

Agenda item 7

AGS/05/23

Report title: Local Government Association (LGA) 'Debate not Hate' campaign	
Report to: Audit, Governance and Standards Committee	
Report author: Paul Turner, Director, Legal and Assurance	
Date: 30 January 2023	For: Information
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 The Audit Governance and Standards Committee has a role to develop and maintain high standards of conduct by members.
- 1.2 This report summarises the LGA's 'Debate Not Hate' campaign and how it relates to standards of conduct by Members and ECC's work to support the safety of members.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the content of the LGA 'Debate Not Hate' campaign and the related work that has been undertaken in ECC.
- 2.2 That the Committee asks the Chairman to write to all members inviting them to sign the [online LGA "Debate Not Hate" public statement](#) and drawing their attention to the LGA toolkit.

3. Background

- 3.1 The LGA's [Debate Not Hate campaign](#) aims to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in their communities, encourage healthy debate and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation.
- 3.2 In June 2022 the LGA published a report: Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy. This work was undertaken in response to an apparent increase in levels of abuse and intimidation in political and public discourse. Respondents to the call for evidence were asked to share their personal experiences of abuse and intimidation as councillors or candidates, or abuse of councillors they had witnessed. The LGA then set out seven recommendations to improve the environment for current and prospective

councillors. These recommendations were aimed at a range of organisations, recommendation 1 is for Councils:

'Councils and other relevant partners should take greater responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of councillors and take a proactive approach to preventing and handling abuse and intimidation against councillors. This should include addressing the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing and working in partnership with other agencies and councils to ensure that threats and risks to councillors' safety, and that of their families, are taken seriously.'

- 3.3 All ECC Members have been regularly offered members personal safety training, including at induction. There have been two ECC 'in house' online sessions delivered since May 2021 and the recording is available to all Members. Members have also regularly been offered the option to attend an LGA webinars on personal safety. Members are also offered Social Media training, advice and support. The Member Development Steering Group regularly considers and advises officers on Member's personal safety training needs.
- 3.4 The ECC Members Portal contains detailed advice on safety and risk, including for conducting surgeries, during election periods and regarding online conduct. All ECC Members have the option to sign up for an SOS fob for lone working to provide them with additional security. Members are encouraged to contact the Head or Democracy and Transparency, the Monitoring Officer or the Health and Safety Manager if they have any questions or concerns about their safety or wellbeing. Instances of abuse or intimidation should be reported to the Head or Democracy and Transparency or the Monitoring Officer for investigation.
- 3.5 As part of the campaign the LGA encourages Councillors to sign their [public statement](#), which states:

'We are calling on local government leaders, the Government and relevant partners, like the police, political parties and social media companies to come together through a government convened working group to produce and implement an action plan that addresses the abuse and intimidation of elected members and candidates and ensures their safety while they fulfil their democratic roles.'

Individual members may wish to consider signing this online.

- 3.6 In December 2022 the LGA launched a new [toolkit](#), building on from their June 2022 report. The toolkit is designed to provide councils and councillors with resources to raise awareness of the campaign's aims to challenge and reduce abuse against local politicians and encourage improvements in the quality of public discourse and political debate. The toolkit is available in two formats one for individual elected members and one for councils as a whole. Members may wish to review the content of the Councillors toolkit, which includes a motion that could be passed by full Council. Officers will bring

forward items to the relevant committees or informal boards as the 'Debate Not Hate' campaign progresses.

4. Links to our Strategic Ambitions

- 4.1 An effective approach to Member standards of conduct and Member personal safety is critical in ensuring that the Council successfully delivers in all areas of work across ECC's strategic ambitions.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications to this report.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 The Council is required by the Localism Act 2011 to adopt a code of conduct which is consistent with the 'Nolan' principles. Under the Health and Safety at Work Etc Act 1974 the Council is required to take such steps as is reasonably practicable to conduct the Council so as avoid exposing people to risks to their health and safety.

7. Equality and Diversity Considerations

- 7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 7.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 7.3 The equality impact assessment indicates that this activity will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

8 List of Appendices

8.1 None

9 List of Background papers

9.1 LGA report *Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy*