

WLGA Executive Board

31st January 2020

CIVILITY IN PUBLIC LIFE CAMPAIGN

Purpose

1. To update members on the UK-wide Civility in Public Life campaign coordinated by the LGA, WLGA, COSLA and NILGA.

Background

2. Across the UK, there are growing concerns about the impact an increasing level of public intimidation and toxicity of debate is having on our country's democratic processes.
3. In July 2019, the WLGA Executive Board discussed concerns about the increase in abuse and intimidation for councillors, particularly online and via online news comments sections. Leaders were keen that the WLGA take proactive action and the former WLGA Leader, Baroness Wilcox of Newport, launched a joint WLGA/LGA Councillors Guide to Handling Intimidation at the LGA Annual Conference 2019.
4. Following these discussions and subsequent agreement at the UK Forum hosted by the WLGA in November, the Civility in Public Life campaign has been developed.
5. The Civility in Public Life campaign is a joint initiative, led by the LGA, with the WLGA, COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) and NILGA (Northern Ireland LGA) as partners. The programme was officially launched on the 16th December 2019 in London with Cllr Jane Mudd, WLGA Deputy Presiding Officer representing the WLGA.
6. The purpose of the campaign is:
 - to address the intimidation of local government members and officers;
 - to address standards of public discourse;
 - to address standards of political discourse and behaviour in public office; and
 - to provide support and advice to councils and councillors.
7. The campaign has three main themes which will serve as the foundations for future action:
 - 7.1 Prevention** - Support and guidance for authorities and research into the prevalence, impact, good practice and international action on the intimidation of those in public office.

7.2 Support and Intervention- Development of policy and legislative proposals that address intimidation and standards of public discourse, particularly with a view to gaining a more consistent and robust response from the Police and Crown Prosecution Service. This also includes the proposal for a new criminal offence for intimidating a person in public office, engagement with Police and Crime Commissioners and exploring the potential for an informal council duty of care towards councillors.

7.3 Challenge – A Pan UK commitment to call out and challenge instances of intimidation and abuse of politicians.

8. The WLGA has already produced guidance for members on bullying, harassment and personal safety and is continuing to work with Heads of Democratic Services to encourage more practical support for members. Councils are providing councillors with access to staff counselling services and working with the police locally to ensure support is in place.
9. The WLGA will also seek an all Wales commitment from editors to set out clear standards, moderate comments and adopt a zero-tolerance stance on abuse in the online media.
10. A core priority for the LGA in England is to revise the English Councillors' Code of Conduct through the campaign following a recent Committee on Standards in Public Life report. The English code is inconsistent and less robust than the statutory code applicable in Wales.
11. Welsh councils have also introduced local resolution processes, whereby 'lower level' councillor-on-councillor complaints can be dealt with informally within the council (sometimes via Monitoring Officers, Group Leaders or the Chair) and sanctions include a public apology or training.
12. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill also proposes the introduction of a new duty that leaders of political groups must take reasonable steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the members of their group. The WLGA supports this proposal.

Online Abuse and Intimidation

13. In the Queen's Speech in December, the UK Government committed to introducing Online Harms legislation to protect children and vulnerable adults from digital threats. This will establish a new statutory duty of care to make online companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users and tackle harm caused by content or activity on their services, which will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator.

14. This follows on from the Online Harms White Paper earlier in 2019. In response to the White Paper, the LGA called for proposed action to protect MPs from harassment and abuse to extend to and include protections for local councillors; it is unclear at this stage whether the proposed legislation will include these protections.
15. As part of its ongoing review into 'Intimidation in Public Life', the Committee on Standards in Public Life has received correspondence in December from Google, Facebook and Twitter¹.
16. Although there remain significant concerns about online abuse and intimidation, the correspondence demonstrates some improvements and a commitment from social media companies to deal with concerns. For example, Twitter reports improved responses dealing with concerns, complaints and referrals, the launch in November of the option for users to hide replies to their tweets and a new tool for the UK General Election that enables people to report deliberately misleading information about the voting process.

Next Steps

17. Feedback from the launch event, recent regional Diversity workshops in Wales and the discussions at the WLGA's Diversity in Democracy Working Group has outlined some early suggestions for action, including:
 - Political parties to act within council political groups where standards of conduct are not always adhered to;
 - Woman councillors to be supported due to the prevalence of abuse towards women;
 - Senior councillors to model appropriate behaviour. This was a theme emerging from the LGA launch, but is also relevant in Wales given the proposed new duty on Group Leaders, which is yet to be developed
 - Councils to clearly state that they will not tolerate abuse towards elected members in the same way as they would, for example, for front line staff; and
 - Councils committing to a duty of care for councillors, including support around mental wellbeing and provision personal safety training and equipment for members.
18. The four Associations are now working together to develop action plans within the three themes of Prevention, Support and Intervention and Challenge.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/search/all?organisations%5B%5D=the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life&order=updated-newest&parent=the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

Recommendations

19. Members are recommended to:

- 19.1 Support the UK Forum Civility in Public Life Campaign; and
- 19.2 Consider what actions or priorities should feature in the developing WLGA and/or UK Forum action plans

Report cleared by: **Cllr Jane Mudd**
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