
Report of the:

**Handling Harassment, Abuse and
Intimidation for Councillors Task &
Finish Group**

Date: 11 November 2024

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the Democratic Services Committee meeting held on 27th November 2023, Committee Members supported the establishment of a Task and Finish Group in relation to handling harassment abuse and intimidation for Councillors while promoting Councillor safety at a local level. The scoping document for the Task & Finish Group was considered by the committee at the meeting held on 8th April 2024 and it was decided to offer membership of the group to all non-executive members.

The Task and Finish Group held repeat workshops on 7th and 14th June 2024 to identify member's issues and any actions that can be taken to address these issues. Following the workshops, members of the group who were unable to attend were invited to contribute to the discussion and share their thoughts via a Microsoft Forms questionnaire.

The information gathered from members was input into an action plan which is attached at appendix A. The draft action plan was considered by the Task and Finish Group at a meeting on the 10th October and is now presented to the Democratic Services Committee for comment and onward endorsement to Full Council

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The Task and Finish Group was established in response to increasing levels of intimidation, harassment and abuse faced by elected members in the course of their work. Whilst debate and expressing different opinions is part of a healthy representative democracy, unacceptable behaviours undermine the key democratic principles of free speech, debate and engagement, and sometimes pose a risk to councillors' safety.

Councillor safety has been part of the collective discussions and work of Local Authorities and the WLGA (Welsh Local Government Association) for the past few years both in terms of electoral planning, ethical framework/standards and diversity in democracy.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Title	Handling Harassment Abuse and Intimidation for Councillors Task & Finish Group
Reasons for undertaking Task and Finish Group	To consider how harassment, abuse and intimidation of Councillors can be addressed and promote Councillor safety at a local level.
Key Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are members concerns in relation to harassment, abuse and intimidation in the course of their work as an elected member? • How can risks be mitigated and members supported in the event of severe intimidation and threats? • Why there is a change in culture and what are the underlying issues that create this behaviour? • What actions can be taken to address the change in culture and identify the routes that intimidation and harassment can take.
Intended Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create a local protocol setting out procedures, should a councillor feel they are being publicly harassed, intimidated or abused. • To establish regular briefings for all councillors, including those who have been newly elected, to share experiences and concerns can both help identify persistent offenders and look at council-led solutions. • To identify what steps should be taken by the Council to mitigate the risk to Councillors in the event of severe intimidation and threats.
Background Information	Local Authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) have undertaken work in relation to increasing levels of intimidation, harassment and abuse elected members are experiencing whilst carrying out their role in public office.

	<p>During October/November 2022, Democratic Services Committee members were updated on the areas of work being undertaken in relation to Councillor Safety and Wellbeing by various organisations. A Local Government Association (LGA) guidance document in relation to How Councillor's Handle Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation provided practical advice to enhance Councillors personal security and to minimise the risk of physical abuse in various settings including surgeries, home visits and whilst travelling to and from council meetings.</p> <p>Following the publication of the guidance, the Democratic Services Committee noted steps that this Council are considering.</p>
<p>Member Involvement</p>	<p>Cllr. Wayne Carpenter Cllr. Carol Clement Williams Cllr. Charlotte Galsworthy Cllr. Nathan Goldup-John Cllr. Wyndham Griffith Cllr. Stephanie Grimshaw Cllr. Jo Hale Cllr. Sian Harris Cllr. James Henton Cllr. Rob Jones Cllr. Scott Jones Cllr. Caroline Lewis Cllr. Alan Lockyer Cllr. Andy Lodwig Cllr. Saifur Rahaman Cllr. Peter Rees Cllr. Sonia Reynolds Cllr. Phil Rogers Cllr. Chris Williams</p>

	To open member involvement to other non-executive members, if requested by committee members.
Officer Support	Head of Legal and Democratic Services Democratic Services Manager Democratic Service Scrutiny Officer
List of potential key officers, stakeholders, partners or other agencies to involve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Wales Police • WLGA • LGA
Timeframe/ plan for meetings	1/2 meetings

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Members of the Democratic Services Committee endorse the draft Handling Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation for Councillors Action Plan and the same be forwarded to Full Council for approval.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

The following Members took part in the Task & Finish Group:

Cllr. Saifur Rahaman (Chair)
Cllr. Wayne Carpenter
Cllr. Charlotte Galsworthy
Cllr. Wyndham Griffith
Cllr. Jo Hale
Cllr. Sian Harris
Cllr. James Henton
Cllr. Scott Jones
Cllr. Caroline Lewis
Cllr. Alan Lockyer
Cllr. Andy Lodwig
Cllr. Sonia Reynolds
Cllr. Phil Rogers

Members were provided with support from the following officers:

Craig Griffiths
Stacy Curran
Pamela Chivers

Appendix A

Handling Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation for Councillors Task & Finish Group

Action Plan 2024

Theme: Social Media				
Issue	Action to Address Issue	Responsibility	Monitoring/Progress	Completed Date
Public debate on social media channels has increased. There is public perception that members tagged in social media posts should contribute to online debates, personal comments are made if councillors do not respond to tags.	Members to be offered training on social media settings to enable them to apply settings to prevent tagging.	Communications and Marketing Team		
	Members to consider whether they wish to use closed groups on social media for ward resident information only.	Councillors		
Members of the public inciting aggressive and intimidating behaviour online.	Members to consider whether they wish to utilise face to face meetings as opposed to other forms of communication and suitable risk assessment documents to be provided to identify issues.	Health and Safety		
	When dealing with issues on social media, respond with facts. Members to consider if they wish to limit comment if information has been provided and be clear what comments are acceptable. Suitable draft wording to be provided to members that will highlight such comments/terminology are inappropriate	Councillors Legal and Democratic Services		

It is difficult for Councillors to respond to personal/critical posts on social media.	Councillors should remove themselves from inflammatory situations on social media. Offer to discuss offline either by phone/e-mail or in person. Consider blocking residents if abusive behaviour continues. Suitable draft wording to be provided to members that will highlight such comments/terminology are inappropriate	Councillors		
It is hard to ascertain the tone of a social media post.		Legal and Democratic Services		
Politically motivated abuse can be received online from other Councillors.	Support and respect other Councillors regardless of political ideology. Guidance on the Code of Conduct and applicability to Social Media be issued to all members	Councillors Legal and Democratic Services		
Theme: Harassment by E-Mail				
Issue	Action to Address Issue	Responsibility	Monitoring/Progress	Completed Date
Councillors have received harassment via e-mail, despite providing a suitable response. Potential to be reported to the ombudsman if an e-mail is unanswered.	Advise the member of the public that no further responses would be made and seek advice from Legal and Democratic Services Suitable draft wording to be provided to members that will highlight such comments/terminology are inappropriate	Councillors Legal and Democratic Services		
Theme: Harassment and Abuse in the Community				

Issue	Action to Address Issue	Responsibility	Monitoring/Progress	Completed Date
Councillors harassed by certain groups of people prior to the last Local Authority election.	All Councillors to be reminded that they are able to remove their home address from the Council website.	Legal and Democratic Services		
	Legal and Democratic Services identify a named contact within South Wales Police that member harassment can be directed to	Community Safety Team/South Wales Police/Legal and Democratic Services		
	Develop local support, make contact with the police through local PCSO.			
Councillors being physically threatened by aggressive members of the public. Aggressive members of the public enticing other people in the community to threaten councillors. The potential threat to Councillors was increasing in seriousness	A protocol on dealing with harassment, intimidation and alarm to be developed and issued to all members.	Legal and Democratic Services Team		
	Provide a set paragraph for Councillors use when members of the public are displaying aggressive/intimidating behaviour; stating the behaviour would not be tolerated and there may be possible further action.	Legal and Democratic Services Team		
	Develop local support, make contact with the police through local PCSO.	Community Safety Team/South Wales Police		
Young people are being fed incorrect information and influenced by others in the community.	Discussions to be had with Youth Council, Education, Leisure and Lifelong Directorate on potential ways to address this	Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning Directorate		
Councillors experiencing abuse and threats from known violent members of the community.	All members be afforded the opportunity to attend Conflict Resolution Training	Legal and Democratic Services Team		

Councillors are unaware of potentially violent members of the public in their communities.	Investigate whether Councillors can access information on the Potentially Violent Persons Register (PVP).	Legal and Democratic Services / Health and Safety		
Police have been called to provide protection at meetings attended by Councillors.	Legal and Democratic Services identify a named contact within South Wales Police that member harassment can be directed to	Community Safety Team/South Wales Police/Legal and Democratic Services		
	Develop local support, make contact with the police through local PCSO.			
Councillors holding surgeries are vulnerable.	Consider the location of surgeries, ensure surgeries are held in populated venues; Councillors should not conduct surgeries alone. Suitable risk assessment documents to be provided to identify issues.	Councillors Health and Safety		
	Consider not holding face to face surgeries due to potential intimidation in the political arena. Suitable risk assessment documents to be provided to identify issues.			
	Ensure risk assessments are in place if holding a Members Surgery. Suitable risk assessment documents to be provided to identify issues.			
National cases of politicians being attacked.	Risk assessments should be in place if Councillors are concerned about their personal safety.	Councillors / Health and Safety		
Councillors are unaware of the existence of right wing/abusive groups who may target councillors in the course of their work.	Briefings regarding national groups who may target local events or events that may draw community tension.	Community Safety Team		

Councillors concerned around the possibility of being called out for mis-gendering individuals.				
Theme: Items outside of Councillors Remit				
Issue	Action to Address Issue	Responsibility	Monitoring/Progress	Completed Date
Public criticising the local authority/Councillors for items outside of the council's control.	Toolkit/information (job description & sample responses) to share with the public to assist in educating on the remit of a Councillor.	Legal And Democratic Services		
Unrealistic public expectation and misunderstanding of a councillor's remit.				
Theme: Miscellaneous				
Issue	Action to Address Issue	Responsibility	Monitoring/Progress	Completed Date
The Local Authority is unable to support Councillors financially in making slander/defamation claims. More protection/safeguarding is needed through the local authority and Welsh Government with funding available to enable action to be taken against perpetrators.	Raise an issue with Welsh Government concerning local authorities having no duty of care towards Councillors.	Legal and Democratic Services		
	Support Councillors by providing standard letters and advising on legal options.	Legal and Democratic Services		
	Investigate the potential for a consortium to be formed with neighbouring authorities; whereby Councillors could contribute to a fund that provided access to independent legal advice.	Legal and Democratic Services / Welsh Local Government Association		
Hybrid working does not allow for new Councillors to build relationships with fellow Councillors.	In cases of severe abuse, intimidation or threats, members to be advised of the situation so that support can be given to the affected Councillor (with their prior consent).	Legal and Democratic Services		

Politically motivated abuse can be received during council meetings	<p>Support and respect other Councillors regardless of political ideology.</p> <p>All members to undertake Code of Conduct training and attend a refresher session</p>	<p>Councillors</p> <p>Legal and Democratic Services</p>		
Access to support/counselling services	Ensure all members are aware of the Peer mentoring Network through WLGA	Legal and Democratic Services		
	Ensure that all members have access to WLGA guidance on Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation	Legal and Democratic Services		
	Investigate the Occupational Health Support offer for Councillors	Legal and Democratic Services		
	All members of Democratic Services Team to be made aware of protocols in place and how to sign post members to access available support	Legal and Democratic Services		
Poor Communication between officers and Councillors can aggravate situations	<p>Improved communication between officers and Councillors when there are issues in specific wards. Proactive communications may diffuse complaints from the public and reduce online abuse.</p> <p>All members and officers to be made aware of the Member/Officer Protocol and obligations contained there in and all accountable managers to undergo training.</p>	All Council service areas.		
Community organisations and the third sector also face abuse in the course of their work	Utilising existing networks to ensure that issues of concern are given prominence and how organisations can work collaboratively to address	Voluntary Sector Liaison Forum		

