

## **Civility in public life campaign and model councillor code of conduct training**

### **Purpose of report**

For direction.

### **Summary**

This report updates members on key aspects of the Civility in public life programme agreed at 10 June Executive Advisory Board, including the #DebateNotHate campaign plan, the and the proposed Code of Conduct training offer. Members are asked to consider and comment the proposals related to each area of work.

### **Recommendations**

1. Members of the Board are asked to note the proposed Model Code of Conduct training offer outlined in paragraphs 4 to 6 and make comments as necessary.
2. Members of the Board are asked to consider and agree the direction of the Civility in public life campaign outlined in paragraph 7 to 30.
3. Members are asked to note the launch of the Call for evidence.

### **Actions**

Officers to take note of members comments on the proposed training offer and the direction of the Civility in public life campaign and make amendments as necessary.

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## **Civility in public life campaign and model councillor code of conduct training**

### **Background**

1. At the Executive Advisory Board on 10 June, members agreed the proposed Civility in public life work programme for 2021/22 with some minor alterations. Key parts of the proposal included work to develop an Informal duty of care, to respond to any Government work around the use of sanctions, a review of the Code of conduct and associated training and support, and an update of the councillors' guide to handling intimidation. The Board also agreed to establish a Steering Group to oversee the programme and provide ongoing oversight and commentary.
2. As part of the discussion, members of the Board shared their experience of abuse, harassment, and intimidation as a result of being a councillor. They agreed that the LGA should look into options for a campaign emphasising that this behaviour is unacceptable and promoting the LGA's wider work around civility in public life.
3. The Steering Group has now met for the first time and considered progress against the work plan and proposals for the #DebateNotHate campaign and the Model councillor code of conduct training offer.

### **Model councillor code of conduct training offer**

4. The LGA published the Model Councillor Code of Conduct in December 2020 and published councillor guidance on the model code in July 2021. The next phase of the Code of conduct work is to develop a training offer to help councils embed the Code and the principles of the Code in councils.
5. Officers are working with various stakeholders, including monitoring officers and democratic service officers, to develop this offer. The proposal is to develop a three-part offer based on the guidance the LGA has already published, which will include:
  - 5.1. Online e-learning modules covering the principles of the model code, core elements of the Code and technical training on pecuniary interests and gifts and hospitality. The modules will be available to councillors through the LGA online learning platform.
  - 5.2. A resource pack to support officers in councils and LGA improvement colleagues and peers to deliver training on the model code directly in councils. The pack will cover the same content as the online modules.
  - 5.3. Webinars with expert speakers looking at areas of subtlety within the Code, for example, considering topics like 'What does respectful debate look like?'

6. The offer will focus on good practice in councils and the value of the model code in protecting individual councillors and their councils and raising standards of conduct across local government.

#### **The Civility in Public Life campaign plan**

7. There are growing concerns about the impact an increasing level of public intimidation and toxicity of debate is having on our country's democratic processes, particularly at a local level.
8. The national discussion has predominately focused on the abuse of MPs, and more generally, the way social media has become a conduit for intimidation, abuse and misinformation directed at those with high-profile accounts, such as sports professionals and celebrities. To support the effective functioning of local democracy and ensure councillors are not at risk, the conversation needs to call for improvements in the quality of public debate for all those holding public office.
9. The Civility in Public Life programme, together with COSLA, NILGA and WLGA is already a successful programme of work, using the hashtag #DebateNotHate.
10. Three distinct issues have been raised through consultation and by members – abuse and intimidation from the public, abuse and intimidation by other councillors, and member-officer relations.
11. The campaign will concentrate on the abuse and intimidation of councillors. It is recognised that the intimidation of officers is an urgent issue, but this will be addressed as a by-product of better public discourse measures introduced more widely, as well through the Civility in Public Life programme, including work on the Model Member Code of Conduct.

#### Key proposals for the campaign

12. The Civility in Public Life campaign will focus on detoxifying public political discourse, improving the response to unacceptable behaviour, increasing the profile of the work of the programme.

#### Objectives for the campaign

13. Increase awareness of what action councillors they can take if their physical or mental health, safety and wellbeing is threatened.
14. Secure improved responses by the police to reports by councillors of threats, intimidation and harassment
15. Ensure the upcoming Online Safety Bill has the measures in place needed to improve the quality of public debate and respect for all those holding public office, including councillors.

### Strategy

16. Work with a broad range of organisations to make this a sector-wide initiative, cross-nation and at all levels of local government – with Solace, the NALC, and the local government associations in the devolved nations.
17. To influence the debate and increase awareness with the public that intimidation is not just an issue for MPs, we need to publicly illustrate the scale and wide range of experiences faced by councillors online and offline. A call for evidence from councillors will be used to collate stories. This will also allow us to monitor emerging issues over time and adapt our messaging to focus on those of most concern.
18. Publicly use real life stories of councillors to illustrate the person behind the office, rather than a focus on intimidation which could be distressing. Work through the Be a Councillor and Build Back Local campaigns to raise the profile of the role and improve its reputation.
19. Use national moments of discussion around the key issues as an opportunity to call for improvements in the quality of public debate for all those holding public office.
20. Focus activity on the social media platforms where abuse and intimidation is most visible, to build support for change with platform users and owners. To bring the public inside, it should be clear that it is the quality of discourse that needs to change, for everyone, not just councillors, but those in public office need the right to recourse, using the hashtag #DebateNotHate.
21. The campaign will include communications, policy and improvement elements, drawing together and building on the LGA's existing work.

### Key messages for the campaign

22. Councillors are representatives of their local area, they work for their residents and on behalf of their local communities.
23. For local democracy to function effectively it is essential that councillors feel empowered in their interactions with residents and each other.
24. In order to increase the number of people entering local politics, we need to ensure people feel confident they will be supported and protected.
25. Debating and disagreeing with one another is a healthy part of democracy but we cannot allow intimidation, abuse and disinformation to continue to put councillors at risk.
26. Abuse has no place in politics and is stopping residents from engaging in local government and councillors from reaching their full potential in the role.
27. We need to see concrete action to protect current councillors and ensure potential future councillors feel safe to stand for election.
28. There is a commonality between MPs and councillors in the abuse they face. We need to be united in calling for change – enough is enough.

29. Councillors are like everybody else. They're part of your community – they're your next-door neighbours.
30. Anyone, regardless of their background or political affiliation, should feel safe to become a councillor and be proud to represent their community.

### **Call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors**

31. The Call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors is designed to give councillors the opportunity to feed their experiences into the LGA evidence base around abuse and intimidation of councillors by the public. In addition, the Call for evidence will allow those who have witnessed abuse and intimidation of councillors and those who have stood for election but may not be an elected member now to share their experiences.
32. The survey will cover key areas, including identifying information, experiences of abuse and intimidation, abuse and/or intimidation of others, the impact of abuse and/or intimidation, dealing with abuse and/or intimidation and protected characteristics where the respondent is describing their own experiences.
33. The Call for evidence will be an ongoing part of the Civility in Public Life programme designed to capture elected members' experiences and emerging trends around abuse and intimidation from the public. Evidence collected in this way will help the LGA develop a body of evidence to support our calls for legislative and systemic change and develop support for elected members.
34. The Call for evidence is now live and is accessible via the [Civility in public life webpage](#).

### **Implications for Wales**

35. We are working with colleagues at the Welsh LGA to ensure work is applicable across councils in England in Wales, subject to legislation.

### **Financial Implications**

36. This work can be carried out within existing resources.

### **Recommendations**

37. Members of the Board are asked to consider and agree the direction of the Civility in public life campaign.
38. Members are asked to note the launch of the Call for evidence.
39. Members of the Board are asked to note the proposed Model Code of Conduct training offer and make comments as necessary.

### **Next steps**

40. Officers will commission the Model Code of Conduct training offer with the aim to deliver in time for the May 2022 elections.

41. Once members are happy with the direction of the campaign set out in the paper, the campaign plan will be worked up and implemented.