



CIVILITY AND RESPECT PLEDGE

ABOUT

Throughout the sector, there are growing concerns about the impact bullying, harassment, and intimidation are having on local (parish and town) councils, councillors, clerks and council staff and the resulting effectiveness of local councils. The National Association of Local Councils (NALC), One Voice Wales (OVW), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and county associations have responded to this by setting up a Civility and Respect Working Group to oversee the Civility and Respect Project.

CIVILITY AND RESPECT PLEDGE

NALC, SLCC, and OVW believe now is the time to put civility and respect at the top of the agenda and start a culture change for the local council sector. The Civility and Respect Pledge is being introduced because there is no place for bullying, harassment, and intimidation within our sector. The pledge is easy for councils to sign up for and it will enable councils to demonstrate that they are committed to standing up to poor behaviour across our sector and to driving through positive changes which support civil and respectful conduct.

By signing the Pledge, a council is agreeing that it will treat councillors, clerks, employees, members of the public, and representatives of partner organisations and volunteers with civility and respect in their roles and that it:

- has put in place a training programme for councillors and staff
- has signed up to the Code of Conduct for councillors
- has good governance arrangements in place including staff contracts and a dignity at work policy
- will seek professional help at the early stages should civility and respect issues arise
- will commit to calling out bullying and harassment if and when it happens
- will continue to learn from best practices in the sector and aspire to be a role model/champion council
- supports the continued lobbying for change in legislation to support the Civility and Respect Pledge including sanctions for elected members where appropriate

MISSION STATEMENT

- 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, clerks and council staff, in person or online, is unacceptable, whether by councillors, clerks, council staff, or public members.
- 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.
- NALC, county associations and OVW, as the membership organisations representing the first tier of local government in England and Wales, and the 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 Civility and Respect Working 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 encouraging 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 critical 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 essential step in 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, 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 support. The project team is working on some strategies to support struggling councils.
4. **Legislative:** The Committee on Standards in Public Life 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 continuous 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 support available to clerks and councils.

NALC Civility and Respect Online Courses (via Nimble) £16 each

Standards in Public Life

This bespoke e-learning module has been developed by county associations in the South West region. It is primarily designed to support those elected or co-opted and/or working in local councils, to understand the principles of conduct expected of all councillors. Information is based upon a national model code of conduct produced by The Local Government Association. Still, it recognises that councillors must abide by their own council's code of conduct and provides some generic support for those wishing to understand better the behaviours expected of all councillors.

Respectful and positive social media for councils and councillors

In this introductory e-learning module, we'll consider the opportunities and risks associated with social media from a civility and respect perspective. We will explore a range of proactive and pre-emptive strategies councils, and councillors can implement to set themselves up for success. We'll explore what to do if things go wrong and how to manage a range of scenarios from trolling to harassment, and practice what steps you can take.

Leadership in challenging situations for councils and councillors

In this introductory e-learning module, we will consider different leadership styles in the context of your role at the council, exploring which styles we personally 'default' to and which can work effectively for different situations. We will also discover how to build, support and get the most from an effective and motivated team.

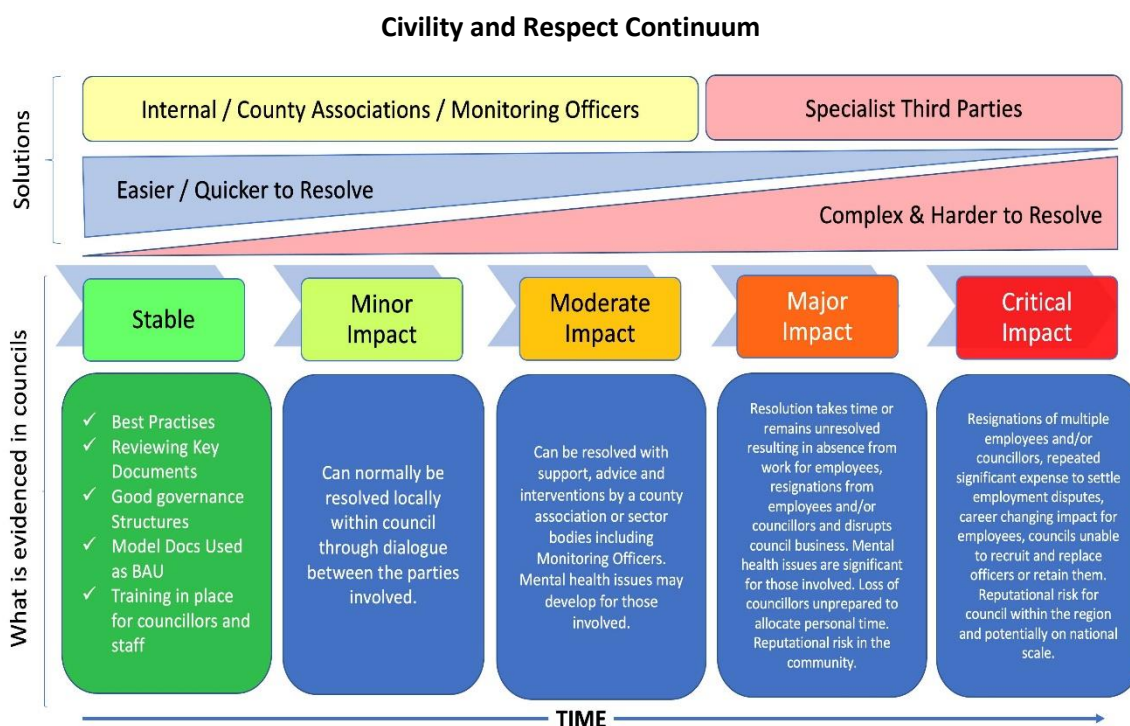
Personal resilience for councils and councillors

In this introductory e-learning module, we develop a better understanding of where our behaviour comes from. We'll consider what resilience means for us in the context of our roles within the council. There will be opportunities to explore role-focused scenarios and consider how we might respond to them. We'll also explore strategies to deal with and manage various situations.

RESOURCES

Bullying and harassment statement: Local councils may wish to add a statement poster to their websites stating that bullying, harassment and intimidation will not be tolerated.

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 the local government.



Civility and Respect Continuum: The Civility and Respect Continuum illustrates how issues escalate over time. Our research has indicated that councils experiencing poor conduct or vexatious demands/complaints often experience problems repeatedly over a significant period of time. The longer an issue is permitted to continue, unaddressed, the more complex, time-consuming, and expensive the resolution becomes. This can eventually result in damage to the reputation of the council and health issues for those involved eventually ending with multiple resignations of both staff and councillors. Councils that have up-to-date policies and procedures, well-trained councillors and employees can often manage and mediate issues with or without advice and support from county associations and/or monitoring officers. Where councils become overwhelmed or fail to draw upon the resources available, matters can escalate and come under significant strain and pressure. In these situations, the solutions are often beyond the existing support offered and invariably best resolved by third parties, a costly and time-consuming challenge.

The project is identifying solutions to support councillors, officers, councils, and county officers at every stage of the civility continuum, however, whilst governance and training solutions may help with minor and moderate issues, the options for support at the major end of the scale become more limited. Support from monitoring officers and county associations may provide resolution in some instances but often issues have become too complex to resolve without costly interventions from specialist third parties. Every attempt should be made to prevent escalation by addressing potential behavioural issues as soon as they arise, calling out bullying and harassment at the earliest opportunity and standing up for civil and respectful behaviour.

If the issues within a council have escalated to critical, then the options for resolution are still further limited, with costly external resolution and legal support often being required to reach resolutions. Potential action/intervention at this stage is being piloted with a town council struggling with chronic issues. It is being overseen by the joint NALC/SLCC Internal Development Board. If the solution proves successful it may be possible to expand the support programme, but much depends on the councils' willingness to make a positive change. Early intervention to head off chronic issues is a far more effective mechanism to handle poor behaviour.

[Dignity at Work Policy](#)

The Dignity at Work policy is the first of a series of new or revised governance documents which are being developed by the project team. The documents have been reviewed by a focus group made up of clerks, councillors, monitoring officers, and county associations.

The Dignity at Work policy will replace any previous bullying and harassment policy. It encompasses behaviours beyond bullying and harassment and zero-tolerance to deal with concerns before they escalate. It has been produced with supporting guidance because it is essential that any commitment to the policy is applied in practice.

The wording has been suggested to demonstrate a council's commitment to promoting dignity and respect where they have signed up to the **Civility and Respect Pledge**. Councils who have not signed up for this are requested to consider making this pledge which is based on basic behaviours and expectations of all council representatives to create workplaces that allow people to maintain their dignity at all times.

Briefing note prepared by the Clerk, February 2024 with a view to Personnel Committee agreeing to recommend the adoption of the Civility and Respect Pledge.