

Standards Committee

Local Government Association “Debate Not Hate” Campaign

Zero-Tolerance to Abuse Policy

6th September 2024



Report of the Corporate Management Team

**Helen Bradley, Director of Legal and Democratic Services,
Monitoring Officer**

Electoral division(s) affected:

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To present a proposed Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy.

Executive summary

- 2 The Local Government Association’s (LGA) Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise awareness of the role of Councillors in their communities and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.
- 3 On 25 January 2023, it was agreed that the Leader of the Council would sign the public Debate Not Hate statement on behalf of the County Council and since December 2022, the campaign has been a standing item on the Standards Committee’s work programme with updates on any developments being presented to the committee.
- 4 On 28 June 2022, the LGA published a report titled “Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors” which resulted in a series of recommendations for local authorities to tackle abuse and intimidation towards Members and Officers. The Council already had the arrangements suggested in the recommendations in place, with the exception of a Zero-Tolerance to Abuse Policy.
- 5 Standards Committee therefore requested that Officers prepare such a policy. The attached policy has been prepared in consultation with relevant colleagues across the Council to ensure consistency with the Customer First Strategy and existing complaints procedures.

Recommendation(s)

6 Standards Committee is recommended to:

- (a) Consider the Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy; and
- (b) Recommend that Council adopt the Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy.

Background

- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 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.
- 10 A report was presented to the Standards Committee in September 2023 detailing the LGA's published report titled, "Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors" and included what the LGA identified to be three key challenges to supporting councillors with abuse:
 - (i) **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.
 - (ii) **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.
 - (iii) **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.
- 11 In response to the findings, the LGA proposed the following five guiding principles to assist Council's 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 It was noted at the Standards Committee in September 2023 that Durham County Council currently have the following procedures and resources in place which implement four of the five recommendations made by the LGA:

- (i) 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 Legal and Democratics Member Services team who are able to assist Members in raising concerns and can provide support. Additionally, the Director 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.
- (ii) 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 Director of Legal and Democratic Services to seek advice and guidance which can be relayed to Members.
- (iii) 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.
- (iv) 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.

- 13 To ensure that the Council meets the LGA's recommendations, the Committee requested that Officers look to implement a document which sets out a zero-tolerance approach to abuse. Following, that recommendation a proposed policy has now been produced for consideration.

Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy

- 14 The purpose of the zero-tolerance policy document will be to serve as a reminder of the Council's commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to abuse and to set out the Council's expectations for interactions between our elected members, employees, and members of the public.
- 15 The policy will apply to elected members when interacting with each other and when employees and elected members are engaging with each other. The policy will also apply to members of the public and set out our expectations of their interactions with both employees and elected members.
- 16 The policy is intended to cover all forms of communications and interactions such as verbal, telephone, written correspondence or via technology including social media and email. It is also intended that the policy will complement existing policies and procedures.
- 17 The policy is broken down into the following six headings:
- (i) **Introduction:** An introduction explaining the policy and our commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to abuse.
 - (ii) **Expectations of Behaviour:** An explanation of how we expect our members, employees and members of the public to engage with each other.
 - (iii) **Examples of Unacceptable Behaviour:** A definition of what abuse can be and a list of examples of behaviour that will not be tolerated.
 - (iv) **Reporting Abusive Behaviour:** An outline of the established process in which elected members and employees should follow when needing to raise any concerns that they may have.
 - (v) **Our Response to Abusive Behaviour:** A list of actions that may be taken against perpetrator(s) of abuse and detailing the support and training we offer to our elected members and employees.

- (vi) **Other Documents and Resources:** Sign posting via hyperlinks to existing policies and wellbeing support on the internet and our internal intranet.

- 18 In preparing the report, Officers have consulted with Customer Services, Member Support and HR and Employee Services and the relevant trade unions to ensure that the policy is consistent with existing policies and procedures.

- 19 The draft Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy can be found at Appendix 3.

- 20 If the Standards Committee approve the Policy, it is proposed that will be presented to Council for approval. If approved, the Policy will be circulated to all Members and Employees for information. It is also intended that the Policy will be published on the Council's Intranet, Member's Portal and will form part of the Member's Handbook for May 2025.

Background papers

- [LGA: Debate Not Hate 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

The Council's Customer Relations, Member Services and Human Resources teams were forwarded the Zero-Tolerance to Abuse Policy for their consideration. It may also be appropriate for Constitution Working Group to be consulted on the Policy.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

No Implications

Climate Change

No Implications

Human Rights

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

Crime and Disorder

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

Staffing

No Implications

Accommodation

No Implications

Risk

No Implications

Procurement

No Implications

Appendix 2: Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors.pdf

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-ending-abuse-public-life-councillors#introduction-and-background>

Appendix 3: Zero-Tolerance Approach to Abuse Policy
