

## Standards Committee

### Local Government Association “Debate Not Hate” Campaign

8<sup>th</sup> September 2023



## 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 Members of any developments of the Local Government Association (LGA)'s Debate Not Hate campaign.

### 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 At the meeting of the Standards Committee in December 2022 it was agreed that the Debate Not Hate Campaign would be added to the Committee's work programme as a standing item, allowing the Committee to remain informed of any developments.

### Recommendation(s)

- 4 The Standards Committee is asked to:
  - (a) Note the report;
  - (b) Recommend that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services outlines a proposal to implement the LGA's recommendations to a zero-tolerance approach to abuse in relation to debates and;
  - (c) Request a report be brought to the next Standards Committee meeting to consider and agree to adopt that proposal and;
  - (d) Consider any further recommendations arising from the report.

## Background

- 5 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.
- 6 Since the Committee meeting in June 2023, the LGA published a new report titled, "Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors", which outlines how Councils can better support Councillors to prevent and handle abuse. A copy of the report is attached at Appendix 2.

## Supporting Councillors with Abuse Case Studies

- 7 The Committee will recall that it previously agreed for the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, in consultation with the Chair to work with the LGA to provide case studies in relation to the Council's approach for dealing with abuse and intimidation towards Councillors. These case studies are included in the report along with others from different authorities.
- 8 The Durham County Council case studies focus on the Council's Social Media Toolkit and the Council's joint approach with Durham Constabulary. The two case studies, 'Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police' and, 'Using Social media safely' are attached at **Appendices 3 and 4**. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services has received an enquiry from another local authority regarding the Social Media Toolkit.

## Debate Not Hate; Ending abuse in public life for councillors.

- 9 The report identified three main challenges to supporting Councillors with abuse:

**Challenge 1:** Councillors feel vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped or supported to handle abuse, harassment, and intimidation. Councillors are informed of their risk but have limited knowledge of tools for effective conflict resolution and aftercare.

**Challenge 2:** Lack of clear process around reporting instances of abuse, harassment, and intimidation to the Council. Councillors don't know who to turn to when an incident occurs. There is limited understanding about the role and help that supporting officers can provide.

**Challenge 3:** There is uneven engagement and response from the police to abuse and harassment of Councillors. Some police forces are

sympathetic, some are not, and some consider low-risk abuse as something insignificant. There is limited advice tailored for elected officers in local politics and on occasion, a lack of understanding of why they need special measures.

10 The LGA used a variety of methods to inform their report including literature reviews, interviews and, focus groups. Officers from Legal and Democratic Services participated in two of the focus groups.

11 In response to their findings, the LGA have proposed 5 guiding principles to assist Councils to deal with abuse effectively:

(i) **Zero-tolerance approach to abuse:** Establish and enforce a strict policy which clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.

(ii) **Clarity of process and responsibility:** Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the Council to provide support to Councillors.

(iii) **Relationships with local police:** Proactively develop strong relationships with the police to enhance coordination and foster mutual understanding of abuse affecting Councillors and the role of police in addressing it.

(iv) **Tailored risk assessments:** Consider individual Councillors' needs and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

(v) **Prioritise Councillor wellbeing:** Recognise and consider how your Council can support Councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries.

12 In addition to the guiding principles intended for the use of local authorities, the LGA have also developed three recommendations for central government, regulators, and police forces to consider:

**Recommendation 1:** The Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online, including developing clear guidance for social media and other online service providers on their obligations to mitigate the risks of online abuse and how this may be best achieved; and that the experience of elected members is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill.

**Recommendation 2:** The Government should work with the police to set out clear and consistent guidance on the role of policing in addressing abuse, intimidation, and harassment of elected members. This should

include expert capacity to monitor crime associated with elected members and act as a single point of contact for both Councils and Councillors.

**Recommendation 3:** The Government should widen the scope of the Defending Democracy Programme to explicitly include the safety, security, and wellbeing of locally elected politicians, rather than focusing solely on national politicians and foreign interference.

- 13 Durham County Council currently have procedures and resources in place which implement four of the five recommendations made by the LGA and are reflected in the case studies which were provided to the LGA.
- 14 The Council have a clear process which allows members to raise any concerns which they may have, all of which are then flagged internally, and where appropriate with the police. Councillors have access to the Member Support Team who are able to assist Members in raising concerns and can provide support. Additionally, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services is responsive to any member concerns of a serious nature and will confer with the Deputy Chief Constable where appropriate.
- 15 The Council have a strong relationship with Durham Constabulary, and the Police take a responsive approach to any issues that are reported in relation to the safety of Councillors. Additionally, the strong relationship allows the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to seek advice and guidance which can be relayed to Members.
- 16 The Council also keep records of any incidents which pertain to each individual Councillor and use such register to determine the appropriate course of action which is proportionate to the incident. An example of actions which have been taken by the Council to support individual Councillors who feel at risk is withholding their address from their public register of interests.
- 17 The Council provide a range of wellbeing support for Councillors to ensure they feel supported both in their role as a Councillor, and if they are experiencing any incidents of abuse or harassment. Support available includes the Social Media training and toolkit, training sessions pertaining to personal safety, and access to the employee assistance scheme amongst other support.
- 18 Given the Council's decision to sign the Debate Not Hate Public Statement, a focus of which is encouraging healthy debate, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services proposes that the Council look to implement a policy outlining the Council's zero-tolerance approach to abuse.

## **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>

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **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**

**No implications. 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 Councillor's 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

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**Appendix 2: Debate Not Hate The impact of abuse on local  
democracy.pdf**

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# Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy

Our call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors was launched in October 2021. This report sets out the findings and recommendations for the future of local democracy.

28 Jun 2022

## Executive summary and background

Councillors are at the centre of local democracy. Elected from amongst their local community and forming a vital link between councils and residents, it is a privilege and responsibility to be elected to public office. However, increasing levels of abuse and intimidation in political and public discourse are negatively impacting politicians and democracy at local and national levels.

Rights to object and constructive challenge are both key components of democracy, but abuse and intimidation cross the line into unacceptable behaviour and serve to silence democratic voices and deter people from engaging with politics.

There is a considerable volume of evidence of the impact of abuse, intimidation, and aggression at a national level, including extreme incidents such as the murder of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP.

To understand the impacts on local government and councillors, the LGA launched a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors in October 2021. This report summarises the findings from the first six months of the call for evidence. It sets out what more could be done to improve support and responses to abuse and intimidation of councillors and reverse national trends around abuse and intimidation that are harmful to democracy.

## Key findings

Respondents to the call for evidence were asked to share their personal experiences of abuse and intimidation as councillors or candidates or abuse of councillors they had witnessed. This included **quantitative questions** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/lgas-call-evidence-quantitative-data>) looking at frequency, location and circumstances of abuse. In addition, respondents were asking for details about triggers of abuse, impacts of abuse personally and more widely, and reflections on support and responses from relevant agencies.

The following themes were identified in the responses to the call for evidence:

- **Variability of support** – The support offered by councils, political parties, and the police varied across the country. In particular, respondents identified a lack of proactive support from some councils and responses from some police forces to threats made against councillors and their families.
- **Targeted abuse** – Evidence from the qualitative responses indicated that councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were more likely to receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses.
- **Personal and democratic impacts** – Abuse and intimidation can significantly impact councillors and their families, and the wider community. Several respondents described the negative impacts of ongoing abuse on their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, respondents supported the idea that abuse can impact councillors' willingness to stand for re-election or deter others from considering standing for public office.
- **Vulnerability of councillors** – Many respondents highlighted the visibility and accessibility of councillors in their local community, particularly when councillors' home addresses are available online. Councillors are therefore vulnerable to physical abuse, particularly compared to national politicians who may have greater protections and access to specialist police support.
- **Normalisation** – There is a growing feeling that abuse and intimidation, particularly online, are becoming normalised. Attitudes

around councillors expecting abuse and being expected to manage abuse with little support were prevalent in the responses.

## Recommendations

In considering these findings, it is possible to set out some initial recommendations to improve the environment for current and prospective councillors. These recommendations range from relatively simple legislative changes to protect councillors' privacy to creating a longer-term culture change which seeks to de-normalisation of abuse of politicians and other high-profile individuals.

**Recommendation 1:** Councils and other relevant partners should take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors' safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously.

**Recommendation 2:** The LGA should continue to gather and disseminate good practice from across the sector, consider what more can be done to prevent abuse and intimidation of councillors through the Civility in public life programme, and support councils and councillors when these incidents occur.

**Recommendation 3:** Police forces should work to improve the consistency of responses to abuse of and threats made against councillors and take a risk-based approach that accounts for the specific risks that councillors face, as they do with other high-risk individuals, such as MPs. This should include identifying best practice in relation to councillor support and safety and sharing it across the country.

**Recommendation 4:** The Government should prioritise legislation to put it beyond doubt that councillors can withhold their home address from the public register of pecuniary interests.

**Recommendation 5:** The LGA should work with political parties, election and democratic officers, and organisations responsible for guidance to raise awareness of the options currently available and promote the practice of keeping home addresses private during the election process and once elected.

**Recommendation 6:** Social media companies and internet service providers should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.

**Recommendation 7:** The relevant **Government department should convene a working group** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/debate-not-hate-sign-our-public-statement>), in partnership with the LGA, to bring together relevant agencies to develop and implement an action plan to address the issue of abuse of local politicians and their safety.

## Introduction

Councillors are at the centre of local democracy. Elected by residents in their neighbourhood and tasked with making decisions that affect the whole community, they are as much a part of the community as those they represent and form a vital and direct link between the council and residents.

It is a key democratic principle which all councillors champion, that local government should be open and transparent and that decisions made by elected councillors should be open to scrutiny and challenge. Residents who are unhappy with decisions made by the council or services that the council provides have every right to object and have their voices heard. This is a civil liberty that must be maintained and protected.

However, the growing levels of abuse, intimidation and harassment against elected politicians are a real threat to representative democracy. Comments and actions that cross the line from honest and respectful debate to abuse and intimidation are designed to silence democratic expression, constructive challenge, and free speech.

There is evidence that increasing levels of toxicity of debate and abuse against public figures are having an impact on our country's democratic processes at a national and local level. In 2017, the Committee for Standards in Public Life published a report on **Intimidation in public life** (<https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00236-9>) in which the Committee suggested that “the scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life”. Since then, research into abuse toward parliamentary candidates has supported anecdotal concerns that levels of abuse are increasing and that women, ethnic minority and LGBTQIA+ politicians receive more discriminatory abuse related to their personal characteristics [1]. During the general election in 2019, concerns were raised over a number of female MPs who retired from politics and cited abuse they faced as a key factor in their decision-making [2].

Beyond abuse that may dissuade prospective politicians from standing for election, there are significant concerns about the risks to politicians' personal safety. Although rare, serious incidents do occur as shown by the murder of Jo Cox MP in 2016 and Sir David Amess MP in 2021.

The ability to debate and disagree well, as set out in the Committee for Standards in Public Life 2017 report, is all the more important when there is significant division in viewpoints and politicians grapple with difficult decisions about how to manage complex local issues.

Councillors represent and serve their local communities and the majority do so without being negatively impacted by abuse and intimidation. Recent councillor census data shows that a large majority of councillors (79 per cent) would recommend being a councillor to others and 65 per cent intended to stand for re-election; almost a third said they had never experienced abuse or intimidation linked to their councillor role and 72 per cent said they had never felt at risk in their role.

Nevertheless, some councillors do experience significant abuse and intimidation and the intensification of these harmful behaviours are unacceptable and represent a real risk to democracy at all levels.

### **Work of the LGA Civility in public life programme**

Following the publication of the Committee for Standards in Public Life reports into Intimidation in public life and Local government ethical standards, the LGA established the Civility in public life programme. The

purpose of the programme is to address intimidation, standards of public and political discourse and behaviour in public office and provide support and advice to councils and councillors.

Since 2019, the LGA has developed a Model Councillors Code of Conduct and supportive guidance such as Digital citizenship guidance, Guidance for handling intimidation and abuse for councillors and case-studies on council support for councillors dealing with abuse and personal safety issues and run a series of evidence on councillor safety (grant-funded by the UK Government). The LGA launched this Call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors to formally record the experiences of councillors impacted by abuse and intimidation and develop a greater understanding of what could be done to improve civility in public life.

### **Work of the UK Government**

In response to the Committee for Standards in Public Life's reports and national events, the Government established the Defending Democracy programme, a cross-Whitehall initiative focusing on four priorities including strengthening the integrity of UK elections, protecting democratic processes and institutions, empowering British citizens and respecting open debate, and tackling disinformation. Under this programme, the Government has passed legislation to address intimidation of electoral candidates and campaigners and introduced legislation to create new offences related to threatening and harmful online communication and false information online.

We welcome progress in these areas, however, evidence gathered by the LGA indicates that greater attention needs to be paid to prevention to stop abuse and intimidation of elected politicians happening in the first place and reverse the impacts of an increasingly toxic political environment on current and prospective politicians.

### **About this report**

In October 2021, the LGA launched an open call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors by the public. The aim of the survey was to capture elected and prospective councillors' experiences and concerns about public abuse and intimidation and what the impacts of abuse are on them, those around them and democracy more generally. The survey was open to councillors, candidates and individuals who support candidates and

councillors and might have witnessed relevant abuse. The Call for evidence remains open for submissions to capture experience of newly elected councillors.

In the first six months of the Call for evidence, 419 responses were received in relation to principal councils [3] and these responses formed the basis of this analysis and recommendations. This report uses the lived experience of councillors to fill a data gap around the abuse that councillors receive while fulfilling their elected role, the impacts of abuse on people in public life and local government, and what more needs to be done to improve the state of public discourse.

[1] Gorrell et al., **Online abuse toward candidates during General Election 2019: Working Paper** (<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2001.08686.pdf>), Jan 2020

[2] Gorrell et al, **Which politicians receive abuse? Four factors illuminated in the UK general election 2019** (<https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00236-9>), July 2020

[3] A principal council is a local government authority as defined under the Local Government Act, section 270. Here it is used to mean any council across the UK which is not a parish and town council or combined authority, i.e. district, county, unitary, London borough, metropolitan etc.

## Key facts and figures

The **call for evidence of abuse and intimidation** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/lgas-call-evidence-quantitative-data>) was an open survey targeted at candidates, councillors and officers who have witnessed abuse of councillors. Four hundred and nineteen respondents from principal councils responded to the Call for evidence in the first six months. A summary of the key statistics from the survey is set out below:

- 88 per cent of respondents said they had experienced abuse and/or intimidation, directed at them personally in relation to their role as a councillor or because they were a political candidate



- 98 per cent of respondents who said they had experienced abuse and/or intimidation said they had experienced such incidents on multiple occasions
- Most abuse was received via social media, with 73 per cent of respondents with multiple experiences said they received abuse by social media
- 64 per cent of respondents had been abused and/or intimidated in person
- 50 per cent of respondents said the abuse was ongoing
- 72 per cent of respondents said they had taken actions themselves to avoid intimidation and/or abuse, or to protect themselves
- 60 per cent of respondents said they were aware of others being unwilling to stand or re-stand for election, or take on leadership roles, due to anticipated abuse.
- 42 per cent of respondents said they would be standing for re-election at the next election.
- 27 per cent of respondents said they would not stand for the next election and 31 per cent were undecided, of those respondents 68 per cent said abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again.

### The **2022 LGA Councillor census**

(<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>) was a time-limited survey directed at all councillors in England which took place between January and February 2022. The survey covered a range of areas including representation, councillor views and councillors' work. 5055 respondents responded to the survey which is response rate of 30 per cent. A summary of the key statistics relating to the experiences and impacts of abuse and intimidation of councillors from the survey is set out below:

- 70 per cent of respondents thought that the council had effective arrangements for dealing with inappropriate behaviour by council officers, 57 per cent by councillors and 55 per cent by members of the public



- 28 per cent of respondents had either frequently or occasionally felt at risk personally in their role as a councillor, 45 per cent felt at risk rarely and only 26 per cent never felt at risk
- 65 per cent of respondents thought that council arrangements for protecting councillors personally were either very or fairly effective
- 7 in 10 respondents experienced abuse or intimidation in last twelve months; 10 per cent experienced it frequently, 29 per cent occasionally, 33 per cent rarely. Only 27 per cent had never had any such experiences
- 63 per cent of respondents felt that the arrangements in place for protecting councillors personally were effective
- 79 per cent of respondents would recommend the role of councillor to others
- 65 per cent of respondents intended to stand for re-election

### **Detailed examination of the responses to the call to evidence**

According to the recent LGA Councillor census <sup>[1]</sup>, which gathers key demographic data and perceptions from serving councillors 10 per cent of councillors have experienced abuse and intimidation frequently, with a further 29 per cent experiencing it occasionally. Only 27 per cent said they have never had any such experiences. To get a clearer understanding of how abuse against councillors usually presents, what kinds of abuse councillors experience and why people abuse councillors, councillors and those around them were asked to share their experiences of abuse and intimidation of councillors by the public.

### **Experiences of abuse**

Respondents were from across the political spectrum, from different council types, and geographical areas, including submissions from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. 88 per cent of respondents had experienced abuse and/or intimidation directed against them personally due to their role, with the majority receiving both; 76 per cent had witnessed abuse and/or intimidation of this nature. Respondents to the survey were from a range of demographic groups in terms of age, sex and other protected characteristics; although it was not possible to do further

statistical analysis to look for particularly at prevalent groups in the data due to the sample size. Together this could suggest that all councillors may be at risk of experiencing abuse and intimidation during their political career and that some councillors both experience and witness abuse. However, there is evidence from the qualitative responses to the survey that councillors with protected characteristics are more likely to experience personal attacks and abuse. Later in the report we will consider in more depth whether some councillors are targeted with different kinds of abuse.

The abuse described by respondents was multi-faceted and took place in both the online and in-person spaces. Death threats, abusive and discriminatory language, character assassination and intimidatory behaviour, such as encroaching on personal spaces, were common forms of abuse. Destruction of property, physical assault and serious ongoing harassment like stalking or sexual harassment were reported, but these forms of abuse were rarer and more likely to result in some form of police involvement.

Overall, when the reports of abuse were grouped as either offline abuse (in-person or via telephone or post) or online abuse (social media, virtual meetings, or other online communication) they were equal, showing that online abuse happens just as much as offline abuse. However, 73 per cent of respondents said that multiple incidents of abuse they experienced took place on social media, making it the most common place for abuse to occur. Respondents were much more likely to report that abuse had occurred on multiple occasions and involved multiple perpetrators, than multiple incidents by one person or a single incident. This was particularly the case with online communication and on social media, referred to as “the Wild West” by one respondent.

Respondents felt that the increased use of unregulated social media platforms had increased the likelihood of abuse and hurtful comments. Respondents mentioned ‘pile-on’ abuse which is when a number of different individuals sending harassing communication to one victim in a public (social media platform) or semi-public space (messaging service like WhatsApp). Significant amounts of abuse can accumulate very quickly in this way through individual posts, which can be difficult to remove from the platform but nevertheless have a cumulative harmful effect. The immediacy and 24-hour nature of social media and the reach into personal spaces was

also cited as an area of concern, with councillors feeling targeted within their own homes and unable to disengage from abuse being directed at them online. Respondents also suggested that the anonymity of social media emboldened perpetrators to be more extreme on social media and allowed them to set up multiple accounts for the purpose of abusing or 'Trolling' others with impunity.

Whilst the Government's Online Safety Bill may help to address some forms of serious harmful online communication by introducing new communication offences and by introducing a duty to protect adults from harmful content, most online abuse would probably not meet the threshold for criminal prosecution or might fall below the scope of what content should be removed under this duty. We therefore have concerns that these provisions will not have the intended impact and more is needed to address non-criminal but nonetheless harmful online abuse and misinformation.

Councillors have many in-person interactions with residents. Respondents report that single incidents were more likely to happen in person than online and even single incidents had a significant impact on victims. Respondents repeatedly highlighted how visible and locally accessible councillors are to the public, particularly compared to national politicians. In their formal role, councillors attend clearly advertised council events like council meetings and make decisions about highly emotive local issues like planning, licensing and service provision that affect a lot of residents. Council meetings are rightly open to the public, but there is generally little or no security or police presence to handle incidents when they occur. This is often down to the level of resource available, and some respondents indicated that even when the police accepted there were heightened risks at certain council meetings, they often could not guarantee police support due to resourcing issues. As a consequence, some reported council meetings being adjourned or postponed due to safety concerns.

By comparison members of parliament conduct their official parliamentary role in the highly secure Houses of Parliament and often have formal offices and staff to support their local role and surgeries in their constituency. Members of parliament have a high local and national profile, representing thousands of constituents and are at significant risk of abuse and serious threats. It is therefore right that they have the appropriate facilities and protection to keep them safe as they fulfil their elected role.

However, councillors, particularly those with special responsibilities, make decisions affecting hundreds of thousands of people and may experience similar levels of abuse and threats as MPs. Councillors should therefore receive support appropriate to the level of risk associated with their role and their particular situation, just as MPs do.

Councillors also engage less formally with their local community by holding ward surgeries, door-knocking and visiting residents in their homes. Advice from political parties and the LGA is that these activities are not carried out alone, but responses from the survey indicated that many had done so before an incident occurred, and many rely on volunteers to support these activities. Respondents highlighted that in-person abuse takes place in both formal and informal settings and includes verbal abuse such as threats and discriminatory language and other physical abuse amounting to criminal incidents. Spitting was a common and upsetting form of physical abuse, but respondents also reported more serious physical assaults.

Threats were a consistent theme throughout the responses and ranged from threats to smear a councillor's reputation to threats to the physical person, family or property of the councillor. These threats were seen to be more serious due to the public availability of councillors' personal information, such as home addresses on council websites, making councillors more vulnerable to serious incidents and high-profile incidents over the past few years.

**“I have been abused on the street and threatened by being told, I know where you live...and I've been told to watch my back.”**

*Anonymous respondent*

In addition, some felt this accessibility of information increased the risks of threats being made online translating into real violence. One respondent gave an example of a death threat being made online where multiple individuals suggested councillors should be shot, one social media user posted that they would be willing to 'pull the trigger, just tell me where they live', while another signposted to councillors' home addresses on the council website. In another case, threats were implied by leaving a live bullet on the doorstep of a councillor's house. This is a rare example, however, many respondents had less extreme examples of online

communications leading to real world threats, such as multiple 'poison pen' letters being delivered to councillors homes and orchestrated demonstrations outside a councillors home.

## Normalisation

Respondents who said they had experienced multiple incidents were asked to describe how often they received abuse from more than once a day through to less than once a month. The responses indicated that a high frequency of abuse was common. For example, one in ten respondents said they experienced abuse due to their role once a day or more than once a day and 36 per cent of those who experienced multiple incidents of abuse, said they experienced abuse once a week or more frequently. Almost half the respondents who experienced multiple incidents said the abuse was ongoing and many described it as constant. A third said the abuse was not ongoing and some said described abuse not as regular but as directly linked to specific engagement activities, such as posting online. Nevertheless, there was a clear theme that a certain level of abuse and intimidation is a feature of political life which is both expected and accepted by councillors and those around them.

Normalisation of abusive behaviour towards councillors was also evident in the qualitative responses councillors gave to the call for evidence. Some respondents said that although they were initially shocked by the prevalence and level of abuse when they were elected, the accepting attitude of their councillor colleagues, council staff and political officers quickly led to a shift in their expectations and norms. Consequently, respondents expressed a perception that councillors ought to be able to manage the majority of abuse themselves and that when they struggled to cope, they were concerned people would judge them or say they were not cut out for politics. This might partly explain why 37 per cent of respondent did not seek support in relation to their experiences. A few challenged this perception, recognising that councillors should not have to suffer personal attacks to represent their communities.



All organisations could take it more seriously; being robust enough to handle personal attacks should not be a pre-requisite for public office. *Anonymous respondent*

In relation to council staff or political officers, responses showed this normalisation playing out in two distinct and opposing ways. One approach accepted that abuse of councillors by the public is expected and normalised such that very little individual support was offered; abuse is so every day and constant that trying to address it would be a huge and never-ending effort without much benefit. The second approach to increased abuse by the public was for councils to put in place varying levels of support for councillors including specific training, guidance, support, and policies to deal with abuse from the public and bespoke risk assessments of councillors' personal safety. There is a similar divergence of experience in relation to police response to abuse and intimidation of councillors. In some cases, normalisation of abuse of elected members has led to some poor practices where genuinely criminal or threatening behaviour has not been investigated or addressed because of the victim's role as a councillor.

**“I think there is an element of not being believed, that you are exaggerating, that you have to put up with it, and that if you do not like it, you can change your role and give to someone else.”**

*Anonymous respondent*

Normalisation of abuse by councillors themselves may also have led to some councillors not reporting serious abuse or threats when they occurred. Some respondents were clearly self-categorising abuse as tolerable or serious enough to report to the police, with little in between. In addition, some councillors said that their more experienced councillor colleagues seemed more resilient to abuse and described being told they would get used to abuse after a while. In some cases, this high tolerance had led to councillors not reporting serious incidents, which the police later advised were criminal, should have been reported, and may have put the councillor at risk of harm.



The idea that councillors and other people in high profile public roles should expect and grow used to abuse, that they learn to cope with threats and intimidation, and that there is little to be done to curb abuse is a pervasive narrative at local and national levels. In the aftermath of the murder of Sir David Amess MP, the Government rightly reviewed arrangements for MP's security to assess the provision available and bring consistency across different areas of the country. The LGA welcomed this prioritisation of elected members security, however, the Government chose not to widen the scope of the review to include councillors and other local politicians, despite repeated calls from them to do so. In addition, all police forces were instructed to make direct contact with MPs in their area to discuss their safety and provide advice and support. By comparison councils coordinated support for councillors locally; police input relied on existing relationships rather than a national directive and therefore varied across different areas.

Finally, councillors are leaders of their local community and often act as role models for future leaders; most are striving in good faith to exemplify high levels of discourse and respect debate. However, some respondents commented that rising level of general abuse and disrespectful debate at the national level was coarsening debate in the council chamber. Others said they felt abuse from fellow councillors and political party members was on the rise, despite there being common and well understood standards of behaviour and conduct based on the Nolan principles and principles of respect.

Large scale reviews of standards in local government, such as the Committee for Standards in Public Life 2019 report, have found little evidence of a widespread standards problem. However, there was evidence of misconduct by some councillors related to bullying and harassment. The LGA is committed to maintaining high standards of conduct and creating a consistency of approach by councils when dealing with councillor standards and behaviour. In 2020, the LGA developed a Model Councillor Code of Conduct in consultation with the sector to set out a common standard of behaviour and support councillors to role model positive behaviours, and respectful conduct.

The normalisation of abuse and intimidation of people in public life has had a negative impact for many, including councillors. If this normalisation of abuse is symptomatic of a wider toxification of society and public discourse, further consideration will need to be given to solutions that will address this within the sphere of local government and in wider society.

### **Targeted abuse towards councillors with protected characteristics**

Targeted abuse towards councillors with protected characteristics was a recurring theme in the responses to the call for evidence, whether through first-hand experience or as a witness. The qualitative evidence from the survey indicated that councillors with protected characteristics may experience more personal attacks, compared to others who experience more general abuse.

Some respondents suggested that councillors with protected characteristics were more likely to experience more extreme and a higher volume of abuse; due to the number of responses and style of the survey it has not been possible to confirm this claim through statistical analysis of these results. However, this would follow trends seen at national levels. For example, in a 2020 study looking at ‘Which politicians receive abuse?’ in the run up to the 2019 UK general election, Gorrell et al. found that women received more sexist abuse, whereas men received more general and political abuse.

Misogyny, racism and homophobia were all mentioned by respondents, although misogyny and reference to women’s personal characteristics or making threats designed to specifically impact women were particularly common.

**“Initially when I became a councillor, I was told by a colleague that I should never hold a surgery alone as I was at risk... I was told that with me being disabled, I would be the target of negative treatment by people.”** *Anonymous female respondent*

Many councils, political parties and organisations, like the LGA, are working hard to increase the diversity of representation in local government and this requires a greater variety of candidates to stand at local election. So, it’s important to note here that many respondents directly linked abuse associated with personal characteristics with reluctance to stand for



election or re-election; some described women choosing to take on back-office roles in the local party rather than run for office because of concerns about what abuse they would face.

Some argue that this kind of targeted abuse is symptomatic of wider inequality and discrimination in society and the solution in the long run is to tackle the root cause. Personal and discriminatory abuse of candidates and councillors with protected characteristics undoubtedly hampers efforts to improve local representation and if it continues may have a negative impact on the limited diversity we currently have in local government. So, in the meantime, actions to address those symptoms and reduce the excessive amount and severity of abuse women and other people with protected characteristics receive could help reverse the trend of underrepresentation of these groups in local and national politics.

### **Triggers of abuse**

To better understand the reasons why perpetrators direct abuse at councillors, respondents were asked to comment on whether they felt there were triggers that acted as catalysts of abuse and what those triggers might be. This covered specific to non-specific events and processes and picked up where abuse was not triggered but appeared to be generalised.

59 per cent of respondents believed the abuse was triggered by specific events. Others were not sure or felt there was not a specific trigger event except being in public life. These triggers can broadly be categorised into abuse related to decisions of the council, abuse linked to political party or individual political stances, abuse aggravated by other factors, like perceived poor performance of the council or a misunderstanding of the role of councils and councillors, and abuse linked to the councillor's role in public life. Abuse, triggered by a specific event or otherwise, could also be aggravated by certain myths and perceptions about councillors.

The most common and easy to identify trigger was contentious council decisions; respondents highlighted abuse related to unsuccessful planning and licensing applications and objections to general planning and parking decisions as common triggers. Planning and licensing are an integral part of council business and can be very emotive issues as these decisions can have an impact on individuals and the whole community. Councillors appointed to committees dealing with these issues will generally receive training on the technicalities of planning and licensing and making these

decisions before they take up the role. However, there is no strengthened level of support for councillors sitting on these committees, or training for planning staff who support councillors, to help them deal with abuse linked to the types of decisions they make.

Another trigger for abuse was wider council policy on topical issues and in some cases, these were associated with certain types of councils, for example **Low Traffic Neighbourhood issues** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/stakeholder-engagement-emergency-lessons-low-traffic-neighbourhoods>) were clearly associated with urban rather than rural councils. However, there were many triggers, like Covid-19 vaccinations and climate change, that traversed geography across all types of councils.

Here it is useful to examine the different kinds of behaviours respondents said residents displayed and clarify the distinction between appropriate objections to council decisions and policy or complaint about council services. Respondents reported a range of behaviours from continuous and repeated complaints and objections to personalised verbal abuse and intimidatory comments and physical aggression intended to inappropriately influence individual councillors and local decision-making. Residents have a right to object to policies they are unhappy with; these civil liberties are a vital democratic principle and must be maintained. Further to this, the LGA actively encourages residents to engage with their local council and the decisions that affect their communities. However, actions that amount to harassment and devolve into personal attacks or are intended to intimidate a councillor into changing their position or actions are not acceptable and this is happening far too often.

Campaigning and canvassing in the community were also highlighted as high-risk activities by respondents. One respondent labelled door-knocking as “particularly harrowing”, with some councillors saying they had concerns about their own safety and wellbeing, as well as their volunteers while campaigning. Many respondents stated that this abuse was connected to the policy positions of their political party or their own views on particularly divisive issues, such as leaving the European Union. Respondents described how disagreement and opposing views were then reflected in the form of aggression, threats, and personal abuse. Some commented that

this has become steadily worse in recent years and that personalised abuse between national and local politicians had set a precedent that has filtered down into conversations with members of the public.

Responses to the questionnaire indicate that it is sometimes possible to anticipate what events or activities might trigger abuse and aggression towards councillors. Consequently, it may be possible to put in place measures to prevent abuse from taking place or mitigate the impacts of abuse. Council officers often work with their councillors ahead of contentious or high-profile decisions to ensure that they are handled sensitively and that councillors know how to respond to online abuse. For example, councils can remove the option for comments on social media posts for a set period of time and advise councillors to do the same. Allowing time before opening up for comments can reduce 'knee-jerk' reactions and allow time for consideration, while still allowing people to have their say at a later point.

### **Aggravating factors**

There was a clear theme running through the qualitative responses about factors that served to aggravate and intensify abuse. These were chiefly based on preconceptions about the role and powers of the councillors, levels of council performance and the public's right to abuse people in public office.

Respondents commented that it was common for abuse to be rooted in a misunderstanding of the role of the council and councillors, particularly where councils are required to implement government policy. Confusion about responsibility and functions of different levels of government was compounded by residents' incorrect assumption that councillors have the power to immediately influence national policy and change local policy independently of the rest of the council. Respondents also commented that councillors are more accessible and available to residents than members of parliament and therefore were often the first port of call for disgruntled residents.

**“Council is always seen as the bearer of bad news whilst MP’s who are often responsible for setting the policy are deemed as a hero.”**

*Anonymous respondent*

Change, reduction or closing of local discretionary services was a common theme in responses, this was linked to these services being vulnerable to reduction in central funding from Government and often being highly visible physical infrastructure in the community, such as library services.

Respondents commented that it was sometimes difficult to control the narratives around service changes and even positive changes, such as transferring library services to local community groups, was sometimes seen as an abdication of responsibility.

21 per cent of respondents felt that the abuse they experienced was not triggered by a specific event. Many of those felt that abuse was related solely to being a figure in public life and that abusing politicians was seen as fair game.



The problem is that abuse often starts as low level... This creates a sense that local councillors are easy game for abuse. *Anonymous respondent*

They particularly highlighted running for election, being elected and taking on additional responsibilities as points where abuse started or intensified. This is supported by the fact that 72 per cent of respondents said they had additional responsibilities as a councillor. A further 19 per cent of respondents were not sure whether abuse was related to specific events or not and some said it was a combination of ongoing abuse and events that exacerbated abuse, such as engaging with resident online or at ward surgeries.

Councils and political parties have a role in supporting candidates and councillors representing them. The evidence suggests abuse is becoming more common, consistent and normalised in the eyes of the public, councillors and public organisations; one in five respondents to the survey said the abuse or intimidation was ongoing. To ensure this trend does not continue, organisations that support councillors should be proactive in

handling serious abuse and referring incidents to the police where necessary, as well as actively supporting councillors to handle abuse that falls below the criminal level.

### **Personal impacts of abuse and intimidation of councillors**

A critical part of the call for evidence asked respondents to share what the impacts of abuse and intimidation had been on them and other councillors. Evidence from these responses shows that abuse and intimidation of councillors has a significant impact on individual councillors and those around them.

Three broad categories of impacts emerged; impacts on the individual, impacts on the individual's family and friends, and impacts on local democracy and the community. These categories were influenced by how public the abuse was, who the councillor shared their experiences with and how the abuse influenced the councillors' choices.

Many respondents described how their experiences of abuse had negatively impacted their mental health and their ability to function in their councillor or other professional and personal roles. Depression and anxiety were commonly reported and some even reported being suicidal due to the levels of abuse. Some had to seek medical advice to deal with the physiological impacts of stress, and in extreme cases respondents described being so scared of verbal and physical abuse that they stopped going out or would only leave the house if accompanied by someone else.

Due to the public or threatening nature of the abuse, many respondents were concerned for their loved ones. These concerns ranged from family members being distressed by the amount of public abuse directed towards the councillor to fears for their safety or the safety of the family home.

**“[Threats have] made me more aware of both mine and others safety and [the] importance of protecting myself and my family home...we all have to be careful.”** *Anonymous respondent*

Respondents commented that in small communities it is very easy to identify a councillor's family members and friends and sometimes they encounter abuse because of this association. These included grandchildren being bullied by other children at school, family members being ostracised

from community spaces, and family businesses losing custom. Family members also worried about the councillor's safety and asked them not to stand for election again.



**My stress affects my family and I fear that they will be tainted too by the accusations levelled at me. *Anonymous respondent***

### **Democratic impacts of abuse and intimidation of councillors**

To understand the full implications of abuse and intimidation of councillors, it is important consider impacts beyond the immediate and personal to the knock-on impacts on democracy and local representation.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they would stand for election again and 42 per cent said they would stand again and 27 per cent were not decided. 43 per cent of respondents went on to answer a question about whether the possibility of abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again and over two-thirds said it had.

Many respondents added their comments saying that the impact of abuse and intimidation on them personally and their family had directly influenced their decision on whether to stand at the next local election. Some described the lack of structural support for councillors or way to challenge poor behaviour as a contributing factor.

**“I could not run in another election ...I would not want to put my family through the stress and anxiety...**



Unfortunately in politics it is perceived by some that councillors are ‘fair game’ and should have a thick skin. **Even a thick skin can be penetrated.** *Anonymous respondent*

Further to this, respondents said that some councillors were resigning before their term had finished and potential candidates were being discouraged from running for election by the levels of abuse. 60 per cent of respondents said they knew others who were unwilling to run for election or take on leadership roles due to anticipated abuse. Elections are naturally highly stressful, but some respondents said that the line between political competition and personal attacks had been crossed.

On the other hand, a few respondents said they found that abuse had spurred them on to “fight harder”, particularly when the abuse related to personal characteristics rather than objections to their policies or decisions. In general, these cases should be taken as the exception not the rule and certainly not an expectation of the majority of councillors. It is therefore still vital that abuse against councillors is treated seriously, and that councils and police challenge the normalisation of this kind of abuse.

### **Support from relevant agencies and self-protection**

As part of the call for evidence respondents described whether and how they sought support for abuse and how relevant agencies, such as the police, council officers and political parties, responded when they ask for help or reported an incident. This helped clarify the range of opinions, approaches and responses that councillors experience when they seek support to handle abuse and intimidation and in particular brought out the variety of provision at different councils.

63 per cent of respondents sought support in relation to the abuse they experienced, and many received support from multiple sources. However, out of those who sought support almost a third sought informal support from councillor peers, friends and family and by employing a barrister or solicitor to give legal advice. Respondents were most likely to seek support



from their peers but many went to multiple agencies, such as their own political party, council officers or the police over the abuse they experienced. Some looked for support from other sources, including national organisations like the LGA, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, the Local Government Ombudsman, and social media companies. Some also described handling these issues alone and managing their own personal safety.

When asked how helpful different types of support were, respondents said that support from friends and family was by far the most helpful, followed by peer support. This is particularly challenging finding as friends and family are likely to be the least well equipped to provide effective solutions to public abuse, apart from compassion and empathy. The police and the council were similarly ranked but respondents said they were not as helpful as family and peers. Support from political parties was ranked lowest out of all the options.

There were significant inconsistencies in the level and efficacy of responses to abuse of councillors from relevant agencies. Councillors themselves take a mixture of different approaches to dealing with these issues and responses from relevant agencies were equally mixed. In some cases, respondents reported an excellent experience, with prompt and effective action for those involved.

**“Officer and member colleagues were very helpful and supportive. The police were fantastic – took a statement, gave me advice and helped me enhance security at my home, put me on an emergency call list.”** *Anonymous respondent*

However, this was not universally the case and a common theme from respondents was a lack of coordination and partnership working between the council and political parties. Some councillors felt they were falling through the gaps between different agencies, with no one taking responsibility for councillor safety and wellbeing.

**“Both officers listened and offered me moral support. However, neither have been able to stop the residents’ abuse. The council would not take legal action on my behalf against the worst abuser and advised me against taking a personal case against the individual. The**



**police have seemed powerless to help me. My party haven't really been of any help... Some members of my family have given me lots of moral support.”** *Anonymous respondent*

In general, councillors sought support from their council in relation to misinformation online, abusive communications and physical safety or to request that their personal information, such as home addresses, be removed from the public domain. The response from councils was variable with no one set way of doing things. Some councils focused on equipping councillors to handle abuse and intimidation themselves with training and guidance, while others took a more involved approach, treating councillors similarly to employees and offering lone worker equipment and 24/7 support. Some councils had developed a successful collaborative approach working with political parties and the police to offer support and triage risk to councillors and offering bespoke risk assessments for ward surgery venues and private homes.

**“This [incident] happened over a weekend, the chief executive rang me, in fact my phone never stopped ringing, messages of support from the police and senior officers... I felt truly supported by county staff and councillor colleagues.”** *Anonymous respondent*

Support for councillors needs to be flexible to the specific situation and context, therefore it is expected that this offer will look different in different places. However, respondents also shared examples where they received little or no support at all and in particular, highlighted the lack of pastoral care available to councillors. It is becoming more common for political parties to actively record and deal with abuse against their members and some councils now allow their councillor to access staff wellbeing and counselling offers. However, many respondents said that council officers told them to ignore abuse and were apathetic towards addressing these incidents, particularly when they took place online.

There was a similar theme around the police classifying abuse against councillors as political or free speech and refusing to get involved as they would with other citizens. Threats against councillors' safety was generally, although not consistently, treated seriously by the police with some form of action being taken. However, this did not always result in a cessation of the threats and abuse or a warning or prosecution and so perpetrators continue with impunity.

A consistent theme from respondent's experiences was that the police often do not consider online abuse as their responsibility and believe that councillors who willingly stand for office should "expect to receive more abuse than a member of the public". Due to this perception, respondents described not being taken seriously by the police, struggling to get their complaint investigated and consequently no action being taken against the perpetrators. Councillors do expect more abuse than members of the general public and often have very high tolerances for abuse, however, this does not mean abuse should be treated as acceptable or that councillors should not expect police to investigate crimes committed against them. In time, new offences in the Online Safety Bill may improve the police and prosecution response. The bar for criminal sanction has rightly been set very high to ensure legitimate free speech is protected, nevertheless the new offences may act as a deterrent to perpetrators and encourage police to investigate reports of online harm or misinformation more thoroughly.

37 per cent of respondents did not seek support for the abuse they experienced. Some respondents said this was due to the abuse being a "one-off" event or the abuse being at a tolerable level, such that seeking formal support felt disproportionate. This description adds to the argument that abuse against politicians has become normalised; while abuse may be tolerated, it is still not acceptable.

However, there were some more extreme examples of abuse, intimidation and threats where respondents still did not seek formal support. This was mainly due to a perception that the onus was on them as the victim to protect themselves from abuse and poor behaviour and that there are few or no structural mechanisms in place to protect them from abuse. This feeling was summarised well by a response who said that councillors are "very much left to provide their own security."

Further to this, some said they had little faith that the council could help them deal with the abuse affecting them. This is borne out to an extent by the 2022 councillor census data, where 45 per cent of councillors did not feel that their council had effective arrangements in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour by the public or didn't know what those arrangements were and 37 per cent did not feel that the arrangements their council had in place to protect them personally were effective.

Finally, some councillors commented that some perpetrators were known to have mental health problems and were known to council services and the police. Respondents mentioned that social care teams could be helpful in risk assessing and facilitating interactions between councillors and residents with additional needs to ensure those residents are able to access their elected representative. However, respondents also expressed frustrations that action was often not taken against some perpetrators because of their mental health problems. While a person's mental state may influence their behaviour, this does not lessen the impact abuse has on the victim or threats made by people with mental health problems should be taken as seriously as any other threat.

### Councillor safety

Abuse and intimidation form part of a spectrum of abuse which can include very serious assaults and evidence suggests abuse is to be shifting towards the more extreme end of this spectrum. In the recent councillor census less than a third of respondents said that they had never felt at personal risk when fulfilling their role as councillor. Respondents to the call for evidence commented that it felt like abuse was getting worse and risks of running for office were increasing.



Local politics is a far more dangerous place now that it ever was in the past. *Anonymous respondent*

72 per cent of respondents to the survey had taken some action to avoid intimidation and abuse. These actions were usually around moderating or managing planned and unplanned engagement with the public, specifically using the options on social media to block abusive accounts, holding wards surgeries in public buildings, never working alone, and installing home security equipment. Some respondents commented that their approach had been to disengage from social media entirely and move to holding appointment only surgeries or “walking surgeries” held outside.

Over the last few years, high profile incidents like the murder of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP outside their respective ward surgeries have highlighted the vulnerability of elected politicians to serious assaults. This has rightly reignited concerns about the safety of councillors, mayors and police and crime commissioner and some historic practices that could put them at additional risk, such as the publication of politicians' home addresses.

As mentioned earlier, there was a centrally coordinated programme of support for MPs following the death of Sir David Amess MP. This was a high-risk period for MPs and there were real concerns for their safety; a direct police response was a reasonable expectation from MPs. However, there was no expectation from central government that police would contact councillors in the same way. Instead, councils worked with their local police forces to reinforce their approaches to councillor safety. This was light touch in some cases, updating and reissuing councillor safety guidance or rerunning training designed to help councillors keep themselves safe. However, others recognised that councillors cannot control everything around them and that other agencies have a clear role in enhancing personal safety councillors are as safe as possible while going about their day-to-day council business.

Leeds City Council, for example, took the step of risk assessing all venues that councillors use as ward surgeries whether or not they were council-owned and worked with the councillors and venue providers to mitigate any risks identified. Many councils now provide personal alarms or systems for councillors to use when they are out in the community, in a person's home and at their ward surgeries. These alarms vary in functionality, but usually they can provide a way to alert council officers to an incident taking place. Officers can then respond appropriately, starting with a welfare check and escalating to calling the police to attend the councillor's location if necessary. Some alarm systems can also audio-record what is going on for evidence or have a mechanism to allow the councillor to silently alert the police that they need help.

In the past councils have routinely displayed councillor home addresses on their websites and until March 2019 councillors were required to publicly declare their home address on the ballot paper when they ran for election. Election practice has changed in line with recommendations made by the

Committee for Standards in Public life 2017 and 2019 reports into **Intimidation in public life** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>) and **Local government ethical standards** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-government-ethical-standards-report>) that making councillors' home addresses public was unnecessary and put them at risk of incidents in their home. Evidence from respondents suggests that just the idea of having to publish a home address can also put people off standing for election and this is out of step with the way we treat personal data in every other sphere of life.

The practice of putting councillor addresses on council websites has reduced as councillors' attitudes have changed. However, councillors may still be required to publicise their home addresses as part of declaring their pecuniary interests on the public register of interests. Councillors may apply for a dispensation from their monitoring officer if they feel disclosing their address would put them or a member of their household at risk of violence. However, the monitoring officer has the discretion to decide whether this test has been met and this has led to inconsistent approaches in different councils. Some monitoring officers have taken the proactive view that all councillors are at risk of violence due to their public role and allow all councillors a dispensation, while others require a specific reason or incident to occur before they will remove an address. Effectively this means that someone could run for election without declaring their address and within 21 days of being elected be required to put it on a public document. Clarity that dispensation may be applied without a specific incident taking place would help create consistency of approach across different councils and reassure prospective councillors that they will have this protection if they are elected. In the view of the LGA, legislative change is required to put this beyond doubt.

Changes to allow councillors to withhold their home addresses from the public register of interests would be in line with changes rules on publishing home addresses for candidates running in elections. Prior to 2018, candidates in local elections were required to declare their home address on the ballot paper; now candidates may choose to opt out of sharing their address. Some councillors still choose to declare their home address. However, feedback from members and safety experts is increasingly

moving towards the idea that candidates and councillors' personal information should be protected and that they should have to opt-in to sharing information like homes addresses as is the case with private citizens.

In recognition of the concerns in the sector and the real risk to councillors, the LGA ran three 'Personal safety for councillors' events for over 500 attendees between December 2021 and March 2022, updated the Councillor guide to handling intimidation, and produced case studies outlining how councils can support councillors with their safety and wellbeing.

Beyond the role of councils, political parties and individual councillors to manage councillor safety, there is a wider issue about how violence and threats against councillors are dealt with by the police. Earlier we mentioned some examples of councillors having excellent experiences where the council and the police worked together to mitigate risks to councillor safety. However, the overwhelming feedback was that concerns raised by councillors were not taken seriously enough or were outright dismissed by police as part and parcel of political life.

Councillors have the same legal rights and protections as any other member of the public and some would argue councillors have an enhanced risk profile when it comes to physical abuse which should be considered when they report abuse, threat and intimidation. Despite this, some believe that the bar for police to investigate and act when a crime is reported appears to have been set higher for councillors.

This should be considered in relation to other elected politicians, such as members of parliament. Members of parliament have a dedicated team based in the Metropolitan Police called the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigations Team to handle crime on the parliamentary estate in Westminster and liaise with Single Points of Contact (SPoC) in local constabularies to deal with crime and security of members of parliament in their home constituencies. This can include doing specialist risk assessments of MPs homes and offices and handling improved security measures like the installation of better locks and lighting and digital doorbells or CCTV.



By comparison there is no single team or functionality in police forces that are equipped with the specialist knowledge required to triage and handle crimes committed against local politicians because of their role as an elected official. In addition, although informal relationships may exist between councils and police in relation to councillor safety this does not always translate into a coordinated approach to addressing crimes against councillors. For example, some police forces will not accept a report of a crime from the council on the councillor's behalf but insist on a report from the councillor as a citizen. This risks taking the complaint out of context and can lead to an incorrect assessment of the associated risks to the complainant. On the other hand, some councils have proactively established partnerships and collaborative forums to ensure there are strong links between local emergency services in case of incidents or emergencies. One council, for example, holds regular collaborative meetings with the Neighbourhood Safety Team, local police, local fire and rescue service and Police Community Support Team where they share latest intelligence and resources and complete a joint risk assessment for an individual councillor's activities. This can help prevent incidents taking place, but can also support councillors if an incident does occur.

Councils and police services have a duty to work together to formulate and implement strategies to tackle local crime and disorder under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. This is usually facilitated through a Community Safety Partnership. So, relationships should already exist that could help to manage crime against councillors. However, this does not always seem to be working. One respondent shared that the only reason their complaint was dealt with was because they mentioned it in passing to the police and crime commissioner and chief constable of the local police force.

Actions to abuse or intimidate councillors stifle democracy and the voice of elected leaders and threats to councillors' personal safety is a crime. We recognise that there is significant pressure on the police and the Crown Prosecution Service and that it is not always appropriate to pursue prosecution for all crime. However, as with MPs, councillors should expect to have their complaints are taken seriously, and for police to use all available and appropriate tools at their disposal against perpetrators.

## [1] LGA 2022 Councillor census data

(<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>)

### Summary and recommendations

The call for evidence has revealed an ongoing issue with abuse and intimidation of councillors and concerns about the safety of local politicians that are having an impact on councillors and local democracy more widely. It is important that we address these issues to ensure that they do not have a detrimental impact on councillors, councils and local democracy in the future.

There are clear gaps and inconsistencies in the support and response mechanisms available to councillors to deal with these issues, including council support, support from political parties and preventative support from local police. There is also evidence of a normalisation and acceptance of abuse of councillors that should be challenged. However, there is some evidence of good practice around risk assessing ward surgery venues and home locations for councillors, building partnerships with local police, wellbeing support and having clear policies for dealing with communications from abusive residents.

**Recommendation 1: Councils and other relevant partners should take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors' safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously.**

**Recommendation 2: The LGA should continue to gather and disseminate good practice from across the sector, consider**



**what more can be done to prevent abuse and intimidation of councillors through the Civility in public life programme, and support councils and councillors when these incidents occur.**

There is evidence of inconsistency in the response of the police to incidents of abuse, intimidation and aggression towards councillors and a normalisation of unacceptable conduct against politicians. There is also a perception that in some cases the threshold for intervention has been set higher for councillors than other members of the public. However, there were examples of good practices by police who took a proactive and coordinated approach to councillor harassment and safety. This worked best when police took a risk-based approach, took the public nature of the councillor role into account, and used all the powers at their disposal to disrupt abusive behaviour before it became more serious.

Police could consider replicating successful approaches taken with MPs or candidates during elections and providing a specialist Single Point of Contact for councillors in the local police force. Another approach would be having a Safety Liaison Officer as is provided for journalists across many forces in England; SLOs oversee cases related to crime against journalists and intervene only when necessary.

**Recommendation 3: Police forces should work to improve the consistency of responses to abuse of and threats made against councillors and take a risk-based approach that factors in the specific risks that councillors face, as they do with other high-risk individuals, such as MPs. This should include identifying best practice in relation to councillor support and safety and sharing it across the country.**

The availability of councillors' personal information can make them vulnerable in their own homes and the current legislation lacks clarity in relation to when home addresses can be withheld from the public register of interests. There is also an ongoing presumption that councillors should

share their home address, and this can put people off from standing for election. Instead, it may be better for the sector to move towards a presumption that councillors do not share their home addresses publicly and councillors should have to actively 'opt-in' to having this information shared as with private individuals and their personal information.

**Recommendation 4: The Government should prioritise legislation to put it beyond doubt that councillors can withhold their home address from the public register of pecuniary interests.**

**Recommendation 5: The LGA should work with political parties, election and democratic officers, and organisations responsible for guidance to raise awareness of the options currently available and promote the practice of keeping home addresses private during the election process and once elected.**

It is clear in the responses from the call for evidence that councillors experience a lot of abuse online and that social media can be a fertile ground for abuse and intimidation. There were significant concerns about the availability of personal information online and how easily online abuse and translate into physical harm. Common concerns were about the cumulative impact of 'pile-on' abuse and how online abuse can transcend traditional boundaries into personal spaces 24 hours a day. The Online Safety Bill currently going through Parliament will aim to better regulate online spaces through protecting users from illegal and harmful content. The LGA welcome the Bill and will work to ensure it can protect users from harmful abuse and misinformation that might otherwise fall below the criminal level as currently written.

**Recommendation 6: Social media companies and internet service providers should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.**

There is currently no clear offer of support or leadership

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Government in relation to the safety of local councillors, despite serious incidents taking place in the last year and concerns about the vulnerability of councillors and the impact of abuse on local democracy. This is in contrast to the centrally coordinated support provided to MPs in relation to abuse, harassment and personal safety.

**Recommendation 7: The relevant Government department should convene a working group, in partnership with the LGA, to bring together relevant agencies to develop and implement an action plan to address the issue of abuse of local politicians and their safety.**

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**Appendix 3: Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for  
councillors**

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## Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors

Our new publication outlines how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse and includes principles for councils to consider, top tips and good practice case studies.

03 Jul 2023

LGA

43.28

### Executive summary

Serving in public office is both a privilege and a responsibility and **our Debate Not Hate campaign** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate>) is working to challenge the abuse local politicians face. However, there is a growing issue of abuse and intimidation in public and political discourse that can have a negative impact on councillors, their families and local democracy. This is why the LGA commissioned Riber Consultants to work with councils and relevant partners to consider the best approaches to supporting councillors to prevent and manage abuse linked to their elected role. Through the project, researchers identified key challenges to supporting councillors with these issues, principles for councils to consider, and top tips and good practice case studies to help councils better support councillors prevent and handle abuse and intimidation.

### Challenges

- **Challenge 1:** Councillors feel vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped or supported to handle abuse, harassment, and intimidation. Councillors are informed of their risk but have limited knowledge of tools for effective conflict resolution and aftercare.
- **Challenge 2:** Lack of clear process around reporting instances of abuse, harassment and intimidation to the council. Councillors don't know who to turn to when an incident occurs. There is limited understanding about the role and help that supporting officers can provide.
- **Challenge 3:** There is uneven engagement and response from the police to abuse and harassment of councillors. Some police forces are sympathetic, some others are not or consider low-risk abuse as something insignificant. There is limited advice tailored for elected officers in local politics and in occasions, a lack of understanding of why they need special measures.

### Principles for support agencies

Based on workshops and follow up interviews with council officers, we propose some guiding principles to help councils navigate these challenges:

1. **Zero-tolerance approach to abuse:** Establish and enforce a strict policy that clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.
2. **Clarity of process and responsibility:** Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the council to provide support to councillors.
3. **Relationships with local police:** Proactively develop strong relationships with the police to enhance coordination and foster mutual understanding of abuse affecting councillors and the role of police in addressing it.
4. **Tailored risk assessments:** Consider individual councillors' needs and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

**5. Prioritise councillor wellbeing:** Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries

## Recommendations

For this project, researchers used the framework of agency, whereby councillors, councils, police and local agencies have specific powers, resources and spheres of influence that they can affect. Through this framing, they also identified barriers to addressing abuse and intimidation which originate outside this sphere. In brief these issues included the management of harmful content online, the capacity and expectation of the police to respond to abuse against elected members, and the normalisation of abuse leading to poor standards of political and public discourse.

In response to these challenges, the LGA has developed three recommendations for central government, regulators and police forces across England to consider.

- **Recommendation 1:** The Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online, including developing clear guidance for social media and other online service providers on their obligations to mitigate the risks of online abuse and how this may be best achieved; and that the experience of elected members is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Government should work with the police to set out clear and consistent guidance on the role of policing in addressing abuse, intimidation and harassment of elected members. This should include expert capacity to monitor crime associated with elected members and act as a single point of contact for both councils and councillors.
- **Recommendation 3:** The Government should widen the scope of the Defending Democracy Programme to explicitly include the safety, security and wellbeing of locally elected politicians, rather than focusing solely on national politicians and foreign interference.

## Introduction and background

Abuse of elected members is unacceptable and there is evidence that these experiences are forcing good councillors out of local politics and deterring others from running for election.

In 2022, **the LGA found that seven out of 10 councillors** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>) had experienced abuse from the public in the previous year. Further research by the LGA in 2022, reinforced concerns that abuse in public life and public discourse is becoming normalised and seriously impacting civic life and local democracy.

The LGA has been working for some time to build a better understanding of the issue of abuse and intimidation of elected members and what individuals, local organisations and national government can do to reverse this trend. This project is part of a series of projects looking at what can be done to prevent abuse and address it when it occurs and focuses on what local agencies including councils and police can do to prevent and address abuse perpetrated against councillors. Other resources in this series include the **Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy report** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>) and the **Councillor guide to handling abuse and intimidation**. (<https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation>)

## Project background

The project is based on the premise that individuals and organisations have various spheres of influence within specific structures and different levels of autonomy and agency. Here agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices, while structure pertains to the broader social systems and institutions that shape individual behaviour and limit agency. There is an inherent tension between agency and structure as individual actions are influenced by and impacted by the structures in which they sit. This is particularly relevant to discussions about councillors as they occupy an unusual position, neither volunteer nor employee: they have both more agency by sitting slightly outside usual employment frameworks, but also benefit from fewer legal protections.

In this paradigm, there have been efforts to maximise on this agency and upskill councillors to manage their own environments, mitigate risks and build resilience. However, councillors only have the power and autonomy to impact their own actions. Beyond a councillor's circle of influence, other organisations in the local area may have the power, resources and, in some cases, the responsibility to respond to abuse, intimidation and threats aimed at locally elected members.

For example, councils alongside political parties provide the primary support mechanism for councillors locally, with officers acting as points of contact for day-to-day business and providing specialist advice and information. However, councils also have limited powers, resources, and their own specific sphere of influence. Only with the coordinated input from other statutory and non-statutory parties, such as the police, media providers, and social media providers can we hope to address abuse and intimidation against councillors and other elected members. Further still there are some issues that require national, social or systemic change and which local organisations cannot address in isolation.

Throughout this project and this report, the authors have used abuse, intimidation and public intimidation to refer to "words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life". This could include a range of behaviours, a summary of which is set out in **Appendix A**.

## **Project methodology**

Through this project the LGA aimed to take a step beyond existing research evidencing the prevalence and severity of this issue and set out possible local and national mitigations and solutions to abuse against councillors. To support this aim, researchers engaged with a range of resources and individuals who supporting councillors, have experience of handling issues of abuse and intimidation more generally, or have lived experience of these issues.

This was delivered through two distinct research phases. The first phase was delivered through primary and secondary research and aimed to identify the challenges and barriers deterring councils, the police and other agencies providing better support to councillors. The second phase was delivered through primary research workshops and looked to generate and develop solutions to the identified barriers. This was supported by the expertise of a project steering group drawn from a range of organisations with a substantive interest in the project.

## **Phase 1: Challenges and barriers identification**

### **Detailed methodology:**

#### **Ecosystem mapping and stakeholder interviews**

The issue of harassment, abuse and intimidation is a global issue, affecting all societies to varying degrees across the globe. As such there are many organisations and individuals interested in this issue. The purpose of the ecosystem mapping was to understand what expert organisations exist primarily in the UK, but also across the whole, how they approach abuse and intimidation issue and how this could apply to the local government sector.

In the UK there is significant interest in the topic of harassment, abuse and intimidation has increased significantly in recent years. Many organisations focus on women's rights and violence against women in politics; few are directed at other underrepresented minority groups or at politicians more generally. We identified approximately 60 key stakeholders working on the topic (full list at **Appendix C**) and prioritised a selection for detailed interviews.

Using a semi-structured interview method, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with stakeholders from a range of backgrounds, including the public sector, the police, legal, social media and third sector organisations. The interviews focus on advice for people in public life, interventions that work well, problems with implementation and what change is needed to address the issue of abuse against people in public life.

#### **Literature review**

To better understand what tailored support there is for councillors, we conducted a systematic search of documents offering support and guidelines published by a random selection of 50 councils. The aim was to identify public approaches to handling abuse and intimidation of elected people, including councillor support

packages, guidance on personal safety, zero-tolerance policies and other relevant content. In one fifth of the councils, we were unable to identify support aimed at supporting councillors with abuse or intimidation or personal safety. However, this does not necessarily mean that councils do not have these resources available to councillors. In many councils reviewed there was comprehensive or supportive guidance. Good practice identified from this exercise has been incorporated into this report.

### Focus groups

As part of this phase, we hosted two focus groups, one for councillors dealing with abuse and intimidation and one for council officers with a role supporting councillors. The aim was to identify the barriers and challenges to providing councillors with better support around abuse and intimidation from each perspective. The focus groups were similarly structured and explored key issues around prevention, support, responses, and aftercare. Fourteen councillors attended the councillor workshop and 11 officers from a range of specialisms attended the officer workshop. Attendees came from a diverse range of authority types with different political control across the variety of English regions.

## Findings

### Changing dynamics

Abuse and intimidation in public life have emerged as escalating concerns over the past few decades.

**According to a study by Collignon and Rudig (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12855>)**(2020), in 2019, 49 per cent of parliamentary candidates reported experiencing some form of harassment, abuse, or intimidation during their campaigns. This represents an 11-percentage point increase compared to 2017. Some officers reported that they felt that rising abuse levels in public discourse could be a result of anti-politics sentiment and proliferation of conspiracy theories online, which sometimes present as unfounded allegations of bias and corruption, and other abusive behaviours.

However, this change has been gradual, is not well evidenced in local government and has not always presented in the same way in different places creating a variability of responses linked to differential experiences. For example, an increase in support provided by councils has frequently been tied to severe national incidents or localised threats. In regions where such issues have not been prevalent or high profile, councils and other agencies may not have kept pace with increasing risks associated with the role of elected members.

Council officers and councillors have reported that abuse, intimidation, and harassment faced by elected members can have a detrimental impact on democratic representation, particularly where underrepresented groups in local and national politics receive higher volumes and more aggressive forms of abuse. For example, research analysing the effects of abuse on women's campaign strategies revealed a damaging link where women who experience intimidation tend to moderate their campaigning strategies and see their chances of electoral success undermined (**Collignon and Rüdig, 2021**). (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2021.1968413>)

### Criminal thresholds and the legal framework

Councillors are elected officials and therefore are open to wider public scrutiny and criticism than officers and private citizens. This can make it challenging to identify the point when legitimate criticism becomes abuse, harassment and intimidation.

Serious incidents, such as physical assaults and credible threats to life and limb, will clearly meet the threshold for police intervention. These events will general fit neatly into the existing legal framework, which primarily concentrates on individual cases that involve a solitary victim and a lone perpetrator. It is understood that the risk of physical violence towards councillors is low in the England and most incidents may not constitute an immediate emergency but may nevertheless be criminal. Serious crimes like hate crime, stalking, and harassment have robust definitions, charging thresholds and legal consequences. However, many councillors have reported that they feel the threshold for police to record and investigate incidents against them is higher than ordinary citizens, because of their elected role.

While the law is relatively clear for some crimes, the same cannot be said for more frequent yet equally damaging forms of abuse, as online abuse and misinformation. The current legal framework inadequately addresses the cumulative or escalating impact of such abuse, as well as cases involving multiple perpetrators.



This lack of clarity and understanding creates a grey area, which has significant implications for establishing clear reporting thresholds to the police and leaves victims without the necessary support or options for redress.

Additionally, it is not against the law to be unpleasant and in the process of determining if abusive speech is criminal, police must balance several considerations, including freedom of expression and journalistic expression. Abuse may not meet this threshold and yet still have a profoundly negative impact on councillors and their families, particularly if it is repeated. Here it is also imperative to consider what additional vulnerabilities or aggravating factors there may be. For example, this is evidence that some groups with protected characteristics may receive higher volumes and more vitriolic abuse, particularly racist, homophobic and misogynistic abuse. Police should consider this in their assessment of risk and impact.

### **Capacity and awareness of the relevant agencies**

Local agencies such as the council, the police and political parties all have a role in supporting councillors to ensure their safety and protect them as integral to the local democratic system. However, there are capacity issues across the whole of the public sector and there isn't consistent awareness of the issues of abuse against politicians across all areas. This can lead to councillors falling between the gaps between different organisations and feeling that all partners have abdicated responsibility for their safety.

This can play out in terms of prevention and response to abuse. Councils and police both hold valuable intelligence about their local areas and sharing this information allows for risks to be identified ahead of time and mitigated against before they become an issue. Capacity and structures to allow this information sharing to take place are therefore vital.

Police often face challenges due to limited resources and training. They must prioritise their resources and have many specific statutory duties that draw on their resources. This can hinder their ability to respond to lower-level incidents of harassment, abuse, and intimidation promptly or effectively. Operational separation between different police forces means there is significant variation across different regions, leading to inconsistent experiences for councillors who seek support and protection. Persistent issues revolve around the reporting process itself, including informal approaches, inconsistencies, and uncertainty regarding what will be investigated and what won't.

### **Lack of clear guidance on how to deal with vulnerable persons**

Councillors engage with residents from all walks of life in their role, including vulnerable people seeking assistance. Councillors should always consider whether they are the most appropriate person to be supporting an individual and where it would be more appropriate to direct them to an officer at the council. In the case of vulnerable people, this could mean referring to the safeguarding team at the council who are trained and have resources to provide specific support. Councillors are often reluctant to disengage with residents even if they are abusive, particularly if they consider the resident to be vulnerable – clear processes for referral and ensuring vulnerable people are appropriately supported through the council can help reassure councillors that they have done the best thing for the resident and disengage personally if necessary.

In extreme cases where an individual who is vulnerable due to mental health problems appears to be displaying fixated behaviour, such as harassment, stalking or threatening behaviour towards public figures the **Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (<https://www.beh-mht.nhs.uk/services/fixated-threat-assessment-centre-ftac/297>)** can help to assess the situation. The Centre is a joint police and mental health unit established in 2006 to assess and manage the risk to politicians, members of the British Royal Family and other public figures from obsessive individuals. It is unclear whether this support extends to local politicians. The Centre receives around 1,000 referrals a year, half of which are assessed as low risk and are referred to local health services.

### **Standards of political discourse**

Politicians have a significant role in shaping public discourse, and their words and actions can have a powerful impact on society. As representatives of their local communities, councillors are dedicated to improving the lives of their residents through the development of better services and positive changes at the local level. Citizens have high expectations of their elected members, and councillors should strive to meet these expectations with integrity and professionalism. The council must also have a Code of Conduct to help councillors model best conduct, balance their behaviour, understand the expectations of their role and indicate

the kind of conduct that could lead to action being taken against them. The LGA has developed a **Model Councillor Code of Conduct** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/councillor-conduct>), in association with key partners and after extensive consultation with the sector, as part of its work to support all tiers of local government to aspire to high standards of leadership and performance. At the same time, councillors deserve to be treated with respect by officers, fellow elected members, and the public at large.

## Challenges

Based on the initial research phase, we developed three specific challenges that councils face in providing adequate support to their councillors with abuse and intimidation issues. These challenges then formed the basis of the phase two solution identification and development exercises.

### **Challenge 1: Councillors feel vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped or supported to handle abuse, harassment, and intimidation**

Due to the public nature of their role, councillors may be susceptible to verbal, psychological and physical abuse and intimidation from various sources, including members of the public. A central part of their role is engaging with local residents, and they often are involved with making difficult local decisions about local services. These decisions can be a catalyst for community disputes, personal disagreements and can escalate into heated confrontations. Councillors are generally aware of the risks associated with their role due to their experience campaigning and engaging with residents. However, without specific training and support, they may not possess the necessary skills to confidently identify risky situations, diffuse potentially volatile situations and de-escalate tensions, and ensure a positive outcome. Concerns about the risk of these challenging engagements can deter candidates and councillors from meeting and engaging with the residents they represent as much as they would wish.

Furthermore, councillors may also struggle to manage the aftermath of individual or ongoing incidents. For example, there may be practical concerns about the safety of their home, travel and council activities and they may need to make different arrangements to usual. This can be overwhelming, as can the need to engage with various agencies, such as the council, their political party and the police to handle serious abuse and put in place safety mitigations. The emotional impact, effort to seeking support and potentially counselling can be difficult if this support isn't readily available through the council or political party.

### **Challenge 2: Lack of clear process around reporting abuse, harassment and intimidation to the council results in councillors not knowing who to turn to when an incident occurs**

Council officers play a vital role in supporting councillors with a range of needs associated with their elected role. This includes how councillors engage with the public on council matters and supporting councillors to deal with abuse, harassment, and intimidation they might experience. However, the council's role in protecting councillors' wellbeing is not set out in statute and therefore the thresholds and levels of support can be variable and are not well-understood by councillors. As a result, councillors may be unclear as to who they should contact in the council and what evidence they should collect of abuse. This is especially problematic when they experience low-level abuse that may not necessarily be a police matter but that requires to be logged and properly documented in case it escalates further.

### **Challenge 3: There is inconsistent engagement and response from the police to abuse and harassment of councillors**

The diversity among police forces, including differences in resources and training, results in variable responses and levels of support provided to councillors based on geographical location. This discrepancy is influenced by differing understanding regarding the public role of councillors, leading to inconsistent engagement from the police and a lack of tailored safety advice. Consequently, we found inconsistencies in reporting procedures, which makes it difficult to develop effective interventions to prevent abuse, harassment, and intimidation of councillors. We also found that the differences in levels of engagement and support between police forces contribute to underreporting, leaving councillors feeling isolated and unable to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. To address this challenge, it is vital to foster positive relationships between the council and the police, underpinned by comprehensive training. Additionally, police forces need to establish a consistent understanding of when and how to intervene, ensuring that councillors receive the necessary support and protection they require.

## Phase 2: Solution identification and development phase

During this phase of the research project, we used a bottom-up approach to identify best practice that already exists in councils and local police forces and develop new solutions to support councillors with abuse and intimidation from the public.

We used an iterative and agile methodology to identify and develop solutions to the three challenges identified in the first phase of the research at two workshops with council officers and other relevant experts. The approximately 60 attendees were drawn from a range of types of councils from across urban and rural areas in England. From these sessions, researchers developed a range of good practice case studies and suggested practice which councils and their local partners may find helpful.

## Findings

The methodology employed in this project resulted in several key findings, which we would propose as guiding principles.

**1. Zero-tolerance approach to abuse:** establish and enforce a strict policy that sets clear expectations for interactions and promoting respectful debate.

Normalisation of abuse and intimidation in public and political discourse is a well-established growing issue with **demonstrable negative impacts on local democracy**. (<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>) Democratic institutions may therefore need to respond to this rising issue and set expectations for interactions between the public and councillors, as many already do with staff.

Setting out a zero-tolerance approach to abuse could include a range of actions, such as ensuring that all relevant policies about managing negative interactions between the public and council staff also reflect councillor engagement with the public. Councils can also set expectations by highlighting respectful debate and engagement principles through digital and physical marketing materials aimed at those who engage regularly with staff and councillors.

Finally, there is evidence that many councillors consider their residents' right to engage with their elected representative as sacrosanct and are reluctant to disengage, take officer advice or report incidents to the police even if the engagement is unhealthy, abusive or even threatening. In addition, councillors, unlike staff, are not obliged to comply with employment policies in the same way as employees. However, setting expectations and thresholds of what is acceptable communication with councillors from the outset may help them identify unacceptable behaviour and disengage from or refer abusive residents on to officers when appropriate.

**2. Clarity of process and responsibility:** Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible persons who are well equipped and located in the council to provide councillors with support.

Clarity of process was highlighted as a key challenge by councillors and officers alike. Councillors have consistently raised concerns about not knowing where to go for support in their councils. However, we found evidence that this is an issue that varies from place to place and in some areas, there is a clear and formalised process for raising concerns, either through a single point of contact (SPoC) individual or department.

This may be a symptom of the way abuse and intimidation of councillor presents locally. For example, we found that councils that had robust and embedded arrangements for supporting councillors with abuse and intimidation had often been galvanised into action by a local high-profile event or national event that have caused them to reflect on their local arrangements. Other areas were less prepared because they had historically not experienced these issues.

Setting out who is responsible for supporting councillors with abuse and intimidation within the functions of the council and ensuring they are appropriately skilled and resourced is critical to ensuring that appropriate support is embedded into the activities of the council. In addition, clearly setting out the kinds of support the council will provide, how and in what circumstances the support will be provided, and who councillors should

go to day-to-day and in the event of an out-of-hours concern or emergency in clear processes and procedures can help to ensure officers know what to do consistently when councillors ask for support and help councillors feel well-supported in their role.

**3. Relationships with local police:** Proactively foster strong relationships with police to improve coordination and advance mutual understanding of abuse affecting councillors and the police role in addressing it.

Many councils have excellent relationships with their local police forces working together on a range of local issues, from anti-social behaviour to licensing. However, we hear often that police do not always engage with the issues of abuse and harassment that affect councillors. In particular, some councillors have expressed the belief that police did not take appropriate actions to record and investigate potential crimes against them because they were councillors.

We must be clear here that police forces must balance a range of considerations including the severity of the infraction and threat level, as well as capacity and available resources when responding to crime in their local area. In addition, through the process of this research we heard that police response is varied across different areas and that there are excellent examples of police taking action to deal with serious risk and incidents involving councillors.

Contributors to this research were clear that a strong relationship with the local police force was critical to ensuring that the police understood the specific experiences and challenges that elected members experience and to setting expectations with elected members as to when it is appropriate for police to get involved.

**4. Tailored risk assessments:** Consider the needs of individual councillors and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

At the centre of this support should be the needs of members. Some council officers said that because they didn't have many reports of abuse and intimidation incidents, they had assumed it wasn't an issue for their members. However, once they began proactively asking members about their experiences, they found this wasn't the case. On the other hand, some councillors do not agree that abuse and intimidation is an issue for them personally or in their area and feel that support offered by officers is paternalistic and not a good use of public money. Officers should be alive to these views, but not assume that this feeling in one member reflects the views of others. Many councils have taken the approach of regularly surveying councillors on their training and support needs, this can help officers to tailor the support to the genuine needs of members and keep track of the changing issues in their local area.

As mentioned earlier, some councils had been prompted to put in place better support and protections by a particular incident or local tensions, but without sustained focus and attention to issues of councillor safety, good practice sometimes diminished with the threat. Some officers reflected that they recognised this challenge in their own area and were keen to reinvigorate their efforts. Other said they had recognised the role of the council in monitoring local tensions and ensuring these factors were played into a dynamic risk assessment of risks against staff and elected members alike. Council officers also have valuable information and a range of skills, such as health and safety, communications, community engagement and legal, that can help to identify and mitigate risks of everyday councillor activities, like engaging with the public and safely visiting locations in the local area

**5. Prioritise councillor wellbeing:** Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries.

Many officers commented that councillor wellbeing is a much bigger consideration now than ever before. The expectations of the public, ability to critique on social media and a tendency towards blame culture against public figures has resulted in high-profile local and national politicians being very exposed to hurtful public commentaries.

While it is absolutely right that councillors should be held to account for their actions as part of their role, many are now finding public abuse crossed the line into unnecessarily personal attacks and this can deter people from standing for election or re-election and seeking leadership positions. This is detrimental to democracy and at the extreme can lead to councillors feeling anxious and depressed. Beyond actions to support

councillors manage their online engagement and protect them from real threats, many councils are now considering what more they can do to support councillor resilience and wellbeing. This can take a range of forms from informal buddying to counselling via employee assistance programmes.

### **Tops tips and case studies**

The principles are designed to help councils to consider how best to provide support for their councillors in their local context. As part of both phases of the project, we collected ideas and good practice case studies to illustrate the range of activities councils are doing to support their members. We have divided these by theme of prevention and support, incident management and aftercare, but some examples will apply equally across all areas.

#### **Prevention and support**

##### Understanding needs and coordination

As mentioned in the principles, it's vital to understand the needs of individual councillors as they will not be homogenous across the country or even in the same council. Engaging well with members can also help with uptake of training and support, as their input can help ensure the offer will be most relevant to them.

There are several ways a council can achieve this engagement and a combination of approaches may be most appropriate. For example:

- establishing a small working group of councillors to identify gaps in support and share intelligence about common experiences
- doing regular surveys of members to understand what incidents affect them and what aspects they particularly struggle with
- creating open door or drop-in opportunities for individual councillors to speak to staff about concerns
- establishing a wellbeing or councillor safety champion(s) who can collect information from the range of members at the council and pass this information on to staff.

Many councils have been slowly increasing their action on these issues over the last few years, others have recently begun programmes of work to proactively consider their approach to council safety and wellbeing. Many have chosen to create an internal staff working group including the various departments that have relevant expertise. This could include officers such as:

- monitoring officer
- head of legal if not the monitoring officer
- democratic services
- heads of political group offices
- health and safety
- community safety
- communications
- community engagement
- human resources.

With expertise from a wide range of department innovative solutions can be brought forward. For example, one council use their Anti-Social Behaviour reporting system to record abuse against councillors. Police colleagues have access to this system which means that police can assess the reports, provide advice and note any patterns of abuse that might develop into harassment or other crimes. Leeds City Council use their existing assets, such as their 24-hour CCTV centre, to ensure councillors can call for assistance through lone worker devices when they are out in their communities visiting residents.

#### **London Borough of Hounslow: Case study on cross-organisational practitioner working group**

Hounslow Council is taking steps to address harassment affecting its elected members. Following the passing of a motion by the council is now working on setting up a cross-organisational working group with expert representatives from democratic services, legal, health and safety, and other relevant departments. The purpose of the group will be to use the various expertise to identify emerging issues and gaps in support and develop solutions that will help to prevent and deal with these issues when

they arise. The group will also work towards creating a hub space on the intranet where members can access all the necessary information in one place, including access to counselling through the employee assistance scheme.

The council is also considering providing training on emotional intelligence and softer skills to help members pre-empt, navigate and deescalate tensions when challenging issues create passionate responses in the community. Furthermore, the council is encouraging and facilitating respectful and civil conversations about sensitive issues, such as misogyny, between its elected members.

The group will also consider what the council can do to prevent abuse against councillors and when the council should step in actively protect members. For example, it is sometimes appropriate for the council's legal department to take over communications when correspondence is abusive and vexatious and to write an official letter informing the resident that the correspondence is no longer appropriate. This is an important step to explore all avenues before taking any further action.

### Policies and guidance

Policies and guidance can support councillors to understand new aspects of their role, including elements of risk, and how the council can support them to navigate any issues they encounter. Councils may wish to consider if they need new policies to set what support is available or whether councillors can be incorporated into existing policies. Key policies could include:

- vexatious complainants' policies
- lone-worker policies and/or personal safety policies
- receipt of threat policies
- social media policies.

Where a policy isn't appropriate, guidance and good practice examples can support councillors to make informed decisions. The LGA has a [Councillor guide to handling abuse and intimidation \(https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation\)](https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation), which includes comprehensive social media guidance. However, some councils have developed their own guidance tailored to local circumstances:

- [Blaby District Council guide - Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors \(https://w3.blaby.gov.uk/decision-making/documents/s39158/Personal%20Safety%20for%20Councillors%20-%20GUIDANCE%20V2.pdf\)](https://w3.blaby.gov.uk/decision-making/documents/s39158/Personal%20Safety%20for%20Councillors%20-%20GUIDANCE%20V2.pdf)
- [Bradford Metropolitan District Council - Guide to Personal Safety for Councillors \(https://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/documents/Safety%20Guidance%20and%20Information/Person](https://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/documents/Safety%20Guidance%20and%20Information/Person)

### Training

Councillors are usually provided with a lot of information and possibly training when they first become a councillor. However, it's important to repeat key training often to ensure councillors are well equipped throughout their term. Common options for training around abuse and intimidations include:

- personal safety and risk assessment
- social media training and digital citizenship
- general communications and healthy debate
- emotional intelligence
- conflict de-escalation
- code of conduct.

The LGA provides training and e-learning on some of these topics that are free for councillors in England.

Councillors can access all learning options through the [Civility in public life hub](https://www.google.com/search?q=civility+in+public+life&rlz=1C1GCEB_enGB891GB891&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i5913j0i131i433i512j69i608)

([https://www.google.com/search?](https://www.google.com/search?q=civility+in+public+life&rlz=1C1GCEB_enGB891GB891&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i5913j0i131i433i512j69i608)

[q=civility+in+public+life&rlz=1C1GCEB\\_enGB891GB891&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i5913j0i131i433i512j69i608](https://www.google.com/search?q=civility+in+public+life&rlz=1C1GCEB_enGB891GB891&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i5913j0i131i433i512j69i608)).



### **Durham County Council: Using social media safely**

The council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use. The toolkit includes a section that advises councillors on how to manage comments, protect accounts, and reduce the risk of harassment or abuse online. The council recently updated the toolkit in accordance with the civility and respect guide on social media, published by the civility and respect project in consultation with the Society of Local Council Clerks, National Association Local Councils, One Voice Wales and County Associations, ensuring that it is comprehensive and accessible to all councillors.

The toolkit is presented as part of the council's training on social media which is made up of a theoretical and practical session. The first part of the training is conducted by the legal team and sets out how to communicate and use social media positively and in line with the council's code of conduct. The following practical sessions are conducted by the communications team and cover how to set up and use social media accounts and keep them technically safe.

The council's communication team engage with social media providers when they are aware of offensive posts and request their removal when necessary. This approach helps the council to strike the balance between promoting a safe and respectful online environment for councillors and residents alike.

### **Technology**

Some councils are now providing a range of technological solutions to councillors to mitigate against safety risks associated with their councillor role and to help handle some lower-level abuse.

Some examples of useful technological solutions:

- Councillors have been provided with personal safety alarms, panic alarms or apps on their phone through which they can silently call for assistance. There are a range of options available for this and in some areas mobile options will not function due to poor signal.
- Some councils will provide councillors with a separate phone for council work, allowing them to keep their personal and council numbers separate. This can help councillor to disconnect and set time boundaries when they will respond to council business. Similarly, councillors can use a dual sim to have two phone numbers routed to one phone. This allows the convenience of carrying only one phone, but also allows the council to disable one number when they do not want to receive calls and to filter incoming calls depending on which number is being used.
- Profanity filters are now commonly available. Councils could support councillors to set profanity filters on their council email addresses. However, careful consideration should be given to what happens to the blocked emails. Blocked emails could contain a threat to life, and it's therefore important that someone checks the content of the email.

Councillors engage with residents in a variety of ways and occasionally this might mean hosting online, rather than in-person, ward surgeries. If there are any concerns about threats or abuse against a councillor, virtual meetings can help them to control their environment more easily, while also fulfilling their democratic functions. Providing access to zoom accounts and additional strategies like asking participants to pre-register, monitoring or disabling the chat function and setting expectations about conduct.

### **Risk assessment and mitigation**

Risk assessments are a key part of a preventative approach to councillor safety and something that council officers will be very familiar with in relation to risk assessing council events and council buildings. However, as part of their role, councillors will often hold ward surgeries, meet people in public places, travel to and from meetings and may even visit resident's homes in their role as a councillor. It's important that these situations

are also risk assessed and mitigations put in place to make these interactions as safe as possible. There are several approaches to this, which depend on the available resources and the level of risk associated with the individual councillor.

Risk assessment options range from simply supporting councillors to make their own risk assessments of their activities through templates and light touch guidance. However, if the level of risk is higher, it may be necessary to support councillors more directly by offering officer support to make risk assessment and mitigation proposals for a range of activities and locations, including the councillor's home.

In addition, officers may be able to provide information to councillors to help them assess risk related to individuals, rather than locations. For example, if a councillor is planning to visit a resident they haven't engaged with before, they may wish to check that the person isn't flagged on the councils potentially violent persons register. Council officers may be able to provide advice as to whether visiting is advised or not, without providing specific information about the individual. Some police forces have also provided this kind of check previously and can give advice on whether to visit or not, again without providing personal or confidential information.

If the threat is deemed to be viable, then the police may also be able to provide home security and other safety advice, such as better lighting, ring doorbells, separating post-boxes from the main home and may flag a home address for priority response by the police.

### **Engaging with the police**

Information sharing between the police and councils is key for various reasons. However, councillor safety is one among many priorities that police must balance against available capacity, and that's why it is key to proactively engage with the police and create environments where information can be shared in both directions and where potential issues can be flagged and addressed early. Contributors to this project suggested several ways this council be achieved.

- Having a senior police officer responsible for liaising with the council as an organisation was key for intelligence sharing, particularly around identifying increasing community tensions or trigger issues that the council or specific councillors might be involved with. Having this connection could also help progress investigations where the officers dealing lacked the expertise to factors in the added risk dimensions associated with being an elected councillor.
- Creating strong connections between neighbourhood policing teams and their local councils and councillors helped provide soft support at events where the council didn't have a formal presence. This could include local neighbourhood patrols including ward surgery location on surgery days and flagging councillors home addresses for urgent response if a risk had been identified.
- Having police attend candidate election briefings and councillor induction events can help to improve mutual understanding of each other's roles and what councillors can reasonably expect police to be involved with.

#### **Kirklees Council: Collaboration with police and political parties to embed safety on daily activities**

Kirklees Council took a practical approach to dealing with abuse and intimidation of candidates and councillors focusing on engaging more with the police on these issues. First, the council established a specific named point of contact within the local police force. Ongoing contact with this officer meant they developed a good understand needs and concerns of councillors. This helps to streamline the reporting process for councillors who experience harassment or abuse.

Second, they now involve discussion of the role of the police in members' induction. This allows the council to proactively approach the issue of harassment and intimidation by setting out a clear understanding of the enforcement role of police and the role of the council in the early induction of new councillors. This can help to ensure that councillors are aware of the support and resources available to them and where to access support if they experience any form of abuse or harassment.



Some lessons learned include; not all councillor and candidates will experience abuse and intimidation, but it's key for them to be aware of these issues so they can be properly prepared to manage them if they do happen. Engaging with the police regularly can help to develop a long-term sustainable relationship.

### Managing councillor information

Councillors are representatives of their local communities and engage regularly with their residents. In the past it was usual for councillors to have their home address published on the ballot paper when they were running for election, on the council website and on the register of pecuniary interests. Since 2019 councillors have had the option to put their local authority areas on their ballot paper rather than their full address. However, they may still then have to declare the address on the public register of the interests and some councils still put home addresses up on the website, although this is becoming increasingly rare.

Councillors may apply to their monitoring officer for a dispensation not to declare their full address if they believe it is a sensitive interest where disclosing the interest could lead to the member, or a person connected to them, being subject to violence or intimidation. However, the threshold for this is not set out in guidance or in law, although a letter to council leaders from the then Minister for Local Government, Rishi Sunak MP, encouraged monitoring officers to "look sympathetically at such requests where there are legitimate concerns of abuse or intimidation".

Some candidates and councillors prefer to have their information available to the public to ensure transparency and accessibility. However, increasingly councillors are reporting that had they known the abuse they would experience they would have requested to withhold that information. Being open throughout the election process about the options and potential risks of publishing personal information may help councillors make informed decisions.

### Setting expectations

Many councillors find it very difficult to disengage from residents, even if the communication has become abuse and continued engagement is unlikely to have a positive outcome for the resident or the councillor. Proactive actions to set out how councillors will engage with their residents can help to set expectations before the interaction begins and provides councillors with a clear policy and guidelines as to when they should disengage. This could be practical information in the first instance, for example, setting out response times and opening hours and indicating that casework should be sent via email. However, councillors can extend this principle to specific that abuse will not be tolerated.

### LGA: Digital citizenship rules of engagement

The LGA published [Digital citizenship guidance for councillors \(https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0\)](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0) which includes infographics setting out the Rules of engagement. These rules set out clearly what was welcome, including debate and disagreement, but that abuse, threats, false information, and discriminatory language or statements would result in a cessation in engagement and being blocked if on social media. These rules were intended for online communication, but could be amended for other medium of communication, including in person engagement.

This approach has been adopted by other organisations that engage with the public. For example, Transport for London often engages with residents and believes in setting expectations as to how a meeting should be conducted ahead of time. To support the aim of having a mutually conducive meeting, they use a Terms of Attendance document to set out their expectations for the meeting, which the chair of the meeting must acknowledge and agree to adhere to. This agreement means that if a meeting becomes abusive or inappropriate, TfL staff reserve the right to terminate the meeting. In a council setting, template terms of

attendance could support councillors to set expectations ahead of ward surgeries or home visitors. In addition, template responses explaining that abusive communications will not be responded to and setting out corrective actions would help councillors reset communications and enforce rules of engagement.

### Managing public narratives

Research by the LGA found that sometimes there are particular trigger events or decisions that are a catalyst for abuse, harassment and intimidation. Sometimes these are unexpected, but often the council is aware of that a decision is contentious before it is made. This prior knowledge presents an opportunity to provide proactive support to councillors to help them manage any negative impacts that arise following an event or decision. Communications officers are responsible for responding to requests for information from the public and the media and will often prepare for enquiries following significant council or local events.

Providing this advanced warning of potentially contentious issues and providing factual briefing to councillors can help them to weather social media storms and ensure that information does not become distorted. Advice about how to suspend comments, report abuse on social media, and tips for responding in a productive and safe way can also help councillors online.

### Behaviour and conduct

Councillors are leaders of their local community and engage with other elected members to make decisions that impact their residents. In doing so they must act in accordance with the [Seven principles of public life](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>), often called the "Nolan principles":

- selflessness
- integrity
- objectivity
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- leadership.

Under the heading of leadership, the principles are clear that holders of public office should treat others with respect and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Councils are required to have a councillor code of conduct in place based on these principles and this should be the basis for instructing councillors on the standards and conduct expected of them. Councils should try to ensure that the code of conduct and any associated training support their councillors to display the best behaviours and encourages high standards of respectful debate and conduct. This could mean regular training on the code, reviewing the code to ensure it is fit for purpose, and developing a shared understand across political groups and members of the value of high standards. In addition, councils can consider tools to reduce reliance on the code of conduct, for example [local resolutions protocols](https://www.ombudsman.wales/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Model-Local-Resolution-Protocol-for-Community-and-Town-Councils.pdf) (<https://www.ombudsman.wales/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Model-Local-Resolution-Protocol-for-Community-and-Town-Councils.pdf>) that are widely used in Welsh councils.

Councillors may also benefit from resources aimed at generally raising the quality of online communication and reducing abuse and misinformation. This could include councillors committing to using good digital citizenship techniques as set out in the [LGA Digital citizenship guide](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0) (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0>).

### Incident management

#### Support and reporting mechanisms

Council officers support councillors with many aspects of their role, guiding them through the processes of the council, providing support with case work and information the councillor requires. However, when it comes to reporting abuse and intimidation councillors need to be clear where to go to find information and who they should contact and in what circumstances.

Council should try to ensure that all the information councillors need is in one place and easily accessible. For example, the London Borough of Hounslow is developing a 'one-stop-shop' space on the council intranet where councillors will be able to access all the relevant information.

Many councils have a single point of contact for councillors, although the responsible individual or function in the council varies from council to council. This variation is to be expected, but the crucial point is that councillors know who to go to and that the function available is able to cope with workday and out-of-hours issues.

This can be a lot of expectation to place on one individual, and some officers suggested having a team as the SPoC with a responsible senior manager balanced the need for 24-hour support with clarity of responsibility.

Councils should also establish a clear and simple method for reporting incidents which allows easy analysis so that trends and repeated harassment can be identified. Again councils have a range of ways to manage this:

- one council uses their Anti-Social Behaviour system to record abuse against councillors
- others use simple forms and shareable documents on SharePoint
- others use other case management systems to record data.

### **Triage**

It can be challenging to determine when criticism crosses the line into abuse and when councillors should report this to the council or to the police. They should be encouraged to report if they are in any doubt and obviously if they are in fear for their safety, they should call 999.

Councils should be prepared and have plans in place to deal with the receipt of threats so that officers can respond quickly and reassure the councillor. This could include basic actions, like being absolutely clear where and how councillors can report a threat, securing as much information as possible about the threat, informing the police, checking in with the individual involved, updating them regularly on what is going on, and being very clear about the role of the police as compared to that of the council.

For lower-level abuse, some councils have taken innovative approaches of using a committee to review abuse received by councillors and determining whether this has crossed the line and warrants an official response from the council. This removed the responsibility for determining thresholds from the individual experiencing the abuse and creates a level of consistency as to how abuse against councillors is dealt with.

### **Informal and legal actions**

If a resident or other individual has crossed the line from legitimate criticism to abuse in a way that may not be criminal but is harmful to the councillor and which the council agrees warrants a response, there are some actions a council could take:

- The council leader or monitoring officer could send a letter to the individual setting out why the behaviour is unacceptable and requesting that they desist from further abuse.
- The council could put in place a single point of contact for the individual where they would be asked not to contact the council again, but communicate with a senior officer instead.
- In multi-councillor wards, the other councillors might agree to take over communications with the individual, allowing the victim of the abuse to disengage.

In extreme circumstances, where an individual continues to abuse an individual, their actions could constitute a criminal offence such as harassment or stalking and a criminal or civil case could be pursued, and an injunction could be placed on an individual instructing them to desist. However, criminal cases must pass a high threshold for prosecution and civil cases are extremely expensive, may not be successful, and can have unintended consequences. For example, the extreme case of Robert Pickthall who took his own life rather than accepting a prison sentence for breaching an injunction which prevented him from harassing councillors and officers at Cheshire West and Chester Council (case law: [Cheshire West and Chester Council v Pickthall \(http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2015/2141.html\)](http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2015/2141.html)).

**Durham County Council: Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police**

Durham Council has a strong commitment to protecting councillors from abuse, harassment, and intimidation and takes threats against councillors very seriously. The council's approach to dealing with harassment or abuse of councillors is proportionate to the level of threat using the expertise of the council's legal and health and safety teams to decide how to proceed. This is supported by engagement with the police as appropriate to address serious incidents and provide essential advice and support depending on the severity of the situation.

For example, the council's Monitoring Officer, meets regularly with the Deputy chief constable. This provides an opportunity to flag concerns and share intelligence. In the meetings they discuss any issues related to councillor's experiences of harassment or threats of violence, and the police provide advice and guidance. The police are very responsive to issues that need to be reported in between meetings. Councillors are encouraged to report all incidents of abuse, harassment and intimidation to Members Services even if it is considered to be minor or low level. All such incidents are logged internally and where appropriate with the police. This helps track incidents and identify patterns of behaviour which may pass the threshold for police action.

Member services in consultation with the health and safety team assess the level of threat using a predetermined process. Where the risk is low, the incidents will be logged and appropriate advice given to the councillor (e.g. how to amend social media settings/re-direct or block emails). In more serious cases, which do not meet the threshold for police action, the council will consider whether to take action e.g. writing to the individual and/or seeking an injunction. In serious cases of abuse harassment and intimidation, the police will take appropriate action.

Where it is considered that an individual's behaviour threatens the immediate safety of councillors or staff, a decision may be taken to place that individual on the Potentially Violent Persons Register. Such behaviour includes conscious, deliberate or malicious acts of violent, aggressive or abusive behaviour towards council employees or councillors. It is possible for those who interact with the public to check whether someone they are due to meet is on the register and what mitigations are in place.

## Aftercare and resilience

### Peer support

Councillors have a unique position as elected members and do not fit into the usual managerial structures of a council. However, following an incident they may want to speak to someone who understands their position, such as a buddy, a mentor or specific member who has taken responsibility for welfare issues. This works differently in each council, but key examples include:

- Wellbeing champion – this could be a senior member who has taken responsibility for the wellbeing of councillors across the council or there could be wellbeing champions in each political group catering to their own members.
- Wellbeing cafés –parish councils in Cornwall have set up wellbeing cafes designed to allow members to come together in an informal space to discuss concerns, share experiences and solutions.
- For independent councillors who sit outside formalised political parties, there can be an additional challenge. However, independent councillors may make informal arrangements with other councillors to provide valuable peer support improving wellbeing and reducing stressed caused by independent working.
- Finally, councillors struggling to find peer support within their authority, can request support through the four **LGA Political Group Offices** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/our-meetings-and-leadership/political-composition/political-groups>).

### Formal support

Although peer support is an important aspect of aftercare and building resilience, there may also be a need for more formalised support from someone with specific skills, such as a mental health first aider or counsellor. Mental health first aiders are becoming more common and this may be helpful training for councillors and officers in political group offices. Some councils have also allowed councillors access to their employee assistance programmes so they have equal access to counselling support.

## Conclusion – what barriers remain?

Councillors' experiences of abuse and intimidation vary, and some councils may experience more issues than others. However, there is clear evidence that abuse of politicians is on the rise across the board and that issues can arise and escalate very quickly. Councils would therefore be prudent to anticipate issues that may occur in the future and prepare to respond to abuse from members of the public. Additionally, this variation of experience means that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to follow, but the general principles we have set out in this report may help councils to consider the level of support their members require and how best to provide this support.

Councillors, political parties, councils and local police all have a role to play in preventing and dealing with abuse targeted against councillors. However, there is also a limit to their power, resources and responsibility to handle these issues and some things they will not be able to influence.

The behaviour of the public can be influenced and managed but cannot be entirely mitigated against. In addition, it is not against the law to be unpleasant or abusive and for the purposes of protecting freedom of speech the threshold for criminality is high. However, there are some environments where abusive speech and behaviour has the capacity to cause particular personal and democratic damage – notably online, particularly on social media. Cumulative derogatory and abusive comments, which are easily facilitated by online environments, can have a serious impact on individuals and their families, while online misinformation and disinformation can be impossible to contain and may in fact impact the integrity of local democracy itself.

Engagement with police and the variability of police response to abuse against councillors and others in public life was a common theme in this research. Most feedback indicated that the police can be relied on to deal with serious threats to life and violent crime. This is reassuring, but the perception that less serious or immediately threatening crimes are taken much less seriously and in many cases are not addressed at all is pervasive.

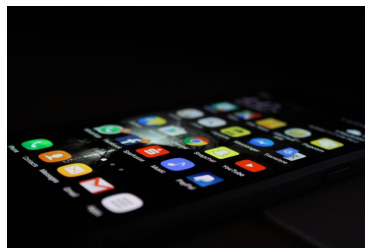
The role of the police is to maintain law and order in local areas by protecting the public and their property, including preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime. However, we have heard from many sources that the police are not resourced to deal with all crime and this manifests as reports of crimes not being recorded or investigated. This is aggravated by a lack of understanding of the role that councillors fulfil and the associated risks. Within this research we have set out various options for improving relationships with the police and improve the mutual understanding of the role of councillors and the police, however, more is needed to improve consistency and outcomes.

Finally, councillors are a central part of our democratic system. Residents have high expectations of councillors and entrust them to make decisions that affect their lives. It is therefore vital that councillors are held accountable for their actions and display appropriate behaviours for leaders and representatives of their council. The vast majority of councillors strive to uphold these standards, understanding the individual and collective responsibility associated with their role. However, this is not universally the case. It is important that political parties and their members set the example of proper conduct and councils have the appropriate processes and powers to deal with breaches of the code of conduct.

## Case studies



**Supporting councillors through closer working with the police (/case-**



**Supporting councillors to use social media safely (/case-studies/supporting-councillors-use-social-**



**Collaboration with police and political parties to embed safety in daily activities (/case-studies/collaboration-**



**studies/supporting-councillors-through-closer-working-police)**

North Lincolnshire Council has established a robust and effective relationship with the police. The police have nominated a senior officer to help the Monitoring Officer deal with incidents of abuse, harassment, and intimidation.

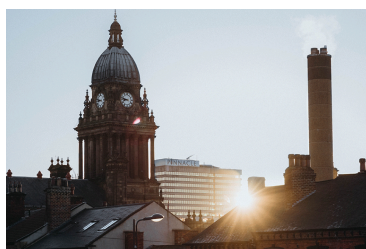
**Case Study** | 24 Jul 2023



**Wellbeing support for councillors - Middlesbrough Council (/case-studies/wellbeing-support-councillors-middlesbrough-council)**

Middlesbrough Council noted the challenging environments and high-pressure decision-making requirements of the councillor role and decided to provide councillors with tools to support their wellbeing, including a tailored forum for councillors to raise concerns and access to 1-2-1 support and the council's staff wellbeing offer.

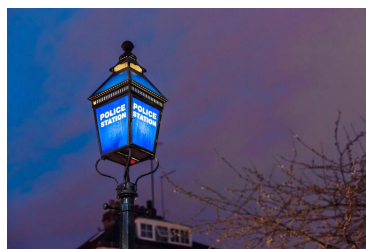
**Case Study** | 28 Jun 2022



**media-safely)**

Durham Council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use.

**Case Study** | 24 Jul 2023



**Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police (/case-studies/reporting-abuse-and-establishing-productive-relationships-police)**

Durham Council and the local police work collaboratively together to protect councillors from abuse and harassment.

**Case Study** | 24 Jul 2023



**police-and-political-parties-embed-safety-daily-activities)**

Kirklees Council took a practical approach to dealing with abuse and intimidation of candidates and councillors focusing on engaging more with the police on these issues.

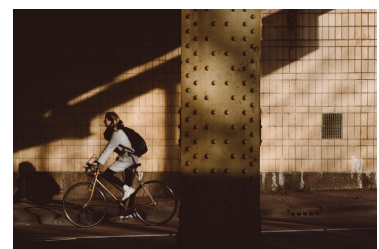
**Case Study** | 24 Jul 2023



**Cross-organisational working group on councillor safety and "one stop shop" model of support (/case-studies/cross-organisational-working-group-councillor-safety-and-one-stop-shop-model-support)**

Hounslow Council have set up a cross-organisational working group with expert representatives to help identify emerging issues and gaps in support and develop solutions that will help to prevent and deal with these issues when they arise.

**Case Study** | 24 Jul 2023



**Leeds City Council: Councillor Safety Champions (/case-studies/leeds-city-council-councillor-safety-champions)**

At Leeds City Council, the Deputy Leader has taken on the role of 'Councillor Safety Champion' to ensure that councillor safety remains at the top of the agenda.

Case Study | 16 May 2022



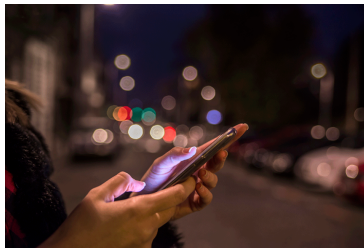
**Leeds City Council: Venue risk assessments to support councillor safety (/case-studies/leeds-city-council-venue-risk-assessments-support-councillor-safety)**

It is important that councillors feel equipped to manage occasionally aggressive encounters with residents, including taking preventative steps to limit the risk of serious consequences. Leeds City Council helped councillors risk assess venues to ensure that they were safe and find appropriate alternatives if necessary.

**Gloucestershire County Council: Improving councillor personal safety through training and development (/case-studies/gloucestershire-county-council-improving-councillor-personal-safety-through-training)**

In response to recent high-profile violence and aggression incidents towards publicly elected officials, Gloucestershire County Council reviewed and redesigned the personal safety approach, training and development offered to local councillors.

Case Study | 16 May 2022



**Telford and Wrekin Council: A risk-based approach to councillor safety (/case-studies/telford-and-wrekin-council-risk-based-approach-councillor-safety)**

Telford and Wrekin Council were faced with a challenging situation in 2019 when they commissioned an inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation. Councillors were at risk of abuse and aggression from residents and national groups interested in the inquiry. The council took this risk seriously, providing councillors with

**Cardiff Council: Councillor safety - lone working devices (/case-studies/cardiff-council-councillor-safety-lone-working-devices)**

Cardiff Council reviewed the relevant safety arrangements and implemented a new system to improve support to councillors during their council business.

Case Study | 16 May 2022



**Eastleigh Borough Council: Independent network supporting councillor safety (/case-studies/eastleigh-borough-council-independent-network-supporting-councillor-safety)**

This case study demonstrates how a team of independent councillors replicated the support offered by more traditional party structures to create a safer environment for local independent councillors.

appropriate and proportionate safety measures depending on the level of risk.

Case Study | 16 May 2022

Case Study | 10 Jun 2022

Case Study | 16 May 2022

## Appendix A: Definitions of abuse

Public intimidation is defined by the LGA as “words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life”.

This includes actions of abuse, harassment and intimidation such as:

- verbal abuse
- physical attacks
- being stalked, followed, or loitered around
- threats of harm
- distribution of misinformation
- character assassination
- inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media
- sexual harassment or sexual assault
- Any other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety.

## Appendix B: Guidance and other documents

- **Blaby District Council guide - Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors** (<https://w3.blaby.gov.uk/decision-making/documents/s39158/Personal%20Safety%20for%20Councillors%20-%20GUIDANCE%20V2.pdf>)
- **Bradford Metropolitan District Council - Guide to Personal Safety for Councillors** (<https://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/documents/Safety%20Guidance%20and%20Information/Person>)
- The **True Vision website** (<https://www.report-it.org.uk/home>) was created because there was an issue with underreporting of hate crime that was difficult to quantify. This website makes the reporting of hate crime easier. The website also has a special section on hate crime during an election. There is accompanying **HRC guidance on hate crime during the election period**. ([https://www.reportit.org.uk/hate\\_crime\\_during\\_an\\_election\\_period](https://www.reportit.org.uk/hate_crime_during_an_election_period))
- The Suzy Lamplugh Trust ran the **Staying Safe on the Doorstep Campaign** (<https://www.suzylamplugh.org/staying-safe-on-the-doorstep>) for the parliamentary candidates and their staff during the 2015 General Election campaign. The advice is still relevant to any volunteers, staff or candidates of local elections who are seeking who seek to canvass support by knocking on doors. The **advice card with safety tips and information is available in their website at no cost**. (<https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=051ee412-f705-49ad-935a-afd7048b117a>)

## Appendix C: List of key stakeholders identified in ecosystem mapping

1. CfGS
2. Crash Override Network
3. Crimestoppers
4. Digital-Trust
5. Elect Her
6. Equality Advisory Support Service
7. Fix the Glitch



8. Get Safe Online
9. Hope Not Hate
10. Hourglass
11. Jo Cox Foundation
12. Paladin – National Stalking Advocacy Service
13. Protection Against Stalking
14. Samaritans
15. SARSAS
16. Stop Hate UK
17. SupportLine
18. the National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
19. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust
20. Unison
21. Victim Support
22. Victims Choice
23. CACH
24. Cybersmile
25. NPCC - National Police Chiefs Council
26. True Vision, Hate Crime Independent Advisory Group
27. Electoral Commission
28. Weightmans
29. SOLACE
30. LLG
31. COSLA/Scottish Police
32. Social Media
33. Illegal Harms, Hate & Terrorism at Ofcom
34. Facebook /Meta
35. Instagram
36. Twitter
37. Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
38. Political parties / GO (inc. Individuals who signed Debate Not Hate public statement)
39. the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)
40. Association of Labour Councillors
41. Compassion in Politics
42. the Association of Democratic Services Officers
43. the Association of Electoral Administrators
44. Employment Related Services Association
45. Lawyers in Local Government
46. National Hate Crime Awareness Week
47. Amnesty International
48. Digital Freedom Fund
49. eSafety Commissioner
50. NDI (National Democratic Institute)
51. NetSafe
52. SPARC
53. THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION



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## Appendix 4: LGA Case Study - Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police

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### Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police

Durham Council and the local police work collaboratively together to protect councillors from abuse and harassment.

Durham Council has a strong relationship with the police, with regular meetings between the Monitoring Officer and the Deputy Chief Constable where any incidents of harassment, abuse or intimidation against councillors can be raised.

The council keeps a log of such incidents and uses it to determine the appropriate course of action which is proportionate to the level of threat. The council's health and safety team assess the level of threat using a pre-established process, and if it is low, it is logged, and if it is serious or explicitly violent, it is immediately flagged to the police.

#### **The challenge:**

Durham has noticed an increase in the number of councillors experiencing abuse, harassment and threats of violence. Not only is this highly distressing for elected members, their families and those who support them, it may put people off standing for election.

#### **The solution:**

Durham Council has a strong commitment to protecting councillors from abuse, harassment, and intimidation and takes threats against councillors very seriously.

The council's approach to dealing with harassment or abuse of councillors is proportionate to the level of threat using the expertise of the council's legal and health and safety teams to decide how to proceed. This is supported by engagement with the police as appropriate to address serious incidents and

provide essential advice and support depending on the severity of the situation.

For example, the council's Monitoring Officer, meets regularly with the Deputy chief constable. This provides an opportunity to flag concerns and share intelligence. In the meetings they discuss any issues related to councillor's experiences of harassment or threats of violence, and the police provide advice and guidance. The police are very responsive to issues that need to be reported in between meetings.

Councillors are encouraged to report all incidents of abuse, harassment and intimidation to Members Services even if it is considered to be minor or low level. All such incidents are logged internally and where appropriate with the police. This helps track incidents and identify patterns of behaviour which may pass the threshold for police action.

Member services in consultation with health and safety team assess the level of threat using a predetermined process.

Where the risk is low, the incidents will be logged and appropriate advice given to the councillor (e.g. how to amend social media settings/re-direct or block emails). In more serious cases, which do not meet the threshold for police action, the council will consider whether to take action e.g. writing to the individual and/or seeking an injunction. In serious cases of abuse harassment and intimidation, the police will take appropriate action.

Where it is considered that an individual's behaviour threatens the immediate safety of councillors or staff, a decision may be taken to place that individual on the Potentially Violent Persons Register. Such behaviour includes conscious, deliberate or malicious acts of violent, aggressive or abusive behaviour towards council employees or councillors. It is possible for those who interact with the public to check whether someone they are due to meet is on the register and what mitigations are in place.

The council also offers training on health and safety as part of the councillor induction programme. Additional advice is provided, and risk assessments are undertaken in response to specific incidents. This has included conducted security assessments of councillors' homes and providing advice in relation to additional security measures. Where appropriate addresses may be flagged by the police for a priority response. All councillors have access to the employee assistance scheme which provides well-being and counselling support.

**The impact:**

Abuse and intimidation in politics is a rising issue and it's critical that councils and police are well connected to deal with these issues effectively and efficiently. A good and well supported relationship between the council and police allows the council to raise issues directly at a senior level, rather than relying solely on the usual crime reporting mechanisms which can be ill-suited to handling the nuance of abuse of elected members.

Councillors at the council feel well supported by the council whether or not they have experienced abuse or intimidation, and this helps them to continue their councillor role with confidence.

### **How is the new approach being sustained?**

The approach is borne out of strong and effective working relationships between the council and police. The approach has long been integrated as business as usual at the council. Working with the police to manage issues of abuse and threats against councillors in this manner is more efficient and creates a swifter resolution than usual methods.

### **Lessons learned:**

- Proactively creating a relationship between police and the council can take time, but it also helps to set appropriate expectations and foster a more nuanced understanding of what issues affect councillors in local policing and the role of police in dealing with these issues.
- Using a consistent method to assess what needs to be dealt with by the council and what should be reported to the police can help councillors to understand the risks of the incidents they encounter and councils to provide consistent and effective support which is tried and tested over time.
- Reporting and logging incidents can help the council and police to build a picture of ongoing or escalating issues before they become too serious.

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## Appendix 5: LGA Case Study – Using Social Media Safely

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### Supporting councillors to use social media safely

Durham Council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use.

The council provides a social media toolkit that covers health and safety, as well as training for members on how to keep within the code of conduct online and how to deal with online abusive behaviour. The training includes theoretical and practical help from the communications team. Additionally, the communications team takes action to have offensive posts on third-party accounts removed.

#### **The challenge:**

Durham has noticed an increase in the number of councillors experiencing abuse, harassment, threats of violence and the number of social media related incidents. Not only is this highly distressing for elected members, their families and those who support them, it may put people off standing for election.

#### **The solution:**

Durham Council has a strong commitment to protecting councillors from abuse, harassment, and intimidation and takes threats against councillors very seriously.

The council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use. The toolkit includes a section that advises councillors on how to manage comments, protect accounts, and reduce the risk of harassment or abuse online. The council recently updated the toolkit in accordance with the civility and respect guide on social media, published by the civility and respect project in consultation with the SLCC, NALC, OVW and County Associations, ensuring that it is comprehensive and accessible to all councillors.

The toolkit is presented as part of the council's training on social media which is made up of a theoretical and practical session. The first part of the training is conducted by the legal team and sets out how to communicate and use social media positively and in line with the council's code of conduct. The

following practical sessions are conducted by the communications team and cover how to set up and use social media accounts and keep them technically safe. The council's communication team engage with social media providers when they are aware of offensive posts and request their removal when necessary.

This approach helps the council to strike the balance between promoting a safe and respectful online environment for councillors and residents alike.

### **The impact:**

For better or worse social media and online engagement is becoming a permanent part of local civic and political engagement. As a result, many councillors want to develop the skills to use social media safely and confidently. This programme of proactive training has helped councillors to set the appropriate tone online, while also providing them with the tools to disengage and flag inappropriate content when they need to.

Councillors at the council feel well supported by the council whether or not they have experienced abuse or intimidation, and this helps them to continue their councillor role with confidence.

How is the new approach being sustained?

This training now forms a part of the package of training members have access to alongside other induction and repeated training for councillors.

### **Lessons learned:**

- Social media and online engagement are here to stay and it's important to help councillors develop the skills to use these platforms safely to support them in their role and protect their well-being.
- Good online engagement is a two-way thing and it's just as important for elected members to role model good practices as it is to enforce good standards by reporting poor engagement from other online.
- Not all elected members wish to engage online and many will prefer to use other methods of engagement. This support should be available for those who want and need it.