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Ethics Committee

9 December 2021

**Name of Cabinet Member:**

N/A - Ethics Committee

**Director Approving Submission of the report:**

Director of Law and Governance

**Ward(s) affected:**

**None**

**Title:** Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship

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**Is this a key decision?**

No

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**Executive Summary:**

The LGA has been coordinating a programme of work entitled “Civility in Public Life”. This work is in response to the increasing concern about intimidation and toxicity of debate and the impact this has been having on democratic processes.

To support this work the LGA has now started to develop a range of guidance and tools to support councillors and candidates in their online communications (also known as their “Digital Citizenship”) as it is now recognised that online communication is intrinsic to democratic engagement.

The Ethics Committee has been monitoring the work of the LGA and considering how that work can be adopted as a local response to promote Civility in Public Life. Digital Citizenship has been included in this report to reflect the developments made by the LGA. This remains part of the Committee’s work programme and this report is to provide an update of that local response.

## **Recommendations:**

The Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the work that has been undertaken by the LGA and locally in promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship
2. Support the work that is taking place locally to adopt Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship, including approving the Rules of Engagement Info Graphics at Appendix A of this Report, and supporting officers in promoting this approach amongst members
3. Support officers in promoting the LGA's consultation, amongst elected members. A full list of the consultation's questions are at Appendix B of this Report; and
4. Request that this item remains on the work programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review.

## **List of Appendices included:**

- A. Rules of Engagement Info Graphics
- B. Full list of questions in the LGA's consultation: "Call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors"
- C. Extract from: 'Fix the Glitch Toolkit 2.0' – *Round 4 Online Active Bystander Interventions What can I do to support Black women online when they experience online abuse?*
- D. Social Media Protocol for Elected Members

**Other useful background papers can be found at the following web addresses:**

<https://www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life>

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/digital-citizenship>

**Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?**

No

**Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?**

No

**Will this report go to Council?**

No

## Report title: Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship

### 1 Context (or background)

1.1 The Council's Ethics Committee has requested that Civility in Public Life (and now Digital Citizenship) remains part of the committee's work programme.

1.2 The work of the LGA

1.2.1 The LGA has been coordinating programme of work entitled 'Civility in Public Life', primarily aimed at:

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

1.2.2 Updates in respect of the Civility in Public Life work are as follows:

- a) The LGA has re-confirmed its commitment to promoting civility in public life and supporting the well-being of elected members, stating that 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 and the LGA has also stated that it is a challenge that they are determined to meet.

To support this programme the LGA has issued a "Call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors" consultation. A copy of the questions asked are at the Appendix B of this Report. The call for evidence is intended to capture elected members' experiences and emerging trends around abuse and intimidation from the public. It is anticipated that the evidence collected will help the LGA to develop a body of evidence to support its calls for legislative and systemic change and develop support for elected members.

- b) In July 2021 the LGA published supporting guidance on its Model Councillor Code of Conduct, which aims to help understanding of and allow for consistency of approach towards the Model Code.

1.2.3 Improving Digital Citizenship has always been a key element of the LGA's Civility in Public Life work and is becoming increasingly important as our daily interactions continue to take place online and new technologies of information are constantly used to facilitate communication with citizens, officers and councillors. Online abuse and intimidation of local councillors and supporting officers working with them is a major challenge to local democracy and to the diversity of our local representatives.

1.2.4 The LGA's work in respect of Digital Citizenship is ongoing but the following have been published to date:

a) Rules of Engagement Info Graphic – the info graphic produced by LGA can be pinned to a member's social media profile to outline the ways in which they intend to engage with people online. These rules are designed to give all users a clear 'code' by which they should operate, with a clear statement that users can be blocked, or posts deleted, if they fail to participate in a civil manner. Based on this infographic, Coventry specific ones have been created for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for the consideration of the Ethics Committee and can be found in Appendix A.

b) Signpost to further resources – in particular "Glitch" which is a UK charity that is working to end online abuse – particularly against women and marginalised people. It was founded in 2017 by then local politician, Seyi Akiwowo, after she received a flood of abuse when a video of her speech at the European Parliament went viral. Through training, research, workshops, and programs, Glitch aims to build an online world that is safer for all.

Glitch's 'Fix the Glitch Toolkit 2.0' is designed to end online gender-based violence for Black women. It covers online gender-based violence, self-care, supporting women online when they experience online abuse, and how we can work to end online violence against Black women. Councillors may find the section on being an active by-stander particularly helpful, an extract of which can be found at Appendix C.

### 1.3 Local picture

1.3.1 Before the Covid pandemic a piece of work was being undertaken sponsored by the Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities that looked at challenges for City Council elected members and how to support participation in public service. More recently this work was picked up in the review of the offer to elected members around member support as a result of a different emerging landscape for elected members to operate in post Covid.

- 1.3.2 A consultation “Leader of our Communities – can we improve our service” was sent to all members. Overall, there were 31 responses received to the survey out of a possible total of 54. Responses from the consultation included experiences of intimidation and what support would help in managing or preventing such situations.
- 1.3.3 These consultation responses have been evaluated and are informing a targeted approach to supporting members in this area. One part of the proposed response being to raise awareness of the LGA guidance on intimidation and harassment alongside additional local protocol and guidance.
- 1.3.4 Civility in public life is supported through adherence to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Elected and Co-opted Members in treating others with “respect”. This is enhanced in the new Model Code of Conduct produced by the Local Government Association, which the Council adopted a revised version of with effect from the 2021/22 municipal year.
- 1.3.5 Digital Citizenship is supported through advice and guidance available from the Council’s Communications Team. Earlier this year, the Social Media Protocol for Elected Members was updated to recommend ways in which councillors protect themselves online, how to respond to abusive messages, and encourages councillors to seek support where needed. A copy of the guide can be found in Appendix D.

## **2. Options considered and recommended proposal**

Ethics Committee are requested to:

1. Note the work that has been undertaken by the LGA and locally in promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship
2. Support the work that is taking place locally to adopt Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship, including approving the Rules of Engagement Info Graphics at Appendix A of this Report, and supporting officers in promoting this approach amongst members
3. Support officers in promoting the LGA’s consultation, amongst elected members. A full list of the consultation’s questions are at Appendix B of this Report; and
4. Request that this item remains on the work programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review

## **3. Results of consultation undertaken**

3.1 There has been no consultation as there is no proposal to implement at this stage which would require a consultation.

#### **4. Timetable for implementing this decision**

4.1 Any actions arising from this report will be implemented as soon as possible.

#### **5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance**

##### 5.1 Financial implications

There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report.

##### 5.2 Legal implications

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. The issues referred to in this report will assist the Council in complying with its obligations under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011.

#### **6 Other implications**

None

##### **6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan ([www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/](http://www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/))?**

Not applicable.

##### **6.2 How is risk being managed?**

There is no direct risk to the organisation as a result of the contents of this report.

##### **6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?**

No direct impact at this stage.

##### **6.4 Equalities / EIA**

There are no public sector equality duties which are of relevance at this stage.

##### **6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment**

None

## 6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None at this stage.

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Graham Clark	Lead Accountant – Business Partnering	Finance	25.11.2021	25.11.2021
Councillor Walsh	Chair of Ethics Committee		25.11.2021	29.11.2021

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