members have a responsibility to maintain a positive reputation for the party, and that is a good starting point, but agreeing that principle does not automatically indicate that there is a shared understanding of what we might mean when we think that a behaviour is likely to undermine the party’s reputation. It is also important to note that this guidance is specifically about bringing the party into disrepute – it is not intended to cover situations where one member feels that another member has caused harm to their personal reputation (which is likely to be covered in the Code of Conduct). Certain kinds of conduct may damage the reputation of an individual but won't necessarily mean that they are damaging the reputation of the party, and it is important that complaints of a member (or members) bringing the party into disrepute clearly demonstrate that the party is at risk.

Here is the understanding that informs this document:

The party is brought into disrepute if a member’s behaviour causes the party to be held in low or negative esteem by its own members and/or the wider public. The party is liable to be brought into disrepute where a member...

- Seeks to abuse the power that they have relative to other members and/or members of the public. This would include abusing responsibilities related to being in a publicly elected role (for instance, if a councillor seeks to ensure that planning permission is granted to the application made by a friend and does not declare a conflict of interest); also the responsibilities related to being in an internally elected or appointed role (for instance, if a member breaches the confidentiality of committee discussions or makes inappropriate postings on a local party’s social media account).

- Behaves in a way which is dishonest or deceitful. An example would be where a member appears at a Public Enquiry into a road building scheme and makes misleading claims about the evidence for the potential impact of the new road on local wildlife.
- Acts in way that is likely to undermine confidence in the party and its processes. Criticism of the party and/or its processes is not necessarily going to bring the party into disrepute, but 'going public' with concerns may well run this risk, especially if there has been little attempt to engage appropriately through engaging directly with the individual or body that is the subject of the criticism, or through using the whistleblowing process in circumstances where that would be applicable. So, for example, if a member makes a posting on social media claiming that an internal election was rigged, this may well have the effect of bringing the party into disrepute especially if they have not raised their concern privately with an appropriate individual or body.

In each case the member may feel that they are justified in this behaviour, but that subjective opinion is not enough on its own to outweigh the risk of bringing the party into disrepute. In the examples above, they may think their friend's planned building will be good for the local area, that the confidential business needs to be shared with people it affects, that the social media postings are too boring and need to be 'livened up' to increase the number of followers, that it is so important that the road is not built that exaggerating the impact is reasonable, and that the only reason why that their chosen candidate did not win was because there had been a corrupt process... but in each case they are likely to be bringing the party into disrepute through their actions as arguably these behaviour will erode confidence in the Green Party and its members. There may be other kinds of behaviour that could bring the party into disrepute but are not obviously linked to abuse of power, dishonesty/deceit or questioning the integrity of other members, but a perception of the erosion of confidence in the Green Party will be a consistent theme.

It is important to bear in mind the level that the person is in the party: 'ordinary' members might on occasion behave in ways that are dishonest (such as 'enhancing' a CV as part of a job application) and whilst this is wrong it probably won't bring the party into disrepute. Where a member is clearly linked to the party by virtue of their public profile then this sort of behaviour is much more likely to have the aspect of party disrepute associated with it, in addition to the way that the dishonesty reflects poorly on the person themselves.

It is also important to bear it in mind that there can be different degrees of behaviours that have the potential to bring the party into disrepute.

Serious behaviours. This could be visible transgression of party values by elected Greens and officers at national and local level; publicly undermining the right to disagree respectfully; behaviour which seeks to inhibit the reasonable rights of others in the party; repeated and persistent personal criticism and name calling in a public setting. One serious behaviour on its own is likely to constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct in relation to bringing the party into disrepute (and will possibly breach other elements of the Code of Conduct as well).

Minor behaviours. This could be a miscalculated and probably isolated or contained event such as a one-off spoken remark (made in public) or social media posting to which may offend some people; a single careless misuse of party properties e.g. logos, members' time, etc. Minor behaviours should be talked through in the first instance, so that the person being complained about has the opportunity to understand what the problem is and how to avoid repeating it. An isolated minor behaviour will probably not bring the party into disrepute, but a pattern of repeated or varied minor behaviours may well have this effect.

Six hypothetical scenarios are set out below, as illustrations of situations where there is a clear risk that the party will be brought into disrepute. However, it is important to note that there are always going to be a number of complicating factors when applying this guidance to real world situations. In particular, the context of the behaviour needs to be considered. Please note that this list is not exhaustive, and there may be other aspects that are considered relevant when considering whether a behaviour is likely to have brought (or risked bringing) the party into disrepute:

- is the person who is allegedly bringing the party into disrepute a publicly-elected official, and what level are they elected at? A statement made by a parish councillor is unlikely to attract the same attention as the same statement made by a Principal Authority councillor, and again that will probably attract less attention than the same statement made by a Member of Parliament or an Assembly member
- is the person who is allegedly bringing the party into disrepute a role holder within GPEW, and what level do they work at? A statement made by an officer of a local party is unlikely to attract the same attention as the same statement made by a regional role holder or a member of a national committee
- if the person who is allegedly bringing the party into disrepute is an ordinary member, are they obviously linked to GPEW, for instance are they a local activist and/or do they mention membership of GPEW on their social media accounts? There may be a judgment call to be made over whether a stated link to GPEW is intended, or understood, to be conferring additional credibility on the views.
- is there a pattern of behaviour or is this the first time that the person has been accused of bringing the party into disrepute? Other than where the behaviour is felt to be ‘serious’ rather than ‘minor’ (as defined above) it is likely that repeated behaviours will be treated more seriously within the disciplinary system, especially if efforts have been made to work with the person to help them moderate their problematic approach.
- is it possible to demonstrate that the party has actually been brought into disrepute or is this only a theoretical risk? This aspect may be influenced by the extent to which the person’s behaviour has been amplified by the actions of others, whether in support or disagreement, and whether that amplification could reasonably have been predicted. For instance, if a private email exchange is shared without permission the ‘amplification’ will not be looked at in the same way as a social media posting that gets shared/retweeted.

One key point is that although all members must abide by the Code of Conduct, no member has to agree with all elements of GPEW political policy, and disagreeing with party policy is not in itself a way of bringing the party into disrepute. This is stated in the Code of Conduct (clause 8.2, reproduced at Note 1, above) Significantly this does not mean that all forms of dissent from party policy are acceptable – being aggressive, harassing or insulting whilst expressing disagreement is not acceptable, whether towards other members of the party or towards political opponents.

Similarly, engaging in discussions with organisations who disagree with GPEW political policy is not in itself a way of bringing the party into disrepute (though where an organisation is in conflict with the Philosophical Basis, and/or the Core Values of the party, this is more problematic). On occasion it may be appropriate for a member of GPEW to participate in an event organised by, or including, individuals or organisations whose views are antithetical to GPEW political policy. However, if the individual member is invited as a representative of GPEW, or if their participation may give the impression that they are officially representing GPEW, then it is important that they consult with their local party, region and/or the national External Communications team before committing to

taking part. As noted in the Code of Conduct clause 8.2 (reproduced at Note 1, above) they must state the party's position as well as their personal view.

Here are six scenarios where it is very likely that there is a clear risk of the party being brought into disrepute:

1. Being visibly drunk or under the influence of drugs during a council meeting, meeting of a local party that is open to the public, or similar public event
2. Posting on social media a call for the current leadership (of the party, or of a Green group of councillors/Assembly members) or other prominent Greens, to resign from their position, especially if aggressive, harassing or insulting language is used. Where the member making the posting refuses to engage with their local or regional party executive committee and/or appropriate members of the national party (such as members involved in governance) about why they are making this posting this may well increase the likelihood that the behaviour is risking bringing the party into disrepute.
3. Publicly endorsing an external organisation whose values are in conflict with the Core Values and/or Philosophical Basis of GPEW. This would include recording a video which is circulated by the organisation and/or issuing a statement in their support, but not simply attending an event or liking/retweeting a social media post. Where the behaviour includes signing a petition, this is only deemed to be a 'public endorsement' if the signatory actively identifies themselves with a GPEW status within the act of signing the petition. Please note that in any complaint which includes an allegation of signing a petition Disciplinary Committee are likely to investigate whether the respondent (the person being complained about) admits to having signed the petition, as there is potential for someone's name (and GPEW status) being added to a petition without their knowledge.
4. Using defamatory, insulting or harassing language on social media, or in a public setting, towards one or more other members of the party. This aspect may be particularly serious where there is an element of prejudice in the language used – such as racism, sexism, homophobia and/or transphobia, and/or the remarks are aimed at a minority or marginalised group.
5. Using defamatory, insulting or harassing language towards a member of another political party, noting that this is particularly significant when the offending member is acting as representative of GPEW: Code of Conduct 7.2 Members should maintain civilised standards of conduct towards each other and others such as political opponents or non-members when acting in a Party capacity, or when identifiable as a Green Party member
6. Circulating one or more vexatious, malicious or otherwise highly inappropriate e-mails/letters/leaflets to members or to the general public

One important additional aspect relates to the concept of 'speaking truth to power'. Is it possible for a member to bring the party into disrepute by stating something that they believe to be true? The answer to that question has to be 'yes' – it depends on the way that this 'truth' is being spoken and what the member has already done about their concerns. Simply because something is factual it does not mean that there is free licence to broadcast that fact in whatever way the member decides. We each need to accept personal responsibility: airing a legitimate grievance about an internal issue against another member on social media, or in a public meeting (including an open session at

conference), is very likely to bring the party into disrepute, and almost always will have that effect if this is the first time that the grievance has been voiced. We need to ensure that we use the channels that are open to us within the party structure to address our concerns, and not simply take the route that we feel will give us the most attention and/or the quickest response.

Finally, GPEW should aim to have a development culture, where we feel that we can always learn and improve. This includes the concept of learning from our mistakes – so when a member is taken through the disciplinary process and found to have brought the party into disrepute, this should not mean that they are inevitably excluded from membership. However, there are limits on the extent to which members should be allowed to become ‘repeat offenders’ and it is open to Disciplinary Committee to conclude that an isolated offence is so serious that exclusion from the party is the best solution, or that a pattern of repeated offences indicates that the ongoing risk cannot be mitigated and that exclusion is warranted.