

## 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	<p>Annex 1 – LGA Survey ‘Debate Not Hate’ Outcomes August 2024</p> <p>Annex 2 – LGA publication ‘Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors’</p> <p>Annex 3 – LGA toolkit ‘Ending abuse in public life self-assessment’</p> <p>Annex 4 – Summary and Improvement Plan</p> <p>Annex 5 – Survey questions</p>