

Standards Committee

Local Government Association “Debate Not Hate” Campaign

5 December 2022



Report of Legal and Democratic Services

Helen Lynch, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Monitoring Officer

Electoral division(s) affected:

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To inform the Committee of the Local Government Association’s “Debate Not Hate: The Impact of Abuse on Local Democracy” report. (“the Report”)

Executive summary

- 2 The LGA’s Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in their communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.
- 3 In October 2021, the LGA launched a “Call for Evidence on Abuse and Intimidation of Councillors”. The key findings from the call for evidence were used to produce the “Debate Not Hate: The Impact of Abuse on Local Democracy” Report.
- 4 In conjunction with the report, the LGA have also produced a “Debate Not Hate” Public Statement which supports their campaign. The LGA are calling for Councillors, MPs, and Organisations to sign the Public Statement to show support for the Debate Not Hate Campaign.
- 5 The LGA will be publishing further information in relation to their campaign at the end of November 2022. This report summarises the findings of the call for evidence and the support provided to Durham County Councillors. It also makes recommendations on how the Council might respond to the campaign.

Recommendation(s)

6 Standards Committee is asked to:

- (a) Note that the report.
- (b) Agree that the Debate Not Hate Campaign should be added to the Committee's work programme so that it is kept up to date with progress and developments.
- (c) Request that the report is presented to a meeting of full Council with a recommendation that Durham County Council signs the Debate Not Hate Public Statement.

Background

- 7 In October 2021, the LGA launched a Survey entitled 'The LGA's Call for Evidence on Abuse and Intimidation of Councillors.' The Survey aimed to gather data of participants' experiences and concerns regarding public abuse and intimidation.
- 8 The Survey was open to all councillors in the UK both past and serving, to current and previous candidates from previous elections, those who assist or have assisted councillors, or those who have personally witnessed abuse towards councillors.
- 9 The LGA received 419 responses within the first six months of the call for evidence, which were used to inform the Report.

Key findings from The Survey

- 10 The Report was published in June 2022, a copy is attached at Appendix 2. The key findings from the survey are set out below:
 - i. 88% respondents have experienced abuse directed at them with 98% of these councillors having experienced it on multiple occasions.
 - ii. 73% report experiencing abuse via social media with it being the most common way abuse is received.
 - iii. 64% have experienced in person abuse.
 - iv. 59% believe abuse was triggered by a particular event, with 68% of these believing it was a particular decision which triggered the abuse.
 - v. 50% reported that the abuse they receive is ongoing.
 - vi. It was reported that those experiencing abuse viewed the political parties providing the least effective support to help councillors deal with abuse.
 - vii. 72% of respondents take proactive steps to avoid intimidation and abuse.

Themes identified in The Report

11 The report also identifies the following themes:

- i. **Variability** - Support from Councils, Political Parties and the Police varied throughout the country.
- ii. **Targeted Abuse** - Councillors and candidates with protected characteristics more at risk of abuse with misogyny, racism and homophobia highlighted within the responses.
- iii. **Personal and Democratic impacts** - Abuse and intimidation can have an impact on councillors and their families. Many respondents highlighted the impact of such incidents on their mental health. Respondents have reported that such incidents also have an impact on their willingness to stand for re-election.
- iv. **Vulnerability of councillors** – Councillors are vulnerable to physical abuse and intimidation due to them being visible and accessible in the local community. Similarly, factors such as their home addresses being available online increases their risk of receiving abuse.
- v. **Normalisation** – The attitude that abuse, particularly online abuse should be something that Councillors should be expected to deal with is becoming more common.

Recommendations made by The Report

12 The LGA have made the following seven recommendations:

Recommendation 1 Councils and relevant partners should take more responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of councillors. Proactive steps should be taken to prevent abuse and intimidation towards councillors and take similar steps to handling cases. Councils should work with agencies to support councillors' mental health and address risks and threats directed at councillors.

Recommendation 2 LGA should continue to consider what measures can be put in place to prevent abuse and intimidation through the civility in public life programme.

Recommendation 3 Police forces should be more consistent in their response to abuse and threats towards councillors. Risk based approaches should be taken in a similar way which they are for MPs. Similar procedures should be implemented nationally.

Recommendation 4 Legislation should be passed to entitle councillors can withhold their home address.

Recommendation 5 LGA should work with parties, election and democratic officers and organisations responsible for guidance to promote practice of withholding home addresses.

Recommendation 6 Social media companies should provide better methods to deal with abuse reported by councillors.

Recommendation 7 In partnership with LGA a working group should be formed by the relevant Government department to address issues around abuse and intimidation of councillors.

Local Picture

- 13 The Report does not attribute responses to individual Councillors, authorities or regions. However, in the last five years the Head of Legal & Democratic Services has noticed an increase in requests for disclosable pecuniary interests to be treated as sensitive and advice in relation to abuse and intimidation experienced by Councillors online and in person.
- 14 In September 2019, an individual was found guilty of harassing a Councillor who had objected to a planning application. A restraining order was imposed and the defendant was ordered to pay a fine.
- 15 More recently, an individual was convicted of harassment towards a Councillor in their private capacity. They will be sentenced on 24 November 2022. The Council was not involved in these proceedings. However, the individual has made Member Code of Conduct complaints in relation to the Councillor connected to the dispute. No further action has been taken in respect of those complaints as the Councillor was not acting in an official capacity.
- 16 The Council takes all incidents of abuse and intimidation towards Councillors very seriously. It has provided all Councillors with advice in relation to personal security. It has developed the Social Media Toolkit, which advises Councillors on how to stay safe online and what to do if they are subject to abuse and intimidation.
- 17 Councillors are advised to report all incidents of abuse and intimidation to Members Support and the Police so that a record can be kept. Even if the conduct complained of does not reach a threshold for immediate action, it may become part of a pattern of behaviour.
- 18 Legal and Democratic Services work closely with the Health & Safety team to conduct risk assessments and provide specific advice and guidance where appropriate and take steps to mitigate any potential risks to Councillors. Where appropriate, the Council will consider taking legal action to protect Councillors.

- 19 Councillors are reminded that they are able to access the health and well-being support available under the Council's Employee Assistance Scheme.
- 20 The Council also has a very good relationship with Durham Constabulary who are responsive when concerns are raised with them.
- 21 The above support provided to Councillors is generally well-received. However, in light of the LGA's first recommendation it is appropriate for the Council to consider what else it could do to tackle abuse and intimidation and support Councillors.

The Debate Not Hate public statement

- 22 In relation to recommendation seven, the LGA are asking all Councillors and MPs across the country to sign a public statement to support their work and act as a call for action for the relevant government department to form a working group to bring together relevant agencies and partners to produce an action plan.
- 23 To date, over 400 Councillors have signed up to the public statement in June 2022.

The Debate Not Hate Campaign

- 24 The LGA will be launching the Debate Not Hate Campaign. It is understood that as part of this the LGA will publish a toolkit to assist Councils in supporting their members in relation to abuse and intimidation. The LGA will also be seeking further information regarding the challenges, solutions and examples of good practice.
- 25 It is proposed that following the launch of the Campaign, a report is prepared for Council, which provides details of the support available for Members, details of the Debate Not Hate Campaign, the toolkit and recommends that the Council signs the Debate Not Hate Public Statement.
- 26 Details of the campaign and the proposed recommendation to Council will also be reported to the Standards Committee on 5 December 2022. The Committee will be asked to consider adding the Debate Not Hate Campaign to their work programme so that it can monitor progress, promote the campaign within the Council and identify opportunities for the Council to participate in the campaign.
- 27 Once further details of the campaign and the toolkit have been published, the Standards Committee will be asked to consider any further action that the Council can take to support the campaign and its members.

Conclusion

- 28 Given the LGA's findings in relation to abuse and intimidation and the increase in issues locally, it is important to raise awareness of the support available to Members and to support and promote the Debate not Hate Campaign

Background papers

- The LGA's Call for evidence quantitative data
<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/lgas-call-evidence-quantitative-data>

Other useful documents

- LGA Debate Not Hate Public Statement
<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate/debate-not-hate-sign-our-public-statement>

Author(s)

Helen Lynch

Tel: 03000 269729

Katherine Marley

Tel: 03000 265854

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. The issues referred to in this report will assist the Council in complying with its obligations under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

Finance

There are no financial implications.

Consultation

Constitution Working Group considered the report at its meeting on 24 November 2022 and were supportive of the proposals.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No Implications

Climate Change

No Implications

Human Rights

There are no direct Human Rights implications arising out of the report. However, when considering allegations of abuse and intimidation, it is necessary to consider a balance between protecting Councillors from harassment and complying with Article 10 – Freedom of Expression of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Crime and Disorder

Incidents of abuse and intimidation may amount to criminal behaviour. The Debate Not Hate Campaign is intended to reduce incidents of abuse and intimidation and therefore have a positive impact on crime and disorder.

Staffing

No Implications

Accommodation

No Implications

Risk

No Implications

Procurement
No Implications

Appendix 2: Appendix A - Debate Not Hate The impact of abuse on local democracy.pdf (coventry.gov.uk)
