

**Report to:** Governance Committee

**Date of meeting:** 18 April 2023

**By:** Assistant Chief Executive

**Title:** Personal Safety of Councillors

**Purpose:** To provide an update and seek the committee's views on the measures currently in place to support councillors regarding personal safety, inform the committee of the Local Government Association's 'Debate not Hate' campaign; and to seek the Committee's agreement to sign the LGA's 'Debate not Hate' public statement

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Governance Committee is recommended to:

- 1) note and comment on the measures currently in place to support councillors; and
  - 2) sign the Local Government Association's 'Debate not Hate' public statement on behalf of the Council
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### 1 Background

1.1 It is important that the Council has measures in place to support councillors to maintain their personal safety. The Local Government Association's recent 'Debate not Hate' public statement, calls for a national action plan that will address the abuse and intimidation of elected members and candidates so that they can fulfil their democratic roles in full safety and peace of mind. This report details the 'Debate not Hate' call for action and highlights the procedures, measures and support mechanisms, such as training currently in place and available to councillors as set out in paragraph 2.2. These measures have been reviewed and added to in recent years.

1.2 There has been an increase in national coverage of intimidation and threat towards politicians and increasing levels of abuse and concern for the safety of both national and local politicians.

### 2 Current measures to consider

2.1 A key element of a democratic system is openness and accessibility with elected members. However, the level of intimidation and vulnerability that has gained coverage in recent years threatens this. In order to assist with maintaining safety and ensure the running of a democratic system the Council has a number of measures, procedures and training in place that aim to proactively help with councillors' personal safety.

2.2 Measures put in place by the Council to address the personal safety of county councillors and promote civility in public life are:

2.2.1 **The Council's Code of conduct.** This sets out the standards of conduct required of councillors and is designed to protect the democratic role, encourages good conduct, and safeguards the public's trust in local government.

2.2.2 **Home addresses:** Members have a choice as to whether their home address details are published and can request these details are removed from the Council's website by contacting Member Services.

2.2.3 **Internal Guidance:** The Council's intranet provides advice on members' health and safety and wellbeing. [Member Health and Wellbeing – ESCC Intranet](#). This includes details of

how members can access counselling support via the Council's Employee Assistance Programme. The service is free to use and is available 24 hours a day. Details are also provided about the Mental Health First Aider Scheme, which aims to raise awareness of mental health and train individuals so they can provide initial support and signposting to colleagues who may be experiencing mental health issues. The internal intranet page highlights that there have been few instances of members reporting intimidation or harassment and where any issues of this nature arise, they are responded to on a case-by-case basis, with advice and action dependent on the specific circumstances. East Sussex County Council has produced a '[Councillors' guide to: Personal Safety](#)' which is available on the councillors' area of the intranet. The guidance provides a range of practical advice on personal safety topics such as dealing with emotional constituents and car safety.

**2.2.4 LGA Guidance:** LGA guidance is a comprehensive guide that covers topics such as how to handle cases of abuse in different platforms, whether it's face-to-face, letter or online including handling abuse on social media and the legal and practical solutions and remedies to this. This guidance includes advice around the nature of criminal offences and the role of the police in these matters: [Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation | Local Government Association](#).

Links to the LGA Guidance can also be found on the members' intranet pages (see link in paragraph 2.2.3 above).

**2.2.5 Training:** Recent training sessions for members have included:

- 'Let's Talk Wellbeing' (December 2022). This training focused on the importance of seeking support when necessary and where to find it; and
- 'Digital Footprints' (June 2022). This session briefed members on how to enhance their online safety by following practices that minimise the amount of information available to third parties.

Training sessions are recorded and saved to ensure that it is always accessible to all members. The Local Government Association runs [training courses](#) for members; a number of these are webinars and so are accessible for members nationwide. These include webinars on Personal Safety for Councillors. The LGA training can be found on the members' training and support intranet page: [Training and support for Councillors – ESCC Intranet](#).

**2.2.6 Social Media:** Social media can be a place of intimidation and harassment for public figures. The Communications Team offers training and guidance on how best to use social media to support member's roles and with this can direct and signpost members to the relevant support should it be needed following incidents of intimidation. There is always someone in the Communications Team on social media duty during officer hours and they can be contacted if an urgent issue arises. Contact details for this will be shared with members separately.

**2.2.7 Meetings considering controversial matters:** The Council has a number of protocols and mechanisms in place to assess and manage any risks that may be present during meetings. The Member Services Team works with the Facilities Team to manage any concerns that may arise surrounding meetings.

**2.2.8 Online accident / incident reporting:** The Council has an [online accident / incident reporting system](#) for staff. Members can also use this to address and report instances of abuse or threats that are related to work or the workplace. More serious incidences are reported to the police.

3.1 The LGA is running a 'Debate not Hate' campaign to help encourage civility in public life. The LGA has produced a report (please see Appendix 1) and is calling for Councillors, MPs, and organisations to sign the public statement. The signatures will be presented to the Minister in June 2023 on the year anniversary of the campaign. The campaign highlights the toxicity of debate and abuse against public figures that has grown in recent years and notes the serious impact this has had on democracy. The campaign calls for concrete action to protect councillors, current and future, to ensure they feel safe in their roles and feel safe to stand for election.

3.2 The LGA's report puts forward recommendations which range from prioritising legislative changes to protect councillors' privacy whilst ensuring a democratic process to working alongside social media companies to allow for more efficient routes for councillors when reporting abuse and misinformation. The LGA report bases its reasoning for the 7 recommendations it sets out on a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors in October 2021. The key findings are as follows:

3.2.1 **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.

3.2.2 **Targeted abuse:** Evidence from the qualitative responses indicated that councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were most likely to receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism, and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses.

3.2.3 **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.

3.2.4 **Vulnerability of Councillors:** Many respondents highlighted the visibility and accessibility of councillors in their local community, particularly when councillors' home addresses are available online. The LGA consider that councillors are therefore vulnerable to physical abuse, particularly compared to national politicians who may have greater protections and access to specialist police support.

3.2.5 **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.

3.3 Many of the recommendations in the report relate to actions for the LGA and central Government. However, one recommendation identified for local councils was to take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors, including addressing the impacts of abuse on councillor's mental health and wellbeing. The Committee is therefore invited to consider whether the Council needs to do anything more in this area.

3.4 The Civility in Public Life Steering Group are a cross party group of councillors that over see all aspects of the Civility in Public Life Programme, which includes the 'Debate Not Hate' campaign. The Steering Group have launched a [Debate not Hate: Council toolkit](#); this is designed to provide both councils and councillors with resources to raise awareness of the campaign and its aim to challenge the abuse against local politicians. The toolkit includes a range of resources for both councils and councillors. These include links to case studies and, for example, sections on:

3.4.1 [Practical advice for handling online abuse | Local Government Association](#)

3.4.2 [Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security | Local Government Association](#)

3.5 The committee is recommended to sign the LGA's 'Debate not Hate' public statement set out below:

**“We are calling on local government leaders, the Government and relevant partners, like the police, political parties and social media companies to come together through a government convened working group to produce and implement an action plan that addresses the abuse and intimidation of elected members and candidates and ensures their safety while they fulfil their democratic roles.”**

3.6 Over 600 councillors nationwide have signed the public statement. There is also further opportunity to promote and incorporate the values of the 'Debate not Hate' campaign through the Council's 'Be a Councillor' campaign and further promote civility in public life.

#### **4 Conclusion and recommendations**

4.1 This report has set out the current mechanisms that the Council has in place to ensure safety of its staff and members and recommends the committee note and comment on the current measures in place. The committee is recommended to sign the Local Government Association 'Debate not Hate' public statement.

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