Public Document Pack

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE SERVICES

Chief Executive Damian Roberts	Gibson Building Gibson Drive Kings Hill, West Malling Kent ME19 4LZ West Malling (01732) 844522

NB - This agenda contains proposals, recommendations and options. These do not represent Council policy or decisions until they have received proper consideration through the full decision making process.

Contact: Committee Services
committee.services@tmbc.gov.uk

22 May 2025

To: MEMBERS OF THE JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE
(Copies to all Members of the Council)

Dear Sir/Madam

Your attendance is requested at a meeting of the Joint Standards Committee to be held in the Council Chamber, Gibson Drive, Kings Hill on Monday, 2nd June, 2025 commencing at 7.30 pm.

Members of the Committee are required to attend in person. Other Members may attend in person or participate online via MS Teams.

Information on how to observe the meeting will be published on the Council's website.

Yours faithfully

DAMIAN ROBERTS

Chief Executive

A G E N D A

1.   Guidance on the Conduct of Meetings   5 - 8

PART 1 - PUBLIC

2.   Apologies for Absence

Members are reminded of their obligation under the Council's Code of Conduct to disclose any Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Other Significant Interests in any matter(s) to be considered or being considered at the meeting. These are explained in the Code of Conduct on the Council's website at Code of conduct for members – Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (tmbc.gov.uk).

Members in any doubt about such declarations are advised to contact Legal or Democratic Services in advance of the meeting.

To confirm as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting of the Joint Standards Committee held on 20 January 2025.

Matters for Decision under Delegated Powers

This report invites the Committee to consider the Local Government Association's publication on how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse.

Any other items which the Chairman decides are urgent due to special circumstances and of which notice has been given to the Chief Executive.

Matters for consideration in Private

The Chairman to move that the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting during consideration of any items the publication of which would disclose exempt information.

PART 2 - PRIVATE

Any other items which the Chairman decides are urgent due to special circumstances and of which notice has been given to the Chief Executive.

MEMBERSHIP

Cllr D A S Davis (Chair)
Cllr Mrs S Bell (Vice-Chair)

Cllr K Barton	Cllr B A Parry
Cllr G C Bridge	Cllr M R Rhodes
Cllr Mrs T Dean	Cllr R V Roud
Cllr S M Hammond	Cllr K B Tanner
Cllr J R S Lark	

Parish and Town Representatives:

Vacancy	Addington
Mr A Sullivan	Aylesford
Mr J Reading	Borough Green
Mr B Stead	Burham
Mr N Newman	Ditton
Mr M Williams	East Peckham
Mr O Baldock	Hadlow
Mr A Petty	Kings Hill
Mrs W Palmer	Platt
Mr M Carboni	Plaxtol
Prof M McKinlay	Ryarsh
Ms K Mordecai-Wolfe	Snodland
Mr D Gaunt	Trottiscliffe
Mr D Beach	Wrotham
Mr D Mercier	Independent Person
Mr P Cummins	Independent Person

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GUIDANCE ON HOW MEETINGS WILL BE CONDUCTED

(1) Most of the Borough Council meetings are livestreamed, unless there is exempt or confidential business being discussed, giving residents the opportunity to see decision making in action. These can be watched via our YouTube channel. When it is not possible to livestream meetings they are recorded and uploaded as soon as possible:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPp-IJlSNgoF-ugSzxjAPfw/featured

(2) There are no fire drills planned during the time a meeting is being held. For the benefit of those in the meeting room, the fire alarm is a long continuous bell and the exits are via the doors used to enter the room. An officer on site will lead any evacuation.

(3) Should you need this agenda or any of the reports in a different format, or have any other queries concerning the meeting, please contact Democratic Services on committee.services@tmbc.gov.uk in the first instance.

Attendance:

- Members of the Committee are required to attend in person and be present in the meeting room. Only these Members are able to move/ second or amend motions, and vote.

- Other Members of the Council can join via MS Teams and can take part in any discussion and ask questions, when invited to do so by the Chair, but cannot move/ second or amend motions or vote on any matters. Members participating remotely are reminded that this does not count towards their formal committee attendance.

- Occasionally, Members of the Committee are unable to attend in person and may join via MS Teams in the same way as other Members. However, they are unable to move/ second or amend motions or vote on any matters if they are not present in the meeting room. As with other Members joining via MS Teams, this does not count towards their formal committee attendance.

- Officers can participate in person or online.

- Members of the public addressing an Area Planning Committee should attend in person. However, arrangements to participate online can be considered in certain circumstances.   Please contact committee.services@tmbc.gov.uk for further information.

Before formal proceedings start there will be a sound check of Members/Officers in the room. This is done as a roll call and confirms attendance of voting Members.

Ground Rules:

The meeting will operate under the following ground rules:

- Members in the Chamber should indicate to speak in the usual way and use the fixed microphones in front of them. These need to be switched on when speaking or comments will not be heard by those participating online. Please switch off microphones when not speaking.
- If there any technical issues the meeting will be adjourned to try and rectify them. If this is not possible there are a number of options that can be taken to enable the meeting to continue. These will be explained if it becomes necessary.

For those Members participating online:

- please request to speak using the 'chat or hand raised function';
- please turn off cameras and microphones when not speaking;
- please do not use the 'chat function' for other matters as comments can be seen by all;
- Members may wish to blur the background on their camera using the facility on Microsoft teams.
- Please avoid distractions and general chat if not addressing the meeting
- Please remember to turn off or silence mobile phones

Voting:

Voting may be undertaken by way of a roll call and each Member should verbally respond For, Against, Abstain. The vote will be noted and announced by the Democratic Services Officer.

Alternatively, votes may be taken by general affirmation if it seems that there is agreement amongst Members. The Chairman will announce the outcome of the vote for those participating and viewing online.

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Joint Standards Committee					
	Conservative	**Liberal Democratic**	**Green**	**Ind. Kent Alliance**	**Labour**
1	Robin Betts	Bill Banks	Lee Athwal		
2	Matt Boughton	Tim Bishop	Anna Cope		
3	Martin Coffin	James Clokey	Mark Hood		
4	Des Keers	Frani Hoskins	Robert Oliver		
5	Colin Williams	Michelle Tatton	Stacey Pilgrim		

May 2025

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Declarations of interest

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TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MINUTES

Monday, 20th January, 2025

Present: Cllr D A S Davis (Chair), Cllr K Barton, Cllr M D Boughton (substitute), Cllr G C Bridge, Cllr J Clokey (substitute), Cllr M A Coffin (substitute), Cllr B A Parry, Cllr R V Roud, Cllr K B Tanner and Cllr C Williams (substitute).

Together with parish/town representatives Mr W Stead (Burham Parish Council), Mr N Newman (Ditton Parish Council), Mr O Baldock (Hadlow Parish Council), Mrs W Palmer (Platt Parish Council), Mr M Carboni (Plaxtol Parish Council) and Prof M McKinlay (Ryarsh Parish Council).

Cllr M Taylor* was also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

(*participated via MS Teams)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs S Bell (Vice-Chair), Mrs T Dean, J R S Lark and M R Rhodes.

PART 1 - PUBLIC

ST 25/1 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Notification of substitute Members were recorded as set out below:

- Cllr Boughton substituted for Cllr Bell
- Cllr Clokey substituted for Cllr Dean
- Cllr Williams substituted for Cllr Lark
- Cllr Coffin substituted for Cllr Rhodes

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules 17.5 to 17.9 these Councillors had the same rights as the ordinary member of the committee for whom they were substituting.

ST 25/2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

1

ST 25/3   **MINUTES**

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Joint Standards Committee held on 5 June 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

DECISIONS TAKEN UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

ST 25/4   **CONSULTATION - STRENGTHENING THE STANDARDS AND CONDUCT FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND**

The report of the Monitoring Officer presented the consultation on strengthening the standards and conduct framework, published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 18 December 2024 (attached at Annex 1), together with a proposed response for approval by the Committee (attached at Annex 2).

The consultation sought views on introducing measures to strengthen the standards and conduct regime in England and ensure consistency of approach amongst council's investigating serious breaches of their member codes of conduct, including the introduction of the power of suspension. Members discussed the proposed responses in detail and their comments were noted. In particular, Members raised concern in relation to Question 24, i.e. that a suspended councillor be banned from council premises and the use of council facilities withdrawn in cases where deemed appropriate, and suggested that this should not be applied to a member who was the subject of an interim suspension.

RESOLVED: That the Borough Council's response to the consultation, as set out in Annex 2, be approved subject to the comments made.

MATTERS SUBMITTED FOR INFORMATION

ST 25/5   **COMPLAINTS UPDATE**

The Committee received an update on the complaints made to the Monitoring Officer that a Member may have failed to comply with their authority's code of conduct.

Details of the complaints received since the last meeting of the Joint Standards Committee were set out in Annex 1. Three complaints had been made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman in relation to decisions reached by the Monitoring Officer. Two of these cases related to decisions made by the Monitoring Officer during 2024 with the third relating to a decision made during 2023. In all three cases, the Ombudsman had indicated that it would not investigate the complaints because there was insufficient evidence of fault.

2

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN PRIVATE

ST 25/6   EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no items considered in private.

The meeting ended at 8.32 pm

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Joint Standards Committee

02 June 2025

Part 1 - Public

Matters Taken Under Delegated Powers

Cabinet Member   Not applicable

Responsible Officer   Adrian Stanfield, Monitoring Officer

Report Author   Adrian Stanfield, Monitoring Officer

Debate Not Hate

1   Summary and Purpose of Report

1.1   This report invites the Committee to consider the Local Government Association's publication on how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse.

2   Corporate Strategy Priority Area

2.1   Efficient services for all our residents, maintaining an effective council.

2.2   It is imperative that Councillors are able to perform their duties in a safe and supportive environment. Abuse and intimidation of those performing public duties will not only undermine the effective discharge of those duties but will also act as a deterrent to anyone seeking election or re-election.

3   Recommendations

3.1   The Committee is asked to:-

(1) Note the contents of this report and accompanying annexes;

(2) Note the progress made in completion of the self-assessment toolkit at Annex 3;

(3) Agree the improvement steps to address the gaps in the self-assessment toolkit set out in the summary at Annex 4.

(4) Consider setting up a panel of Members to oversee delivery of the improvement steps at Annex 4.

(5) Undertake a survey as set out at Annex 4 to gain a better understanding of the extent to which all TMBC councillors have suffered abuse and intimidation.

(6) Agree that the Borough Council monitors any reports of abusive and threatening behaviour to determine whether any protected characteristic group is affected more or less than any other.

4 Introduction and Background

4.1 In August 2024 the Local Government Association (LGA) published the results of an online survey sent to all councillors in England and Wales to investigate the extent to which they had experienced abuse or intimidation due to their councillor role. This survey expanded on a previous 'Debate Not Hate' survey and formed part of an ongoing campaign by the LGA to tackle ongoing concerns about abuse and intimidation in public life.

4.2 In the Councillors guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation, the LGA use the following definitions: -

Abuse

4.3 The Home Office and the Department of Health Guidance on Developing and Implementing Multi-agency Policies and Procedures to Protect Vulnerable Adults from Abuse define abuse as a single act or repeated physical, verbal or psychological acts that violate an individual's human and civil rights. Some cases of abuse constitute criminal offences. For example, physical, psychological or sexual assault, theft, fraud and gender and racial discrimination.

Harassment

4.4 The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 indicates that someone's actions amount to harassment when they make the victim feel distressed, humiliated, threatened or fearful of further violence. The main goal of harassment is to persuade victims either not to do something that they are entitled or required to do or to do something that they are not obliged to do. Actions listed under the Protection from Harassment Act include, but are not limited to:

- phone calls
- letters
- emails
- visits
- stalking
- verbal abuse of any kind, including on social media
- threats
- damage to property
- bodily harm

Such actions amount to harassment when they occur more than once.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Anti-Harassment Policy Guidelines defines coercion or intimidation as a form of harassment. Coercion is defined as the action of forcefully persuading or threatening an individual to do something which includes behaviours, such as blackmail, extortion, threats or physical and sexual assaults could also be considered as a form of harassment.

Intimidation

4.5 Public intimidation is defined as "words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life". This includes actions of abuse, harassment and intimidation such as: verbal abuse; physical attacks; being stalked followed or loitered around; threats of harm; distribution of misinformation; character assassination; inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media; sexual harassment or sexual assault; and other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety

4.6 A copy of the LGA survey outcome is attached as **Annex 1** and the key findings set out below.

73 per cent of respondents reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past 12 months.

49 per cent of respondents reported that abuse and intimidation had increased in the past 12 months.

57 per cent of respondents reported that their authority's arrangements for protecting councillors were very or fairly effective.

23 per cent of respondents had reported an incident of abuse or intimidation to the police.

22 per cent of respondents had experienced a threat of violence due to their role, whilst 10 per cent had experienced a threat of damage to their property, and 5 per cent had experienced actual damage to property.

19 per cent of respondents had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic. Sex was the most commonly cited characteristic for which respondents had suffered abuse or intimidation.

4.7 The Committee is asked to note that of the 16,774 councillors invited to take part in the survey, a total of 1,734 responses were received – a response rate of 10 per cent. This level of response means that these respondents should not necessarily be taken to be widely representative of the views of all councillors.

Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents. If Members wish to seek the views of councillors more locally, it is suggested that the questions posed in the LGA survey (**Annex 5**) could be used as a basis for a survey.

4.8   Shortly before the LGA survey the Borough Council gave consideration to a Notice of Motion (24/004) submitted by Cllr Clokey in relation to the LGA Debate Not Hate Campaign. As set out in the Notice of Motion, Cllr Clokey proposed that:

- the Chair of the Joint Standards Committee be responsible for co-ordinating the completion of this toolkit; and

- the Joint Standards Committee review progress against the measures supplied in the toolkit on an annual basis.

4.9   This was supported unanimously by Members. However, it was also recognised that elements of the campaign could be applied to members of the public and could be reviewed by a Scrutiny Select Committee if appropriate.

4.10   Attached to this report are a number of further annexes. The first of these (**Annex 2**) is a copy of the LGA publication 'Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors'. The second (**Annex 3**) is a copy of the LGA toolkit 'Ending abuse in public life self-assessment' (with a summary of the improvement steps at **Annex 4**) and the final annex (**Annex 5**) is a copy of the survey questions used by the LGA, modified to allow for use by TMBC.

4.11   Within the publication at Annex 2, the LGA's project researchers identified the following three key challenges to supporting councillors with these issues:-

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.

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.

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

4.12   In response to these challenges, the LGA proposed five guiding principles and three recommendations for councils, central government, regulators and police forces across England to consider, as follows:-

Principles for support agencies

1. Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: Establish and enforce a strict policy that clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.

2. Clarity of process and responsibility: Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the council to provide support to councillors.

3. 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.

4. Tailored risk assessments: Consider individual councillors' needs and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

5. Prioritise councillor wellbeing: Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online, including developing clear guidance for social media and other online service providers on their obligations to mitigate the risks of online abuse and how this may be best achieved; and that the experience of elected members is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill.

Recommendation 2: The Government should work with the police to set out clear and consistent guidance on the role of policing in addressing abuse, intimidation and harassment of elected members. This should include expert capacity to monitor crime associated with elected members and act as a single point of contact for both councils and councillors.

Recommendation 3: The Government should widen the scope of the Defending Democracy Programme to explicitly include the safety, security and wellbeing of locally elected politicians, rather than focusing solely on national politicians and foreign interference.

4.13 In order to ensure that the Borough Council takes appropriate steps to address the issues raised in the LGA publication, I have completed the self-assessment toolkit at **Annex 3**. I am not in a position to complete this self-assessment on behalf of any of the town or parish councils within the Borough but Clerks and Members of those councils are invited to carry out a corresponding exercise on behalf of their organisations.

4.14 The self-assessment summary (**Annex 4**) identifies that there are further steps that the Borough Council may wish to consider taking as a means of tackling and mitigating the impact and risks of abuse and intimidation that councillors may encounter as part of their role and supporting them to be safe.

Digital citizenship

4.15 To support councillors and candidates in their online communications, the LGA has developed a range of guidance and tools. Whilst the LGA recognises the importance of social media for councillors to *"share political information and engage with other councillors, support officers and residents."* It also recognises that *"it also opens the door for abuse, harassment and intimidation."*

4.16 As part of the 'Digital Citizenship' the LGA have issued the following infographics which can be downloaded and saved by members or pinned to their social media profiles:-

Rules of engagement: Outlining the ways in which to communicate activities as a councillor or as a candidate. The LGA states that the *"rules are designed to give all users a clear 'code' by which they should operate, with a clear statement that users can be blocked, or posts deleted, if they fail to participate in a civil manner."*

Handling online abuse: A quick reference guide which helps to guide councillors to "understand the steps they can take to protect themselves online, how to respond to abusive messages, and encourages councillors to seek support where needed."

Mis and disinformation: The infographic sets out five steps to assist councillors in avoiding or spreading mis and disinformation. The LGA states that the *"steps should help councillors be confident in what they are posting, sharing and liking online."*

[Digital citizenship: support and resources for councillors | Local Government Association](#)

4.17 The LGA also offers practical advice for handling online abuse:-

[Practical advice for handling online abuse | Local Government Association](#)

4.18 A presentation from a recent LGA seminar 'Handling online abuse and intimidation' can also be viewed via the above page.

4.19 The Committee is also asked to note 'Glitch' an award-winning UK charity that is working to end online abuse – particularly against women and marginalised people. Founded in 2017 by then local politician, Seyi Akiwowo, after she received a flood of abuse when a video of her speech at the European Parliament went viral. Through training, research, workshops, and programs, Glitch aims to build an online world that is safer for all.

[Glitch](#)

5   Proposal

5.1   Members will note from the summary and forward plan attached at Annex 4 that a number of improvement actions have been identified to address the gaps in the toolkit. It is proposed that the actions identified at Annex 4 are taken forward, with a further report submitted to a future meeting of this Committee in order to review progress. Alternatively, Members may wish to consider setting up a panel to oversee delivery of the identified actions.

6   Other Options

6.1   No alternative options have been identified at this stage.

7   Financial and Value for Money Considerations

7.1   None arising from this report.

8   Risk Assessment

8.1   Having a robust approach towards the abuse and intimidation of elected members reduces the risk of councillors being exposed to such behaviour and gives a clear message to all about our expectations and acceptable forms of conduct.

9   Legal Implications

9.1   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.

9.2   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.

10   Cross Cutting Issues

10.1   Climate Change and Biodiversity

10.1.1   Adaptation and resilience have not been considered.

10.1.2   Climate change advice has not been sought in the preparation of the options and recommendations in this report.

10.2   Equalities and Diversity

10.2.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. Abuse and intimidation can happen to any councillor, irrespective of their sex, race or any other protected characteristic.

10.2.2 It is however recommended that the Borough Council monitors any reports of abusive and threatening behaviour to determine whether any protected characteristic group is affected more or less than any other.

Background Papers	None
Annexes	Annex 1 – LGA Survey 'Debate Not Hate' Outcomes August 2024 Annex 2 – LGA publication 'Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors' Annex 3 – LGA toolkit 'Ending abuse in public life self-assessment' Annex 4 – Summary and Improvement Plan Annex 5 – Survey questions

Debate Not Hate

Survey of councillors, August 2024
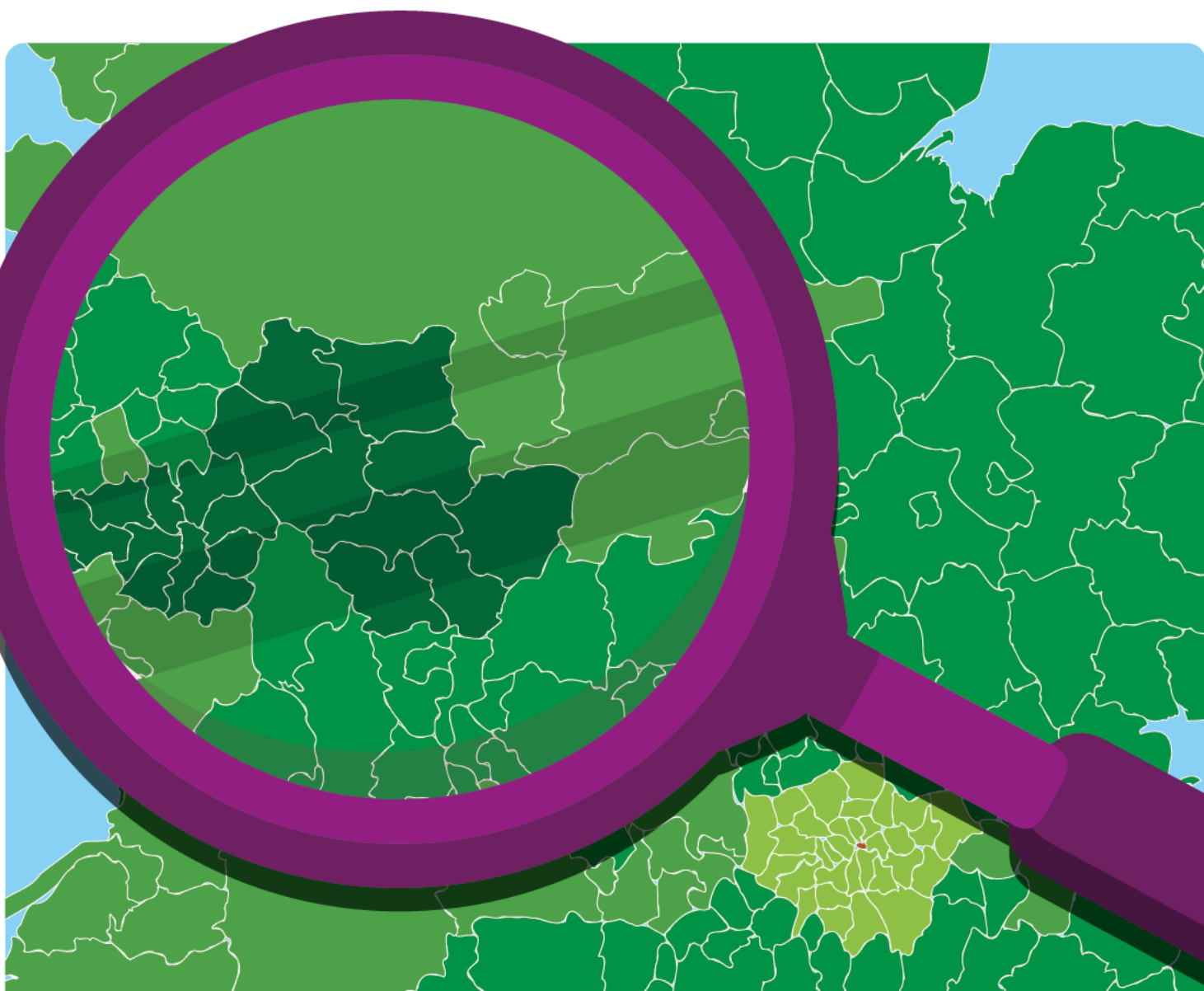
Research report

To view more research from the Local Government Association Research and Information team please visit: https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/research

Contents

1

Summary

Background

In August 2024, the Local Government Association (LGA) sent an online survey to all councillors in England and Wales to investigate the extent to which they had experienced abuse or intimidation due to their councillor role. This survey expanded on the 2023 Debate Not Hate survey, which explored how abuse and intimidation of councillors has changed compared to the 2022 Councillors' Census. A total of 1734 councillors responded to the 2024 survey – a response rate of 10 per cent – which was higher than the 5 per cent response rate in 2023. The responding councillors represented a wide cross-section of political affiliations and levels of experience.

Key findings

- **73 per cent** of respondents reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past 12 months. This was lower than the 2023 survey but remains in line with the 2022 Councillors' Census.

- **49 per cent** of respondents reported that abuse and intimidation had increased in the past 12 months.

- **57 per cent** of respondents reported that their authority's arrangements for protecting councillors were very or fairly effective.

- **23 per cent** of respondents had reported an incident of abuse or intimidation to the police.

- **22 per cent** of respondents had experienced a threat of violence due to their role, whilst **10 per cent** had experienced a threat of damage to their property, and **5 per cent** had experienced actual damage to property.

- **19 per cent** of respondents had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic. Sex was the most commonly cited characteristic for which respondents had suffered abuse or intimidation.

2

Introduction

The Local Government Association launched its "Debate Not Hate" campaign in 2022 following rising concerns about abuse and intimidation in public life, including findings in the 2022 Councillors' Census that seven in 10 councillors reported having experienced abuse or intimidation. The campaign aims to raise awareness of the damaging impact of intimidation on local democracy and lobby for changes to relevant legislation and improved protections for councillors.

The following survey was the second iteration of the Debate Not Hate survey – the first having taken place in June 2023 – and aimed to understand the extent to which abuse and intimidation has changed since both the 2022 Councillors' Census and since last year's iteration of the survey, as well as the nature of this abuse and intimidation in greater detail.

Methodology

The LGA's Research and Information Team sent an online survey to all councillors of all political affiliations belonging to principal authorities in England and Wales. One councillor's office requested a paper copy to be delivered to the councillor's home address, and this was completed and returned via post. The survey was open for just over three weeks, from 5 August to 27 August 2024.

Of the 16,774 councillors invited to take part in the survey, a total of 1,734 responses were received – a response rate of 10 per cent. This level of response means that these respondents should not necessarily be taken to be widely representative of the views of all councillors. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

In addition, the following should be considered when interpreting the findings of this survey:

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- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. Please note that bases can vary throughout the survey.

- Throughout the report, percentages may not appear to add up to exactly 100 per cent due to rounding.

- Throughout the report, the term 'abuse' is used to describe abuse and intimidation.

4

Debate Not Hate Survey 2024

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

Councillor profiling

Respondents were first asked to indicate the type of council of which they are a member. Respondents were able to select more than one option, as councillors are able to sit on more than one council. Only principle council members were invited to participate, however, respondents could indicate if they also sit on town, parish, or community councils. The full results are shown in Table 1, and demonstrate that the sample represented a broad range of council types, with the percentage of responses per council type broadly in line with the percentage of overall councillors per council type, noting a slight overrepresentation of county councillors.

Table 1: Council type

	Percentage of responses	Percentage of all councillors
District	42%	45%
County	18%	10%
London borough	9%	12%
Metropolitan borough	12%	14%
Unitary	22%	20%
Town council	14%	-
Parish/community council	9%	-
Other	1%	-

Base: all respondents (1734). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one option.

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Respondents were then asked to indicate their political affiliation. As Table 2 shows, 39 per cent of respondents were affiliated with the Labour Party, which is broadly in line with the proportion of Labour councillors overall. Twenty-one per cent of respondents were affiliated with the Conservative Party, who comprise 28 per cent of all councillors, whilst 19 per cent of respondents were affiliated with the Liberal Democrats, who comprise 17 per cent of all councillors. Eight per cent of respondents were affiliated with the Green Party, comprising 5 per cent of councillors, whilst 1 per cent were affiliated with Plaid Cymru, in line with the overall proportion of Plaid Cymru councillors. Independent councillors and all other political groups comprise 13 per cent of all councillors, in line with their response rate to the survey. A handful of respondents were affiliated with Reform UK, however these amounted to less than half a per cent.

Table 2: Political affiliation

	Percentage of responses	Percentage of all councillors
Labour	39%	36%
Conservatives	21%	28%
Liberal Democrats	19%	17%
Green Party	8%	5%
Plaid Cymru	1%	1%
Independent and all other groups	**13%**	**13%**

Base: all respondents (1734).

Respondents were then asked how long they had been serving as a councillor. The survey was launched three months after a set of local elections (May 2024) and 12 per cent of respondents had been serving for less than a year or were newly elected in May 2024. Around a fifth of respondents had been serving for between one and two years (19 per cent), whilst a further fifth had been serving for between two and

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five years (19 per cent). Half of all respondents (50 per cent) had been serving for five years or more. The full results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Length of time serving as a councillor

	Per cent
Less than one year / newly elected in May	12%
1 to <2 years	19%
2 to <5 years	19%
5 years or more	50%

Base: all respondents (1734).

Feeling at risk as a councillor

Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they felt personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor. This question was asked in the 2022 Councillors' Census, and both iterations of the Debate Not Hate survey. The results for all three years are shown in Table 4.

The table shows that in August 2024, 4 per cent of respondents reported feeling frequently personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor, representing a decrease of four percentage points compared to June 2023 but remaining in line with the 2022 Census. A quarter of respondents (27 per cent) reported feeling occasionally personally at risk in August 2024, compared to a third of respondents (33 per cent) in June 2023, and 24 per cent of respondents in 2022. A similar proportion of respondents reported feeling rarely at risk personally in August 2024 (43 per cent) as in June 2023 (41 per cent) and in 2022 (45 per cent). The proportion of respondents who reported that they never felt at risk increased from 18 per cent in June 2023 to 26 per cent in August 2024, but remains in line with the 2022 Census (27 per cent).

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Table 4: How often, if at all, do you feel personally at risk when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey	2024 survey
Some level of risk	**73%**	**82%**	**74%**
Frequently	4%	8%	4%
Occasionally	24%	33%	27%
Rarely	45%	41%	43%
Never	27%	18%	26%

Base: all respondents: 2022 (5055), 2023 (814), 2024 (1734).

Table 5 illustrates the impact of length of service on the level of personal risk felt by respondents. The results show that respondents who had been serving for five or more years were more likely to feel some level of personal risk, with more than three quarters (76 per cent) reporting that they feel personally at risk frequently, occasionally, or rarely when fulfilling their role as councillor, compared to two thirds (67 per cent) of respondents who had been serving for less than a year. The results suggest a correlation between length of service and likelihood to feel personally at risk, as the longer a respondent had been serving as a councillor, the more likely they are to feel some level of personal risk. The full breakdown by length of service is shown in Table 5.

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Table 5: How often, if at all, do you feel personally at risk when fulfilling your role as a councillor? (2024 survey)

	Less than 1 year	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 2 and 5 years	5 or more years
Some level of risk	**67%**	**70%**	**75%**	**76%**
Frequently	4%	3%	5%	4%
Occasionally	20%	23%	28%	29%
Rarely	43%	44%	43%	43%
Never	33%	30%	25%	24%

Base: all respondents: less than 1 year (203), between 1 and 2 years (325), between 2 and 5 years (333), more than 5 years (873).

Support from the local authority

Respondents were then asked how effective or not they thought their authority's arrangements were for protecting them whilst they fulfil their role as councillor. This question was also across all three surveys, and the results are shown in Table 6.

The table shows that compared to the 2023 survey, there has been an increase of 13 percentage points in the proportion of respondents reporting that their authority's protection arrangements were very or fairly effective. In August 2024, 57 per cent of respondents reported that their authority's protection arrangements were very or fairly effective, compared to 44 per cent in June 2023. There was also a decrease in the proportion of respondents reporting that the arrangements were not very or not at all effective; 17 per cent of respondents reported that the arrangements were not very effective in August 2024 compared to 25 per cent in June 2023, whilst the proportion reporting that their authority's arrangements were not at all effective decreased from 15 per cent in June 2023 to 8 per cent in August 2024. Table 6 also compares these results with the Census, however the Census did not include a

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"don't know" option for this question, meaning that the results cannot be directly compared.

Table 6: How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey	2024 survey
Very or fairly effective	**64%**	**44%**	**57%**
Very effective	15%	9%	14%
Fairly effective	49%	34%	43%
Not very effective	25%	25%	17%
Not at all effective	12%	15%	8%
Don't know	-	17%	18%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year: 2022 (5055), 2023 (654), 2024 (1531).

Table 7 illustrates the impact of length of service on respondents' perception of their authority's protection arrangements. The table shows that respondents who had been serving for five or more years were more likely to report that their authority's arrangements for protection were very or fairly effective, compared to those who had been serving for less than five years. The shorter the length of service, the more likely the respondent was to be unsure how effective the arrangements were, with over a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents who had served for between one and two years unsure, compared to 14 per cent of those serving for five or more years. The full results for this breakdown are shown in Table 7.

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Table 7: How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor? (2024 survey)

	Between 1 and 2 years	Between 2 and 5 years	5 or more years
Very or fairly effective	**53%**	**53%**	**60%**
Very effective	13%	13%	15%
Fairly effective	39%	41%	45%
Not very effective	16%	19%	17%
Not at all effective	6%	7%	9%
Don't know	26%	20%	14%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year: between 1 and 2 years (325), between 2 and 5 years (333), more than 5 years (873).

Abuse and intimidation during campaign periods

Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they experienced abuse or intimidation during this year's election campaign periods. This related to experiences as both a candidate and as a campaigner, and across both the local elections in May and the general election in July.

The results show that of those respondents who participated in elections this year, almost three quarters (73 per cent) experienced some level of abuse or intimidation during the campaign period. This included 8 per cent who experienced abuse or intimidation frequently, 30 per cent who experienced abuse or intimidation occasionally, and 35 per cent who experienced it rarely. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents did not experience any abuse or intimidation during the campaign periods. The full results for this question are shown in Table 8.

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Table 8: How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's local and/or general election campaign period?

	Per cent
Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, or rarely)	**73%**
Frequently	8%
Occasionally	30%
Rarely	35%
Never	27%

Base: all respondents who took part in elections this year (1596).

This figure is broadly in line with last year, as 75 per cent of those who took part in elections in 2023 reported experiencing some level of abuse or intimidation during the campaign period. These figures have not however been directly compared, due to the fact that 2024 included both local elections and a general election, whereas 2023 only included local elections.

Abuse and intimidation over the last 12 months

Respondents who had served as a councillor for at least a year were then asked how often, if at all, they had experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor over the last 12 months prior to completing the survey. Similar to during the campaign periods, almost three quarters of respondents (73 per cent) reported that they had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation during the last 12 months, including 9 per cent who reported experiencing it frequently, 31 per cent who reported experiencing it occasionally, and 33 per cent who reported experiencing it rarely. This was in line with the 2022 Census, with 73 per cent reporting experiencing abuse either frequently, occasionally, or rarely, but lower than June 2023, with 81 per cent reporting experiencing some level of abuse or

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intimidation over the 12 months prior to completing the survey. Just over a quarter of respondent councillors (27 per cent) had never experienced abuse or intimidation over the last 12 months, representing an eight percentage point increase from June 2023, but remaining in line with the 2022 Census. The full results for this question are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Over the last 12 months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey	2024 survey
Some level of abuse or intimidation	**73%**	**81%**	**73%**
Frequently	10%	20%	9%
Occasionally	29%	34%	31%
Rarely	33%	27%	33%
Never	27%	19%	27%

Base: all respondents – 2022 (5055); all respondents serving for at least a year – 2023 (655), 2024 (1531).

Respondents who reported that they had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation in their capacity as councillor over the last 12 months were then asked how the volume of abuse or intimidation had changed over the past 12 months. The full results for this question are shown in Table 10 and Figure 1.

The table shows that almost half of respondents (49 per cent) who had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation over the past year reported that the abuse had increased in the past 12 months, including 14 per cent who reported that it had sharply increased. Forty-two per cent of respondents reported that the level of abuse had stayed about the same over the past 12 months, whilst 4 per cent reported that it

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had slightly decreased, and 1 per cent reported that it had sharply decreased. Three per cent of respondents were unsure how the level of abuse had changed over the past year.

Table 10: And thinking about the last 12 months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed?

	Per cent
It has sharply or slightly increased	**49%**
It has sharply increased	14%
It has slightly increased	35%
It has stayed about the same	42%
It has slightly decreased	4%
It has sharply decreased	1%
Don't know	3%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year who had experienced some level of abuse over the past 12 months (1116).

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Figure 1: How abuse and intimidation has changed over the last 12 months
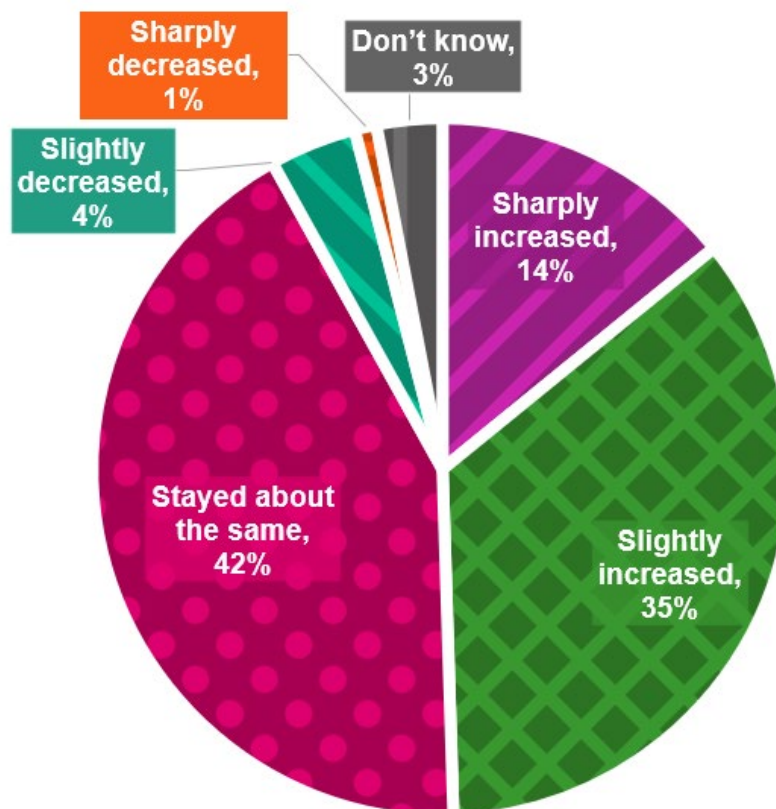
Base: all respondents serving for at least a year who had experienced some level of abuse over the past 12 months (1116).

Respondents had the opportunity to provide further detail on how the volume of abuse or intimidation had changed in the last 12 months. A total of 852 respondents provided comments, which were grouped into common themes. The following themes emerged most frequently from respondents' comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards:

- **Social media and online abuse.** Over a quarter of all comments mentioned social media, making it the most frequently mentioned factor in levels of abuse. Respondents explained that councillors are easily accessible by social media and that the anonymity of social media platforms

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enables users to abuse councillors or spread disinformation without consequences. Some respondents reported that they had come off or reduced their use of social media and this had naturally led to a decrease of abuse online.

- **Political affiliation.** Political affiliation was cited as a significant driver of abuse, with many respondents citing that political opponents have become less tolerant of each other, and it has become more acceptable to abuse councillors simply for their political affiliation. Respondents noted that this type of abuse was received from both members of the public and from opposition councillors. Many respondents reported that election periods in particular are a time of heighted abuse, due to in-person and online campaigning activity which can increase the visibility and profile of political figures. A few respondents noted that the change in government of July 2024 contributed to the level of abuse faced due simply to political affiliation

- **Persistent perpetrators.** Many respondents cited that the abuse they received was led by one individual, or a handful of individuals, who had taken a personal dislike to the councillor. This led to sharply increasing or decreasing levels of abuse depending on the efforts of these individuals. In some cases, respondents said individuals were easier to deal with, while others said these individuals were persistent and they simply had to avoid contact with them.

- **International conflicts.** The conflict in Israel and Gaza was cited as a catalyst for abuse against councillors. For some, this was due to their party's stance on the conflict, whilst a few respondents cited public investment in arms as a source of abuse, and others cited related protests. Furthermore, some Jewish councillors reported an increase in antisemitic abuse linked to the conflict.

- **Councillors as public representatives.** Respondents reported a rise in abuse from residents linked to council performance and decisions. Some respondents highlighted that dissatisfaction with public services in the

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context of the cost-of-living pressures and budget cuts led to abuse of individual councillors and that a lack of public understanding resulted in councils being unfairly blamed for central government's decisions. On the other hand, some respondents noted that abuse was often linked to specific council decisions which residents or political opponents disagreed with. Planning decisions were the most commonly cited example, but controversial Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), parking policies, and decisions to house asylum seekers in the area were also mentioned.

- **Holding particular positions within the council.** Some respondents reported that abuse was exacerbated by holding a particular position within the council as they could become the face of the council's decisions, irrespective of their involvement. The planning committee was most frequently mentioned as a driver for abuse, for example, a planning committee member highlighted "clichéd remarks about brown envelopes and corruption". However other risky positions included licensing, scrutiny, or pension fund committees, as well as being leader or mayor of the council. Similarly, a few respondents noted that abuse decreased once they stepped down from this particular role.

- **Rise of extremism and increased polarisation.** Some respondents reported that a rise in extremist views and political polarisation had fuelled an increase in abuse. The topic of immigration and asylum seekers was most commonly cited as a driver of extremist views and irreconcilable polarisation, with some respondents noting the impact of the far-right riots which took place across the UK in August, whilst this survey was active.

- **General increased negative perception of politicians.** Some respondents noted that they have felt an increased general sense of hostility towards all political figures as a homogenised group. Some noted that this is reinforced by the mainstream media and the poor behaviour of national politicians linked to scandals, such as Party-Gate. Others reported receiving accusations of bribery and corruption. As one respondent noted, "people are

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much more confident to make "you're all the same" accusations and lump local government as the same as national".

Involvement of the police

Respondents were asked if they had ever reported to the police an incident of abuse experienced in their capacity as councillor. Around one quarter of respondents (23 per cent) answered that they had reported an incident to the police, whilst around three quarters (76 per cent) had not. Two per cent of respondents did not wish to disclose whether or not they had reported an incident to the police. The full results for this question are shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as councillor?

	Per cent
Yes	23%
No	76%
Do not wish to say	2%

Base: all respondents (1724).

Experiences of damage and violence

Respondents were asked whether they themselves, or someone closely connected with them, had been the victim of a range of violent activities due to their role as councillor. The full results for this question can be seen in Table 12.

Of all respondents who answered this question, 10 per cent reported experiencing a threat of damage to their own property, whilst 5 per cent reported being a victim of actual damage to their own property. Five per cent of respondent councillors reported that someone closely connected to them had experienced a threat of

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damage to their property, whilst 3 per cent of respondents reported that someone close to them suffered actual damage to their property, due to the respondent's role as councillor.

More than one in five (21 per cent) reported experiencing a threat of violence against themselves due to their role as councillor, whilst 3 per cent had been a victim of actual violence due to their role. Eight per cent reported experiencing a threat of violence against someone closely connected to them, whilst 1 per cent reported that someone close to them had been a victim of violence due to the respondent's role as councillor. Five per cent of respondent councillors had been a victim of a death threat, whilst 2 per cent of respondent councillors had had someone close to them receive a death threat due to the respondent's role as councillor.

Respondents had the opportunity to report other experiences not listed; 10 per cent of respondents reported another experience against themselves, and 3 per cent reported another experience against someone close to them. The following themes emerged most frequently from respondents' comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards:

- Verbal abuse

- Online abuse

- Slander or libel against the councillor, including claimed slanderous accusations against the councillor to the police

- Abuse relating to protected characteristics, including racism

- Attempts to damage the councillor's reputation, through public impersonation or doxing (the publication of private information)

- Abusive emails

- Sexual harassment

- Abusive phone calls

- Stalking, or visits to home address

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- Abusive letters or unpleasant items posted through the door

- Emotional abuse or social ostracisation

- Deliberate attack by an animal.

Table 12: Due to your role as councillor, have you or a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following?

	Against you	Against someone connected to you
Threat of damage to property	10%	5%
Actual damage to property	5%	3%
Threat of violence	22%	8%
Actual violence	3%	1%
Threat of death	5%	2%
Other, please write in	10%	3%

Base: all respondents (1617).

Protected characteristics

Protected characteristics are a list of characteristics for which it is against the law to discriminate against someone under the Equality Act 2010. Respondents were asked whether or not they had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to any protected characteristics in their role as a councillor. This also covered abuse relating to the perception that a protected characteristic applies to the respondent, regardless of whether or not it does. The full results are shown in Table 13.

The table shows that around one fifth of respondent councillors (19 per cent) had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic, whilst three quarters (75 per cent) had not. Five per cent were unsure whether or not they had

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experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic, whilst 1 per cent did not wish to disclose whether or not they had.

Table 13: In your role as councillor, have you ever received abuse or intimidation relating to any protected characteristics?

	Per cent
Yes	19%
No	75%
Don't know	5%
Do not wish to say	1%

Base: all respondents (1734).

Respondents who reported that they had experienced an incident relating to a protected characteristic had the opportunity to specify the characteristic(s). The full results from this question are shown in Table 14 and Figure 2.

Sex was the most commonly cited protected characteristic for which respondents experienced abuse, with more than a third (37 per cent) reporting abuse related to this characteristic. This was followed by race, reported by 28 per cent of respondents who had experienced abuse relating to a protected characteristic. Twenty-three per cent reported receiving age-related abuse, and a further 23 per cent reported receiving abuse relating to their religion or belief. Seventeen per cent reported receiving abuse relating to their sexual orientation, whilst a similar proportion (16 per cent) reported receiving abuse relating to disability. Three per cent reported an experience relating to their status as married or in a civil partnership, whilst 2 per cent reported an abusive experience relating to gender reassignment, and 1 per cent reported an experience relating to being pregnant or on maternity leave. Two per cent of respondents did not wish to specify the characteristic.

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Table 14: Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to?

	Per cent
Sex	37%
Race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin	28%
Age	23%
Religion or belief	23%
Sexual orientation	17%
Disability	16%
Being married or in a civil partnership	3%
Gender reassignment	2%
Being pregnant or on maternity leave	1%
Do not wish to say	2%

Base: all respondents who had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic and answered the question (334). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one option.

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Figure 2: Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to?
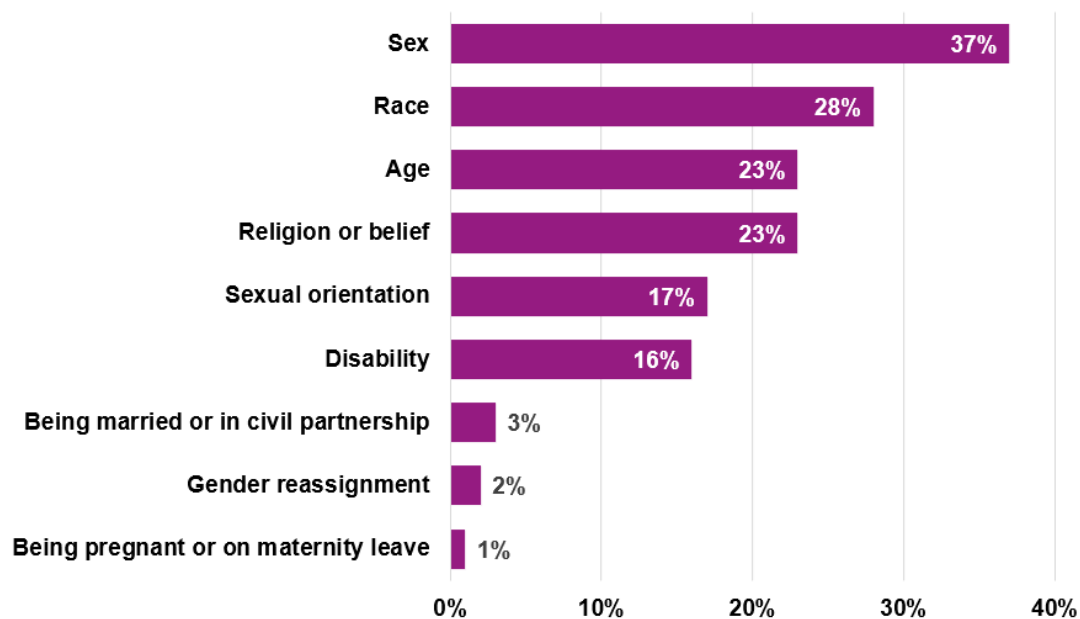
Base: all respondents who had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic and answered the question (334).

Respondents then had the opportunity to provide any further detail on the abuse they experienced if they wished. A total of 170 respondents provided comments, which were grouped into common themes. The following themes emerged most frequently from respondents' comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards:

- **Misogyny.** Around a third of comments elaborated on the issue of sex-based abuse, specifying that this was rooted in misogyny. Female councillors reported being undermined and belittled, shouted at and spoken over, criticised for their appearance, as well as experiencing sexualisation of their bodies, suffering name calling using female-specific insults, and physical intimidation from larger men. Female councillors also reported suffering unsolicited sexual advances, or the threat of sexual violence.

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- **Racism and xenophobia.** Respondents emphasised that racism and xenophobia are still rife in politics, describing first-hand experiences of racist abuse they have received. One respondent also noted that they had suffered racism directed towards their spouse.

- **Age.** Abuse on the basis of age spanned both ends of the spectrum, with younger respondents reporting suffering abuse suggesting they were too inexperienced because of their age, whilst older respondents reported being called too old and out-of-touch to fulfil the role.

- **Intersectionality of protected characteristics.** Many comments emphasised the intersectionality of the protected characteristics, and how abuse often intensified for those councillors who identified with more than one characteristic.

- **Spreading untrue information.** Some respondents reported that lies or false accusations in relation to protected characteristics had been used as an abuse or intimidation tactic. This was largely in relation to sexual orientation, leaving the respondent vulnerable to homophobic abuse.

- **Social media.** Some respondents commented that activity that might constitute hate crime or illegal discrimination in other environments had apparently no consequences when perpetrated online.

- **Allegations of positive discrimination.** Some respondents reported that allegations of positive discrimination related to race, gender or disability have been used to belittle them and suggest that their success was not due to their own merit.

- **Bullying.** Some councillors reported that abuse based on protected characteristics often came from other councillors and formed part of a toxic bullying culture within the council.

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Contact at home

Respondents were asked if, due to their role as councillors, a member of the public had attended or threatened to attend their home in an intimidatory or inappropriate way. Twenty-two per cent of respondents reported that they had experienced intimidatory or inappropriate contact at their home by a member of the public; 9 per cent had experienced a threat, whilst 10 per cent had experienced an actual visit, and 6 per cent reported another form of intimidatory or inappropriate contact at home. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents had not had such an experience. One per cent were unsure whether or not they had experienced a threat of, or actual, visit at home. The full results for this question are shown in Table 15.

Table 15: In your role as councillor, have you ever had a member of the public attend, or threaten to attend, your home in a way that you considered intimidatory or inappropriate?

	Per cent
Yes – threat or actual contact at home	**22%**
Yes – threatened to attend my home	9%
Yes – attended my home	10%
Yes – other form of contact at home	6%
No	78%
Don't know	1%

Base: all respondents (1734). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one option.

Respondents who had experienced either a threat of or actual intimidatory or inappropriate contact at home by a member of the public were then asked to indicate who this contact was from. The full results for this question can be seen in Table 16.

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Seventy per cent of respondents who had been contacted, or threatened to be contacted, at home in an intimidatory or inappropriate way reported that this had been from one person acting alone. Thirteen per cent reported that they had experienced this from more than one person, each acting alone, whilst 19 per cent reported that they had experienced this from a group of people acting together. Three per cent were unsure who the contact, or threat of contact, was from, whilst 6 per cent of respondents indicated another form of grouping.

These respondents had the opportunity to provide further detail, and the majority indicated that this was either not direct contact at home (i.e., by social media, telephone, or letter), or that they were unsure who had contacted them at home. Two respondents indicated that the contact had been from fellow councillors, whilst one indicated it had been from a candidate's relative. Two reported contact at home from public authorities (the police and social services), reportedly in response to a malicious claim against the councillor.

Table 16: And was this intimidatory or inappropriate contact at home from...

	Per cent
One person acting alone	70%
More than one person, each acting alone	13%
A group of people, acting together	19%
Other, please specify	6%
Don't know	3%

Base: all respondents who had had a member of the public contact them at home in some way (374). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one option.

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Home address in public domain

Respondents were asked whether or not they had requested their home address be withheld from the public register of members' interests. More than half of all respondents (55 per cent) had not requested that their home address be withheld, whilst 43 per cent had requested this. Two per cent were unsure whether or not they had, whilst 1 per cent did not wish to disclose whether or not they had. The full results for this question are shown in Table 17.

Table 17: In your role as councillor, have you ever requested that your home address be withheld from the public register of interests?

	Per cent
Yes	43%
No	55%
Don't know	2%
Prefer not to say	1%

Base: all respondents (1734).

Respondents who had not requested the withholding of their home address were asked whether or not they were aware that their address could be withheld. The majority (85 per cent) reported that they were aware that their address could be withheld, whilst 15 per cent reported that they were unaware of this. The full results for this question are shown in Table 18.

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Table 18: Were you aware that your home address could be withheld from the public register of interests?

	Per cent
Yes	85%
No	15%

Base: all respondents who had not yet requested the withholding of their home address, or were unsure/chose not to say (990).

Respondents who had requested the withholding of their home address were asked whether or not their request was successful. The majority (84 per cent) reported that their home address had been removed, whilst 6 per cent reported that their home address had not been removed. Ten per cent were unsure whether or not their address had been removed. The results for this question are shown in Table 19.

Table 19: And was your home address removed from the public register of interests?

	Per cent
Yes	84%
No	6%
Don't know	10%

Base: all respondents who had requested the withholding of their home address (741).

Respondents who reported that their request had not been successful had the opportunity to detail why their address had not been removed. A total of 44 respondents provided comments, and reasons included:

- Request not deemed necessary due to insufficient perceived threat

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- Not the council's policy to remove home addresses

- Error on behalf of the council (requested removal but not actioned, removed and then re-added at a later date)

- No reason given

- Pending removal.

Home modifications

Respondents were asked whether or not they had made modifications to their home since having been elected due to concerns about their safety as a councillor. One fifth of respondents (20 per cent) reported that they had made modifications to their home since becoming a councillor due to safety concerns, and a further 11 per cent of respondents felt they needed modifications despite having not made them. Two thirds of respondents (66 per cent) had not made modifications and felt they did not need them, whilst 3 per cent of respondents chose not to report whether or not they had made modifications. The full results for this question are shown in Table 20.

Table 20: Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member?

	Per cent
Yes	20%
No – but I feel I need them	11%
No – but I do not feel I need them	66%
Prefer not to say	3%

Base: all respondents (1734).

Those who had not made modifications but felt that they needed to were then asked why they had not yet made them. More than half (53 per cent) reported that were

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unsure what modifications they should get, whilst 38 per cent reported they could not afford them. Twenty-four per cent of respondents specified another reason for not yet making modifications, including:

- Not having the time to make modifications

- Being in the process of making modifications

- Not wanting, or family members not wanting, to live under surveillance or with security modifications

- Already had security measures in place prior to becoming a councillor

- Living in rental accommodation and not having the landlord's permission

- Layout or access routes to property meaning it is very difficult to implement effective security measures (e.g. drive exposed on all sides)

- Concerns about data security of CCTV software or camera doorbells

- Not believing that security measures would act as a deterrent

- Emphasis on the cost, feeling that this should be covered by council expenses.

One respondent reported that they would implement security measures if they were successful in being appointed to a more high-profile position within the council. The full results for this question can be seen in Table 21.

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Table 21: Why have you not made modifications to your home security despite feeling you need to?

	Per cent
I am not sure what I should get	53%
I cannot afford them	38%
Other, please specify	24%

Base: all respondents who had not made modifications but feel they need them (183). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one option.

Respondents who had made modifications were asked about the modifications that they had made. Of those who had made security modifications, the most common was installing CCTV or other cameras, indicated by 59 per cent of respondents, followed by a camera doorbell, indicated by 49 per cent of respondents, and security lights, indicated by 47 per cent of respondents. Twenty-one per cent had installed new locks, whilst 14 per cent had installed an external post box, and a further 14 per cent had flagged their home address for police response. Nine per cent had installed a panic button or panic alarm. Three per cent of respondents chose not to indicate which modifications they had made, whilst twelve per cent of respondents indicated another modification not on this list. Other modifications specified included:

- Reinforcing external security, including higher fences or electric gates

- Installing a house alarm

- Installing better locks or locking doors when inside

- Getting a dog

- Dummy CCTV

- Having lighting on a timer setting, to appear at home when out

- Protective window covering.

The full results for this question are shown in Table 22.

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Table 22: What modifications have you made?

	Per cent
CCTV or other cameras	59%
Camera doorbell	49%
Security lights	47%
New locks	21%
Installed an external post box	14%
Home address flagged for police response	14%
Panic button/alarm	9%
Other, please specify	12%
Prefer not to say	3%

Base: all respondents who had made modifications (350). Please note: respondents were able to select more than one response.

Awareness of the Debate Not Hate campaign

Respondents were asked whether or not they were aware of the LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign, or its slogan, prior to completing the survey. Half of all respondents (50 per cent) reported that they were aware of the campaign, whilst a similar but slightly smaller proportion (48 per cent) reported that they were not aware. Two per cent of respondents were unsure whether or not they had heard of the campaign or its slogan. The results for this question are shown in Table 23.

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Table 23: Before this survey, had you heard of the Debate Not Hate campaign, or its slogan, "the right engagement matters"?

	Per cent
Yes	50%
No	48%
Don't know	2%

Base: all respondents (1734).

Further comments

Respondents were asked to provide any comments about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally. A total of 840 respondents provided comments, which were grouped into common themes. The following themes emerged most frequently from respondents' comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards:

- **Social media and online abuse.** Social media and the prevalence of online abuse were dominant themes in comments across the 2023 and 2024 surveys, with respondents emphasising that anonymity online makes it difficult for abusers to face consequences. Furthermore, social media is seen to facilitate proliferations of mis- and disinformation, which can exacerbate abuse. Some respondents noted that they no longer use social media due to the abuse faced or moderate their use to avoid engaging in conflict. As one respondent commented, "I think more needs to be done […] with sanctions being brought against platforms who refuse to take action against threats and disinformation".

- **Personal and democratic impact of abuse.** Many respondents gave accounts of abuse that they personally, a fellow councillor, or someone close to them had suffered due to their role as councillor. Some

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respondents reported that they regret standing for office or are considering standing down due to these experiences, highlighting the impact of abuse on victims, and the barrier to being a councillor that abuse can create.

- **Need for better support for councillors.** In light of the abuse faced, many comments expressed the need for better support for councillors from both the police and the council. This was also a frequently mentioned theme in last year's iteration of the survey. Respondents recalled anecdotes in which their reports of abuse or intimidation were not taken seriously by either the police or the council, even in cases where apparent criminal behaviour had taken place. As one respondent warned, "this is an important issue which councils should take seriously otherwise we risk limiting the people who are prepared to stand for election".

- **Comparison to protection measures for MPs.** Some respondents highlighted that councillors are not offered the same level of personal protection as MPs and called for equal access for councillors. Examples of protection measures included personal panic alarms and home security reinforcements reportedly provided to MPs at public expense, whereas councillors would have to fund this themselves.

- **Effective personal safety training needed**. Some councillors expressed that there is a need for an effective program of personal safety training for councillors. Suggestions for topics included personal safety when holding surgeries, when travelling to and from engagements, and when visiting residents in the community. Safety measures suggested by respondents included holding surgeries with other councillors to avoid being alone at public engagements, setting up a separate business email address and phone number, and exercising caution when promoting their public engagements if their home address is in the public domain. A few respondents reported that they had received effective training from their council and praised the impact of this in helping them manage and limit abuse.

- **Abuse relating to protected characteristics.** Some respondents noted that abuse is often targeted towards councillors due to their protected characteristics. This also emerged in the comments of last year's survey, revealing that this remains an issue. Female councillors reported feeling unsafe when carrying out their role due to sex-based abuse, and some respondents noted that having more than one protected characteristic can compound the level of abuse received. A few male councillors reported that although they had no personal experience of abuse, they had witnessed their female colleagues suffer this, emphasising its prevalence. As one female councillor noted, "I feel that if I had been a man, I would not have faced the same level of abuse".

- **Impact of specific events.** Some respondents flagged that abuse they received was sometimes linked to certain national or international events. The most frequent example cited was the war in Israel and Gaza, with respondents receiving abuse due to their party's, or their own, stance on the conflict. Other examples included the UK riots of summer 2024 (coinciding with the fieldwork of this survey), the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Brexit, and the COVID pandemic.

- **Insufficient public understanding of local government.** Some respondents expressed that there is a lack of understanding of local government and the role of the councillor. Respondents explained that this can fuel abuse as some residents overestimate the power councillors hold and confuse the responsibilities of local and central government, leading to councillors being blamed for national decisions over which they have no influence. Some respondents also reported that residents overestimate the remuneration councillors receive, believing that it is a full-time job. One councillor commented that "there seems to be an ignorance and indifference to how councils and government/parliament work – something I feel could be addressed in schools".

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- **Negative perception of politicians.** In addition to the lack of understanding of the role of councillor, some comments described that there is a general sense of negativity and distrust towards politicians at a local and national level, which can generate abuse. This also emerged in comments last year, however a few respondents reported that the atmosphere feels increasingly hostile. As one councillor reported, "there is so much anger towards elected members" who are seen as an "elitist group who are completely out of touch for ordinary people and make decisions that benefit themselves".

- **Abuse received from other councillors.** Many comments flagged the abuse and intimidation that happens between councillors themselves, which was another recurrent theme from last year. Respondents explained that this largely occurs between opposing political parties and can be face to face during council meetings or on social media. Some respondents also noted that abuse and intimidation can be a tactic used during elections to impact a candidate's chances of gaining office, whilst other respondents complained that abuse and intimidation between councillors is not taken seriously by the council. One councillor emphasised that "the relationship between different parties is much more heated than public to politicians. More work is needed to make debates less personal".

- **Need for healthy debate in public life.** Some respondents commented that debate is an important part of public life, and that a certain level of disagreement and argument should be expected when taking on the role of councillor. Such comments emphasised that public access to councillors is important, and protection measures should not come at the expense of legitimate challenge and debate. As one councillor reported, "I think that debates are good for democracy and accountability, however personal abuse is unacceptable".

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Annex A: Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

All responses will be treated confidentially. Information will be aggregated, and no individual or authority will be identified in any publications without your consent. Identifiable information may be used internally within the LGA but will only be held and processed in accordance with our privacy statement. We are undertaking this survey to aid the legitimate interests of the LGA in supporting and representing authorities.

You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted.

1. Please amend the details we have on record if necessary. If you are a member of more than one council, please only complete this survey once.

- Name

- Authority

- Email address

2. Please indicate the type of council(s) of which you are a member. Select all that apply

- District council

- County council

- Unitary council

- London borough

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- Metropolitan borough

- Town council

- Parish/community council

- Other, please specify

3. What is your political affiliation as a councillor?

- Conservatives

- Green Party

- Independent (including Residents' Association)

- Labour

- Liberal Democrats

- Plaid Cymru

- Reform UK

- Other (please specify)

4. How long have you been serving as a councillor?

- Less than one year / newly elected in May

- 1 to <2 years

- 2 to <5 years

- 5 years or more

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5. How often, if at all, do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

- Frequently

- Occasionally

- Rarely

- Never

Ask those who have been serving for at least a year:

6. How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

- Very effective

- Fairly effective

- Not very effective

- Not at all effective

- Don't know

The following questions relate to whether you have experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor and/or as a candidate or campaigner at the most recent local and/or general electoral period.

These terms are defined as follows:

Abuse – words and/or behaviour that constitute abuse or mistreatment can include, but is not limited to, physical abuse, bullying, emotional abuse, unsolicited abusive communication, and harassment. It may be one-off or repeated.

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Intimidation – words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence, or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life. It may be one-off or repeated behaviour.

7. How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's local and/or general election campaign period?

- Frequently

- Occasionally

- Rarely

- Never

- Not applicable – I did not take part in elections this year

Ask those who have been serving for at least a year:

8. Over the last twelve months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

- Frequently

- Occasionally

- Rarely

- Never

Show to respondents who answered rarely, frequently or occasionally at Q8:

9. And thinking about the last twelve months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed?

- It has sharply increased

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- It has slightly increased

- It has stayed about the same

- It has slightly decreased

- It has sharply decreased

- Don't know

10. Please give reasons for your answer.

<div style="border:1px solid black; min-height:100px;"> </div>

11. Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as a councillor?

- Yes

- No

- Do not wish to say

12. Due to your role as a councillor, have you or a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following?

For the purposes of this question, a person closely connected with you could be your immediate or extended family, your partner, or a close friend.

- Threat of damage to property

- Actual damage to property

- Threat of violence

- Actual violence

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- Threat of death

- Other, please write in

- None of the above

- Against you

- Against a person closely connected with you

Protected characteristics are a list of characteristics, for which it is against the law to discriminate against someone under the Equality Act 2010. The protected characteristics are:

- age

- being married or in a civil partnership

- being pregnant or on maternity leave

- disability

- gender reassignment

- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin

- religion or belief

- sex

- sexual orientation

More information about protected characteristics can be found on the Gov.UK Discrimination rights webpage.

13. In your role as councillor, have you ever received abuse or intimidation relating to any of the protected characteristics above?

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This also includes abuse and intimidation relating to the perception that a protected characteristic applies to you, regardless of whether or not it does.

- Yes

- No

- Don't know

- Do not wish to say

Ask those who had received abuse/intimidation relating to a protected characteristic:

14. Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to? Select all that apply.

- age

- being married or in a civil partnership

- being pregnant or on maternity leave

- disability

- gender reassignment

- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin

- religion or belief

- sex

- sexual orientation

- Do not wish to say

15. If you would like to share more details about your experience(s), please use the space below.

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16. In your role as councillor, have you ever had a member of the public attend your home or threaten to attend your home in a way that you considered intimidatory or inappropriate? Select all that apply.

- Yes – threatened to attend my home

- Yes – attended my home

- Yes – other form of contact at home

- No

- Don't know

Shown to respondents who answer yes (threat / actual / other) at Q16

17. And was this…

- One person acting alone

- More than one person, each acting alone

- A group of people, acting together

- Other, please specify

- Don't know

18. In your role as councillor, have you ever requested that your home address be withheld from the public register of interests?

- Yes

- No

- Don't know

- Prefer not to say

Ask if respondent had not explicitly requested the withholding of their address

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19. Were you aware that your home address could be withheld from the public register of interests?

- Yes

- No

20. And was your home address removed from the public register of interests?

- Yes

- No

- Don't know

Ask if home address was not removed:

21. Why was your home address not removed?

| |
| |

22. Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member?

- Yes

- No – But I feel I need them

- No – I do not feel I need them

- Prefer not to say

45

Ask respondents who answered No – But I feel I need them:

23. Why have you not made modifications to your home security despite feeling you need to? Select all that apply

- I cannot afford them

- I am not sure what I should get

- Other, detail:

Ask respondents who had made modifications:

24. What modifications have you made? Select all that apply

- Security lights

- Camera doorbell

- CCTV or other cameras

- New locks

- Panic button/alarm

- Installed an external post box

- Home address flagged for police response

- Other, please specify

- Prefer not to say

25. The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors and provides support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation. Before this survey, had you heard of the Debate Not Hate campaign, or its slogan, "the right engagement matters"?

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- Yes

- No

- Don't know

26. Please use the space below to tell us anything more you'd like to about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally.

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27. Please tick the box below if you would like to be involved in future work related to this area and/or the contents of this survey.

[ ] I would like to be involved in further work

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted.

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Local Government Association

Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors

Our publication outlines how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse and includes principles for councils to consider, top tips and good practice case studies.

03 Jul 2023
LGA
43.28

Executive summary

Serving in public office is both a privilege and a responsibility and **our Debate Not Hate campaign (https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate)**is working to challenge the abuse local politicians face. However, there is a growing issue of abuse and intimidation in public and political discourse that can have a negative impact on councillors, their families and local democracy. This is why the LGA commissioned Riber Consultants to work with councils and relevant partners to consider the best approaches to supporting councillors to prevent and manage abuse linked to their elected role. Through the project, researchers identified key challenges to supporting councillors with these issues, principles for councils to consider, and top tips and good practice case studies to help councils better support councillors prevent and handle abuse and intimidation.

Challenges

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

Principles for support agencies

Based on workshops and follow up interviews with council officers, we propose some guiding principles to help councils navigate these challenges:

1. Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: Establish and enforce a strict policy that clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.

2. Clarity of process and responsibility: Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the council to provide support to councillors.

3. 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.

4. Tailored risk assessments: Consider individual councillors' needs and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

5. Prioritise councillor wellbeing: Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries

Recommendations

For this project, researchers used the framework of agency, whereby councillors, councils, police and local agencies have specific powers, resources and spheres of influence that they can affect. Through this framing, they also identified barriers to addressing abuse and intimidation which originate outside this sphere. In brief these issues included the management of harmful content online, the capacity and expectation of the police to respond to abuse against elected members, and the normalisation of abuse leading to poor standards of political and public discourse.

In response to these challenges, the LGA has developed three recommendations for central government, regulators and police forces across England to consider.

- **Recommendation 1:** The Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online, including developing clear guidance for social media and other online service providers on their obligations to mitigate the risks of online abuse and how this may be best achieved; and that the experience of elected members is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Government should work with the police to set out clear and consistent guidance on the role of policing in addressing abuse, intimidation and harassment of elected

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members. This should include expert capacity to monitor crime associated with elected members and act as a single point of contact for both councils and councillors.

- **Recommendation 3:** The Government should widen the scope of the Defending Democracy Programme to explicitly include the safety, security and wellbeing of locally elected politicians, rather than focusing solely on national politicians and foreign interference.

Introduction and background

Abuse of elected members is unacceptable and there is evidence that these experiences are forcing good councillors out of local politics and deterring others from running for election.

In 2022, t**he LGA found that seven out of 10 councillors (https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022)**had experienced abuse from the public in the previous year. Further research by the LGA in 2022, reinforced concerns that abuse in public life and public discourse is becoming normalised and seriously impacting civic life and local democracy.

The LGA has been working for some time to build a better understanding of the issue of abuse and intimidation of elected members and what individuals, local organisations and national government can do to reverse this trend.This project is part of a series of projects looking at what can be done to prevent abuse and address it when it occurs and focuses on what local agencies including councils and police can do to prevent and address abuse perpetrated against councillors. Other resources in this series include the **Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy report (https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy)** and the **Councillor guide to handling abuse and intimidation. (https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation)**

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Project background

The project is based on the premise that individuals and organisations have various spheres of influence within specific structures and different levels of autonomy and agency. Here agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices, while structure pertains to the broader social systems and institutions that shape individual behaviour and limit agency. There is an inherent tension between agency and structure as individual actions are influenced by and impacted by the structures in which they sit. This is particularly relevant to discussions about councillors as they occupy an unusual position, neither volunteer nor employee: they have both more agency by sitting slightly outside usual employment frameworks, but also benefit from fewer legal protections.

In this paradigm, there have been efforts to maximise on this agency and upskill councillors to manage their own environments, mitigate risks and build resilience. However, councillors only have the power and autonomy to impact their own actions. Beyond a councillor's circle of influence, other organisations in the local area may have the power, resources and, in some cases, the responsibility to respond to abuse, intimidation and threats aimed at locally elected members.

For example, councils alongside political parties provide the primary support mechanism for councillors locally, with officers acting as points of contact for day-to-day business and providing specialist advice and information. However, councils also have limited powers, resources, and their own specific sphere of influence. Only with the coordinated input from other statutory and non-statutory parties, such as the police, media providers, and social media providers can we hope to address abuse and intimidation against councillors and other elected members. Further still there are some issues that require national, social or systemic change and which local organisations cannot address in isolation.

Throughout this project and this report, the authors have used abuse, intimidation and public intimidation to refer to "words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public

debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life". This could include a range of behaviours, a summary of which is set out in **Appendix A**.

Project methodology

Through this project the LGA aimed to take a step beyond existing research evidencing the prevalence and severity of this issue and set out possible local and national mitigations and solutions to abuse against councillors. To support this aim, researchers engaged with a range of resources and individuals who supporting councillors, have experience of handling issues of abuse and intimidation more generally, or have lived experience of these issues.

This was delivered through two distinct research phases. The first phase was delivered through primary and secondary research and aimed to identify the challenges and barriers deterring councils, the police and other agencies providing better support to councillors. The second phase was delivered through primary research workshops and looked to generate and develop solutions to the identified barriers. This was supported by the expertise of a project steering group drawn from a range of organisations with a substantive interest in the project.

Phase 1: Challenges and barriers identification

Detailed methodology:

Ecosystem mapping and stakeholder interviews

The issue of harassment, abuse and intimidation is a global issue, affecting all societies to varying degrees across the globe. As such there are many organisations and individuals interested in this issue. The purpose of the ecosystem mapping was to understand what expert organisations exist primarily in the UK, but also across the whole, how they approach abuse and intimidation issue and how this could apply to the local government sector.

In the UK there is significant interest in the topic of harassment, abuse and intimidation has increased significantly in recent years. Many organisations focus on women's rights and violence against women in politics; few are directed at other underrepresented minority groups or

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at politicians more generally. We identified approximately 60 key stakeholders working on the topic (full list at **Appendix C**) and prioritised a selection for detailed interviews.

Using a semi-structured interview method, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with stakeholders from a range of backgrounds, including the public sector, the police, legal, social media and third sector organisations. The interviews focus on advice for people in public life, interventions that work well, problems with implementation and what change is needed to address the issue of abuse against people in public life.

Literature review

To better understand what tailored support there is for councillors, we conducted a systematic search of documents offering support and guidelines published by a random selection of 50 councils. The aim was to identify public approaches to handling abuse and intimidation of elected people, including councillor support packages, guidance on personal safety, zero-tolerance policies and other relevant content. In one fifth of the councils, we were unable to identify support aimed at supporting councillors with abuse or intimidation or personal safety. However, this does not necessarily mean that councils do not have these resources available to councillors. In many councils reviewed there was comprehensive or supportive guidance. Good practice identified from this exercise has been incorporated into this report.

Focus groups

As part of this phase, we hosted two focus groups, one for councillors dealing with abuse and intimidation and one for council officers with a role supporting councillors. The aim was to identify the barriers and challenges to providing councillors with better support around abuse and intimidation from each perspective. The focus groups were similarly structured and explored key issues around prevention, support, responses, and aftercare. Fourteen councillors attended the councillor workshop and 11 officers from a range of specialisms attended the officer workshop. Attendees came from a diverse range of authority types with different political control across the variety of English regions.

Findings

Changing dynamics

Abuse and intimidation in public life have emerged as escalating concerns over the past few decades. **According to a study by Collignon and Rudig (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12855)**(2020), in 2019, 49 per cent of parliamentary candidates reported experiencing some form of harassment, abuse, or intimidation during their campaigns. This represents an 11-percentage point increase compared to 2017. Some officers reported that they felt that rising abuse levels in public discourse could be a result of anti-politics sentiment and proliferation of conspiracy theories online, which sometimes present as unfounded allegations of bias and corruption, and other abusive behaviours.

However, this change has been gradual, is not well evidenced in local government and has not always presented in the same way in different places creating a variability of responses linked to differential experiences. For example, an increase in support provided by councils has frequently been tied to severe national incidents or localised threats. In regions where such issues have not been prevalent or high profile, councils and other agencies may not have kept pace with increasing risks associated with the role of elected members.

Council officers and councillors have reported that abuse, intimidation, and harassment faced by elected members can have a detrimental impact on democratic representation, particularly where underrepresented groups in local and national politics receive higher volumes and more aggressive forms of abuse. For example, research analysing the effects of abuse on women's campaign strategies revealed a damaging link where women who experience intimidation tend to moderate their campaigning strategies and see their chances of electoral success undermined **(Collignon and Rüdig, 2021). (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2021.1968413)**

Criminal thresholds and the legal framework

Councillors are elected officials and therefore are open to wider public scrutiny and criticism than officers and private citizens. This can make it challenging to identify the point when legitimate criticism becomes abuse, harassment and intimidation.

Serious incidents, such as physical assaults and credible threats to life and limb, will clearly meet the threshold for police intervention. These events will general fit neatly into the existing legal framework, which primarily concentrates on individual cases that involve a solitary victim and a lone perpetrator. It is understood that the risk of physical violence towards councillors is low in the England and most incidents may not constitute an immediate emergency but may nevertheless be criminal. Serious crimes like hate crime, stalking, and harassment have robust definitions, charging thresholds and legal consequences. However, many councillors have reported that they feel the threshold for police to record and investigate incidents against them is higher than ordinary citizens, because of their elected role.

While the law is relatively clear for some crimes, the same cannot be said for more frequent yet equally damaging forms of abuse, as online abuse and misinformation. The current legal framework inadequately addresses the cumulative or escalating impact of such abuse, as well as cases involving multiple perpetrators. This lack of clarity and understanding creates a grey area, which has significant implications for establishing clear reporting thresholds to the police and leaves victims without the necessary support or options for redress.

Additionally, it is not against the law to be unpleasant and in the process of determining if abusive speech is criminal, police must balance several considerations, including freedom of expression and journalistic expression. Abuse may not meet this threshold and yet still have a profoundly negatively impact on councillors and their families, particularly if it is repeated. Here it is also imperative to consider what additional vulnerabilities or aggravating factors there may be. For example, this is evidence that some groups with protected

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characteristics may receive higher volumes and more vitriolic abuse, particularly racist, homophobic and misogynistic abuse. Police should consider this in their assessment of risk and impact.

Capacity and awareness of the relevant agencies

Local agencies such as the council, the police and political parties all have a role in supporting councillors to ensure their safety and protect them as integral to the local democratic system. However, there are capacity issues across the whole of the public sector and there isn't consistent awareness of the issues of abuse against politicians across all areas. This can lead to councillors falling between the gaps between different organisations and feeling that all partners have abdicated responsibility for their safety.

This can play out in terms of prevention and response to abuse. Councils and police both hold valuable intelligence about their local areas and sharing this information allows for risks to be identified ahead of time and mitigated against before they become an issue. Capacity and structures to allow this information sharing to take place are therefore vital.

Police often face challenges due to limited resources and training. They must prioritise their resources and have many specific statutory duties that draw on their resources. This can hinder their ability to respond to lower-level incidents of harassment, abuse, and intimidation promptly or effectively. Operational separation between different police forces means there is significant variation across different regions, leading to inconsistent experiences for councillors who seek support and protection. Persistent issues revolve around the reporting process itself, including informal approaches, inconsistencies, and uncertainty regarding what will be investigated and what won't.

Lack of clear guidance on how to deal with vulnerable persons

Councillors engage with resident from all walks of life in their role, including vulnerable people seeking assistance. Councillors should always consider whether they are the most appropriate person to be supporting an individual and where it would be more appropriate to direct them to an officer at the council. In the case of vulnerable people,

this could mean referring to the safeguarding team at the council who are trained and resources to provide specific support. Councillors are often reluctant to disengage with residents even if they are abusive, particularly if they consider the resident to be vulnerable – clear processes for referral and ensuring vulnerable people are appropriately supported through the council can help reassure councillors that they have done the best thing for the resident and disengage personally if necessary.

In extreme cases where an individual who is vulnerable due to mental health problems appears to be displaying fixated behaviour, such as harassment, stalking or threatening behaviour towards public figures the **Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (https://www.beh-mht.nhs.uk/services/fixated-threat-assessment-centre-ftac/297)** can help to assess the situation. The Centre is a joint police and mental health unit established in 2006 to assess and manage the risk to politicians, members of the British Royal Family and other public figures from obsessive individuals. It is unclear whether this support extends to local politicians. The Centre receives around 1,000 referrals a year, half of which are assessed as low risk and are referred to local health services.

Standards of political discourse

Politicians have a significant role in shaping public discourse, and their words and actions can have a powerful impact on society. As representatives of their local communities, councillors are dedicated to improving the lives of their residents through the development of better services and positive changes at the local level. Citizens have high expectations of their elected members, and councillors should strive to meet these expectations with integrity and professionalism. The council must also have a Code of Conduct to help councillors model best conduct, balance their behaviour, understand the expectations of their role and indicate the kind of conduct that could lead to action being taken against them. The LGA has developed a **Model Councillor Code of Conduct (https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/councillor-conduct)**, in association with key partners and after extensive consultation with the sector, as part of its work to support all tiers of local

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government to aspire to high standards of leadership and performance. At the same time, councillors deserve to be treated with respect by officers, fellow elected members, and the public at large.

Challenges

Based on the initial research phase, we developed three specific challenges that councils face in providing adequate support to their councillors with abuse and intimidation issues. These challenges then formed the basis of the phase two solution identification and development exercises.

Challenge 1: Councillors feel vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped or supported to handle abuse, harassment, and intimidation

Due to the public nature of their role, councillors may be susceptible to verbal, psychological and physical abuse and intimidation from various sources, including members of the public. A central part of their role is engaging with local residents, and they often are involved with making difficult local decisions about local services. These decisions can be a catalyst for community disputes, personal disagreements and can escalate into heated confrontations. Councillors are generally aware of the risks associated with their role due to their experience campaigning and engaging with residents. However, without specific training and support, they may not possess the necessary skills to confidently identify risky situations, diffuse potentially volatile situations and de-escalate tensions, and ensure a positive outcome. Concerns about the risk of these challenging engagements can deter candidates and councillors from meeting and engaging with the residents they represent as much as they would wish.

Furthermore, councillors may also struggle to manage the aftermath of individual or ongoing incidents. For example, there may be practical concerns about the safety of their home, travel and council activities and they may need to make different arrangements to usual. This can be overwhelming, as can the need to engage with various agencies, such as the council, their political party and the police to handle serious

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abuse and put in place safety mitigations. The emotional impact, effort to seeking support and potentially counselling can be difficult if this support isn't readily available through the council or political party.

Challenge 2: Lack of clear process around reporting abuse, harassment and intimidation to the council results in councillors not knowing who to turn to when an incident occurs

Council officers play a vital role in supporting councillors with a range of needs associated with their elected role. This includes how councillors engage with the public on council matters and supporting councillors to deal with abuse, harassment, and intimidation they might experience. However, the council's role in protecting councillors' wellbeing is not set out in statute and therefore the thresholds and levels of support can be variable and are not well-understood by councillors. As a result, councillors may be unclear as to who they should contact in the council and what evidence they should collect of abuse. This is especially problematic when they experience low-level abuse that may not necessarily be a police matter but that requires to be logged and properly documented in case it escalates further.

Challenge 3: There is inconsistent engagement and response from the police to abuse and harassment of councillors

The diversity among police forces, including differences in resources and training, results in variable responses and levels of support provided to councillors based on geographical location. This discrepancy is influenced by differing understanding regarding the public role of councillors, leading to inconsistent engagement from the police and a lack of tailored safety advice. Consequently, we found inconsistencies in reporting procedures, which makes it difficult to develop effective interventions to prevent abuse, harassment, and intimidation of councillors. We also found that the differences in levels of engagement and support between police forces contribute to underreporting, leaving councillors feeling isolated and unable to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. To address this challenge, it is vital to foster positive relationships between the council and the police, underpinned by comprehensive training. Additionally, police forces need

to establish a consistent understanding of when and how to intervene, ensuring that councillors receive the necessary support and protection they require.

Phase 2: Solution identification and development phase

During this phase of the research project, we used a bottom-up approach to identify best practice that already exists in councils and local police forces and develop new solutions to support councillors with abuse and intimidation from the public.

We used an iterative and agile methodology to identify and develop solutions to the three challenges identified in the first phase of the research at two workshops with council officers and other relevant experts. The approximately 60 attendees were drawn from a range of types of councils from across urban and rural areas in England. From these sessions, researchers developed a range of good practice case studies and suggested practice which councils and their local partners may find helpful.

Findings

The methodology employed in this project resulted in several key findings, which we would propose as guiding principles.

1. Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: establish and enforce a strict policy that sets clear expectations for interactions and promoting respectful debate.

Normalisation of abuse and intimidation in public and political discourse is a well-established growing issue with **demonstrable negative impacts on local democracy. (https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy)** Democratic institutions may therefore need to respond to this rising issue and set expectations for interactions between the public and councillors, as many already do with staff.

Setting out a zero-tolerance approach to abuse could include a range of actions, such as ensuring that all relevant policies about managing negative interactions between the public and council staff also reflect

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councillor engagement with the public. Councils can also set expectations by highlighting respectful debate and engagement principles through digital and physical marketing materials aimed at those who engage regularly with staff and councillors.

Finally, there is evidence that many councillors consider their residents' right to engage with their elected representative as sacrosanct and are reluctant to disengage, take officer advice or report incidents to the police even if the engagement is unhealthy, abusive or even threatening. In addition, councillors, unlike staff, are not obliged to comply with employment policies in the same way as employees. However, setting expectations and thresholds of what is acceptable communication with councillors from the outset may help them identify unacceptable behaviour and disengage from or refer abusive residents on to officers when appropriate.

2. Clarity of process and responsibility: Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible persons who are well equipped and located in the council to provide councillors with support.

Clarity of process was highlighted as a key challenge by councillors and officers alike. Councillors have consistently raised concerns about not knowing where to go for support in their councils. However, we found evidence that this is an issue that varies from place to place and in some areas, there is a clear and formalised process for raising concerns, either through a single point of contact (SPoC) individual or department.

This may be a symptom of the way abuse and intimidation of councillor presents locally. For example, we found that councils that had robust and embedded arrangements for supporting councillors with abuse and intimidation had often been galvanised into action by a local high-profile event or national event that have caused them to reflect on their local arrangements. Other areas were less prepared because they had historically not experienced these issues.

Setting out who is responsible for supporting councillors with abuse and intimidation within the functions of the council and ensuring they are appropriately skilled and resourced is critical to ensuring that

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appropriate support is embedded into the activities of the council. In addition, clearly setting out the kinds of support the council will provide, how and in what circumstances the support will be provided, and who councillors should go to day-to-day and in the event of an out-of-hours concern or emergency in clear processes and procedures can help to ensure officers know what to do consistently when councillors ask for support and help councillors feel well-supported in their role.

3. Relationships with local police: Proactively foster strong relationships with police to improve coordination and advance mutual understanding of abuse affecting councillors and the police role in addressing it.

Many councils have excellent relationships with their local police forces working together on a range of local issues, from anti-social behaviour to licensing. However, we hear often that police do not always engage with the issues of abuse and harassment that affect councillors. In particular, some councillors have expressed the belief that police did not take appropriate actions to record and investigate potential crimes against them because they were councillors.

We must be clear here that police forces must balance a range of considerations including the severity of the infraction and threat level, as well as capacity and available resources when responding to crime in their local area. In addition, through the process of this research we heard that police response is varied across different areas and that there are excellent examples of police taking action to deal with serious risk and incidents involving councillors.

Contributors to this research were clear that a strong relationship with the local police force was critical to ensuring that the police understood the specific experiences and challenges that elected members experience and to setting expectations with elected members as to when it is appropriate for police to get involved.

4. Tailored risk assessments: Consider the needs of individual councillors and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.

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At the centre of this support should be the needs of members. Some council officers said that because they didn't have many reports of abuse and intimidation incidents, they had assumed it wasn't an issue for their members. However, once they began proactively asking members about their experiences, they found this wasn't the case. On the other hand, some councillors do not agree that abuse and intimidation is an issue for them personally or in their area and feel that support offered by officers is paternalistic and not a good use of public money. Officers should be alive to these views, but not assume that this feeling in one member reflects the views of others. Many councils have taken the approach of regularly surveying councillors on their training and support needs, this can help officers to tailor the support to the genuine needs of members and keep track of the changing issues in their local area.

As mentioned earlier, some councils had been prompted to put in place better support and protections by a particular incident or local tensions, but without sustained focus and attention to issues of councillor safety, good practice sometimes diminished with the threat. Some officers reflected that they recognised this challenge in their own area and were keen to reinvigorate their efforts. Other said they had recognised the role of the council in monitoring local tensions and ensuring these factors were played into a dynamic risk assessment of risks against staff and elected members alike. Council officers also have valuable information and a range of skills, such as health and safety, communications, community engagement and legal, that can help to identify and mitigate risks of everyday councillor activities, like engaging with the public and safely visiting locations in the local area

5. Prioritise councillor wellbeing: Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries.

Many officers commented that councillor wellbeing is a much bigger consideration now than ever before. The expectations of the public, ability to critique on social media and a tendency towards blame culture

against public figures has resulted in high-profile local and national politicians being very exposed to hurtful public commentaries.

While it is absolutely right that councillors should be held to account for their actions as part of their role, many are now finding public abuse crossed the line into unnecessarily personal attacks and this can deter people from standing for election or re-election and seeking leadership positions. This is detrimental to democracy and at the extreme can lead to councillors feeling anxious and depressed. Beyond actions to support councillors manage their online engagement and protect them from real treats, many councils are now considering what more they can do to support councillor resilience and wellbeing. This can take a range of forms from informal buddying to counselling via employee assistance programmes.

Tops tips and case studies

The principles are designed to help councils to consider how best to provide support for their councillors in their local context. As part of both phases of the project, we collected ideas and good practice case studies to illustrate the range of activities councils are doing to support their members. We have divided these by theme of prevention and support, incident management and aftercare, but some examples will apply equally across all areas.

Prevention and support

Understanding needs and coordination

As mentioned in the principles, it's vital to understand the needs of individual councillors as they will not be homogenous across the country or even in the same council. Engaging well with members can also help with uptake of training and support, as their input can help ensure the offer will be most relevant to them.

There are several ways a council can achieve this engagement and a combination of approaches may be most appropriate. For example:

- establishing a small working group of councillors to identify gaps in support and share intelligence about common experiences

- doing regular surveys of members to understand what incidents affect them and what aspects they particularly struggle with
- creating open door or drop-in opportunities for individual councillors to speak to staff about concerns
- establishing a wellbeing or councillor safety champion(s) who can collect information from the range of members at the council and pass this information on to staff.

Many councils have been slowly increasing their action on these issues over the last few years, others have recently begun programmes of work to proactively consider their approach to council safety and wellbeing. Many have chosen to create an internal staff working group including the various departments that have relevant expertise. This could include officers such as:

- monitoring officer
- head of legal if not the monitoring officer
- democratic services
- heads of political group offices
- health and safety
- community safety
- communications
- community engagement
- human resources.

With expertise from a wide range of department innovative solutions can be brought forward. For example, one council use their Anti-Social Behaviour reporting system to record abuse against councillors. Police colleagues have access to this system which means that police can assess the reports, provide advice and note any patterns of abuse that might develop into harassment or other crimes. Leeds City Council use their existing assets, such as their 24-hour CCTV centre, to ensure councillors can call for assistance through lone worker devices when they are out in their communities visiting residents.

London Borough of Hounslow: Case study on cross-organisational practitioner working group

Hounslow Council is taking steps to address harassment affecting its elected members. Following the passing of a motion by the council is now working on setting up a cross-organisational working group with expert representatives from democratic services, legal, health and safety, and other relevant departments. The purpose of the group will be to use the various expertise to identify emerging issues and gaps in support and develop solutions that will help to prevent and deal with these issues when they arise. The group will also work towards creating a hub space on the intranet where members can access all the necessary information in one place, including access to counselling through the employee assistance scheme.

The council is also considering providing training on emotional intelligence and softer skills to help members pre-empt, navigate and deescalate tensions when challenging issues create passionate responses in the community. Furthermore, the council is encouraging and facilitating respectful and civil conversations about sensitive issues, such as misogyny, between its elected members.

The group will also consider what the council can do to prevent abuse against councillors and when the council should step in actively protect members. For example, it is sometimes appropriate for the council's legal department to take over communications when correspondence is abusive and vexatious and to write an official letter informing the resident that the correspondence is no longer appropriate. This is an important step to explore all avenues before taking any further action.

Policies and guidance

Policies and guidance can support councillors to understand new aspects of their role, including elements of risk, and how the council can support them to navigate any issues they encounter. Councils may wish to consider if they need new policies to set what support is available or whether councillors can be incorporated into existing policies. Key policies could include:

- vexatious complainants' policies
- lone-worker policies and/or personal safety policies
- receipt of threat policies
- social media policies.

Where a policy isn't appropriate, guidance and good practice examples can support councillors to make informed decisions. The LGA has a **Councillor guide to handling abuse and intimidation (https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation)**, which includes comprehensive social media guidance. However, some councils have developed their own guidance tailored to local circumstances:

- **Blaby District Council guide - Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors (https://w3.blaby.gov.uk/decision-making/documents/s39158/Personal%20Safety%20for%20Councillors%20-%20GUIDANCE%20V2.pdf)**
- **Bradford Metropolitan District Council - Guide to Personal Safety for Councillors (https://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/documents/Safety%20Guidance%20and%20Information/Personal%20Safety%20Councillors%202021.pdf)**

Training

Councillors are usually provided with a lot of information and possibly training when they first become a councillor. However, it's important to repeat key training often to ensure councillors are well equipped throughout their term. Common options for training around abuse and intimidations include:

- personal safety and risk assessment

- social media training and digital citizenship
- general communications and healthy debate
- emotional intelligence
- conflict de-escalation
- code of conduct.

The LGA provides training and e-learning on some of these topics that are free for councillors in England. Councillors can access all learning options through the **Civility in public life hub (https://www.google.com/search?q=civility+in+public+life&rlz=1C1GCEB_enGB891GB891&oq=&aqs=chrome.1.69i59l3j0i131i433i512j69i60l3j69i65.2114j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)**.

Durham County Council: Using social media safely

The council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use. The toolkit includes a section that advises councillors on how to manage comments, protect accounts, and reduce the risk of harassment or abuse online. The council recently updated the toolkit in accordance with the civility and respect guide on social media, published by the civility and respect project in consultation with the Society of Local Council Clerks, National Association Local Councils, One Voice Wales and County Associations, ensuring that it is comprehensive and accessible to all councillors.

The toolkit is presented as part of the council's training on social media which is made up of a theoretical and practical session. The first part of the training is conducted by the legal team and sets out how to communicate and use social media positively and in line with the council's code of conduct. The following practical sessions are conducted by the communications team and cover how to set up and use social media accounts and keep them technically safe.

The council's communication team engage with social media providers when they are aware of offensive posts and request their removal when necessary. This approach helps the council to strike the balance between promoting a safe and respectful online environment for councillors and residents alike.

Technology

Some councils are now providing a range of technological solutions to councillors to mitigate against safety risks associated with their councillor role and to help handle some lower-level abuse.

Some examples of useful technological solutions:

- Councillors have been provided with personal safety alarms, panic alarms or apps on their phone through which they can silently call for assistance. There are a range of options available for this and in some areas mobile options will not function due to poor signal.
- Some councils will provide councillors with a separate phone for council work, allowing them to keep their personal and council numbers separate. This can help councillor to disconnect and set time boundaries when they will respond to council business. Similarly, councillors can use a dual sim to have two phone numbers routed to one phone. This allows the convenience of carrying only one phone, but also allows the council to disable one number when they do not want to receive calls and to filter incoming calls depending on which number is being used.
- Profanity filters are now commonly available. Councils could support councillors to set profanity filters on their council email addresses. However, careful consideration should be given to what happens to the blocked emails. Blocked emails could contain a threat to life, and it's therefore important that someone checks the content of the email.

Councillors engage with residents in a variety of ways and occasionally this might mean hosting online, rather than in-person, ward surgeries. If there are any concerns about threats or abuse against a councillor,

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virtual meetings can help them to control their environment more easily, while also fulfilling their democratic functions. Providing access to zoom accounts and additional strategies like asking participants to pre-register, monitoring or disabling the chat function and setting expectations about conduct.

Risk assessment and mitigation

Risk assessments are a key part of a preventative approach to councillor safety and something that council officers will be very familiar with in relation to risk assessing council events and council buildings. However, as part of their role, councillors will often hold ward surgeries, meet people in public places, travel to and from meetings and may even visit resident's homes in their role as a councillor. It's important that these situations are also risk assessed and mitigations put in place to make these interactions as safe as possible. There are several approaches to this, which depend on the available resources and the level of risk associated with the individual councillor.

Risk assessment options range from simply supporting councillors to make their own risk assessments of their activities through templates and light touch guidance. However, if the level of risk is higher, it may be necessary to support councillors more directly by offering officer support to make risk assessment and mitigation proposals for a range of activities and locations, including the councillor's home.

In addition, officers may be able to provide information to councillors to help them assess risk related to individuals, rather than locations. For example, if a councillor is planning to visit a resident they haven't engaged with before, they may wish to check that the person isn't flagged on the councils potentially violent persons register. Council officers may be able to provide advice as to whether visiting is advised or not, without providing specific information about the individual. Some police forces have also provided this kind of check previously and can give advice on whether to visit or not, again without providing personal or confidential information.

If the threat is deemed to be viable, then the police may also be able to provide home security and other safety advice, such as better lighting, ring doorbells, separating post-boxes from the main home and may flag a home address for priority response by the police.

Engaging with the police

Information sharing between the police and councils is key for various reasons. However, councillor safety is one among many priorities that police must balance against available capacity, and that's why it is key to proactively engage with the police and create environments where information can be shared in both directions and where potential issues can be flagged and addressed early. Contributors to this project suggested several ways this council be achieved.

- Having a senior police officer responsible for liaising with the council as an organisation was key for intelligence sharing, particularly around identifying increasing community tensions or trigger issues that the council or specific councillors might be involved with. Having this connection could also help progress investigations where the officers dealing lacked the expertise to factors in the added risk dimensions associated with being an elected councillor.
- Creating strong connections between neighbourhood policing teams and their local councils and councillors helped provide soft support at events where the council didn't have a formal presence. This could include local neighbourhood patrols including ward surgery location on surgery days and flagging councillors home addresses for urgent response if a risk had been identified.
- Having police attend candidate election briefings and councillor induction events can help to improve mutual understanding of each other's roles and what councillors can reasonably expect police to be involved with.

Kirklees Council: Collaboration with police and political parties to embed safety on daily activities

Kirklees Council took a practical approach to dealing with abuse and intimidation of candidates and councillors focusing on engaging more with the police on these issues. First, the council established a specific named point of contact within the local police force. Ongoing contact with this officer meant they developed a good understand needs and concerns of councillors. This helps to streamline the reporting process for councillors who experience harassment or abuse.

Second, they now involve discussion of the role of the police in members' induction. This allows the council to proactively approach the issue of harassment and intimidation by setting out a clear understanding of the enforcement role of police and the role of the council in the early induction of new councillors. This can help to ensure that councillors are aware of the support and resources available to them and where to access support if they experience any form of abuse or harassment.

Some lessons learned include; not all councillor and candidates will experience abuse and intimidation, but it's key for them to be aware of these issues so they can be properly prepared to manage them if they do happen. Engaging with the police regularly can help to develop a long-term sustainable relationship.

Managing councillor information

Councillors are representatives of their local communities and engage regularly with their residents. In the past it was usual for councillors to have their home address published on the ballot paper when they were running for election, on the council website and on the register of pecuniary interests. Since 2019 councillors have had the option to put their local authority areas on their ballot paper rather than their full address. However, they may still then have to declare the address on

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the public register of the interests and some councils still put home addresses up on the website, although this is becoming increasingly rare.

Councillors may apply to their monitoring officer for a dispensation not to declare their full address if they believe it is a sensitive interest where disclosing the interest could lead to the member, or a person connected to them, being subject to violence or intimidation. However, the threshold for this is not set out in guidance or in law, although a letter to council leaders from the then Minister for Local Government, Rishi Sunak MP, encouraged monitoring officers to "look sympathetically at such requests where there are legitimate concerns of abuse or intimidation".

Some candidates and councillors prefer to have their information available to the public to ensure transparency and accessibility. However, increasingly councillors are reporting that had they known the abuse they would experience they would have requested to withhold that information. Being open throughout the election process about the options and potential risks of publishing personal information may help councillors make informed decisions.

Setting expectations

Many councillors find it very difficult to disengage from residents, even if the communication has become abuse and continued engagement is unlikely to have a positive outcome for the resident or the councillor. Proactive actions to set out how councillors will engage with their residents can help to set expectations before the interaction begins and provides councillors with a clear policy and guidelines as to when they should disengage. This could be practical information in the first instance, for example, setting out response times and opening hours and indicating that casework should be sent via email. However, councillors can extend this principle to specific that abuse will not be tolerated.

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LGA: Digital citizenship rules of engagement

The LGA published Digital citizenship guidance for councillors (h
ttps://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civil
ity-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0) which
includes infographics setting out the Rules of engagement.
These rules set out clearly what was welcome, including debate
and disagreement, but that abuse, threats, false information,
and discriminatory language or statements would result in a
cessation in engagement and being blocked if on social media.
These rules were intended for online communication, but could
be amended for other medium of communication, including in
person engagement.

This approach has been adopted by other organisations that engage
with the public. For example, Transport for London often engages with
residents and believes in setting expectations as to how a meeting
should be conducted ahead of time. To support the aim of having a
mutually conducive meeting, they use a Terms of Attendance document
to set out their expectations for the meeting, which the chair of the
meeting must acknowledge and agree to adhere to This agreement
means that if a meeting becomes abusive or inappropriate, TfL staff
reserve the right to terminate the meeting. In a council setting, template
terms of attendance could support councillors to set expectations ahead
of ward surgeries or home visitors. In addition, template responses
explaining that abusive communications will not be responded to and
setting out corrective actions would help councillors reset
communications and enforce rules of engagement.

Managing public narratives

Research by the LGA found that sometimes there are particular trigger
events or decisions that are a catalyst for abuse, harassment and
intimidation. Sometimes these are unexpected, but often the council is
aware of that a decision is contentious before it is made. This prior
knowledge presents an opportunity to provide proactive support to

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councillors to help them manage any negative impacts that arise following an event or decision. Communications officers are responsible for responding to requests for information from the public and the media and will often prepare for enquiries following significant council or local events.

Providing this advanced warning of potentially contentious issues and providing factual briefing to councillors can help them to weather social media storms and ensure that information does not become distorted. Advice about how to suspend comments, report abuse on social media, and tips for responding in a productive and safe way can also help councillors online.

Behaviour and conduct

Councillors are leaders of their local community and engage with other elected members to make decisions that impact their residents. In doing so they must act in accordance with the **Seven principles of public life (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2)**, often called the "Nolan principles":

- selflessness
- integrity
- objectivity
- accountability
- openness
- honesty
- leadership.

Under the heading of leadership, the principles are clear that holders of public office should treat others with respect and challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Councils are required to have a councillor code of conduct in place based on these principles and this should be the basis for instructing councillors on the standards and conduct expected of them. Councils should try to ensure that the code of conduct and any associated training support their councillors to display the best behaviours and encourages high standards of respectful debate and conduct. This

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could mean regular training on the code, reviewing the code to ensure it is fit for purpose, and developing a shared understand across political groups and members of the value of high standards. In addition, councils can consider tools to reduce reliance on the code of conduct, for example **local resolutions protocols (https://www.ombudsman.w ales/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Model-Local-Resolution-Protocol- for-Community-and-Town-Councils.pdf)** that are widely used in Welsh councils.

Councillors may also benefit from resources aimed at generally raising the quality of online communication and reducing abuse and misinformation. This could include councillors committing to using good digital citizenship techniques as set out in the **LGA Digital citizenship guide (https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resourc es/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/handling-abuse-and-0)**.

Incident management

Support and reporting mechanisms

Council officers support councillors with many aspects of their role, guiding them through the processes of the council, providing support with case work and information the councillor requires. However, when it comes to reporting abuse and intimidation councillors need to be clear where to go to find information and who they should contact and in what circumstances.

Council should try to ensure that all the information councillors need is in one place and easily accessible. For example, the London Borough of Hounslow is developing a 'one-stop-shop' space on the council intranet where councillors will be able to access all the relevant information.

Many councils have a single point of contact for councillors, although the responsible individual or function in the council varies from council to council. This variation is to be expected, but the crucial point is that councillors know who to go to and that the function available is able to cope with workday and out-of-hours issues.

This can be a lot of expectation to place on one individual, and some officers suggested having a team as the SPoC with a responsible senior manager balanced the need for 24-hour support with clarity of responsibility.

Councils should also establish a clear and simple method for reporting incidents which allows easy analysis so that trends and repeated harassment can be identified. Again councils have a range of ways to manage this:

- one council uses their Anti-Social Behaviour system to record abuse against councillors
- others use simple forms and shareable documents on SharePoint
- others use other case management systems to record data.

Triage

It can be challenging to determine when criticism crosses the line into abuse and when councillors should report this to the council or to the police. They should be encouraged to report if they are in any doubt and obviously if they are in fear for their safety, they should call 999.

Councils should be prepared and have plans in place to deal with the receipt of threats so that officers can respond quicky and reassure the councillor. This could include basic actions, like being absolutely clear where and how councillors can report a threat, securing as much information as possible about the threat, informing the police, checking in with the individual involved, updating them regularly on what is going on, and being very clear about the role of the police as compared to that of the council.

For lower-level abuse, some councils have taken innovative approaches of using a committee to review abuse received by councillors and determining whether this has crossed the line and warrants an official response from the council. This removed the responsibility for determining thresholds from the individual experiencing the abuse and creates a level of consistency as to how abuse against councillors is dealt with.

Informal and legal actions

If a resident or other individual has crossed the line from legitimate criticism to abuse in a way that may not be criminal but is harmful to the councillor and which the council agrees warrants a response, there are some actions a council could take:

- The council leader or monitoring officer could send a letter to the individual setting out why the behaviour is unacceptable and requesting that they desist from further abuse.
- The council could put in place a single point of contact for the individual where they would be asked not to contact the council again, but communicate with a senior officer instead.
- In multi-councillor wards, the other councillors might agree to take over communications with the individual, allowing the victim of the abuse to disengage.

In extreme circumstances, where an individual continues to abuse an individual, their actions could constitute a criminal offence such as harassment or stalking and a criminal or civil case could be pursued, and an injunction could be placed on an individual instructing them to desist. However, criminal cases must pass a high threshold for prosecution and civil cases are extremely expensive, may not be successful, and can have unintended consequences. For example, the extreme case of Robert Pickthall who took his own life rather than accepting a prison sentence for breaching an injunction which prevented him from harassing councillors and officers at Cheshire West and Chester Council (case law: **Cheshire West and Chester Council v Pickthall (http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2015/2141.html)**).

Durham County Council: Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police

Durham Council has a strong commitment to protecting councillors from abuse, harassment, and intimidation and takes threats against councillors very seriously.   The council's

approach to dealing with harassment or abuse of councillors is proportionate to the level of threat using the expertise of the council's legal and health and safety teams to decide how to proceed. This is supported by engagement with the police as appropriate to address serious incidents and provide essential advice and support depending on the severity of the situation.

For example, the council's Monitoring Officer, meets regularly with the Deputy chief constable. This provides an opportunity to flag concerns and share intelligence. In the meetings they discuss any issues related to councillor's experiences of harassment or threats of violence, and the police provide advice and guidance. The police are very responsive to issues that need to be reported in between meetings.   Councillors are encouraged to report all incidents of abuse, harassment and intimidation to Members Services even if it is considered to be minor or low level. All such incidents are logged internally and where appropriate with the police. This helps track incidents and identify patterns of behaviour which may pass the threshold for police action.

Member services in consultation with the health and safety team assess the level of threat using a predetermined process. Where the risk is low, the incidents will be logged and appropriate advice given to the councillor (e.g. how to amend social media settings/re-direct or block emails). In more serious cases, which do not meet the threshold for police action, the council will consider whether to take action e.g. writing to the individual and/or seeking an injunction. In serious of cases of abuse harassment and intimidation, the police will take appropriate action.

Where it is considered that an individual's behaviour threatens the immediate safety of councillors or staff, a decision may be taken to place that individual on the Potentially Violent Persons Register. Such behaviour includes conscious, deliberate or

malicious acts of violent, aggressive or abusive behaviour towards council employees or councillors. It is possible for those who interact with the public to check whether someone they are due to meet is on the register and what mitigations are in place.

Aftercare and resilience

Peer support

Councillors have a unique position as elected members and do not fit into the usual managerial structures of a council. However, following an incident they may want to speak to someone who understands their position, such as a buddy, a mentor or specific member who has taken responsibility for welfare issues. This works differently in each council, but key examples include:

- Wellbeing champion – this could be a senior member who has taken responsibility for the wellbeing of councillors across the council or there could be wellbeing champions in each political group catering to their own members.
- Wellbeing cafés –parish councils in Cornwall have set up wellbeing cafes designed to allow members to come together in an informal space to discuss concerns, share experiences and solutions.
- For independent councillors who sit outside formalised political parties, there can be an additional challenge. However, independent councillors may make informal arrangements with other councillors to provide valuable peer support improving wellbeing and reducing stressed caused by independent working.
- Finally, councillors struggling to find peer support within their authority, can request support through the four **LGA Political Group Offices (https://www.local.gov.uk/about/our-meetings-and-leadership/political-composition/political-groups)**.

Formal support

Although peer support is an important aspect of aftercare and building resilience, there may also be a need for more formalised support from someone with specific skills, such as a mental health first aider or

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counsellor. Mental health first aiders are becoming more common and this may be helpful training for councillors and officers in political group offices. Some councils have also allowed councillors access to their employee assistance programmes so they have equal access to counselling support.

Conclusion – what barriers remain?

Councillors' experiences of abuse and intimidation vary, and some councils may experience more issues that others. However, there is clear evidence that abuse of politicians is on the rise across the board and that issues can arise and escalate very quickly. Councils would therefore be prudent to anticipate issues that may occur in the future and prepare to respond to abuse from members of the public. Additionally, this variation of experience means that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to follow, but the general principles we have set out in this report may help councils to consider the level of support their members require and how best to provide this support.

Councillors, political parties, councils and local police all have a role to play in preventing and dealing with abuse targeted against councillors. However, there is also a limit to their power, resources and responsibility to handle these issues and some things they will not be able to influence.

The behaviour of the public can be influenced and managed but cannot be entirely mitigated against. In addition, it is not against the law to be unpleasant or abusive and for the purposes of protecting freedom of speech the threshold for criminality is high. However, there are some environments where abusive speech and behaviour has the capacity to cause particular personal and democratic damage – notably online, particularly on social media. Cumulative derogatory and abusive comments, which are easily facilitated by online environments, can have a serious impact on individuals and their families, while online misinformation and disinformation can be impossible to contain and may in fact impact the integrity of local democracy itself.

Engagement with police and the variability of police response to abuse against councillors and others in public life was a common theme in this research. Most feedback indicated that the police can be relied on to deal with serious threats to life and violent crime. This is reassuring, but the perception that less serious or immediately threatening crimes are taken much less seriously and in many cases are not addressed at all is pervasive.

The role of the police is to maintain law and order in local areas by protected the public and their property, including preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime. However, we have heard from many sources that the police are not resourced to deal with all crime and this manifests as reports of crimes not being recorded or investigated. This is aggravated by a lack of understanding of the role that councillors fulfil and the associated risks. Within this research we have set of various options for improving relationships with the police and improve the mutual understanding of the role of councillors and the police, however, more is needed to improve consistency and outcomes.

Finally, councillors are a central part of our democratic system. Residents have high expectations of councillors and entrust them to make decisions that affect their lives. It is therefore vital that councillors are held accountable for their actions and display appropriate behaviours for leaders and representatives of their council. The vast majority of councillors strive to uphold these standards, understanding the individual and collective responsibility associated with their role. However, this is not universally the case. It is important that political parties and their members set the example of proper conduct and councils have the appropriate processes and powers to deal with breaches of the code of conduct.
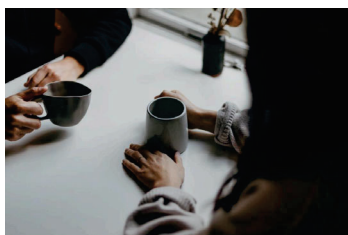
Case studies

Page 110
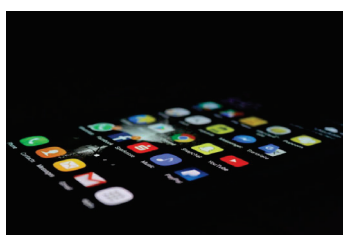
Supporting councillors through closer working with the police (/case-studies/supporting-councillors-through-closer-working-police)

North Lincolnshire Council has established a robust and effective relationship with the police. The police have nominated a senior officer to help the Monitoring Officer deal with incidents of abuse, harassment, and intimidation.

Case Study

| 24 Jul 2023

Supporting councillors to use social media safely (/case-studies/supporting-councillors-use-social-media-safely)

Durham Council has developed a comprehensive social media toolkit that guides councillors on social media use.

Case Study

| 24 Jul 2023

Collaboration with police and political parties to embed safety in daily activities (/case-studies/collaboration-police-and-political-parties-embed-safety-daily-activities)

Kirklees Council took a practical approach to dealing with abuse and intimidation of candidates and councillors focusing on engaging more with the police on these issues.

Case Study

| 24 Jul 2023

Wellbeing support for councillors - Middlesbrough Council (/case-studies/wellbeing-suppo

Reporting abuse and establishing productive relationships with the police (/case-studies/reporting-abu
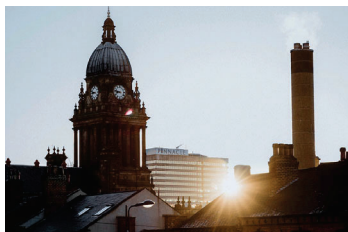

Cross-organisational working group on councillor safety and "one stop shop" model of support (/case-studies/cross-organisati

rt-councillors-middlesbrough-council)

Middlesbrough Council noted the challenging environments and high-pressure decision-making requirements of the councillor role and decided to provide councillors with tools to support their wellbeing, including a tailored forum for councillors to raise concerns and access to 1-2-1 support and the council's staff wellbeing offer.

se-and-establishing-productive-relationships-police)

Durham Council and the local police work collaboratively together to protect councillors from abuse and harassment.

onal-working-group-councillor-safety-and-one-stop-shop-model-support)

Hounslow Council have set up a cross-organisational working group with expert representatives to help identify emerging issues and gaps in support and develop solutions that will help to prevent and deal with these issues when they arise.

Leeds City Council: Councillor Safety Champions (/case-studies/leeds-city-council-councillor-safety-champions)
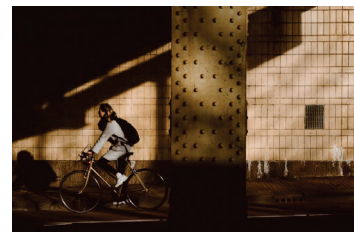
Gloucestershire County Council: Improving councillor personal safety through training and development (/case-studies/gloucestershire-county-council-improving-counci l-improving-counci

Cardiff Council: Councillor safety - lone working devices (/case-studies/cardiff-council-councillor-safety-lone-working-devices)

At Leeds City Council, the Deputy Leader has taken on the role of 'Councillor Safety Champion' to ensure that councillor safety remains at the top of the agenda.

llor-personal-safety-through-training)

In response to recent high-profile violence and aggression incidents towards publicly elected officials, Gloucestershire County Council reviewed and redesigned the personal safety approach, training and development offered to local councillors.

Cardiff Council reviewed the relevant safety arrangements and implemented a new system to improve support to councillors during their council business.

Case Study

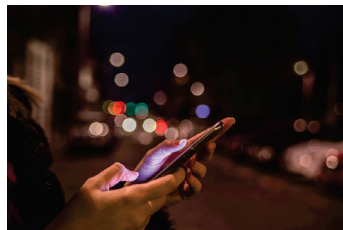| 16 May 2022

Case Study

| 16 May 2022

Case Study

| 16 May 2022

Leeds City Council: Venue risk assessments to support councillor safety (/case-studies/leeds-city-council-venue-risk-assessments-support-councillor-safety)

It is important that councillors feel equipped to manage

Telford and Wrekin Council: A risk-based approach to councillor safety (/case-studies/telford-and-wrekin-council-risk-based-approach-councillor-safety)
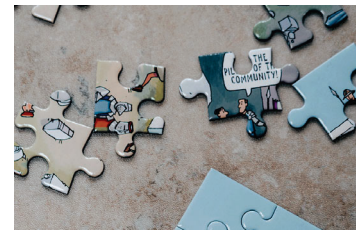
Eastleigh Borough Council: Independent network supporting councillor safety (/case-studies/eastleigh-borough-council-independent-network-supporting-councillor-safety)

occasionally aggressive encounters with residents, including taking preventative steps to limit the risk of serious consequences. Leeds City Council helped councillors risk assess venues to ensure that they were safe and find appropriate alternatives if necessary.

Telford and Wrekin Council were faced with a challenging situation in 2019 when they commissioned an inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation. Councillors were at risk of abuse and aggression from residents and national groups interested in the inquiry. The council took this risk seriously, providing councillors with appropriate and proportionate safety measures depending on the level of risk.

This case study demonstrates how a team of independent councillors replicated the support offered by more traditional party structures to create a safer environment for local independent councillors.

Case Study

16 May 2022

Case Study

10 Jun 2022

Case Study

16 May 2022

Appendix A: Definitions of abuse

Public intimidation is defined by the LGA as "words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life".

This includes actions of abuse, harassment and intimidation such as:

- verbal abuse
- physical attacks
- being stalked, followed, or loitered around
- threats of harm
- distribution of misinformation

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- character assassination
- inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media
- sexual harassment or sexual assault
- Any other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety.

Appendix B: Guidance and other documents

- **Blaby District Council guide - Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors (https://w3.blaby.gov.uk/decision-making/documents/s39158/Personal%20Safety%20for%20Councillors%20-%20GUIDANCE%20V2.pdf)**
- **Bradford Metropolitan District Council - Guide to Personal Safety for Councillors (https://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/documents/Safety%20Guidance%20and%20Information/Personal%20Safety%20Councillors%202021.pdf)**
- The **True Vision website (https://www.report-it.org.uk/home)** was created because there was an issue with underreporting of hate crime that was difficult to quantify. This website makes the reporting of hate crime easier. The website also has a special section on hate crime during an election. There is accompanying **HRC guidance on hate crime during the election period. (https://www.reportit.org.uk/hate_crime_during_an_election_period)**
- The Suzy Lamplugh Trust ran the **Staying Safe on the Doorstep Campaign (https://www.suzylamplugh.org/staying-safe-on-the-doorstep)** for the parliamentary candidates and their staff during the 2015 General Election campaign. The advice is still relevant to any volunteers, staff or candidates of local elections who are seeking who seek to canvass support by knocking on doors. The **advice card with safety tips and information is available in their website at no cost. (https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Handl**

ers/Download.ashx?IDMF=051ee412-f705-49ad-935a-afd7048b
117a)

Appendix C: List of key stakeholders identified in ecosystem mapping

1. CfGS
2. Crash Override Network
3. Crimestoppers
4. Digital-Trust
5. Elect Her
6. Equality Advisory Support Service
7. Fix the Glitch
8. Get Safe Online
9. Hope Not Hate
10. Hourglass
11. Jo Cox Foundation
12. Paladin – National Stalking Advocacy Service
13. Protection Against Stalking
14. Samaritans
15. SARSAS
16. Stop Hate UK
17. SupportLine
18. the National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
19. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust
20. Unison
21. Victim Support
22. Victims Choice
23. CACH
24. Cybersmile
25. NPCC - National Police Chiefs Council
26. True Vision, Hate Crime Independent Advisory Group
27. Electoral Commission
28. Weightmans
29. SOLACE
30. LLG
31. COSLA/Scottish Police

32. Social Media
33. Illegal Harms, Hate & Terrorism at Ofcom
34. Facebook /Meta
35. Instagram
36. Twitter
37. Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
38. Political parties / GO (inc. Individuals who signed Debate Not Hate public statement)
39. the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL)
40. Association of Labour Councillors
41. Compassion in Politics
42. the Association of Democratic Services Officers
43. the Association of Electoral Administrators
44. Employment Related Services Association
45. Lawyers in Local Government
46. National Hate Crime Awareness Week
47. Amnesty International
48. Digital Freedom Fund
49. eSafety Commissioner
50. NDI (National Democratic Institute)
51. NetSafe
52. SPARC
53. THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION

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Reviewing our approach (Creating supportive and informed spaces)

0: Not Addressed: No action taken or significant deficiencies observed.
1: Partial Implementation: Some measures in place but room for improvement.
2: Comprehensive Implementation: Meets or goes above and beyond the requirements of the statement.

Prioritise councillor wellbeing: Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries	Total score _3_ / 10			Evidence
Statement	**0: Not Addressed**	**1: Partial**	**2: Comprehensive**	
We recognise and acknowledge the impact of abuse and intimidation on councillor wellbeing, ensuring that support services and resources are readily available and accessible.		1		All Members have access to a range of training resources via the Council's e-learning system. These resources include modules on dealing with violent behaviour, harassment, victimisation and bullying and supporting good mental health.
We prioritise councillor wellbeing by establishing regular and meaningful engagement opportunities where councillors can openly discuss their concerns and access support services as needed, ensuring they feel supported and valued.		1		
We promote a culture of self-care among councillors, encouraging boundary setting, stress management techniques, and healthy coping strategies.	0			
We equip and resource council staff to identify signs of distress in councillors and offer appropriate advice to support their personal wellbeing.		1		
We regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the wellbeing support program, soliciting feedback from councillors and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement and enhancement.	0			

0: Not Addressed: No action taken or significant deficiencies observed.
1: Partial Implementation: Some measures in place but room for improvement.
2: Comprehensive Implementation: Meets or goes above and beyond the requirements of the statement.

Identifying and mitigating risk: Consider broad risks across our political landscape as well as empowering individual councillors' so we can work together to proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.	Total score __3 / 10			Evidence
Statement	**0: Not Addressed**	**1: Partial**	**2: Comprehensive**	
We equip councillors with the skills and resources to conduct their own risk assessments, empowering them to assess their role, responsibilities, visibility, and personal circumstances and flag when they need support from officers.	0			No formal risk assessment support currently exists for members
We provide councillors with guidance and advice to mitigate against specific risks identified through their own risk assessment.	0			See above. No formal advice currently provided on specific risks identified through a risk assessment
We encourage and facilitate open communication and collaboration between councillors and council staff to identify and escalate significant emerging risks, fostering a culture of transparency and shared responsibility in risk management.		1		
We offer additional individual risk assessment and mitigation support to councillors if higher risks are identified, ensuring that their safety and wellbeing are prioritised.		1		Whilst no formal process currently exists, Council staff are always available to offer support to Members if any risks are identified. This could be enhanced through the development of a formal process with named contacts.
We continuously monitor and review the effectiveness of risk mitigation measures, including as part of post incident reviews, soliciting feedback from councillors and stakeholders to adapt		1		No formal process for review exists, but any incident will be subject to review by the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer (Director of Central Services &

strategies as needed and ensure ongoing safety and wellbeing.				Deputy Chief Executive) Safeguarding Officer (Esther Wright) and Policy, Scrutiny & Communities Manager. This could be enhanced through the development of a formal review process.

0: Not Addressed: No action taken or significant deficiencies observed.
1: Partial Implementation: Some measures in place but room for improvement.
2: Comprehensive Implementation: Meets or goes above and beyond the requirements of the statement.

Clarity of process and responsibility: Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the council to provide support to councillors. This includes collaboration across Local Authority tiers where relevant	Total score __7 / 10			Evidence
Statement	**0: Not Addressed**	**1: Partial**	**2: Comprehensive**	
We have established a clear process for raising concerns related to abuse or intimidation, including the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders.			2	All Councillors are able to raise concerns directly with the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Executive or the designated Safeguarding Officer (Esther Wright). Any incidents of abuse can be escalated via the Community Safety Partnership.
We assign specific individuals within the council, such as designated safeguarding officers or welfare leads, to provide support and guidance to councillors who experience abuse.			2	The Council has a designated safeguarding officer who is able to provide support and guidance to councillors.
We ensure that councillors have access to comprehensive information about available support and how the council will handle reports of abuse, including communication channels and points of contact.		1		Any instances of abuse can be reported to the Monitoring Officer (Director of Central Services & Deputy Chief Executive), the Chief Executive or the designated Safeguarding Officer. However, this could be enhanced by the provision of a dedicated Councillor support page with details of contacts and how reports of abuse will be considered.
We equip and resource council staff to provide support to councillors who experience abuse			2	Senior Council staff are able to assist any member who is experiencing abuse

and help them to navigate the reporting process.				and to raise this with the relevant partner agency. We have experience of escalating incidents to Kent Police where necessary.
We regularly review and evaluate the effectiveness of the process, soliciting feedback from councillors and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement.	0			

Reviewing our approach (Creating connections)

Relationships with local police (and wider partners as relevant): 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.	Total score 9 / 10			Evidence
Statement	**0: Not Addressed**	**1: Partial**	**2: Comprehensive**	
We establish regular communication channels and liaison arrangements with local police forces to facilitate collaboration on issues related to abuse affecting councillors.			2	We have very close links to Kent Police through the Community Safety Partnership and regular meetings take place between the Chief Inspector of Kent Police and the Council's Chief Executive. Any issues of abuse have been dealt with via these existing channels.
We provide councillors and council staff with clear advice on the role of the police in addressing abuse and the process for engaging with law enforcement agencies.		1		Advice is provided on an ad-hoc basis, as and when issues arise. A more formal guidance document could assist in enhancing this objective.
We promote mutual understanding and trust between councillors, council staff, and local police officers through various joint initiatives. This collaborative approach enhances coordination and fosters a shared understanding of addressing abuse affecting councillors.			2	The Council has adopted a protocol on Member/ Officer relations, which forms part of the adopted constitution.
We have established approaches for sharing information and intelligence related to serious instances of abuse, harassment, and threats, ensuring compliance with data protection and confidentiality requirements. This information exchange enables us to identify patterns and flag			2	We have established links with Kent Police and other agencies to share information via the Kent and Medway Information Sharing Protocol.

potential escalation, facilitating timely intervention and support for councillors facing abuse and intimidation.				
We establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership with local police, including regular meetings and feedback sessions to continually make improvements.			2	We have frequent meetings (at least weekly) with Police and other partner agencies via the CSP (Community Safety Partnership) to review the effectiveness of our partnership.

Reviewing our approach (**Creating a culture of safety and respect**)

0: Not Addressed: No action taken or significant deficiencies observed.
1: Partial Implementation: Some measures in place but room for improvement.
2: Comprehensive Implementation: Meets or goes above and beyond the requirements of the statement.

Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: Establish and enforce a local approach that clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.	Total score __6 / 10			Evidence
Statement	**0: Not Addressed**	**1: Partial**	**2: Comprehensive**	
We have developed a shared understanding with councillors, which we promote publicly, as to what constitutes abuse and intimidation and clarified actions the council may take to address abuse of councillors.		1		The Council's adopted Code of Conduct defines what is meant by bullying and harassment.
We actively promote respectful debate and constructive engagement among councillors, council staff, and the wider community, fostering an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect across all interactions.			2	On 14 May 2024 the full Council considered and supported a motion relating to 'Debate Not Hate'. Members agreed that abuse of any sort was unacceptable, that behaviour in meetings and online should always be respectful and there should be less aggressive expression of opinions in writing, in the Council Chamber and especially on social media platforms. The Council's adopted code of conduct and protocol on Member/ Officer relations further promote the principles of mutual respect, trust and courtesy.
We have effectively communicated and equipped councillors to communicate clear expectations for interactions, wherever they take place, between councillors and the public that prioritise inclusive,	0			

respectful, and constructive dialogue.				
We provide ongoing awareness campaigns and training initiatives to equip councillors and council staff with the skills to identify, address, and prevent abusive behaviour effectively, fostering a culture of accountability and support.		1		
We regularly evaluate our practices and procedures to ensure alignment with evolving standards and best practices, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation to effectively address abuse and intimidation within our organisation.			2	The Council's constitution (which contains both the code of conduct and protocol on member/ officer relations) is the subject of regular review.

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Summary and forward plan

Date of assessment:	April 2025			Total score
Conducted by:	Adrian Stanfield, Monitoring Officer			
Agreed review date (if applicable):	June 2026			
Principle	**Score**	**Key gaps identified**	**Actions to progress**	**Updates**
Creating safe spaces	3	Information is available to Members, but opportunities to openly discuss concerns are limited and unstructured No formal process is in place for Members No formal or structured process to get feedback from Members	Provide structured opportunities for Members to discuss concerns Promote rather than signpost to support services Provide training to support relevant staff to identify signs of stress	
Creating a risk led approach	3	No formal risk assessment tool is available for Members, nor any advice on specific risks arising out of an assessment (other than on an ad-hoc basis) There is no regular monitoring or review of risk	Develop a risk assessment tool for Members Provide formal support opportunities for Members to receive feedback on risk assessments Provide training to support relevant staff to identify signs of stress	
Creating infrastructure	7	Limited information provided to Members about available support and how the council will handle reports of abuse,	Provision of a dedicated Councillor support page with details of contacts and how	

		including communication channels and points of contact	reports of abuse will be considered	
Creating connections	9	No key gaps identified	Develop formal guidance for Members and Council staff on the role of the police in addressing abuse and the process for engaging with law enforcement agencies	
Creating a culture of safety and respect	6	No formal support offered to Members to communicate clear expectations for interactions with the public	Provide all Members with access to the guidance and infographics developed by the Local Government Association under the 'Digital Citizenship' campaign.	

Debate not hate – questions for survey

1. Please amend the details we have on record if necessary. If you are a member of more than one council, please only complete this survey once.

- Name
- Authority
- Email address

2. Please indicate the type of council(s) of which you are a member. Select all that apply

- District council
- Town council
- Parish/community council

3. What is your political affiliation as a councillor?

- Conservatives
- Green Party
- Independent Alliance
- Labour
- Liberal Democrats

4. How long have you been serving as a councillor?

- Less than one year
- 1 to <2 years
- 2 to <5 years
- 5 years or more

5. How often, if at all, do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Ask those who have been serving for at least a year:

6. How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

- Very effective
- Fairly effective
- Not very effective
- Not at all effective
- Don't know

The following questions relate to whether you have experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor and/or as a candidate or campaigner at the most recent local and/or general electoral period.

These terms are defined as follows:

Abuse – words and/or behaviour that constitute abuse or mistreatment can include, but is not limited to, physical abuse, bullying, emotional abuse, unsolicited abusive communication, and harassment. It may be one-off or repeated.

Intimidation – words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence, or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life. It may be one-off or repeated behaviour.

7. How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during the local election campaign period in 2023?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Ask those who have been serving for at least a year:

8. Over the last twelve months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Show to respondents who answered rarely, frequently or occasionally at Q8:

9. And thinking about the last twelve months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed?

- It has sharply increased
- It has slightly increased
- It has stayed about the same
- It has slightly decreased
- It has sharply decreased
- Don't know

10. Please give reasons for your answer.

11. Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as a councillor?

- Yes
- No
- Do not wish to say

12. Due to your role as a councillor, have you or a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following?

For the purposes of this question, a person closely connected with you could be your immediate or extended family, your partner, or a close friend.

- Threat of damage to property
- Actual damage to property
- Threat of violence
- Actual violence
- Threat of death
- Other, please write in
- None of the above

- Against you
- Against a person closely connected with you

Protected characteristics are a list of characteristics, for which it is against the law to discriminate against someone under the Equality Act 2010. The protected characteristics are:

- age
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

More information about protected characteristics can be found on the **Gov.UK Discrimination rights webpage**.

13. In your role as councillor, have you ever received abuse or intimidation relating to any of the protected characteristics above?

This also includes abuse and intimidation relating to the perception that a protected characteristic applies to you, regardless of whether or not it does.

- Yes
- No

- Don't know
- Do not wish to say

Ask those who had received abuse/intimidation relating to a protected characteristic:

14. Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to? Select all that apply.

- age
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation
- Do not wish to say

15. If you would like to share more details about your experience(s), please use the space below.

16. In your role as councillor, have you ever had a member of the public attend your home or threaten to attend your home in a way that you considered intimidatory or inappropriate? Select all that apply.

- Yes – threatened to attend my home
- Yes – attended my home
- Yes – other form of contact at home
- No
- Don't know

Shown to respondents who answer yes (threat / actual / other) at Q16

17. And was this…

- One person acting alone
- More than one person, each acting alone
- A group of people, acting together
- Other, please specify
- Don't know

18. In your role as councillor, have you ever requested that your home address be withheld from the public register of interests?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

- Prefer not to say

Ask if respondent had not explicitly requested the withholding of their address

19. Were you aware that your home address could be withheld from the public register of interests?

- Yes
- No

20. And was your home address removed from the public register of interests?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Ask if home address was not removed:

21. Why was your home address not removed?

22. Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member?

- Yes
- No – But I feel I need them
- No – I do not feel I need them
- Prefer not to say

Ask respondents who answered No – But I feel I need them:

23. Why have you not made modifications to your home security despite feeling you need to? Select all that apply

- I cannot afford them
- I am not sure what I should get
- Other, detail:

Ask respondents who had made modifications:

24. What modifications have you made? Select all that apply

- Security lights
- Camera doorbell
- CCTV or other cameras
- New locks
- Panic button/alarm

- Installed an external post box
- Home address flagged for police response
- Other, please specify
- Prefer not to say

25. The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors and provides support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation. Before this survey, had you heard of the Debate Not Hate campaign, or its slogan, "the right engagement matters"?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

26. Please use the space below to tell us anything more you'd like to about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally.

27. Please tick the box below if you would like to be involved in future work related to this area and/or the contents of this survey.

[ ] I would like to be involved in further work

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted.

Any other items which the Chairman decides are urgent due to special circumstances and of which notice has been given to the Chief Executive.

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The Chairman to move that the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting during consideration of any items the publication of which would disclose exempt information.

ANY REPORTS APPEARING AFTER THIS PAGE CONTAIN EXEMPT INFORMATION

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Any other items which the Chairman decides are urgent due to special circumstances and of which notice has been given to the Chief Executive.

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