Report to:	Governance Committee
Date of meeting:	24 February 2026
By:	Director of Adult Social Care and Health
Title:	Supporting staff to address and report unacceptable behaviour at work
Purpose:	Update on progress with work linked to addressing unacceptable behaviour at work.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Governance Committee is recommended to:

1) Note the context and progress on work to encourage staff to report incidents of unacceptable behaviour at work, and to strengthen the reporting systems across East Sussex County Council;

2) Agree the corporate statement in Appendix 1, and note the other resources developed (see Section 2);

3) Note the updates to East Sussex County Council's incident reporting system (see Section 3), which will be launched in March 2026; and

4) Note the proposed approach to communicating the launch of the resources and updated reporting system, including Chief Officer support.

1. Background

1.1. The Race Equality in the Workplace Pilot in Children's Services Department (CSD) Social Care took place from 2022 to 2024 and has tested evidence-based and co-designed approaches to addressing workplace discrimination, and recruiting and retaining a more ethnically diverse workforce.

1.2. Parallel and linked to the CSD pilot, the Violence, Harassment and Discrimination (VHD) against staff project ran for a year between July 2023 to July 2024 hosted within Adult Social Care and Health Department (ASCH).

1.3. These projects have informed Council-wide collaborative working to bring together learning and insights and create new resources for use across East Sussex County Council (ESCC). This collaborative working involved researching best practice, drafting materials and co-ordinating the user testing of materials to address unacceptable behaviour at work.

2. Supporting information

2.1. Incidents of unacceptable behaviour experienced by ESCC staff are increasing, but colleagues do not always report these or receive the support they need. The Council-wide project aims to:

1. encourage staff to report incidents of unacceptable behaviour at work, including harassment, discrimination, aggression and violence, so that they can receive support;

2. utilise a sustainable and effective reporting system to enable a shared understanding of incidents and to enable ESCC to monitor trends and take actions in response; and

3.   increase staff awareness of the support available to them should they experience an incident of unacceptable behaviour at work.

2.2.   A significant amount of engagement with ESCC staff, in addition to input from provider staff and residents, has enabled the Council to achieve a broad understanding of the issues staff face and the mitigations that can help ESCC address those issues. Over 300 responses were received to the consultation and the findings informed the development of the project.

2.3.   A summary of the issues and areas of improvement identified by the consultation can be found below:

- Some staff indicated that discrimination and abuse at work had on occasion been 'normalised'
- Unacceptable behaviour should not be seen as simply 'part of the job' and should never be ignored
- Some staff noted a reluctance to report incidents of unacceptable behaviour, or requested easier ways to report
- Some staff indicated feeling unsafe at work
- Staff wanted training on recognising different forms of abuse and its effects
- Managers should support staff wellbeing, and have awareness of how trauma affects staff and service users

2.4.   The consultation also identified examples of good practice:

- An 'open door' management policy
- Strong peer support and regular opportunities to disclose or share experiences
- Opportunities to debrief and offload following an incident
- Staff being supported to restore relationships with people who display unacceptable behaviour and manage complex needs
- Staff sometimes having a choice on when to cease working (or co-working) with a service user who displays unacceptable behaviour

2.5.   The Reference Group for the VHD project, which comprised representatives from each ESCC department, has been working to develop a range of resources for use across the organisation to raise awareness and support good practice. These include:

- E-learning course for staff (internal and external)
- Managers' guidance
- Corporate statement

3. Overview of resources

3.1.   The council-wide Project Reference Group, Human Resources Management Board, and Corporate Management Team (CMT) have had the opportunity to review and agree these resources, and they have been trialled with staff within the Council.

Table 1: Overview of resources and purpose

Product	Purpose
E-learning course	• Increase staff awareness of the range of unacceptable behaviour that staff may experience (including verbal, online and in person) and its impact. • Offer staff some basic advice on managing situations to reduce risks to them and colleagues. • Help staff to respond to incidents and access support when necessary.
Managers' guidance	• Encourage a best practice approach for managers to support staff who have experienced unacceptable behaviour e.g. protect staff wellbeing. • Promote consistency in how incidents of unacceptable behaviour are recorded and responded to e.g. debriefs, incident reporting and steps to take if there is an ongoing relationship with the perpetrator.
Corporate statement	• Set out the shared values ESCC wants both staff and residents to uphold and reciprocate regarding unacceptable behaviour. • ESCC commitment and actions to protect staff in context of these incidents.

3.2.   Activities to address incidents of unacceptable behaviour are already being undertaken in a range of departments, including the Improving Adult Care Together (IMPACT) project with Personal Assistants, the CSD Race Equality Pilot, and the introduction of body-worn cameras to protect front line parking staff working for provider organisations commissioned by Communities, Economy and Transport Department (CET)**.** The new resources are intended to complement and enhance examples of work done within departments.

4. Reporting system

4.1.   A common theme through both phases of staff engagement were concerns regarding ESCC's incident reporting arrangements, such as barriers and reluctance to reporting, the need for an improved reporting form for non-physical harm, and staff feeling no sense of change after reporting an incident.

4.2   In 2025, CMT approved the adaptation of the Council's current Health and Safety (H&S) reporting system to enable the separate reporting of incidents of discrimination and harassment.

4.3   It should be noted that this adaptation will not impact on the current reporting of H&S incidents which will still be processed by the H&S Team. This includes any incident which is reportable to the national Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and those resulting in any physical harm/injury, threats of violence or any other incident requiring the assessment of staff safety.

4.4   Work has been completed with the system provider to transform the hierarchical structure within the existing (live) system. This is required to enable notification of incidents to be automatically sent to line managers as standard (for both H&S and other incidents). Following this, we have introduced the new discrimination reporting section to the live system. This also aims to provide space within the incident report for managers to record

data linked to the actions taken post-incident, such as steps to support staff wellbeing or address the behaviour of the perpetrator.

4.5   Having reviewed feedback in relation to recording and reporting incidents gathered through both the Race Equality Pilot and the VHD project, it is clear that a key theme within the new resources is encouraging staff reporting.

4.6   The updated reporting system will be able to provide anonymised data to identify trends or patterns of incidents of discrimination and/or harassment occurring. It is proposed that department specific data (anonymised) is also provided to Departmental Management Teams for any required follow-up.

4.7   The Council has worked to rationalise the outcomes it aims to achieve for reporting incidents, and the processes required to achieve those, given the feedback noted that staff need to have more confidence in the reporting process.

5.   Phased launch of resources, communications and maintenance

5.1.   The resources will be launched in three phases:

1.   **Phase 1**: A soft launch of the managers' guidance, to give managers early sight of the guidance and help them deliver improved support to staff following phase 2. An online workshop for managers, fronted by representation from relevant Assistant Directors, took place in December 2025 with over 150 managers participating.

2.   **Phase 2**: Launch of the e-learning and corporate statement to all ESCC staff, alongside our improved reporting process and tool, supported by a communications campaign aimed at staff (see section 4.2 below).

3.   **Phase 3**: As part of this work there is an opportunity to share the e-learning with external providers of Council services, many of whom are experiencing incidents of unacceptable behaviour. The final phase will be launched pending progress with phase 2, and work to adapt the e-learning training for this audience.

5.2.   A communications plan, and targeted campaign, is being developed to support the launch phases and ongoing communications. The aim is to develop materials and messaging within existing resources, with ESCC staff being the primary audience. The campaign will include newsletter copy, messaging via relevant staff boards/forums including Viva Engage, and videos. Our corporate statement will be featured within these materials and the campaign. The launch process is an opportunity to signal a culture change within the Council regarding reporting, recording and support, emphasising the importance of staff speaking up, seeking support post-incident, and the important role managers play in listening and helping staff feel they take the impact of incidents seriously.

5.3.   Senior leaders also have an important role in this culture change, and CMT have endorsed the approach and the wider issues linked to unacceptable behaviour at work and the resources being launched to help address these. Content is being produced to help signal the launch of the resources and updated reporting system, featuring staff stories on their experience of unacceptable behaviour at work and highlighting the importance of reporting.

5.4.   It is proposed that to ensure the resources remain up to date, a cross-council group meet on an ongoing basis, every 12 months (or more frequently if required). The group will be responsible for contributing insight from their departments and consulting wider staff groups on the resources as appropriate.

6.   Conclusion and reason for recommendations

6.1.   The insight gained through the staff consultation, and building on valuable pilots in ASCH and CSD, the Council recognises that the number of staff experiencing unacceptable behaviour at work is increasing, meaning a greater need to support staff to feel safe at work. The Council-wide VHD Reference Group has developed a range of resources to support culture change in ESCC in relation to the better awareness of incidents of unacceptable behaviour at work and the impact of such incidents; clearer reporting and recording processes; and a strengthened offer of support for staff who experience these incidents.

6.2.   These resources are ready to be launched, pending Governance Committee agreeing the corporate statement, alongside improvements to reporting.

6.3.   Governance Committee are asked to:

1) Note the context and progress on work to encourage staff to report incidents of unacceptable behaviour at work, and to strengthen the reporting systems across ESCC;

2) Agree the corporate statement in Appendix 1 and note the other resources developed (see Section 2);

3) Note the updates to ESCC's incident reporting system (see Section 3), which will be launched in March 2026; and

4) Note the proposed approach to communicating the launch of the resources and updated reporting system, including members of CMT supporting the launch

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APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: ESCC corporate statement on Unacceptable Behaviour