

Debate not hate

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.

One of the most pressing concerns facing those in public office at the moment is the increasing incidents of public intimidation and abuse. These attacks risk the personal safety of elected members, undermine local democracy and decision-making, and can put off prospective candidates from standing.

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.

Responding to these concerns, the Local Government Association (LGA) is leading on 'civility in public life' campaign which has formed part of the work programme for Coventry City Council's Ethics Committee this year.

Working with the LGA, a range of advice and assets have been created to help and advise members – particularly those using social media – of good practice and tips on how best to act when faced with such issues.

For more information visit the members' pages on the intranet.

Handling online abuse

Rule 1:

 Set expectations – point people to your rules and apply them consistently (see example below)

Rule 2:

 Lead by example – do not post comments that could be considered abusive and never post false or unverified information

Rule 3:

 Defuse conflict – waiting to respond can take the heat out of situations

Rule 4:

 Know when to step back – remember you do not have to engage with abusive or threatening behaviour. Set the record straight with factual information if you wish, but step away when you want to

Rule 5:

 Understand privacy settings – there is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts

Rule 6:

 Record abuse – screenshot comments and keep a record of threatening or abusive communications

Rule 7:

 Report serious issues – if you feel unable to deal with online abuse yourself or have any concerns about your safety, report this to the council or to police

An example of the downloadable asset available on the members' intranet pages:

Debate not hate

Welcome to my Facebook page, which aims to communicate my activities as a councillor.

If you wish to be part of this online community, you must agree to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

Rule 1:

 Debate and disagreement are welcome but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

Rule 2:

 Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

Rule 3:

 Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

If any of these rules are broken, I reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report the content to the police if necessary.

Rule 4:

 Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

It may not be possible to respond to all questions due to time constraints. If you do have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.

Rule 5:

 For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously.