

TITLE	LGA Guidance on "Debate Not Hate" Campaign
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Standards Committee on 29 January 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 the Committee received a presentation on 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. 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 are 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.
- 1.3 For ease of reference, this report attaches the LGA report and findings – see Appendix A.

Analysis of Issues

- 2.1 The survey of all borough councillors took place between 30 November and 20 December. Seven responses were 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) A low response rate may indicate that councillors feel this is not a significant area of concern. However, for those councillors who did respond, the following conclusions may be drawn.
 - b) 3 out of 7 reported that they had been subject to a form of abuse, harassment or intimidation.
 - c) Types of abuse reported were verbal abuse, distribution of misinformation, character assassination, inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media.

- d) 1 out of 3 who were subject to abuse reported this to the Monitoring Officer. Others reported to their political party.
- e) 2 out of 3 knew the process for reporting abuse.
- f) 4 out of 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.
- g) 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.

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?)
This report does not of itself contribute to the Council's Priorities, however, the safety of members will support the democratic process and enable members to work to achieve those priorities.

Public Sector Equality Duty
This is an information report but any specific proposals will be informed by an equalities assessment as appropriate.

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 Climate Emergency implications of this report.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable

List of Background Papers
LGA report

Contact Andrew Moulton	Service Governance
Telephone No Tel: 07747 777298	Email andrew.moulton@wokingham.gov.uk