

Standards in Public Life: Update on Councillors safety, Work on reducing harassment, abuse and intimidation

Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Recommendation

That the Committee be asked to consider the report and make any further recommendations as felt necessary and to note the ongoing work.

Summary

1. Following a discussion at the last Standards Committee meeting regarding the response by the Government to proposals by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, in which concerns were raised about an increase in abuse and intimidation experienced by Councillors, it was agreed to bring back a report to the meeting to discuss the matter further.

Introduction and Background

2. Members may recall a Report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life about Local Government Ethical Standards, published in 2019. This had resulted in several recommendations which the Council had reacted to and actioned, including revised guidance around bullying and harassment and inclusion in the Code.
3. A number of those recommendations were for Government action and required primary legislative changes. One of these related to the public disclosure of home addresses. The response of Government was that this issue had been raised during work on intimidation in public life, and that Government had already taken forward several steps and is open to further steps to help prevent intimidation. It further stated: 'Government will engage with interested parties on the best means to ensure that candidates and councillors are not required publicly to disclose their home address. Notwithstanding, it is important that home addresses are internally registered with monitoring officers, to help avoid conflicts of interest.'
4. This issue and other relating factors relating to reported increases in abuse and intimidation experienced by Councillors was discussed at the last Standards Committee meeting. It had been agreed to bring back a report for discussion by the Committee.

Changes made and current work

5. Following the review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the Council amended the Members Code of Conduct to further help members being able to undertake their role without intimidation, abuse, bullying or threatening behaviour from anyone, including the general public. This guidance aims to encourage good conduct and assist members in modelling the behaviour that is expected, to provide check and balance. [Constitution - Part 6a Code of Personal Conduct Members Code of Conduct.pdf \(devon.gov.uk\)](#). It has been good practice for a number of years that an annual review of the Code will be undertaken by the Standards Committee.
6. Guidance from the Local Government Association about handling intimidation with practical steps that Members and the Council can take has also been published on the Members Sharepoint Site [Members' Area - Handling intimidation \(Local Government Association\).pdf - All Documents \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
7. A discussion took place at the last Committee meeting around the public disclosure of member addresses and within this, concerns about abuse and intimidation experiences by Members. Following this, a Report about the publication of Councillors' homes addresses was brought for consideration to the Procedures Committee in September.
8. The Procedures Committee resolved that publication of home addresses on individual profile pages was a choice for individual Members, notwithstanding the current legislative position that the register of interests must include a home address unless the Member concerned and Monitoring Officer deem this to be a 'sensitive interest'.
9. All Members have now been contacted to ask if they would like to change the address on their profile pages and to remind them, they can do this in future. A few Councillors have already asked for this change and it has been implemented.
10. The Member Development Steering Group considered the issue of Personal Safety of Councillors at their last meeting on 29 September and suggested that the next Member Wellbeing Survey include a question to members for views about their safety concerns. The Wellbeing Survey will be circulated to members at the end of November.
11. Further steps being taken include notifications and communications regarding any briefing or training events around safety, harassment and related issues taking place which members can attend. These are added on the Members Sharepoint site and advertised through the Members Bulletins such as with a forthcoming LGA event on Personal Safety for Councillors taking place on 7 December. [Training and Development \(sharepoint.com\)](#).

Summary and Conclusion

12. The Council has taken a number of practical steps to address the issue of abuse and intimidation of Councillors, notwithstanding the legislative limitations in some areas. However, Members are asked to consider if there are other areas of support that the Council could assist with.

MARIA PRICE

[Electoral Divisions: All]

Local Government Act 1972: List of Background Papers

Contact for Enquiries: Julia Jones (email: Julia.e.jones@devon.gov.uk)

Tel No: 01392 380547 Room: G31

<u>Background Paper</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>File Reference</u>
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As listed in the report