

Annual report of the Civility in Public Life Steering Group

Purpose of Report

For direction.

Summary

The report summarises the activities of the Civility in public life 2022/23 programme and suggests areas of focus for the programme in 2023/24.

LGA Plan Theme: Stronger local economies, thriving local democracy

Recommendation

That the Board notes the 2022/23 annual report of the Civility in Public Life programme and comments on the proposed areas of focus for the 2023/24 programme set out in paragraph 16.

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Background

1. The Civility in Public Life programme was established in September 2019 to tackle the issue of rising abuse and intimidation in public life. The purpose of the programme is to address the intimidation of local government members and officers, address standards of public and political discourse and behaviour and provide support to councils and councillors with civility issues.
2. In June 2021 the Executive Advisory Board agreed to launch the Debate Not Hate campaign to support these aims and establish a steering group for the Civility in Public Life programme (the "Steering Group"). This report sets out the work of the programme under the Steering Group for the 2022/23 year and proposes areas of focus of the 2023/24 programme.

Annual report

3. This annual report is divided into two general objectives agreed by the Steering Group for the 2022/23 work programme:
 - 3.1. Objective 1: Tackling abuse and intimidation of councillors
 - 3.2. Objective 2: Improving councillor standards of behaviour and conduct.

Objective 1: Tackling abuse and intimidation of councillors

4. The Debate Not Hate campaign was launched at the 2022 Annual Conference and has now been running for a complete year. The purpose the campaign is to detoxify public and political discourse, improve responses to unacceptable behaviour and increase the profile of the civility programme. Specific objectives were agreed by the Steering Group for the first year of the campaign. These objectives and key activities and successes this year are set out below.
5. Increasing awareness with the general public of what councillors do and what healthy debate looks like:
 - 5.1. Launched the [Debate Not Hate: The Impact of abuse on local democracy report](#) at the 2022 Annual Conference with dedicated campaign stand and plenary session including a government minister and representatives from the National Association of Local Councils, Hope Not Hate and the LGA Civility Steering Group. At the 2022 conference the #DebateNotHate was used 286 times, interacted with 1,200 times and was viewed 1.5 million times by Twitter users. Since launching, the report has received 3,161 views to date.
 - 5.2. Launched the Debate Not Hate toolkit for councillors and councils, including social media assets, virtual meeting backgrounds, posters, template press release and letters and a template motion to publicly support the campaign. 62 councils requested the toolkit and 42 councils have signed up to the [Debate Not Hate public statement](#) and/or passed a motion at their council in support of the campaign since launching and 700 councillors have signed up to the public statement. The campaign has received 2,193 views since launching.

- 5.3. Established a baseline question in the LGA residents survey to measure levels of respect of local elected people and understanding of the councillor role. In the first poll in October 2022, 84 per cent of respondents agreed that councillors should be treated with respect, a similar percentage agreed in February 2023 (85 per cent). At the same time residents' awareness of the role councillors fulfil locally fell from 53 per cent to 41 per cent. These statistics will be used to measure the impact of efforts across the campaign.
- 5.4. One hundred days before the 2023 local elections, Chair of the Civility in Public Life Steering Group, Cllr Marianne Overton promoted the campaign through six ITV regional news features, with an estimated reach of 1.6 million people. Through this coverage we highlighted the experiences of candidates during the campaign period to engender positive campaigning and public engagement.
- 5.5. Surveyed councillors about their experiences of abuse and intimidation and released a [press release](#) of the results to highlight the ongoing and progressive nature of the issue of abuse in local government in time for the first anniversary of the campaign.
6. Build understanding among councillors of the support and resources available to them:
 - 6.1. Established a new bulletin covering Democracy, elections and the voluntary and community sector, which now has over 1000 subscribers. The most recent bulletin had a 59 per cent open and 43 per cent click rate.
 - 6.2. Delivered five government-funded webinars and a series of bespoke workshops for councils on councillor safety and handling online abuse for councillors before May 2023. The webinars were attended by over 550 councillors, and 13 individual councils were provided with support through the bespoke workshops.
7. Secure improved responses to abuse and intimidation aimed at councillors from relevant agencies:
 - 7.1. Published a new report, [Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life](#) for councillors at LGA Annual Conference 2023, alongside a member and officer workshop. The report aims to improve the support councils provide to councillors around abuse they may experience, including principles of prevention, incident management, and aftercare. The report has had 883 visits since July, with 388 unique user views.
 - 7.2. Submitted written evidence to the Jo Cox Civility Commission considering how to address the issue of abuse and intimidation in politics at all levels of government.
 - 7.3. Built new relationships with key partners, including the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) and the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC). The APCC have completed a parallel survey on abuse against PCCs. The NPCC have confirmed a new lead for policing elections who will also cover abuse of councillors and councillor safety outside of the electoral period.
 - 7.4. Promoted the resources of the DNH toolkit to encourage engagement with the local police force to improve preventative support and responses to incidents, implement a clear and joined up reporting mechanism for safety concerns and regularly review the safety of staff and councillors.

- 7.5. Briefed on the Online Safety Bill as it progressed through Parliament to encourage legislators to properly consider the concerns of councillors about online abuse.
8. Lobby for legislative change which puts it beyond doubt that councillors can withhold their home address and government commit to tackle this issue through a dedicated action plan:
- 8.1. Launched the campaign in Parliament as part of the LGA Parliamentary reception on 29 November 2022. Speeches from the LGA Chairman and President included promotion of the campaign and its aims. Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP, and various other ministers and shadow ministers took photos with our anti-abuse signage and promoted the campaign on their own social media channels.
- 8.2. Continued to engage with the Defending Democracy Programme and relevant colleagues in DLUHC to push for a more coordinated approach and legislative change around home addresses.

Objective 2: Improving councillor standards of behaviour and conduct

9. Officers continued to promote the Model Code resources across this period and this year developed a DLUHC funded e-learning module on Bias and predetermination to complement the existing Model Code e-learning.
10. The Steering Group commissioned a review of the uptake of the Model code of conduct. Officers completed a survey and further desktop exercise and established that 63 per cent of councils have adopted the Model Code in part or wholly and 37 per cent have not. Of those who responded to the survey, almost all said they found the Model Code useful in reviewing their code and 82 per cent of them had adopted the Model Code.
11. In addition, responses to the survey indicated that awareness of the Model Code and associated guidance is good across the sector, but fewer monitoring officers are aware of the Monitoring Officer Adaptable Model Code Training Pack and Model code e-learning modules. The full [Code of Conduct survey results](#) are available on the LGA website.
12. Just over half of non-respondent councils appeared not to have adopted the Model Code. Further consideration is needed to understand reasons for non-adoption. However, these could include not having reviewed their code since the publication of the Model Code, wanting to set a higher standard than the Model Code, or adopting elements of the Model Code which were not detected through the light-touch review conducted by officers.
13. Officers are working with legal, leadership and communications colleagues to consider how to promote the Model Code and associated resources further this year, including developing additional case studies, providing open access options on the LGA website and utilising partner bulletins.
14. The Government committed to working with the sector to determine how sanctions against poor behaviour could be strengthened in March 2022. Officers have commissioned a review of the English standards regimes against comparable jurisdictions and continuing to engage with civil servants to ensure that the LGA's view is

taken to account in this work. However, DLUHC have not progressed this commitment since September 2022.

Proposal

15. While we have made good progress on supporting councillors in councils, there is more to be done to address external and other barriers to civility in public life. 2023/24 activities will include completing the second year of the Debate Note Hate campaign following similar objectives to year one, but with more focus on influencing the public and parliament and continuing to deliver improvement and support events to councils and councillors through the DLUHC grant funding (£15,000).
16. In addition to the existing work we have already done under the programme to raise awareness of this issue, evidence the severity of abuse against councillors and provide councillors and councils with the tools to better tackle abuse in public life, the Steering Group proposes four areas of focus for the Steering Group discussed areas of focus for the 2023/24 cycle, including:
 - 16.1. Police capacity and resources to address abuse and threats of councillors
 - 16.2. Abuse on social media platforms and online and the responsibility of digital companies to address abuse on their platforms
 - 16.3. Councillor-on-councillor abuse and “Healthy debate”
 - 16.4. Support for Standards Committees and the standards process in councils.
17. Officers propose that the Executive Advisory Board note the progress made against the Civility in public life programme aims and objectives and discuss the possible areas of focus set out in paragraph 16.

Implications for Wales

18. The Welsh LGA is a key stakeholder for this project and we work to ensure our work is applicable across councils in England and Wales, subject to legislation. We will continue to offer our national support offer to Welsh councillors, alongside English councillors.

Financial Implications

19. This work will continue to be carried out within existing resources.

Equalities implications

20. 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.

Next steps

21. Officers to finalise the 2023/24 work plan in line with comments from members.