

AUTONOMOUS CENTRE OF EDINBURGH SAFER SPACES POLICY

THE POLICY IN BRIEF

This policy applies to our meeting spaces, social spaces and online spaces.

If you feel unsafe in one of our spaces due to somebody else's behaviour, you should contact a Safer Spaces volunteer by emailing contact (at) saferspacesedinburgh.noflag.org.uk. The Safer Spaces team will initiate a process to deal with the behaviour.

If you wish, your complaint will be kept confidential and your identity secret.

If you have been subjected to violence, sexual assault or sexual harassment, the perpetrator will be asked not to use the space while the process is ongoing. The process will be survivor-led, you will be able to choose a mediator and you will not be expected to see or speak with your attacker if you do not wish to do so.

For complaints that do not involve violence, we encourage both/all parties to engage with our Conflict Resolution procedure, and will provide mediation if required. See our Conflict Resolution and Survivor-led procedures for details of how these processes work.

We define the following as abusive behaviours which are not tolerated in this space:

Physical abuse

1. Violence and threat of violence (unless in self defence)
2. Use of force and threat of force (unless minimal to protect users of the space and the space itself)
3. Rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment

Verbal abuse

4. Personal insult (insults or aggression towards an individual)
5. Oppressive language (insults or generalisations about a group of people)
7. Verbal Harassment, sexual or otherwise (repeated uninvited personal comments or requests)
8. Verbal abuse in writing (all of the above in written form)

See 'The Policy in Detail' (page 2) for a full description of what we mean, and what we do not mean, by each of these behaviours.

See 'Applying the Safer Spaces Policy' (page 4) for details of the places and people this policy applies to, and how to enact it.

See 'Background to the Policy' (page 5) for more information about Safer Spaces and the reasons why we have this policy.

THE POLICY IN DETAIL

This section outlines what we mean, and what we don't mean, by each of the behaviours defined as abusive.

Physical abuse

1. Violence and threat of violence: A deliberate action that is likely to cause somebody physical pain, or the threat of such action, made verbally or implied physically.

This does not mean: Acting in self-defence or in defence of others, as a last resort, in response to a clear and direct physical threat.

2. Use of force and threat of force: Preventing a person from leaving a situation or forcing them into one, either by physically restraining them, blocking their way, refusing to stop following them or refusing to move away from them when asked. Threat to carry out any of these actions.

This does not mean: Preventing somebody from doing violence to themselves or others, or preventing somebody from damaging a space being used collectively, using minimal necessary force.

3. Rape/Sexual assault/Sexual harrasment: non-consenting sex or sexual touching, as well as acting in a sexual way towards somebody, invading their personal space or making sexually suggestive moves or gestures to them without their explicit consent.

This does not mean: Telling somebody that you find them attractive or initiating a flirtation, provided that **lack of enthusiastic reciprocation is taken as an unequivocal "NO" with immediate effect, and all attempts at flirtation cease.**

Verbal abuse

4. Personal insult: This means insulting terms specifically applied to individuals, or criticism made abusive by being shouted or expressed aggressively, with the outcome of causing hurt, intimidation or humiliation. This applies regardless of whether the outcome was intentional. It is not the intentions of the person who made the remark or the offence felt by the person being insulted that is being addressed here, though these issues will be relevant to any resolution or disassociation process that follows. The behaviour is problematic because it is a means of forcing a point through the use of intimidation rather than reason, and this works to silence dissent and stifle constructive and reasonable discussion.

This does not mean: A ban on insults, compliments or personal remarks in conversation amongst friends who know and respect one another's limits. However, when engaging in such banter, we should always be aware of our context – where we are, who else is around us and how what we're saying affects the general atmosphere of the space. It is not enough to assume that everybody within earshot knows our intentions, or even to state that we don't mean anything by our use of insulting terms, or that they are being used ironically.

The trust that is being asked by somebody who uses insulting or aggressive language in jest has to be earned and maintained, and is not automatically due to anybody with good intentions.

5. Oppressive language: This is language used in general conversation, not necessarily in connection with a specific person, that insults, expresses prejudices or reinforces preconceptions about a group of people that are marginalised, disadvantaged or oppressed by mainstream society. This includes (but is not limited to) any racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic or disablist language. The reason for this is not “political correctness” or fear of criticising people’s values. The real problem with such language is that it normalises prejudices and recreates the very hierarchies that we aim to oppose, as well as creating a space that is unwelcoming to anybody outside of a narrow demographic.

This does not mean: Compiling lists of unacceptable words and phrases in order to catch out the unwary – we don’t necessarily need to ban words, we do need to meet challenges to our language without defensiveness, be prepared to apologise for unintentional offence and take the opportunity to reconsider our language, the implications behind it and the impact it can have on others. Free expression ends at the point where it becomes an act of oppression to another.

6. Verbal Harassment, sexual or otherwise.

This includes making unsolicited and inappropriately personal remarks (complimentary or otherwise) about somebody’s appearance or other personal attributes, or making repeated personal requests of them, sexual or otherwise, which have been previously refused, ignored or not met with enthusiasm.

This does not mean: This isn’t a ban on developing sexual relationships or flirting. However, a social centre is not a singles club, and persistently using the space to initiate flirtations is not appropriate, and can be objectifying and demeaning to other users of the space. Develop personal relationships at appropriate times and places, where nobody is likely to feel trapped, coerced, isolated or embarrassed, and make sure anybody you are flirting with has ample opportunity to exit the situation or end the flirtation at any time. It bears repeating: **always treat the absence of enthusiastic reciprocation as an unequivocal “no” with immediate effect.**

7. Verbal abuse in writing. The same issues often come up in written communications, whether on mailing lists, forums and social networks or personal e-mails and text messages. It can be easier to both misunderstand written communication and to cross boundaries in terms of abusive language, since the things that would normally hold us back in a face-to-face confrontation (e.g. social unease, immediate negative response and awareness of the other party’s distress) are not as pronounced in this medium. The medium also has advantages for debate – many people find it easier to express themselves clearly and coherently in writing, to think their points through and to find the confidence to put their words into a public forum. But the same rules should apply in terms of avoiding personal insult, oppressive language and harassment, and for the same reasons.

This does not mean: That you can’t discuss political issues or dispute things that people have said by e-mail. However, always try to always keep it civil, and if you feel that you are being antagonised, suggest a different format for the discussion (e.g. private correspondence or a meeting). Avoid

sending e-mails or messages while you feel upset or angry. Wait until you feel calm and read over your response, thinking of every phrase you have used in terms of the way you would feel to see it applied to yourself or your friends. Always address the points that you disagree with, rather than the person who has made them (or the kind of person who you believe makes such points). Don't assume that you know somebody else's opinions or motives beyond those that they have expressed unambiguously. You can only argue with what somebody has said, not what they might have been thinking. Argue with a view to developing everybody's ideas, including your own, rather than attempting to defeat the opposing view or force a retraction. There are no individual winners or losers, only productive discussions and destructive ones. People very rarely back down from an opinion once they have expressed it publicly in writing. Accept that, even when you do persuade somebody to change their mind, they probably won't admit it publicly, and you may never know about it.

APPLYING THE SAFER SPACES POLICY

This section explains how to use the safer spaces policy.

What are our "spaces"? Where does this apply?

This policy should be considered to apply wherever members of the Autonomous Centre collective meet together, be it at the centre itself or in another space. It applies to both meetings and social events. It also applies to our online spaces: the mailing lists, Facebook pages and even our private communications with other members of the collective. It is not OK for us to abuse one another just because it's a personal e-mail rather than the mailing list, or a party rather than a meeting.

Who does this apply to?

This applies to everybody who uses the Autonomous Centre: group members, their friends and guests, visitors and attendees. Some of the behaviours listed shouldn't be considered acceptable by a member of the collective (or anybody else) at any time, to anybody, e.g. sexual assault, or sexually or racially charged verbal abuse. This behaviour makes the space around the person displaying it unsafe for everybody and reinforces an oppressive culture, even if the behaviour is aimed at people with whom we are in direct confrontation, such as the police or members of fascist organisations.

How do I enact the policy?

Contact a member of the Safer Spaces team at [contact \(at\) saferspacesedinburgh.noflag.org.uk](mailto:contact@saferspacesedinburgh.noflag.org.uk) to begin a process to deal with a behaviour you have experienced. The processes are outlined in our Conflict Resolution and Survivor-led Processes document. You will be offered anonymity and confidentiality for all complaints, and given the opportunity to nominate trusted members of the collective to mediate for you in any process that follows (though you are also welcome to speak for yourself directly if you prefer). Complaints involving physical violence, rape, sexual assault or sexual harassment will be dealt with through a survivor-led process, and need not involve any members of the collective who the survivor(s) have not nominated. Anybody who has been named as a perpetrator of these or other violent and serious abuses will be asked not to enter the Autonomous Centre or post to its lists while

the process is ongoing. Complaints not involving violence will be dealt with through the Conflict Resolution procedure, and both/all parties will be encouraged to communicate their concerns in constructive ways – with mediation, if required – with a view to restoring the ability to work together effectively in a space safe for all concerned.

BACKGROUND TO THE POLICY

This section outlines what the policy is for.

What are safer spaces and why do we need them?

A safe (or safer) space is somewhere where people can feel that they're not likely to face violence, harassment, intimidation or bullying. It is not about having to adhere to a dominant ideology, but it is about not tolerating the use of violence, harassment or intimidation, even in the name of "free expression" or "open debate". Safer spaces are not about trying to forbid or suppress conflict, they are concerned with allowing it to happen constructively, while ensuring that it doesn't lead to people getting hurt, marginalised or silenced.

When we organise non-hierarchically, we're working in an environment that we haven't been socialised for, and we need to think about what that means for the ways in which we control our own behaviour or influence each other's. We live in a society that imposes limits on conflict from above, allowing only state sanctioned violence and characterising as aggression only resistance to state laws. Capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism and a multitude of other interacting systems of oppression are all a part of the world we live in. We've been shaped by these systems, and our conscious rejection of them is not enough to make them disappear from either our organisations or our own attitudes. We need safer spaces, not because we think that we can build a little slice of utopia free from oppression and hierarchy, but because we know that we can't, and so we need ways of recognising and dealing with those oppressions when we find ourselves facing them from friends and comrades.

Since we reject state laws, we need to set our own benchmarks for reasonable behavior and for dealing with unreasonable behaviour. The safer spaces policy and the conflict resolution/disassociation procedure are our means for doing this. The safer spaces policy is a set of definitions of behaviours that should be avoided and that, if they occur, may require the use of the conflict resolution and survivor-led processes. These are sets of guidelines agreed upon as a means for dealing with situations that have made the space in which we organise unsafe.

But don't we already know what is and isn't acceptable behaviour? Can't we just be sensible?

In reality, once a conflict is underway it is difficult for anybody involved to talk about the behaviours displayed in isolation from the people who displayed them. We end up defending or attacking individuals rather than talking about why an action was, in itself, right or wrong. A pre-agreed set of definitions allows us to look at our conflicts a little more objectively. When somebody is angry, they tend to feel justified in whatever they're doing – that's one of the side effects of anger. Another is that people witnessing it often feel intimidated. It is easy to take a reasonable criticism as a personal slight if there is no pre-existing policy to justify the criticism. It is

also easy to be intimidated out of making a necessary challenge to somebody's behaviour without some pre-existing objective policy to justify your concerns.

These guidelines are not designed to prevent disagreements, shut down normal argument or any kind of constructive verbal confrontation, but to discourage situations in which people are intimidated out of such discussions.

The point of naming these behaviours isn't that anybody who displays them in any way at any time can be instantly banned; the conflict resolution and survivor-led processes should make sure that responses to conflicts are proportionate. We name these behaviours in the Safer Spaces policy so that we have an agreement on what we can feel justified in challenging, so that anybody challenging these behaviours doesn't have to feel alone or risk dismissal of their concerns, and so that those who might be tempted to use these behaviours as a shortcut to making their point will think twice about the possible negative consequences.

This does not mean that any behaviour not specifically covered by this policy cannot be challenged. If a behaviour is problematic, it should be dealt with through the same procedures as a breach of this policy, and if we are all agreed that the behaviour is problematic we should expand the policy to include it.