



Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Standards and Ethics Committee – 10 September 2026

Report Title

Standards and Ethics Committee – Debate not Hate

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 work undertaken by the Standards and Ethics Committee Working Group in completing the Local Government Association Debate Not Hate self-assessment toolkit. It provides an overview of and assurance as to the Council's arrangements across the five principles, identifies areas for improvement and recommends a proportionate programme of action.

Recommendations

1. That the Committee notes the work undertaken by the Working Group and endorses its findings regarding the comprehensiveness of the Council's existing arrangements.
2. That the Committee approve the recommendation of the Working Group that a Member Wellbeing Guide and portal are developed.
3. The Committee approves the recommendation of the Working Group that a Debate not Hate Communications and Engagement Plan are developed.
4. That the Committee approves the content of the Action Plan for further improvements at appendix 1.

5. That a report as to progress in respect of the Action Plan be brought back to the Committee within 12 months.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 Action Plan
Appendix 2 Health and Safety Handbook

Background Papers

None

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Standards and Ethics Committee – Debate not Hate

1. Background

- 1.1 In September 2025 the Standards and Ethics Committee considered the objectives and resources associated with the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate campaign. The Committee established a Working Group to undertake the self-assessment and report its findings and recommendations.
- 1.2 The Working Group agreed to consider each of the self-assessment toolkit's five principles in turn, supported by evidence from Democratic Services, Human Resources, Health and Safety, Neighbourhoods, Communications and relevant external partners. Meetings took place between November 2025 and July 2026.
- 1.3 The five principles considered were:
 - Creating supportive and informed spaces
 - Creating a risk-led approach
 - Creating an infrastructure
 - Creating connections
 - Creating a culture of safety and respect
- 1.4 The Working Group used the toolkit questions to structure discussion and evidence gathering. The conclusions in this report are judgements based on the evidence considered by the Group.

- 1.5 A cross-party Debate Not Hate motion was considered by Council in July 2026. The motion committed the Council to challenge the normalisation of abuse, sign up to the campaign, maintain clear reporting mechanisms, regularly review support, work with the police and take a zero-tolerance approach to abuse of councillors and officers.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 The Working Group found that substantial and comprehensive arrangements are already in place. These include induction and briefing, a Members' Portal, health and safety guidance, regular Member check-ins, wellbeing and Employee Assistance Programme access, an internal incident reporting route, risk assessment support, liaison with South Yorkshire Police and Operation Ford, and established officer responsibilities. The principal issue which the Working Group concluded is not the absence of systems, but the need to improve awareness, consistency of use, visibility, review and communication of those systems.
- 2.2 The key findings from the Working Group in respect of each of the Principles within the Self-Assessment Toolkit are set out below and the actions required to make the improvements referred to are set out in the Action Plan at Appendix 1:

Principle	Finding	Key evidence	Improvement focus
1. Supportive and informed spaces	Comprehensive	Members have access to health and safety guidance, surgery guidance, induction, six-monthly check-ins, incident reporting, wellbeing advisers, the Employee Assistance Programme and online learning.	Create a Member-specific wellbeing guide or hub; strengthen proactive promotion; refresh induction and regular communications; signpost suitable material to parish and town councils.
2. Risk-led approach	Comprehensive	Guidance, individual risk assessments for serious cases, safe surgery advice, police referral routes, safety checklists, alarms/apps and relevant intelligence checks are available.	Repeat personal safety and risk training during the term; strengthen social media safety guidance; encourage use of the central reporting route; periodically review themes and learning from incidents and check-ins.
3. Infrastructure	Comprehensive	A reporting process, designated officer contacts, escalation routes, supporting guidance and cross-service involvement are in place.	Reinforce and further publicise reporting pathways; refresh the handbook; review whether existing vexatious contact, social media, lone-working and

threat procedures can be adapted for Members.

4. Connections	Comprehensive, with an outcomes dependency on partners	Regular liaison and intelligence-sharing arrangements with South Yorkshire Police and Operation Ford are in place, supported by briefings and escalation routes.	Improve feedback and evaluation of partnership outcomes; reinforce consistent reporting; maintain local briefings; raise unresolved concerns about legal and enforcement thresholds through appropriate regional and national channels.
5. Culture of safety and respect	Partial, with a clear development opportunity	The Council has adopted a cross-party motion and the Code of Conduct addresses bullying, harassment and intimidation. Existing systems support individuals after incidents.	Translate the motion into a visible, sustained communications and engagement programme; publish clear expectations for respectful engagement; integrate messages into Council channels and Member communications; consider parish and candidate audiences.

2.3 Principle 1: Creating supportive and informed spaces

Evidence to the Working Group demonstrated that a broad support offer is already available. The Members' Portal contains a comprehensive Health and Safety Handbook (included at Appendix 2 as indicative of the material available), surgery guidance and links to LGA material on abuse and intimidation. The Group also heard that benchmarking undertaken through Democratic Services indicated that the Council's arrangements compared well with other authorities.

Member induction includes health and safety information and guidance on available support. Democratic Services undertakes six-monthly check-ins with Members, providing regular opportunities to discuss health, safety, wellbeing and other concerns. Incidents can be reported through the Members' Portal or raised directly with Democratic Services, with referral routes to South Yorkshire Police where necessary.

Members can access HR wellbeing advisers, the Employee Assistance Programme, counselling support and online learning containing wellbeing and stress-management material. The employee wellbeing guide could be adapted for Members, and relevant LGA material could be brought together with the Council's existing offer.

The Group identified a visibility issue. Health and safety information was substantial, but wellbeing-specific information was less prominent and Members may only discover support after a difficulty arises. Uptake of online learning may also be affected by limited awareness. Proactive and repeated promotion through induction, bulletins, briefings and the portal was therefore supported.

A separate Member Health and Wellbeing Champion was considered but was not recommended at this stage. Group Whips already have a pastoral function, while Democratic Services and HR provide established professional routes. The position could be reconsidered if future monitoring identifies an unmet need.

The finding of the Working Group in respect of the systems in place was that they were comprehensive (this is the terminology adopted in the Self-Assessment toolkit – Comprehensive, Partial and not addressed) The improvements referred to above and in the Action Plan should consolidate the offer into a Member wellbeing and support guide or hub, strengthen communications, make reporting and referral routes more visible and provide suitable signposting for parish and town councils.

2.4 Principle 2: Creating a risk-led approach

The Working Group heard that Members receive health and safety training during induction and have access to handbook and surgery guidance. The use of Council buildings for surgeries is encouraged because risk assessments, CCTV, staffing or footfall and other safety arrangements are more readily available. Guidance also addresses lone working, home visits and communicating whereabouts.

Where a serious or heightened concern is identified, Democratic Services can involve Health and Safety to undertake an individual risk assessment and identify proportionate measures. Evidence included checklists, personal safety tools, referrals to police and access through designated officers to information about potential hazards before visits or meetings.

The six-monthly check-in process provides a further mechanism for discussing safety and risk. The Working Group felt that a structured thematic review of the notes could help identify recurring concerns and inform guidance, communications or training, while preserving the confidentiality of individual discussions.

The online incident-reporting mechanism is not regularly used because Members commonly contact officers directly. Direct contact should remain available, but a complete central record would help to identify patterns, recurring perpetrators and changes in incident types. Members should therefore be reminded to ensure incidents are corporately recorded.

Online abuse and harassment emerged as the most persistent developing risk. Existing processes include a Member safety checklist, police escalation and platform reporting, but the Working Group heard that material often may not meet criminal, evidential or platform thresholds. Improved practical guidance could cover account safety, evidence retention, reporting and disengagement where necessary.

The finding of the Working Group in respect of the systems in place for this principle is Comprehensive. Improvements could include periodic refresher training, better central recording, thematic and post-incident review, clearer online-safety material and reminders about the risk-management tools already available.

2.5 Principle 3: Creating an Infrastructure

A formal process exists for reporting and responding to abuse and harassment. Members can use the Portal or contact Democratic Services directly. The Head of Democratic Services and team act as the principal point of contact, maintain records, provide advice and coordinate the response according to seriousness and circumstances.

The response can involve Health and Safety, Neighbourhood Services, Community Protection, senior officers, the Monitoring Officer and South Yorkshire Police. Where direct contact is made, an internal form can be completed so the concern is recorded and escalated where appropriate. Confidential political group support is also available.

For online cases, reports and evidence may be collated for Operation Ford and the police and content may be reported to platforms. Some material has been removed for breaching platform rules, while other content has remained as below action thresholds. Detailed logs, screenshots, references and audit trails are therefore important.

The Working Group heard that guidance exists through the handbook, portal, induction materials, briefing slides, bulletins and check-ins. The Group considered whether policies on vexatious contact, social media, lone working, threats and IT contact controls could be repurposed or extended to Members. Any change would require clear ownership and legal, information-governance and operational review.

The Working Group finding in this area was that the systems are Comprehensive and benchmarking suggested the Council compares well. Improvements could include a further awareness and reinforcement of the reporting pathway, refreshed guidance, consistent recording, annual effectiveness review and consideration of an adaptation of existing policies.

2.6 Principle 4: Creating connections

The Group examined links with South Yorkshire Police, Operation Ford, neighbourhood policing and wider partnerships. Operation Ford strengthens protective security and policing support for specified elected roles. The Group heard possible offences should still be reported through 999, 101 or online routes and identified as Operation Ford incidents.

The Head of Democratic Services has liaison arrangements with police contacts and intelligence is shared about specific matters, trends and emerging risks. Security briefings have been provided to Members and reporting routes are explained through induction and communications.

Neighbourhood Services and local partnerships also contribute. The Working Group heard that community forums are not substitutes for formal reporting, but relationships can provide informal support, signposting and opportunities to raise wider safety concerns. Data-sharing and regular liaison help identify patterns and escalation.

The concern was not the absence of connections but limited tangible outcomes in some cases. Extensive intelligence may be shared while conduct remains below police, prosecution or platform thresholds. Repeated incidents can have a serious cumulative impact even when individual communications are assessed separately.

Consistent reporting remains important because a cumulative record supports risk assessment and pattern identification. The Group felt clearer feedback after reports would be beneficial and more explicit evaluation of how partnership interventions improve safety, confidence and outcomes.

The Working Group finding is that the systems in place in this context are Comprehensive, with some outcomes dependent on external agencies. The Group felt the Council should maintain liaison, encourage full reporting, seek feedback and evaluation, continue briefings and raise systemic concerns through the LGA, regional networks and appropriate governmental channels.

2.7 Principle 5: Creating a culture of safety and respect

The Working Group felt that this principle presented a clear opportunity for visible further action. The toolkit describes zero tolerance as aspirational and locally defined, while lawful criticism, scrutiny and robust disagreement must remain protected. The Group considered internal support stronger than the public promotion of these values.

The Group agreed that the cross-party motion considered by Council on 15th July 2026 provides a democratic mandate. It commits the Council to challenge normalisation of abuse, sign up to the LGA campaign, maintain reporting, review support, work with police and take a zero-tolerance approach to abuse

of councillors and officers, all issues underpinned by the matters considered by the Working Group.

The Code of Conduct addresses bullying, harassment and intimidation, and the handbook contains relevant safety material. The Group felt that the Council should nevertheless communicate a shared understanding of what crosses the line into abuse, what respectful engagement means and what action may be taken, without suggesting that criticism itself is unacceptable.

The LGA provides campaign materials which can support local activity. The Group favoured an integrated and sustained approach rather than a one-off gesture. Potential channels included social media, email signatures, posters, bulletins, messages at meetings, ward correspondence and moderation rules on Council channels.

The Group felt that activity could use anonymised case studies, testimonials or national examples. The Group thought it would be helpful for the Council to more widely explain the impact of abuse and set expectations for engagement.

The Working Group finding for this Principle was Partial, with a strong platform for improvement following the motion. The Working Group recommended a Communications and Engagement Plan defining ownership, audiences, messages, channels and review arrangements.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 3.1 The alternative option would be for the Committee not to accept or endorse the findings of the Debate Not Hate Working Group. This is not recommended, as it would miss the opportunity to build on the work undertaken by the Working Group and to strengthen the relevant systems and arrangements within the Council.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 The Working Group considered information and evidence from Democratic Services, Legal Services, Human Resources, Health and Safety, Neighbourhoods, Communications and police liaison arrangements

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

The timescales for implementing the recommendations of the Working Group are set out in the Action Plan at Appendix ..

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 The officer time in dealing with this issue is met within existing Legal Services resources and the resources of those other Services referred to above.

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. The adoption of the recommendations as set out within this report, will contribute to the promotion and maintenance of high standards 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)

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