

Report of the Monitoring Officer

DEBATE NOT HATE MOTION1. Purpose of Report

To report back the Officer and Member Task and Finish Groups recommendations having considered the Local Government Association (LGA) 'Debate Not Hate' Campaign objectives in more detail.

2. Recommendation

The Committee is asked to NOTE that

- 1. The increasing levels of toxicity in public and political discourse is having a detrimental impact on local democracy and that prevention, support and responses to abuse and intimidation of local politicians must improve to ensure Councillors feel safe and able to continue representing their residents.**

The Committee is asked to RECOMMEND to Council that

2. The Council commits to the following:

- a. To signing up to the 'Debate Not Hate' campaign**
- b. To write to the Government to ask them to work with the LGA to develop and implement a plan to address abuse and intimidation of politicians and to legislate that Councillors can withhold their home addresses to ensure parity with MPs**
- c. To work together, across the political groups to promote and uphold exemplary standards of public and political debate**
- d. To improve the reporting mechanism to record and monitor incidents of harassment and abuse for Councillors facing intimidation and abuse**
- e. To regularly review the support available for Councillors and Officers who are experiencing intimidation and abuse**
- f. To work with the local police to ensure there is a clear and joined-up mechanism for reporting threats and other concerns about the safety of Councillors and their families**
- g. To include as part of the Member training programme support available and relevant training to Councillors in relation to abuse and intimidation and Councillor safety.**

3. Detail

On 11 October 2023 a Motion was brought to full Council by Councillor MacRae to sign up to the LGA 'Debate Not Hate' campaign. Council referred the Motion to Governance, Audit and Standards Committee to work with Officers to get a better understanding of what signing up to the LGA 'Debate Not Hate' Campaign would mean and to explore the range of support currently available to deal with Member abuse and intimidation and to consider what further support could be developed.

The Governance, Audit and Standards Committee nominated a politically balanced Member and Officer Task and Finish Group to meet to consider the motion in more detail and their findings are reported in the attached APPENDIX.

4. Financial Implications

There are no cost implications in signing up to the campaign. The Council will be able to access free resources, including a digital toolkit, which will enhance the support that can be offered to Members.

5. Legal Implications

By signing up to the 'Debate Not Hate' campaign, the Council can ensure that Members are fully supported when faced with harassment and intimidation. The risks in not signing up to the campaign or not supporting Members who face harassment are that reduced numbers of people choose to stand for election and that Members do not feel safe in their role and may choose to stand down early. There are no legal implications of signing up.

6. Human Resources Implications

The Human Resources Manager supports signing up to the Campaign and supporting Members with their wellbeing.

7. Union Comments

There are no comments from the Union.

8. Climate Change Implications

The campaign is run digitally and there is limited impact on climate change or the Council's carbon footprint.

9. Data Protection Compliance Implications

This report does not contain any OFFICIAL(SENSITIVE) information and there are no Data Protection issues in relation to this report. Equality Impact Assessment
As there is change to policy an Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

10. Background Papers

LGA 'Debate Note Hate' campaign:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate>

APPENDIX**Background: LGA findings and Debate Not Hate Campaign**

The Local Government Association (LGA) launched the ‘Debate Not Hate’ campaign following publication of the report ‘Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy’ in June 2022. It 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.”

In 2022, the LGA Census of Councillors found that seven out of 10 Councillors had experienced abuse and intimidation over the last 12 months. Councillors reported feeling that abuse is becoming more common and increasing in severity.

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.

Overall, when the reports of abuse were grouped as either offline abuse (in-person or via telephone or post) or online abuse (social media, virtual meetings, or other online communication) they were equal, showing that online abuse happens just as much as offline abuse. However, 73 per cent of respondents said that multiple incidents of abuse they experienced took place on social media, making it the most common place for abuse to occur. Respondents were much more likely to report that abuse had occurred on multiple occasions and involved multiple perpetrators, than multiple incidents by one person or a single incident.

Respondents felt that the increased use of unregulated social media platforms had increased the likelihood of abuse and hurtful comments. Respondents mentioned ‘pile-on’ abuse which is when a number of different individuals sending harassing communication to one victim in a public (social media platform) or semi-public space (messaging service like WhatsApp). Significant amounts of abuse can accumulate very quickly in this way through individual posts, which can be difficult to remove from the platform but nevertheless have a cumulative harmful effect. The immediacy and 24-hour nature of social media and the reach into personal spaces was also cited as an area of concern, with Councillors feeling targeted within their own homes and unable to disengage from abuse being directed at them online. Respondents also suggested that the anonymity of social media emboldened perpetrators to be more extreme on

social media and allowed them to set up multiple accounts for the purpose of abusing or 'Trolling' others with impunity.

Whilst the Government's Online Safety Bill may help to address some forms of serious harmful online communication by introducing new communication offences and by introducing a duty to protect adults from harmful content, most online abuse would probably not meet the threshold for criminal prosecution or might fall below the scope of what content should be removed under this duty. We therefore have concerns that these provisions will not have the intended impact and more is needed to address non-criminal but nonetheless harmful online abuse and misinformation.

Councillors have many in-person interactions with residents. Respondents report that single incidents were more likely to happen in person than online and even single incidents had a significant impact on victims. Respondents repeatedly highlighted how visible and locally accessible Councillors are to the public, particularly compared to national politicians. In their formal role, Councillors attend clearly advertised Council events like Council meetings and make decisions about highly emotive local issues like planning, licensing and service provision that affect a lot of residents. Council meetings are rightly open to the public, but there is generally little or no security or police presence to handle incidents when they occur. This is often down to the level of resource available, and some respondents indicated that even when the police accepted there were heightened risks at certain council meetings, they often could not guarantee police support due to resourcing issues. As a consequence, some reported Council meetings being adjourned or postponed due to safety concerns.

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.

Councillors should therefore receive support appropriate to the level of risk associated with their role and their particular situation, just as MPs do.

This research reinforces concerns that abuse in public life and public discourse is becoming normalised and is seriously impacting civic life and local democracy.

The intimidation and abuse of Councillors, in person or otherwise, undermines democracy; prevents elected Members from representing the communities they serve, deters individuals from standing for election, and undermines public life in democratic processes.

The LGA Debate Not Hate Public Statement – “Debating and disagreeing with one another has always been, and will continue to be, a healthy part of democracy. However, the right engagement matters and abuse and intimidation crosses the line into dangerous territory and has no place in politics. We are calling on local government leaders, the Government and relevant partners, like the police, political parties and social media companies to come together through a government convened working group to produce and implement an action plan that addresses the abuse and intimidation of elected Members and candidates and ensures their safety while they fulfil their democratic roles”

This campaign has received support from across the political spectrum, as well as representatives from bodies such as the National Association of Local Councils, Compassion in Politics, the Local Government Information Unit and the National Hate Crime Awareness Week.

The Task and Finish Group Meetings Update

The Task and Finish Group met on 21 December 2023 and 11 January 2024 and discussed the LGA’s findings and the Motion to sign up to the ‘The Debate Not Hate’ campaign.

The Task and Finish Group consulted their own political groups Members to understand what issues they had experienced with intimidation and abuse, as elected Members. This information was used to identify what further support and training needed to be developed by the Council to better support and address these issues.

The LGA ‘Debate Not Hate’ guidance and toolkits were explored to understand how they could be used to aid the Council approach of supporting Members. A number of Officers and the Police also attended to discuss what support already existed and explored what further support could be developed and explained in training to better inform Members.

The Task and Finish Group agreed there was a need to:

1. To write to the Government to ask them to work with the LGA to develop and implement a plan to address abuse and intimidation of politicians and to legislate that Councillors can withhold their home addresses to ensure parity with MPs
2. To sign up the ‘Debate Not Hate’ campaign
3. Improve the reporting mechanism to record and monitor incidents of harassment and abuse for Councillors facing intimidation and abuse.

4. Foster a strong relationship with police to improve coordination and advance mutual understanding of abuse affecting Councillors and the police role in addressing it and to set expectations with elected Members, as to when it is appropriate for police to get involved.
5. To regularly review the support available for Councillors and Officers who are experiencing intimidation and abuse and for each political group to consider nominating support to help Members raise and deal with these issues.
6. To include as part of the Member training programme support available and relevant training to Councillors in relation to abuse and intimidation and Councillor safety.

The Task and Finish Group consider the recommendations set out in the body of the report to be in line with the support identified and required by Members.

Further guidance from the LGA will continue to inform the support the Council will develop and implement for its Members to de-normalise intimidation and abuse, to ensure that anyone, regardless of their background or political affiliation, feels safe to become a Councillor and proud to represent their community.