



Birmingham City Council

Standards Committee

Date: 16 February 2023

Subject: Debate not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy

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1. Purpose of report:

- 1.1 To bring to the attention of the Standards Committee (the Committee) the Local Government Association (LGA) programme around civility in public life especially in response to increasing concern about intimidation and toxicity of debate and the impact this has been having on the democratic process.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To note the work undertaken by the LGA in promoting civility in public life.
- 2.2 To put the LGA's "Debate not Hate" campaign on the Committee's forward plan for consideration.

3. Background

- 3.1 The LGA's Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship work was established following the publication of the Committee for Standards in Public Life reports into Intimidation in public life in 2019. The work is, primarily aimed at:
 - articulating good standards for anyone engaging in public and political discourse
 - understanding the scale and impact of intimidation and abusive behaviour on membership organisations, and developing recommendations for achieving positive debate and public decision-making on a local level
 - supporting LGA members and all democratically elected local representatives in addressing intimidation and abuse, so they deliver the best on behalf of their communities
 - recognising that daily interactions continue to take place online and new technologies of information are constantly used to facilitate communication with citizens, officers and councillors. Online abuse and intimidation of local councillors and supporting officers working with them is a major challenge to local democracy and to the diversity of local representatives.

- 3.2 The LGA commissioned a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors, which was launched in October 2021. On 28 June 2022, the LGA published “Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy” (the LGA Report), a copy of which has been attached to this report at Appendix 1 and can also be found online at the following link: [Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy | Local Government Association](#)
- 3.3 The LGA have identified that 7 out of 10 Councillors (ie the majority) have reported abuse. The LGA Report contains recommendations from the evidence gathered over the first 6 months.
- 3.4 As identified in the LGA Report common themes amongst the evidence are as follows:
- “Variability of support – The support offered by councils, political parties, and the police varied across the country. In particular, respondents identified a lack of proactive support from some councils and responses from some police forces to threats made against councillors and their families.
 - Targeted abuse – Evidence from the qualitative responses indicated that councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were more likely to 4 receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses.
 - Personal and democratic impacts – Abuse and intimidation can significantly impact councillors and their families, and the wider community. Several respondents described the negative impacts of ongoing abuse on their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, respondents supported the idea that abuse can impact councillors’ willingness to stand for re-election or deter others from considering standing for public office.
 - Vulnerability of councillors – Many respondents highlighted the visibility and accessibility of councillors in their local community, particularly when councillors’ home addresses are available online. Councillors are therefore vulnerable to physical abuse, particularly compared to national politicians who may have greater protections and access to specialist police support.
 - Normalisation – There is a growing feeling that abuse and intimidation, particularly online, are becoming normalised. Attitudes around councillors expecting abuse and being expected to manage abuse with little support were prevalent in the responses
- 3.5 The Recommendations made are as follows:
- “Recommendation 1: Councils and other relevant partners should take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors’ mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors’ safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously.

- Recommendation 2: The LGA should continue to gather and disseminate good practice from across the sector, consider what more can be done to prevent abuse and intimidation of councillors through the Civility in public life programme, and support councils and councillors when these incidents occur.
- Recommendation 3: Police forces should work to improve the consistency of responses to abuse of and threats made against councillors and take a riskbased approach that accounts for the specific risks that councillors face, as they do with other high-risk individuals, such as MPs. This should include identifying best practice in relation to councillor support and safety and sharing it across the country.
- Recommendation 4: The Government should prioritise legislation to put it beyond doubt that councillors can withhold their home address from the public register of pecuniary interests.
- Recommendation 5: The LGA should work with political parties, election and democratic officers, and organisations responsible for guidance to raise awareness of the options currently available and promote the practice of 5 keeping home addresses private during the election process and once elected.
- Recommendation 6: Social media companies and internet service providers should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.
- Recommendation 7: The relevant Government department should convene a working group, in partnership with the LGA, to bring together relevant agencies to develop and implement an action plan to address the issue of abuse of local politicians and their safety.”

3.6 In respect to Recommendation 7, LGA have provided a link as follows:

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

to its “Debate Not Hate public statement” for Councillors, MPs and organisations to sign to support the work of the LGA and act as a call to action for the relevant Government department to form a working group.

4. Financial Implications

4.1 There are none arising from this report.

5. Legal Implications

5.1 There are none arising from this report.

6. Human Resources

6.1 There are none arising from this report.