

INTIMIDATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Report of the County Solicitor

Recommendation: that the report be noted.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Report was the 17th report of the Committee of Standards in Public Life, on intimidation in public life. This followed the request to undertake a review on the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates in July 2017, but also considering the wider implications for public office-holders, and producing recommendations for action.
2. The executive summary is attached to this covering report.

BACKGROUND

3. The report outlined that whilst intimidation in public life is nothing new, the scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life in ways which are a serious issue. Also, Intimidation also reflects broader issues with our public political culture and the report states that those in public life must take responsibility for shaping that culture.
4. To understand this issue, the investigation heard from a range of individuals and organisations, including candidates, MPs, social media companies, local councillors, regulatory bodies, broadcasters and journalists, police and security authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. There were 34 individual meetings, a roundtable, and a public and private hearing. 88 written submissions to the call for evidence were also received.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REPORT

5. The recommendations stand as a package and it is suggested they should be implemented together, as a comprehensive response to the issue, which is of central importance to representative democracy.
6. Of particular note was the widespread use of social media which has been the most significant factor accelerating and enabling intimidatory behaviour in recent years. Although social media helps to promote widespread access to ideas and engagement in debate, it also creates an intensely hostile online environment.
7. The attached executive summary includes a table of recommendations, mainly aimed at Social Media companies, However there are other recommendations for Government and Policing organisations. As well as recommendations for those in positions of leadership within political parties and political parties themselves.
8. Members will further note there is a recommendation for Local Authority Monitoring Officers to ensure that members required to declare pecuniary interests are aware of the sensitive interests provisions in the Localism Act 2011, but also that this is included in the Members Code of Conduct in the Constitution.

9. There are also five recommendations for all those in public life including;
- Nobody in public life should engaging in intimidatory behaviour, nor condone or tolerate it, as all in public life have a responsibility to challenge and report it wherever it occurs;
 - Seeking to uphold high standards of conduct, adhering to the Seven Principles of Public Life, and help prevent a decline in public trust in political institutions through their own conduct;
 - Setting and protecting a tone in public discourse which is not dehumanising or derogatory, and which recognises the rights of others to participate in public life;
 - Having a responsibility not to use language which engenders hatred or hostility towards individuals because of their personal characteristics; and
 - Not engaging in in highly personalised attacks, nor portray policy disagreements or questions of professional competence as breaches of ethical standards.

SUMMARY / CONCLUSION

10. The report makes recommendations meaning that all those across public life must work together to address the problem and there needs to be greater action from social media companies, political parties, Parliament, the police, broadcast and print media, and from MPs and Parliamentary candidates themselves. This in turn means leadership by the largest political parties, which, as the report highlights, is all the more important in the light of recent allegations of sexual harassment and bullying in Parliament which will have shaken public confidence.

11. The report proposed legislative changes that Government should bring forward on social media companies' liability for illegal content online, and an electoral offence of intimidating Parliamentary candidates and party campaigners. Political parties must also put in place measures for more effective joint working to combat intimidation in advance of the next general election. In the long term, prevention will be more effective and important than any individual sanction. Those in public life must adopt a more healthy public discourse and must stand together to oppose behaviour which threatens the integrity of public life.

11. This Report has no specific equality, sustainability, legal or public health implications that have not already been assessed and appropriate safeguards and/or actions taken or included within the detailed policies or practices or requirements relating to the conduct of meetings, to safeguard the Council's position.

JAN SHADBOLT

[Electoral Divisions: All]

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

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<u>Background Paper</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>File Reference</u>
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Nil