

**STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**Standards Committee**

**18 November 2022**

<b>TITLE:</b>	<b>Debate Not Hate Report</b>
<b>PORTFOLIO HOLDER:</b>	<b>Councillor Paul Roberts – Leader</b>
<b>CONTACT OFFICER:</b>	<b>Linden Vernon - Head of Democratic Services</b>
<b>WARDS INVOLVED:</b>	<b>Non-Specific</b>

**Appendix A – Debate Not Hate Report**

**1. Reason for the Report**

- 1.1 The report updates the Committee on the Debate Not Hate report issued by the Local Government Association under its 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.

**2. Recommendation**

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the report.

**3. Executive Summary**

- 3.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) launched a call for evidence 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. The Councillor Census also took place between January and February 2022. Both of these exercises revealed the experiences of councillors with regards to incidents of abuse and intimidation.
- 3.2 The following themes with regards to gaps and inconsistencies were identified:
- Variability of support
  - Targeted abuse
  - Personal and democratic impacts
  - Vulnerability of councillors

- The normalisation of incidents

3.3 The report makes 7 recommendations. These relate to councils, government, the Police, the LGA and social media organisations taking greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors, dissemination of good practice and changes to legislation.

#### 4. **How this report links to Corporate Priorities**

4.1 The ability of councillors to make good evidence based decisions, free from abuse and intimidation, is fundamental to the achievement of the Council's priorities.

#### 5. **Alternative Options**

5.1 A number of options for improving the protection of councillors from abuse and intimidation are detailed in the report.

MARK TRILLO  
**Executive Director (Governance & Commissioning)**

#### **Web Links and Background Papers**

Appendix A - Attached

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#### 6. **Detail**

6.1 Following the publication of the Committee for Standards in Public Life reports into Intimidation in public life and Local government ethical standards, the Local Government Association (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.

6.2 The LGA launched a call for evidence 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. 419 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% 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% 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% of respondents with multiple experiences said they received abuse by social media.
- 64% of respondents had been abused and/or intimidated in person.
- 50% of respondents said the abuse was ongoing.
- 72% of respondents said they had taken actions themselves to avoid intimidation and/or abuse, or to protect themselves.
- 60% 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% of respondents said they would be standing for re-election at the next election.
- 27% of respondents said they would not stand for the next election and 31% were undecided, of those respondents 68% said abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again.

6.3 The Councillor Census also took place between January and February 2022. This survey covered a range of areas including representation, councillor views and councillors' work. Over 5,000 councillors responded to the survey which is a response rate of 30%. 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% of respondents thought that the council had effective arrangements for dealing with inappropriate behaviour by council officers, 57% by councillors and 55% by members of the public.
- 28% of respondents had either frequently or occasionally felt at risk personally in their role as a councillor, 45% felt at risk rarely and only 26% never felt at risk.
- 65% 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 the last twelve months; 10% experienced it frequently, 29% occasionally, 33% rarely. Only 27% had never had any such experiences.
- 63% of respondents felt that the arrangements in place for protecting councillors personally were effective.
- 79% of respondents would recommend the role of councillor to others.
- 65% of respondents intended to stand for re-election.

6.4 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.

- 6.5 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.
- 6.6 59% of respondents believed the abuse was triggered by specific events. The most common trigger was contentious council decisions such as unsuccessful planning and licensing applications. Another trigger for abuse was wider council policy on topical issues such as Covid-19 vaccinations and climate change.
- 6.7 The report states that 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.
- 6.8 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.
- 6.9 72% 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 ward 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.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

- 6.10 The call for evidence 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.
- 6.11 The report stated that it is important that these issues are addressed to ensure that they do not have a detrimental impact on councillors, councils and local

democracy in the future. The following themes with regards to gaps and inconsistencies were identified:

- **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.

6.12 In considering these findings the report makes the following recommendations:

- **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, 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.

6.13 The Council has promoted the “Personal Safety for Councillors” webinars conducted by the LGA in recent months. The LGA’s Personal Safety Guide for Councillors can also be viewed via the Councillors’ Portal on the Authority’s intranet and will be included in the induction pack issued to all councillors following the 2023 all out elections. Requests received from councillors with regards to the visibility of their address details being displayed on the Council’s website are always acted upon.

6.14 Under section 32 of the Localism Act 2011 (sensitive interests) where a councillor and the Monitoring Officer consider that disclosure of the details of an interest (such as address details) could lead to the member or a person connected with the member being subject to violence or intimidation those interests maybe redacted from the public version of the register.

6.15 The Council also has arrangements in place for both councillors and officers to access a free, independent counselling service if required. This is a strictly confidential service for anyone who is experiencing difficulties at work or home. The service is staffed by professional, qualified counsellors who work to the British Association for Counselling code of practice.