
NON EXEMPT

HAVANT BOROUGH COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE 7th December 2022

Guidance for Councillors on dealing with abuse and intimidation

FOR DECISION

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Tony Denton

Monitoring Officer: Mark Watkins

Key Decision: No

Report Number: [HBC/097/2022]

1. Purpose

This report seeks a decision to establish a working group of this Committee, with a view to developing recommendations and investigating issues of interest relevant to the above topic.

2. Recommendation

The Standards Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to:

Establish, with immediate effect, a working group to be known as the Safety and Wellbeing of Councillors Working Group in accordance with the terms of reference appended at Appendix 1 of this Report.

3. Executive Summary & Background.

- 3.1. Havant Borough Council's Councillors are at the centre of local democracy. Elected from amongst their local community and forming a vital link between councils and residents. However, increasing levels of abuse and intimidation in political and public discourse are negatively impacting politicians and democracy at both local and national levels.

- 3.2. Although constructive challenge is a key component of democracy, abuse and intimidation cross the line into unacceptable behaviour and serve to silence democratic voices and deter people from engaging with politics.
- 3.3. There is a considerable volume of evidence of the impact of abuse, intimidation, and aggression at a national level, including extreme incidents such as the murders of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP.
- 3.4. To understand the impacts on local government and councillors, the LGA launched a call for evidence of abuse and intimidation of councillors in October 2021. This report summarises the findings and also details what more, according to the LGA, could be done to improve support moreover to reverse these worrying national trends which are so harmful to democracy.

The following themes were identified in the responses to the call for evidence:

- a. Variability of support – The support offered by councils, political parties, and the police varied across the country. In particular, respondents identified a lack of proactive support from some councils and responses from some police forces to threats made against councillors and their families.
- b. Targeted abuse – Evidence from the qualitative responses indicated that councillors and candidates with protected characteristics were more likely to receive personalised abuse. Misogyny, racism and homophobia were particularly highlighted in the responses.
- c. Personal and democratic impacts – Abuse and intimidation can significantly impact councillors and their families, and the wider community. Several respondents described the negative impacts of ongoing abuse on their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, respondents supported the idea that abuse can impact councillors' willingness to stand for re-election or deter others from considering standing for public office.
- d. Vulnerability of councillors – Many respondents highlighted the visibility and accessibility of councillors in their local community, particularly when councillors' home addresses are available online. Councillors are therefore vulnerable to physical abuse, particularly compared to national politicians who may have greater protections and access to specialist police support.
- e. Normalisation – There is a growing feeling that abuse and intimidation, particularly online, are becoming normalised. Attitudes around councillors

expecting abuse and being expected to manage abuse with little support were prevalent in the responses

- 3.5. This report suggests that councils should now take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against elected members. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors' safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously
- 3.6. In terms of how a council might go about considering the detail of this topic moreover working up some recommendations, a number of other councils' committees have utilised the "working group approach". This has been found to greatly assist with and develop policy and or guidance. The holding of these meetings has proven to be popular as a mechanism to allow greater time for issues to be considered and discussed by Members in detail, outside of the formal Committee setting and allowing for an outcomes report and recommendations being submitted for consideration to formal meetings. It should be noted that there is also the option with such groups to hold meetings by remote means as opposed to in person bringing with it the added flexibility that this also affords.
- 3.7. It is recommended that a selection of Committee Members (and other individuals and officers – see Appendix 1) are involved with the working group itself who then proceed to undertake the work required, in accordance with the Term of Reference (again – see Appendix 1).

4. Additional Budgetary Implications

- 4.1. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

5. Options considered

- 5.1. Do nothing and not to establish any such working group thereby giving no further consideration to the subject matter concerned. However, it is hoped that Members will welcome the background and key considerations detailed in this Report when determining if they wish to establish a group.

6. Resource Implications

- 6.1. Financial Implications:
 - i. None

Section 151 Officer comments

Date: 29 November 2022

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

6.2. Human Resources Implications

- i. None

6.3. Information Governance Implications

- i. None

6.4. Other resource implications

- i. There are no direct resource implications arising from this report other than to make reference to the fact that holding meetings including that of the Officer Support Group (see TOR in Appendix 1) has a consequential impact on staffing, placing demands on officer time and resources.

7. Legal Implications

There are no specific legal implications.

Monitoring Officer comments

Date: 15th November 2022

In addition to the comment made throughout this Report, it should be noted that working groups do not have to comply with political proportionality requirements. Committee will need to approve specific terms of reference and membership, which may include invited persons holding relevant expertise or knowledge and Members who are not members of the parent committee.

8. Risks

- 8.1. There are no direct risks arising from this report.

9. Climate & Environment Implications

- 9.1. None

10. Consultation

- 10.1. Consultation has already been had with the Leader and Chair of Standards Committee

11. Appendices

Proposed Terms of Reference

12. Background papers

None

Agreed and signed off by:

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Section 151 Officer: Malcolm Coe – 29th November 2022

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