



WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

A Meeting of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** will be held in David Hicks 1 - Civic Offices, Shute End, Wokingham RG40 1BN on **TUESDAY 12 MARCH 2024 AT 7.00 PM**

Susan Parsonage
Chief Executive
Published on 4 March 2024

Note: Non-Committee Members and members of the public are welcome to attend the meeting or participate in the meeting virtually, in line with the Council's Constitution. If you wish to participate either in person or virtually via Microsoft Teams, please contact Democratic Services. The meeting can also be viewed using the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/7M06sXGhpyA?feature=shared>

This meeting may be filmed for inclusion on the Council's website. Please note that other people may film, record, tweet or blog from this meeting. The use of these images or recordings is not under the Council's control.

Our Vision
<i>A great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place to do business</i>
Enriching Lives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Champion excellent education and enable our children and young people to achieve their full potential, regardless of their background. • Support our residents to lead happy, healthy lives and provide access to good leisure facilities to enable healthy choices for everyone. • Engage and empower our communities through arts and culture and create a sense of identity for the Borough which people feel part of. • Support growth in our local economy and help to build business.
Providing Safe and Strong Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect and safeguard our children, young and vulnerable people. • Offer quality care and support, at the right time, to reduce the need for long term care. • Nurture our communities: enabling them to thrive and families to flourish. • Ensure our Borough and communities remain safe for all.
Enjoying a Clean and Green Borough
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play as full a role as possible to achieve a carbon neutral Borough, sustainable for the future. • Protect our Borough, keep it clean and enhance our green areas for people to enjoy. • Reduce our waste, promote re-use, increase recycling and improve biodiversity. • Connect our parks and open spaces with green cycleways.
Delivering the Right Homes in the Right Places
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer quality, affordable, sustainable homes fit for the future. • Ensure the right infrastructure is in place, early, to support and enable our Borough to grow. • Protect our unique places and preserve our natural environment. • Help with your housing needs and support people, where it is needed most, to live independently in their own homes.
Keeping the Borough Moving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and improve our roads, footpaths and cycleways. • Tackle traffic congestion and minimise delays and disruptions. • Enable safe and sustainable travel around the Borough with good transport infrastructure. • Promote healthy alternative travel options and support our partners in offering affordable, accessible public transport with good transport links.
Changing the Way We Work for You
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be relentlessly customer focussed. • Work with our partners to provide efficient, effective, joined up services which are focussed around our customers. • Communicate better with customers, owning issues, updating on progress and responding appropriately as well as promoting what is happening in our Borough. • Drive innovative, digital ways of working that will connect our communities, businesses and customers to our services in a way that suits their needs.
Be the Best We Can Be
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be an organisation that values and invests in all our colleagues and is seen as an employer of choice. • Embed a culture that supports ambition, promotes empowerment and develops new ways of working. • Use our governance and scrutiny structures to support a learning and continuous improvement approach to the way we do business. • Be a commercial council that is innovative, whilst being inclusive, in its approach with a clear focus on being financially resilient. • Maximise opportunities to secure funding and investment for the Borough. • Establish a renewed vision for the Borough with clear aspirations.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Councillors

Morag Malvern (Chair)
Phil Cunnington
Caroline Smith

Rachel Burgess (Vice-Chair)
Graham Howe

Sam Akhtar
Imogen Shepherd-DuBey

Parish/Town Council Representatives

Sally Gurney
Jackie Jagger
Sheena Matthews

Co-Optee, Wokingham Town Council
Co-Optee Twyford Parish Council
Co-Optee Earley Town Council

ITEM NO.	WARD	SUBJECT	PAGE NO.
27.		APOLOGIES To receive any apologies for absence.	
28.		MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING To confirm the Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 January 2024.	5 - 8
29.		DECLARATION OF INTEREST To receive any declarations of interest.	
30.		PUBLIC QUESTION TIME To answer any public questions. A period of 30 minutes will be allowed for members of the public to ask questions submitted under notice. The Council welcomes questions from members of the public about the work of this committee. Subject to meeting certain timescales, questions can relate to general issues concerned with the work of the Committee or an item which is on the Agenda for this meeting. For full details of the procedure for submitting questions please contact the Democratic Services Section on the numbers given below or go to www.wokingham.gov.uk/publicquestions	
31.		MEMBER QUESTION TIME To answer any Member questions.	
32.		PARISH / TOWN COUNCIL QUESTION TIME To answer any Parish/Town questions.	
33.	None Specific	UPDATE ON COUNCILLOR CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS To consider the regular update on Code of Conduct complaints.	9 - 16

- | | | | |
|------------|---------------|---|----------------|
| 34. | None Specific | LGA GUIDANCE ON "DEBATE NOT HATE" CAMPAIGN
To consider the Council's actions in response to the Debate Not Hate campaign. | 17 - 20 |
| 35. | None Specific | JO COX CIVILITY COMMISSION REPORT
To consider the report of the Jo Cox Civility Commission - No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation. | 21 - 52 |
| 36. | None Specific | ANNUAL REPORT
To consider the Committee's Annual Report, prior to its submission to WBC's Council meeting. | 53 - 60 |

Any other items which the Chairman decides are urgent.

A Supplementary Agenda will be issued by the Chief Executive if there are any other items to consider under this heading.

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**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
HELD ON 29 JANUARY 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.20 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Morag Malvern (Chair), Rachel Burgess (Vice-Chair), Sam Akhtar, Phil Cunnington, Graham Howe, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey and Caroline Smith
Parish/Town Council Representatives:- Sally Gurney (Co-Optee, Wokingham Town Council), Jackie Jagger (Co-Optee Twyford Parish Council) and Sheena Matthews (Co-Optee Earley Town Council)

Officers Present

Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer
Neil Allen, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

19. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

20. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 October 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

21. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

23. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

24. PARISH / TOWN COUNCIL QUESTION TIME

There were no Parish or Town Council questions.

25. UPDATE ON CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 9 to 16, which provided an update on Code of Conduct complaints.

The report stated that, since the previous meeting in October 2023, nine new complaints had been received. This brought the total number of complaints in 2023/24 to 18. 17 of the complaints related to WBC with one complaint relating to a Parish Council.

At the October 2023 meeting, Members asked if there any trends relating to Member to Member complaints along party lines. It was confirmed that of the 17 complaints received in the year to date, six were submitted by WBC Members. There was no discernible pattern with complaints being from more than one political group. Members also asked whether individuals were making multiple complaints. In 2023/24 there was no evidence of multiple complaints. There were, however, three examples of incidents leading to multiple complaints from different complainants. This could be a factor in the increased number of complaints received compared to previous years.

Appended to the report was a breakdown of the complaints received and an update on progress.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the update on Code of Conduct complaints be noted;
- 2) progress on the complaints currently under investigation be reported to the Committee's next meeting in March 2024.

26. LGA GUIDANCE - DEBATE NOT HATE CAMPAIGN

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 17 to 20 which reminded Members that, at its previous meeting, the Committee had received a presentation on the Local Government Association's (LGA) "Debate Not Hate" campaign.

The Debate Not Hate campaign related to councillors and individuals considering putting themselves forward in the future to stand for election with a view to enhancing key themes such as prevention, policies and guidance, training, technology, risk assessment, engaging with the police, managing councillor information, setting expectations, and managing public narratives and behaviour/conduct.

The Committee noted the report and was keen to identify the extent of the issue locally. Therefore, a survey of all 54 borough councillors was conducted between 30 November and 20 December 2023. Seven responses were received, the details of which are provided in the main body of the report. Whilst a low response may be indicative that there were no significant issues locally, there were examples reported where councillors had suffered abuse on the doorstep when campaigning and also on social media, particularly for those councillors who used social media extensively.

A summary of the main findings from the survey was:

- A low response rate may indicate that councillors felt that this was not a significant area of concern. However, for those councillors who did respond, the following conclusions may be drawn.
- 3 out of 7 reported that they had been subject to a form of abuse, harassment or intimidation.
- Types of abuse reported were verbal abuse, distribution of misinformation, character assassination, inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media.
- 1 out of 3 who were subject to abuse reported this to the Monitoring Officer. Others reported the abuse to their political party.
- 2 out 3 knew the process for reporting abuse.
- 4 out 7 suggested that written guidance would be helpful – there was also 1 proposal for a training session and 1 for establishing a forum to share experiences.

- 1 out of 7 indicated that there should be greater scrutiny of how the Monitoring Officer conducts the initial investigation process to determine whether a complaint is valid.

In the ensuing discussion, Members commented that seven responses to the local survey was too low to draw firm conclusions. It was suggested that the survey be repeated supported by a statement from the Chair. The aim should be to achieve a full response from Members, including nil returns.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Debate Not Hate survey be repeated for WBC Members, with an update to the next meeting of the Committee in March 2024;
- 2) officers review the sequencing of questions in the survey;
- 3) Members confirm the importance of completing the survey to their political groups;
- 4) the survey be rolled out to Town and Parish Councils following consideration of the WBC findings.

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Agenda Item 33.

TITLE Update on Councillor Code of Conduct Complaints

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Standards Committee on 12 March 2024

WARD (All Wards);

LEAD OFFICER Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To inform and feedback results of the Member Complaints process.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to note the update on complaints and consider any issues arising.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Since the last update report to the Committee on 29 January 2024, there has been one new complaint received. Detailed updates on 2023/24 complaints can be found at Appendix A.

Background

One of the roles of the Committee is to monitor the operation of the Member Code of Conduct.

The Committee undertakes this role through the receipt of regular updates from the Monitoring Officer that provides information on the numbers, types, and outcomes of complaints.

The relevant part of the Constitution is 9.1.12 – Process for Considering Code of Conduct Complaints.

On receipt of a complaint, the Monitoring Officer makes an initial assessment and writes a summary of the complaint and then, subject to consultation with an Independent Person, has delegated authority to decide to:-

- a) take no action if there is clear evidence that there has been no breach of the Code of Conduct.
- b) resolve the matter informally by asking the Subject Member to:-
 - i) take part in mediation with the complainant in order to settle the complaint, provided both the Subject Member and the complainant are willing to do so, and/or
 - ii) make a written apology to the complainant which is acceptable to the Monitoring Officer and the Independent Person, and/or
 - iii) attend training and/or
 - iv) correct an entry in the Members' Register of Interests or correct a declaration made;

OR

- c) Require a formal investigation and a written investigation report by an Investigating Officer. The investigation report shall conclude whether there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct. Copies of the investigation report will be provided in confidence to the Independent Person, and the Subject Member.

OR

- d) Refer the complaint to the Standards Committee for a decision on whether options a), b) and c) above should be followed

Analysis of Issues

During 2023/24 to date, there have been 18 complaints against Wokingham Borough councillors. A full analysis of the complaint can be found in the draft Annual Report – see separate agenda item.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic

climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
None specific

Public Sector Equality Duty
This is an information update report

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
There are no direct implications arising from this report on the Council’s carbon neutral objective

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
Not applicable.

List of Background Papers
None.

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Appendix A
Member Code of Conduct Complaints 2023/24 (on 4 March 2024)

Ref	Date Received	Acknowledged	Within 3 days?	Complainant	Subject Member	Summary of Complaint	Progress/Conclusion	Date Concluded/ Next steps	Within Performance Timescales
WBC18	19/2/24	19/2/24	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that a failure to declare an interest brought the Council into disrepute.	Initial assessment of complaint being undertaken prior to consultation with independent person.	Ongoing	Y
WBC17	18/1/24	18/1/24	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that a failure to declare an interest brought the Council into disrepute.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held with independent person on 29/1 where it was agreed to commission a short investigation.	Ongoing	Y
WBC16	16/1/24	16/1/24	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that social media post breached the Social Media guidance in the Constitution. NB: WBC15 and WBC14 relate to the same post but received from different complainants.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held with independent person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	6/2/24	Y
WBC15	16/1/24	16/1/24	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that social media post breached the Social Media guidance in the Constitution.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held with independent person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	6/2/24	Y
WBC14	16/1/24	16/1/24	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that social media post breached the Social Media	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held	6/2/24	Y

						guidance in the Constitution.	with independent person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.		
WBC13	12/1/24	15/1/25	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that a social media post breached the requirements of "respect."	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held with independent person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	2/2/24	Y
WBC12	15/11/23	16/11/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that a social media post concerning the Israel Gaza conflict breached the Code.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held on 15 November with Independent Person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/12/23	Y
WBC11	8/11/23	9/11/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation that a social media post concerning the Israel Gaza conflict breached the Code.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held on 15 November with Independent Person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/12/23	Y
WBC10	8/11/23	8/11/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Council Parish Councillor	Allegation that a social media post concerning the Israel Gaza conflict breached the Code.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held on 15 November with Independent Person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/12/23	Y
WBC9	23/10/23	23/10/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of breaches of disrepute and misuse of position relating to social media post.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held with Independent Person where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	7/12/23	Y

T&P1	28/9/23	28/9/23	Y	Member of Public	Parish Councillor	Complainant currently clarifying which part(s) of Code they believe have been breached.	Following further discussions with the complainant, it was concluded that this was not a Councillor Code of Conduct Complaint and has been forwarded to the parish council to deal with under their complaints policy.	7/11/23 Complaint withdrawn – not a Code of Conduct matter.	Y
WBC8	18/9/23	18/9/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of breaches of respect, impartiality of officers and disrepute relating to social media post.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation meeting held on 2 November with Independent Person where it was agreed to undertake a short investigation.	Ongoing – a verbal update will be provided at the meeting.	N
WBC7	25/8/23	25/8/23	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of breaches of respect, impartiality of officers and disrepute relating to social media post.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 2 October where it was agreed to undertake a short investigation.	Ongoing – a verbal update will be provided at the meeting.	N
WBC6	27/7/23	28/7/23	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of inappropriate language used in an informal meeting which may have breached respect, unlawful discrimination, and disrepute clauses.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 15 August where it was agreed to undertake a short investigation. Investigation concluded one breach of respect clause and finding of no breach of two other clauses.	Finding of breach - Decision Notice published Reported to Council on 16/11/23	Y
WBC5	12/7/23	13/7/23	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of disrepute relating to a post made on social media.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 28 July where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	28/7/23	Y

WBC4	10/7/23	10/7/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of disrespect shown to complainant at a public meeting of the Council's Executive.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 21 July where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/7/23	Y
WBC3	8/7/23	10/7/23	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor x 2	Allegation of disrespect shown to complainant at a public meeting of the Council's Executive.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 21 July where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/7/23	Y
WBC2	7/7/23	8/7/23	Y	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Wokingham Borough Councillor	Allegation of disrespect shown to complainant at a public meeting of the Council's Executive.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 21 July where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/7/23	Y
WBC1	3/7/23	3/7/23	Y	Member of Public	Wokingham Borough Councillor x 2	Allegation of disrespect shown to complainant at a public meeting of the Council's Executive.	Initial assessment of complaint undertaken by MO. Consultation held with Independent Person on 21 July where it was concluded that there had been no breach of the Code.	21/7/23	Y

Performance Timescales (introduced October 2021)

Acknowledgement within 3 days of receipt

Initial consultation meeting held within 15 working days of acknowledgement.

Conclusion within 3 months (if investigation required)

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TITLE	LGA Guidance on "Debate Not Hate" Campaign
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Standards Committee on 12 March 2024
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Raises the public awareness of the role of councillors and improves the responses and support for local councillors facing abuse or intimidation.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:-

1. Notes the results of the survey of Wokingham borough councillors;
2. Identifies the specific priorities for the Council to consider in response to the LGA's campaign; and
3. Considers further whether it wishes to roll-out the survey more widely amongst town and parish councils.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

At its last meeting on 29 January, the Committee received the initial results of a survey relating to the Local Government Association's (LGA) "Debate Not Hate" campaign.

The campaign relates to councillors and individuals considering putting themselves forward in the future to stand for election with a view to enhancing key themes such as prevention, policies and guidance, training, technology, risk assessment, engaging with the police, managing councillor information, setting expectations, and managing public narratives and behaviour/conduct. The Committee noted the report and was keen to identify the extent of the issue locally but noted an initial low response rate. At the Committee's request, the survey was re-run of all 54 borough councillors with a closing date of 29 February.

31 responses have been received, the details of which are provided in the main body of the report.

As no significant issues locally, there were examples reported where councillors have suffered abuse on the doorstep when campaigning and also on social media, particularly for those councillors who use social media extensively.

The main finding was that councillors requested further written guidance.

Background

1.1 The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in their communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.

1.2 The LGA has recently (July 2023) published its report outlining how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse and includes principles for councils to consider, top tips and good practice case studies.

Analysis of Issues

2.1 In total, 31 responses have been received.

2.2 The substantive questions asked were:-

- In your role as a Councillor have you been subjected to abuse, harassment and intimidation?
- What form did the abuse, harassment and intimidation you experience take?
- How many incidents of abuse, harassment or intimidation have you experienced in the last 2 years?
- Did you report the abuse?
- Who did you report the incident to?
- If you experienced abuse, harassment or intimidation do you know the process to report it?
- Is there anything you feel would be helpful in supporting you in relation to abuse, harassment or intimidation connected to your role as a Councillor?

2.3 The main findings were as follows:-

a) 16 (52%) reported that they had been subject to a form of abuse, harassment or intimidation.

b) Types of abuse reported were verbal abuse, distribution of misinformation, character assassination, inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media.

c) 2 (6%) who were subject to abuse reported this to the Monitoring Officer. Others reported to their political party or to another unnamed person.

d) 2 out of 3 knew the process for reporting abuse.

e) 15 (48%) suggested that written guidance would be helpful – there was also 7 (22%) proposals for a training session and 1 for establishing a forum to share experiences.

f) 1 indicated that there should be greater scrutiny of how the Monitoring Officer conducts the initial investigation process to determine whether a complaint is valid.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic

climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
Impacts across all services and work of the council.

Public Sector Equality Duty
This is an information report.

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
There are no direct implications of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
Not applicable

List of Background Papers
Survey results

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Agenda Item 35.

TITLE Jo Cox Civility Commission Report - No Place in Politics: tackling abuse and intimidation

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Standards Committee on 12 March 2024

WARD (All Wards);

LEAD OFFICER Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Raising awareness of the issue of abuse and intimidation and identifying what further responses the Committee may wish to make to strengthen existing arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION

To note the report and agree any recommendations the Committee wishes to make to Council in response to the report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Councillor Sally Gurney requested that the Committee consider the recently published report by the Jo Cox Civility Commission titled, "No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation." The report is attached at Appendix 1.

A series of recommendations are made in the report which are directed towards different audiences including the Government, the Police, the Electoral Commission and Political Parties. However, three of the recommendations are specifically directed to local government as follows:-

1. Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.
2. Councils should pass motions affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour, from the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate toolkit or the National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) Civility and Respect Project.
3. Local authorities should ensure security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors. These should be clearly signposted, and there should be a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.

The Committee is asked to consider what further actions it may wish to recommend in response to the above.

Background

The Jo Cox Civility Commission was launched in February 2023. The Commission takes as its starting point a belief that abuse and intimidation is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK, but that addressing the issue is complex and requires action across multiple different sectors.

Analysis of Issues

The Commission has undertaken extensive research and interviews with a wide range of interested parties. The results of this were reported in their January 2024 report which is attached at Appendix 1.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

None

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)

Impacts the work of all councillors and the safe delivery of services.

Public Sector Equality Duty

This is an information report. Therefore, an equalities assessment is not required for this report.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030

There are no specific impacts of the decision being made on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

Jo Cox Civility Commission report – No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation.

Contact Andrew Moulton	Service Governance
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THE JO COX
FOUNDATION

The Jo Cox Civility Commission

No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation



A call to action

About The Jo Cox Foundation

The Jo Cox Foundation makes meaningful change on issues that the late Jo Cox MP was passionate about.

Like Jo, we believe that a kinder, fairer, and more connected world is possible. Underpinning this belief is the understanding that we have more in common than that which divides us. As we work to make change, we follow Jo's example of collaborating with others and bringing people together to achieve more than we can alone.

We work in three areas: we nurture stronger communities, champion respect in politics and advocate for a fairer world.

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About the Jo Cox Civility Commission

As part of our Respectful Politics workstream, we launched the Jo Cox Civility Commission in February 2023. The Commission takes as its starting point a belief that abuse and intimidation is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK, but that addressing the issue is complex and requires action across multiple different sectors.

We set out to find practical and deliverable solutions to the problem. We have listened to those with lived experience of the issue, and to experts in the field, with a focus on ensuring our final recommendations are both ambitious and implementable.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Gabrielle Bertin and Lord Vernon Coaker. The Co-chairs have had a particular focus on ensuring the Commission represents views and experiences from across the political spectrum.

Since February, we have engaged with significant numbers of stakeholders, including:

- 87 submissions to our open call, spanning serving and former politicians, government officials, policy professionals and other experts in the field.
- Interviews and discussions with relevant expert bodies, including the Electoral Commission, the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councillors, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association, and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.
- Conversations with security and justice departments and organisations, including the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Parliamentary Security team, officials from Operation Bridger, and the City of London Police.
- Interviews and roundtable discussions with experts on representative democracy, including Elect Her, the Centenary Action Group, the Board of Deputies, and the Disability Policy Centre.
- Interviews with current and former politicians in Westminster and devolved administrations, and current and former local councillors.



The Rt Hon Jacqui Smith, Chair of The Jo Cox Foundation



At The Jo Cox Foundation, we believe that abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is one of the biggest threats to democracy in the UK.

In talking to people about the Commission, there is broad recognition of the problem, but people have often said to me “But what can be done? It feels very difficult to solve”.

They’re right, but Jo didn’t believe in the ‘too difficult’ pile and was ambitious to achieve change. That’s why we’re proud to be leading this work in her name and we believe that we’ve found some practical and deliverable ways to tackle the problem and improve our public life and democracy.

The starting point of our work on this issue is Jo. Her tragic murder in 2016 was a turning point in recognising the need for better politics and the risks of divisive discourse. But we don’t focus on this because of the way that Jo died, but because of the way she lived. At the Foundation we seek to make positive change on issues that Jo was passionate about, and one of those was achieving a 50/50 Parliament, and empowering other women to get involved in politics. We know that abuse disproportionately impacts women, as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people. If people are put off entering political life, our democratic institutions become less representative and less effective. We all suffer.

Abuse impacts both those already engaged in politics and those who may want to get involved. We’ve seen many sitting MPs say they are standing down at the next election, with some specifically referencing the issue of abuse.



In her announcement that she would not seek reelection, SNP MP Mhairi Black drew particular attention to the impact that abuse has had on her family, saying *“Since 2015, the lives of my loved ones have been turned upside down and inside out. Between media attention, social media abuse, threats, constant travel, and the murders of two MPs, my loved ones have been in a constant state of anxiety for my health and safety.”* Research by Girl Guiding UK¹ shows that the issue of online abuse is shaping the career choices of girls and young women, with more than a third (36%) put off from doing certain jobs, including politics, because of the abuse high profile women get online. If we wish to empower women to run for office, this research makes it clear that it is essential to act now.

We don't seek to 'sanitise' political debate. A healthy democracy has debate, disagreement and different opinions at its heart. Jo held strong views and argued for them. I have never backed off a political argument. It is abuse and intimidation which stifle debate and limit those willing to engage in it.

There is no simple solution to this complex problem. That's why we have engaged widely and why we have made recommendations that cover a range of themes. We want to see immediate action to protect those who are already elected or are standing for election. But we also want to address the underlying causes of abuse and intimidation including addressing the lack of political literacy which often underlies attacks. We will build a broad coalition to deliver change.

Two main refrains have dominated the work on this project. Firstly, a lack of a central coordinating force at government level. With change needed in so many areas, we think it's vital that countering this problem of abuse becomes the responsibility of central government. Secondly, a lack of political education has come up in almost all the conversations we've had - the public just don't know what role their elected officials play, what they can change, and what is outside their control. This leads to confusion, misunderstanding, and abuse.

This is vital work, and we have been proud to lead on the development of these recommendations. I am particularly grateful to Baroness Bertin and Lord Coaker for their stewardship of the Commission and for bringing cross-party experience and support. The team at the Foundation led by CEO Su Moore and Hannah Phillips have worked tirelessly to develop this report - thank you. I would also like to thank the donors who have made this work possible, most notably the JRSST Charitable Trust.

However, we couldn't have done it alone and we are thankful to all of the over 100 stakeholders who have engaged so willingly. The really hard work begins now, as we enter the second phase of this work and push for the implementation of our proposals.

We know that there is broad support for action in this area and we are already building a coalition who are clear that they don't want this to be a report that sits on a shelf. We call for anyone with an interest in the future of democracy to support us in this second phase.

1. Girl Guiding UK, *Girls Attitude Survey Report, 2021*.
<https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2021-report.pdf>

**Baroness Gabrielle Bertin
and Lord Vernon Coaker,**
Co-chairs of the Jo Cox
Civility Commission



We have taken different paths in politics, but we are united in our belief that the abuse and intimidation of elected representatives is a worrying and significant threat to democracy in this country.

We have a long and honourable tradition of robust political debate in the UK, which is something that we should rightly be proud of, but political discourse now frequently moves beyond the rough and tumble of political life – and into the realms of abuse and intimidation. This can have a devastating impact on the lives of those who represent us, their staff, and their families.

This report does not seek to evidence the problem that exists, but rather to put forward solutions that will make a difference when addressing the issue. That said, the evidence that exists is shocking and distressing. We all know that two MPs have been killed in the last eight years. At a national level, politicians experience attacks on their offices, threats of extreme sexual violence, death threats and credible threats against family members. But the issue doesn't just exist at a national level.

Local politicians also experience extreme abuse, including having their homes and cars attacked, being slandered and accused of terrible crimes, being stalked, and having their families threatened.

The timing of this report is important. The issue is bad, it's getting worse, and we think that with a General Election on the horizon there is an opportunity to perform a reset, setting a new tone for political life in the UK.

We've seen worrying research about perceptions of what's acceptable from the general public. In polling after the May 2023 local elections, the Electoral Commission asked the public what kind of behaviour towards politicians was acceptable. What was particularly striking was the difference in perception according to age. While for those 45 and over, 3% thought abusive behaviour was acceptable, this rose to 16% in the 18 - 24 age group. We need change now so these feelings don't become even more entrenched.²

It's been so important for us to work together as Co-chairs of this project because this issue has an impact across the political landscape; it is not a matter of political party but of the good health of public life. We believe there will be cross-party support for these recommendations, and we look forward to working with politicians across the spectrum to push for real change on abuse and intimidation.

As Jacqui has said, we know that we can only truly achieve impact by working in partnership, and we look forward to continuing to champion the recommendations of the Jo Cox Civility Commission.



2. Electoral Commission, Public Attitudes, 2023.
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes-2023>

Abuse and intimidation: a worsening problem

Abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is not a new problem, but it is a worsening one. The extent of the issue was comprehensively outlined in the Committee on Standards in Public Life's 2017 Intimidation in Public Life report.³

Since then a range of research has been conducted, including academic research about the gendered impact of harassment⁴, social media analysis at election times, and reports by sector experts including the Local Government Association⁵ and the Fawcett Society⁶.

Here we set out an overview of the nature and extent of the issue, as well as outlining why this is a problem for our democracy. This is not a comprehensive analysis of the issue – that is not the intention of this report – but rather a summary of the problem which demonstrates the necessity of our recommendations.

We are also aware that new issues and challenges might arise, and will remain flexible to amend and update our recommendations when needed. We do not believe we currently have enough evidence about the impact of misinformation on abuse, for example, but this is an issue that we will stay abreast of, particularly ahead of the next General Election.

We follow the lead of the Local Government Association and use the following definitions:

Abuse:

a single act or repeated physical, verbal, or psychological acts that violate an individual's human and civil rights

Intimidation:

words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence, or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life

Online and offline abuse

Abuse takes place both online (including via social media, email, and virtual meetings) and offline (in-person or via telephone or post). It takes many forms, but includes death threats, threats of sexual violence, abusive and discriminatory language, threats to family members, and reputational assaults. Examples of the most serious types of abuse include destruction of property, physical assault, and serious ongoing harassment like stalking.

Strikingly, although most abuse comes from the public, abuse also comes from other politicians. The Local Government Association found that 7% of local councillors reported that abuse had come from other councillors⁷.



I am currently facing death threats and a torrent of Islamophobic and misogynistic abuse. In fact I've received such abuse since being elected, since putting myself forward as a candidate for elections and receive comments including, and I quote, 'vile and filthy religion, importing vile and filthy creatures like Apsana Begum'.

I am now facing a heightened risk to my safety with serious death threats, threats to kidnap me, threats of sexual violence and threats about ripping off my hijab in public. It goes on and on.

Apsana Begum MP

Speaking in the House of Commons, November 2023



3. Committee on Standards in Public Life, *Intimidation in Public Life*, 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

4. Collignon et al., "The Gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates," *The Political Quarterly* 93, 1 (2022), pp. 32-38. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-923X.13070>

5. Local Government Association, *Debate Not Hate*, 2022. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>

6. The Fawcett Society, *A House for Everyone*, 2023. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone>

7. Local Government Association, *National census of local authority councillors*, 2022. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>



The scale of the problem

Abuse and intimidation impact politicians at all levels – from local to national, and across the UK, including MPs, Peers, members of the devolved administrations, local councillors, elected mayors, and Police and Crime Commissioners. Though research has been carried out about how prevalent the problem may be, there is no current coherent data collection mechanism (something we will be recommending in this report) to show the full scale and impact of the problem.

Existing research paints a bleak picture. In 2023, ITV Wales found that 80% of Welsh MPs and Senedd Members have felt threatened since being in office, while 43% have received a death threat.⁸ In Scotland, Holyrood magazine revealed that 70% of Members of Scottish Parliament said they had feared for their safety since being elected, rising to almost 90% of female MSPs.⁹ On a local level, Local Government Association data from 2022 showed that seven out ten of local councillors had experienced abuse and intimidation in the last year.¹⁰



I've had a swastika painted on my wall, the words traitor painted on my wall, campaign posters defaced and destroyed, tyre slashed and threatened with being egged on the street.

Local councillor, 2023

8. S. Vivian, "MP abuse: 'My staff have to sit behind bulletproof glass' says Welsh politician Fay Jones", *ITV Wales*, 12 June 2023. <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2023-06-12/death-threats-mean-my-staff-have-to-sit-behind-bulletproof-glass>

9. L. Wilson, "Death Threats Sent to Third of MPs", *Holyrood*, 15 February 2021. <https://www.holyrood.com/news/view/death-threats-sent-to-third-of-msps>

10. Local Government Association, *National census of local authority councillors, 2022*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>

11. The Fawcett Society, *A House for Everyone, 2023*. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone>



I was subject to an array of dead animals appearing on my front lawn and my door. I woke up to find a rat through my door following a Parish Council meeting the night before.

I was extremely ill during the election period this year and contemplated suicide.

Parish councillor, 2023

The inflammatory nature of some issues

Whilst we all retain the right to disagree with our elected representatives, their role is to speak out about issues of importance. However, in our stakeholder research it has become clear that some representatives are deciding not to speak about certain issues because of the amount of abuse they know that will cause. The Fawcett Society shows this to be the case: 58% of MPs (and 73% of female MPs) 'do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online'.¹¹

At a local level, issues such as planning and transport have been shown to be the cause of a considerable amount of abuse. In October 2023, MP Ben Bradshaw spoke out after local councillors were subject to threats and abuse following decisions about a low traffic neighbourhood saying *"It's much worse for local councillors. They have been subjected to appalling abuse and defamation on social media and elsewhere. I have been getting increasingly concerned about the tone of some of the discussions and debates around the active travel scheme."*¹²

A disproportionate impact on some groups

Though our research suggests that the majority of elected representatives receive abuse, studies show that some groups are targeted more frequently, and in different ways. Misogyny plays a significant role in abuse. Social media analysis from the 2019 General Election showed that abuse targeted at male candidates focused more on their political beliefs, while women received more sexist abuse¹³. In their Debate Not Hate research, many Local Government Association respondents directly linked abuse associated with personal characteristics with a reluctance to stand for election or re-election; some described women choosing to take on back-office roles in the local party rather than run for office because of concerns about what abuse they would face.¹⁴

Politicians from minority ethnic backgrounds are also specifically targeted for abuse. Ahead of the 2017 General Election, Amnesty research about abuse targeted towards female MPs showed that the 20 minority ethnic MPs received almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.¹⁵ Recent research shows that some politicians are particularly targeted with racist abuse. In July 2023, Greater London Authority research showed that Sadiq Khan had received more than 300,000 pieces of openly racist or racially-oriented abuse on social media since he was elected London mayor.¹⁶ Those with multiple marginalised identities, such as black women, may experience particular forms of abuse, which Glitch¹⁷ and others have identified.

12. Road CC, "MP calls out "criminal behaviour" after local councillors receive faeces in their mailbox for implementing LTNs, Road CC, 5 wober 2023. <https://road.cc/content/news/politicians-receive-death-threats-supporting-ltns-304319>

13. Gorrell et al, "Which Politicians Receive Abuse", EPJ Data Science, 2020. <https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00236-9>

14. Debate Not Hate, 2022.
15. Amnesty International UK, Black and Asian women MPs abused more online, 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/news/online-violence-women-mps>

16. P. Walker, Rise in racist abuse against Sadiq Khan linked to London clean air zone expansion, The Guardian, 5 July 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jul/05/rise-in-racist-abuse-against-sadiq-khan-linked-to-london-clean-air-zone-expansion>

17. Glitch, The Digital Misogynoir Report, 2023. https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Glitch-Misogynoir-Report_Final_18Jul_v5_Single-Pages.pdf

The impact of abuse and intimidation

A diminishing pool of candidates

Abuse and intimidation is one of the contributing factors for elected representatives choosing to step back from politics. At the time of writing, over 75 MPs have said that they will not be seeking reelection. While politicians have various reasons for stepping down, several have specifically stated that the level of abuse to which they have been subjected has informed their decision.



At a local level, the Local Government Association found that 27% of councillors said they would not stand for the next election and 31% were undecided. Of those respondents, 68% said abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again.¹⁸

In a poignant letter to her constituents when standing down in 2019, Heidi Allen MP wrote, *“Nobody in any job should have to put up with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home”*.

While it is challenging to research, there are clear indicators and anecdotal evidence that the issue of abuse and intimidation is putting people off getting involved in politics in the first place. Local Government Association research showed that 60% of respondents said they were aware of others being unwilling to stand or restand for election, or take on leadership roles, due to anticipated abuse.¹⁹



The politics of today, with all its anger, abuse and in my own case, two threats on my life, is not the politics we want or need for our great country.

We have always been at our best and delivered the most, when we are able to express political disagreements through healthy debate then unite as a community and as a country. I hope one day that we can return to such a place.

Mark Lancaster, MP

Announcing he was standing down in 2019

A negative impact on the relationship between representative and represented

In 2017 the Committee on Standards in Public Life research²⁰ referenced how intimidation had led to MPs changing their working arrangements and the ways they interacted with their constituents. This included making surgeries by appointment only, and limiting public appearances. The murder of Sir David Amess in 2021 highlighted the risks that MPs face, and in the days following his death, some called for an end to face-to-face meetings with constituents altogether.

It is clear that most MPs want to continue meeting with their constituents, and the access to our representatives is a vital part of the British political system. However, the current risks mean that some MPs have taken measures to ensure their safety that many would consider shocking. For example, in 2023, Virginia Crosbie MP spoke about how she now wears a stab vest to her constituency surgeries.²¹ We believe that the reduction of abuse is key to ensure that contact between MPs and constituents can be facilitated safely.



I could not run in another election. I would not want to put my family through the stress and anxiety.

Local councillor, 2022

Sometimes, though, the systems that are currently in place may need to change to prevent abuse and ensure the safety of representatives. That is particularly the case at a local level, where Council meetings are often a flashpoint. In 2022, the Deputy Leader of Warrington Borough Council spoke about her experiences in a Council meeting. She said, *“A controversial planning application was granted, and at the end of the meeting, the crowd surged forward and circled around me and were pushing me and pointing in my face, yelling at me and swearing. I honestly thought I was going to die. I couldn’t get out until I felt someone dragging me out of that room.”*²²

Summary

Abuse and intimidation of elected representatives is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK. The problem is severe, and it’s getting worse.

We believe that the recommendations presented in this call to action, if implemented, will bring about significant change on this issue, supporting a healthy democracy and an improved public life into the future.

18. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

19. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

20. Intimidation in Public Life, 2017.

21. W. Hayward, “Welsh MP wears a stab vest when meeting the public at surgeries due to security concerns”, *Wales Online*, 3 January 2023. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/welsh-mp-wears-stab-vest-25882570>

22. C. Hamilton, “Angry mob leaves Warrington councillor fearing for her life”, *BBC*, 11 October 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-63221404>

Our recommendations

The aim of this work has been to find implementable solutions that make a difference to the issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians. Throughout our discussions with stakeholders, our focus has been on working collaboratively to highlight the areas where change is both necessary and possible. Our recommendations are deliberately ambitious – we want them to be able to address the root causes of the issue, as well as to bring more immediate solutions to improve the situation for those politicians who currently serve.

Coordination and behaviour

A key theme from our stakeholder research is the absence of a central body to monitor abuse and intimidation of elected representatives and to act to reduce it. There has been significant progress through bodies such as Operation Bridger, local police forces, the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC), and actions in Parliament led by the Speaker. Yet, more action is needed to streamline monitoring and reporting. Furthermore, throughout our research we have spoken to organisations and individuals taking on initiatives to reduce abuse, often in a voluntary role, because they have personally identified a gap. While this progress and initiative is to be commended, further systemic change is needed.



I find it difficult to recommend this job to anyone.

Sitting MP, 2022

We have always known that abuse towards elected representatives is a complex issue. With solutions falling across many different sectors, we strongly believe that central government has a role to play in taking responsibility for bringing about change. This needs to be explicitly included in a ministerial portfolio, with a UK-wide mandate, and accompanied by a team to support the Minister, with a budget and powers to enact these recommendations. We stand ready to work with the government to support the establishment of this function.

Another overarching recommendation that we have included in this category is about modelling behaviour. If members of the public witness their representatives behaving poorly towards each other, there is little precedent for the public to treat them with respect. Elected representatives must understand the Nolan Principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership, and they must implement and demonstrate these in their professional lives.

Government should implement and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all elected politicians.

This would include coordinating existing initiatives, resourcing new solutions, and facilitating information sharing between agencies.

This unit should be responsible for better measurements and analysis of the problem, and should be expected to produce an annual report on the scale of the problem, actions taken, and impact.

All elected representatives, and especially those in leadership roles, should model good behaviour.

Political literacy

A commonality in the stakeholder interviews and in the submissions we received was that abuse often stems from a lack of understanding of what elected representatives do, and how the public should engage with them. As an example of this, one MP's constituency staff member told us about the frequency with which they are contacted by members of the public seeking help with an issue that lies within the Council's remit. When an immediate solution cannot be found, there is often an escalation into abuse directed at the staff.

We are proposing a two-fold solution to this issue, which we believe addresses some of the roots of the wider problem. Firstly, we think this needs to be tackled within education. To that end, we are backing the work of Shout Out UK and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Political Literacy²³, and supporting their calls to embed mandatory political literacy in the curriculum and ensure teachers have the training and confidence to deliver this education. We are also proposing that elected representatives have a duty

to support this work, and should be expected to visit educational institutions to raise awareness of their roles, as advocated by I Have A Voice²⁴. We know that many serving politicians do excellent work within their communities, especially in educational establishments. Our recommendation acknowledges this and backs more work in this area.

Secondly, we are also proposing that measures need to be taken to expand political awareness in the general public. We have deliberately framed this recommendation quite broadly, but believe that a potential solution could be a public education campaign run alongside elections, supporting the public to understand the process and the responsibilities of different levels of government, as well as appropriate behaviour towards candidates.

We acknowledge that, of all the recommendations, it is this group where the impact on the issue may take the longest to be seen. However, when it comes to tackling the root causes of abuse and intimidation, we believe that change here is vital.

Government should implement significant awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility.

All councillors and parliamentarians should regularly visit education institutions in their constituencies, raising awareness of their roles.

Impartial political and media literacy should be made a mandatory part of the school curriculum, including addressing how to deal with information sources and misinformation. Teachers should be adequately trained to deliver this.



Social media

When speaking publicly about this topic, spokespeople for The Jo Cox Foundation have been asked more than once: “Isn’t it just a social media issue?”. While it is clear that there is a correlation between the advent of social media and an increase in the ease of abusing representatives, it is very clear that social media alone is not the cause of the problem.

However, this does not mean that social media does not play a role in the solution. Stakeholders have told us about the sheer quantity of hate and abuse they get on the platforms and the impact this has on their work. Jess Phillips MP has spoken publicly about how she received 600 rape threats via social media in one evening alone.²⁵ Research also suggests that politicians avoid posting on social media for fear of pile-ons.²⁶

As we have developed this call to action, we have closely watched the development and passing of the Online Safety Act. While we welcome the broader responsibilities on social media companies that this enshrines, we call for Ofcom, the regulator, to specifically consider the experiences of elected politicians as part of their regulatory duties. We also recommend additional requirements for social media companies to offer support to representatives at election time and to expand their current support to include local government representatives, who are often neglected when it comes to this provision.

We have focused this section specifically on social media, but more broadly we believe there is a role for print and broadcast media to play in setting the tone and encouraging civil discourse. We note that progress has been made on the regulation surrounding this since the Committee On Standards in Public Life made a suite of recommendations in 2017.

The specific issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians must be considered when implementing the Online Safety Act.

The regulator Ofcom must actively seek the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area, and ensure regular, specific training.

Social media companies should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.

This supports the call made by the Local Government Association in their Debate Not Hate²⁷ publication.



25. BBC, “MP Jess Phillips in web plea ‘after 600 rape threats’”, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-essex-and-birmingham-44438468>

26. e.g. National Democratic Institute, *Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics*, 2019. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Tweets%20That%20Chill%20Report.pdf>

Police and security

In December 2015, Operation Bridger was established, designed to offer police protection to MPs, both at Westminster, and when they are in their constituency. After the murder of Jo Cox, Operation Bridger was expanded to include the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team, who coordinate reports from Parliament and local police forces. We would support strengthening the requirement for parliamentarians to take up these security measures in order to protect themselves, their staff and their families.

Though progress has clearly been made, and many politicians we have spoken to are grateful for the support from both Operation Bridger and their local police forces, the system is not perfect. There are inconsistencies in the roll-out and a lack of communication between various key players. We would like to be clear that this is not due to a lack of will, and we have found all police and security stakeholders to be supportive of our work in developing these recommendations. However, resourcing remains an issue, and many of the dedicated officers are doing this work on a voluntary basis in addition to their normal policing duties.

While extra protection has been offered to parliamentarians, and we have heard promising feedback from the devolved administrations about the

support they receive, the protection of local politicians remains a gap. This is why we are recommending that Operation Bridger be extended to offer support to local politicians including councillors, elected mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners. Our stakeholder discussions have revealed that it is at a local government level where there are particular inconsistencies and misunderstandings, which is why we are also calling for ongoing training for police officers about the role of elected representatives at all levels. We commend the collaboration efforts that are ongoing, including between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Police Scotland.²⁸ We also call for improved coordination and information sharing between the various forces and bodies across the nations and regions.

We believe that the full extent of this problem is not understood by police forces due to underreporting. For this reason, we are calling for clearer guidance about what should be reported to the police, and then a responsibility on the elected representatives to report anything that breaches this threshold.

While our recommendations in this area are probably the most precise and detailed of the whole report, there is one binding theme, and that is resourcing. We believe that without more resource, nothing here can change, so we are calling for the Home Office to ensure that this work is properly funded.

Parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear and specific briefings, including:

- Clear guidelines about what communications received by parliamentarians should be reported to police.
- Clear guidance about which bodies are responsible for which aspects of security and a clear explanation about what security arrangements are available.
- Clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Guidance should be developed for local councillors about what communications should be reported to the police, and the mechanism for doing this. This should include clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

27. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

28. COSLA, **Priorities Agreed to Strengthen Collaboration Between Local Government and Policing, April 17 2023.**
<https://www.cosla.gov.uk/news/2023/cosla-police-scotland-and-the-scottish-police-authority-agree-priorities-to-strengthen-collaboration-between-local-government-and-policing-17th-april-2023>

Police and security continued

Ongoing training must continue for all police about their responsibilities for dealing with threats against elected representatives. This should include training in the following areas:

- Equalities including particular vulnerabilities related to misogyny and other protected characteristics.
- The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
- Cross-cutting nature of abuse including hate crime.
- New legislation, including the Election Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023.

Agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives must be defined. Elected representatives must then adopt the minimum level.

Elected politicians should report all abuse (threshold confirmed by police) so an understanding of the level of threat is built up in police systems.

Elected politicians should follow guidance from the police and the Crown Prosecution Service about when to pursue prosecution.

There must be dedicated resources in each local police force to ensure an appropriate, consistent response to support elected representatives across the country.

This would enable:

- Increasing the remit of the Single Point of Contact in each police force to include local elected representatives.
- Streamlining implementation of Operation Bridger and enforcement of the Single Point of Contact system.
- Increased capacity for police forces to provide home and venue (surgeries) risk assessments for both MPs and local government elected representatives and facilitate additional security measures if necessary.

Information sharing must be improved between different forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations)

This set of recommendations is designed to offer immediate support to those currently in office who are experiencing abuse and intimidation. We acknowledge the commitment of the Speakers of the House of Commons and House of Lords in this area, and the progress made to date. We look forward to working with the Speakers and others, including the Committee on Standards, to make further progress on this work ahead of the General Election and beyond.

It is here that we have the most explicit recommendations about the experiences of both family and staff who are often on the frontline of abuse received. Staff are often the first to read abuse directed to their employer, and family members have to deal with stress and worry about their loved ones.

We want to ensure that their wellbeing is taken care of, and that provisions are put in place to support them.

29. *Debate Not Hate, 2022.*

30. *National Association of Local Councils (NALC), Civility and Respect Project, 2023.*
<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/civility-and-respect-project>

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations) continued

Parliamentarians should be able to claim for the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, including:

- Costs associated with wellbeing measures for staff who process/ experience abuse.
- The swift implementation of security measures advised by Operation Bridger.

Written resources should be developed for the families of elected representatives about dealing with abuse. This should include explanations of escalation procedures and clarification of points of contact.

Mandatory, properly resourced training should be developed for both elected representatives and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse. This should include active bystander training, situational awareness, and training around safe social media use.

Local government

The Local Government Association (LGA) have been vital partners as we have developed this work, and their Debate Not Hate campaign, launched in 2022, has been a trailblazer in the fight against abuse and intimidation.²⁹ Many of our recommendations in this section are adapted from their 2022 report, and we lend our full weight to their ongoing work on this issue. We also recognise that there are particular issues at the parish and town council level, where the abuse can be very much on the doorstep and there are few resources to support councillors. We thank the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for their essential engagement in our work and commend their ongoing Civility and Respect project.³⁰

During our stakeholder research we have heard from a significant number of local councillors as well as staff, many of whom have shocking stories of abuse they have faced, including destruction of property, defamation, and death threats. But more is needed to support these officials who play a vital role in our government, as we have already suggested within the policing and security section.

Local government is often a stepping stone for national politics, and we are clear, not only is abuse unacceptable at any level, but that if we do not manage to make an impact at the local level we will be unable to change politics at the national level.

Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.

- Police should be involved where appropriate and in particular when there is a risk to democratic engagement.
- The opportunity should exist for council meetings to take place online in instances when there are specific risks of physical abuse to councillors.

Councils should pass motions affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour, from the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate toolkit or the National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) Civility and Respect Project.

Local authorities should ensure security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors. These should be clearly signposted, and there should be a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.

Elections

We launch this report at the beginning of what is very likely to be a General Election year. We believe that this election gives the opportunity for a reset on this issue. With the potential for a new cohort of parliamentarians, we can show that abuse is not to be simply accepted.

We also acknowledge that election periods can be a time of heightened tensions and potential conflicts, which is why we have put forward a set of recommendations specifically focused on this. These are broad, including proposals around candidate selection, guidance for candidates and regulation around spending. On the rigorousness of candidate selection we recognise the existing work on this by many of the political parties. We also recognise the huge improvements that have been made on this issue generally by the Electoral Commission who have been an extremely helpful partner in the development of this call to action.

Once an election is called, we are urging all candidates to sign up to The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge³¹, confirming that they intend to run a respectful campaign. By showing a powerful and united front, we can demonstrate to the public that respect and civility really do matter.

IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS, I PLEDGE TO:

1.

Set a respectful tone
when campaigning

2.

Lead by example to foster
constructive democratic debate

3.

Demonstrate compassion by
defending and promoting the dignity
of others, especially my opponents



Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.

The Electoral Commission should expand its guidance for candidates about use of social media during the election period, with a specific focus on upholding public confidence in the democratic process.

Political parties should rigorously screen candidates during the candidate selection process.

Political parties should require candidates to sign up to an election code of conduct in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.

Social media companies should offer additional support for candidates at election times about how to protect themselves on the platform and report abuse. Advice should also be available to the general public around misinformation that might interfere with the democratic process.

Political parties

While individual politicians certainly have a role to play in addressing this problem, so too do political parties. While most parties have their own codes of conduct which govern how members should behave, there is inconsistency in how these codes are implemented when representatives are in breach of them. We understand that this process can be complicated and time-consuming, and that work is already on-going in this area, but we believe that it is important for high standards to be met and maintained, and

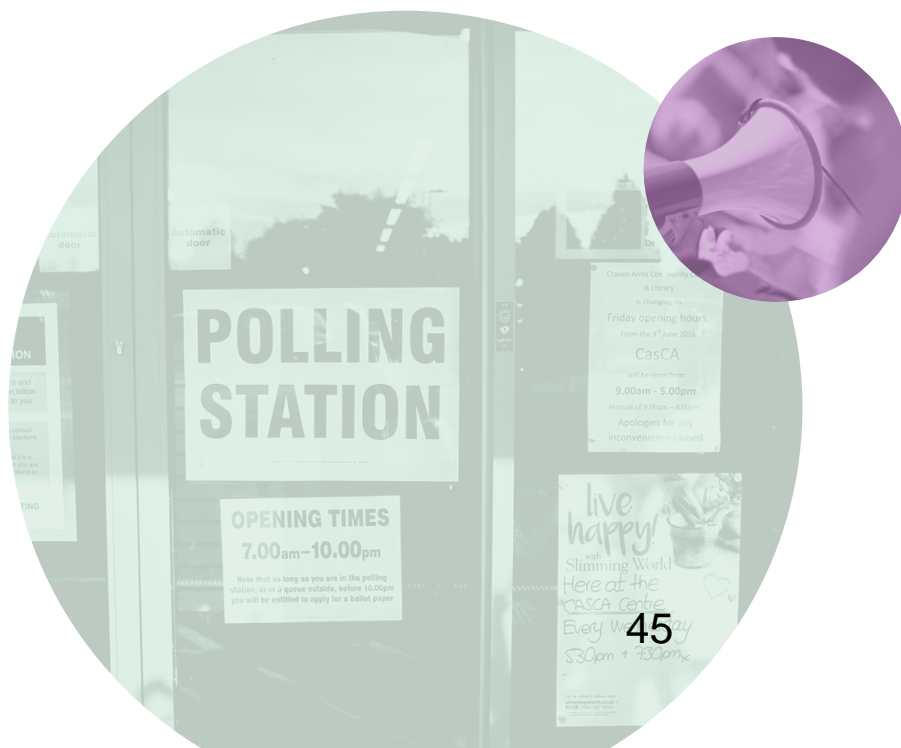
for the parties to show leadership on this issue. We believe that civility and equalities training should not only be implemented when reacting to incidents but proactively offered to promote an inclusive culture.

As well as oversight of behaviour, parties also should have a responsibility to their elected representatives when they face abuse, and we have included a recommendation about the support that should be offered for party members who wish to take legal action in instances of abuse.

Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct, with relevant sanctions when the code is not adhered to.

Mandatory civility and equalities training should be implemented for all candidates.

Political parties should review how they offer legal support to candidates or elected officials where civil action is more appropriate than criminal action.



Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Coordination and behaviour

Government should implement and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all elected politicians. This would include coordinating existing initiatives, resourcing new solutions, and facilitating information sharing between agencies.

This unit should be responsible for better measurements and analysis of the problem, and should be expected to produce an annual report on the scale of the problem, actions taken, and impact.

All elected representatives, and especially those in leadership roles, should model good behaviour.

Government

2024

Elected representatives

2024

Political literacy

Government should implement significant awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility.

All councillors and parliamentarians should regularly visit education institutions in their constituencies, raising awareness of their roles.

Impartial political and media literacy should be made a mandatory part of the school curriculum, including addressing how to deal with information sources and misinformation. Teachers should be adequately trained to deliver this.

Government

2024

Elected representatives

2024

Department for Education
Devolved administrations

2027

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Social media

The specific issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians must be considered when implementing the Online Safety Act. The regulator Ofcom must actively seek the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area, and ensure regular, specific training.

Ofcom

2024

Social media companies should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online. This supports the call made by the Local Government Association in their Debate Not Hate³² publication.

Social media companies

2024

Police and security

Parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear and specific briefings, including:

- Clear guidelines about what communications received by parliamentarians should be reported to police.
- Clear guidance about which bodies are responsible for which aspects of security and a clear explanation about what security arrangements are available.
- Clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Operation Bridger

City of London Police

2024

Guidance should be developed for local councillors about what communications should be reported to the police, and the mechanism for doing this. This should include clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Operation Bridger

City of London Police

Local Government Association

2027

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Police and security continued

Ongoing training must continue for all police about their responsibilities for dealing with threats against elected representatives. This should include training in the following areas:

- Equalities including particular vulnerabilities related to misogyny and other protected characteristics.
- The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
- Cross-cutting nature of abuse including hate crime.
- New legislation, including the Election Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023.

College of Policing

2024

Agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives must be defined. Elected representatives must then adopt the minimum level.

Security agencies
Elected representatives

2024

Elected politicians should report all abuse (threshold confirmed by police) so an understanding of the level of threat is built up in police systems.

Elected politicians should follow guidance from the police and the Crown Prosecution Service about when to pursue prosecution.

All elected representatives

2024

Information sharing must be improved between different forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

National Police Chiefs' Council

2025

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Police and security continued

There must be dedicated resources in each local police force to ensure an appropriate, consistent response to support elected representatives across the country. This would enable:

- Increasing the remit of the Single Point of Contact in each police force to include local elected representatives.
- Streamlining implementation of Operation Bridger and enforcement of the Single Point of Contact system.
- Increased capacity for police forces to provide home and venue (surgeries) risk assessments for both MPs and local government elected representatives and facilitate additional security measures if necessary.

Home Office

2025

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations)

Parliamentarians should be able to claim for the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, including:

- Costs associated with wellbeing measures for staff who process/ experience abuse.
- The swift implementation of security measures advised by Operation Bridger.

IPSA

2024

Written resources should be developed for the families of elected representatives about dealing with abuse. This should include explanations of escalation procedures and clarification of points of contact.

**Speaker's Office
(Commons and Lords)**

2024

Mandatory, properly resourced training should be developed for both elected representatives and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse. This should include active bystander training, situational awareness, and training around safe social media use.

**Security teams
in Westminster**

**Devolved
administrations**

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Local government

Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.

- Police should be involved where appropriate and in particular when there is a risk to democratic engagement.
- The opportunity should exist for council meetings to take place online in instances when there are specific risks of physical abuse to councillors.

Councils should pass motions affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour, from the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate toolkit or the National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) Civility and Respect Project.

Local authorities should ensure security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors. These should be clearly signposted, and there should be a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.

Local authorities

2024

Local authorities

2025

Local authorities

2025

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Elections

Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.	Government	2024
The Electoral Commission should expand its guidance for candidates about use of social media during the election period, with a specific focus on upholding public confidence in the democratic process.	Electoral Commission	2024
Political parties should rigorously screen candidates during the candidate selection process.	Political parties	2024
Political parties should require candidates to sign up to an election code of conduct in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.	Political parties	2024
Social media companies should offer additional support for candidates at election times about how to protect themselves on the platform and report abuse. Advice should also be available to the general public around misinformation that might interfere with the democratic process.	Social media companies	2024

Political parties

Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct, with relevant sanctions when the code is not adhered to.	Political parties	2024
Mandatory civility and equalities training should be implemented for all candidates.	Political parties	2025
Political parties should review how they offer legal support to candidates or elected officials where civil action is more appropriate than criminal action.	Political parties	2025

Summary and next steps

Abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is a genuine threat to democracy in this country. Now is the time to act to stop this problem getting worse, before even more elected representatives step down and the pipeline of potential politicians is further depleted.

We believe that these recommendations are only the first step for change in our campaign to reduce abuse and intimidation of elected representatives. Now the hard work begins, as we collaborate with government and stakeholders to make the case for their adoption of these recommendations.

Do you want to back our call for change?

If you're an elected politician, or an organisation working on any of the areas we cover in this report, we would welcome your public endorsement.

You can pledge your support at
www.jocoxfoundation.org/commission

Do you want to support our campaigning on this issue?

You can donate to our work at
www.jocoxfoundation.org/donate

All donations will enable us to make even more progress as we push for the implementation of these recommendations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many stakeholders who have engaged with us as we have developed these recommendations. Many individuals and organisations have been generous with both their time and their expertise, and this work would not have been possible without their support.

We would particularly like to thank:

- The **JRSST Charitable Trust** whose funding has made this work possible.
- **WA Communications** who have supported the PR for this work, and have also designed the report.
- The many individual donors who have supported this work.

The JRSST Charitable Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust.

 JRSST Charitable Trust

Contact us

If you would like to be in touch, please contact us on
commission@jocoxfoundation.org

THE JO COX
FOUNDATION



WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

Standards Committee

Annual Report

2023/24

Submitted to the Council – March 2024

Introduction by Morag Malvern, Chair of the Standards Committee

I am pleased to present the Annual Report of the Standards Committee for 2023/24.

The main aim of the Standards Committee is to promote and maintain the highest standards of conduct by elected Members representing the Borough, Town and Parish Councils. Local government impacts the lives of residents every day, providing essential services to those it serves. High standards are required in order to demonstrate that key decisions are taken in the public interest and to maintain public confidence in elected Members and officers. Doing things in the right way and in the public interest is critical for public confidence in the bodies that operate on the public's behalf and supports the delivery of essential public services.

Members' conduct should be underpinned by the ethical standards summarised in the seven principles of public life, also known as the Nolan Principles - selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. These principles are the basis of the ethical standards expected of public office holders.

The Standards Committee met four times during the year and focussed on ensuring that the Borough Council's policies, as set out in the Member Code of Conduct, were up-to-date, understood and underpinned by best practice. Bearing in mind the significant ongoing challenges facing the Borough, Town and Parish Councils over the year, I am pleased to report that the level of Code of Conduct complaint activity in 2023/24, although showing an increase, still remained at a relatively low level.

At each meeting, the Committee focussed on a specific aspect of the Standards regime in order to ensure that Members were up to speed and aware of the latest developments. The Committee also considered national initiatives including the LGA's Debate Not Hate Campaign and the report of the Jo Cox Civility Commission. Members were keen to ensure that the Committee was aware of new initiatives aimed at ensuring that best practice principles were being adopted, especially at a time when the temperature of political discourse, both nationally and locally, had been raised.

The work of the Standards Committee is supported by three Independent Persons who, as the name suggests, provide an independent perspective to the Borough Council's Monitoring Officer in relation to Code of Conduct complaints. Sadly, one of the Independent Persons – Nick Oxborough – died during the year whilst another – David Comben – has indicated that he will step down from the role following 20 years' service. I would like to record the Committee's thanks for the sage advice provided by Nick and David over many years.

Finally, I would like to record my thanks to the Borough, Town and Parish Members and officers who contributed to the work of the Committee during the year.

**Morag Malvern
March 2024**

1.0 What does the Standards Committee Do?

The role of the Standards Committee is to promote, monitor and enforce probity and ethical standards amongst elected Members within the Wokingham Borough, including Town and Parish Councillors. The Localism Act 2011 removed the requirement for a national code of conduct and statutory Standards Committees. The Act introduced a locally focussed “light touch” framework for the adoption of a Member Code of Conduct, and processes for the receipt and consideration of complaints. Although not obliged to do so under the terms of the Localism Act, Wokingham Borough Council decided to maintain a dedicated Standards Committee.

In addition to maintaining an overview of Code of Conduct complaints against Wokingham Borough Council Members, the Committee is also responsible for overseeing complaints against Town and Parish Councillors. The Committee discharges this duty through regular consideration of update reports from the Monitoring Officer who is responsible for deciding on and dealing with complaints, except for those which are required to be referred to a Hearing Panel of the Standards Committee.

If the complaints process determines that a Town/Parish Councillor is in breach of the Code of Conduct, recommendations will be submitted to the relevant Town/Parish Council as to the appropriate sanction. However it is for the Town/Parish Council to decide what action is to be taken.

Role and Functions

The Standards Committee has the following role and functions:

- a) promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by elected Members, co-opted members and officers;
- b) assisting the elected Members and co-opted members to observe the Member Code of Conduct;
- c) advising the Council on the adoption or revision of its Member Code of Conduct;
- d) monitoring the operation of the Member Code of Conduct, the Officer Code of Conduct, the Council’s Whistleblowing Policy and any other appropriate codes of conduct and procedures;
- e) advising, training or arranging to train elected Members and co-opted members on matters relating to the Members’ Code of Conduct;
- f) the exercise of (a) to (e) above in relation to the Parish/Town Councils in the Borough and the members of those Parish/Town Councils;
- g) the presentation of an annual report by the Chair of the Standards Committee to Council.

2.0 The Nolan Principles of Public Life

As mentioned earlier, elected Members should seek to carry out their duties in line with a set of principles known as the Nolan Principles. In 1994, Prime Minister John Major established the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Nolan. The Committee's first report established a set of seven guiding principles for conduct in public life.

The Principles of Public Life apply to anyone elected or appointed to public office, nationally and locally, and everyone appointed to work in local government, the Civil Service, police, courts and probation service, etc. All public office-holders are both servants of the public and stewards of public resources.

The seven Nolan Principles are:

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

Integrity

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

Objectivity

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

Openness

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

Honesty

Holders of public office should be truthful.

Leadership

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

Building on the Nolan Principles, the Local Government Association (LGA) has developed the following general principles specifically for the role of elected Member. In accordance with the public trust placed in me, on all occasions:

- I act with integrity and honesty
- I act lawfully

- I treat all persons fairly and with respect; and
- I lead by example and act in a way that secures public confidence in the role of elected Member.

In undertaking my role:

- I impartially exercise my responsibilities in the interests of the local community
- I do not improperly seek to confer an advantage, or disadvantage, on any person
- I avoid conflicts of interest
- I exercise reasonable care and diligence; and
- I ensure that public resources are used prudently in accordance with my local authority's requirements and in the public interest.

3.0 **Who Sits on the Standards Committee?**

The Committee is made up of seven Wokingham Borough Council Members. These Members are voting members of the Committee and are appointed on the basis of political proportionality. An elected Member from Wokingham Borough Council chairs the Committee. The Committee also includes three, non-voting, Town and Parish Council representatives. The 2023/24 membership of the Committee was:

Wokingham Borough Council Representatives:

- Morag Malvern (Chair)
- Rachel Burgess (Vice-Chair)
- Sam Akhtar
- Keith Baker (part year)
- Phil Cunnington
- Graham Howe
- Imogen Shepherd-Dubey
- Caroline Smith

Town and Parish Council Representatives

- Sally Gurney (Wokingham Town Council)
- Jackie Jagger (Twyford Parish Council)
- Sheena Matthews (Earley Town Council)

4.0 **Independent Persons**

Under the terms of the Localism Act 2011, Wokingham Borough Council is required to appoint an Independent Person (a member of the public, not a Council Officer or elected Member) whose views must be sought before a Hearing Panel of the Standards Committee takes a decision on an allegation.

The Independent Person's views may also be sought on an allegation prior to that stage. In addition, a Member who is subject of an allegation may seek the views of an Independent Person. Two people are currently acting in the Independent Person role, with one vacancy.

- David Comben
- Paddy Haycocks

- Vacancy

An Independent Person cannot sit as a member of the Standards Committee, but may attend meetings with the same rights as a member of the public.

As outlined above, there will shortly be two vacancies for the Independent Person role. A recruitment process will be undertaken to restore the full complement of Independent Persons for the 2024/25 Municipal Year.

5.0 **Who Supports the Standards Committee?**

The Committee is supported by:

- Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director, Governance and Monitoring Officer
- Neil Allen, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer
- Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

6.0 **Standards Committee Activity in 2023/24**

During the 2023/24 Municipal Year, 19 Code of Conduct complaints were received – 18 relating to Borough Members and one relating to a Parish Council Member. The Standards Committee considered an update report on the complaints and investigations at each of its meetings. The complaints included:

- alleged failure to declare a prejudicial interest;
- a number of complaints relating to the content of posts on social media;
- alleged use of inappropriate language in an informal meeting;
- a number of complaints alleging disrespect shown to complainants at public meetings.

Of the 19 complaints received, no action was taken in nine cases, one was withdrawn and eight were still under consideration by the Monitoring Officer, in liaison with the Independent Person. In the other case, following an investigation it was concluded that there had been a breach of the relevant “respect” clause of the Code of Conduct. The matter was reported to the Borough’s full Council meeting in November 2023.

As agreed previously, in cases where no action was taken, the complainant and other interested parties received a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind the decision.

At the October 2023 meeting of the Committee, Members asked if there were any trends relating to Member to Member complaints along party lines. It was confirmed that of the 17 complaints received in the year to October, six were submitted by WBC Members. There was no discernible pattern with complaints being from more than one political group. Members also asked whether individuals were making multiple complaints. In 2023/24 there was no evidence of multiple complaints. There were, however, three examples of incidents leading to multiple complaints from different complainants. This could be a factor in the increased number of complaints received compared to previous years.

It is worth reiterating that the number of complaints received should be seen in the context of there being 54 Borough Council Members and over 200 elected Members of Town and Parish Councils across the Borough. Whilst recognising that the level of complaint activity in 2023/24 was relatively low, the Committee continues to recognise the importance of dealing with every complaint seriously and expeditiously.

In addition to discussing complaints activity, the Committee also considered the following issues and national campaigns:

- LGA Debate Not Hate Campaign – the campaign believes that serving in public office is both a privilege and a responsibility. It is working to challenge the abuse local politicians face within the public and political discourse, abuse that can have a negative impact on councillors, their families and local democracy. Through the project, researchers identified key challenges to supporting councillors with these issues, principles for councils to consider, and top tips and good practice case studies to help councils better support councillors prevent and handle abuse and intimidation. The three key challenges were:

Challenge 1: Councillors feel vulnerable to abuse and ill-equipped or supported to handle abuse, harassment and intimidation. Councillors are informed of their risk but have limited knowledge of tools for effective conflict resolution and aftercare.

Challenge 2: Lack of clear process around reporting instances of abuse, harassment and intimidation to the council. Councillors do not know who to turn to when an incident occurs. There is limited understanding about the role and help that supporting officers can provide.

Challenge 3: There is uneven engagement and response from the police to abuse and harassment of councillors. Some police forces are sympathetic, some others are not or consider low-risk abuse as something insignificant. There is limited advice tailored for elected Members in local politics and, on occasions, a lack of understanding of why they need special measures.

In order to understand the issue locally, the Committee commissioned a survey of Wokingham BC Members, with the results due for consideration at the March 2024 meeting. It was then proposed to roll-out the survey to the Town and Parish Councils in the Borough.

- Jo Cox Civility Commission – The Commission takes as its starting point the belief that abuse and intimidation is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK. However, addressing the issue is complex and required action across different sectors. The Commission's report made a number of recommendations covering police and security, Parliaments, local government, elections and social media. The recommendations for local government were that:
 - Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with adequate security;
 - Police should be involved where appropriate and particularly where there is a risk to democratic engagement;

- Councils should pass Motions affirming the principles to address abuse and model good behaviour from the Debate Not Hate toolkit;
- Security and wellbeing resources should be made available for elected Members, with a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.

7.0 LGA Model Code of Conduct

In December 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) published a Model Code of Conduct. All councils were required to adopt a local Member Code of Conduct and the Model Code was provided for use by councils as a template to adopt in whole and/or with local amendments should they wish to. It is the role of the Standards Committee to determine whether to recommend the Model Code, amended or otherwise, to full Council for inclusion in the Council's Constitution. Council subsequently agreed to adopt the LGA Model Code with variations proposed by the Standards Committee. The Code of Conduct is subject to continuous review by the Committee.

8.0 Standards Committee – Future Actions

The Standards Committee will continue to make further improvements to the Code of Conduct and its supporting procedures in order to ensure continuous improvement in line with best practice. In so doing it will seek to maintain the credibility and good governance of the Borough, Town and Parish Councils.

The Committee will commission further training and support, as necessary, to underpin high standards of ethical behaviour by elected Members and officers across the Borough. Members will continue to receive training on specific aspects of the Code of Conduct, such as the use and mis-use of social media, to ensure that it remains a living document.

The Committee is keenly aware that high standards of behaviour help to build trust in elected representatives which is crucial to the democratic process. The Committee aims to ensure that the highest standards of behaviour are delivered and complaints are kept to a minimum. Any complaints received, however, will be investigated robustly and fairly within the agreed timeframe.