
Ethics Committee

30 March 2023

Name of Cabinet Member:

N/A - Ethics Committee

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Chief Legal Officer

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title: Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship Update

Is this a key decision?

No

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 15 December 2022.

This work remains part of the Committee's Work Programme and this report is to provide an update of the local response.

Recommendations:

The Ethics Committee are recommended to:

1. Note the work undertaken by the Local Government Association on their Debate Not Hate campaign;
2. Note the work that is being undertaken locally; and

3. Request that this item remains on the work programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review.

List of Appendices included:

None

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

- Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate: Campaign toolkit:
<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate/debate-not-hate-campaign-toolkit>
- Local Government Association's Code of Conduct supporting guidance:
<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/civility-and-respect-project#code-of-conduct-supporting-guidance>

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 Update

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.

2 Work of the LGA

2.1 Debate Not Hate

- 2.1.1 A new toolkit to help combat abuse of Councillors was launched on 1 December 2022 by the LGA as part of their Debate Not Hate Campaign, which can be found at the following link: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/debate-not-hate/debate-not-hate-campaign-toolkit>. The toolkit is aimed at putting an end to the increasing intimidation reported by a number of Councillors.
- 2.1.2 Seven in 10 Councillors said they have either been abused or have felt intimidated within the last twelve months, with one in 10 saying that they now felt it was becoming a frequent occurrence, according to a recent LGA census.
- 2.1.3 The new toolkit offers a range of resources and actions for both individual Councillors and Councils to take forward, including digital assets and template press releases that can be used to help raise awareness of the issue locally.
- 2.1.4 The toolkit outlines different ways Councils and Councillors can support the Debate Not Hate campaign objectives and take action. The Council launched its own campaign commencing on 5 September 2022 called "Debate Not Hate". It is felt at this time that the resources from the LGA can be kept for future reference and used as required.

2.2 Code of Conduct Supporting Guidance

- 2.2.1 The Civility and Respect Project team established by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), One Voice Wales, the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and county associations has revised the Local Government Association (LGA) Code of Conduct Supporting Guidance "to better reflect the sector's needs". This can be found at the following link: <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/civility-and-respect-project#code-of-conduct-supporting-guidance> .
- 2.2.2 The LGA produced a revised code of conduct in December 2020, supported by a guidance document it first circulated in July 2021.
- 2.2.3 The Civil and Respect Project team said the supporting guidance was "a beneficial document but not tailored to the nuances of local (parish and town) councils".
- 2.2.4 The project team has worked with Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd, with the support of the LGA, to revise the guidance "to precisely reflect the needs of and situations relevant to local councils".

- 2.2.5 The guidance covers the following:
- The general principles of Councillor conduct
 - Application of the model Councillors' Code of Conduct
- 2.2.6 General obligations under the Code include:
- Respect
 - Bullying
 - Harassment
 - Discrimination
 - Impartiality
 - Misuse of position
- 2.2.7 Protecting the reputation of the Council, including:
- Declarations of interest
 - Bias and pre-determination
- 2.2.8 The guidance has been approved by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and endorsed by LGA.

3 Local picture

- 3.1 The Council launched a campaign commencing on 5 September 2022 called "Debate Not Hate". On 27 September a virtual session entitled "Civility Saves Lives" was held, as part of National Inclusion Week, which was open to all Councillors and Council staff. The session discussed civility and respect and how people treat each other at work.
- 3.2 Following this work it has been identified that training for Members on Chamber Skills, rules of debate and standing orders would be beneficial, especially as new Members will be joining following the May elections. A training provider has been found who can offer the following to be held in June before the first full Council meeting after the elections:
- (a) **'Chamber Skills - Coaching for the Mayor'** to be firm, fair, efficient and effective - delivered in the Chamber with the Mayor, Deputy and support colleagues, including 'Speaking at public events' if time permits
 - (b) **'Chamber skills and etiquette'** training for administration and opposition groups (separately). This would therefore be 2 x 90 minute courses. These would be tailored to prepare Members for the first full Council in June and meetings thereafter. This would cover the application of Council procedure rules, common errors, speaking and the types of behaviour expected of Members in the Chamber.
- 3.3 Social media training took place on 14 March 2023. 15 Members attended the 2 hour session which covered the variety of different social media platforms, separating personal and public accounts, as well as the positives of social media as well as how to address some of the negatives, including support from the

Council as well as guidance and links to the Debate Not Hate campaign.

- 3.4 As a result of this successful session, a follow-up is to be arranged looking at accessibility good practice, security settings and adapting content for different social media platforms.

4 Options considered and recommended proposal

The Ethics Committee are recommended to:

1. Note the work undertaken by the Local Government Association on their “Debate Not Hate” Campaign;
2. 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
3. Request that this item remains on the work programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review.

5 Results of consultation undertaken

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

6 Timetable for implementing this decision

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

7 Comments from Interim Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer) and Chief Legal Officer

- 7.1 Financial implications
There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report.
- 7.2 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.

8 Other implications

None

- 8.1 **How will this contribute to the Council Plan (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)?**

Not applicable.

8.2 How is risk being managed?

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

8.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

No direct impact at this stage.

8.4 Equalities / EIA

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

8.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None

8.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None at this stage.

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