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