

REPORT TO: **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

DATE: 14 December 2021

REPORT OF: Sandra Stewart – Executive Director Governance & Resources
(Monitoring Officer)

SUBJECT MATTER: **CIVILITY IN PUBLIC LIFE**

REPORT SUMMARY: Increasing intimidation of politicians and increasing toxicity of public debate is having an impact on the democracy of our country. Across the UK, 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. In response, the LGA is working closely with WLGA, COSLA and NILGA to coordinate a programme of work entitled '*Civility in public life*', primarily aimed at

- articulating good standards for anyone engaging in public and political discourse
- understand the scale and impact of intimidation and abusive behaviour on our membership organisations, and develop recommendations for achieving positive debate and public decision-making on a local level
- to support elected members and all democratically elected local representatives in addressing intimidation and abuse, so they deliver the best on behalf of their communities

Civility and respect should be at the heart of public life and good governance is fundamental to ensuring an effective and well-functioning democracy at all levels. The intimidation, abuse, bullying and harassment of councillors, professional officers and staff, in person or online, is totally unacceptable whether that is by councillors, professional officers, staff or members of the public. We are committed to working together to promote civility and respect in public life, good governance, positive debate and supporting the well-being of councillors, professional officers and staff'. This report updates on training provided to members for their safety and security and recommends (1) a bullying & harassment statement and (2) a member's pledge.

RECOMMENDATION(S) That the Committee consider the report and note the training undertaken and make final recommendations in respect of the proposed (1) bullying & harassment statement and (2) member's pledge to support civility in public life.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS: There are no significant financial issues arising from this Report.
(Authorised by Borough Treasurer)

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS: The promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by councillors is an important part of maintaining public confidence in both the council and its members. Failure to do so could have significant reputational implications.
(Authorised by Borough Solicitor)

RISK MANAGEMENT:

Standards Committees should be aware of the National position in order that consistency of approach is taken in respect of setting and advising on local ethical and standard issues.

LINKS TO COMMUNITY PLAN:

Support the current arrangements for ethical and corporate governance of the Authority to ensure that the public can have confidence in local government.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

NON-CONFIDENTIAL

This report does not contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the Press or members of the public

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS:

Appendix A	copy of the training materials for personal safety and crime prevention development session for elected members on the 22 November 2021,
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The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer, Sandra Stewart, the Council's Borough Solicitor and statutory Monitoring Officer by:



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1. CIVILITY AND RESPECT IN PUBLIC LIFE

- 1.1 The LGA recognise the growing need among councillors for support related to intimidation, and have jointly developed a resource following advice from both councils, councillors, other council representative organisations, as well as national organisations such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and National Counter Terrorism Security Organisation.
- 1.2 The guide covers topics such as how to handle abuse, both face-to-face, letters or online, and the legal and practical remedies, including the nature of the criminal offences involved and will be continuously updated with the latest advice and information available.
- 1.3 Becoming and serving as a councillor is a responsibility, a privilege and a hugely rewarding undertaking. We are all aware that an increasing number of councillors and candidates are being subjected to abuse, threats and public intimidation, undermining the principles of free speech, democratic engagement and debate. The growth of social media has provided an additional and largely anonymous route for individuals and groups to engage in such activity.
- 1.4 We are also aware that the growth in public intimidation is putting people off standing as local councillors. This is of concern to the LGA, an organisation representing local government, as it should be to everyone.
- 1.5 The LGA want to encourage more people to stand as councillors as part of their *Be a Councillor* campaign. We all recognise we need a numerous and diverse set of candidates and councillors to represent our numerous and diverse local communities, ensuring that local decision making is robust and well-informed.
- 1.6 In the guide the LGA define public intimidation as “*words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block or deter participation in public debate, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life*”.
- 1.8 While debate and having different views is all part of a healthy democracy; abuse, public intimidation and threats are designed to undermine democratic decision making by generating fear in those who represent it.
- 1.9 Whilst the world under lockdown and since has become increasingly virtual, social media has become centre stage in both personal and private lives leading to all too many examples of social media causing embarrassment or loss of reputation. However, there is also a darker side to social media which has increased over recent years. Malicious abuse, threats of violence and harassment are unfortunately, all too prevalent across virtual platforms.
- 1.10 The Committee on Standards in Public Life’s review on ‘Intimidation in Public Life’ (2017) stated:

“The vitality of our political culture depends upon free and vigorous expression of opinion, and it is crucial that this freedom is preserved. The increasing prevalence of intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and others in public life, should concern everyone who cares about our democracy. This is not about defending elites from justified criticism or preventing the public from scrutinising those who represent them: it is about defending the fundamental structures of political freedom”.

This is a position that we should all agree with.

2.0 BULLYING AND HARASSMENT IS NEVER ACCEPTABLE

- 2.1 The LGA has committed to promoting civility in public life and supporting the well-being of elected members. This is a long-standing area of work for the LGA, but the recent tragic death of Sir David Amess MP has brought this issue into marked focus. Everyone in public life should be able to go about their daily business without fear of attack. Now, more than ever, this is a challenge that we as a sector are determined to meet. To support their Civility in Public Life programme, the LGA has been developing and now launched a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors - Click here [Civility in public life call for evidence: Abuse and intimidation of councillors \(local.gov.uk\)](#) to go to the survey (or search for Civility in Public life on the LGA website).
- 2.2 The call for evidence is an ongoing part of the LGA Civility in Public Life Programme, capturing elected members' experiences and emerging trends around abuse and intimidation from the public. The survey is primarily designed to capture the experience of councillors, but candidates who have run for election, officers who have supported candidates or councillors and members of the public can also share their reflections.
- 2.3 The evidence gathered will help the LGA develop a body of evidence to support LGA calls for legislative and systemic change and develop support for elected members.
- 2.4 In light of some of these issues, the Council's Organisational Development team with support of CMA Training a specialist training company offering training and consultancy in personal safety and crime prevention provided elected members with a development session on the 22 November 2021, which was very well attended by over 90% of Councillors. A copy of the training materials are provided herewith at **Appendix 1**.

3. BULLYING AND HARASSMENT STATEMENT

- 3.1 As a first step in the promotion of civility and respect, councils are recommended to add a statement to their websites stating that bullying, harassment and intimidation will not be tolerated.
- 3.2 This is a suggested LGA statement:

**CIVILITY AND RESPECT IN PUBLIC LIFE
BULLYING AND HARASSMENT STATEMENT**

We treat everyone with courtesy and respect and ask for the same in return. We ask that you treat your councillors and council staff courteously without violence, abuse or harassment. Councillors and council staff have the right to carry out their civic duties and work without fear of being attacked or abused. Any behaviour whether that be verbal, physical or in writing, which causes either councillors or council staff to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened, is totally unacceptable. The zero tolerance policy includes abuse, aggression or threats made in person, over the telephone or in written communication, including on social media. The council considers threatening behaviour to be: Attempted or actual aggressive, or physical actions made towards any councillor or member of staff. The use of aggressive, or abusive language, (including raising of the voice, swearing, shouting or in writing) which threatens or intimidates councillors or council staff. This policy applies throughout all council meetings, but it also applies to any councillor or council employee whilst undertaking their duties on behalf of the Council.

4. CIVILITY AND RESPECT IN PUBLIC LIFE – MEMBERS POLITICS BEFORE PERSONALITIES PLEDGE

- 4.1 At our last Standard Committee members proposed that Tameside Council Members from across the political spectrum are asked to agree on a pledge that will set a tone of civility and respect that can be mirrored by everyone. As Community Leaders, Tameside Council Members attend formal public meetings, have active social media presence and are very much present in the community. With the privilege of being elected to serve our residents comes a responsibility to lead by example of how we should be conducting ourselves in today's modern world.
- 4.2 As we see all too increasingly, the often-toxic culture of online debate, and poor public arena etiquette we need to set an example to the residents we represent. Politics revolves around differing opinions, and while it is natural to criticise other politicians' policies and views, our debates should be respectful and constructive. Anything other than that only causes divide and, in the worse cases, unnecessary and unwarranted negativity towards individual members themselves.
- 4.3 A suggested Member pledge is set out below for discussion:

CIVILITY AND RESPECT IN PUBLIC LIFE

MEMBERS PLEDGE

We pledge to treat each other with respect and decency, whatever colour rosette we wear as we work co-operatively to shape and form services and the place we live for the benefit of our residents.

Criticism of other political parties, when made, shall be confined to their policies and programme, past record and work and never be aimed at aspects of a person's private life.

We honour the role we have been elected into and will lead by example in the way we conduct ourselves in public debate and forums.

5. RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 As set out at the front of the report.