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Ethics Committee

29 September 2022

**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 Review

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**Is this a key decision?**

No

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**Executive Summary:**

The Ethics Committee has been monitoring the work of the Local Government Association (LGA) programme around Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship. 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. A report was last provided to the Committee on 9 December 2021.

This work remains part of the Committee's work programme and this report is to provide an update of the work undertaken by LGA and the local response.

**Recommendations:**

The Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the work that has been undertaken by the LGA in promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship;
2. Consider signing the "Debate Not Hate" public statement to support the work of the LGA which seeks to act as a call to action for the relevant Government department to form a working group to address this issue;

3. Note the work that has been undertaken locally in respect of the Council's *Debate Not Hate* Campaign promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship; and
4. Request that this item remains on the work programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review.

**List of Appendices included:**

- A. "Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy", 28 June 2022, <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>;
- B. Coventry City Council "Debate Not Hate" leaflet.

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

- Item 14: Report of the Director of Law and Governance, entitled Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship, presented to the Ethics Committee on 9 December 2021 (with minutes): <https://edemocracy.coventry.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=161&MId=12535&Ver=4>
- LGA "Debate Not Hate public statement: Councillors, MPs and organisations: Add your voice to our Debate Not Hate public statement": <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate/debate-not-hate-sign-our-public-statement>

**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 Digital Citizenship remains part of the committee's work programme.

#### 1.2 *Update on the work of the LGA*

1.2.1 The LGA's Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship work was established following the publication of the Committee for Standards in Public Life reports into Intimidation in public life in 2019. The work is, 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
- recognising that 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 local representatives.

1.2.2 As reported to the Committee last year, the LGA commissioned a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors, which was launched in October 2021. On 28 June 2022, the LGA published "Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy" (the LGA Report), a copy of which has been attached to this report at Appendix 1 and can also be found online at the following link: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>. LGA have identified that 7 out of 10 Councillors (ie the majority) have reported abuse. The LGA Report contains recommendations from the evidence gathered over the first 6 months.

1.2.3 As identified in the LGA Report common themes amongst the evidence are as follows:

- **“Variability of support** – The support offered by councils, political parties, and the police varied across the country. In particular, respondents identified a lack of proactive support from some councils and responses from some police forces to threats made against councillors and their families.
- **Targeted abuse** – Evidence from the qualitative responses indicated that councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were more likely to

receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses.

- **Personal and democratic impacts** – Abuse and intimidation can significantly impact councillors and their families, and the wider community. Several respondents described the negative impacts of ongoing abuse on their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, respondents supported the idea that abuse can impact councillors' willingness to stand for re-election or deter others from considering standing for public office.
- **Vulnerability of councillors** – Many respondents highlighted the visibility and accessibility of councillors in their local community, particularly when councillors' home addresses are available online. Councillors are therefore vulnerable to physical abuse, particularly compared to national politicians who may have greater protections and access to specialist police support.
- **Normalisation** – There is a growing feeling that abuse and intimidation, particularly online, are becoming normalised. Attitudes around councillors expecting abuse and being expected to manage abuse with little support were prevalent in the responses.”

#### 1.2.4 The Recommendations made are as follows:

- **“Recommendation 1:** Councils and other relevant partners should take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors' safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously.
- **Recommendation 2:** The LGA should continue to gather and disseminate good practice from across the sector, consider what more can be done to prevent abuse and intimidation of councillors through the Civility in public life programme, and support councils and councillors when these incidents occur.
- **Recommendation 3:** Police forces should work to improve the consistency of responses to abuse of and threats made against councillors and take a risk-based approach that accounts for the specific risks that councillors face, as they do with other high-risk individuals, such as MPs. This should include identifying best practice in relation to councillor support and safety and sharing it across the country.
- **Recommendation 4:** The Government should prioritise legislation to put it beyond doubt that councillors can withhold their home address from the public register of pecuniary interests.
- **Recommendation 5:** The LGA should work with political parties, election and democratic officers, and organisations responsible for guidance to raise awareness of the options currently available and promote the practice of

keeping home addresses private during the election process and once elected.

- **Recommendation 6:** Social media companies and internet service providers should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.
- **Recommendation 7:** The relevant Government department should convene a working group, in partnership with the LGA, to bring together relevant agencies to develop and implement an action plan to address the issue of abuse of local politicians and their safety.”

1.2.5 In respect to Recommendation 7, LGA have provided a link as follows: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate/debate-not-hate-sign-our-public-statement> to its “Debate Not Hate public statement” for Councillors, MPs and organisations to sign to support the work of the LGA and act as a call to action for the relevant Government department to form a working group.

### 1.3 *Local picture*

1.3.1 The Council launched a campaign commencing on 5 September 2022 called “Debate Not Hate” as follows:

- The first part of the “Debate Not Hate” programme from week commencing 5 September included:
  - Digital Citizenship – Campaign running from week commencing 5 September 2022;
  - At Full Council on 6 September 2022 leaflets were distributed to Councillors and the campaign publicised (a copy of the leaflet can be found at Appendix B);
  - Infographics have been provided to share on Member Webpages (ie banners that Councillors can add to their social media pages);
  - Advice that further information is available on Members Webpage;
  - Information that this campaign has been led by the Ethics Committee Work Programme;
  - Advice that inclusion week starts 26 September - Sunday 2 October and Councillors can join the remote sessions provided by the Council including a session entitled “Civility Saves Lives” which is a one hour session held virtually on 27 September. The session discussed civility and respect and how people treat each other at work. It acknowledged that in highly pressurised workplaces, behaviours of incivility and disrespect can become common place and have a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing and customer care. The session, designed and delivered by NHS England, aimed to support and promote cultures of civility and respect, creating positive working environments that are kind, compassionate and inclusive for all.

- The second part of the “Debate Not Hate” programme will include:
  - Civility & Respect Pledge/Civility Matters;
  - Personal Safety training on 12 October 2022 to be provided by LGA, bespoke to the Council. Areas of work which will be discussed as part of the training will be personal physical safety but also psychological safety and wellbeing including the importance of respectful debate, handling online abuse, and the legal and practical remedies which can be used to resolve issues. The session will provide practical advice for members to encourage them to be proactive in considering personal safety issues.

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

Ethics Committee are asked to:

1. Note the work that has been undertaken by the LGA in promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship;
2. Consider signing the “Debate Not Hate” public statement to support the work of the LGA which seeks to act as a call to action for the relevant Government department to form a working group to address this issue;
3. Note the work that has been undertaken locally in respect of the Council’s “Debate Not Hate” Campaign promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship; 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 Chief Operating Officer (Section 151 Officer) 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) climate change and the environment**

None

**6.6 Implications for partner organisations?**

None at this stage.

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