

Standards Committee

Local Government Association “Debate Not Hate” Campaign

6th September 2024



Report of Legal and Democratic Services

**Helen Bradley, Director 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 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.

Recommendation(s)

- 3 Standards Committee is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the report.
 - (b) Request that the Director of Legal and Democratic Services circulates details of the LGA's work book on stress management and personal resilience to all Members.

Background

- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.
- 7 A report was presented to Members at the Standards Committee in September 2023 detailing the LGA's published report titled, "Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors". The report outlined how Councils can better support Councillors to prevent and handle abuse. A copy of the report is attached at Appendix 2.
- 8 The report also contained 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.

- 9 It was noted at the Standards Committee in September 2023 that Durham County Council currently have procedures and resources in place which implement four of the five recommendations made by the LGA.
- 10 In order to meet all of the LGA's recommendations, Members requested that officers look to implement a document which sets out a zero-tolerance approach to abuse. Members are being asked to consider a draft policy in a separate report at the Standards Committee in September 2024 with a view to recommending its adoption to full Council.

Ending abuse in public life council self-assessment toolkit

- 11 On 30 May 2024 the LGA launched a self-assessment toolkit to assist Officers in assessing the arrangements that their Council has in place in relation to the abuse and intimidation of councillors.
- 12 The toolkit will help inform the ongoing review of the member development programme and resources available to members in preparation for the new term of office in May 2025. Members will be consulted in relation to proposals throughout the course of the review.

Threat to democracy: The alarming rise of violence against council staff

- 13 In June 2024 the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) published a briefing looking at the rising trend of violence and abuse directed towards council staff and its impact on democracy.
- 14 Within the briefing note, the LGiU highlighted figures from the LGA and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), where it was reported that 88% of parish and town councillors reported experiencing abuse, intimidation, or both, whilst 81% of councillors from other tiers of local government faced similar issues. The LGiU however, stated that it is often the frontline staff of local authorities who "*bear the brunt of this behaviour*".
- 15 The LGiU highlighted that the effect of this abuse is far-reaching, noting that the impact on an employee's wellbeing and professional performance can affect the delivery of vital public services. Further, it was also noted that the disruption to services from these incidents could have a negative impact on service delivery and could erode the trust in local authorities. In turn this can present itself with employee retention challenges.
- 16 The LGiU stated that whilst some councils have implemented safety measures such as body-worn cameras or lone worker devices, they are concerned that a lack of consistent and comprehensive safety protocols persist across the UK. The LGiU warns that if those who serve communities are not safeguarded, there will be an increased risk to democracy.

17 To address the issue, the LGiU has suggested the following measures:

- **“Training**

One option is to develop and implement comprehensive training programmes for all staff, helping them to identify potential threats, implement de-escalation techniques and communicate effectively. This can help to mitigate the onset of any abusive or violent incidents and help tackle the root cause of the issue.

- **Reporting mechanisms**

Often, reporting mechanisms for violent and abusive incidents differ, both within the local authority area and between different areas. An NASUWT paper regarding violence in schools raises the fact that across each local authority, there are different reporting models for violent incidents and different behaviour management policies and strategies. It also identifies that there are variations between schools within the same local authority, referencing considerable inconsistencies in reporting systems and significant under-reporting of violent incidents in some council areas.

- **Risk assessments and preventive measures**

Local authorities should conduct risk assessments to identify any potential ‘high-risk’ situations or locations where staff may be vulnerable to abuse or violence. They could also implement preventative measures such as bodycams, CCTV, increased security staff, panic alarms or secure entry/exit points in high-risk areas. They should also provide personal protective equipment (PPE) if necessary. Staff should be trained to carry out risk assessments correctly and both they, and any associated policies and procedures, should be regularly reviewed and updated.

- **Multi-agency working**

Local authorities will be establishing partnerships with other associated organisations, including police, to both address underlying societal issues that may be contributing to the problem and to share intelligence about any current issues. Collaboration with mental health services and social services may also be helpful to ensure that, those exhibiting aggressive or violent behaviour, obtain any help and support they may need.

- **Employee support**

Counselling, mental health support and other associated resources should be provided to employees affected by abuse or violence. Local authorities should also adopt a culture of open communication and support and make clear what help is available to people.

- **Incident monitoring**

It is important that local authorities maintain good data collection and monitoring systems to track any incidents of abuse or violence. Data should be analysed to inform risk assessment, resource allocation and the development of targeted prevention strategies.

- **Policies and procedures**

Policies and procedures associated with staff safety and well-being should be regularly reviewed and updated, taking into account any data obtained from incident monitoring.

- **Education campaign**

Public awareness campaigns can be developed to promote respect for council employees, highlighting the consequences of abusive or violent behaviour. It is important that communities understand the position and that there is mutual understanding and cooperation.”

- 18 In addition to the suggestions above, the LGiU also mentions the Civility and Respect Project by the Civility and Respect Working Group, which Members may recall aims to promote civility and respect in local government. The Civility and Respect Working Group is supported by representatives from SLCC, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), County Associations and One Voice Wales. Local authorities are able to sign the Civility and Respect Pledge to agree to treat councillors, clerks, employees, members of the public, representatives of partner organisations and volunteers with civility and respect in their roles.
- 19 The LGiU concluded that a collective effort from all stakeholders is required to address the issue and that by *“working together and prioritising the well-being of council staff, a culture of respect, accountability and zero tolerance for violence and abuse in the public sector can be established.”*

A councillor’s workbook on stress management and personal resilience

- 20 In June 2024, the LGA published a workbook which aims to help councillors deal with stress and to assist councillors in building their personal resilience.
- 21 The LGA notes that local authorities have to make decisions about what services they are able to provide for their communities and their local residents, and that it often elected members who have to deal with explaining those decisions, which can be stressful.

- 22 The LGA have stated that by completing the workbook, councillors will be able to:
- *“recognise stress in themselves and others*
 - *take action to reduce stress and build their personal resilience*
 - *make decisions affecting their communities*
 - *handle difficult situations within their communities*
 - *provide effective leadership.”*
- 23 The workbook does not need to be completed in one session and the LGA have noted that councillors may wish to work through the material at their own pace. Whilst they recognise that some of the content may be more useful to newly elected members, the workbook can still serve as a useful reminder to those who have been elected for some time.
- 24 The workbook is available to Members via the Members Portal but it is proposed that the Director of Legal and Democratic Services circulate the link to the workbook to all Members to remind them that it is there. It is also suggested that details of the workbook are included within the new Members Development Programme for May 2025.

Civility in public life motion

- 25 On the 18 July 2024 the LGA’s Executive Advisory Board accepted a recommendation to adopt the Civility in public life motion.
- 26 The motion calls for a central unit to be set up by the Government to assess, address and monitor abuse of locally elected politicians and prospective candidates. The motion was proposed by the Deputy Chair of the Association of North East Councils (ANEC) and seconded by the Leader of Durham County Council.
- 27 The LGA noted that they have worked to improve the public and political discourse by working with councils and the police in respect of the support available for councillors experiencing abuse and by setting high standards of the conduct expected of councillors.
- 28 Further, whilst the LGA note that they welcome the Governments proposal of dedicated police support for elected members they are still concerned with the safety of councillors, noting that more action is needed in order to prevent the negative impact on our democracy.
- 29 It was therefore recommended for the LGA Executive Advisory Board to:
- *Call on His Majesty’s Government to establish and resource a permanent central unit to monitor, assess and address abuse, intimidation and safety of locally elected politicians and candidates. As a priority, this unit should:*

- *Coordinate the bringing forward of legislation to allow councillors to withhold their home address from the public register of interests.*
 - *Review the preparedness of our justice system (police and the Crown Prosecution Service) to respond to abuse of councillors online and in person under the new Online Safety Act and existing laws on abuse, harassment, stalking and other relevant offences.*
 - *Call on the Government to work to improve the general public's understanding of the decision-making role of councillors and councils, and respectful debate expectations.*
 - *Continue to support councils in tackling abuse and intimidation at a local level, including prioritising the well-being and resilience of councillors, taking a risk-based approach to councillor safety issues, and role-modelling good councillor behaviours and conduct."*
- 30 The report concluded that if members agreed to the motion, officers of the LGA are to update corporate documents to include *"the new requests and ensure they are incorporated into proposals the LGA makes to the government."* The LGA have also stated that they will *"continue to work with the sector and members to support councils in addressing abuse and intimidation of councillors locally."*

Background papers

- [LGA: Debate Not Hate Public Statement](#)
- [LGA Council Self-assessment Toolkit](#)
- [LGiU Briefing: Threat to democracy: The alarming rise of violence against council staff](#)
- [A councillor's workbook on stress management and personal resilience](#)
- [Civility in public life motion](#)
- [Report LGA Executive Advisory Board: Civility in Public Life Motion](#)

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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 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**
