

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MINUTES

Monday, 2nd June, 2025

Present: Cllr D A S Davis (Chair), Cllr K Barton, Cllr R P Betts (substitute), Cllr G C Bridge, Cllr J Clokey (substitute), Cllr J R S Lark, Cllr B A Parry, Cllr M R Rhodes, Cllr K B Tanner.

Together with parish/town council representatives Mr O Baldock (Hadlow Parish Council) and Mr A Sullivan* (Aylesford Parish Council)

*participated via MS Teams

Cllr L Chapman were also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Apologies for absence were received from Borough Councillors Mrs S Bell, Mrs T Dean, S Hammond and R Roud and Parish/Town Councillors J Reading (Borough Green), W Steam (Burham), W Palmer (Platt) and M Carboni (Plaxtol).

PART 1 - PUBLIC

ST 25/7 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Notification of substitute Members were recorded as set out below:

- Cllr Betts substituted for Cllr Bell
- Cllr Clokey substituted for Cllr Dean

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

ST 25/8 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

ST 25/9 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Joint Standards Committee held on 20 January 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

MATTERS FOR DECISION UNDER DELEGATED POWERS

ST 25/10 DEBATE NOT HATE

The report of the Monitoring Officer invited Members to consider the Local Government Association's publication on how councils could better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse.

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. A copy of the survey outcome was attached at Annex 1 to the report and the key findings were set out in paragraph 4.6 of the report. Also attached to the report was a copy of the LGA publication 'Debate Note Hate: Ending abuse in public life for Councillors' (Annex 2), a copy of the LGA toolkit 'Ending abuse in public life self-assessment' (Annex 3) with a summary of the improvement steps (Annex 4) and a copy of the survey questions used by the LGA, modified to allow for use by Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (Annex 5).

Of the 10% who responded to the survey, several councillors reported abuse and intimidation. It was crucial to distinguish between acceptable political debate and harassment or intimidation and knowing where to draw the line was essential. It was proposed that the Council conduct its own survey to see if its councillors experienced similar to those reported in the survey.

Issues arising from the LGA survey included the reporting of only 2% of physical violence incidents to the police, highlighting the need for more scrutiny, especially in the digital age. Whilst there were statistical concerns, Members did not consider the low response rate to invalidate the concerns and felt that it was essential that councillors receive appropriate support.

Members felt that the digital age had exacerbated the problem and empowered individuals to broadcast their views more widely; and recognised that the majority of councillors were committed to upholding ethical standards.

In order to be proactive rather than reactive to abuse, Members felt that it was important to identify where and how intimidation and abuse was happening and determine how best Members could be supported in the future. Members supported a survey of Borough Council Members to establish a baseline so improvement could be monitored and activities tracked to alleviate problems. Furthermore, it was felt that a working group, comprising individuals with experience in these issues, be established to review the survey responses.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the contents of the report and accompanying annexes, be noted;
- (2) the progress made in completion of the self-assessment toolkit at Annex 3, be noted;
- (3) the improvement steps to address the gaps in the self-assessment toolkit set out in the summary at Annex 4, be agreed;
- (4) a panel of Members to oversee the delivery of the improvement steps at Annex 5, be agreed;
- (5) a survey as set out at Annex 4, be undertaken, to gain a better understanding of the extent to which all Tonbridge and Malling Borough Councillors have suffered abuse and intimidation; and
- (6) 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.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN PRIVATE**ST 25/11 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

There were no items considered in private.

The meeting ended at 8.19 pm