
Not So Civil Service

*A report into the secret
culture of bullying in
Whitehall departments*

**- Based on official government staff surveys
now revealed for the first time.**

Report by Grant Shapps MP
July 2009

Summary

During the Spring 2009 a series of Parliamentary Questions were asked to ascertain how many staff within each departments had been disciplined for bullying and harassment of colleagues in the last three years.

The answers were not all that revealing, but we also asked for information on whether staff surveys had been carried out and then pursued these results through Freedom of Information requests.

Eight departments returned full staff survey results providing us with the following insights into bullying inside of government for the first time:

- 3,004 staff, representing almost 11% of the workforce from just eight government departments, responded to their employer's annual staff survey by saying they had experienced bullying or harassment at work over the previous 12 months.
- Despite Parliamentary Answers from Ministers at the Department of Health saying that no civil servants have been disciplined in the last three years for bullying, 372 staff said that they had 'experienced bullying or harassment in the last year alone'.
- 10 per cent of the Department for Culture, Media & Sport's workforce said they had personal experience of bullying or harassment in the preceding 12 months.
- 5 per cent of civil servants at the Department for Schools claim to have been bullied because of their educational background.
- Almost 300 Department for International Development civil servants said they would *not* feel confident about reporting a case of bullying or harassment.

The government has disciplined 129 central government civil servants for harassing and bullying colleagues over the last three years.

A real problem

- 129 civil servants in central government departments have been disciplined for bullying or harassment in the last three years.
- Last year 55 civil servants were dismissed or reprimanded for bullying colleagues.
- Over the period, 45 Home Office civil servants have faced disciplinary action.
- 1 in 30 staff at the Northern Ireland Office has been disciplined for bullying colleagues in the last two years.

Comment and quote from the report's author Grant Shapps MP:

"Gordon Brown presides over a culture of bullying which now appears to have permeated through Whitehall and is in danger of seriously undermining the quality of public administration.

"All organisations are led by a culture set from the top so it comes as no surprise that departments -- answering to a Prime Minister whose idea of people management is to throw phones and staplers around the office -- are inclined to develop a culture of bullying.

"Bullying in any form is unacceptable and to reverse this cycle of intimidation we need urgent change which can only come with a General Election."

Background

Between 3 February and 11 March, government ministers were asked, in the form of parliamentary questions, how many staff within their departments had been disciplined for bullying and harassment of colleagues in the last three years.

Bullying is something which is, at least nominally, taken very seriously by the government and the senior civil service.

Civil Service departments and agencies are obliged to ensure staff can work in a safe and non-threatening environment. Updated on 9th December 2008 the Civil Service code states that harassment and bullying includes any type of behaviour that in any way causes offence to an employee.

Should someone be made to feel 'undervalued, uneasy, intimidated, uncomfortable, excluded or humiliated' or feel their job is vulnerable in any way, then the victim is encouraged to approach a confidential support network that exists within many departments. Trained staff are available for support and any harassment or bullying can be officially registered with them.¹

Employers have a 'duty of care' to all staff and so if there is evidence that insufficient action has been taken within the department when bullying or harassment has been highlighted then an employee may resign and claim 'constructive dismissal' on the grounds of 'breach of contract.'²

According to the Civil Service, the breaking down of a relationship due to bullying or harassment can be between employees or the employers and neither is tolerated. All employees have a right to work in an environment free from any type of degradation, regardless of background.

The Ministry of Justice use clear definitions to recognise instances of harassment and bullying. The Department's *Conduct Policy* states that:

*'Harassment is... unwanted behaviour which affects a person's dignity. It can relate to age, sex, race, disability, religion, nationality or any other personal characteristic and may be continuous or a one-off incident.'*³

¹ Civil Service, *Bullying and Harassment guidelines*, www.civilservice.gov.uk

² *Ibid.*

³ *Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 344W

Whilst 'bullying' is more difficult to define legalistically, the Department considers it a form of harassment which may consist of:

*'offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour; persistent unwarranted criticism; and exclusion or ostracising'*⁴

The Department for Work and Pensions states it promotes 'an environment free from discrimination, bullying and harassment' and will tackle any 'behaviour which breaches this'.⁵

The Treasury has a 'zero tolerance policy' when it comes to discrimination, bullying and harassment.⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Department for Work and Pension, *Diversity and equality statement*, www.dwp.gov.uk

⁶ HM Treasury, *Gender Equality Scheme*, www.hm-treasury.gov.uk, p.50

Results

Ministers were asked how many staff within their departments had been subject to disciplinary action as a result of bullying or harassment in each of the last three years.^{7 and 8}

Ministers reported 129 instances of disciplinary action being taken against staff for cases of bullying or harassment in the three years for which each department provided figures.⁹

The information presented in the table below shows what, at first glance, may seem shocking. For instance, at the Northern Ireland Office, one in every 30 members of staff has been reprimanded for bullying over the past two years alone.¹⁰ Meanwhile, 45 Home Office civil servants were disciplined or dismissed for harassment or bullying between 2005 and 2008.

Department	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008-pres	Total	Notes
BERR			<5		4	For reasons of "confidentiality", further info is unavailable
Cabinet Office			<5		4	cant comment further
Children, Schools and Families	0	0	0	0	0	
Culture, Media and Sport	0	0	0	0	0	
Communities and Local Government	0	0	0	0	0	
Defence	n/a	n/a	16	10	26	No information prior to 2007
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs		1	5	1	7	
Foreign Office		1	2	3	6	
Health		0	0	0	0	
Home Office	17	9	19	n/a	45	
Innovation, Universities and Skills	0	0	0	0	0	
International Development			<5		4	
Ministry of Justice		0	3	4	7	Actual dismissals
Northern Ireland		0	2	2	4	
Scotland		0	0	0	0	
Transport			10		10	
Treasury		<5	<5	<5	12	Fewer than 5 in each year over period
Wales		0	0	0	0	
Women and Equality		0	0	0	0	
Work and Pensions		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	"disproportionate cost"
Total	17	11	47	20	129	

⁷ While some departments responded with information for the last three *completed* years, others included the current year within their results. As a result, the table includes four years but each department is only represented in three of the columns.

⁸ The exact question, answers received and Hansard references are contained in the appendix of this report.

⁹ In cases where the department reported "fewer than 5 cases", the figure taken for the purposes of the total was 4.

¹⁰ Based on a full-time equivalent annual staffing level of 120 persons. *Civil Service Statistics 2008 First Release*, 20 January 2009, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/cs0109.pdf>

A much wider problem

While the answers from government departments should be a cause for concern, it appears to be merely the tip of a very large and ominous iceberg.

The Department for Work and Pensions, with the manpower equivalent to the Departments for Business, Justice and Schools combined, refused to provide information citing 'disproportionate cost'.¹¹

Even within the departments where ministers did provide data, the true extent of the problem seems to have been either ignored or not fully understood. Analysis of the staff surveys from eight government departments reveals a much wider problem within Whitehall.

Department of Health

On 23 February 2009, the Health Minister, Ben Bradshaw responded to the written parliamentary question by saying "None of the Department's staff has been disciplined for either bullying or harassment in any of the last three years".¹²

However, the Department of Health's own departmental staff survey, conducted during 2008 found that 372 civil servants had 'experienced bullying or harassment at work in the last year'.¹³

Estimated number: 372

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

The most recent audit of staff opinion at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport - occasionally referred to as the 'Ministry of Fun' - indicates that the problem is a common one throughout Whitehall.

In March 2009, ministers at the DCMS stated that there had 'been no cases of bullying reported in DCMS' in the last three years¹⁴.

Again, the departmental survey carried out by the department in the summer of 2007 found that 10 per cent of all staff had 'personally experienced' bullying in the 12 months prior to the survey being

¹¹ *Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 51W

¹² *Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 203W

¹³ 372 is 17% of the Department's full-time equivalent workforce, *Civil Service Statistics 2008 First Release*, 20 January 2009, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/cs0109.pdf>

¹⁴ *Hansard*, 25 March 2009, col. 381W

conducted while 13 per cent had witnessed bullying during the same period.

Five per cent had experienced harassment and the same number had experience of discrimination.

Estimated number: 46

Department for Children, Schools and Families

The 2008 DCSF staff survey asked if they had 'personally been treated in a way [they] would describe as [bullying] by a member of staff'. Astonishingly, 10 per cent replied in the affirmative. 4 per cent felt that they had been treated unfairly by their manager due to their appearance.

According to ministers the situation is rather different. The Minister for Schools and Learners, Sarah McCarthy-Fry said in February 2009, 'there have been no recorded cases of bullying or harassment of employees in the Department or the former DfES which resulted in staff being disciplined'.¹⁵

Estimate number: 321

Department for Work and Pensions

The Department for Work and Pensions were unable to provide figures on the numbers of civil servants disciplined due to bullying because of the 'disproportionate cost' involved with sourcing the information.

The Department's own survey of staff¹⁶ in 2008 found that 7 per cent claimed to have been bullied by their managers and 5 per cent said that their bullying had been at the hands of colleagues. A further 11 per cent stated that they were the victims of harassment. However, what is even more worrying are the numbers of individuals alleging to have experienced 'the threat of physical violence, intimidation or extreme verbal abuse'. 1 per cent, some 1,057 departmental employees, felt physically threatened, intimidated or abused.

Unfortunately, the department's inability to provide any detail on the numbers of staff dealt with for bullying or harassment means we must establish a reasonable estimate.

¹⁵ *Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 433W

¹⁶ The DWP staff survey included all staff of the main department as well as staff at its agencies.

Applying the proportion which had claimed to be bullied to the DWP itself, leads us to the shocking estimate of 1,150 incidences of bullying.¹⁷

Estimated number: 1,150

Department for Transport

The DfT reported 10 cases of bullying or harassment over the course of the last three years.

When asked in the form of an anonymous survey conducted in 2008, 11 per cent of civil servants claimed to have experienced either bullying or harassment in the previous 12 months.

Estimated number: 220

Cabinet Office

In response to questions on the subject, ministers at the Cabinet Office stated that there had been 'fewer than five cases in the Department where staff were disciplined for bullying and harassment' in the period for which figures were requested.

However, 7 per cent of respondents to the Cabinet Office's staff survey in 2007 said they had experienced harassment in the last year while working in the department. This equates to 85 people claiming to have experienced harassment in the intervening 12 months.

Estimated number: 85

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Foreign Office civil servants were asked in their 2007 annual staff survey if they had experienced bullying on the basis of a number of different factors.

For various reasons, for instance, gender, race, age, ethnic origin, up to 7 per cent of officials felt that they had been subjected to bullying behaviour.

Estimated number: 410

¹⁷ Based on employment figures for DWP Shared Services and DWP Corporate Services, *Civil Service Statistics 2008 First Release*, 20 January 2009, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/cs0109.pdf>

Home Office

The Home Office responded to parliamentary questions with the highest number of disciplinary proceedings of any government department. The figure of 45 included staff at the department's agencies, such as the then Border and Immigration Agency, as well as the main department.

The Home Office departmental staff survey report of 2008 was broken down by agency. In the headquarters alone, 15 per cent claimed to have been bullied in their current or previous directorate within the department in the past year.

Separate figures for the Home Office Border and Immigration Agency detail an altogether depressing story.

The organisation which was included by Home Office ministers in its figures for disciplinary proceedings, reveals a truly shocking situation.

More than 1 in 6 staff (18%) at the organisation - which has since merged with other bodies to form the UK Border Agency - said that they had experienced bullying in their current or previous directorate within the BIA during the past year. Taking these proportions into account would suggest an additional 3,270 instances of bullying

Estimated number (main department only): 400

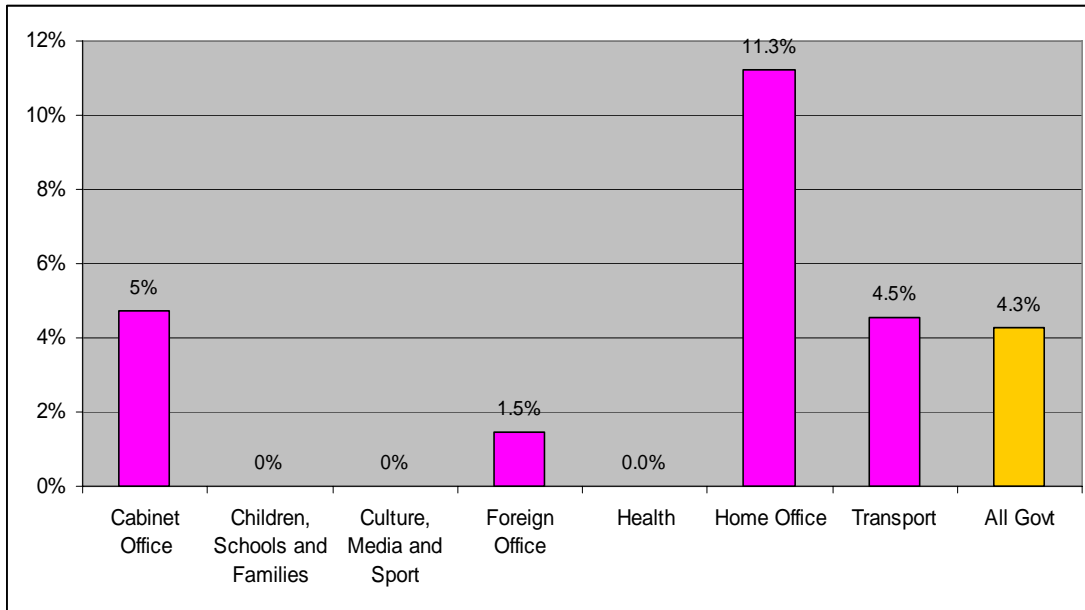
Factoring in just these results from seven departments above suggests that the real number of bullies in the civil service is far higher than the 129 disciplinary procedures outlined above points to.

Total estimated number of cases: 3,004

These estimates suggest that ministers are seriously underestimating the severity of the bullying problem within the civil service. Including just those departments which have reported at least one case of disciplinary action being followed, the true scale of the problem is, on average, 30 times higher.¹⁸

¹⁸ This takes into account the Foreign Office, Cabinet Office, the Department for Transport and the Home Office.

Percentage of estimated cases within departments in which disciplinary action is taken¹⁹



¹⁹ The figure for 'all government' only includes estimates for the 8 government departments for which information was provided in their staff survey results

Lack of confidence in reporting mechanisms

The disparity in the number of cases for which bullies are disciplined and the perceived level of harassment within government departments might be explained by the lack of confidence in either the reporting mechanisms within the department or in the ability of managers and senior civil servants to deal with cases of harassment or bullying.

At the Department for International Development, 291 out of the Department's 1600 civil servants could not agree with the statement: 'I would be confident to report harassment or bullying in the area where I work'.²⁰

The fairly evident problem pointed to by these figures was not reflected in the Department's answer to the question posed in Parliament. The Minister, Ivan Lewis stated that fewer than five staff were disciplined in each of the three years. Indeed, the figure was deemed so 'small' that a detailed breakdown of the cases was not possible.²¹

Staff at the Department for Transport, 11 per cent of whom claim to have experienced bullying in the 12 months prior to the survey being conducted, appear equally lacking in trust.

Of those at the DfT who were brave enough to report the incident, just 2 per cent felt satisfied with the action taken as a result of the complaint.

At the Home Office just 30 per cent of staff experiencing bullying behaviour had reported the incident with only 30 per cent of those that did feeling satisfied with the outcome.

A similar reticence on the part of staff could be the answer for the lack of disciplinary proceedings at the DCMS. Just 12 per cent of those witnessing bullying confirmed that they had reported the incident and only 50 per cent of those that did were satisfied with the way the matter was dealt with.

Worryingly, less than two-thirds of staff believed that reporting an incident of bullying would be possible without negative consequences for their career.

²⁰ *Civil Service Statistics 2008 First Release*, 20 January 2009, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/cs0109.pdf>

²¹ *Hansard*, 9 March 2009, col. 17W

The Department of Health's employees showed a clear lack of confidence in their superiors' ability to deal with issues such as these.

Only 40 per cent of staff felt that their 'manager deals effectively with bullying and harassment if it happens' while less than a quarter agreed that the 'Senior Civil Service deals effectively with bullying and harassment if it happens'.

Comment

The author of this research and report, Grant Shapps MP said:

“Gordon Brown presides over a culture of bullying which now appears to have permeated through Whitehall and is in danger of seriously undermining the quality of public administration.

“All organisations are led by a culture set from the top so it comes as no surprise that departments -- answering to a Prime Minister whose idea of people management is to throw phones and staplers around the office -- are inclined to develop a culture of bullying.

“Bullying in any form is unacceptable and to reverse this cycle of intimidation we need urgent change which can only come with a General Election.”

Conclusion

The spectre of bullying is extremely worrying for all concerned. Not only does it severely hamper the quality of life for civil servants, who are merely trying to do their jobs, it also has an unwelcome impact on productivity amongst the people required to facilitate and implement government policies.

At a time of great upheaval in the country and with increasing strain being placed on public servants generally, it is counter-productive for those very people to be dealing with unnecessary pressures.

The University of Glamorgan's Centre for Workplace Behaviours last year estimated that, nationwide, the UK lost more than 33 million work days as a result of stress during 2007 at a total estimated cost to the economy of £13.75 billion.²²

The attitudes of government staff suggest that the problem of bullying is not only widespread but also deeply entrenched within the civil service. The most disturbing aspect of this research is the apparently minimal confidence in the ability of managers and senior civil servants' to effectively deal with individuals within departments who seek to make their colleagues lives a misery.

²² 'New centre to tackle workplace bullying launched at the House of Lords', *Centre for Workplace Behaviours press release*, 16 September 2008, <http://workplacebehaviours.research.glam.ac.uk/news/en/2008/sep/16/new-centre-tackle-workplace-bullying-launched-hous/>

The quantitative effect on productivity and morale is immeasurable but with the country facing up to its current challenges, it is time that ministers take account of this hidden problem and acts.

Making the most of what is already at the disposal of the government is absolutely vital to increase productivity and morale in the public sector.

Doing so would also send a clear message to the private sector that bullying or harassment in the workplace should be dealt with as a matter of urgency in order to drive up productivity.

Appendix - Answers to Parliamentary Questions

Surveys

The surveys were sourced from a variety of places. Of those placed in the House of Commons Library, the references are:

- DCSF: 26 March 2009, paper no. DEP-2009-0977
- DCMS: 19 March 2009, paper no. DEP-2009-0905
- DIUS: 16 March 2009, paper no. DEP-2009-0873
- DH: 16 March 2009, paper no. DEP-2009-0835
- DFID: 16 March 2009, paper no. DEP-2009-0827

The DWP 2008 survey is available via the resource centre on the departmental website, www.dwp.gov.uk/resourcecentre/dwp-survey-results-2008.pdf

The most recent returns for the DfT, DBERR, HM Treasury and the Foreign Office are available in the Statistics section of the Civil Service website, <http://beta.civilservice.gov.uk/about/who/statistics/staff-surveys.aspx>

Question to each Department

Grant Shapps: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff in his Department were disciplined for (a) bullying and (b) harassment of colleagues in each of the last three years.

Department of Health

Mr. Bradshaw: None of the Department's staff has been disciplined for either bullying or harassment in any of the last three years.

(Hansard, 23 February 2009, col. 203W)

Department for Work and Pensions

Jonathan Shaw: This information is not available in the format requested. To extract more detailed information from individual records under the category requested would be at disproportionate cost.

(Hansard, 23 February 2009, col. 51W)

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Mr. Sutcliffe: There have been no bullying or harassment cases in the last three years in DCMS.

(Hansard, 25 March 2009, col. 381W)

Ministry of Justice

Mr. Wills: Harassment is defined in the MOJ conduct policy as:

“unwanted behaviour which affects a person's dignity. It can relate to age, sex, race, disability, religion, nationality or any other personal characteristic of the individual and may be continuous or a one-off incident.”

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Bullying is not specifically defined by law, but may be seen as a form of harassment. Bullying could consist of:

- offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour;
- persistent unwarranted criticism; and
- exclusion and ostracising.

In the Ministry of Justice there are three levels of sanction in disciplinary cases. They are first written warning, final written warning and dismissal.

The Ministry of Justice, HMPS and NOMS do not hold the information centrally in the format requested and can be provided only at a disproportionate cost. However, validated records of dismissals for the MOJ (excluding HMPS and NOMS) are held centrally. The following table details the number of dismissals in the last three years.

	<i>Bullying</i>	<i>Harassment</i>
2008	2	2
2007	1	2
2006	0	0

(*Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 344W)

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Huw Irranca-Davies: Seven employees have been disciplined for bullying and harassment in the last three years. One employee was disciplined in 2007, five employees were disciplined in 2008, and one employee has been disciplined in 2009.

DEFRA'S procedures do not differentiate between bullying and harassment so I am unable to provide a further breakdown.

(*Hansard*, 11 March 2009, col. 434W)

Ministry of Defence

Mr. Kevan Jones: The information requested is not held centrally for all the dates requested. However, records held centrally of civilian staff disciplined specifically for bullying and harassment of colleagues in the Department for the periods:

March 2007 to March 2008 include 16 cases of disciplinary action specifically for bullying and harassment of colleagues.

April 2008 to January 2009 include 10 cases of disciplinary action specifically for bullying and harassment of colleagues.

(*Hansard*, 23 February 2009, col. 30W)

Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform

Mr. McFadden: In total, there have been fewer than five such cases in the Department over the past three years. I am unable to give further details as to do so could breach the confidentiality of individuals concerned.

(*Hansard*, 24 February, col. 731W)

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Cabinet Office

Mr. Watson: It is not the policy of the Cabinet Office to release personal data relating to individual staff. I can confirm that in the period specified, there were fewer than five cases in the Department where staff were disciplined for bullying and harassment of colleagues. It would not be appropriate to provide a further breakdown.

(Hansard, 4 March 2009, col. 1658W)

Department for Children, Schools and Families

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: There have been no recorded cases of bullying or harassment of employees in the Department or the former Department for Education and Skills which resulted in staff being disciplined.

(Hansard, 23 February 2009, col. 433W)

Department for International Development

Mr. Ivan Lewis: The Department for International Development (DFID) has disciplined less than five employees for *(a)* bullying and *(b)* harassment of colleagues in each of the last three years. Due to the small number of cases, a detailed breakdown is not made public on the grounds of confidentiality.

(Hansard, 9 March 2009, col. 17W)

HM Treasury

Angela Eagle: In each of the last three years there has been fewer than five staff disciplined for both *(a)* bullying and *(b)* harassment.

(Hansard, 4 February, col. 1270W)

Department for Transport

Mr. Hoon: 10 members of staff in the Department for Transport and its agencies have been disciplined for bullying and/or harassment in the last three years.

(Hansard, 11 February 2009, col. 2012W)

Women and Equality

Maria Eagle: Since the Government Equalities Office was established on 12 October 2007 no members of staff have been disciplined for bullying or harassment.

(Hansard, 4 February 2009, col. 1231W)

Wales Office

Mr. Paul Murphy: None.

(Hansard, 4 February 2009, col. 1185W)

Northern Ireland Office

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Paul Goggins: The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and its agencies have policies and procedures in place to deal with harassment and bullying. Staff in the NIO undergo mandatory training in equality and diversity, which includes guidance on appropriate behaviour in the workplace. The number of staff disciplined for bullying and/or harassment of work colleagues in each of the years requested is as follows:

	<i>Bullying</i>	<i>Harassment</i>	<i>Bullying and harassment</i>
2006	0	0	0
2007	0	1	1
2008	1	1	0

(*Hansard*, 9 February 2009, col. 1562W)

Scotland Office

Ann McKechin: There have been no complaints of bullying or harassment in the Scotland Office during the period requested.

(*Hansard*, 3 February 2009, col. 994W)

Department for Communities and Local Government

Mr. Khan: The Department for Communities and Local Government have had no staff who have been disciplined for (a) bullying and (b) harassment of colleagues in the last three years.

(*Hansard*, 11 February 2009, col. 2063W)

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

Grant Shapps: To ask the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills how many staff in his Department have been disciplined for (a) bullying and (b) harassment of colleagues since its inception. [254084]

Mr. Simon: There have been no recorded cases of bullying or harassment of employees in the Department or the former Department for Education and Skills which resulted in staff being disciplined.

(*Hansard*, 10 February 2009, col. 1900W)

Home Office

Mr. Woolas: This response covers staff within Home Office headquarters, the UK Border Agency, the Identity and Passport Service and the Criminal Records Bureau.

Information on the number of staff disciplined (including any dismissed) under the Department's Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination Policy during the last three financial years is shown in the following table:

	<i>Staff disciplined (including any dismissed)</i>
2005-06	17
2006-07	9
2007-08	19

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Information on the number of staff disciplined in each specific category is not held centrally and could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

(*Hansard*, 10 February 2009, col. 1825-6W)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Gillian Merron: The information is as follows:

In 2006, one member of staff was disciplined for bullying. None were disciplined for harassment.

In 2007, one member of staff was disciplined for bullying, one was disciplined for harassment.

In 2008, three members of staff were disciplined for combined bullying and harassment.

These records cover reported disciplinarys of UK-based staff. There are no central records held for locally-engaged staff. This information would be held locally at post and could only be retrieved with disproportionate cost.

(*Hansard*, 11 February 2009, col. 2000W)