

## Rother District Council

**Report to:** Audit and Standards Committee

**Date:** 28 February 2024

**Title:** Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors

**Report of:** Linda Walker, Interim Monitoring Officer

**Purpose of Report:** To consider the Local Government Association's publication on how councils can better support councillors to prevent and handle abuse.

### Officer

**Recommendation(s):** It be **RESOLVED**: That:

- 1) the Council's actions to date to support Councillors in preventing and handling abuse in public life be noted;
- 2) the procedure for the reporting of incidents of abuse be formalised and Councillors be provided links to all relevant recorded training sessions, Local Government Association's guidance and other sources of support on a regular basis;
- 3) the Member Development Task Group be reminded to regularly review the support available; and
- 4) the findings of the Local Government Association's report be noted.

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## Introduction

1. In July 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) published a report which outlines 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. A copy has been reproduced at Appendix A and is available electronically at the following link: [debate not hate report](#)
2. This report highlights the key findings and recommendations of the LGA report and what steps Rother District Council has already put in place to ensure that Councillors feel supported when dealing with abuse in public life.
3. As elected officials, Councillors are open to wider public scrutiny and criticism than officers and private citizens and this can make it challenging to identify the point when legitimate criticism becomes abuse, harassment and intimidation, particularly over social media.

## Findings

4. The LGA's project researchers identified the following three key challenges to supporting councillors with these issues:

**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 don't 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 officers in local politics and in occasions, a lack of understanding of why they need special measures.

5. In response to these challenges, the LGA has developed three recommendations for central government, regulators and police forces across England to consider, as follows:

**Recommendation 1:** The Government and Ofcom should take steps to ensure that harmful and abusive behaviour does not continue unrestricted online, including developing clear guidance for social media and other online service providers on their obligations to mitigate the risks of online abuse and how this may be best achieved; and that the experience of elected members is considered in any new Ofcom guidance mandated by the Online Safety Bill.

**Recommendation 2:** The Government should work with the police to set out clear and consistent guidance on the role of policing in addressing abuse, intimidation and harassment of elected members. This should include expert capacity to monitor crime associated with elected members and act as a single point of contact for both councils and councillors.

**Recommendation 3:** The Government should widen the scope of the Defending Democracy Programme to explicitly include the safety, security and wellbeing of locally elected politicians, rather than focusing solely on national politicians and foreign interference.

## Principles

6. The LGA report identifies the following principles for support agencies, with commentary under each principle on the actions already undertaken by Rother that work towards achieving these principles:

**Zero-tolerance approach to abuse: Establish and enforce a strict policy that clearly outlines expectations for interactions and promotes respectful debate.**

New signage has been created and displayed in the Council Chamber alerting attendees that Councillors and officers should be treated with respect at all times and any failure to do so will result in removal from the meeting.

Wording in routine emails confirming public speaking arrangements for participants at Planning Committee and Full Council meetings has been strengthened to confirm expected conduct from public participants.

The commitment to provide security personnel at high profile, potential controversial meetings, where local intelligence has suggested there may be issues.

In February 2023, ahead of the local elections, the Council approved a Motion to sign up to the LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign and following this the "Debate not Hate" logo was adopted and is present on the bottom of all email communication sent from the Council. A copy of the approved Motion is attached at Appendix B.

The Motion further committed the Council to regularly review the support available to Councillors in relation to abuse and intimidation and Councillor safety through the Member Development Task Group. The provision of personal safety training as part of the Member Induction Programme has already taken place the Democratic Services Manager will ensure that this support will be reviewed annually.

**Clarity of process and responsibility: Clearly define the process for raising concerns and assign responsible individuals within the council to provide support to councillors.**

Whilst this has not been formalised, Members have reported incidents of on-line and in-person abuse / harassment to the Democratic Services Manager on a number of occasions and support has been provided by way of signposting to LGA guidance and Police, where necessary. It is recommended that the process is formalised with any incidents being reported to the Council's Monitoring Officer via the [MonitoringOfficer@rother.gov.uk](mailto:MonitoringOfficer@rother.gov.uk) email account in the first instance.

**Relationships with local police: Proactively develop strong relationships with the police to enhance coordination and foster mutual understanding of abuse affecting councillors and the role of police in addressing it.**

The Council's Chief Executive meets regularly with Sussex Police area commanders and local intelligence is shared with the Council; there is a good collaborative relationship between the Council and Sussex Police.

The Council's Community Safety Coordinator attends regular JAG meetings and liaises where appropriate with the Chief Executive with any concerns over Councillor safety issues.

**Tailored risk assessments: Consider individual councillors' needs and proactively identify risks through dynamic and periodic risk assessments.**

Officers have not undertaken risk assessments on behalf of Councillors but have provided training on how to go about assessing personal safety risks whilst conducting the duties of a Councillor via personal safety training delivered as part of the initial Member Induction Programme. Whilst the

training was not recorded (at the trainers' request) a copy of the slides have been made available on the Council's Intranet for all Councillors.

**Prioritise councillor wellbeing: Recognise and consider how your council can support councillor wellbeing and address the negative impacts of personal attacks and hurtful commentaries.**

All Councillors have access to the Council's Employee Assistance Programme via the BeSupported Website which provides Councillors and their immediate family with information, resources and options to address a wide range of issues both at home and at work including counselling.

**Conclusions**

7. This report demonstrates that Rother District Council has already implemented a number of steps to ensure that Councillors are provided with the support and resources to deal with abuse in their public life.
8. The Committee is asked to consider the report, note the actions already undertaken by Rother District Council and make any further recommendations to improve the support available to Councillors in these matters.

<b>Other Implications</b>	<b>Applies?</b>	<b>Other Implications</b>	<b>Applies?</b>
Human Rights	No	Equalities and Diversity	No
Crime and Disorder	No	Consultation	No
Environmental	No	Access to Information	No
Risk Management	No	Exempt from publication	No

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Appendices:	Appendix A – Debate Not Hate: Ending abuse in public life for councillors Appendix B – Motion to Council – Debate not Hate
Relevant Previous Minutes:	None.
Background Papers:	None.
Reference Documents:	