

CIVILITY & RESPECT PROJECT

Throughout the sector, there are growing concerns about the impact bullying, harassment and intimidation is having on councils, councillors and staff and the resulting effectiveness of local councils. In response, the Civility and Respect Project has been founded by the Civility and Respect Working Group and is supported by representatives from across the sector including the SLCC, National Association of Local Councils (NALC) councils, County Associations and One Voice Wales (OVW).

Mission Statement

The Civility and Respect Project Working Group set out a mission statement summarising the core aims and values for securing permanent change in the sector:

‘Civility and respect should be at the heart of public life and good governance is fundamental to ensuring an effective and well-functioning democracy at all levels.

The intimidation, abuse, bullying and harassment of councillors, professional officers and staff, in person or online, is totally unacceptable; whether that is by councillors, professional officers, staff or members of the public.

This can prevent councils from functioning effectively, councillors from representing local people, discourage people from getting involved including standing for election, and undermine public confidence and trust in local democracy.

National Association of Local Councils (NALC), county associations of local councils and One Voice Wales (OVW), as the membership organisations representing the first tier of local government in England and Wales, and Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) as the professional body for clerks, are committed to working together to promote civility and respect in public life, good governance, positive debate and supporting the well-being of councillors, professional officers and staff.

To that end the Group will be working to deliver tangible resources, actions and interventions in four main areas: providing councils with the tools to support good governance; lobbying to strengthen the standards regime and encourage more people to get involved; training; and processes to intervene to provide support to struggling councils.’

Project Workstreams

The group has identified a significant number of changes and improvements considered vital to provide support to help reduce and manage the issues related to bullying and harassment in the sector. These factors have been organised into six project workstreams that will deliver on the mission statement.

1. Training

A key step in creating a safe and inclusive environment for local councils is making all councillors, clerks and council staff aware of the issues, what is — and what is not — acceptable. Knowing how to

recognise and address bullying, harassment, discrimination, and inclusion is an important step in its prevention.

Training ensures that councils demonstrate that they do not tolerate these types of behaviour and provide the tools to intervene immediately, consistently, equitably, and appropriately when bullying occurs.

2. Governance

Bullying can have a detrimental effect on officers and is corrosive to leadership. It could lead to decision-making that is not in the public interest and a failure of standards and governance.

Good governance is one of the building blocks of anti-bullying and harassment and is fundamental to ensuring an effective and well-functioning democracy at all levels.

3. Intervention

Sometimes relations in a council deteriorate beyond the ability to be repaired by the implementation of, and adherence to, good governance and comprehensive training of staff and councillors.

The council may have recognised that it cannot restore effective leadership, functionality and civility without some support.

The project team is working on some strategies to support struggling councils.

4. Legislative

The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) undertook a review of Local Government Ethical Standards and, in January 2019, **produced a report comprising 26 recommendations for legislative changes**. The resulting recommendations included:

- The ability for the principal authority to impose sanctions on a parish councillor following a review.
- The ability for a local authority to suspend councillors.
- Mandatory training for clerks.

The lobbying of the government to implement these, and other recommendations, is ongoing within NALC and SLCC. The project will highlight the ongoing action taken to progress these and other legislative changes.

5. Collaboration

The project team is working closely with the Local Government Association (LGA), Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) and other associations navigating their way through similar sector issues.

6. Enabling

The enabling workstream makes bullying and harassment information and supports accessible to clerks and councils.

Resources

Statement Poster

As a first step in the promotion of civility and respect, you may wish to add the following statement poster to your council website stating that bullying, harassment and intimidation will not be tolerated.

See attached

Code of Conduct

One of the critical issues already identified by the project is that the Code of Conduct produced by the Local Government Association (LGA) in 2021 has not been widely adopted. The Civility and Respect project has endorsed the LGA model Code of Conduct, and the guidance notes aimed to help understanding and consistency of approach towards the code.

The code is a template for councils to adopt in whole and or with amendments to take into account local circumstances.

The code and guidance have been designed to protect our democratic role, encourage good conduct, and safeguard the public's trust and confidence in the role of councillor in local government.



While it sets out the minimum standards of behaviour expected, together with the guidance, it is designed to encourage councillors to model the high standards expected, to be mutually respectful even if they have personal or political differences, to provide a personal check and balance, and to set out the type of conduct that could lead to complaints being made of behaviour falling below the standards expected of councillors and in breach of the code. It is also to protect councillors, the public, local authority officers and the reputation of local government.

Watchet Town Council adopted the new Code of Conduct at the Annual Council meeting held on 16 May 2022

Early Day Motion for Sanctions

The parliamentary session for this early day motion has now expired, but please do continue to use the sample letters as amendable templates to lobby your MP's on civility and respect issues.

An early day motion (EDM) has been registered by an MP calling for the government to establish an appropriate and effective sanctions mechanism to deal with local councillors who have been found guilty of bullying and harassment following an independent investigation. The MP was alerted to the issue when an ALCC* member contacted him with regards to the behaviour she had suffered.
*The Association of Local Council Clerks (ALCC) is the independent trade union for clerks.

What are EDMs?

EDMs are motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons for which no day has been fixed. Whilst few are debated, many attract a great deal of public interest and media coverage.

They are used to put on record the views of individual MPs or to draw attention to specific events or campaigns. By attracting the signatures of other MPs, they can be used to demonstrate the level of parliamentary support for a particular cause or point of view.

What can you do?

The more MP's that support this EDM, the more likely it is to get discussed in parliament. Please either table an agenda item to pass a resolution to write to your MP asking that they back this motion and have it discussed in parliament or write to your MP as an individual. <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/59182/conduct-of-councillors-towards-town-and-parish-council-clerks> The drive to improve standards in our sector is being included as a topic on NALCs lobby day on 23rd March, so it is a great time to support lobby day with a letter to your MP.

draft letter to MP from the Clerk as an individual and as a Council – sent 25 July 2022

Also, to note, earlier this year an Early Day Motion (EDM) was tabled by MP Dr Julian Lewis, calling for the government to establish an appropriate sanctions mechanism to deal with local councillors found guilty of bullying and harassment. Although the parliamentary session for this EDM has now expired, it is still important to draw this important issue to the attention of your local MP.