

Debate Not Hate campaign update

Purpose of the report

For information.

Is this report confidential? No

Summary

This report sets out the activities of the Debate Not Hate campaign since the last update members received on 7 September and sets out the plans for the campaign up until the expected UK Parliamentary election.

LGA Plan Theme: Stronger local economies, thriving local democracy

Recommendation

That the Executive Advisory Board note the progress of the 2024 Debate Not Hate campaign and that members promote the campaign through their own networks.

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Debate Not Hate campaign update

Background

1. In June 2021, the Executive Advisory Board (EAB) commissioned officers to develop a new campaign to support the aims of the Civility in Public Life programme to tackle abuse and intimidation of councillors and support councillor safety.
2. The Debate Not Hate (DNH) campaign was launched at LGA Annual Conference in Harrogate, alongside [Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy report](#), with four main objectives:
 - 2.1. Increase awareness with the general public on what councillors do and encourage healthy debate
 - 2.2. Build understanding among councillors of the support and resources available to them
 - 2.3. Secure improved responses to abuse and intimidation aimed at councillors from relevant agencies
 - 2.4. Lobby for legislative change on councillors' home addresses and push the Government to tackle the issue of councillor abuse through a dedicated action plan.
3. The campaign is administered through the Civility in Public Life Steering Group ("Civility Steering Group"), with overall responsibility for the campaign sitting with EAB, chaired by Cllr Marianne Overton and is attended by Cllr Sue Woolley, Cllr Sharma Tatler, Cllr Cordelia Law and Cllr Peter Golds (Conservative substitute). EAB received an update on the campaign as part of the [Annual report of the Civility in Public Life Steering Group](#) on 7 September 2023. At this point, members confirmed their wish that the campaign continue into the second year. The Civility Steering Group signed off the campaign plan at their meeting on 23 January 2024. This report, specifically on the DNH campaign, was requested by members of the LGA Board at their meeting on 24 January.

Progress since September 2023

4. From early autumn 2023 our focus has been on policy development and stakeholder engagement, along with planning for new bursts of public campaigning and communications activity in 2024. Work included:
 - 4.1. Engaging regularly with the **Home Office Defending Democracy Taskforce** to ensure councillors are included in their work around protective security for high-profile individuals. To date, this has included providing written and verbal briefings, inviting officials to present to the Civility Steering Group, organising a lived-experience roundtable between officials and councillors, and writing to Tom Tugendhat MP, as Security Minister, setting out key

priorities for councillor safety. The Minister responded in January 2024 and confirmed that he was taking specific steps to consider the safety of locally elected representatives. Additionally, on 28 February, the Home Office announced an additional [£31 million of funding to bolster security measures](#) for MPs and provide all elected politicians with a dedicated police contact to liaise with over security issues. [The LGA welcomes this announcement as we have been asking for police support to be extended to councillors for several years](#). We continue to engage with officials on this issue and have requested that the Minister attend an Executive Advisory Board meeting to discuss councillor security in due course.

- 4.2. Following the **terrorist attack in Israel** on 7 October, the LGA raised the issue of councillor security and home addresses with the Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP via a private letter. Simon Hoare MP, the Local Government Minister, responded in December, setting out the current Government advice to monitoring officers to treat requests for home addresses to be treated as sensitive interests with sympathy. However, he did not provide a timeline for the legislative change required to allow monitoring officers discretion on this point. We also worked with the **Counter-Terrorism Policing Command** to share information about new security briefings being made available to councillors. Following lobbying, these briefings are now planned to continue on an ongoing basis. In addition, we ran an additional personal safety webinar and made more funding available for safety workshops through our grant-funded improvement offer.
- 4.3. We have worked closely with the **Jo Cox Foundation Civility Commission**. The final report incorporated many of the Debate Not Hate recommendations, including that the Government should establish and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all elected politicians, greater police response and wellbeing support from relevant organisations. We supported the final report and promoted it in First magazine. Cllr Shaun Davies and Cllr Marianne Overton attended the parliamentary launch on 24 January. We will continue to work with the Commission on the implementation of their recommendations.
- 4.4. Ahead of the next set of local elections, we have worked with the **Crown Prosecution Service** to refresh their “When it goes too far” candidate guidance, which sets out when abuse or intimidation becomes criminal to ensure it is applicable to local as well as national politicians. The guidance is due to be relaunched shortly.
- 4.5. We have commissioned and published a **Safer Canvassing Guide** in advance of the local, PCC and likely general elections in 2024. The guide sets out seven principles for safe canvassing, aims to increase confidence

and preparedness for councillors who are taking part in or helping to organise canvassing session. The guide includes a range of easily adopted, practical top tips for safer canvassing, and has been widely promoted, including through bulletins and groups.

Debate Not Hate campaign plan 2024 and evaluation

5. In January, the public campaign was relaunched with a new focus on councillor safety and the issue of councillors' home addresses being publicly available on the register of interests. The campaign plan centres around four phases running up to the UK Parliamentary General election. For the purposes of this plan, we have assumed the election will take place in the Autumn, however the plan can be adapted according to the political timetable.
6. Key activities during these periods:
 - 6.1. **Phase 1 (Jan-Feb):** Key activities:
 - 6.1.1. Updated and repromoted the Debate Not Hate toolkit with councils and councillors.
 - 6.1.2. Over the course of a few months the LGA media team worked closely with Charlie Haynes, an investigative reporter at the BBC, to highlight the impact that abuse of councillors was having on local democracy. Charlie was extensively briefed on the LGA's research in this area, put in touch with other stakeholders and spoke to councillors from across the country who had suffered the most severe abuse and intimidation.
 - 6.1.3. The campaign was featured in articles on [BBC News Online](#) and [The Telegraph](#). As well as this, a broadcast package was produced for BBC [Newsnight](#), [BBC Radio Five Live](#) as well as BBC regional TV featuring Cllr Marianne Overton. The campaign was highlighted on BBC radio stations including in; London, Sussex, Coventry, Derby, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leicester, Guernsey, Berkshire and Oxford. We estimate this reached a combined audience of 1.2 million people.
 - 6.1.4. At the time of writing, a feature article about the campaign by Chair of the Civility Streeting Group Cllr Marianne Overton is being placed in a national media outlet. This will already feature in March's edition of First magazine.
 - 6.1.5. We are planning to collaborate with Baroness Eaton in the House of Lords, as well as Rachel Hopkins MP and Layla Moran MP (both LGA Vice Presidents) in the House of Commons, to get questions tabled in both Houses on the need to clarify that councillors' home addresses should not have to be disclosed. This will utilise the context of it being

two years since the Government agreed to address the issue in their response to the Committee for Standards in Public Life in 2022.

- 6.2. **Phase 2 (Pre-election period):** The aim of this period is to promote our key messages about healthy and respectful debate, educate on what councillors do for their communities and signpost relevant civility resources available. We will do this by promoting existing resources, including toolkit assets like the posters and the new safer canvassing guide and record new vox pop style videos for social media, interviewing the public as a chance to educate and challenge stereotypes.
- 6.3. **Phase 3 (June-July):** This is a chance to celebrate the campaign at the LGA's annual conference and take stock at the two-year mark. We have applied for a DNH reception at LGA Annual Conference to bring together supportive councils and stakeholders. We have commissioned a new survey to refresh our DNH statistics in time for a press release highlighting the second anniversary of the campaign at conference.
- 6.4. **Phase 4 (September-General election):** We will focus on the home addresses ask again in the lead-up to the next General Election and re-promote our key messages of civility and healthy debate. Officers hope to develop a series of think pieces from key stakeholders, including councillors, MPs and relevant organisations, to promote the key issues and explore the experiences of public figures.
7. Across all phases we will continue to support councils to improve the support they offer. For example, through our work with the Association of Northeast Councils to deliver a Civility Awayday for senior officers and leaders and by developing a self-assessment toolkit for councils to reflect on the support available to their members.
8. The original campaign was intended to end after two years, by July 2024, but it has been extended to take it up to the general election. Following the general election, we will reiterate our DNH lines to the new Government and commission an evaluation of the campaign against the original objectives.

Implications for Wales

9. The Debate Not Hate campaign has primarily been run on an England-only basis. However, we engage regularly with WLGA on wider civility and democracy issues.

Financial Implications

10. We have capacity within relevant teams to deliver the current plan. Any additional work requested would need to be subject to additional resourcing or deprioritising other work.

Equalities implications

11. The Debate Not Hate campaign has significant equalities dimensions. Our research has found that people with certain protected characteristics may experience higher volumes of more vitriolic abuse, including women, LGBTQIA+ councillors and Black and ethnic minority councillors. We have been conscious to highlight these aspects of the research within the campaign.

Next steps

12. Officers continue to implement the 2024 Debate Not Hate campaign plan.