

Standards Committee

Local Government Association “Debate Not Hate” Campaign

7th March 2024



Report of Legal and Democratic Services

Helen Bradley, 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 report provides an update to the Committee on any developments of the LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign, which 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 The report also provides an update in relation to the Council's Zero-Tolerance Policy which was proposed at the Standards Committee in September 2023.

Recommendation(s)

- 4 The Standards Committee is asked to:
 - (a) Note the report
 - (b) Request a report be brought to the next Standards Committee meeting to consider a draft zero-tolerance of abuse policy.
 - (c) Request that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services circulates the LGA guidance on safe canvassing practices to all Members.

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 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.
- 7 Following a recommendation from the Committee a report was presented to Full Council on 25 January 2023, where it was agreed that the Leader of the Council would sign the public Debate Not Hate statement on behalf of the County Council.

Zero-tolerance Approach to Abuse

- 8 Following the LGA's 'guiding principles' which were set out in their publication 'Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors', the Standards Committee in September 2023 requested that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services look to implement a policy outlining the Council's zero-tolerance approach to abuse.
- 9 Since the September Committee, officers have undertaken a comprehensive review of a number of the Council's policies and procedures in relation to councillors and customer services. Whilst the review highlighted several documents which discuss expectations of behaviour on the part of members, the support available for members, and vexatious and habitual complainants there is not a composite document setting out a zero-tolerance approach to abuse.
- 10 Officers are preparing a draft zero tolerance policy. To ensure that the zero-tolerance policy is consistent with the Council's Customer First Strategy, the team will also ensure that they consult and liaise with colleagues in Customer Services.
- 11 It is proposed that the draft policy is presented to the Standards Committee for consideration.

No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation

- 12 On 24 January 2024 the Jo Cox Civility Commission co-chaired by the Rt Hon Jacqui Smith, Baroness Gabrielle Bertin and Lord Vernon Coaker, launched their report 'No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation' in Parliament.

- 13 The report looks at ‘the impact of abuse and intimidation on British democracy’.
- 14 It further considers a wide range of ‘implementable solutions’ with recommended implementation dates ‘to improve civility in public life’.
- 15 The report recognises that the suggested recommendations are ‘deliberately ambitious’ in their aim to address the root causes of abuse and intimidation, ‘as well as to bring more immediate solutions to improve the situation for those politicians who currently serve’.
- 16 A summary of the recommendations are as follows:

- (i) **Coordination and behaviour:** A central unit to address abuse and intimidation should be implemented and resourced by Government for all elected politicians.
- (ii) **Political literacy:** Significant awareness campaigns for the public to understand the role of elected representatives should be implemented by the Government, along with all councillors and parliamentarians visiting education institutions regularly to raise awareness of their roles.

Teachers should also be adequately trained to deliver impartial political and media literacy, which should be made a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

- (iii) **Social media and media:** When implementing the Online Safety Act the abuse and intimidation of elected politicians must be considered, the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area must be sought by Ofcom along with ensuring regular, specific training.

Social media companies should also ‘acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.’

- (iv) **Policy and Security:** Clear and specific briefings for parliamentarians, staff and families and guidance for local councillors should be developed about what should be reported to the police and knowledge of which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

There should also be ongoing training for all police for dealing with threats against representatives and agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives to be defined and adopted.

All abuse (threshold confirmed by police) should be reported from elected politicians with dedicated resources in each local police force to ensure an appropriate and consistent response to support elected representatives.

Information sharing should also be improved between different police forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

- (v) **Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations):** Parliamentarians should be able to claim for costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, written resources about dealing with abuse should be developed for families of elected representatives and mandatory training should be developed for both elected representatives and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse.

- (vi) **Local government:** Risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events should be improved by local authorities including police being involved where appropriate and where there is a risk to democratic engagement.

Motions should be passed by Councils affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour from the LGA's Debate Not Hate toolkit.

Local authorities should ensure that security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors.

- (vii) **Elections:** The 'Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.'

Guidance for candidates about the use of social media during the election period should be expanded by the Electoral Commission.

Candidates should be rigorously screened by political parties during the selection process.

Additional support for candidates during election times should be offered by social media companies and candidates should be required to sign up to an 'election code of conduct' by political parties in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.

- (viii) **Political parties:** 'Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct'.

Civility and equalities training should be mandatory and implemented for all candidates and how legal support is offered to

candidates or elected officials where civil action is more appropriate than criminal should be reviewed by political parties.

- 17 The Commission notes that they welcome public endorsement from elected politicians or organisations who are working on any of the areas covered in the report and concludes that the recommendations set out above are only the first step for change in their campaign to reduce abuse and intimidation of elected representatives. The full copy of the report can be found in Appendix 2
- 18 The Committee will note that the Council has already implemented the recommendations in relation to local government. As referred to paragraph 7, the Council agreed to sign the Debate not Hate statement. Members also have access to the wellbeing support via the Employee Assistance Scheme. The Committee will also recall that the Council's approach in relation to security for Members featured as a case study in the LGA's Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors.

LGA Publishes Safe Canvassing Practices

- 19 The LGA in response to concerns expressed by councillors and candidates, regarding possible instances of harassment during canvassing activities has published a safe canvassing guide to offer helpful and practical hints for canvassers.
- 20 The guide outlines the following seven principles for safe canvassing:
- (i) **'Be prepared, not scared:** Regularly assess risks, seek available training and support, including advice from local police, parties, or council, and trust your instincts for personal safety during canvassing to ensure a confident and secure approach.
 - (ii) **Focus on group safety:** Whenever possible, canvass in groups or pairs for safety – and because it is more enjoyable! Inform others of your whereabouts when canvassing alone. Prioritise team safety by halting and discussing any incidents that may occur.
 - (iii) **Actively communicate with the team and set periodic check-ins:** Share canvassing plans with the team and trusted contacts, establishing regular check-ins for safety.
 - (iv) **Use technology to make canvassing safer:** Use available technological aids like wearable devices and tracking apps for mobile phones. Get familiar with their emergency features to enhance safety while canvassing. Familiarise yourself with smartphone security functions beforehand and align technology choices with the risk assessment for canvassing.

- (v) **Be security aware:** Prioritise safety and security when canvassing. Try carrying only essentials and avoid going into residents' homes. When available, follow party do-not-knock lists and update them if you encounter any problem.
 - (vi) **Keep a record:** Maintain a detailed incident log and report any uncomfortable situations encountered while canvassing. Sharing incident reports with both your party and the council/police ensures appropriate awareness and action.
 - (vii) **Prioritise aftercare and set emergency protocols:** Offer team support after any experiences of abuse or intimidation, prioritising aftercare. Debrief sessions should encourage sharing experiences and seeking support, focusing on both positive and negative encounters. Periodically review emergency response procedures.'
- 21 The LGA has also provided physical tips for canvassing such as ensuring that candidates mobiles are fully charged when campaigning, ensuring there is a clear exit route, how to safely knock on doors and even carrying a rape alarm which can be used to signal and confuse an attacker in the event of an emergency. It is suggested that the Committee request the Head of Legal and Democratic Services circulate this guidance to all members for information.

LGA response to the House of Lords Debate on parliamentary democracy and standards in public life, 11 January 2024

- 22 On 11 January 2024 the House of Lords 'debated the current standing of parliamentary democracy and standards in public life.'
- 23 In response to the debate the LGA noted that 'democracy and standards in public life are vital at a national and local level. However, increasing levels of toxicity in public and political discourse are deterring people from standing for election and representing their local communities.'
- 24 Given the growing concerns about abuse and councillor safety, the LGA noted the following priority areas of reform:
- (a) **'Councillor home addresses:** The relevant legislation (the Localism Act 2011) and associated regulations should be modernised to reflect the increased risk profile associated with being an elected member and move towards the presumption that councillors do not share their home addresses publicly as with members of parliament.' Further 'the legislation should recognise that councillors are the best judge of their own safety and put it beyond doubt that monitoring officers can withhold councillors' home addresses proactively rather than waiting for a specific threat or an incident to occur.'

- (b) **‘Specialised police support:** The Home Office should work with the police at a national level to extend some specialist provisions for locally elected people, including a SPoC or liaison officer and security assessments, advice and support for councillors' homes, ward surgery venues and council meetings.’
- (c) **‘Funding for security mitigations:** the UK Parliament funds specific security support for MPs, including providing home safety mitigations, such as security lights, ring doorbells, better locks, etc. However, this advice is not readily available to councillors and councillors and councils may be unable to afford to put these mitigations in place.

The Government should follow the example of other countries, like the Dutch Government, and provide funding for certain home and civic security mitigations to ensure locally elected members are protected in their homes and civic buildings.’

- 25 In relation to the call from the LGA for monitoring officers to have the flexibility to withhold councillors’ home addresses the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and members of her team are currently in the process of consulting members as to the Council’s approach on the issue. Any proposals arising from the consultation will be presented to the Committee for consideration in the future.

Background papers

- The Jo Cox Civility Commission No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Jo-Cox-Civility-Commission-report.pdf>
- LGA Seven principles for safer canvassing: A guide for councillors and candidates <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/seven-principles-safer-canvassing-guide-councillors-and-candidates>
- Debate on parliamentary democracy and standards in public life, House of Lords, 11 January 2024 <https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/debate-parliamentary-democracy-and-standards-public-life-house#priority-areas-for-reform>

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

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

Appendix 2: No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation

<https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Jo-Cox-Civility-Commission-report.pdf>

Appendix 3: Seven principles for safer canvassing: A guide for councillors and candidates

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/seven-principles-safer-canvassing-guide-councillors-and-candidates>

Appendix 4: LGA Debate on parliamentary democracy and standards in public life, House of Lords, 11 January 2024

<https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/debate-parliamentary-democracy-and-standards-public-life-house#priority-areas-for-reform>