

Supporting councillors to handle and prevent abuse and intimidation research report

Purpose of Report

For decision.

Summary

This report sets out the context for a recently completed research project looking into the support councils and other local agencies can provide to councillors to prevent and handle abuse and intimidation. The report also sets out three recommendations to national agencies to address remaining barriers. The full research report is attached at **Appendix A**.

LGA Plan Theme: Stronger local economies, thriving local democracy

Recommendation

That the Board comment on the content of the report attached in Appendix A and agree the recommendations set out in paragraphs 4, 6 and 8 of this report.

If the Board requires amendment to the recommendations, the Board is asked to delegate final sign off to the Political Group Leaders.

Contact details

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Background

1. The Supporting councillors to prevent and handle abuse research project was commissioned from Riber Consultants in Autumn 2022 to investigate the various approaches councils and other agencies could take to prevent abuse against councillors and support them when abuse does occur. The commission for this project was agreed by the Executive Advisory Board in June 2022 as part the of [Debate Not Hate report](#) recommendation that the LGA should continue to gather and disseminate good practice from the sector. The LGA Civility in public life Steering Group have reviewed the report and comments from the Group have been incorporated into the final draft which is attached in **Appendix A** to this report.

Proposal

2. The report sets out the challenges associated with supporting councillors with these issues, and principles which councils can use to consider how best to support their councillors locally, including top tips and practical examples of support that some councils already provide. The report concludes with a summary of barriers beyond the control of councillors and local agencies which can prevent better support for elected members.
3. Attached to the report is an Executive summary, which includes proposed recommendations to address these remaining barriers. Set out below are the recommendations in full and explanatory comments. Members are asked to agree the recommendations or make comments on the recommendations and agree to delegate final decision-making to Political Group Leaders.
4. **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.
5. **Rationale:** Throughout this project and others by the LGA, online abuse and the unregulated nature of online content has emerged as a theme. This recommendation dovetails with other lobbying work by the LGA around the Online Safety Bill, which is currently passing through Parliament, and aims to

ensure that activities by Ofcom fully take into account the impact of online abuse on locally elected members.

6. **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.
7. **Rationale:** Inconsistency of police response to harassment of councillors was a common concern raised throughout this project. Councillors should not expect significantly different approaches to the same incidents in different areas and a reduced response from the police could contribute to councillors feeling unsafe in their role. Guidance setting out the response expected from the police would help to create consistency and manage expectations of councillors as to what it is appropriate for police to respond to. In addition, having a single point of contact, as MPs do, would ensure that each police force has expert functionality to help to better assess the risk of incidents affecting councillors.
8. **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.
9. **Rationale:** The Government has established mechanisms for supporting and protecting democracy in the UK, including the cross-Whitehall Defending Democracy Programme. This programme was established in 2019 to protect democratic processes, systems and institutions, including personal and physical threats, and to encourage respect for open, fair and safe democratic participation, and for fact-based and open discourse. However, the programme has focused almost exclusively on threats to and abuse of national politicians; and on foreign interference with elections and other democratic processes. A cross-Whitehall approach to abuse of local politicians involving the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities, the Home Office and others relevant departments, would help to address some of the national barriers set out in the report.

Implications for Wales

10. There are no implications for Wales as this report related to councillors in English local government. However, the WLGA are aware of this project and will receive a copy of the final report for their information.

Financial Implications

11. There are no financial implications of this report.

Equalities implications

12. Previous LGA research has highlighted the perception that abuse and intimidation impacts some groups more than others. In particular, misogyny, homophobia and racism have been mentioned in relation to the abuse candidates and councillors receive.
13. This report focuses on the general support structures which may help any councillor in relation to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation. However, the report also highlights that risk assessments should be tailored to the individual and take into account the specific types of threats they may be vulnerable to, including intimidation and abuse base on protected characteristics.

Next steps

14. Officers to finalise the recommendations as per the comments of the Board and publish the full report on the LGA website.