STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE

Date and Time:- **Thursday 12 November 2026 at 2.00 p.m.**

Venue:- **Rotherham Town Hall, The Crofts, Moorgate Street, Rotherham. S60 2TH**

Membership:- **Councillors Clarke (Chair), Harper (Vice-Chair), Brent, T. Collingham, Cowen, Currie, Hall and McKiernan.**

Parish Council Representatives:- Mr. A. Griffin and Mr. M. Senior.

Independent Members:- Mrs. A. Bingham, Mrs. K. Penney and Ms. R. Wright.

Independent Persons:- Mr. P. Beavers and Mr. D. Roper-Newman.

The items which will be discussed are described on the agenda below and there are reports attached which give more details**.**

Rotherham Council advocates openness and transparency as part of its democratic processes. Anyone wishing to record (film or audio) the public parts of the meeting should inform the Chair or Governance Advisor of their intentions prior to the meeting.

AGENDA

1. Apologies for Absence

To receive the apologies of any Member who is unable to attend today's meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest

To receive declarations of interest from Members in respect of items listed on the agenda.

3. Exclusion of Press and Public

To consider whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting during consideration of any part of the agenda.

Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for Agenda Items 8 and 9 (Consideration of Whistleblowing Policy and Complaints) on the grounds that their appendices

involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

4. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 10th September, 2026 (Pages 3 - 11)

To consider and approve the minutes of the previous meeting held on 10th September, 2026 as a true and correct record of the proceedings and signed by the Chair.

5. LGA Debate Not Hate Survey 2026: Councillor Safety, Abuse and Intimidation (Pages 13 - 91)

To consider and notes the findings of the LGA Debate Not Hate Survey 2026.

6. Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics - "Enough is Enough" Report (Pages 93 - 158)

To consider and note the publication and principal findings of the Solace report; and the report's recommendations insofar as they relate to member conduct, member-officer relationships and governance.

7. Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Regime for Local Authorities in England - Update (Pages 159 - 163)

To consider and note the Government proposals and the current position, and receives further updates as the necessary legislation and implementation arrangements develop.

8. A Review of Concerns Raised Pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy (Pages 165 - 172)

To give consideration to a report regarding concerns raised pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy and the actions taken to address these matters.

9. Review of Complaints (Pages 173 - 180)

To give consideration to a report updating the Committee on the Complaints received against Members of the Council, and Town and Parish Councillors alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct.

10. Urgent Business

To determine any item which the Chair is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency.

The next meeting of the Standards and Ethics Committee will be held on Thursday 14 January 2027 commencing at 2.00 p.m. in Rotherham Town Hall.



JOHN EDWARDS,
Chief Executive.

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STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE
10th September, 2026

Present:- Councillor Clarke (in the Chair); Councillors Brent, Currie, Brent, Currie, Harper and McKiernan, along with Parish Councillors Griffin and Senior and Mrs. A. Bingham and Mrs. K. Penney (Independent Members).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T. Collingham and Hall.

Also in attendance were:-

Mr. S. Fletcher, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Mr. P. Beavers, Independent Person
Mr. D. Roper-Newman (Independent Person).

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

13. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved:- That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for (Minute Nos. 17 and 18 (Whistleblowing and Complaints) on the grounds that the appendices to those reports involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

14. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 11TH JUNE, 2026

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 11th June, 2026 were approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

With regards to Minute No. 5 (Civility and Respect Pledge) and the second resolution, this had not yet been undertaken, but the Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed he would be sending a further reminder to Town and Parish Councils on the benefits to encourage them to sign up to the Pledge shortly.

15. STRENGTHENING THE STANDARDS REGIME

The Deputy Monitoring Officer provided a verbal update on the latest position on proposed reforms to the Standards regime. Members were advised that the most recent update, reported in the Municipal Journal last week, indicated that Whitehall officials were continuing to explore options to strengthen the Standards Framework despite the absence of a primary legislative vehicle.

While proposed Standards reforms were not included in any specific legislation announced in the King's Speech earlier this year, the Government remained committed to wider system reform. Proposed measures included the introduction of powers to suspend Councillors for misconduct and the ability to withhold allowances where standards of behaviour fell below the required level.

Members were informed that senior Whitehall officials were considering alternative routes to progress the reforms and were continuing to engage with the Local Government sector to develop policy proposals. The intention was for the reforms to be ready for introduction when Parliamentary time allowed.

Local authorities remained keen to see the introduction of a more robust and enforceable Standards regime.

Resolved:- That the update be received and the content noted.

16. REPORT OF THE DEBATE NOT HATE WORKING GROUP

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, which outlined the work undertaken by the Standards and Ethics Committee Working Group following completion of the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate self-assessment toolkit.

The Working Group had been established in the previous year and had held a number of meetings between November 2025 and July 2026. During this period, evidence was gathered from a range of internal and external stakeholders to assess the Council's arrangements against the five principles of the Debate Not Hate framework.

The Working Group agreed to consider each of the self-assessment toolkit’s five principles in turn which were:-

- Creating supportive and informed spaces.
- Creating a risk-led approach.
- Creating an infrastructure.
- Creating connections.
- Creating a culture of safety and respect.

The Working Group used the toolkit questions to structure discussion and evidence gathering.

Members were advised that the Working Group had reviewed the Council's arrangements against the Debate Not Hate principles and found that comprehensive systems and support mechanisms were already in place. However, opportunities had been identified to improve awareness, visibility and accessibility of the support available to Members.

The Group considered the range of wellbeing and support services available, including health and safety arrangements, Member resources and support initiatives. It was concluded that these could be brought together more effectively through improved signposting, communications and the development of a dedicated Member Wellbeing Guide and Hub.

In relation to personal safety, the Group reviewed the Council's approach to supporting Members who experienced abuse, harassment or intimidation. Strong arrangements were in place, including referral pathways and support from the Police where appropriate. However, the Group identified opportunities for refresher training, greater awareness of social media risks and more consistent recording of incidents.

The Group also considered reporting and escalation arrangements and found that clear reporting routes and support mechanisms were available. It was felt that further promotion of these processes and a review of guidance could help ensure Members were fully aware of how to access support when required.

Partnership working with the Police and other relevant organisations was also reviewed. Effective liaison and information sharing arrangements were found to be in place. However, it was recognised that some incidents, while distressing for Members, did not meet the threshold for enforcement action or prosecution. The Group, therefore, considered that there was value in strengthening feedback mechanisms and continuing to work closely with partners, particularly the Police, while also supporting wider lobbying efforts to address abuse and intimidation in public life.

The Group concluded that the Council already had a strong culture of safety and respect, supported by previous cross-party commitments and clear democratic leadership. However, it was considered that further communication and awareness-raising activity would help reinforce expectations around respectful engagement and acceptable standards of behaviour.

Members were reminded that the work was not intended to prevent criticism or robust democratic debate, which remained essential parts of public life, but to ensure that abuse, harassment and intimidation were not accepted as part of public service and that appropriate support was available to those affected.

The Committee was asked to endorse the findings of the Working Group and the recommendations set out in the report. It was noted that additional detailed issues identified by the Group would be presented at a future meeting by way of an action plan. An implementation update report would be brought back to the Committee within twelve months to monitor progress against the action plan. Continued engagement with the Police, particularly in relation to potential criminal offences committed online, would also be taken forward as part of the programme of work.

Members welcomed the report and emphasised the importance of continuing to report incidents and gather robust evidence to support improvements in the protection of Councillors.

The Chair wished to place on record her thanks to the Working Group and their efforts were acknowledged, with a view that the review had identified a generally sound framework, although some refinements may be beneficial. It was also agreed that ongoing monitoring of incident numbers and emerging trends would be important for the Committee's oversight role.

Concerns were raised about the impact of abuse, intimidation and harassment directed at some Councillors. Members stressed the importance of ensuring Elected Members felt safe and supported and noted that legislative changes may be required to strengthen protections and drive further improvement.

The Committee discussed reports that, while some incidents did not meet the threshold for formal action, they nevertheless remained concerning and could have a negative impact on those affected. It was recognised that behaviour falling below the threshold for criminal or regulatory intervention could still damage relationships and discourage participation in public life.

Members were advised that a number of incidents had been referred to the Police and relevant social media platforms. However, it was noted that obtaining action from some social media platforms could be challenging. Although some content had been removed where it breached platform rules, concerns remained about the consistency of responses.

The need for greater clarity around the criteria used by both Police and social media platforms when assessing abusive or threatening content was discussed. Members felt that a better understanding of these thresholds could help Councillors recognise what should be reported and what action may realistically be expected.

Members also highlighted the importance of supporting those who were targeted by abuse and of reinforcing the message that such behaviour was unacceptable. Particular concerns were expressed regarding anonymous and fake online accounts, which could make it difficult to identify perpetrators and pursue further action. It was suggested that increased awareness, education and communication around reporting processes and available support would be beneficial.

Members discussed the importance of following established reporting procedures when experiencing abuse, harassment or concerning communications. It was noted that inappropriate social media content should be reported through the relevant platforms, while concerning emails or other direct communications should be referred through the appropriate Council channels so that advice and support could be

provided. The importance of not responding personally and allowing appropriate officers to manage such matters was stressed.

The Committee acknowledged that abuse directed at Councillors, particularly through social media, remained an ongoing concern and noted that women in public life could be disproportionately affected and expressed support for stronger legislation and protections for Elected Members and local authority staff.

The Committee shared the view that online abuse should not be taken personally.

The value of training was highlighted throughout the discussion and reference made to training on communication skills, respectful engagement and conflict management, suggesting that such learning opportunities could also be extended to Parish Councillors. It was agreed that promoting respectful communication and supporting one another were important aspects of maintaining a positive culture.

The Committee discussed standards and behaviour within Parish Councils, noting that many complaints arose from conduct issues at meetings. Members heard that a significant proportion of local Councils had signed up to the Civility and Respect Pledge with Rotherham more than exceeding the national average. There remained ambition to increase participation further. It was recognised that strong leadership and effective chairing could play an important role in promoting respectful behaviour and reducing complaints.

The Committee also discussed arrangements for recording and monitoring incidents involving threats, violence or personal attacks. It was confirmed that systems were already in place to record and manage such concerns confidentially, although there may be opportunities to improve awareness and understanding of these arrangements.

Overall, the discussion emphasised the importance of reporting concerns appropriately, promoting respectful conduct, continuing training and awareness activities and strengthening protections for Councillors and staff.

Reference was made to whether a database existed that recorded incidents/addresses of concern and the Clerk advised the Committee that such a report on the same subject relating to the violence and aggression database was to be presented to the next meeting of the Member and Democratic Panel. Details of the discussion would be fed back into the next meeting of this Committee with a further update on the reporting routes and how information was captured and linked across systems.

Discussion also took place regarding the distinction between criminal, civil and anti-social behaviour matters and at what point concerns such as false information, persistent complaints or inappropriate behaviour

became matters for Council enforcement action, anti-social behaviour processes or Police involvement.

It was pointed out that the Working Group's focus had been on criminal activity and Police-related processes. It was recognised, however, that there may be value in considering the civil and enforcement aspects further, particularly where behaviour fell below the criminal threshold, but continued to cause concern.

The Committee noted that, in some cases, it could be difficult to identify individuals responsible for online activity, limiting the options available for further action. Current arrangements were, therefore, largely focused on securing the removal of inappropriate content through social media platforms and addressing any potential criminal offences through the appropriate authorities. It was agreed that the wider civil and enforcement perspective would be explored further.

The importance of maintaining accurate records, including dates, times and supporting evidence, was emphasised throughout the discussion.

The Committee referred back to the uptake of the Civility and Respect Pledge amongst Parish Councils. It was observed that some Councils experiencing few or no conduct issues had not signed up to the pledge, while others with a history of complaints had done so.

The Committee expressed an interest in understanding whether there was any relationship between complaint levels and participation in the Pledge and were advised that Parish Council data was already included within oversight arrangements, but no analysis had yet been undertaken to identify any correlation between complaints and Pledge sign-up rates. It was agreed that this would be explored further with the Parish Liaison Officer, with trend data and findings to be reported back to a future meeting.

The Committee concluded that the matters discussed required ongoing attention and monitoring and should not be left without further action, but welcomed the activity and ongoing support to date.

Resolved:- (1) That the work undertaken by the Working Group be received and noted and the findings be endorsed regarding the comprehensiveness of the Council’s existing arrangements.

(2) That the recommendation of the Working Group that a Member Wellbeing Guide and portal be developed be approved.

(3) That the recommendation of the Working Group that a Debate not Hate Communications and Engagement Plan be developed be approved.

(4) That the content of the Action Plan for further improvements at Appendix 1 be approved.

(5) That a report as to progress in respect of the Action Plan be brought back to the Standards and Ethics Committee within twelve months.

(6) That information be provided to a future meeting following consideration by the Member and Democratic Panel of the Violence and Aggression Register.

17. A REVIEW OF CONCERNS RAISED PURSUANT TO THE WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

Consideration was given to the report and appendix presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, which provided an overview of the Whistleblowing cases which have been received over the past year.

Particular reference was made to the appendix to the report which set out clearly the description of the concerns received and action taken. From the cases there were no particular trends just one-off issues.

Unfortunately, due to staff absence updates were pending, but any particular concerns would be taken back.

Members discussed the distinction between grievance procedures and whistleblowing arrangements, questioning whether employees fully understood the difference between the two processes and when each should be used. It was noted that whistleblowing procedures should be reserved for reporting genuine concerns in the public interest rather than matters that could be addressed through management channels or personal reporting routes.

The importance of promoting awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy was highlighted, with a suggestion that additional training or communications could be delivered internally to improve understanding of the process, the protections available to individuals who raised concerns and the appropriate use of the procedure.

Concerns were also raised about the length of time taken to resolve some cases, particularly those that have remained open since 2024.

The Committee was advised that any safeguarding concerns were reviewed and addressed promptly through regular oversight arrangements. However, many cases related to employment matters, where investigations could be complex and take a considerable period to conclude.

Feedback regarding investigation timescales would be taken forward for consideration.

Clarification was also sought regarding the continued inclusion of older cases within committee reports and it was confirmed that the reporting process was cumulative, with cases remaining in the report until they were closed and subsequently removed once they fell outside the reporting period.

A suggestion was made that an analysis of whistleblowing cases be undertaken to identify how many represented genuine whistleblowing concerns. The findings could then be used to inform future training, awareness-raising activities and improvements to the reporting process. This proposal was welcomed and would be considered further.

Resolved:- That the Whistleblowing concerns raised over the previous year and the actions taken to address these matters be noted.

18. REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, detailing the progress with the handling of complaints relating to breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members and Town and Parish Councillors. The report listed the current cases of complaint and the action being taken in respect of each one.

Reference was made to each related case and recommended outcomes/actions identified were highlighted.

Discussion ensued on the findings relating to standards of behaviour, noting that a significant proportion of complaints related to conduct issues and concerns about the culture of some meetings. It was recognised that repeated instances of poor behaviour and a lack of civility could contribute to wider tensions, including interactions outside formal meetings.

Members were advised that work was ongoing to promote the Civility and Respect Pledge and to encourage participation in relevant training opportunities.

Particular concerns were raised regarding standards issues within Parish Councils where it was observed that complaints often stemmed from interpersonal disputes and longstanding local disagreements. It was suggested that a greater emphasis on early intervention, mediation and direct engagement with those involved may help address underlying issues and reduce the number of formal complaints.

The Committee also considered whether stronger local accountability and support arrangements could encourage more effective resolution of concerns before they escalated.

It was noted that the Borough Council had a statutory responsibility to maintain standards arrangements and provide a mechanism for complaints to be submitted. Whilst local resolution was encouraged

wherever possible, this was not always achievable in practice, but there was consensus that promoting positive culture, cohesion and effective working relationships remained key to reducing complaints and improving governance outcomes.

Potential future actions included further engagement through existing Parish Council networks, consideration of peer-support initiatives and exploring opportunities to share best practice and learning across the sector.

The Committee was advised that a more detailed update would be provided at a future meeting and apologies were offered for delays in progressing some actions due to staff absence.

Resolved:- That the report be received and the contents noted.

19. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Committee's consideration.

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Public Report
Standards and Ethics Committee

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Standards and Ethics Committee - 12th November 2026

Report Title
LGA Debate Not Hate Survey 2026: Councillor Safety, Abuse and Intimidation

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
N/A

Report Author(s)
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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
This report presents the principal findings of the Local Government Association Debate Not Hate Survey 2026 and considers their significance for the Standards and Ethics Committee and the effective operation of local democracy. It identifies the continuing importance of councillor safety, respectful democratic engagement and effective arrangements for reporting and responding to abuse and intimidation.

Recommendations
That the Committee:

(1) notes the findings of the LGA Debate Not Hate Survey 2026

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 – LGA Magazine Article (Oct/Nov edition)

Appendix 2 - Local Government Association, Debate Not Hate: Survey of councillors across all four UK nations 2026 Debate Not Hate: Survey of councillors across all four UK nations 2026.

Background Papers
Local Government Association website: LGA survey: Over three-quarters of councillors report feeling at personal risk while fulfilling their elected role.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
None

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

LGA Debate Not Hate Survey 2026: Councillor Safety, Abuse and Intimidation

1. Background

1.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) published the fourth annual Debate Not Hate survey on 18 September 2026. The survey was open from 17 June to 8 July 2026 and, for the first time, covered principal authority councillors across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

1.2 The survey received 1,503 responses from approximately 18,350 councillors, representing an overall response rate of 8%. The LGA expressly cautions that the findings are a snapshot of the responding group and should not necessarily be treated as representative of all councillors. The results nevertheless provide a significant national evidence base about councillors' reported experiences of personal risk, abuse and intimidation. An article which appeared in the LGA Magazine (Oct/Nov edition) about the findings of the survey is at Appendix 1, and the full survey is at Appendix 2.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The principal finding is that abuse and intimidation remain widespread. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents reported feeling at least some level of personal risk while fulfilling their role, and 75% reported experiencing some level of abuse or intimidation during the preceding 12 months.

2.2 More than half of respondents (52%) considered that abuse and intimidation had increased sharply or slightly over the preceding 12 months. The proportion was higher among respondents in England at 55%, compared with 41% in Wales and 36% in Scotland.

2.3 The survey also records serious threats. Twenty-six per cent of respondents reported having received threats of violence and 7% reported receiving a death threat. In England, 74% of councillors responding to the relevant question reported some level of abuse or intimidation during the 2026 local election campaign..

2.4 The reported effects extend beyond individual incidents. Thirty-five per cent of respondents had made, or felt they needed to make, security modifications to their home because of safety concerns arising from their role. Among respondents who were undecided about standing again or had decided not to stand, 30% said that the possibility of abuse or intimidation had influenced that decision.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 The survey provides important evidence about the effect of abuse and intimidation on councillor safety, participation and confidence in local democracy. It reinforces the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct and of distinguishing clearly between legitimate criticism, scrutiny and robust political debate, which must remain protected, and behaviour involving abuse, intimidation, harassment or threats.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 No consultation has been undertaken in relation to this report, which presents the findings of the national LGA survey for the Committee's consideration.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 No specific implementation timetable arises from the recommendation to note the survey findings. The work undertaken arising out of the Committee's Debate not Hate Working Group will be undertaken over the next 12 months and reports will be brought back to the Committee in this regard over that period.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no financial implications arising out of the recommendations within this report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 Sections 27 and 28 of the Localism Act 2011 provide the statutory basis for the Council's duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, adopt a code of conduct and maintain arrangements for dealing with allegations that members have failed to comply with that code. The survey does not itself create additional legal duties, but it is relevant evidence for the Council's governance, risk and Member-support arrangements.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 None.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 No direct implications for children and young people or vulnerable adults arise from noting the survey.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 The survey reports particularly high levels of perceived risk among female, ethnic minority, LGBT+ and disabled councillors, with more than 85% in those groups reporting some level of personal risk. Continued work should therefore

be inclusive and accessible, recognising that abuse may be targeted or experienced disproportionately.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 South Yorkshire Police and Operation Ford are important partners in this context. The survey reports that awareness of Force Elected Official Advisers in England and Wales increased to 56%, and 74% of those who had engaged with an adviser or Operation Ford found the engagement very or fairly useful.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 The principal risks are that abuse becomes normalised, incidents are under-reported, Members do not access available support, partnership responses do not meet expectations, and sustained hostility deters people from standing or remaining in elected office. Mitigation of these issues should include visible leadership, repeated communications, accessible support and reporting routes, corporate recording and thematic review, training, evidence retention, effective police liaison and periodic assurance reporting to the Committee.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

Bal Nahal, Head of Legal Services

Report Author: Stuart Fletcher, Service Manager (Commercial and Property)
01709 823523 - stuart.fletcher@rotherham.gov.uk

This report is published on the Council's website.

Debate Not Hate: Survey of councillors across all four UK nations 2026

In June 2026, the LGA launched the fourth edition of the annual Debate Not Hate survey. This year, the survey has been extended to councillors in Scotland and Northern Ireland, reflecting the four UK nations' joint commitment to promoting and defending civility in public life as expressed in the joint statement of October 2025.

18 Sep 2026
LGA

Summary

Background

In June 2026, the Local Government Association (LGA) launched the fourth edition of the annual Debate Not Hate survey. The Debate Not Hate campaign was launched following the finding in the 2022 Councillors' Census that seven in 10 councillors reported having experienced abuse or intimidation. Since 2023, the LGA has distributed an annual online survey to all councillors in England and Wales to investigate the extent to which abuse and intimidation remains rife in public life, as well as the nature and scale of abuse and intimidation. This year, the survey has been extended to councillors in Scotland and Northern Ireland, reflecting the four UK nations' joint commitment to promoting and defending civility in public life as expressed in the **joint statement of October 2025 (https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/civility-public-life-resources-councillors/uk-local-government)** (link to statement opens in a new tab).

A total of 1503 councillors across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland responded to the survey – a response rate of 8 per cent. This was slightly lower than 2025, where 11 per cent of councillors in England and Wales responded to the survey. The responding councillors did however represent a wide cross-section of political affiliations, levels of experience and demographic characteristics.

Key findings

- **Abuse and intimidation remain widespread in public life**. More than three-quarters of responding councillors (78 per cent) feel at least some level of personal risk when fulfilling their role as councillor, while three-quarters (75 per cent) reported experiencing some level of abuse or intimidation in their role over the last 12 months.
- **Abuse and intimidation appear to be worsening, particularly in England**. More than half of responding councillors (52 per cent) reported that abuse and intimidation had increased sharply or slightly over the past 12 months. This was significantly higher in England (55 per cent) than Wales (41 per cent) or Scotland (36 per cent).
- **Abuse has a tangible impact on councillors' lives and democratic participation.** More than a third of respondents (35 per cent) had made, or felt they needed to make, security modifications to their home because of safety concerns due to their role. Furthermore, among responding councillors who were undecided about standing again or had decided not to stand, 30 per cent said the possibility of abuse or intimidation had influenced their decision.
- **Police reporting is relatively uncommon, and satisfaction is mixed.** A quarter of respondents (25 per cent) had reported an incident of abuse or intimidation experienced in their role to the police and of those that had, 34 per cent felt the issue had been addressed to a great or moderate extent whilst 33 per cent felt it hadn’t been addressed at all.
- **Operation Ford is showing signs of success.** More than half of all respondents in England and Wales (56 per cent) were aware of

the Force Elected Officials Adviser post – an increase from 40 per cent last year. Awareness was particularly high in Scotland, at 76 per cent. Of those who had engaged with the programme, three-quarters (74 per cent) found the engagement very or fairly useful.

Introduction

The Local Government Association launched its “Debate Not Hate” campaign in 2022 following rising concerns about abuse and intimidation in public life, including findings in the 2022 Councillors’ Census that seven in 10 councillors reported having experienced abuse or intimidation. The campaign aims to raise awareness of the damaging impact of intimidation on local democracy and lobby for changes to relevant legislation and improved protections for councillors.

The following survey was the fourth edition of the Debate Not Hate survey – the first having taken place in June 2023 – and aimed to understand the extent to which abuse and intimidation has changed since both the 2022 Councillors’ Census and since the last three editions of the survey, as well as the nature of this abuse and intimidation in greater detail.

Methodology

The LGA’s Research and Information Team sent an online survey to all councillors of all political affiliations belonging to principal authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The survey was open for three weeks, from 17 June to 8 July 2026.

Around 18,350 councillors were invited to take part in the survey, and a total of 1503 responses were received. This represents a response rate of 8 per cent. This level of response means that these respondents should not necessarily be taken to be widely representative of the views of all councillors. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

The response rate this year was slightly lower than previous years, at 8 per cent of councillors in England and Wales, compared to 11 per cent in 2025 and 10 per cent in 2024.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting findings for Northern Ireland due to the small number of respondents (n=26). The sample size is insufficient to support robust statistical comparisons with other UK nations, and any apparent differences should be treated as indicative only.

In addition, the following should be considered when interpreting the findings of this survey:

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. Please note that bases can vary throughout the survey, because certain questions were not relevant to all respondents they were therefore not required to answer them.
- Throughout the report, percentages may not appear to add up to exactly 100 per cent due to rounding.
- Demographic breakdowns have been included where the sample size is sufficient for comparison. Statistical significance is tested at a 95 per cent confidence interval.
- The * icon denotes a value that is above zero but less than 0.5 per cent, which would otherwise be rounded down to zero.
- Throughout the report, the term ‘abuse’ is used to describe abuse and intimidation.
- Time-series data for 2026 excludes respondents from Scotland and Northern Ireland to maintain consistency with previous years. Where this is the case, this is denoted by a black shaded table.

Debate Not Hate Survey 2026

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

Respondent profiling

Response rate by nation

This year, the Debate Not Hate survey was expanded beyond England and Wales to include Scotland and Northern Ireland. Table 1 explores the survey response rate by nation, and shows that the highest level of response was received from councillors in Scotland (10 per cent),

followed by Wales (9 per cent), England (8 per cent), and finally Northern Ireland, with a response rate of 6 per cent (26 respondents in total).

Table 1: Response rate by nation

	Number of councillors	Number of responses	Response rate
England	15,429	1247	8%
Wales	1,234	111	9%
Scotland	1,226	119	10%
Northern Ireland	462	26	6%
Total	**18,351**	**1,503**	**8%**

Base: all respondents (1503). *The number of English councillors is lower than the number of English seats, accounting for individuals that hold more than one seat.*

Political affiliation

Respondents were asked to indicate their political affiliation. Table 2, Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 display for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively, the political affiliation of survey respondents in comparison to the overall political distribution of councillors in each nation. Each table indicates that the sample of survey respondents reflects a broad distribution of political affiliations across each nation, however, there are cases of overrepresentation and underrepresentation of certain political affiliations.

Among respondents in England, as shown in Table 2, the survey sample reflects a slight overrepresentation of Reform UK councillors (22 per cent, compared to 14 per cent nationally), and an underrepresentation

of Conservative councillors (11 per cent, compared to 22 per cent nationally).

Table 2: Political affiliation: England

	Percentage of responses	Percentage of councillors
Labour	24%	24%
Reform UK	22%	14%
Liberal Democrats	21%	20%
Green Party	11%	8%
Conservatives	11%	22%
Independent or other	11%	12%

Base: all respondents (1247).

The sample of Welsh councillors, as shown in Table 3, is closely in line with the national distribution, noting however a slight underrepresentation of Conservative and Reform UK councillors and a slight overrepresentation of Green Party councillors.

Table 3: Political affiliation: Wales

	Percentage of responses	Percentage of councillors
Labour	41%	39%
Independent or other	29%	28%

Plaid Cymru	15%	16%
Liberal Democrats	7%	6%
Conservatives	5%	8%
Green Party	4%	1%
Reform UK	0%	2%

Base: all respondents (111).

Table 4 explores the distribution among the sample of Scottish councillor respondents. The table indicates an overrepresentation of SNP councillors (51 per cent of the sample, compared to 34 per cent nationally), and an underrepresentation of Scottish Labour, Independent, and Scottish Conservative and Unionist councillors.

Table 4: Political affiliation: Scotland

	Percentage of responses	**Percentage of councillors**
Scottish National Party (SNP)	51%	34%
Scottish Labour	15%	21%
Independent or other	14%	19%
Scottish Conservative and Unionist	10%	14%
Scottish Liberal Democrats	5%	7%

Scottish Greens	3%	3%
Reform UK	2%	2%

Base: all respondents (119).

As shown in Table 5, the small sample of councillors in Northern Ireland is largely in line with the overall national distribution.

Table 5: Political affiliation: Northern Ireland

	Percentage of responses	**Percentage of councillors**
Sinn Fein	31% (8)	31%
Democratic Unionist Party	23% (6)	26%
Independent/other	20% (5)	10%
Alliance	12% (3)	14%
Ulster Unionist Party	12% (3)	11%
Social Democratic and Labour Party	4% (1)	8%

Base: all respondents (26).

Time in post

Respondents were then asked how long they had been serving as a councillor. The survey was launched just over a month after a set of local elections in England, held on 7 May 2026. On this date, national elections were held in Wales for the Senedd, and in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament. No elections were held in Northern Ireland.

As shown in Table 6, almost a third of respondent councillors from England (29 per cent) had been serving less than a year or had been newly elected in May. This proportion is much higher than in Scotland (0 per cent) and Wales (2 per cent), reflecting the fact that local elections only took place in England. Twenty-three per cent of respondents from Northern Ireland had been serving less than a year (change of seat holder can take place outside of the election cycle, through co-option or by-election). The vast majority of respondents from Wales and Scotland had been serving at least two years, with over half of all respondents from both nations having served at least five years.

Table 6: Length of time serving as a councillor

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Less than one year / newly elected in May	**25%**	29%	2%	0%	23% (6)
1 to <2 years	**8%**	8%	4%	1%	0% (0)
2 to <5 years	**25%**	23%	42%	41%	12% (3)
5 years or more	**42%**	39%	52%	58%	65% (17)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1503), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119), NI (26).

Role in May 2026 elections: England, Scotland and Wales

Respondents from England, Scotland and Wales were asked to indicate their role in the May 2026 local, regional or national elections. Among respondents in England, where local and regional elections took place, 48 per cent of respondents were candidates, 7 per cent were election agents, 33 per cent were campaigners and 2 per cent held another role not listed, whilst 27 per cent did not participate at all. Among respondents in Scotland and Wales, the proportion of those who were

candidates was much lower than England, reflecting that for these two nations, there were national rather than local elections. As such, 19 per cent of respondents in Wales were candidates, whilst 37 per cent campaigned, 5 per cent had another type of role, and 41 per cent did not participate at all. For respondents in Scotland, 13 per cent were candidates, 6 per cent were election agents, 68 per cent were campaigners, 6 per cent held another type of role, and 18 per cent did not participate at all. The full results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Role in May 2026 local, regional or national elections

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland
Election candidate	**43%**	48%	19%	13%
Election agent	**7%**	7%	0%	6%
Election campaigner	**36%**	33%	37%	68%
Other, please specify	**3%**	2%	5%	6%
None of the above – I did not participate in any way in the May 2026 elections	**27%**	27%	41%	18%

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1477), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Role in most recent elections: Northern Ireland

As there were no elections in May 2026 in Northern Ireland, respondents within Northern Ireland were asked about their role in the most recent local and/or national elections. As shown in Table 8, more than two-thirds of respondents (69 per cent) were candidates in these elections, 42 per cent were campaigners, and one respondent was an election agent.

Table 8: Role in most recent local and/or national elections

	Northern Ireland
Election candidate	69% (18)
Election agent	4% (1)
Election campaigner	42% (11)
Other, please specify	0% (0)
None of the above – I did not participate in any way in the most recent local/national elections	0% (0)

Base: all respondents; NI (26). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Feeling at risk as a councillor

Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they felt personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor. Across all councillors surveyed, more than three-quarters (78 per cent) felt some level of risk (frequently, occasionally, or rarely), with 8 per cent frequently feeling at risk and 27 per cent occasionally feeling at risk. The full results are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: How often, if at all, do you feel personally at risk when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Some level of risk	**78%**	**78%**	**70%**	**81%**	**92% (24)**
Frequently	**8%**	8%	7%	8%	12% (3)

Occasionally	**27%**	27%	31%	26%	31% (8)
Rarely	**43%**	43%	32%	47%	50% (13)
Never	**22%**	22%	30%	19%	8% (2)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1503), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119), NI (26).

This question was asked across all four editions of the Debate Not Hate survey, and the results are shown in Table 10. For time-series comparisons, 2026 results are based on respondents from England and Wales only to ensure comparability with previous years. The table shows that in 2026 more than three quarters of respondents (77 per cent) felt some level of risk, either frequently, occasionally or rarely. This is a 4-percentage point increase compared to 2025. In addition, the proportion of those feeling frequently at risk has risen from 5 per cent to 8 per cent from 2025 to 2026.

Table 10: How often, if at all, do you feel personally at risk when fulfilling your role as a councillor? *(England and Wales only)*

	2023 survey	**2024 survey**	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
Some level of risk	**82%**	**74%**	**73%**	**77%**
Frequently	8%	4%	5%	8%
Occasionally	33%	27%	25%	27%
Rarely	41%	43%	43%	42%
Never	18%	26%	27%	23%

Base: all respondents; ‘23 (814), ‘24 (1734), ‘25 (1861), ‘26 (1358).

Table 11 shows this question broken down by different demographic groups. The table shows that female respondents are significantly more likely to feel at risk than their male counterparts, with 87 per cent of female respondents reporting feeling some level of risk compared to 71 per cent of male respondents. Ethnic minority respondents are also significantly more likely to feel at risk as reported by 86 per cent of respondents, compared to 77 per cent of white respondents. In addition, 87 per cent of LGBT+ respondents reported feeling at risk compared to 77 per cent of heterosexual respondents, and 85 per cent of disabled respondents felt at risk compared to 75 per cent of non-disabled respondents – again, both significant comparisons. The full results are shown in Table 11 and Figure 1.

Table 11: How often, if at all, do you feel personally at risk when fulfilling your role as a councillor? – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, disability status*

	Some level of risk (frequently, occasionally, rarely)
Male	71%
Female	87%
White	77%
Ethnic minority	86%
Heterosexual	77%
LGBT+	87%
Non-disabled people	75%

Disabled people	85%

Base: all respondents; male (838), female (640), white (1308), ethnic minorities (154), heterosexual (1273), LGBT+ (133), non-disabled (1137), disabled (275).

Figure 1: Feeling personally at risk when fulfilling role as councillor frequently, occasionally, or rarely – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, disability status*

Base: all respondents; male (838), female (640), white (1308), ethnic minorities (154), heterosexual (1273), LGBT+ (133), non-disabled (1137), disabled (275).

Support from the local authority

Respondents were then asked how effective or not they thought their authority's arrangements were for protecting them in their role as councillor. Table 12 shows that 57 per cent of respondents felt that their authority's arrangements were very or fairly effective. Nineteen per cent felt that the arrangements were not very effective, whilst 10 per cent felt that they were not at all effective. A further 14 per cent were unsure. Minor differences can be observed between the UK nations, however these differences were not statistically significant. The full results are shown in Table 12.

As shown in Table 13, this year's results were closely in line with 2024 and 2025.

Table 12: How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Very or fairly effective	**57%**	**57%**	**53%**	**63%**	**45% (9)**

Very effective	**14%**	13%	20%	15%	15% (3)
Fairly effective	**43%**	44%	33%	48%	30% (6)
Not very effective	**19%**	18%	19%	21%	20% (4)
Not at all effective	**10%**	10%	10%	8%	20% (4)
Don’t know	**14%**	14%	17%	8%	15% (3)

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year; Tot. (1128), Eng. (880), Wal. (109), Scot. (119), NI (20).

Table 13: How effective or not do you think are your authority’s arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor? *(England and Wales only)*

	2023 survey	**2024 survey**	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
Very or fairly effective	**44%**	**57%**	**58%**	**57%**
Very effective	9%	14%	14%	14%
Fairly effective	34%	43%	44%	43%
Not very effective	25%	17%	18%	18%
Not at all effective	15%	8%	8%	10%
Don’t know	17%	18%	16%	14%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year: 2023 (654), 2024 (1531), 2025 (1598), 2026 (989).

Abuse and intimidation during campaign periods

Respondents in England, Wales and Scotland were asked how often, if at all, they experienced abuse or intimidation during this year's election campaign period. Respondents in Northern Ireland were asked this same question but relating to their most recent election. In all cases, the question was asked not only to candidates, but also campaigners, agents, and those with any other role in the electoral campaign.

The results for England, Wales and Scotland are shown in Table 14. The table shows that 75 per cent of respondents within England that participated in some way in the elections were faced with some level of abuse (frequently, occasionally, or rarely), whilst around two-thirds of respondents who participated in the elections from Wales (66 per cent) and Scotland (68 per cent) experienced some form of abuse or intimidation during the campaign period. It should be noted that the elections differed across the three nations, with council elections taking place in England and devolved parliamentary elections taking place in Wales and Scotland. These differences in electoral context may have influenced respondents' experiences, although the differences observed between the nations were not statistically significant.

Table 14: How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's local, regional or national campaign period?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland
Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, or rarely)	**74%**	**75%**	**66%**	**68%**
Frequently	**11%**	12%	3%	11%
Occasionally	**31%**	32%	34%	26%

Rarely	**32%**	32%	29%	32%
Never	**26%**	25%	34%	32%

Base: all respondents who participated in May 2026 elections; Tot. (1077), Eng. (914), Wal. (65), Scot. (98).

Table 15 displays the results for this question among respondents in Northern Ireland, relating to the most recent local and/or national elections. The table shows that 81 per cent of respondents experienced a level of abuse and intimidation during the most recent elections. For around half of these, the abuse was rare, whilst about a fifth of those who experienced abuse experienced it frequently (four respondents out of 21). It must be stated that due to the small sample size, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Table 15: How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during the most recent local and/or national election campaign period?

	Northern Ireland
Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, or rarely)	**81% (21)**
Frequently	15% (4)
Occasionally	27% (7)
Rarely	38% (10)
Never	19% (5)

Base: all respondents who participated in most recent elections; NI (26).

Abuse and intimidation over the last 12 months

Respondents who had served as a councillor for at least a year were then asked how often, if at all, they had experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor over the last 12 months.

The results show that three-quarters of respondents (75 per cent) had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation in their role as councillor over the last 12 months, including 14 per cent who had experienced it frequently and 29 per cent who had experienced it occasionally. This was slightly higher among respondents within Scotland, with 80 per cent experiencing a level of abuse or intimidation in the last 12 months, and slightly lower among respondents within Wales at 69 per cent, however these differences were not statistically significant.

Among the 20 respondents within Northern Ireland, 80 per cent (16 respondents) had experienced a level of abuse or intimidation, with around half of those respondents experiencing it rarely (9 respondents). The full results are shown in Table 16.

Table 16: Over the last 12 months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, or rarely)	**75%**	**75%**	**69%**	**80%**	**80% (16)**
Frequently	**14%**	14%	12%	15%	20% (4)
Occasionally	**29%**	31%	25%	26%	15% (3)

Rarely	**32%**	31%	32%	39%	45% (9)
Never	**25%**	25%	31%	20%	20% (4)

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year; Tot. (1128), Eng. (880), Wal. (109), Scot. (119), NI (20).

As shown in Table 24, the level of abuse and intimidation experienced over the past 12 months remains in line with levels observed in 2024 and 2025.

Table 17: Over the last 12 months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor? *(England and Wales only)*

	2023 survey	**2024 survey**	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, or rarely)	**81%**	**73%**	**72%**	**74%**
Frequently	20%	9%	10%	13%
Occasionally	34%	31%	28%	30%
Rarely	27%	33%	34%	31%
Never	19%	27%	28%	26%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year; 2023 (655), 2024 (1531), 2025 (1598), 2026 (989).

Table 18 explores how the level of abuse or intimidation received in the councillor role over the past 12 months differs among demographic groups. The table shows that female respondents were significantly more likely than male respondents to have experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as councillor over the past 12 months, as reported by 80 per cent of female respondents compared to 70 per cent of male respondents. Significant differences were also observed by ethnicity, sexuality and disability status. Eighty-nine per cent of respondents from an ethnic minority background had suffered abuse or intimidation in their role over the past year compared to 74 per cent of white respondents. Eighty-eight per cent of LGBT+ respondents had suffered abuse or intimidation in their role over the past year compared to 73 per cent of heterosexual respondents, whilst 85 per cent of disabled respondents had, compared to 71 per cent of non-disabled respondents.

Table 18: Over the last 12 months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor? – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, disability status*

	Some level of abuse or intimidation (frequently, occasionally, rarely)
Male	70%
Female	80%
White	74%
Ethnic minority	89%
Heterosexual	73%
LGBT+	88%

Non-disabled people	71%
Disabled people	85%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year; male (608), female (503), white (1016), ethnic minorities (85), heterosexual (967), LGBT+ (98), non-disabled (841), disabled (226).

Channels of abuse or intimidation

Respondents who had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation were asked where this had occurred. Respondents were able to select more than one option, to reflect that they may have experienced multiple instances of abuse or intimidation. Overall, the most frequently reported channels of abuse or intimidation were public online platforms and in-person, each reported by 67 per cent of respondents. Twenty-three per cent reported receiving abuse or intimidation privately by phone or direct messaging channels including text, email, or WhatsApp, whilst 5 per cent reported receiving abuse or intimidation by post.

A key difference was observed between the UK nations, as respondents in England were significantly more likely to suffer abuse and intimidation in person compared to those in Wales and Scotland.

Respondents who indicated another channel of abuse or intimidation not listed had the opportunity to specify what this was. Responses included:

- Abuse or intimidation from other councillors or politicians, including at council meetings
- Protests at council meetings or surgeries
- Vandalism or criminal damage to house or car
- Complaints, including false complaints, to police, standards committee, or employer
- Abuse or intimidation on the doorstep whilst campaigning
- Coverage in the local or mainstream media
- Freedom of information requests
- Stickers or boards placed in public

The full results for this question are shown in Table 19.

Table 19: Where did the abuse and/or intimidation occur?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Publicly online, inc. social media, open forums	**67%**	65%	74%	77%	86% (19)
In person	**67%**	70%	57%	49%	41% (9)
Privately by phone, inc. voice message, through direct messaging, text, email, WhatsApp	**23%**	21%	29%	30%	36% (8)
By post, inc. messages and/or articles put through letterbox	**5%**	5%	1%	5%	9% (2)
Other (please specify)	**6%**	6%	4%	5%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents who reported receiving abuse; Tot. (1160), Eng. (959), Wal. (82), Scot. (97), NI (22).

As shown in Table 20, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of respondents in England and Wales who have experienced abuse and intimidation in person this year in comparison to last year, rising from 59 per cent to 69 per cent.

Table 20: Where did the abuse and/or intimidation occur?*(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	2026 survey
In person	59%	69%
Publicly online, inc. social media platforms or open forums	64%	66%
Privately by phone, voice message, or through direct messaging inc. text, email, WhatsApp	25%	21%
By post: inc. messages and/or articles put through letterbox	6%	5%
Other (please specify)	10%	6%

Base: all respondents who reported receiving abuse; 2025 (1352), 2026 (1041). Please note: respondents could select more than one option. Question was introduced in 2025.

Changes over the past 12 months

Respondents serving for at least a year who reported that they had experienced some level of abuse or intimidation in their capacity as councillor over the last 12 months were then asked how the volume of abuse or intimidation had changed over the past 12 months. Just over half of all respondents (52 per cent) reported that the volume of abuse and intimidation received had increased, including 25 per cent who reported that it had increased sharply. Thirty-eight per cent reported that the volume had stayed about the same, whilst 7 per cent reported that the volume had decreased either slightly or sharply. Respondents in England were significantly more likely to report that abuse and intimidation had increased over the last 12 months, as reported by 55 per cent of respondents in England compared to 41 per cent in Wales and 36 per cent in Scotland. The full results are shown in Table 21.

Table 21: And thinking about the last 12 months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ire.
It has sharply or slightly increased	**52%**	**55%**	**41%**	**36%**	**38% (6)**
It has sharply increased	**25%**	27%	19%	12%	25% (4)
It has slightly increased	**27%**	28%	23%	24%	13% (2)
It has stayed about the same	**38%**	35%	51%	54%	38% (6)
It has slightly decreased	**5%**	5%	5%	5%	6% (1)
It has sharply decreased	**2%**	2%	0%	3%	13% (2)
Don’t know	**3%**	3%	3%	2%	6% (1)

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year who had experienced some level of abuse over the past 12 months; Tot. (843), Eng. (657), Wal. (75), Scot. (95), NI (16).

Table 22 compares this year’s results with 2024 and 2025. There has been a significant increase from 2025 to 2026 in the proportion of respondents who reported that abuse and intimidation had increased either sharply or slightly over the past 12 months; last year, 46 per cent

reported that they had experienced and increase, but this rises to 55 per cent this year. This increase is also observed in the proportion who felt specifically that abuse and intimidation had risen sharply over the last 12 months, rising from 17 per cent last year to 27 per cent this year.

Table 22: And thinking about the last 12 months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed? *(England and Wales only)*

	2024 survey	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
It has sharply or slightly increased	**49%**	**46%**	**55%**
It has sharply increased	14%	17%	27%
It has slightly increased	35%	30%	28%
It has stayed about the same	42%	40%	37%
It has slightly decreased	4%	5%	5%
It has sharply decreased	1%	4%	2%
Don’t know	3%	4%	1%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year who had experienced some level of abuse over the past 12 months; 2024 (1116), 2025 (1148), 2026 (719).

When broken down demographically, female respondents were significantly more likely to report that the volume of abuse or intimidation had increased, with 56 per cent noticing an increase

compared to 48 per cent of male respondents. Minor differences were observed by ethnicity and disability status, however, these were not statistically significant. The full breakdown is shown in Table 23.

Table 23: And thinking about the last 12 months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed? – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, disability status*

	Sharply or slightly increased
Male	48%
Female	56%
White	52%
Ethnic minority	55%
Heterosexual	51%
LGBT+	51%
Non-disabled people	50%
Disabled people	57%

Base: all respondents serving for at least a year who had experienced some level of abuse; male (428), female (403), white (747), ethnic minorities (75), heterosexual (707), LGBT+ (86), non-disabled (599), disabled (193).

Involvement of the police

Respondents were asked if they had ever reported an incident of abuse experienced in their capacity as councillor to the police. Twenty-five per cent of respondents answered that they had reported an incident to the police, whilst 73 per cent had not. This was higher in Scotland than in England, with 33 per cent of respondents in Scotland having reported an incident to the police, compared with 24 per cent in England. There was a slight increase among respondents in Wales compared to England, however this difference was not statistically significant. Lower levels were observed among respondents from Northern Ireland, however, the recurring caveat about sample size applies here. The full results for this question are shown in Table 24.

Table 24: Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as councillor?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes	**25%**	24%	28%	33%	19% (5)
No	**73%**	74%	69%	63%	77% (20)
Don’t know	**2%**	2%	3%	4%	4% (1)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1503), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119), NI (26).

As shown in Table 25, the proportion of respondents who had reported an incident to the police remained in line with 2024 and 2025.

Table 25: Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as councillor? *(England and Wales only)*

	2024 survey	2025 survey	2026 survey

Yes	23%	21%	24%
No	76%	77%	74%
Prefer not to say	2%	2%	2%

Base: all respondents; 2024 (1724), 2025 (1850), 2026 (1358).

Table 26 shows a demographic breakdown of this question. The table shows that a third of female respondents (32 per cent) had reported an incident to the police compared to a fifth (20 per cent) of male respondents, whilst 31 per cent of disabled respondents had reported an incident compared to 23 per cent of non-disabled respondents. In addition, a slight difference was observed between ethnic minority respondents and white respondents, as well as between LGBT+ respondents and heterosexual respondents, however these differences were not statistically significant. The full results are shown in Table 26.

Table 26: Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as councillor? – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, disability status*

	Has reported an incident to the police
Male	20%
Female	32%
White	25%
Ethnic minority	29%
Heterosexual	25%

LGBT+	29%
Non-disabled people	23%
Disabled people	31%

Base: all respondents; male (838), female (640), white (1308), ethnic minorities (154), heterosexual (1273), LGBT+ (133), non-disabled (1137), disabled (275).

Police response

Respondents who had reported an issue to the police were then asked the extent to which the policing response addressed the issue of abuse or intimidation that had been reported. Experiences were mixed, as 16 per cent reported that the response addressed the issue to a great extent, whilst 18 per cent felt it was addressed to a moderate extent, and a further 30 per cent felt to a small extent. Thirty-three per cent of respondents reported that the policing response did not at all address the issue, and a further 3 per cent were unsure. The full results are shown in Table 27.

Table 27: To what extent, if at all, did the policing response address the issue of abuse or intimidation that you reported?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
To a great or moderate extent	**34%**	**29%**	**45% (14)**	**56% (22)**	**60% (3)**
To a great extent	**16%**	13%	19% (6)	33% (13)	40% (2)
To a moderate extent	**18%**	16%	26% (8)	23% (9)	20% (1)

To a small extent	**30%**	31%	32% (10)	18% (7)	20% (1)
Not at all	**33%**	37%	19% (6)	18% (7)	0% (0)
Don’t know	**3%**	2%	3% (1)	8% (3)	20% (1)

Base: all respondents who reported an issue to the police; Tot. (374), Eng. (299), Wal. (31), Scot. (39), NI (5).

Among those who had reported an issue of abuse or intimidation to the police, the proportion who felt that the policing response addressed the issue to a great or moderate extent saw a decrease this year compared to last year, falling from 39 per cent to 31 per cent. This is shown in Table 28.

Table 28: To what extent, if at all, did the policing response address the issue of abuse or intimidation that you reported? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	**2026 survey**
To a great or moderate extent	**39%**	**31%**
To a great extent	18%	14%
To a moderate extent	21%	17%
To a small extent	27%	32%
Not at all	30%	35%
Don’t know	4%	2%

Base: all respondents who reported an issue to the police; 2025 (397), 2026 (330).

Forms of abuse or intimidation

To understand the forms that abuse or intimidation may take, respondents were asked to indicate whether they or someone closely connected with them had been the victim of a specific range of violent activities due to the respondent's role as councillor. Respondents were presented with two questions, each containing a list of types of abuse and intimidation. Respondents could choose whether they personally had experienced it, or whether someone closely connected to them had experienced it specifically as a result of the respondent's role as a councillor.

Against the respondent themselves

Of all respondents who answered this question, 10 per cent reported experiencing a threat of damage to their own property, whilst 5 per cent reported being a victim of actual damage to their own property. A quarter (26 per cent) had suffered a threat of violence against themselves, whilst 2 per cent had experienced actual violence, and a further 7 per cent had suffered a death threat against themselves. The results for this part of the question are shown in Table 29.

Table 29: Due to your role as councillor, have you ever experienced any of the following?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Threat of damage to property	**10%**	9%	11%	13%	8% (2)
Actual damage to property	**5%**	5%	4%	1%	8% (2)
Threat of violence	**26%**	25%	23%	29%	50% (12)

Actual violence	**2%**	2%	3%	2%	4% (1)
Threat of death	**7%**	6%	9%	10%	25% (6)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1407), Eng. (1169), Wal. (103), Scot. (111), NI (24).

Table 30 compares this year's responses with 2024 and 2025, and indicates that responses remained broadly in line with previous years.

Table 30: Due to your role as councillor, have you ever experienced any of the following? *(England and Wales only)*

	2024 survey	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
Threat of damage to property	10%	8%	10%
Actual damage to property	5%	5%	5%
Threat of violence	22%	21%	25%
Actual violence	3%	3%	2%
Threat of death	5%	5%	6%

Base: all respondents; 2024 (1617), 2025 (1739), 2026 (1272). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Table 31 contains the results for the second part of the question. The table shows that more than half of all respondents (57 per cent) had suffered the publication of untrue or misleading information about their own personal or political conduct or character. Thirteen per cent had suffered the publication of private information, whilst a further 13 per cent had suffered abuse relating to a protected characteristic. Eight per

cent had had a member of the public attend their home in an intimidatory manner, whilst 7 per cent had been the victim of stalking, and 3 per cent had been the victim of sexual harassment.

The full results, including breakdown at national level, are shown in Table 31.

Table 31: And due to your role as councillor, have you ever experienced any of the following?

	TOTAL	Eng.	Wales	Scot.	N. Ire.
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political OR personal** conduct or character	**57%**	**56%**	**57%**	**65%**	**71% (17)**
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political** conduct or character	**48%**	47%	49%	58%	67% (16)
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **personal** conduct or character	**44%**	42%	46%	54%	46% (11)
Inappropriate publication of private information	**13%**	13%	12%	14%	17% (4)
Abuse related to a protected characteristic	**13%**	12%	15%	19%	4% (1)
A member of the public attending your home in a manner you consider intimidatory or inappropriate	**8%**	7%	11%	13%	17% (4)

Stalking	**7%**	7%	7%	8%	0% (0)
Sexual harassment	**3%**	2%	3%	5%	4% (1)
A public protest at your home	**1%**	2%	0%	0%	0% (0)
Other (please specify)	**6%**	6%	6%	10%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1417), Eng. (1178), Wal. (102), Scot. (113), NI (24).

As shown in Table 32, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of respondents reporting that they have experienced the publication of untrue or misleading information about either their personal or political character. Although the increases are not statistically significant, the results hint at a higher reported prevalence of this form of abuse in 2026 than in 2025.

Table 32: And due to your role as councillor, have you ever experienced any of the following? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	**2026 survey**
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political OR personal** conduct or character	52%	56%
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political** conduct or character	44%	47%
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **personal** conduct or character	41%	43%

Inappropriate publication of private information	11%	13%
Abuse related to a protected characteristic	8%	13%
A member of the public attending your home in a manner you consider intimidatory or inappropriate	8%	8%
Stalking	5%	7%
Sexual harassment	2%	2%
A public protest at your home	1%	1%
Other (please specify)	6%	6%

Base: all respondents; 2025 (1784), 2026 (1280).

Against someone closely connected to them

As well as experiences suffered personally by the respondent, the survey asked about experiences of those closely connected to the respondent, that directly related to the respondent's role as a councillor.

Five per cent of respondents indicated that due to their own role as a councillor, someone closely connected to them had suffered a threat of damage to property, whilst 3 per cent reported that someone closely connected to them had suffered actual damage to their property. Nine per cent indicated that someone closely connected to them had suffered a threat of violence, whilst 1 per cent reported that someone had suffered actual violence, and 3 per cent reported that someone had suffered a threat of death. The results for this part of the question are shown in Table 33.

Table 33: Due to your role as councillor, has a person closely connected to you ever experienced any of the following?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Threat of damage to property	**5%**	5%	5%	4%	0% (0)
Actual damage to property	**3%**	3%	4%	0%	0% (0)
Threat of violence	**9%**	10%	6%	8%	13% (3)
Actual violence	**1%**	2%	0%	0%	0% (0)
Threat of death	**3%**	3%	0%	4%	8% (2)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1407), Eng. (1169), Wal. (103), Scot. (111), NI (24).

Table 34 compares this year's responses with 2024 and 2025. Responses remained broadly in line with previous years.

Table 34: Due to your role as councillor, has a person closely connected to you ever experienced any of the following? *(England and Wales only)*

	2024 survey	2025 survey	2026 survey
Threat of damage to property	5%	4%	5%
Actual damage to property	3%	2%	3%
Threat of violence	8%	9%	9%
Actual violence	1%	1%	1%

Threat of death	2%	2%	3%

Base: all respondents; 2024 (1617), 2025 (1739), 2026 (1272). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Table 35 displays the second part of the question, and demonstrates that 13 per cent of respondents had suffered the publication of untrue information about the personal or political conduct of someone closely connected to them. Four per cent had suffered the inappropriate publication of private information relating to someone closely connected to them, whilst a further 4 per cent had experienced someone closely connected to them suffer abuse relating to a protected characteristic due to the respondent's role as a councillor. Furthermore, 2 per cent had experienced the stalking of someone closely connected to them. The full results for this question, including a national breakdown, are contained in Table 35.

Table 35: And due to your role as councillor, has a person closely connected to you ever experienced any of the following?

	TOTAL	**Eng.**	**Wales**	**Scot.**	**N. Ire.**
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political OR personal** conduct or character	**13%**	**14%**	**7%**	**12%**	**17% (4)**
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political** conduct or character	**10%**	10%	2%	5%	17% (4)
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **personal** conduct or character	**11%**	11%	6%	10%	8% (2)

Inappropriate publication of private information	**4%**	4%	0%	4%	4% (1)
Abuse related to a protected characteristic	**4%**	4%	2%	3%	0% (0)
A member of the public attending your home in a manner you consider intimidatory or inappropriate	**2%**	2%	0%	0%	8% (2)
Stalking	**2%**	2%	1%	1%	0% (0)
Sexual harassment	**0%**	0%	1%	0%	0% (0)
A public protest at your home	**1%**	2%	2%	0%	0% (0)
Other (please specify)	**1%**	1%	0%	1%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1417), Eng. (1178), Wal. (102), Scot. (113), NI (24).

As shown in Table 36, this year's results were closely in line with last year.

Table 36: And due to your role as councillor, has a person closely connected to you ever experienced any of the following? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	**2026 survey**

Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political OR personal** conduct or character	13%	13%
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **political** conduct or character	10%	10%
Publication of untrue/misleading information about your **personal** conduct or character	11%	11%
Inappropriate publication of private information	4%	4%
Abuse related to a protected characteristic	3%	4%
A member of the public attending your home in a manner you consider intimidatory or inappropriate	3%	2%
Stalking	1%	2%
Sexual harassment	1%	0%
A public protest at your home	1%	2%
Other (please specify)	2%	1%

Base: all respondents; 2025 (1784), 2026 (1280).

Protected characteristics

Protected characteristics are a list of characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010, for which it is against the law to discriminate against somebody. Respondents who reported that they had experienced an incident relating to a protected characteristic had the opportunity to specify which characteristic(s) it concerned.

Those that indicated in the previous question (explored in Table 31 and Table 35) that they or someone closely connected to them had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to a protected characteristic

were asked which protected characteristic this related to.

The full results from this question are shown in Table 37. The results show that 33 per cent suffered abuse relating to sex, whilst 25 per cent suffered abuse relating to race. Twenty-two per cent suffered abuse relating to their sexual orientation, whilst a further 22 per cent suffered abuse relating to their religion or belief, and 21 per cent suffered abuse relating to their disability status. Eighteen per cent suffered abuse relating to age, whilst 7 per cent received abuse relating to their gender reassignment status, 2 per cent due to their marital or civil partnership status, and 1 per cent due to pregnancy or maternity leave.

Table 37: Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Sex	**33%**	29%	38% (6)	55% (12)	100% (1)
Race (inc. colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin)	**25%**	25%	13% (2)	32% (7)	0% (0)
Sexual orientation	**22%**	24%	13% (2)	18% (4)	0% (0)
Religion or belief	**22%**	24%	6% (1)	18% (4)	0% (0)
Disability	**21%**	23%	0%	18% (4)	0% (0)
Age	**18%**	17%	31% (5)	23% (5)	0% (0)
Gender reassignment	**7%**	7%	6% (1)	9% (2)	0% (0)

Being married or in a civil partnership	**2%**	2%	6% (1)	5% (1)	0% (0)
Being pregnant or on maternity leave	**1%**	0%	6% (1)	5% (1)	0% (0)
Prefer not to say	**5%**	4%	19% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Base: all respondents who experienced abuse or intimidation about a protected characteristic; Tot. (207), Eng. (168), Wal. (16), Scot. (22), NI (1). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

As shown in Table 38, responses to this question remained broadly in line with responses observed last year. There was an increase in the proportion of those facing abuse due to their sex, however this increase was not statistically significant.

Table 38: Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	**2026 survey**
Sex	22%	30%
Race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin	25%	24%
Sexual orientation	22%	23%
Religion or belief	18%	23%
Disability	21%	21%
Age	21%	18%

Gender reassignment	5%	7%
Being married or in a civil partnership	4%	2%
Being pregnant or on maternity leave	0%	1%
Prefer not to say	7%	5%

Base: all respondents who experienced abuse or intimidation about a protected characteristic; 2025 (180), 2026 (184). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Home modifications

Respondents were asked whether they had made modifications to their home since being elected due to concerns about their safety as a councillor. Overall, 35 per cent of respondents reported having made, or feeling the need to make, modifications to their home because of safety concerns associated with their role. This consisted of 22 per cent who had already made modifications and 13 per cent who felt modifications were needed but had not yet undertaken them. The full results are shown in Table 39.

Table 39: Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes or no – but I feel I need them	**35%**	**34%**	**43%**	**31%**	**58% (15)**
Yes	**22%**	22%	31%	20%	31% (8)

No – but I feel I need them	**13%**	12%	13%	11%	27% (7)
No – but I do not feel I need them	**61%**	62%	54%	64%	42% (11)
Prefer not to say	**4%**	4%	3%	5%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1503), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119), NI (26).

Results from this year were closely in line with those from last year, noting a very slight increase year on year in those who had made, or feel they need to make, home modifications due to security concerns as an elected member; the full results are shown in Table 40.

Table 40: Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member? *(England and Wales only)*

	2024 survey	**2025 survey**	**2026 survey**
Yes, or no – but I feel I need them	**31%**	**32%**	**35%**
Yes	20%	21%	22%
No – but I feel I need them	11%	11%	12%
No – but I do not feel I need them	66%	64%	61%
Prefer not to say	3%	4%	4%

Base: all respondents; 2024 (1734), 2025 (1853), 2026 (1358).

Those who had not made modifications but felt that they needed to were then asked why they had not yet made them. As shown in Table 41, half of respondents (51 per cent) reported that they were unsure what they should get, whilst 42 per cent reported being unable to afford home modifications.

Table 41: Why have you not made modifications to your home security despite feeling you need to?

	2026 survey - total
I am not sure what I should get	51%
I cannot afford them	42%
Other, please specify	25%

Base: all respondents who had not made modifications but felt they need them (187). Please note: respondents could select more than one option.

Twenty-five per cent indicated another reason and had the opportunity to specify their reasoning. Answers included:

- Intending to, but have not yet found the time/energy to make modifications (including some newly elected councillors)
- Currently in the process of making modifications
- Restrictions outside of their control (listed building, council tenant, communal areas, no outside power supply, freeholder permission needed)
- Consideration of family's privacy
- A sense of giving in to the abuse, letting the abusers win
- Moving house soon
- Planning to stand down soon, therefore security features will no longer be required.

Respondents who had made modifications were asked about the modifications that they had made. Fifty-eight per cent had installed a camera doorbell, whilst 56 per cent had installed CCTV or other cameras. Forty per cent had installed security lights, whilst 18 per cent had installed a house alarm, and a further 18 per cent had flagged their home address for police response. Fifteen per cent had installed new locks, whilst 12 per cent had installed an external post-box, 9 per cent had got a dog, and a further 9 per cent had reinforced their fences. Eight per cent had installed gates, and 7 per cent had installed a panic button or panic alarm. The full results for this question are shown in Table 42.

Thirteen per cent indicated other modifications, and these included:

- Removing home addresses from council websites or elsewhere
- Moving house
- Ensuring doors are shut and locked
- Removing or sealing external letterboxes
- Improvements to existing security measures (stronger sensors, brighter lights, reinforced doors or locks)
- Improved car security, including dashcams and steering wheel locks
- Installing a safe
- Having a rape alarm
- Downloading the police app for ease of access
- Putting up ‘Beware of the dog’ signage (despite not having a dog)
- No longer publishing surgery details.

Table 42: What modifications have you made?

	2026 survey - total
Camera doorbell	58%
CCTV or other cameras	56%

Security lights	40%
House alarm	18%
Home address flagged for police response	18%
New locks	15%
Installed an external post-box	12%
Getting a dog	9%
Higher/stronger fences	9%
Installing gates (manual or electric)	8%
Panic button/alarm	7%
Other, please specify	13%
Prefer not to say	1%

Base: all respondents who had made modifications (336). Please note: respondents could select more than one response.

Operation Ford – awareness and engagement

The government's Operation Ford, a policing campaign to support local councillors and candidates, introduced a post to every police force in the country dedicated to supporting local politicians whilst undertaking their role. This position is known as the Force Elected Officials Adviser, the Operation Ford Adviser, or the Elected Representative Safety Officer in Northern Ireland.

Respondents were asked whether or not they were aware of this post. Overall, more than half of all respondents (57 per cent) were aware of the post. Awareness was significantly higher among councillors in Scotland (76 per cent) and Wales (65 per cent) than in England (55 per cent). Awareness was lower in Northern Ireland, with 15 per cent of councillors aware of the position, however, due to the low sample size this must be interpreted with caution. The full results are shown in Table 43.

Table 43: Are you aware that your police force now has a dedicated officer for elected member safety called the Force Elected Officials Adviser (sometimes called the Operation Ford Adviser or the Elected Representative Safety Officer in Northern Ireland)?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes	**57%**	55%	65%	76%	15% (4)
No	**38%**	40%	33%	21%	81% (21)
Don’t know	**5%**	5%	3%	3%	4% (1)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1499), Eng. (1245), Wal. (110), Scot. (118), NI (26).

In comparison to last year’s survey, as shown in Table 44, the awareness among English and Welsh councillors has increased significantly, rising from 40 per cent awareness in 2025 to 56 per cent in 2026.

Table 44: Are you aware that your police force now has a dedicated officer for elected member safety called the Force Elected Officials Adviser? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	2026 survey

Yes	40%	56%
No	55%	39%
Don’t know	6%	5%

Base: all respondents; 2025 (1856), 2026 (1355).

Respondents were then asked whether or not they had engaged with the Adviser, for example by attending an Operation Ford security briefing, or other informal contact. As shown in Table 45, 40 per cent of respondents had engaged with the Adviser, whilst 58 per cent had not, and a further 2 per cent were unsure if they had. Engagement was significantly higher in Scotland than in both England and Wales, with almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of responding councillors in Scotland reporting that they had engaged in some way with the Adviser, compared to 38 per cent and 39 per cent in England and Wales respectively. Engagement was lowest in Northern Ireland, at 8 per cent of responding councillors, however once again this must be interpreted with caution due to the low sample size of respondents from Northern Ireland.

Table 45: Have you engaged with the Force Elected Officials Adviser, for example, by attending an Operation Ford security briefing or other informal contact?

	TOTAL	**England**	**Wales**	**Scotland**	**N. Ireland**
Yes	**40%**	38%	39%	73%	8% (2)
No	**58%**	61%	60%	26%	92% (24)
Don’t know	**2%**	2%	1%	1%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1496), Eng. (1241), Wal. (110), Scot. (119), NI (26).

Respondents who had engaged with the programme were asked how useful they found that engagement. Overall, around three-quarters (74 per cent) considered it to be either very or fairly useful, including one-quarter (25 per cent) who found it very useful. Similar proportions of respondents in England (73 per cent), Wales (88 per cent) and Scotland (72 per cent) found the engagement very or fairly useful, with no statistically significant differences between nations. In Northern Ireland, only two respondents reported engaging with the programme; one found the engagement fairly useful and the other not very useful. The full results for this question are shown in Table 46.

Table 46: How useful, if at all, did you find the engagement with Operation Ford?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Very/fairly useful	**74%**	**73%**	**88% (38)**	**72%**	**50% (1)**
Very useful	25%	26%	26% (11)	20%	0% (0)
Fairly useful	49%	47%	63% (27)	53%	50% (1)
Not very useful	16%	16%	9% (4)	20%	50% (1)
Not at all useful	8%	9%	2% (1)	7%	0% (0)
Don’t know	1%	2%	0% (0)	1%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents who had engaged with the programme; Tot. (597), Eng. (465), Wal. (43), Scot. (87), NI (2).

It should be noted that this year's survey had slightly more accompanying text in the question, detailing that the post may be known as the Operation Ford Adviser or the Elected Representative Safety Officer in Northern Ireland.

Personal safety training

Respondents in England and Wales were then asked whether or not they were aware that the LGA provides personal safety training to all councillors. Whilst more than half of all responding councillors in England and Wales were aware of the LGA's safety training offer, awareness was slightly lower this year (56 per cent), compared to last year (63 per cent). This is shown in Table 47.

Table 47: Are you aware that the LGA provides personal safety training to all councillors? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	2026 survey
Yes	63%	56%
No	31%	38%
Don't know	6%	5%

Base: all respondents; 2025 (1860), 2026 (1351).

Respondents in Northern Ireland were asked whether they were aware that the NILGA provides personal safety training to councillors. Awareness was similar to England and Wales, with 58 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland aware of the NILGA's personal safety training offer. This is shown in Table 48.

Table 48: Are you aware that the NILGA provides personal safety training to all councillors?

	2026 survey

Yes	58% (15)
No	35% (9)
Don’t know	8% (2)

Base: all respondents who are councillors in Northern Ireland (26).

Standing at the next local elections

Respondents were asked whether they planned to stand at the next local elections in their area. As shown in Table 49, just under half of all respondents (45 per cent) indicated that they intended to stand for re-election, while around a fifth (19 per cent) had decided not to stand and a further 36 per cent were unsure.

Respondents in England were less likely to report that they intended to stand for re-election (43 per cent) than respondents in Wales and Scotland (both 54 per cent). Respondents in Scotland were also less likely to be undecided, with 26 per cent reporting that they were unsure whether they would stand, compared with 37 per cent of respondents in England. Similar proportions of respondents in England and Scotland (both 20 per cent) had already decided not to seek re-election.

In Northern Ireland, 20 of the 26 responding councillors indicated that they intended to stand for re-election, while one respondent had decided not to stand and five were unsure. However, these figures should be interpreted with caution given the small number of respondents.

Table 49: Will you be standing for election at the next local elections in your area?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes	**45%**	43%	54%	54%	77% (20)

No	**19%**	20%	14%	20%	4% (1)
Don’t know	**36%**	37%	32%	26%	19% (5)

Base: all respondents; Tot. (1503), Eng. (1247), Wal. (111), Scot. (119), NI (26).

As shown in Table 50, the sentiment among respondents in England and Wales this year remained consistent with 2025.

Table 50: Will you be standing for election at the next local elections in your area? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	**2026 survey**
Yes	44%	44%
No	19%	19%
Not yet decided	36%	37%

Base: all respondents; 2025 (1861), 2026 (1358).

Respondents who were unsure whether to stand, or who had decided not to stand, were asked whether the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation had influenced their position. Overall, 30 per cent reported that the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation had influenced their decision, while 65 per cent reported that it had not. Although there was some variation in responses between nations, these differences were not statistically significant. Across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, respondents were more likely to report that the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation had not influenced their position than to report that it had. The full results are shown in Table 51.

Table 51: Has the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation influenced your position on whether to stand?

	TOTAL	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes	**30%**	29%	31% (16)	40%	33% (2)
No	**65%**	65%	65% (33)	58%	67% (4)
Don’t know	**6%**	6%	4% (2)	2%	0% (0)

Base: all respondents unsure or not standing at next elections; Tot. (819), Eng. (707), Wal. (51), Scot. (55), NI (6).

As shown in Table 52, the proportion of respondents from England and Wales who felt that abuse and/or intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand remained largely consistent from 2025 to 2026.

Table 52: Has the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation influenced your position on whether to stand? *(England and Wales only)*

	2025 survey	2026 survey
Yes	26%	29%
No	67%	65%
Don’t know	7%	6%

Base: all respondents unsure or not standing at next elections; 2025 (1027), 2026 (758).

Table 53 shows a demographic breakdown of this question, and highlights that female councillors, ethnic minority councillors, and LGBT+ councillors are significantly more likely to be impacted by abuse and intimidation to the point that it has influenced their decision on whether or not to stand for re-election; 38 per cent of female

respondents reported that it had impacted their decision compared to 23 per cent of male respondents, whilst 43 per cent of ethnic minority respondents felt it had impacted their decision compared to 28 per cent of white respondents, and 41 per cent of LGBT+ respondents felt it had impacted their decision, compared to 28 per cent of straight respondents. Differences were observed between disabled and non-disabled respondents, however these differences were not statistically significant. The full results are shown in Table 53.

Table 53: Has the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation influenced your position on whether to stand? – *Broken down by sex, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability status*

	Possibility has influenced position on whether to stand
Male	23%
Female	38%
White	28%
Ethnic minority	43%
Heterosexual	28%
LGBT+	41%
Non-disabled people	28%
Disabled people	33%

Base: all respondents unsure or not standing at the next elections; male (444), female (361), white (719), ethnic minorities (76), heterosexual (702), LGBT+ (71), non-disabled (619), disabled (146).

Demographics

Respondents were asked a series of demographic questions to understand what impact, if any, certain characteristics have on experiences of abuse or intimidation in local politics. The questions were optional, and each had a ‘prefer not to say’ option.

Sex

As shown in Table 54, 43 per cent of respondents were female, whilst 56 per cent of respondents were male and a further 1 per cent chose not to specify.

Table 54: Sex

	2026 survey
Female	43%
Male	56%
Prefer not to say/blank	1%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Gender identity

Respondents were asked whether their gender identity is the same as the sex they were registered as at birth. As Table 55 shows, 96 per cent of respondents reported that their gender identity does align with their sex registered at birth, whilst 1 per cent reported that their gender identity does not align with their sex as registered at birth. Three per cent of respondents chose not to specify.

Table 55: Gender identity

	2026 survey
Gender identity **IS** the same as sex registered at birth	96%
Gender identity is **NOT** the same as sex registered at birth	1%
Prefer not to say/blank	3%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Age group

Respondents were asked to indicate their age group. As shown in Table 56, 1 per cent of respondents were under 25, whilst 4 per cent were between 25 and 34, 9 per cent were between 35 and 44, 15 per cent were between 45 and 54, and 28 per cent were between 55 and 64. By far the largest group, 42 per cent of respondents were 65 or over.

Table 56: Age group

	2026 survey
Under 25	1%
25-34	4%
35-44	9%
45-54	15%
55-64	28%
65 or over	42%

Prefer not to say/blank	2%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Ethnicity

Respondents were asked to indicate their ethnicity from a set list. Those who did not feel represented by this list had the opportunity to specify the ethnicity with which they aligned. As Table 57 shows, the majority of respondents to the 2026 survey (87 per cent) identified as white, whilst 4 per cent identified as Asian or Asian British, 3 per cent identified as being from mixed or multiple ethnic groups, and 2 per cent identified as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African. Two per cent indicated another ethnic group, and a further three per cent chose not to say or left the question blank.

Table 57: Ethnicity

	2026 survey
White	87%
Asian or Asian British	4%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	3%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	2%
Other ethnic group (please specify)	2%
Prefer not to say/blank	3%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Sexual orientation

Respondents were asked to indicate their sexual orientation from a set list. Eighty-five per cent of respondents identified as straight or heterosexual, whilst 4 per cent identified as gay or lesbian, 4 per cent identified as bisexual, and 1 per cent identified as another sexual orientation not listed. The full results are shown in Table 58.

Table 58: Sexual orientation

	2026 survey
Straight/heterosexual	85%
Gay or lesbian	4%
Bisexual	4%
Other sexual orientation	1%
Prefer not to say/blank	6%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Long-term physical or mental health conditions/illnesses

Respondents were asked whether or not they had a physical or mental health condition lasting or expecting to last for 12 months or more which reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Eighteen per cent of respondents indicated that they did have a condition of this nature, whilst 76 per cent indicated that they did not, and a further 6 per cent chose not to say. The full results are shown in Table 59.

Table 59: Long-term physical or mental health conditions/illnesses

	2026 survey

Has a physical or mental health condition lasting or expecting to last for 12 months or more which reduces ability to carry out day-to-day activities	18%
Does not have a physical or mental health condition expecting to last for 12 months or more which reduces ability to carry out day-to-day activities	76%
Prefer not to say/blank	6%

Base: all respondents (1503).

Further comments

Respondents were asked to provide any comments about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally. A total of 705 respondents provided comments, which were grouped into common themes. The following themes emerged most frequently from comments:

- **Abuse and physical safety risks:** Comments revealed that councillors face a significant and worsening landscape of abuse, intimidation and physical safety risks. This ranges from aggression on the doorstep and online harassment, to serious threats, stalking, property damage and physical violence. Some felt that councils, parties and the police could improve their efforts to protect elected members. This could include stronger reporting mechanisms, practical safety support and clearer consequences for perpetrators. In addition, some noted the broader cultural and media environment that normalises hostility towards public representatives.
- **Online abuse and misinformation:** For many respondents, social media platforms, particularly Facebook and X, have become the primary vectors for a severe and escalating crisis of online harassment and misinformation directed at councillors. Women, ethnic minorities and those holding powerful or controversial positions within the council (e.g. mayor, those on certain

committees) felt disproportionately targeted. Some felt that action is needed from social media companies, regulators, police and councils to restrict anonymity for abusers, enforce content moderation and provide meaningful support to councillors facing coordinated harassment campaigns.

- **Councillor-on-councillor abuse and misconduct:** Some respondents described incidents of abuse and misconduct on the part of other councillors, with some emphasising that other politicians were the primary perpetrators of abuse and intimidation that they suffered. Once again respondents felt that stronger enforcement mechanisms and clearer codes of conduct, along with a cultural shift within politics, were needed to address this behaviour that is driving councillors (particularly women) out of public life.
- **Abuse from parties and political polarisation:** In addition to more general councillor-on-councillor abuse, some respondents felt that the increasing political polarisation within the UK is serving as a catalyst of abuse and intimidation within public life. This sense of increasing polarisation was felt by those across the political spectrum, with some feeling that political divisions were enabling and amplifying abuse and intimidation. Furthermore, some felt that social media platforms amplified extremist rhetoric and enabled coordinated harassment campaigns.
- **Inadequate police response to abuse and legislative gaps:** Police responses to reports of abuse, threats, and intimidation against elected councillors were often seen as inadequate, with respondents experiencing dismissed complaints, limited or no investigation, or lacking awareness of relevant legislation such as Operation Ford. As such, legislative gaps could be an area for development, including extending employment protections to councillors, introducing background checks for candidates, restricting publication of councillors' home addresses, and introducing harsher penalties for those who intimidate or attack public officials.
- **Toothless standards and complaints mechanisms:** Among respondents, the current complaints and standards mechanisms

were generally regarded as ineffective and failing to protect councillors from abuse and harassment - whether from members of the public, fellow councillors, or organised groups. On the other hand, some respondents described how the systems were simultaneously being weaponised against councillors, with threats of malicious complaints used to intimidate and coerce councillors for political purposes.

- **Few or no issues experienced:** Some respondents reported little to no personal experience of abuse, intimidation, or safety concerns, often attributing this to rural or close-knit community settings where mutual familiarity fosters respectful interactions. However, many acknowledged their good fortune and remain conscious that abuse is a wider problem affecting colleagues and potential candidates elsewhere, particularly online.
- **Safety examples/suggestions:** Respondents suggested a range of practical safety measures that organisations could implement, including providing personal alarms, body cameras, safe transport after late-night meetings, defence training, and home security support, whilst also protecting personal details such as home addresses and private contact information from the public domain. Canvassing in pairs, early safety training, dedicated work phones, and clearer guidance on managing social media exposure and de-escalation were highlighted as essential steps that councils and political organisations could take proactively, rather than leaving individuals to arrange their own protection.
- **Abuse against specific groups of people:** Respondents noted that minority groups (including women, ethnic minorities, disabled people, religious communities, the trans community) face disproportionate levels of abuse, intimidation, and online harassment that actively deters a diverse group of people from standing for or remaining in public office. As such, some comments called for stronger action against online abuse, better protections for those with protected characteristics and a shift away from the normalisation of harassment as an accepted part of political life.
- **Councillor vs MP security disparity:** A few respondents highlighted that councillors receive significantly less security

support, funding and institutional protection than MPs, despite being more visible in their communities and thus potentially more vulnerable to abuse and threats. Responsibility for councillor safety is frequently passed between local authorities, police, and political parties, leaving individuals to manage threats largely alone, which some felt was inadequate in comparison to the personal protection afforded to MPs.

Annex A: Questionnaire

Debate Not Hate Survey 2026

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. This is an LGA survey gathering information about councillors' experiences of abuse and intimidation across all four UK nations. The survey is run in partnership with the Welsh LGA (WLGA), the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), however, management of the survey and resulting data will be retained by the LGA.

You can navigate through the questions using the buttons at the bottom of each page. Use the 'previous' button at the bottom of the page if you wish to amend your response to an earlier question. To review the survey before completing it, you can access a PDF of the questions in English here (this links to a new tab).

If you stop before completing the return, you can come back to this page using the link supplied in the email and you will be able to continue where you left off. To ensure your answers have been saved, click on the 'next' button at the bottom of the page that you were working on before exiting.

All responses will be treated confidentially. Information will be aggregated, and no individual or authority will be identified in any publications without your consent. Identifiable information may be used internally within the LGA but will only be held and processed in accordance with our privacy statement. We are undertaking this survey to aid the legitimate interests of the LGA, COSLA, NILGA and WLGA in supporting and representing authorities. It is necessary for us to collect

and process special category data in relation to our work in monitoring differences in opportunities and outcomes among various protected characteristics, such as gender, age and ethnicity, which we do under condition (a) of Article 9(2) of the Data Protection Act 2018. Aggregate data only will be shared with COSLA, NILGA and WLGA.

You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted. You can find our full privacy policy here: click here to see our privacy policy.

The deadline for completing this survey is 5pm, Wednesday 8th July. Please ensure you have submitted your response by this time.

1. Please amend the details we have on record if necessary. If you are a member of more than one council, please only complete this survey once.

- Name
- Authority
- Email address

2. Please indicate the type of council(s) of which you are a member. *Select all that apply. **Each list only shown to the relevant nation***

England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
District council	Principal council	Principal council	District council
County council	Town council	Community council	Borough council
London borough	Community council	Other (please specify)	City council

Metropolitan borough	Other (please specify)		Other (please specify)
Unitary council			
Town council			
Parish/community council			
Other (please specify)			

3. What is your political affiliation as a councillor?

England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Conservatives	Conservatives	Scottish Conservative and Unionist	Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
Green Party	Green Party	Scottish Greens	Democratic Unionist Party
Independent (inc. Residents' Assoc.)	Independent (inc. Residents' Assoc.)	Scottish Labour	Green Party Northern Ireland
Labour	Labour	Scottish Liberal Democrats	Independent (inc. Residents' Assoc.)

Liberal Democrats	Liberal Democrats	Scottish National Party	Labour Party in Northern Ireland
Reform UK	Plaid Cymru	Reform UK	NI Conservatives
	Reform UK	Independent (inc. Residents' Assoc.)	People Before Profit
			Progressive Unionist Party
			Sinn Fein
			Social Democratic and Labour Party
			Traditional Unionist Voice
			Ulster Unionist Party
Other (please specify)	Other (please specify)	Other (please specify)	Other (please specify)

4. How long have you been serving as a councillor?

- Less than one year / newly elected in May ***Shown to Eng, Wales, Scot***
- Less than one year ***Shown to NI***
- 1 to <2 years

- 2 to <5 years
- 5 years or more

Shown to Eng, Wales, Scotland

5. Which of the following, if any, describes your role in the May 2026 local and/or national elections? *Select all that apply*

- Election candidate
- Election agent
- Election campaigner
- Other, please specify
- None of the above – I did not participate in any way in the May 2026 elections

Shown to NI

5. Which of the following, if any, described your role in the most recent local and/or national elections? *Select all that apply*

- Election candidate
- Election agent
- Election campaigner
- Other, please specify
- None of the above – I did not participate in any way in the most recent local and/or national elections

6. How often, if at all, do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Shown to respondents serving for at least a year

7. How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

- Very effective
- Fairly effective

- Not very effective
- Not at all effective
- Don’t know

The following questions relate to whether you have experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor and/or as a candidate or campaigner at the most recent local and/or general electoral period. These terms are defined as follows:

Abuse – words and/or behaviour that constitute abuse or mistreatment can include, but is not limited to, physical abuse, bullying, emotional abuse, unsolicited abusive communication, and harassment. It may be one-off or repeated.

Intimidation – words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence, or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life. It may be one-off or repeated behaviour.

Shown to England, Scotland and Wales respondents who participated in the May 2026 electoral period

8. How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's local and/or general election campaign period?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Shown to NI respondents who participated in the most recent local and/or national election campaign period

8. How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during the most recent local and/or national election campaign period?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Shown to respondents serving for at least a year

9. Over the last twelve months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Shown to respondents who have experienced abuse and intimidation (Q8 or Q9)

10. Where did the abuse and/or intimidation occur? *Select all that apply*

- In person
- By post, including messages and/or articles put through letterbox
- Privately, by phone including voice message, or through direct messaging including text, email and WhatsApp
- Publicly online, including on social media platforms or open forums online
- Other (please specify)

Shown to those who experienced abuse and intimidation in the last year (Q9)

11. And thinking about the last twelve months, how has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received in your role as a councillor changed?

- It has sharply increased
- It has slightly increased
- It has stayed about the same
- It has slightly decreased
- It has sharply decreased
- Don’t know

12. Have you ever reported to the police an incident of abuse or intimidation you have experienced in your role as a councillor?

- Yes

- No
- Prefer not to say

Shown to respondents who have reported an incident to the police

13. To what extent, if at all, did the policing response address the issue of abuse or intimidation that you reported?

- To a great extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a small extent
- Not at all
- Don’t know

14. Due to your role as a councillor, have you or a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following? *Select all that apply*

For the purposes of this question, a person closely connected with you could be your immediate or extended family, your partner, or a close friend.

- Threat of damage to property
- Actual damage to property
- Threat of violence
- Actual violence
- Threat of death
- None of the above
- Against you
- Against a person closely connected with you

15. And due to your role as a councillor, have you or a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following? *Select all that apply*

- Publication of untrue or misleading information about your personal conduct or character
- Publication of untrue or misleading information about your political conduct or character
- Inappropriate publication of private information
- Abuse related to a protected characteristic

- A public protest at your home
- A member of the public attending your home in a manner you consider intimidatory or inappropriate
- Sexual harassment
- Stalking
- Other, please specify
- None of the above
- Against you
- Against a person closely connected with you

Shown to those who reported that they and/or someone closely connected to them has received abuse relating to a protected characteristic

16. Which protected characteristic(s) was it related to? *Select all that apply*

- age
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- gender reassignment
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation
- Prefer not to say

17. Have you made modifications to your home security since becoming a councillor due to concerns you have about your security as an elected member?

- Yes
- No – But I feel I need them
- No – I do not feel I need them
- Prefer not to say

Shown to respondents who have not made modifications but feel they need to

18. Why have you not made modifications to your home security despite feeling you need to? *Select all that apply*

- I cannot afford them
- I am not sure what I should get
- Other, please specify

Shown to respondents who have made modifications

19. What modifications have you made? *Select all that apply*

- Security lights
- Camera doorbell
- CCTV or other cameras
- New locks
- Panic button/alarm
- House alarm
- Installed an external postbox
- Home address flagged for police response
- Higher/stronger fences
- Installing gates (manual or electric)
- Getting a dog
- Other, please specify
- Prefer not to say

20. Are you aware that your police force now has a dedicated officer for elected member safety called the Force Elected Officials Adviser? *The Force Elected Officials Adviser is sometimes called the Operation Ford Adviser or Elected Representative Safety Officer in Northern Ireland.*

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

21. Have you engaged with the Force Elected Officials Adviser, for example, by attending an Operation Ford Security briefing or other informal contact?

- Yes
- No

- Don’t know

Shown to respondents who have engaged with Operation Ford

22. How useful, if at all, did you find the engagement with Operation Ford?

- Very useful
- Fairly useful
- Not very useful
- Not at all useful
- Don’t know

Shown to Eng and Wales

23. Are you aware that the LGA provides personal safety training to all councillors?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

Shown to NI

23. Are you aware that the NILGA provides personal safety training to all councillors?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

24. Will you be standing for election at the next local elections in your area?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

Shown to those not standing, or unsure about standing

25. Has the possibility of abuse and/or intimidation influenced your position on whether to stand?

- Yes

- No
- Don’t know

Demographics: this section ask some questions about you. These questions are optional.

26. What is your sex?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say

27. Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

28. What is your age group?

- Under 25
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or over
- Prefer not to say

29. What is your ethnic group?

- White
- Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- Asian or Asian British
- Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
- Other ethnic group (please specify)
- Prefer not to say

30. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

- Straight/heterosexual
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual

- Other sexual orientation
- Prefer not to say

31. Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last for twelve months or more which reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

32. Please use the space below to tell us anything more you'd like to about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally.

Shown to councillors in England only

33. Please tick the box below if you would like to be involved in future work related to this area and/or the contents of this survey.

[ ] I would like to be involved in further work.

FEATURE

Debate, not hate

Abuse of councillors rising across UK



Councillor Hannah Dalton is the LGA's Civility in Public Life Ambassador



Back in 2022, the LGA launched its Debate Not Hate campaign after that year's Councillors' Census revealed that seven in 10 councillors reported having experienced abuse or intimidation.

Since 2023, the LGA has distributed an annual online survey to all councillors in England and Wales to investigate the extent to which abuse and intimidation remains rife in public life, as well as the nature and scale of abuse and intimidation.

This year, the survey has been extended to councillors in Scotland and Northern Ireland, reflecting the joint commitment of the UK's four national local government associations to promoting and defending civility in public life, as expressed in their joint statement last year (see **bit.ly/4yF3L1n**).

A total of 1,503 councillors across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland responded to the survey, representing a wide cross-section of political affiliations, levels of experience and demographic characteristics.

The survey delivers a sobering message: abuse and intimidation are still far too prevalent in public life.

More than three-quarters of responding councillors (78 per cent) feel at least some level of personal risk when fulfilling their role as councillor, while three-quarters (75 per cent) reported experiencing some level of abuse or intimidation in their role over the past 12 months.

More than half of responding councillors (52 per cent) reported that abuse and intimidation had increased sharply or slightly over the past 12 months. This was significantly higher in England (55 per cent) than Wales (41 per cent) or Scotland (36 per cent).

Abuse has a tangible impact on councillors' lives and democratic participation.

More than a third of respondents (35 per cent) had made, or felt they needed to make, security modifications to their home because of safety concerns linked to their role.

Furthermore, among responding councillors who were undecided about standing again or had decided not to stand, 30 per cent said the possibility of abuse or intimidation had influenced their decision.

Police reporting is relatively uncommon, and satisfaction is mixed.

A quarter of respondents (25 per cent) had reported an incident of abuse or intimidation to the police and of those, 34 per cent felt the issue had been addressed to a great or moderate extent, while 33 per cent felt it hadn't been addressed at all.

Operation Ford – the policing service that gives stronger protective security and better support to locally elected representatives and candidates – had generally positive feedback in our survey.

More than half of all respondents in England and Wales (56 per cent) were aware of the force elected official adviser post – an increase from 40 per cent last year. Awareness was particularly high in Scotland, at 76 per cent.

Of those who had engaged with the programme, three-quarters (74 per cent) found the engagement very or fairly useful.

The LGA and its sister associations continue to campaign to raise awareness of the damaging impact of intimidation on local democracy and to lobby for changes to relevant legislation and improved protections for councillors.

We must never accept a situation where harassment and personal attacks are simply regarded as part of public service. ●

The LGA provides a range of resources and support for councillors and candidates as part of its Civility in Public Life programme, see **bit.ly/4jm5hRW**. We also run regular online events, such as 'Staying safe in person as a councillor' (4 November) and 'Staying safe online as a councillor' (18 November), see **local.gov.uk/events** to find out more and book your place

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Public Report
Standards and Ethics Committee

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Standards and Ethics Committee - 12th November 2026

Report Title
Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics - “Enough is Enough” Report

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
N/A

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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
This report updates the Committee on the publication by Solace of “Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government”, the final report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics, and highlights its relevance to the Council’s standards, governance and ethical culture arrangements.

Recommendations
That the Committee:

(1) notes the publication and principal findings of the Solace report;

(2) considers the report’s recommendations insofar as they relate to member conduct, member-officer relationships and governance

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 - Solace, “Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government”, October 2026

Background Papers
Solace, “Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government”, October 2026;
Solace news release, “Enough is Enough: Solace Sets Out Blueprint to Tackle Poor Behaviour in Local Government”, 21 October 2026.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics - "Enough is Enough" Report

1. Background

1.1 Solace (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) published "Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government" in October 2026. It is the final report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics, which was established in summer 2025 to examine ethical challenges in modern local public service and to identify practical action to strengthen standards and behaviour. The full report is Appendix 1.

1.2 The report is broader than a review of the statutory member standards regime. It considers leadership, organisational culture, governance, accountability and member-officer relationships, and argues that legislation and formal complaints processes alone will not secure lasting improvement without visible ethical leadership and effective local arrangements.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Solace reports evidence of rising incivility, inappropriate behaviour and declining standards affecting both elected members and officers. Its member survey found that 92% of responding chief executives and senior officers had experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour within the previous three years. The most frequently identified issue was a lack of respect, followed by bullying, harassment and discrimination.

2.2 The report identifies consequences extending beyond the individuals directly affected. These include deterioration in member-officer relationships, reduced organisational effectiveness, difficulties in partnership working, risks to recruitment and retention, and damage to public confidence in local democracy and public institutions.

2.3 Part I of the report examines the nature and causes of poor standards, including disrespect, bullying and abuse, blurred boundaries, social media and technology, political and financial pressures, inexperience and weaknesses in the present standards regime. It also records the lived experiences of officers and members across the sector.

2.4 Part II sets out a blueprint for change containing more than 40 recommendations directed at central government, sector bodies, councils, councillors and senior officers. The recommendations combine support for a

stronger statutory standards regime with practical action on culture, governance, induction and training, member-officer awareness, social media and online abuse, leadership wellbeing and resilience, and early identification of organisational warning signs.

2.5 Two practical tools are included: a Healthy Culture and Governance Audit and a Leadership Wellbeing and Resilience Audit. These are intended to assist authorities in assessing their arrangements proactively rather than relying solely on formal complaints after relationships or conduct have deteriorated.

2.6 From the perspective of the Committee, Monitoring Officer and wider governance perspective, the report is relevant to the Council's duty under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, but its significance is not confined to legal compliance. It supports a preventative approach in which standards arrangements are connected with member development, officer-member protocols, whistleblowing and speaking-up arrangements, workforce wellbeing, governance assurance and organisational culture.

2.7 The report does not itself change the law or create new duties. The Council's existing statutory framework and locally adopted Code of Conduct remain in force. However, the report provides a useful sector benchmark against which local arrangements may be reviewed, particularly as the Government continues to consider reform of the national standards regime.

2.8 It is proposed that officers consider the recommendations and audit tools alongside future national developments and identify whether any proportionate changes should be proposed to the Council's standards, governance, training or assurance arrangements. Any substantive changes would be brought through the appropriate constitutional and decision-making processes.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 No immediate decision on amendments to the Council's arrangements is required. The recommended approach is to note the report and use it as a source of sector learning when reviewing the Council's Code of Conduct, complaints arrangements, member development, member-officer protocols, governance assurance and organisational culture.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 N/A

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 Officers will review the report's recommendations and practical tools alongside the Council's existing governance and standards arrangements. Further reports will be brought to the Committee where national developments or the local review indicate that changes should be considered.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no direct financial or procurement implications arising from noting this report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 Sections 27 and 28 of the Localism Act 2011 remain the principal statutory basis for the Council's member standards arrangements. Section 27 requires the Council to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members, while section 28 requires the adoption of a Code of Conduct and arrangements for dealing with allegations of breach.

7.2 The Solace report is not statutory guidance and does not alter those legal duties. Its recommendations are nevertheless relevant to the effective discharge of the Council's existing duty to promote and maintain high standards and to the wider governance responsibilities of the Monitoring Officer.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no immediate human resources implications arising from this update. The report highlights potential workforce impacts of poor behaviour, including wellbeing, recruitment and retention. Any future proposals concerning training, support or organisational development would be considered with Human Resources.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 No direct implications have been identified at this stage.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 The report identifies that poor behaviour may have differential impacts. Any local review or proposed change should therefore have regard to the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and to the need for fair, transparent and proportionate arrangements protecting complainants, witnesses and subject members.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 The issues addressed by the report concern the wider local government system and are relevant to elected members, officers, town and parish councils, representative bodies and partner organisations.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 The principal risk is that poor conduct or deteriorating relationships are treated only as isolated complaints rather than as indicators of wider cultural or governance weakness. Mitigation includes maintaining effective standards arrangements, promoting early intervention, supporting ethical leadership,

monitoring national developments and using the Solace recommendations and audit tools as part of proportionate governance assurance.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

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This report is published on the Council's website.



Enough is Enough

A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government

Final report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

October 2026

solace

Just because something is frequent does not mean it is normal and it is certainly not acceptable

Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Contents

Foreword 4

Introduction 6

PART I The State of Standards 12

Behaviours 14

Respect 14

Bullying and Abuse 15

Blurred Boundaries 16

Impacts of Behaviour 19

Effects on Partnership Working 19

Impact on Women and Minoritised Groups 20

Contextual and Wider Factors 22

Consequences of Inexperience 22

Social Media and Technology 25

Experiences of Councillors 26

A Failing Standards Regime 27

The Role of the Police 28

PART II Where to Go Next? 30

Organisational/Corporate Culture 32

Tool 1: Healthy Culture and Governance Audit 36

Induction, Training, and Member/Officer Awareness 38

Social Media and Internet-Based Abuse 42

Preventing Burnout 44

Tool 2: Leadership Wellbeing & Resilience Audit 47

Advocating for a Stronger Regime 51

Conclusion 54

Appendix I – Recommendations in full 55

Appendix II – Contributors to the Commission 58

Acknowledgements 59



Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Foreword

Local government has always been about people. It is about people who choose to serve their communities, often in difficult circumstances, and who do so because they believe in the value of public service. Throughout my career, I have seen first-hand the dedication, professionalism and resilience of those working across local government. After 43 years in local government, I remain inspired by the extraordinary colleagues I have had the privilege to work alongside – their resilience, passion and relentless commitment, and the profound difference they make every day to people, places and communities.

The overwhelming majority of those working in and with local government conduct themselves with integrity, respect and professionalism. However, it has become increasingly clear that the environment in which local government operates has changed. The demands are greater, the workload heavier and the workforce smaller. At the same time, expectations have risen, and both what we do and how we do it are under unprecedented public scrutiny. Throughout my career, and especially as a Chief Executive, I have seen unacceptable behaviour become far too common: personal criticism of officers in public, where they have no right of reply; disrespectful language; bullying; and the intimidation of officers and elected members alike. As Chair of the Commission, I heard powerful evidence from people across the sector. Together, their testimony paints a deeply troubling picture of what it means to be a public servant today – one we can no longer afford to ignore.

Across the sector, we are hearing consistent evidence of rising incivility, inappropriate behaviour and declining standards. These challenges affect elected members and officers alike, but as the professional body representing chief executives and senior officers, Solace has a particular responsibility to understand and respond to the experiences of our members, many of whom have found themselves without effective means of redress when standards and behaviours break down.

Solace's Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics was established in the summer of 2025 because we recognised that these issues could no longer be viewed as isolated incidents or simply accepted as part of modern public life.

The fact that 92% of professionals have experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour within the last three years should be a cause of real concern for us all. This should not be about tolerating the situation or building resilience. Just because something is frequent does not mean it is normal and it is certainly not acceptable.

Standards matter because they are fundamental to effective leadership, good governance and public confidence. When respect is eroded, organisations become less effective. When behaviour falls below acceptable standards, relationships deteriorate, talented people leave the sector, and ultimately our ability to deliver for the communities we serve is weakened.

The Commission has therefore sought to understand not only what is happening, but why, and how we might effectively respond. Over the past year we have heard from chief executives, monitoring officers, professional bodies, civil servants, councillors, academics, interested observers, and, above all, you – our members. Taken together the evidence has painted a clear and consistent picture of an increasingly challenging operating environment for local government, shaped by financial pressures, heightened political tensions, wider societal change, and the changing nature of public discourse. Yet alongside these challenges, we have also encountered countless examples of thoughtful leadership, professional courage and organisations committed to fostering positive workplace cultures. Those examples remind us that poor behaviour is neither inevitable nor beyond our influence.

It cannot be right that local government is the only part of the public sector with no meaningful standards system. However, this report is not simply a call for an effective standards regime with teeth, although the need for meaningful reform is clear. It is equally a call to strengthen organisational culture, reinforce ethical leadership and ensure that every council is equipped to create environments where people are treated with dignity, respect and professionalism. Formal standards processes have an important role to play, but legislation alone cannot create organisational excellence. Lasting positive change depends upon leadership, accountability and a shared commitment to the values that underpin public service.

As local government continues to navigate a period of significant, wide-ranging reform, an enhanced suite of powers in a rewired state, and increasing public expectations, there is an opportunity not simply to respond to today's challenges but to build stronger, healthier organisations for the future. I hope this report contributes to that ambition by combining evidence, practical recommendations and examples of good practice that will support chief executives, senior leaders and elected members alike.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the work of the Commission over the past twelve months. We are particularly grateful to those who shared their experiences so openly, often discussing difficult personal and professional circumstances. Their willingness to do so has ensured that this report is grounded not only in research and evidence, but in the lived experiences of those working across local government every day.

This report should not be seen as the conclusion of the conversation, but as the beginning of the next phase. There is much work still to do, both nationally and within individual authorities, to strengthen standards, support those working in public service and rebuild confidence in the systems that protect them. As leaders in local government, we carry both a moral and professional duty to set the standard: to champion respect, ethics and inclusion; to model the conduct we expect from others; and to confront poor behaviour wherever we see it – never excusing it, ignoring it or simply walking past. We must build cultures that protect our people and give them the confidence to speak up. This Commission has brought these issues into the light. Now we must turn that evidence into action. With determined leadership across the sector, reinforced by a robust new government-led standards regime, I am confident we can, and will, deliver lasting change.

Ultimately, the strength of local government rests not only on the services it delivers, but on the countless thousands of staff, managers and elected members who constitute it and the values by which they lead. By working together to promote civility, strengthen standards and foster cultures built on trust and respect, we can ensure that local government remains a place where talented people want to work, where communities have confidence in their institutions, and where public service continues to make a lasting difference to people's lives.

Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

INTRODUCTION

What the Workforce Tells Us

92%

Nine in ten chief executives and senior officers have experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour in the last three years

Source: Solace 2026 standards survey of members

THE 2026 SOLACE SURVEY IN NUMBERS

71%

reported incidents **between councillors and officers** – the most common kind. 63% reported incidents between councillors.

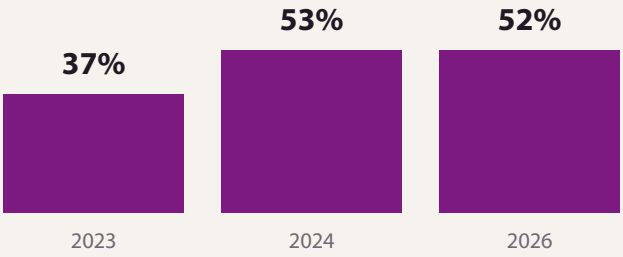
91%

said the most common issue was **respect, or a lack of it**, followed by bullying, harassment and discrimination (62%)

Abuse or intimidation experienced in the last 12 months, by source



Officers saying councillor standards are getting worse



70%

said behaviour among **members of the public** had worsened in the last three years

80%

felt some level of **risk** when fulfilling their role as an officer

45%

have **considered changing role or organisation**, or actually did, because of poor standards

23%

feel they have become **less effective** in their job as a result

23%

do not feel safe to raise concerns or challenge poor behaviour from councillors

"I have been undermined in formal meetings by the Council Leader. A Senior Member wished in writing to all other Members that I and my family would suffer from cancer and an unpleasant death

Behind every statistic presented in this report are individuals whose experiences illustrate the reality of working in local government today.

Throughout the Commission's work, chief executives, monitoring officers and other professionals described a working environment that has become increasingly challenging. Many spoke of persistent disrespect, intimidation and bullying, while others reflected on the cumulative impact of repeated low-level incivility that, over time, had damaged professional relationships, confidence and wellbeing.

Throughout this report we have included a series of quotes from individuals in the sector who have reflected, in their own words, their experiences and views around standards and civility. These have primarily been drawn from the direct evidence gathered by the Commission at its monthly sessions, as well as surveys, with a select number drawing on public interest reports. Due to the nature of the content, any quotes you see in this report have not been attributed to individuals in order to protect their identity.

The evidence gathered by the Commission is reinforced by Solace's own research, in particular repeated surveys of Solace members. The most recent of those surveys, run at the beginning of this year, found nine in ten (92%) officers reported experiencing poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour in one form or another during the previous three years. The most common sort of incident was between councillors and officers (71%) followed by incidents between councillors and councillors (63%).

And more than half (52%) of officers say standards and behaviours among councillors are getting worse. This continues a trend from 2024 when 53% said standards and behaviours among councillors was getting worse which in itself was up from 37% in 2023.

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds (70%) said behaviour among members of the public had worsened in the last three years.

Collectively these experiences range from disrespectful day-to-day interactions to sustained bullying, intimidation and harassment.

By far and away the most common issue of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour relates to respect – or a lack of – (91%), followed by incidents of bullying, harassment and discrimination (62%); trends which echo previous years' findings of 91% (2024) and 89% (2023) respectively.

Almost two-thirds (62%) said they had experienced abuse or intimidation from elected members over the last 12 months, with 44% identifying it as occurring either 'occasionally' or 'frequently'. Abuse or intimidation from members of the public was most frequently reported with 74% of respondents reporting some instance of this behaviour in the last 12 months. Comparatively, only 25% reported experiencing abuse or intimidation from officers.

All of this demonstrates that poor standards and incivility are not isolated incidents but a widespread challenge affecting organisations and individuals across the sector.

In terms of personal impact, eight in 10 (80%) respondents said they felt some level of risk when fulfilling their role as officer, with 34% feeling at risk 'frequently' or 'occasionally'. This was consistent with the 2024 survey (85%), demonstrating that this is an ongoing issue.

Almost half (45%) have either considered changing role and/or organisation or actually did make a change because of issues around poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour showing the picture has not really changed in this regard compared to previous years (50% in 2024 and 51% in 2023).

It is perhaps unsurprising then that nearly a quarter (23%) feel they have become less effective in their job due to poor standards or inappropriate behaviour – an improvement on the 34% reported in 2024 but still a worryingly high number.

Poor standards undermine trust, damage organisational culture and create hostile working environments in which people feel less able to perform at their best. Poor behaviour can also have other significant organisational consequences, contributing to recruitment and retention challenges, consuming valuable leadership time through lengthy standards processes and disputes, and diverting already stretched resources away from delivering services to communities. As the evidence throughout this report demonstrates, standards are therefore not simply a governance issue; they are fundamental to the effectiveness, resilience and long-term sustainability of local government.

Scope of the Report

The Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics was established in July 2025 to better understand the changing nature of standards and behaviour across local government and to identify practical actions that can strengthen ethical leadership, organisational culture and governance.

The Commission met every month over a twelve-month period to gather evidence from a wide range of contributors, including chief executives, senior officers, including monitoring officers, as well as councillors through engagement with the Local Government Association. In addition to this the Commission also took evidence from academics, professional bodies, charities, civil servants and sector experts, recognising that improving standards requires a shared understanding of the challenges across the whole system.

Split into two parts, this report aims to capture the challenges faced by those in the sector, as told by those within it, and then to offer practical proposals addressing those challenges. Organised thematically, Part I gives an overview of the most frequently referenced issues affecting standards, whilst Part II tackles these thematic areas with suggestions at the national, organisational, and individual level. Each section in Part II ends with a concise set of actionable recommendations for the relevant parts of the system that the Commission feels are key to achieving concrete change. The Commission has also developed a couple of tools to help readers navigate some of the issues explored within this report.

Whilst the Commission heard evidence from a broad range of perspectives, this report focuses primarily on the experiences of officers, particularly chief executives and senior leaders. This is not intended to diminish the challenges that elected politicians face in their roles. Members, just like officers, also operate within a broken standards system that undermines local government. As such, there are significant problems in how they are treated, particularly by members of the public, as well as how those problems are dealt with. We absolutely support moves to address this to make the sector a place where all of those within it, members and officers alike, are free from fear of abuse and intimidation. Indeed, earlier this year Solace worked with the LGA and all other professional sector bodies to publish a joint statement on civility in public life, in response to concerns about the increase in abuse council workers are facing whilst doing their jobs. That joint work is continuing to this day.

This report's focus, therefore, is not about sidelining the concerns of others but rather reflects the Commission's remit and the evidence it was established to examine.

A Changing Operating Environment

"I have seen a marked decline in standards, understanding and acceptance in both the public and councillors in my career. Navigating that whilst encouraging future recruitment, and staff retention, in that environment is challenging

A consistent message throughout the Commission's evidence was that this is not a static problem. Contributors repeatedly reflected that standards and behaviour have deteriorated over recent years, with many describing a decline in the baseline level of civility within public life.

Relationships between officers, elected members and members of the public have become increasingly strained, while behaviours once regarded as unacceptable are now perceived to occur with greater frequency. From Solace's 2026 survey, more than half (52%) of officers say standards and behaviours among councillors are getting worse and more than two-thirds (70%) said behaviour among members of the public had worsened in the last three years.

This is not contained to the UK either. When the Commission met with international colleagues from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA, all affirmed a sense of declining civility and worsening behaviours in their respective countries.

The Commission heard that these changes should also be understood within a wider societal context. Declining levels of trust in public institutions have contributed to a more challenging environment for those working in public service. Where confidence in institutions is weakened, frustration and hostility are more readily directed towards those delivering local services, often placing officers and elected members at the forefront of wider public dissatisfaction.

Several contributors also reflected on the lasting social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship, many observed that standards of behaviour appeared to deteriorate following the pandemic, with increased hostility, reduced patience and greater incivility evident both within organisations and in interactions with members of the public.

The Commission recognises that further evidence in this area continues to emerge, but the consistency of these observations across contributors to this work suggests this perception is widely shared.

Indeed, research by Ipsos found that 84% of Britons view the country as divided, with 67% believing the UK is actively gridlocked in "culture wars". A 2026 "Britain Under Strain" study by More in Common revealed that one in six Britons now finds verbal harassment acceptable under certain political or social circumstances.

Pollsters and sociologists attribute the spike in post-Covid hostility to a distinct combination of systemic pressures. The ongoing economic strain is acting as a primary catalyst for public anger. Continuous tracking by the Office for National Statistics reveals that massive majorities (between 88% and 90%) consistently rank the cost of living and the state of the NHS as their top anxieties. This prolonged financial stress has left the public with a much shorter fuse.

Meanwhile, trust in political institutions has eroded significantly. Rather than blaming fellow citizens, data from Ipsos reveals that half of Britons view the nation as increasingly "ungovernable", pointing the finger squarely at politicians for eroding public standards and stoking cultural divisions for political gain.

Specifically in relation to local government, persistent financial pressures have further intensified these challenges. Years of financial constraint have inevitably reduced organisational capacity. Meanwhile many council run services have seen inexorably increasing demand. As a result, the decisions about which services to further cut, and the extent to which these difficult decisions will have on people, intensifies year on year.

Contributors to the Commission's work consistently highlighted that these pressures have affected working relationships, increased tensions within organisations and shaped public perceptions of local government.

At the same time, standards issues themselves create additional demand on already stretched systems, requiring authorities to dedicate time and resources to resolving disputes despite having fewer staff and less funding available to do so. Rather than being separate challenges, financial pressures and standards issues increasingly reinforce one another. Indeed, our analysis of Public Interest Reports demonstrates that the consequences of poor leadership are felt in both weak financial management and pervasive behavioural problems.

The Commission also recognises that local government is currently operating during a period of considerable reform and organisational change. Reforms to planning, children's and adult social care combined with the development of new combined authorities, confusion over the future of local government reorganisation, and changes taking place across other parts of the public sector as part of a broader agenda to rewire the state all create additional pressures and uncertainty, as well as opportunities. While further evidence is needed to fully understand the relationship between these reforms and their impact on standards and behaviours, contributors warned periods of significant transition can increase organisational tensions and place additional demands and difficult decision making on leaders responsible for maintaining effective governance and healthy organisational cultures.

Alongside these changes, contributors highlighted the changing media landscape. The decline of traditional local journalism, coupled with the rapid growth of social media, has altered the context in which local government operates. While social media has created valuable opportunities for engagement, it has also enabled misinformation and disinformation, personal attacks and online abuse to spread more rapidly, placing additional pressure on councils, elected members and officers alike. These issues are explored in greater detail later in this report.

Finally, the Commission heard that uncertainty surrounding the respective roles of local authorities and the police can sometimes complicate the handling of serious standards issues. This should not be understood as a criticism of policing itself, but rather reflects the lack of clarity that can exist around when unacceptable behaviour crosses the threshold from a breach of standards into potential criminal conduct. It may be time to consider whether public servants and staff in local authorities should be treated as having a slightly different threshold for intervention, as occurs for blue light services. Greater clarity around responsibilities and thresholds would support more consistent responses where serious incidents occur.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that declining standards cannot be understood in isolation. They reflect the interaction of wider societal change, organisational pressures and weaknesses within existing governance arrangements. The remainder of this report examines these issues in greater depth before setting out practical recommendations to strengthen standards, support leaders and foster organisational cultures founded on professionalism, integrity and respect.



PART I

The State of Standards

In my time working for local authorities, I have witnessed/seen… a former Leader of a Council bullying browbeaten officers because they did not like the advice they were given and being called to the Leader's Office like a naughty school pupil… and separately officers being told in public meetings that they are incompetent. And this is just the tip of the iceberg

This section sets out the Commission's findings on the current state of professional standards and ethics in local government. It examines how declining standards are being experienced in practice, the behaviours and circumstances that appear to be driving these issues, and the consequences for officers, elected members, organisations and their partners.

The evidence gathered by the Commission points to a complex picture. Poor standards do not arise from a single cause, nor do they take a single form. They range from persistent low-level disrespect and poor communication through to bullying, intimidation, harassment and threats. They can arise between officers and elected members, between elected members themselves, from members of the public towards those working in councils, and, increasingly, through online spaces. And the culprits can be a single person or multiple individuals in any given local authority.

These behaviours also need to be understood within their wider context. Changes in the nature of political discourse, the increasing use of social media, organisational and financial pressures, changes in political representation and a lack of confidence in existing standards arrangements can all contribute to an environment in which poor behaviour is more likely to occur and less likely to be effectively challenged.

To begin, we are going to first look at the forms of poor behaviour most frequently experienced by our members. These fall broadly into the categories of disrespect, bullying and inappropriate behaviour and are often the most visible manifestation of poor standards. Within the Commission's research, they were also the types of misconduct that featured most prominently anecdotally and within survey data. Additionally, this section will also touch on other manifestations of inappropriate behaviour such as overly close professional relationships, as well as how the consequences of misconduct can extend beyond the boundaries of an authority.

IN THIS PART

01 Behaviours
Respect · Bullying and Abuse · Blurred Boundaries

02 Impacts of Behaviour
Partnership working · Women and minoritised groups

03 Contextual and Wider Factors
Inexperience · Social media · Councillors · A failing regime · The police



PART I · THE STATE OF STANDARDS

01

Behaviours

Respect

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The lack of trust is awful. Councillors see officers as the enemy sometimes, when we're actually on the same side

Underlying many of the behaviours described to the Commission was a broader issue: a lack of respect.

Solace's 2026 survey found that respect, or the lack of it, was the most commonly reported issue of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour, identified by 91% of respondents. This finding is consistent with the wider evidence gathered by the Commission about a perceived deterioration in everyday civility and conduct.

A lack of respect can manifest itself in relatively commonplace ways: interruptions during meetings, dismissive attitudes, an unwillingness to listen to alternative views or a lack of collaborative working. However, the same erosion of respect can also exist alongside much more serious behaviours, including belittling comments both in private and in public, sustained bullying campaigns, intimidation, threats and, in the most extreme cases, death threats.

Respect therefore needs to be understood as more than simply an expectation of polite behaviour. It is a foundation for effective working relationships, good governance and a functioning democratic system. Without it, officers and members are less able to challenge one another constructively, difficult decisions become harder to navigate and trust within organisations begins to deteriorate.

Bullying and Abuse

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I have witnessed councillors berating officers over email when requested actions have been declined as not in line with policy. I have witnessed councillors publicly issue rhetoric intentionally disparaging officers

The nature and severity of abusive and disrespectful conduct can vary considerably. Some are isolated incidents, others form part of persistent patterns of behaviour. Some occur between individuals, while others can become embedded within wider organisational cultures. Regardless of their form, these behaviours can damage professional relationships, undermine organisational effectiveness and have a profound impact on an individual's experience of work.

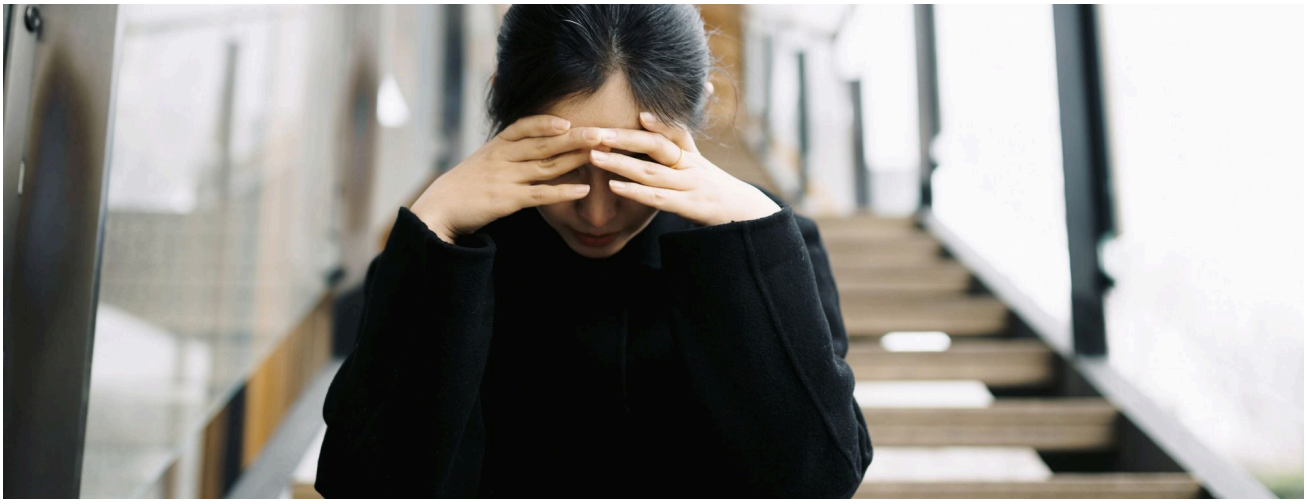
For officers, misconduct by elected members was most frequently identified as the primary source of standards issues directed towards them. Within Solace's survey, for example, half (49%) of respondents to Solace's 2026 survey identified councillors as the most frequent source of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour. This was mirrored in the anecdotal evidence heard by the Commission where councillors were also most frequently identified out of all groups as breaching codes of conduct.

> *"I have experienced behaviour from a senior councillor that was borderline bullying and had to call out respectfully that the behaviour was not OK nor conducive to effective working relationships, whilst not undermining the legitimate role they played"*

This does not mean that poor behaviour is confined to relationships between members and officers, however. The Commission also heard significant evidence of abuse and intimidation from members of the public and Solace's survey revealed that three quarters (74%) of respondents reported some instance of this behaviour in the last 12 months. This behaviour could often take the form of harassment campaigns, vexatious requests for information, and threatening online behaviour.

The limited statutory protections that officers have around these issues was exemplified by a recent news story in which a council director was named directly by a member of the public and taken to court. This singling out for a legal attack is just one example of the ways in which officers are increasingly experiencing harassment. From Solace's wider conversations with other sector bodies, there were discussions around the violence experienced by frontline staff, abuse faced by members of elections teams, and the intersection of the changing political landscape with abuse and intimidation.

> *"The member of the public was a professional, and the employer did all it could to restrain and protect the officers from the intimidation and bullying approaches they used. However, there was only so much that could be done"*



This reflects what contributors to the Commission often reflected on; a sense that behavioural standards across public life, and towards those in it, have deteriorated considerably in recent years. Additionally, claims around 'free speech' have underpinned the defences of those that violate standards of behaviour.

Having to devote attention to dealing with this misconduct by members of the public not only depletes an organisation's resources by having them tied up in attempting to handle complaints and address issues – with mixed results – but has serious effects for the wellbeing of the individuals being targeted.

> *"Those guilty of poor behaviour refuse to accept it as such, citing it as 'freedom of speech'"*

Inappropriate behaviour also takes place within groups too, such as between elected members or between officers. These behaviours can occur in person, through meetings and other workplace interactions, or through email, social media and other forms of electronic communication.

The Commission repeatedly heard that the cumulative effect of persistent, low-level inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour can be particularly damaging. Individual incidents may not always appear sufficiently serious to trigger a formal response, but repeated interruptions, dismissive comments, aggressive communication, public criticism or a refusal to engage constructively, can gradually erode professional relationships and individual confidence. Over time, this can create an environment in which people become anxious about interactions, reluctant to speak openly and less able to work collaboratively.

This dimension of the problem is important. The impact of poor standards should not be assessed solely by considering the most extreme incidents. A culture in which low-level incivility is routinely tolerated is equally corrosive because it establishes a new baseline for what is considered acceptable. Once this happens, behaviours that would previously have been challenged can become normalised, making it increasingly difficult for individuals and organisations to intervene effectively.

Blurred Boundaries

"I have witnessed senior councillors decline transformation plans developed to ensure fair and efficient service delivery because of potential negative impacts on the personal interests of other party members

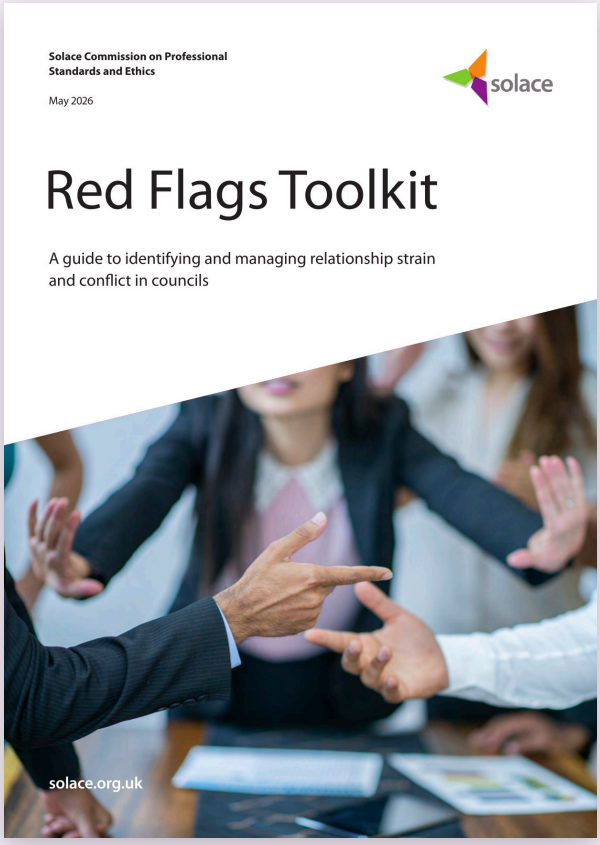
Poor standards do not always take the form of overt hostility. The Commission also heard about the risks created by relationships between elected members and officers that become overly close or fail to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. This is an example of a type of inappropriate behaviour that is potentially more difficult to spot within an authority as it is often

low-level, doesn't always easily lend itself to being addressed through the traditional standards system, and can leave those affected by it unsure of who to report to.

However, just as an abusive remark would violate the principles of an organisation's code of conduct, so too would a relationship that threatened an officer's political neutrality. As such, it needs to be taken just as seriously.

The political impartiality of officers is fundamental to local government. Officers must be able to provide professional advice, including advice that elected members may find difficult or unwelcome, without their independence being compromised by personal or political relationships. Where boundaries become blurred, the traditional checks and balances within an authority can be weakened and behaviours that should be challenged can become more difficult to address.

The Commission's Red Flags Toolkit provides an illustration of how these risks can develop – and, crucially, what you can do about it.



SOLACE RESOURCE

Red Flags Toolkit

A guide to identifying and managing relationship strain and conflict in councils, produced by the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics.

Available on the Solace Civility Hub
solace.org.uk/civility-hub

CASE STUDY

Blurred professional boundaries and a culture of fear

At a large unitary council in England during the mid 2010s, the Chief Executive and other officers experienced significant behavioural challenges from the Council's leader and other members. There were a number of signs of escalating incivility and misconduct such as hostile communications, shouting in meetings, and reports by officers of a culture of anxiety and fear that went unmanaged.

These behaviours were compounded, and reinforced by, blurring of boundaries of professional responsibility and inappropriately close relationships between the leader and certain officers. For example, the Chief Operating Officer/s151 Officer going on holiday with the Leader, and members becoming too closely involved with service delivery. The consequences of this became clear when the situation reached a crisis point and a scandal ensued around contracts given to a health organisation headed by someone personally known to the leader. A Public Interest report found that permissive behaviour by senior officers had been created as a result of the culture of fear that the leader had been able to establish, as well as lack of clarity regarding professional boundaries.

The Chief Executive had attempted some level of challenge and scrutiny to counteract the Leader, but behaviour and the operating environment had devolved to the point that this was insufficient to address the problem.

The outcome was an internal whistleblowing report that resulted in a lengthy police investigation, the resignation of the Council Leader in question and various further resignations and disciplinary investigations into key officers, who also eventually resigned from the Council. This period of poor governance and culture were not effectively or proactively tackled by senior leadership and had serious consequences for the morale of staff and the public image of the authority.

This case study demonstrates not only the risks of inappropriately close working relationships, but also the broader relationship between poor organisational standards and conduct and authorities that require intervention due to governance and financial failings. As in the authority above, a failure to rigorously uphold professional boundaries and respect had serious implications for the governance of the organisation and its financial decision making. This was founded on two axes – the aggressive behaviours of the Leader and the permissive stances of the officers that failed to appropriately offer challenge. The resulting intervention and investigation resulted from fiscal problems caused in part by the culture of poor standards that already existed within the authority. What this makes clear is how an organisational culture that fails to promote and embed good behaviours lays the groundwork for situations that necessitate intervention.



PART I · THE STATE OF STANDARDS

02

Impacts of Behaviour

This section explores the effects of misconduct on both individuals and organisations. In particular, it looks at how the consequences of poor standards can extend beyond the bounds of an authority, as well as how they can affect women and those from minoritised groups.

Effects on Partnership Working

The consequences of poor standards extend beyond the individuals directly involved and beyond the organisation itself.

The Commission heard that external partners are often aware when relationships and behaviours within an authority have deteriorated. Poor internal culture can affect how partners experience an organisation, potentially undermining confidence, collaboration and the ability to work effectively across organisational boundaries.

This is particularly significant because local government has always had a unique convening role in place, operating through complex networks of partnerships. Councils already work closely with health services, police forces, voluntary and community organisations, businesses and other public bodies to deliver services and achieve shared outcomes. However, this activity is only going to increase as part of a rewired state. Effective partnership working depends on trust and professional relationships. Where poor standards and behaviours become visible externally, the consequences can therefore extend well beyond the immediate workplace.



Impact on Women and Minoritised Groups

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I really hate to say this, but there is almost a boys' club atmosphere among some of the more senior male colleagues, and a lack of respect for females who are often more senior and more qualified than themselves

The experience of poor standards and inappropriate behaviour is not equally distributed across the workforce. The Commission heard evidence that women and people from minoritised groups experience more targeted forms of abuse, often linked directly to their protected characteristics.

Findings from the 2025 Solace/ALACE survey on women in local government indicate that women in senior leadership roles, particularly those working in public services and local government, can feel that they are held to higher standards and subjected to greater scrutiny than their male counterparts.

Solace's 2024 survey also found that more than a quarter of respondents (28%) had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to their protected characteristics. Importantly, 59% identified sex as one of the characteristics involved, making it by far the most commonly reported protected characteristic.

> *"It would seem that elected members generally prefer the advice of a male"*

The survey also found that almost half of respondents (49%) had experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as an officer either frequently or occasionally over the previous twelve months, while 47% said they had felt personally at risk either frequently or occasionally when fulfilling their role.

These findings provide further evidence of the targeted nature of abuse experienced by officers and, in particular, the disproportionate relevance of sex within reports of protected-characteristic-related abuse.

> *"We often aren't seen as leadership contenders unless we operate in a very masculine, overconfident and abrasive way"*



The experiences shared through the Solace/ALACE survey further illustrate the complex nature of this problem:

> *"Black women in leadership are subjected to the worst treatment"*

Another respondent observed:

> *"I believe it is even more difficult for women from global majority backgrounds to be treated the same as their counterparts"*

The experiences described were not limited to racial discrimination. One respondent reported:

> *"In my previous authority … I was removed from a Director role after a couple of peers wrote to say they felt uncomfortable serving next to a gay woman in leadership"*

Others described the way misogyny can manifest through relationships between senior women and elected members:

> *"The level of scrutiny in public arenas and on social media, along with the levels of abuse on social media feel and appear different for senior female leaders in the public sector when compared to male counterparts"*

These experiences are unacceptable in themselves, but they also have consequences for the future composition of local government leadership. If talented people from underrepresented groups face greater hostility, scrutiny or abuse when they enter senior public service roles, this can create additional barriers to recruitment, retention and progression at a time when councils are already struggling to create workforces and council chambers which are truly representative of the places they serve.

For the sector to achieve this aim councils must therefore take seriously the environments in which professionals and elected members are expected to work. Greater representation cannot be achieved simply through recruitment. People must also feel that they can succeed and progress without being subjected to disproportionate hostility because of who they are.



PART I · THE STATE OF STANDARDS

03

Contextual and Wider Factors

Consequences of Inexperience

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I have experienced shouting and swearing at me in front of other senior officers; shouting and swearing at other senior officers in front of me; harbouring grudges against individuals; making personal comments; making passive-aggressive digs and exhibiting just plain aggressive behaviours more akin to a football match than a professional workplace

Those who make up the local government workforce and elected membership come from a diverse range of professional and political backgrounds. This diversity is a strength, but it also means that individuals enter local government with varying levels of experience and understanding of its culture, governance arrangements and expectations.

Periods of change, including elections, changes of administration, local government reorganisation and turnover in senior leadership, can result in large numbers of people entering new roles simultaneously. The Commission repeatedly heard that this can create particular challenges where individuals have limited understanding of:

- their role and responsibilities;
- the distinction between member and officer functions;

- the culture and values of the authority; and
- where to seek guidance, support and mentorship.

Inexperience does not inevitably result in poor behaviour. However, it can make existing tensions harder to manage and increase the likelihood of misunderstandings, particularly where relationships are already strained or where individuals are unclear about the boundaries of their role.

Professor Catherine Needham, who spoke to the Commission on her research 'Revisiting the 21st Century Councillor' and 'Revisiting the 21st Century Public Servant' – a body of work which has taken place over the last 10 years, drew attention to a recurring source of friction between councillors and officers: differing views about who speaks for a place, particularly as officers increasingly operate at neighbourhood level. She noted that tensions often arise where the boundary between strategic and operational responsibilities is unclear. The Commission heard that these challenges can be further intensified following changes in political control, particularly where significant numbers of members are entering office for the first time.

The Commission also heard evidence from Dr Jason Lowther, Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham, whose research examines the experience of "challenger parties" entering local government. His research highlights a period of adjustment to formal governance structures, variations in member-officer relationships, and the risks associated with political instability and high turnover.

Dr Lowther also looked at the potential implications of this for professional standards and ethics, which include:

- internal tension and instability
- conflict with officer roles and perceptions of adversarial 'bureaucracy'; and
- attempts to limit or undermine scrutiny (council, public and press)

The issue is not confined to elected members. Inexperienced or insufficiently supported senior officers may struggle to manage difficult relationships, challenge inappropriate behaviour effectively, or navigate unfamiliar political circumstances.

The Commission heard that standards can be particularly vulnerable during periods of organisational or political transition, when members and officers are working together for the first time and established relationships have yet to develop. Even experienced senior officers may find themselves facing unfamiliar challenges where there are significant changes in political composition, such as a move to no overall control. The Commission also considered the changing political environment within which local authorities operate, including the increasing presence of independent councillors and councillors elected from groups without established party structures.

A higher proportion of councillors in some authorities now have limited or no accountability to a traditional party structure or party whip. At the same time, some councillors and groups have explicitly campaigned on platforms of disruption or opposition to established political arrangements.

This reflects a wider change in the political composition and control of local government. The Local Government Association reported in 2023 that the number of councils under no overall control had more than doubled since 2019, with one in three English councils then operating without a single party holding a majority. The 2026 local elections continued this pattern, with the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) stating that 42% of English councils were under no overall control following the elections. At the same time, independent and smaller-party representation has increased: the LGA reported that independents with Residents Associations gained 104 councillors in the 2024 elections, while Greens gained a further 74, with 464 members elected across independents, Greens and smaller parties. This was a trend similarly replicated across 2026's elections, with massive gains for parties such as the Greens and Reform who gained 441 and 1,452 councillors respectively, as well as continued modest growth in the number of independents winning seats across the country.

The increased influence of independent councillors can be particularly significant where relatively small numbers of members hold the balance of power. This isn't an issue in and of itself; the composition of local government can take a multitude of different forms and has done so for decades in some places. However, where relationships between members and officers are

already under strain, different political priorities and competing agendas can lead to friction and make effective governance more difficult.

These challenges may be compounded where independent councillors or newly formed political groups have fewer formal support structures, mentorship opportunities or established processes than are typically available within larger political parties. This does not imply that independent councillors are more likely to behave poorly. Rather, it reinforces the importance of ensuring that all councillors have access to appropriate induction, guidance and support, regardless of political affiliation.

The Commission also considered examples where individual councillors have adopted particularly disruptive approaches, with consequences for officer-member relationships and organisational governance.

One councillor who, after being kicked out of the Conservative group and operating as an Independent, exhibited worsening and more uncontrollable behaviour. His most recent offence related to allegations of homophobic abuse, after which he was subject to legal proceedings. The contributor who shared this with the Commission noted how the lack of established party structures through which to escalate complaints about behaviour made dealing with this individual that much more difficult.

The wider point is that changes in political composition can alter the dynamics within a council. Authorities need governance arrangements and leadership practices that can accommodate these changes while maintaining professional relationships, clear delineation of roles and appropriate standards of conduct. At present, there is no universal approach to addressing these challenges. Variations in the application of codes of conduct, induction arrangements and participation in training mean there is no consistent sector-wide standard for ensuring that members and officers fully understand their responsibilities when entering local government.



Social Media and Technology – Pitfalls and Challenges

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The advent of social media where you can hurl insults and abuse at people without any seeming consequence has emboldened poor behaviours and expectation that we should tolerate what should not be tolerated

The development of social media has fundamentally changed the wider environment in which local government operates. Platforms that can perform a hugely useful role in supporting engagement and communication with communities are also, sadly, increasingly important channels through which abuse, intimidation and harassment are directed towards those working in local government.

Over a third of respondents (39%) to Solace's 2026 survey identified social media as the location in which poor behaviour most frequently occurs. This proportion was even higher in the LGA's 2025 Debate Not Hate survey of councillors where almost two thirds (64%) named social media or open online forums as the most frequently reported channel of abuse or intimidation. While the most visible examples heard by the Commission involved abusive comments from members of the public, inappropriate behaviour can also originate from within authorities, including from elected members and other individuals working in local government.

The Commission also heard concerns about the wider online environment in which this behaviour takes place. Social media algorithms can reinforce particular views and communities, while increasingly hostile online discourse and the growth of radicalised language and movements can contribute to a more aggressive environment.

On top of this, there is also often an inherent asymmetry between those within councils and the transparency measures they operate within, such as publicly available information including names, contact details, and so on, and anonymously perpetrated online abuse. For those who become the target of abuse, the ability for comments and content to spread rapidly can significantly increase the scale and persistence of the experience. Professor Needham's research, for example, found that the negative role played by social media was a part of an increasing sense of public life feeling less safe.

> *"My experience involves a recent sustained politically motivated attack towards officers from an elected Member over six months. This included a bombardment of rude and abrupt emails sent at inappropriate times, being publicly berated by the member in a formal public meeting. Inappropriate social media posts, which included mistruths to gain political advantage. Subject access requests and FOIs over a sustained period. Phone calls out of hours, making threatening suggestions such as 'change your plans otherwise this will go nuclear' as well as face-to-face gaslighting to such an extent it became disenabling to undertake my role effectively"*

Social media has also created new challenges around misinformation and disinformation. False or misleading information can spread quickly, requiring councils to devote considerable time and resources to monitoring, responding and correcting claims. Local online groups and forums can similarly become environments in which negative or inappropriate commentary about council staff is amplified. As the Commission heard, this has become a significant issue for the sector.

Contributors gave accounts of how social media had driven targeted harassment campaigns, eaten up capacity, and overwhelmed communications teams. The pace at which inaccurate information can circulate was also discussed as having a particularly detrimental effect in the current politically polarised operating environment. Councils operating in this context were further affected by closed social media groups that eliminated any opportunity to offer corrections and facilitated the proliferation of incorrect messaging. Overall, the sheer volume of misinformation and disinformation that organisations must contend with has rendered councils continually struggling to play catch up, with little ability to proactively address it.

One incident shared with the Commission concerned the use of AI by an independent councillor to generate a politically motivated video of a political opponent. This followed a disagreement within the Council around when to hold a debate on the city's finances. Due to constraints within the current standards system, the councillor responsible for creating the video didn't face any consequences for creating the video or for circulating it online. Online misconduct is particularly difficult to address through existing standards arrangements. One challenge is determining whether an elected member is acting in their official capacity when using social media. There are often no clear distinctions between personal and official councillor accounts, making it difficult to establish when conduct falls within the scope of existing standards arrangements. These questions intersect with legitimate rights to freedom of expression and with the willingness and ability of social media companies to enforce their own rules.

One respondent to Solace's survey recorded the following experience:

> *"I've seen dirty tricks social media campaigns between parties seeking to vilify opponents and dragging senior officers into the crossfire, I've been stalked in person and virtually, had spurious complaints made to civil servants, police etc. I've been described as part of the cultural Marxist elite – terms used by Anders Breivik and the alt right, I've had my diary subject to FOI and weekly publication online"*

The account illustrates how online abuse can move beyond criticism of decisions or policies and become sustained personal targeting. It also demonstrates the way in which online and offline behaviours can intersect, with social media activity generating complaints, scrutiny and pressure across multiple institutions.

Beyond this, a more foundational issue that is preventing the robust tackling of online abuse; the categorisation of social media sites as "platforms". This designation, as opposed to "publishers", allows for the companies that sit behind them to dodge responsibility for the content and behaviour that takes place on their websites. As a result, there is a lack of meaningful pressure on them to grapple with this issue. Whilst local government can do what it can to introduce its own codes of conduct and influence behaviours, if a space exists where individuals feel uninhibited and unconstrained to act badly, there is currently little recourse to be taken at the sector level to address it.

Experiences of Councillors

Although the Commission's primary focus has been on officers, standards issues clearly affect elected members as well. Councillors operate in an increasingly challenging environment, with many experiencing poor behaviour from members of the public as well as from other councillors.

Evidence from the Local Government Association, alongside material gathered by the Commission, provides an important perspective on these experiences. The LGA's 2025 Debate Not Hate survey of councillors found that almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) reported feeling personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor, with around the same number (72%) reporting having experienced abuse or intimidation due to their role as councillors over the last 12 months.

Councillors can face hostility and abuse because of decisions they take, the political positions they represent or simply because they hold public office. As Professor Needham's research showed, councillors often feel they become a 'lightning rod' for hostility.

This is important to recognise because standards and civility cannot be framed solely as an issue of member behaviour towards officers. Councillors themselves can be victims of inappropriate behaviour and abuse, and creating a healthier environment for local government requires standards to apply consistently across the whole system.

At the same time, the distinct roles of elected members and officers must remain clear. Officers have professional responsibilities and duties of political impartiality that differ from those of elected representatives. A strong standards framework must therefore recognise both the shared expectation of respectful behaviour and the different responsibilities of those working within the local government system.

It should be made clear that it is not an either/or dichotomy between doing more to tackle abuse from members of the public and remedying the absence of a fit-for-purpose standards regime within local government – we can do both. Building effective standards is about more than just the regime itself, it is about addressing all the parts that sit around it, including the relationship between the public and those within authorities. Nonetheless, building an effective standards system should remain a priority.

A Failing Standards Regime

// The sanctions that could be posed upon elected councillors for inappropriate behaviour I have experienced are not worth the paper they are written on

The standards issues plaguing the sector are evidently prolific and damaging, but what role does the system that underpins them play? The most commonly cited complaint that the Commission heard is that the current regime 'lacks teeth', undercutting its role as both deterrent and disciplinary system. As a result, many have felt increasingly disenchanted with the system, with some noting that even when they have used it, it is woefully insufficient.

> *"There is limited action that can be taken, especially against councillors"*

The distinction is important because the current regime does provide some sanctions, but these are limited in their scope and severity. Where a breach is found, councils can, depending on their local arrangements, issue a formal censure or public criticism, require a councillor to apologise or undertake code of conduct training, and remove them from cabinet, committee or other representative roles. However, councils currently have no power to suspend a councillor for breaching the code of conduct, disqualify them from office for such a breach, or withhold their allowances as a disciplinary sanction. There is also no explicit statutory power to impose a ban from council premises or withdraw access to facilities. The Government has acknowledged that these limitations leave councils without an effective way of dealing with more serious or persistent misconduct.

This has also led to emboldening perpetrators of inappropriate behaviour and repeat offenders. Those who are minded to operate in such a way understand there are limited consequences for violating conduct codes and feel they can act either with impunity or are proud of the recourse taken against them. As one respondent to Solace's survey on standards in 2024 detailed:

> *"I have experience of a member who uses standards as a badge of honour and laughs during any conduct enquiries as he is aware that there are no sanctions"*

Whilst this is an extreme example, it is emblematic of the ways in which the standards regime fails. Not only are some significant sanctions unavailable, including suspension, disqualification and withholding of allowances, but the sanctions that are available are insufficient to have a meaningful impact. In this current moment the most that is required of offenders is being 'required' to write a letter of apology. This renders standards processes entirely ineffectual as there are no meaningful mechanisms with which to punish conduct violations.

The failures of the regime are also evident in its lack of capacity to deal with vexatious complaints, whether from elected politicians, or members of the public. What this means is that the standards system not only fails to address and disincentivise poor behaviour but can itself be wielded as tool of abuse.

This is an issue that is becoming ever more pressing with the rise of technologies such as generative AI, particularly at the hands of members of the public. New tools allow for individuals to draft and submit complaints and appeals at a faster pace than ever before, creating even more strain on the system as councils still need to review and respond to them fairly and thoughtfully. As AI use continues to grow, the challenge for councils is not simply managing increased volumes, but ensuring they can continue to provide compassionate, human responses while drawing out the insight needed to make improvements.

> *"I was systematically targeted by a member of the public. I think the council didn't know quite how to handle it"*

As it stands, the system is currently unable to offer officers robust protections when experiencing these types of harassment campaigns – or adequate methods to tackle them.

It is not just in the dealing with incidents that the system falters. This has also led to non-reporting of incidents due to a fear of retribution and intimidation; an issue exacerbated by the knowledge that the system lacks real capacity to remove offending parties.

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents to Solace's 2026 survey said they did not feel safe to raise concerns or challenge poor standards and behaviour from councillors, compared to 13% for members of the public and 10% for other officers.

The Commission also heard frequent accounts of retaliatory behaviour following challenges to inappropriate conduct. This was particularly evident where officers had raised concerns about the behaviour of elected members, but similar experiences were also described between members. Solace's 2026 survey reinforced this, with numerous respondents referencing the retaliatory behaviour that could accompany reports. For example, one individual shared that:

> *"I have witnessed other officers who have raised issues against an officer only for them to be targeted and forced out of the organisation"*

Officers are particularly vulnerable in this due to lacking the same 'right of reply' as elected members possess. Individuals who challenge poor behaviour can themselves become the subject of complaints, criticism, intimidation or other forms of retaliation due to the failure of the standards system.

> *"I was bullied after a councillor found out I had given a statement to police after he assaulted other councillors in the chamber"*

The consequences of this extend beyond those directly targeted. Firstly, fear of retaliation can discourage people from reporting concerns in the first place, undermining the effectiveness of standards processes and allowing poor behaviour to continue unchecked.

Further to this, where those targeted are Monitoring Officers, this undermines the system even further as it opens up those tasked with standards issues to personal attacks and harassment campaigns.

It has also led to cases where standards committees are initiated but struggle to find individuals to sit on them due to this culture of fear. A system cannot provide meaningful protection if those who are expected to use it, or administer it, believe that doing so will expose them to further hostility or professional consequences.

> *"Monitoring Officers are challenged with dealing with such behaviours and they become part of the witch hunt for trying to bring them into line with standards and officer/member protocols"*

These elements reinforce themselves in a vicious cycle. Perpetrators feel able to act disrespectfully or aggressively where they know no consequences will occur and victims feel either too intimidated or fail to see the point in reporting for the same reason – thereby leading to even lower levels of standards processes being started. At each turn, the inherent weaknesses in the standards regime serve to undermine its purpose and fail to meaningfully address misconduct. Without rapid and robust reform, it will continue to do so although a strengthened standards regime on its own will not be enough.

Colleagues in Scotland and Wales, where more robust standards regimes already exist, testify to the fact this is not a silver bullet – this was demonstrated in 2026 by a unanimous vote of no confidence by Edinburgh City Council in the Ethical Standards Commissioner and Standards Commission for Scotland.

Rather than the whole solution, a strengthened standards regime is a safety net that needs to be seen to be as part of a suite of tools to tackle this issue head on.

The Role of the Police

A complicating factor in addressing issues around the standards system can also come from the variable relationships and levels of coordination local authorities can have with their local police force.

There is a perception that a lack of action by the police in response to standards-related incidents is down to a lack of understanding as to the functioning of local government systems, the way in which poor standards manifest in the sector, and how the police can provide support.

As the Commission heard, the police can often be at a loss as to what to charge individuals with and often don't have a significant number of officers who have a good understanding of local government. As a result, there is an organisational gap in knowledge and this lack of understanding often serves to disadvantage organisations by denying them an external partner in combatting standards issues.

The extent this affects local authorities in dealing with standards issues can be seen in when cooperation with the police goes right.

CASE STUDY

Partnership working with the police

One example shared with the Commission related to abusive and harassing behaviour by a councillor that escalated into police involvement, a restraining order being brought into force, and a prison sentence.

The councillor involved was initially subject to a code of conduct standards investigation where he refused to participate and accused those involved of corruption. After being found to have breached the organisation's code of conduct, he was told to apologise – the only possible action to be taken following an investigation – which he refused to do. His behaviour then worsened, including bombarding officers with emails, as well as speaking about shooting another councillor (whilst in possession of a gun license) over a disagreement. He was offered both mental health and occupational health support by the authority, but denied both. He also started physically and verbally harassing officers, such as lingering in car parks and attending committees he wasn't a member of to shout at attendees.

In the end, with the support of the local policing force, the council were able to bring forward an offence. Due to the evidence of his use of emails as part of his abusive behaviour, and through cooperation with the police, he was convicted on use of a public communication network to cause annoyance, inconvenience, and anxiety.
The effect of his behaviour on the authority was considerable. It caused significant difficulty and distress for both officers and monitoring officers, with some having to be escorted from the building at the end of meetings. It also demonstrated the inefficacy of the standards regime when behaviour is below the legal threshold and how robust action being taken often relies on cooperation with local police forces, as well as their understanding of how to address issues in a local government context. Even after conviction, the councillor responsible was not removed from office.

Although the Commission repeatedly sought to engage the police on this piece of work, we were unable to secure their involvement or contribution. While, at the time of publication, we had been unable to share our findings with the police and discuss potential ways forward, Solace will continue to attempt to engage at a national level.



PART II

Where to Go Next?

Local government should not simply believe poor behaviour is an inevitability. Accepting it takes place shouldn't be seen as the norm

This section deals with the suggestions, proposals, and recommendations that the Commission has heard and developed over the last year.

It addresses the thematic areas outlined above and offers ways forward for the sector to proactively address the challenges it currently faces.

Whilst some of the factors contributing to the proliferation of standards-related issues in local government sit outside the direct control of councils, what the Commission's work has revealed is that local government is not powerless – there are always steps that can be taken. Bad behaviour should not be tolerated and there is much that individuals and organisations can do to tackle misconduct.

IN THIS PART

01 Organisational/Corporate Culture

02 Induction, Training, and Member/Officer Awareness

03 Social Media and Internet-Based Abuse

04 Preventing Burnout

05 Advocating for a Stronger Regime



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

01

Organisational/Corporate Culture

"I am confident and forthright enough to have always tackled disrespect head on myself, and when I see it, tackle it on behalf of others. It isn't easy though and is often unexpected – positive behaviour, honesty and trust matter a lot

Looking beyond the standards system, building an effective culture was widely identified by those speaking to the Commission as one of the foundational pillars of strong standards and ethics in an authority.

The Commission also heard that no matter the administration, adequate and robust governance structures are a necessity.

Numerous contributors to the Commission noted that, before anything else, having the right culture in place was one of the most significant things an authority could do to meaningfully impact standards. An authority requires a strong scaffolding of governance where, at the most fundamental level, there must be respect, cooperation, and understanding.

These behaviours should not be viewed as entirely separate. A healthy organisational culture depends upon a shared understanding that people can disagree robustly while continuing to treat one another with professionalism and respect. Where that distinction is lost, disagreement can become personal, political differences can become hostility, and challenge can become intimidation.

Within this, the importance of the Chief Executive's role and that of the extended senior leadership team in 'setting the tone' was stressed. When a set of foundational values are agreed, the modelling of these behaviours is a key part of creating a culture in which expectations around conduct are clearly communicated and understood. If senior leadership fails to live the principles of an authority, this not only sets a poor example, but undermines these agreed principles from the very start.

Beyond this, those in leadership have a responsibility to model respectful challenge and holding individuals to account. Where bad behaviour is ignored or overlooked, it is functionally the same as accepting or condoning it and denies support to those affected. Leaders must therefore be visible and vocal in condemning instances of poor standards.

Solace's Code of Practice for Good Governance, written in conjunction with CIPFA and LLG, provides advice and sets expectations for local government's three highest profile statutory roles of Head of Paid Service, Chief Finance Officer, and Monitoring Officer.

The aim of the Code is to enable them to effectively work together in what is known as the 'Golden Triangle' to best advise their authority, implement its decisions, and help achieve good outcomes. These three roles are senior, critical, and influential positions within a local authority, and have collective responsibility for governance. For the individuals concerned, it is a privilege to undertake the work, delivering positive results with a tangible impact. When done well, the postholders can leave an authority with a lasting, inspiring legacy. Best practice in working arrangements will enable the postholders to perform to the best of their ability. However, as recent failures have clearly and repeatedly demonstrated, where the posts do not operate effectively as a team, their advice is not afforded proper respect, where there is a poor culture, or what they have to say is not heard or understood, governance and decision making suffers and the consequences for local communities can be severe.

It is therefore important that these statutory officer posts, their roles and why they exist are understood, respected, and given the support required for their duties to be undertaken to the full. Additionally, it is important for those in, or aspiring to be in, these roles to understand the power that they wield, its potential impact on others and the responsibility that comes with it. The roles have a unique part to play in modelling good behaviour in governance, calling out poor behaviour, and actively demonstrating the Nolan Principles in practice. Solace's Guide to the Golden Triangle, again written in conjunction with CIPFA and LLG, provides more detail and is a useful reference point.

There are, of course, other key leadership roles within the council which also play an important governance role and sometimes have their own statutory responsibilities – the wider leadership team of any council could also be referred to as a 'Golden Star' and has a vital role in governance, setting and maintaining the right culture, and, where appropriate, calling out inappropriate behaviours.

Beyond the Chief Executive, the first officer that may jump out in this context would be the Monitoring Officer. They are undoubtedly of utmost importance in thinking about good governance due to the significance of their role within standards processes. Monitoring Officers will often be the individual that knows the authority's code of conduct best – if one is in place – and are responsible for much of the formal and informal conflict resolution that takes place in an organisation. As such, the Commission frequently heard from senior leaders that the Chief Executive's relationship with their Monitoring Officer is a key part of successfully dealing with standards issues.

> *"So many times the issues have dragged on, and the Monitoring Officer was swamped with both complaints and the day job"*

However, in thinking about good governance, it is crucial that understanding codes of conduct and governance processes should not solely be the responsibility of the Monitoring Officer, but well-understood across the authority and, in particular, by all senior officers. Ideally an organisation will embed a sense of collective responsibility among officers involved with leadership – the 'Golden Star', but especially the 'Golden Triangle' of statutory officers – when dealing with standards and governance issues, particularly during times of escalating challenge. The 'Golden Triangle' refers to the combination of the Head of Paid Service, Chief Finance Officer, and Monitoring Officer, whereas the "Golden Star" is the extended team of Heads of services and senior officers. Beyond this, it should also be an aim to push this further and have a strong organisational culture of standards which is collectively owned by all members of an authority, from the Chief Executive all the way down.

This responsibility shouldn't start and end with officers, either. Upholding organisational values and standards of the authority also extends to councillors. As the Commission heard, in combatting standards violations by members, it was felt that one of the most effective means of calling out inappropriate behaviour was when this accountability came from other councillors. In particular, this is an area where Group Leaders and Group Whips can play an invaluable role in upholding good standards among their peers.

As the Commission found, part of why culture must be a whole-organisation effort is due to the effect that even one individual can have on the atmosphere and standards of an authority.

A contributor spoke to the Commission about the negative effect one councillor has had on worsening the behaviours of other councillors within an authority. Throughout his time in office, he had repeatedly partaken in bullying and abusive behaviour both virtually and in-person. His actions not only contributed to the high turnover of Monitoring Officers within this council, but also led to mimicry, with other councillors imitating his behaviour, rallying around him, and looking to his example to see what they are able to get away with. The impact this one individual had, therefore, is significant. His own conduct encouraged the deterioration of standards within the authority, negatively affected staff retention, and contributed to an overall degeneration of constructive and respectful working relationships.

Ultimately, addressing standards is not the job of any one individual – it is an everybody, everyday issue and should be seen as a joint endeavour.

Governance and Reporting

Part of having good governance lies in the culture that sits around standards systems. This means ensuring that senior leaders function as an approachable point of contact that individuals feel able to report experiences of inappropriate conduct to.

Beyond just reporting, individuals need to feel safe to begin standards proceedings at all. This is especially crucial in the context of issues discussed in Part I. As the Commission has heard, and as Solace's own surveys have revealed, the inefficacy of current standards systems and the failure of it to hold offenders accountable has led to a lack of recourse for officers, targeted bullying, and, occasionally, a fear of retaliation resulting from making a complaint. These reservations apply to some groups more than others. As Solace's survey showed, almost a quarter of respondents (23%) said they did not feel safe to raise concerns/challenge poor standards and behaviour from councillors.

To counteract this, authorities can take steps to ensure a system of support around that individual where they might feel at risk personally or professionally for starting proceedings.

It is important that victims of standards offences are not minimised within standards processes, whether this is through formal or informal resolution. It is here where senior leaders can have impact, leading with empathy, care, and a firm line on misconduct.

It should also be kept in mind that Chief Executives and senior leaders are also employers and as such have a duty of care to their workforce, including being able to be offered and access employee support arrangements, particularly where individuals may have experienced or are currently experiencing misconduct. Councillors as a

collective also come under this status of employer and this legal duty of care to staff, inclusive of senior officers, therefore extends to them too. These elements are all part of building a positive culture around standards.

As contributors to the Commission stressed, real importance lies in building trust both in the system and its processes, as well as trust that those processes will be undertaken at all.

Another avenue that could be pursued, would be to regularly check in with external partners as to how they see an organisation could have real benefit in identifying issues, as well as improvements, in order to gauge the state of standards. Given an authority's role as a convenor in place, it may benefit to get an outside view from time-to-time to understand how your organisation is perceived and how to improve.

Ultimately, good governance and a positive organisational culture flow from a code of conduct and set of principles that is both widely understood across an authority and continually reinforced, a senior leadership team that models and upholds these values, and a collective sense of ownership of these behavioural standards.



TOOL 1

Healthy Culture and Governance Audit

Ten questions to assess your own organisation's culture and governance. Rate each one Green, Amber or Red.

	QUESTION	GREEN	AMBER	RED
1	Do elected members and officers share a common statement of expected behaviours across the organisation? i.e. is a Member-Officer Protocol in place?	○	○	○
2	Is the Member-Officer Protocol reviewed annually?	○	○	○
3	Do leaders actively model organisational values?	○	○	○
4	Do you consider your Golden Triangle to be functioning effectively?	○	○	○
5	Do people within the organisation feel safe to raise concerns?	○	○	○
6	Are standards complaints analysed for themes?	○	○	○
7	Are these thematic issues regularly discussed by SLT?	○	○	○
8	Are any behavioural concerns tackled early?	○	○	○
9	Are external partners asked for feedback on your organisation's culture, governance and conduct?	○	○	○
10	Are whistleblowing routes well publicised and trusted?	○	○	○

8–10 Greens
Strong culture

5–7 Greens
Improvement needed – see recommendations

Below 5 Greens
Governance risk requiring immediate attention – see recommendations

The Commission has produced a tool to assess your own organisation's culture and governance. In addition to this report, the Commission has also created a set of slides exploring how to build a positive governance culture that can be adapted to local circumstances. The slides can be found on Solace's Civility Hub at: solace.org.uk/civility-hub.

→ Recommendations

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

- Undertake an annual review of organisational culture and standards risks as a senior management team.
- Promote the early use of mediation and other informal resolution mechanisms to prevent disputes from escalating into formal standards cases.

COUNCILLORS

- Councillors subject to upheld complaints must undertake robust and targeted behavioural improvement and/or mediation programmes.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Co-produce, between councillors and officers, a set of agreed values and behaviours that apply to the entire organisation, not just employed officers.
- Adopt and uphold the Model Code of Conduct and embed it within organisational values, governance arrangements and decision-making processes.
- Co-create and/or regularly review the authority's member-officer relations protocol, using the LGA's good practice guide to help clarify expectations and understanding in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as identifying key examples of how this will work in practice and setting out how things will be resolved if they go wrong.
- Ensure robust governance frameworks are in place and subject to regular independent review, but especially where concerns are identified.
- Introduce annual reporting on standards complaints, outcomes and lessons learned.
- Seek and report on independent feedback from external partners on organisational culture, governance and conduct, potentially as part of an annual reporting process.
- Establish organisational culture champions across the organisation aimed at complementing, not competing, with the role of Monitoring Officer. Champions must be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support, including a forum where they can come together and share learning and tools, as well as have access to the senior leadership team and council leader.
- Appoint a whistleblowing champion who also should be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support and work closely with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Audit. (If all the other recommendations put forward here are implemented, the need for this may only be short-term until all changes are embedded).

SOLACE

- Create a Chief Executive Civility Lead, with championing respectful conduct and professional leadership across the sector as part of their remit.
- Review and update all learning programmes to strengthen training on ethics, governance and member-officer relations.
- Review and raise awareness of the Solace Code of Ethics across the profession.
- Provide ongoing practical guidance and support to chief executives and senior officers on standards and ethical leadership, such as creating practical toolkits on mediation, conflict resolution and culture change.
- Establish and promote peer support arrangements for chief executives/senior officers facing standards-related challenges.
- Maintain ongoing monitoring of standards and ethics in the sector.



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

02

Induction, Training, and Member/Officer Awareness

Setting good standards starts at the very beginning with an effective introduction to an authority's values and expectations. As part of this, one of the most pressing refrains throughout the Commission's work has been highlighting the value of a robust and comprehensive induction programme. It was heard that these programmes should come as early as possible, particularly for new members, but also for new officers or those officers new to the local government sector.

The issue of inexperience for councillors has been explored at length; in order to counter the potential obstacles it can raise, a thorough introduction to governance processes, an organisation's code of conduct (which all should have), and the boundaries of their authority is key for new members. This last element is especially crucial for those members who are new not only to an authority, but to the sector. If expectations and understanding on the specific remits and responsibilities of members and officers are embedded early, this can build a foundation for productive cooperation down the line. It is highly useful to communicate as early as possible on this to prevent future misunderstandings that may underpin standards issues.

This should also apply to established members too – frequent refreshers on expectations and rules around behaviour and conduct can be a valuable tool in consistently signalling the importance of standards within an organisation. As Ed Hammond, then Deputy Chief Executive of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, noted in his evidence to the Commission, the best induction and training programmes were co-

designed and developed 'in-house', had a specific focus on the authority's needs and skills, and were regularly updated.

However, as it is not only members that can be inexperienced, it is crucial for officers to undertake adequate personal and professional development too. For younger or less experienced officers that may be moving into the leadership pipeline, for example, it should be a priority for them to build up their political acumen and have sufficient exposure to operating in a political environment, dealing with members, and the member-officer relationship more generally. For senior officers, an emphasis on training and induction might look different. Senior officers that are new in post, particularly those that are entering the sector for the first time, should have an induction to the demands, processes, and scope of their role.

For more experienced Chief Executives and senior officers, on the other hand, there may be some benefit in more tailored training, such as programmes or protocols to address where individuals might become desensitised to issues in their organisation. In a bid to avoid circumstances in which a certain level of poor behaviour is considered the norm, officers may periodically look to resources such as Solace's Red Flags Toolkit to ensure that their authority is functioning healthily.

Finally, whilst senior officers should be at the forefront of maintaining standards and organisational culture, there should also be a system in place where possible to regularly run refresher sessions on good governance.



SOLACE RESOURCE

Managing Political Transition to a New Administration

Practical guidance for chief executives and senior leaders on preparing for, and working through, a change in political control – with key timelines and checklists for each stage.

Available on the Solace Civility Hub
solace.org.uk/civility-hub

In thinking about leadership for both members and officers, good standards are a crucial part of the equation. As such, more attention must be paid to this element within any training programmes or curricula for leadership development. This is where Solace's leadership programmes for current and future leaders, as well as coaching, action learning, peer learning and top-team development, can play a crucial role, helping leaders build the judgement, confidence and relationships needed to navigate complexity and establish good organisational cultures.

It is also worthwhile to keep in mind periods that may be pressure points on standards and to adjust as needed. For example, the Commission repeatedly heard about transition of administration as a time where it was a necessity to have both robust induction programmes for new members, and refreshers for officers on handling transition. Recommendations made by contributors emphasised the value of a neutral approach to inductions, as well as officers making sure to put in ample time to meet with the new administration before and during changeover. This could also be bolstered by scenario planning ahead of elections. If a change is anticipated, it can be useful to prepare by going through different scenarios ahead of results to ensure measures are ready to put into place that cater to each potential outcome. For support in helping navigate this change, Solace also produced a guide to Managing Transition to a New Political Administration that covers key timelines in transition, crucial checklists for ensuring governance is up to date,

and milestones for each step of the process. Steps can also be taken on a peer-to-peer level. For example, one recommendation made by Professor Needham to the Commission discussed the value in peer coaching, mentoring, or creating safe spaces for individuals coming into public life. An example used was of a successful women's network set up by a council to address misogyny in the workplace. However, options could also be explored for officer-to-officer mentoring, or member mentoring for new elected members, but in particular for independent councillors who may not have established party structures for support.

When designing these induction programmes, it was also emphasised that there is no 'one size fits all' model. As local government often necessitates in all things – due to the hyper local nature of an authority, it is vital that training is tailored to its specific needs and context. Within the Commission's research there was a real sense of wanting to share best practice and authorities should feel encouraged to take inspiration from peers in the sector to bolster their own programmes.



→ Recommendations

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

- Complete mandatory governance and standards inductions within three months of being appointed to their roles and undertake mandatory refresher training at least every three years.
- Develop future senior leaders by providing team members with early exposure to member-officer relations, governance and standards issues via regular shared learning and shadowing opportunities to sit in/contribute to public (e.g. Full Council) and private meetings.

COUNCILLORS

- Complete standards and code of conduct training within three months of an election and undertake refresher training during each council term.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Deliver induction and refresher training for all councillors and officers covering governance, codes of conduct, and role/organisational boundaries.

SECTOR BODIES

- Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to develop accredited standards training for councillors and officers.
- Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to create a national repository of standards case studies and learning, and use this to inform:
  - an annual state-of-the sector update on trends in standards and ethics, produced by Solace and other sector bodies;
  - the development of advice/guidance that responds to trends, facilitates sector-wide learning, and disseminate best practice on conduct and standards.

SOLACE

- Feed in to, and influence where possible the direction of, the Ethics and Integrity Commission's Call for Evidence on guidance around designing and embedding codes of conduct for public servants.

POLICE

- Work with the sector to develop and run regular training for police liaison officers tasked with dealing with/responding to local government issues.



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

03

Social Media and Internet-Based Abuse

The complexities of dealing with poor standards via social media and online are obvious, but steps can still be taken to embed good practice where possible within an authority.

Each authority should have its own code of conduct that encompasses online activity, but it is also crucial that this is regularly updated to reflect the changing landscape in which those in local government operate. This is particularly true for emerging technologies like AI – authorities need to be aware of how issues could/can develop and take appropriate steps to ensure policies remain relevant.

Guidance provided by the LGA here can be a useful starting point for forming your own guidelines around safe social media use by members and officers.

Given the vitriol and hostility that can often emerge online, there should be robust support in place for those facing abuse, but in particular for communications teams that are on the front line of dealing with online behaviours. As the Commission has heard, prolonged exposure to negativity can have a deeply detrimental effect on mental health, so it should be made a priority. This may be especially applicable for those authorities with smaller comms teams.

As with all measures, the earlier policies can be put in place, the better. It is necessary to have consistent programmes of support, training, and awareness across an authority – as well as an awareness that it is not just the preserve of comms teams.

It should also be the responsibility of senior officers to understand what challenges and risks social media poses and embed protections for all members of an authority. Where abuse does happen, it is also their responsibility to be an approachable point of contact to offer support. However, this can only happen if a comprehensive understanding of an online context is in place.

When it comes to misinformation and disinformation, another useful guide on how to prepare for and respond to such incidents has been produced by the LGA. The first part of the document sets out definitions of mis/dis/malinformation and its effects on communities, local authorities and individuals. How to respond to such information and possible countermeasures are also covered in section one. The second part of the guide includes case studies provided by councils and the learning that can be taken from these.

For those dealing with mis/disinformation, defamatory comments, or inflammatory content online, the greatest challenge can be in getting it removed by the platform it is hosted on. This can often be attributed to social media companies' own processes around content flagging, which can feel extraordinarily difficult to make progress with. As such, it is important that authorities do what they are able to pre-emptively establish good standards around online conduct within their own organisation. This includes establishing clear frameworks and expectations so each councillor, officer, and member of staff is clear on how to ethically and responsibly use social media and digital platforms, as well as what irresponsible use looks like. Councils and Strategic Authorities must be proactive and practical in their planning in this space, with strategies and protocols in place to tackle information-based issues.

On a broader scale, the Commission heard that the sector should be part of the voices calling for social media companies to be recategorised as "publishers" as opposed to "platforms". This allows them to be held accountable on a national scale for the content that is produced and published via their websites. As a result, it may significantly contribute to combatting the ongoing fights against mis- and disinformation, as well as abusive language and attacks. Without this, there is little to no recourse that can be taken beyond the usual reporting features of these sites, whereas a recategorisation would pressure these companies into taking real action.

→ Recommendations

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Create clear and cohesive organisational guidance on responsible and ethical social media use and online conduct for both officers and councillors.
- Agree a social media strategy which includes arrangements for identifying and responding to mis/mal/disinformation.

COUNCILLORS

- Comply with their authority's guidance and expectations around use of social media and online conduct.

SECTOR BODIES

- Work together to co-create national guidance for elected members on the use of AI, social media and emerging technologies.
- Solace, along with other sector bodies such as the LGA, should seek to forge links with key platforms to create a centralised point of contact through to channel concerns about harmful content.

GOVERNMENT

- Recategorise algorithmically driven social media companies as publishers, in order to establish their accountability for what is published via their platforms.



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

04

Preventing Burnout

"

Asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength

Dealing with standards issues can often feel like an overwhelming task.

For Chief Executives and officers that are often on the front lines of addressing misconduct, it can be a fine balance between performing their duty of care for staff, but also looking after themselves. Too often the mental health of senior leaders and responsible officers can be neglected in the day-to-day crush of working in the sector. This is exacerbated by the pernicious expectation that a role in local government necessitates a 'thick skin', that poor standards are part of the job, or that bad behaviour should simply be expected.

The narrative desperately needs changing. Part of this can be in carving out space for senior officers to proactively address their mental health and introduce measures that make it a clear priority. Otherwise, this damaging association of poor standards with taking on roles in local government – particularly those in leadership – will put the sector in serious danger of losing staff and further thinning out the leadership pipeline.

There are steps that can be taken by senior officers right away, for example accessing supportive peer support networks – such as Solace. These can be a lifeline for

those going through a period of serious challenge even just to speak to a peer with similar experience. It is important to remember that asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength. Knowing when to reach out, to seek support, and to ask for what you need is a skill, and a crucial one at that.

Performing check-ins with yourself as you would with other members of staff can also be invaluable. This means becoming familiar with signs of burnout and taking note of when things might seem to be taking a greater toll. Part of understanding the wider senior leadership team is also key in knowing when issues can be delegated and an awareness that it doesn't all lie on one pair of shoulders. At the most basic level – knowing when to take time, step away, and regroup is also important.

More broadly, greater support structures can be embedded within an authority. These might be the introduction of resources, such as mental health first aiders among staff, or the previously mentioned intra-authority support networks. Ideally, greater funding would come from Government to resource the training and support that the sector needs.

→ Recommendations

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Provide dedicated support services, including mental health, and protection for employees subjected to abuse, harassment or intimidation, as well as to individuals who raise standards concerns and/or participate in complaints processes.
- If not already in place, create and support a trained and accredited mental health first aider (MHFA) network, proportionate to the size of the workforce.



TOOL 2

Leadership Wellbeing & Resilience Audit

The purpose of the audit is to help chief executives, statutory officers and senior leaders assess whether standards-related pressures are becoming personally and/or organisationally unsustainable and to act as an early warning system. It is suggested you check in with this audit at least once every six months.

FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS, USE THE SCORING SYSTEM BELOW:

4	3	2	1	0
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

At the end of the audit, add up your score (total statements = 42 so the maximum score = 168)

Green
126–168

You have strong, healthy wellbeing and resilience. No significant concerns.

Action: Continue monitoring, sharing good practice and learning across the organisation.

Amber
84–125

Some emerging pressures identified, such as a growing workload, reduced resilience, and/or relationship strains.

Action: Review your support arrangements, discuss findings with colleagues, line manager, and/or peers and identify actions to address any issues identified. Consider reaching out for additional coaching or mentoring.

Red
0–83

Wellbeing, resilience, and/or organisational health requires urgent attention.

Action: Review pressures, develop a support plan, access coaching or peer support, and/or consider organisational interventions to address underlying causes.

If a member of your team scored Red on this audit, what support would you provide them?

TOOL 2 · THE AUDIT

Score each statement from 4 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree).

1. ENERGY AND MOTIVATION

1	I finish most weeks with sufficient energy to perform effectively.	
2	I recover effectively following periods of heightened pressure.	
3	I feel equipped to deal with difficult situations and conflict.	
4	Standards-related issues do not dominate my thoughts outside work.	
5	I remain motivated and engaged in my role.	

2. PERSONAL SAFETY AND CONFIDENCE

6	I feel confident challenging inappropriate behaviour when necessary.	
7	I feel able to speak up when I have concerns.	
8	I believe I would be supported if I raised concerns.	
9	I can maintain perspective when facing challenging situations.	
10	I feel safe carrying out my role.	

3. BOUNDARIES AND BALANCE

11	My workload is generally sustainable.	
12	I take annual leave and breaks regularly.	
13	I make time for interests, relationships and activities outside work.	
14	I maintain appropriate boundaries between work and personal life.	

4. REFLECTIONS AND SELF-CARE

15	I actively prioritise my personal wellbeing.	
16	I make time to reflect on difficult experiences and learn from them.	
17	I know where to access professional wellbeing support if needed.	
18	I would feel comfortable using support services if required.	

5. PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

19	I have trusted peers I can speak to confidentially.	
20	I actively use professional support networks when appropriate.	
21	I seek advice and support before issues become crises.	
22	I feel well supported by colleagues and professional contacts.	

6. LEADERSHIP TEAM

23	Senior leaders actively support one another.	
24	Difficult issues can be discussed openly and honestly within the leadership team.	
25	I trust my senior colleagues to help address challenges when they arise.	
26	Responsibilities can be shared effectively during periods of pressure.	

7. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

27	Behavioural expectations are understood throughout the organisation.	
28	Organisational values are reflected in day-to-day behaviours.	
29	Poor behaviour is challenged appropriately and consistently.	
30	Colleagues feel able to raise concerns safely.	
31	Difficult conversations are addressed constructively rather than avoided.	

8. GOVERNANCE AND REPORTING

32	Governance processes are trusted and respected.	
33	Governance challenges are identified and addressed before they escalate.	
34	Standards-related issues are handled fairly and consistently.	
35	Appropriate resources are available to address standards-related concerns.	
36	I understand how concerns and complaints will be handled.	

9. LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP HEALTH

37	Standards-related challenges are manageable within my role.	
38	I feel able to perform my role effectively despite difficult circumstances.	
39	I believe my organisation takes leadership wellbeing seriously.	
40	I believe the organisation is creating conditions in which leaders can thrive.	
41	I remain positive about my future in local government leadership.	
42	I would recommend local government leadership as a rewarding career.	

Your total score (maximum 168)

TOOL 2 · CRITICAL INDICATORS

Critical indicators

Alongside the audit, read the following statements and tick any that apply:

- [ ] I have considered leaving my role due to standards-related issues.
- [ ] I have experienced targeted intimidation, harassment or abuse.
- [ ] I am concerned about my personal safety while undertaking my role.
- [ ] I am reluctant to raise concerns because of potential consequences.
- [ ] Standards-related issues are having a significant impact on my wellbeing.
- [ ] Unresolved conflict is affecting my ability to perform my role effectively.

> **Guidance:** If you ticked any of the statements above that should be the trigger for a supportive conversation with a colleague/peer/coach/mentor, even where your overall score falls within the Green range.

Team-level discussion prompts

What happens *after* is just as important as the audit itself. Periodically, as a senior leadership team reflect on your results together as this will help to shift the conversation away from individual resilience and towards organisational responsibility. A discussion could explore:

01 What standards issues are consuming leadership time?

02 Where are relationships under strain?

03 What patterns are emerging?

04 What action should be taken before problems escalate?

05 What support do colleagues need?



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

05

Advocating for a Stronger Regime

One of the main conclusions of this Commission's work is that the standards system is only as strong as its weakest link – and, at present, there are several weak links.

This is a topic that Solace has been campaigning on for several years. And over that period, the breadth of the coalition of those who agree that the current standards regime is not fit for purpose has continued to grow. Whilst wider factors have contributed to the place local government finds itself in, it is abundantly clear that a robust and universal regime would stand as a bulwark against these exacerbating factors, as well as prevent bad actors from continually reoffending or, ideally, offending at all.

As Part I detailed – and those within the sector will know all too well – the structures underpinning the standards system are demonstrably unfit for purpose. The current regime not only fails to appropriately hold individuals accountable, but also falls wildly short of providing any preventative effect.

What is badly needed is legislative change at the national level. This is something that Government itself has acknowledged. In December 2024, the Government launched its consultation on strengthening the standards and conduct framework, proposing a mandatory minimum code of conduct, stronger sanctions and new powers to suspend councillors for serious breaches. In its formal response, published on 11 November 2025, Government went further, confirming its intention to legislate for a mandatory

code of conduct, powers to suspend elected members for up to six months for serious breaches, the ability to withhold allowances in the most serious cases, interim suspension powers, a new disqualification criterion for repeated serious breaches, and a national appeals function. Government also announced that principal authorities would be required to establish formal standards committees and that complainants and councillors would have a right to have cases reviewed.

However, while the direction of travel is now clearer, the detail and delivery of these reforms remain uncertain. Government has stated that it intends to bring forward the necessary legislation "as soon as parliamentary time allows", but has not set out a firm timetable for when legislation will be introduced or when the new powers will come into force. Important questions also remain around how the new mandatory code will operate in practice, the precise circumstances in which suspension and other sanctions will be available, and the design of the national appeals function.

What the Commission has heard, and what Solace's surveys reveal, are two main areas that feel non-negotiable for successful standards reform: a universal code of conduct and effective sanctions to enforce it. This is something Solace has long advocated for; a robust, legally binding standards system, including compulsory codes of conduct, empowered standards committees, and implementation of sanctions such as suspension.

On this first element, whilst the majority of authorities will have their own code of conduct, there are discrepancies between them. The extent of local variation can be seen particularly in areas of emerging conduct, such as bullying, harassment and social media. For example, the LGA Model Code recommends that councils include explicit provisions prohibiting bullying and harassment, but these provisions are adopted and adapted locally. To give a flavour of the variation across the country, our research found Cambridgeshire County Council's code explicitly prohibits bullying, harassment and unlawful discrimination, and expressly applies its provisions to electronic and social media communications. By contrast, Medway Council's Code of Conduct has previously made no explicit reference to social media, instead relying on separate guidance for members, while West Berkshire Council has a dedicated social media protocol setting out additional expectations around issues including courtesy and respect, bullying and intimidation, confidentiality and conduct that could bring the council into disrepute. This illustrates how expectations around similar areas of councillor conduct can vary between authorities, creating potential inconsistency in what councillors, officers and residents understand to be expected.

A uniform national code of conduct, designed in consultation with local government and bodies such as Solace and the LGA, would ensure that the principles underpinning the operation of local government organisations were universally recognised, and aid in the implementation of a new standards system. It would allow for the application of the same standards of behaviour across all authorities, ensuring that expectations were consistent. This removes any ambiguity around what conduct is and is not acceptable and, by making it both compulsory and binding, empowers this further. An added benefit would be a decrease in any learning curve from individuals moving between authorities.

However, a code of conduct with no teeth delivers no change. As has been made abundantly clear during the Commission's research, if there are no effective sanctions to address misconduct, nothing will change. Any reform from Government must include the ability to meaningfully punish those that commit serious standards violations. Without this, other measures are severely undermined as perpetrators, or potential perpetrators, know there is little to no effective means of holding them accountable.

The appetite for these reforms is evident. A majority of those the Commission spoke to would welcome robust powers to appropriately deal with inappropriate behaviour and poor standards.

It goes without saying that any and all reform by Government requires adequate resourcing. If standards committees are to be successful in reducing the instances of code of conduct breaches, effectively punishing inappropriate behaviour, and supporting victims, they must have the funding and staffing to work effectively and at pace. For example, it can be expected that with the introduction of a new system, initial levels of referrals are likely to be higher. As such, appropriate resourcing should be provided to account for this and increase necessary capacity. It should, however, also be expected that, if implemented and

supported appropriately, an effective system would have a disincentive impact and thereby reduce future numbers of reported cases.

On the staffing element, it is also crucial that the officers involved are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate both standards systems, and the interpersonal challenges that are part and parcel of the process. To ensure this, authorities need further resourcing to deliver training and support.

What is obvious is that these reforms are needed swiftly and to be implemented in full – the system needs drastic change, and it needs it now.

→ Recommendations

SECTOR BODIES

- Work with government to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
- Collectively monitor and evaluate the operation of any new standards framework and advocate for continuous improvement.

GOVERNMENT

- Work with the sector to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
- Provide sustainable and long-term funding for the operation of the strengthened standards system.
- Work with the sector to conduct a comprehensive review of statutory governance roles and strengthen support available to those roles.

POLICE

- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to work with Solace and the Local Government Association to co-design a national Code/guidance of how to report and respond to standards and conduct issues relating to both elected members and officers.
- NPCC to ensure all police forces adopt and enact the national Code/guidance.
- Co-create effective engagement mechanisms between senior representatives from local police forces and local councils to improve understanding of the latest standards-related risks and trends, as well as reporting thresholds, available powers and appropriate responses.
- Establish clear communication channels between every local authority and a named police liaison officer for local government issues.
- Improve data collection on abuse, harassment and intimidation directed at councillors and officers and work with Solace, the LGA and Association of Monitoring Officers to produce an annual update on trends in standards complaints.



Robin Tuddenham
Solace President, and Member, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Conclusion

Over the past twelve months the Commission has heard the experiences of those on the front lines of local government and beyond. The picture that emerged was a complicated one. The challenges were obvious – a sense of worsening behaviours, an inadequate standards regime, and complicating factors in the form of political and technological change combined with an increased level of inexperience within the sector among both councillors and officers.

However, what also emerged is a strong determination to set the sector right and build better workplaces, not just to improve things for those working within councils, but to strengthen the foundations of local democracy.

To make the future of local government about people, place, equity and purpose we must first put in the work to address incivility in public life. The resolve to do so was in no short supply by those that contributed to the Commission's work. For all the accounts of abuse, harassment, and disrespect, there were also countless proposals, suggestions, and recommendations to make things better. Where individuals could have lingered, and rightfully so, over the negative, they looked to take it and transform it into something actionable and positive.

Some of this undoubtedly could, and can, not be done without cooperation at the national level. It is plain to see that without robust legislative reform, local government will still be left without the full suite of tools it needs to tackle poor behaviour.

But, in the meantime, there are still many meaningful steps to be taken. Contributors told the Commission about the power of the individual – the impact each person can have on the culture of an organisation and on others. It is the responsibility of every one of us to do our part in building inclusive, respectful, and productive workplaces, but it is particularly the responsibility of those in leadership to set the tone. What has come through throughout the Commission's work is the crucial role local government leaders have not only in embedding cultures that embody the principles of good public service, but upholding them.

Given the immense good that this sector is capable of, it is unacceptable that local government has, in part, come to be defined by the misconduct of a small number within it. For too long it has been seen as "part of the job" to weather behaviour that goes against the values that underpin our organisations and ourselves as individuals. Addressing these issues will not be an overnight endeavour. The scale of change needed means that it will take time, patience, and determination to realise the difference that we want to see and need to make.

So, for those that live and work in their places, that have been at the sharp end of misconduct, or have been frustrated by the inefficiencies of the current system, one thing is overwhelmingly clear – enough is enough and Solace is here to support you to be the change you want to see.

Robin Tuddenham
Solace President, and Member, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

APPENDIX I

Recommendations in full

The current standards system is unarguably broken and not fit-for-purpose – failing to both inhibit inappropriate behaviour or deliver for victims of poor conduct. With adequate reform and resourcing, the system instead should be swift, balanced, and effective in its purpose, something badly needed by the sector.

However, in addition to statutory changes to the standards system, through the evidence gathered by the Commission, we have generated a list of recommendations to support all those with agency in the system, to take ownership over what they can do to bolster standards, encourage good conduct, and foster effective working relationships.

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Standards is a collective responsibility for the whole senior leadership team and not the sole responsibility of the Monitoring Officer. To that end, every officer should abide by the Nolan Principles at all times and set high organisational standards for conduct by modelling professional behaviour and to challenge misconduct consistently and impartially, regardless of seniority, status or political influence, as and when it occurs.

It is crucial that individuals also build relationships of trust and respect with other officers, staff members, and councillors, including group whips. Specifically, senior officers should:

1. Complete mandatory governance and standards inductions within three months of being appointed to their roles and undertake mandatory refresher training at least every three years.
2. Develop future senior leaders by providing team members with early exposure to member-officer relations, governance and standards issues via regular shared learning and shadowing opportunities to sit in/contribute to public (e.g. Full Council) and private meetings.
3. As a senior management team undertake an annual review of organisational culture and standards risks.
4. Promote the early use of mediation and other informal resolution mechanisms to prevent disputes from escalating into formal standards cases.

COUNCILLORS

Standards is a collective responsibility for the whole council – members as well as officers. To that end, every councillor should abide by the Nolan Principles at all times and robustly uphold the Model Code of Conduct when performing their duties to ensure they support organisational values and to challenge/call out unacceptable behaviour by peers as and when it occurs. The latter should also be a whole political group endeavour. Specifically, councillors should:

1. Complete standards and code of conduct training within three months of an election and undertake refresher training during each council term.
2. Councillors subject to upheld complaints must undertake targeted behavioural improvement and/or mediation programmes.

3. Comply with their authority's guidance and expectations around use of social media and online conduct.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

From councils to mayoral combined/strategic authorities, everyone in local government should be able to work in a safe, secure, and supportive environment. To enable this, local and regional authorities specifically should:

1. Co-produce, between councillors and officers, a set of agreed values and behaviours that apply to the entire organisation, not just employed officers.
2. Adopt and uphold the Model Code of Conduct and embed it within organisational values, governance arrangements and decision-making processes.
3. Co-create and/or regularly review the authority's member-officer relations protocol, using the LGA's good practice guide to help clarify expectations and understanding in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as to identify key examples of how this will work in practice and set out how things will be resolved if they go wrong.
4. Create clear and cohesive organisational guidance on responsible and ethical social media use and online conduct for both officers and councillors.
5. Agree a social media strategy which includes arrangements for identifying and responding to mis/mal/disinformation.
6. Ensure robust governance frameworks are in place and subject to regular independent review, but especially where concerns are identified.
7. Deliver induction and refresher training for all councillors and officers covering governance, codes of conduct, and role/organisational boundaries.
8. Introduce annual reporting on standards complaints, outcomes and lessons learned.
9. Seek and report on independent feedback from external partners on organisational culture, governance and conduct, potentially as part of an annual reporting process.
10. Provide dedicated support services, including mental health, and protection for employees subjected to abuse, harassment or intimidation, as well as to individuals who raise standards concerns and/or participate in complaints processes.
11. If not already in place, create and support a trained and accredited mental health first aider (MHFA) network, proportionate to the size of the workforce.
12. Establish organisational culture champions across the organisation aimed at complementing, not competing, with the role of Monitoring Officer. Champions must be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support, including a forum where they can come together and share learning and develop tools, as well as have access to the senior leadership team and leader.
13. Appoint a whistleblowing champion who also should be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support and work closely with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Audit. If all the other recommendations put forward here are implemented, the need for this may only be short-term until all changes are embedded.

SECTOR BODIES

As bodies representing different parts of the sector, we all have a responsibility to engage in, and seek to address, standards related issues. Specifically, sector bodies should:

1. Work with government to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
2. Collectively monitor and evaluate the operation of any new standards framework and advocate for continuous improvement.
3. Work together to co-create national guidance for elected members on the use of AI, social media and emerging technologies.
4. Solace, along with other sector bodies such as the LGA, should seek to forge links with key platforms to create a centralised point of contact through to channel concerns about harmful content.
5. Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to develop accredited standards training for councillors and officers.
6. Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to create a national repository of standards case studies and learning, and use this to inform:

- an annual state-of-the sector update on trends in standards and ethics;
- the development of advice/guidance that responds to trends, facilitates sector-wide learning, and disseminate best practice on conduct and standards.

SOLACE

In addition to the above, Solace – as the UK's leading member network for senior professionals – we see ourselves as having an additional role and responsibility to champion and promote high standards, as well as drive collaboration with the LGA and the Association of Monitoring Officers on standards. Specifically, Solace should:

1. Create a Chief Executive Civility Lead, with championing respectful conduct and professional leadership across the sector as part of their remit.
2. Review and update all learning programmes to strengthen training on ethics, governance and member-officer relations.
3. Review and raise awareness of the Solace Code of Ethics across the profession.
4. Provide ongoing practical guidance and support to chief executives and senior officers on standards and ethical leadership, such as creating practical toolkits on mediation, conflict resolution and culture change.
5. Establish and promote peer support arrangements for chief executives/senior officers facing standards-related challenges.
6. Feed in to, and influence where possible the direction of, the Ethics and Integrity Commission's Call for Evidence on guidance around designing and embedding codes of conduct for public servants.

POLICE

In order to improve understanding of standards-related risks and trends, there is a need to strengthen collaboration between the police and local government. Specifically, the police should:

1. National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to work with Solace and the Local Government Association to co-design a national Code/guidance of how to report and respond to standards and conduct issues relating to both elected members and officers.
2. NPCC to ensure all police forces adopt and enact the national Code/guidance.
3. Establish clear communication channels between every local authority and a named police liaison officer for local government issues.
4. Co-create effective engagement mechanisms between senior representatives from local police forces and local councils to improve understanding of the latest standards-related risks and trends, as well as reporting thresholds, available powers and appropriate responses.
5. Work with the sector to develop and run regular training for police liaison officers tasked with dealing with/responding to local government issues.
6. Improve data collection on abuse, harassment and intimidation directed at councillors and officers and work with Solace, the LGA and Association of Monitoring Officers to produce an annual update on trends in standards complaints.

GOVERNMENT

There is a national responsibility to promote high standards in public life, create the conditions for safe working environments for councillors and officers, and model both good standards of behaviour, as well as robust treatment of misconduct. Specifically, Government should:

1. Work with the sector to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
2. Provide sustainable and long-term funding for the operation of the strengthened standards system.
3. Work with the sector to conduct a comprehensive review of statutory governance roles and strengthen support available to those roles.
4. Recategorise algorithmically driven social media companies as publishers, in order to establish their accountability for what is published via their platforms.

APPENDIX II

Contributors to the Commission

Members of the Commission

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Chair, Solace Commission on Standards and Ethics, and Chair, Solace

William Benson
Solace Deputy Policy Lead for Finance, and Chief Executive, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

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Chief Executive of East Midlands County Combined Authority

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Managing Director, Solace

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Chief Executive, Brent Council

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Greg Fell
President, ADPH

Kelly Fowler
CEO, Belong

Ann Graham
President, ADCS

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Honorary Secretary, ALACE

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Former Deputy Chief Executive of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

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Barry Quirk
Director of Publicola, and former Chief Executive of Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea

NB: At Solace Summit 2025, the Commission held a roundtable discussion with several international colleagues from New Zealand, Australia, and the USA on their experiences of poor standards.

WITH THANKS

Acknowledgements

With thanks to:

- All members of Solace's Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics for their input and advice in developing not only this report but all of the other guides and toolkits.
- Everyone who gave written and/or verbal evidence to the Commission and helped develop the recommendations contained within this report.
- All of the Solace members who have told their stories.

Written by **Romy Patrick** and **Nekisa Gholami-Babaahmady**

Edited by **Alex Thomson** and **David Paine**

Designed by **Jonathan Kay**

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Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Enough is Enough:
A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government
October 2026

www.solace.org.uk

Public Report
Standards and Ethics Committee

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Standards and Ethics Committee - 12th November 2026

Report Title
Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Regime for Local Authorities in England - Update

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
N/A

Report Author(s)
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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
A report updating the Committee on the Government proposals to strengthen the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England and the current stage reached by those proposals.

Recommendations
That the Committee notes the Government proposals and the current position, and receives further updates as the necessary legislation and implementation arrangements develop.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 - The Municipal Journal, "Standards shake-up", 15 October 2026

Background Papers
Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Framework for Local Authorities in England - consultation results and Government response, published 11 November 2025 The MJ, "Standards shake-up", 15 October 2026.

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
None

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Regime for Local Authorities in England

1. Background

1.1 The Localism Act 2011 establishes the current standards framework for local authorities in England. It requires authorities to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, adopt a code of conduct and maintain arrangements for dealing with allegations that members have failed to comply with that code.

1.2 Following consultation, the Government published its formal response on 11 November 2025 and confirmed its intention to legislate for a significant reform of the standards and conduct regime. Recent reporting in The MJ, excerpt at appendix 1, indicates that the Government has reaffirmed its commitment to bringing forward the proposed legislative reforms.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The Committee has previously received a report on the substance of the Government's proposed reforms to the local government standards regime. This report is therefore intended to provide a further update on the current position and the continuing Government work to take those proposals forward, rather than to revisit the detail of each individual proposal.

2.2 The Government published its consultation response on 11 November 2025, confirming its intention to legislate to strengthen the standards and conduct framework. Since then, the position has remained that the reforms require primary legislation before they can take effect. Recent sector reporting indicates that Ministers remain committed to progressing the changes, but the legislative vehicle, detailed drafting and implementation timetable have not yet been finalised.

2.3 The current position is therefore one of policy commitment rather than legal implementation. The Government is continuing the preparatory work needed to bring forward legislation and associated implementation arrangements, including matters that will need to be addressed through regulations, guidance or national procedural arrangements. Until that work is complete, the existing statutory framework under the Localism Act 2011 continues to apply.

2.4 Officers will continue to monitor Government announcements, the introduction of any Bill and the publication of further regulations or guidance. A further report will be brought to the Committee when there is sufficient clarity on the final statutory requirements, likely implementation timetable and the consequential changes required to the Council's Code of Conduct, complaints procedure, Standards and Ethics Committee arrangements and Constitution.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 No decision on the substance of the Government proposals is required at this stage. The recommended approach is for the Committee to note the current position and for officers to assess the implications for the Council's Code of Conduct, complaints procedure, Standards and Ethics Committee arrangements and Constitution when the legislative requirements are clearer.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 N/A

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 The Government has confirmed the policy direction following consultation, but the reforms require legislation before they can take effect. Implementation timescales will therefore depend on the introduction and passage of the necessary legislation and the publication of any associated regulations or guidance.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 There are no financial or procurement implications arising from this report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 Sections 27 and 28 of the Localism Act 2011 provide the principal statutory basis for the existing local authority standards regime, including the duties to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, adopt a code of conduct and maintain arrangements for investigating and determining allegations.

7.2 The Government proposals do not alter the Council's present legal duties unless and until the necessary legislation comes into force. Any future changes to the Council's Code of Conduct, complaints arrangements, committee structure or Constitution will need to be considered against the final legislation, regulations and guidance.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 There are no immediate human resources implications. Future arrangements may require training and support for officers and members involved in standards investigations, reviews and appeals.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 No direct implications have been identified at this stage.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 A clearer and more consistent standards framework, with appropriate safeguards for complainants and subject members, is intended to support fair decision-making and public confidence. The equality and human rights implications of any revised local procedure will be assessed once the final statutory framework is available.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 The proposed mandatory framework will apply across tiers of local government and will therefore be relevant to town and parish councils as well as principal authorities. The detailed implications for the Council's role in handling parish and town councillor complaints will be assessed when the legislation is available.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 The principal current risk is uncertainty while the legislative detail and implementation timetable remain outstanding. This will be mitigated by continuing to operate the existing statutory arrangements, monitoring Government announcements and bringing further reports to the Committee as the reforms progress.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

Bal Nahal, Head of Legal Services

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Standards shake-up

Government privately reaffirms commitment to legislative reforms to standards originally proposed under Starmer regime

EXCLUSIVE by Dan Peters

The Government under new Prime Minister Andy Burnham has privately committed to legislation that would reform the standards regime 'if at all possible', *The MJ* understands.

Labour ministers under Keir Starmer had promised legislative reforms to the standards regime, but there was no legislation in the King's Speech outlining Bills for the second session of Parliament earlier this year.

The Government committed to a whole-system reform of the standards framework last year, including giving local authorities powers to suspend councillors and mayors for serious misconduct for up to six months and withhold allowances when behaviour fell short.

A senior figure at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) said: 'On reforms to standards, sector pressure is huge. There was a really productive task and finish group ready to go with proposals that was then knocked off the Parliamentary timetable under the last [Keir Starmer] administration so we're now looking at whether the third session could produce enough time to get something on the books.

'I'm more positive now. Some sensible approaches are developing, which hopefully will enjoy mostly cross-party support.

'Nothing is yet concrete but there is a commitment to getting legislation through, if at all possible, subject to space in Parliament.'

Another senior MHCLG source said: 'We've got a plan that we're desperate to do. We need primary legislation. If we can get that legislation, we are ready to run at it.'

No date has been given for legislation, which the Government has said will be brought forward 'when Parliamentary time allows'.

A senior sector source added: 'I'm a bit more positive as the task and finish group is back and meeting. No guarantees but it's still in the process.'

Council chiefs have been privately lobbying senior civil servants over the issue after a survey by senior officers' group Solace found nine out of 10 chief executives and senior officers experienced poor or inappropriate behaviour by elected members during the past three years, with more than half (52%) believing that standards were getting worse.

The final report of Solace's commission on professional standards and ethics, chaired by former chief executive of St Helens MBC Kath O'Dwyer, will detail clear recommendations for reform when it is published next week.

O'Dwyer said: 'Standards and behaviours are not only poor, but in many cases getting worse. We welcome the Government's renewed commitment to reform and will continue working closely with ministers and officials to help make it a reality, but there is no time to lose – reforms must be delivered swiftly and in full.'

Chief executive of Lawyers in Local Government and the Association of Monitoring Officers, Deborah Evans, added: 'Without effective remedies, councils risk driving away good councillors and senior employees and eroding trust in local government. After years of discussion, the Government must now turn its promised reforms into reality by introducing a clear, proportionate and effective standards regime with meaningful sanctions.'

MHCLG declined to comment on whether it was looking at a standalone Bill, adding the reforms to another local government Bill or bringing in any reforms through secondary legislation.


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Ex-Prime Minister Keir Starmer and current PM Andy Burnham both made commitments to reforming standards

What could change for your council

- A single national code would replace locally adopted codes
- Standards committees would become compulsory for principal authorities
- Potential suspension powers of up to six months, with allowances withheld
- Interim suspension during investigations
- Rights of appeal for both complainants and accused councillors

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Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Public Report with Exempt Appendices
Standards and Ethics Committee

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Standards and Ethics Committee – 12 November 2026

Report Title
A Review of Concerns Raised Pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
N/A

Report Author(s)
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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
A report regarding concerns raised pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy and the actions taken to address these matters.

Recommendations

1. That the Committee notes the Whistleblowing concerns raised over the previous two year and the actions taken to address these matters.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 - Schedule of Whistleblowing Concerns

Background Papers

None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

The Appendix to this report will be considered in the absence of the press and public as being exempt under Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended March 2006) (information relating to an individual).

A Review of Concerns Raised Pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy

1. Background

1.1 This report provides an overview of the Whistleblowing cases which have been received over the past two years.

1.2 A description of the concerns received over the past two years, along with the relevant action to address these matters is at Appendix 1. This is appropriately anonymised in order not to identify the Whistleblower, pursuant to the policy in respect of confidentiality.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Matters reported are described within Appendix 1. It is important for there to be oversight of matters being reported pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Recommendations have been referred to above.

4. Consultation on Proposal

4.1 N/A

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 N/A

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 Any work undertaken by Legal Services in dealing with this matter is within the budget for Legal Services.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The Council has a statutory duty to provide an appropriate Whistleblowing Policy and arrangements for dealing with concerns raised through the policy.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

8.1 None.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

9.1 None.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 The Whistleblowing Policy is available to all employees, workers and contractors of the Council.

11. Implications for Partners

11.1 None.

12. Risks and Mitigation

12.1 There is a risk that if serious misconduct is not reported pursuant to the Whistleblowing Policy, serious issues will not be appropriately investigated and addressed.

13. Accountable Officer(s)

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Public Report with Exempt Appendices
Standards and Ethics Committee

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting
Standards and Ethics Committee – 12 November 2026

Report Title
Standards and Ethics Committee - Consideration of Complaints

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?
No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report
N/A

Report Author(s)
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Ward(s) Affected
Borough-Wide

Report Summary
A report updating the Committee on the Complaints received against Members of the Council, and Town and Parish Councillors alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct.

Recommendations
That the Committee notes the Complaints received, and the actions taken to deal with those complaints, pursuant to the Standards and Ethics Committee Complaints Procedure.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Schedule of Complaints and actions taken

Background Papers
None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel
None

Council Approval Required
No

Exempt from the Press and Public
The Appendix to this report will be considered in the absence of the press and public as being exempt under Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended March 2006) (information relating to an individual).

Standards and Ethics Committee - Consideration of Complaints

1. Background

1.1 A Schedule of complaints received and actions taken in respect of those complaints is at Appendix 1.

1.2 As the schedule includes unproven allegations, it is anonymised in order to prevent identification of the relevant subject member.

2. Key Issues

2.1 The nature of each complaint is set out in the Schedule at Appendix 1. Any common themes arising from the Committee's overview of complaints should be identified. Further information in respect of the themes of the complaints is set out in Appendix 2. Members of the Committee may make suggestions in relation to means of addressing common issues which arise in the complaints.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Options for dealing with the complaints are set out in the Complaints Procedure and the action taken in respect of each complaint is set out in the Schedule.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 One of the Standards and Ethics Committee Independent Persons is consulted in respect of each complaint.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

N/A

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 The officer time in dealing with these complaints is met within existing Legal Services resources.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The Council and the Standards and Ethics Committee have a statutory duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. Pursuant to the Localism Act 2011, the Council is required to adopt an appropriate Code of Conduct and arrangements for the investigation of allegations of breach of the Code of Conduct.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

None

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

None

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

None

11. Implications for Partners

None

12. Risks and Mitigation

None

13. Accountable Officer(s)

Bal Nahal, Head of Legal Services

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