

Full Council 25 January 2024

Report Title	Local Government Association – Civility in public life - Debate Not Hate Campaign
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Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number/s for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972	N/A

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Local Government Association -“Debate Not Hate: The Impact of Abuse on Local Democracy” report (the Report).

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. To update and inform Council of the Local Government Association’s “Debate Not Hate: The Impact of Abuse on Local Democracy” report (the Report) and campaign.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 In 2021, the Local Government Association (LGA) launched a “Call for Evidence on Abuse and Intimidation of Councillors” as part of the civility in public life programme. The findings from the report were used to produce a report and a campaign calling for support from Councillors, MPs, and Organisations to sign the public statement to show support for the Debate Not Hate Campaign.
- 2.2 In conjunction with the report, the LGA have also produced a “Debate Not Hate” Public Statement which supports their campaign. The LGA are calling for Councillors, MPs, and Organisations to sign the Public Statement to show support for the Debate Not Hate Campaign.

2.3 This report summarises the findings of the call for evidence, the LGA recommendations and the arrangements at North Northamptonshire Council.

3. Recommendations

3.1.1 It is recommended that:

3.1.1.1 The Council commits to and accepts the following:

- a) To support the 'Debate not Hate' campaign and accept the LGA recommendations in principal.
- b) To work together, across the political groups to promote and uphold high standards of civil behaviour in public and political debate.
- c) To establish a reporting mechanism to record and monitor incidents of harassment and abuse.
- d) To work with officers to ensure that support is provide to councillors who are experiencing intimidation and abuse.
- e) That the Democracy and Standards Committee will review this on an annual basis and will work with the Monitoring Officer to address and challenge ongoing issues and key concerns.

3.1.1.2 The Leader of the Council signs the Debate Not Hate Public Statement on behalf of the Council.

3.2 Reasons for recommendations - The 'Debate not Hate' campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in local communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the response to and support those in public life facing abuse and intimidation.

3.2.1 Other options considered – To do nothing, however providing support to the campaign promotes high ethical standards in public life which is consistent with the Nolan principles and the Councillor Code of Conduct in accordance with the Localism Act 2011.

4. Report Background

4.1 In October 2021, the LGA launched its survey 'The LGA's Call for Evidence on Abuse and Intimidation of Councillors.' The survey aimed to gather data of participants' experiences and concerns regarding public abuse and intimidation.

4.2 The survey was open to all Councillors in the UK both past and serving, to current and previous candidates from previous elections, those who assist or have assisted councillors, or those who have personally witnessed abuse towards councillors.

4.3 The LGA received 419 responses within the first six months of the call for evidence, which were used to inform the Report.

5. Findings, Themes and Recommendations

- 5.1 The key findings from the call for evidence were used to produce the “Debate Not Hate: The Impact of Abuse on Local Democracy” Report which is shown at Appendix A of this report. A summary of the key findings are:
- i. 88% respondents have experienced abuse directed at them with 98% of these councillors having experienced it on multiple occasions.
 - ii. 73% report experiencing abuse via social media with it being the most common way abuse is received.
 - iii. 64% have experienced in person abuse.
 - iv. 59% believe abuse was triggered by a particular event, with 68% of these believing it was a particular decision which triggered the abuse.
 - v. 50% reported that the abuse they receive is ongoing.
 - vi. It was reported that those experiencing abuse viewed the political parties providing the least effective support to help councillors deal with abuse.
 - vii. 72% of respondents take proactive steps to avoid intimidation and abuse.
- 5.2 The report identifies five themes as follows:
- i. Variability - Support from Councils, Political Parties and the Police varied throughout the country.
 - ii. Targeted Abuse - Councillors and candidates with protected characteristics more at risk of abuse with misogyny, racism and homophobia highlighted within the responses.
 - iii. Personal and Democratic impacts - Abuse and intimidation can have an impact on councillors and their families. Many respondents highlighted the impact of such incidents on their mental health. Respondents have reported that such incidents also have an impact on their willingness to stand for reflection.
 - iv. Vulnerability of councillors – Councillors are vulnerable to physical abuse and intimidation due to them being visible and accessible in the local community. Similarly, factors such as their home addresses being available online increases their risk of receiving abuse.
 - v. Normalisation – The attitude that abuse, particularly online abuse should be something that Councillors should be expected to deal with is becoming more common.
- 5.3 Arising from the report there a series of recommendations were produced by the LGA as detailed below.
- 5.4 Recommendation 1
Councils and relevant partners should take more responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of councillors. Proactive steps should be taken to prevent abuse and intimidation towards councillors and take similar steps to handling cases. Councils should work with agencies to support councillors’ mental health and address risks and threats directed at councillors.
- 5.5 Recommendation 2
LGA should continue to consider what measures can be put in place to prevent abuse and intimidation through the civility in public life programme.

- 5.6 Recommendation 3
Police forces should be more consistent in their response to abuse and threats towards councillors. Risk based approaches should be taken in a similar way which they are for MPs. Similar procedures should be implemented nationally.
- 5.7 Recommendation 4
Legislation should be passed to entitle councillors to withhold their home address.
- 5.8 Recommendation 5
LGA should work with parties, election and democratic officers and organisations responsible for guidance to promote practice of withholding home addresses.
- 5.9 Recommendation 6
Social media companies should provide better methods to deal with abuse reported by councillors.
- 5.10 Recommendation 7
In partnership with LGA a working group should be formed by the relevant Government department to address issues around abuse and intimidation of councillors.
- 5.11 The Democracy and Standards Committee considered and gave its support to the Debate Not Hate campaign at its meeting held on 8 January 2024. Members of the Committee considered this to be a very important campaign, emphasizing the opportunities to improve the public perception of councillors in terms of their working in the best interests of constituents.
- 5.12 It was also noted that in some cases behaviour at council meetings could be poor at times as a consequence of passionate debate, and that support to the campaign could also improve matters in this regard. Issues of reinforcing the personal safety of councillors were also raised, noting high profile incidents in recent years.

6. Issues and Choices

- 6.1 The Council and its officers understand the significance and impact of incidents of abuse and intimidation towards Councillors. The intimidation and abuse of councillors, in person or otherwise, undermines democracy; it can prevent elected members from representing the communities they serve, prevent individuals from standing for election and undermine public trust in democratic processes. These harmful behaviours, whether occurring towards, between or by elected members are entirely unacceptable.
- 6.2 The Monitoring Officer has identified the need to further enhance the existing arrangements to support Councillors and promote high ethical standards. This includes updating advice and guidance for Councillors on the topic of personal security and the development of a Councillor social media toolkit. The work to

be undertaken has commenced locally working with Health and Safety and Communication teams.

- 6.3 To ensure improved awareness and engagement it is proposed that the Monitoring Officer presents the local campaign proposals to Committee prior to roll out across the Council.
- 6.4 In relation to recommendation seven, the LGA are asking all Councillors and MPs across the country to sign a public statement to support their work and act as a call for action for the relevant government department to form a working group to bring together relevant agencies and partners to produce an action plan.
- 6.5 Given the LGA's findings in relation to abuse and intimidation, it is important to raise awareness of the support available to Councillors and to promote the Debate not Hate Campaign.

7. Next Steps

- 7.1 Council is recommended to support the LGA campaign as set out at paragraph 3.1.2, if agreed the Leader will sign the Public Statement and the Democracy and Standards Committee will receive updates from the Monitoring Officer on developments and work to be undertaken to the campaign.

8. Implications (including financial implications)

8.1 Resources and Financial

- 8.1.1 There are no direct resource or financial implications arising from the support and signing to the campaign. There will be limited financial and resource implications in a campaign for the Council through the work undertaken by its officers. It is not anticipated that there will be any external expenditure associated with a campaign.

8.2 Legal and Governance

- 8.2.1 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.

8.3 Risk

- 8.3.1 There are no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

8.4 Consultation

8.4.1 The Democracy and Standards Committee considered this report on 8th January 2024 and supported the recommendation to Council.

8.5 Consideration by Executive Advisory Panel

8.5.1 This has not been considered by an Executive Advisory Panel.

8.6 Consideration by Scrutiny

8.6.1 This has not been considered by Scrutiny.

8.7 Climate Impact

8.7.1 Not considered applicable.

8.8 Community Impact

8.8.1 Not considered applicable.

9. Background Papers

9.1 None