



Blaby District Council

Debate not hate: Councillor Handbook for personal safety and healthy debate

DEBATE
NOT HATE

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Introduction

Blaby District Council is committed to robust, lively and respectful debate. It is a vital part of our democracy and should be encouraged. However, debate should never turn to hate. Abusive, intimidating and disrespectful behaviour towards elected Councillors is not acceptable. It stops members from being able to properly represent their communities and undermines our local democracy.

This handbook is a guide for Councillors on

- What abuse is
- Zero-tolerance approach
- Reporting abuse
- Support available
- Practical guidance on how to prevent abuse, and deal with it if it occurs

This guide also sets standards for healthy debate amongst councillors for members to lead by example.

We remain united in the belief that no one should face abuse for serving in public office and are committed to supporting our members to tackle this abuse.



Cllr Terry Richardson
Leader of the Council
(Conservative Group)



Cllr Nick Brown
Leader of the Labour
Group



Cllr Luke Cousin
Leader of the Liberal
Democrat Group



Cllr Tony Deakin
Leader of the Green
Group

What is abuse

The Local Government Association calls abuse to Councillors “public intimidation” and defines that as “words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block or deter participation in public debate, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life”

This includes, but is not limited to, actions of abuse, harassment and intimidation such as:

- verbal abuse
- physical attacks
- being stalked, followed, or loitered around
- threats of harm
- distribution of misinformation
- character assassination
- inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media
- sexual harassment or sexual assault
- any other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety.

Zero tolerance approach

Blaby District Council adopts a zero-tolerance approach to abuse and intimidation.

Councillors should be empowered to end interactions where they are experiencing abuse. Abuse should not be tolerated in any capacity.

Expectations for interactions:

- Parties should speak to each other with respect
- There should be no forms of intimidation or aggression- including insults, humiliation or bullying
- There should be no swearing or inappropriate language
- There should be no threats made

If interactions with residents or other councillors fail to meet these expectations, you should consider ending the interaction.

How to report incidents

How you report an incident may depend on the severity.

1. Report it to the Police

If the situation warrants it (for example, where a crime may have been committed, threats have been made or the Councillor feels unsafe or at risk of further abuse or violence) consideration should be given to reporting matters to the Police. Incidents should be reported via 101 or online at <https://www.leics.police.uk>

If there is an immediate threat to your safety, call 999

2. Report it to Democratic Services or the Chief Executive directly

It is important that the council is made aware of any incidents, **including those you don't consider serious enough for the police**, as it may be possible for action to be taken to prevent a similar incident from re-occurring and to take further steps to protect Councillors and staff from abusive individuals. Actions which may be taken as a result of a report if appropriate:

- Police may be informed if they have not been already
- The individual may be added to the Tread Carefully List, which alerts staff and members to potentially abusive individuals to prevent further contact
- The member may be offered personal protective equipment/surveillance equipment for their home
- Wellbeing support will be offered if deemed relevant
- Training requirement may be identified and actioned

3. Keep a record of the incident

Record or note down the encounter or communication. Emails or letters can be copied or saved. A telephone call or face-to-face discussion or social media incident could be written in a diary after the event, recorded, screenshot or saved. Photos can be taken of damage. It is also important that incidents relating to the same individual or individuals should be recorded as such evidence could be critical if the matter gives rise to a criminal prosecution.

Support available

- **Access to free Counselling Services**- please speak to Democratic Services for more information on how to access free Counselling Services. This is also available for members of your family who have experienced abuse as a result of your position
- **Personal alarms** are available upon request from Democratic Services. These should be used whilst out in the community
- **Online training courses**- Available modules: Keeping safe online, Introduction to Health & Safety, Mental Health Awareness
- **Regular personal safety training** provided by the Local Government Association
- **My possible self app** to promote wellbeing
- **Access to mental health first aiders**- they act as a first point of contact if you are experiencing emotional distress. They can provide initial support and signpost you to appropriate support services
- **Access to the Tread Carefully list**- this list details residents who are recorded as being potentially abusive and should be consulted before one on one interactions with residents occur
- **Comms support**- should you wish to respond to a resident query, officers are able to provide the required information and suggested wording if requested

Leading by example - healthy debate between members

When addressing abusive behaviour, it is important that this is applied in all facets of public life.

Debate is an integral part of democracy and should be encouraged. However, debate should never turn to hate.

Below are standards of behaviour for interactions between councillors which should be adhered to, to ensure that each councillor is treated with respect.

The Code of Conduct for Members adopted in the Blaby District Council Constitution establishes that:

1. As a member I will treat others with respect
2. I will not bully any person
3. I will not harass any person

Members must therefore ensure that they:

1. Do not make personal attacks on another member or other elected representative (including those elected to other bodies such as a Parish Council or Parliament)- debate should refer only to matters related to their role as an elected official and should not become personal
2. Speak to other members with respect – treat others as you would wish to be treated
3. Do not use inappropriate or offensive language
4. Debate should remain within the Council Chamber. It is not always appropriate or welcome to continue a debate outside of the committee meeting

Looking out for each other:

Members are encouraged to look out for their fellow councillors, and where they can, offer support. Often a peer who has similar experiences can be a reassuring and welcome person to share with. Members will have best practice and advice on how to tackle abuse from their own experiences which are valuable. It is actively encouraged that Councillors share their advice and support one another alongside the formal support offered on page 5.

How can I respond to abuse?

To support councillors to handle abuse and intimidation, the LGA has developed the following SHIELD principles. These principles provide councillors with a basic framework on which to base their engagement with the public to reduce the risks and handle incidents if they do occur. These principles are:



LGA SHIELD PRINCIPLES

To support councillors to handle abuse and intimidation, the LGA has developed the following shield principles to reduce risks and handle incidents if they occur:



LGA SHIELD PRINCIPLES



SAFEGUARD
Protect yourself online and in person by proactively setting out a zero-tolerance policy of abuse, threats or intimidation. Seek advice on online and in-person safety.



HELP
Ensure you are safe before you take further action and get help if needed. If the threat is immediate, call 999.



INFORM
If it's safe to do so, say that you consider the communication or action to be intimidating, threatening or abusive and challenge poor behaviour.



EVIDENCE
Gather evidence of abuse, intimidatory or threatening communications; take photos, recordings or screenshots, keep letters, emails and details of witnesses.



LET PEOPLE KNOW
Report the incident to the appropriate person, such as council or political officers, social media companies, and the police if necessary.



DECIDE
Determine whether you want to continue interacting with the person. If not, use social media function to end engagement and consider options to inhibit them from approaching you in person.

FAQs:

Can I photograph or film to record an incident of abuse?

Yes. It is not illegal to take photographs or video footage in public places unless it is for criminal or terrorist purposes.

Practical guidance for councillor personal safety

Social media/online abuse

Social media is a useful tool in interacting with residents, communicating key information and listening to the issues going on in your area. However, social media can also be a forum for online abuse where users feel empowered to speak unkindly or act inappropriately. You should consider establishing an effective security routine.

Preventative measures against online abuse:

- **Set expectation-** Councillors can post on their profiles their own rules of engagement where they can establish expectations about the tone and content of online communications as well as consequences faced by those who break them. They are very helpful to set boundaries and manage expectations. This was be

The LGA has produced model expectations:

Rules of engagement

Welcome to my page, which aims to communicate my activities as a councillor.

If you wish to be a part of this online community, you must agree to abide by this code of digital engagement, which is designed to keep everyone safe.

RULE 1
Debate and disagreement are welcome on this page, but only if expressed with courtesy, respect and politeness.

RULE 2
Posts should not contain abuse, harassment, intimidation or threats of any form.

RULE 3
Posts should not contain any form of discrimination – including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia or religious intolerance.

RULE 4
Posts should not spread false or unverified information.

RULE 5
For transparency reasons, users should not post anonymously.

If any of these rules are broken, page admins reserve the right to delete posts, block users and report content to the police if necessary.

It may not be possible to respond to all queries on this page due to time constraints - if you have specific enquiries or casework, please send directly to my official email.

- **Consider holding two accounts on a platform-** one for personal use, and one for your use as a Councillor. On Facebook, we strongly recommend you use a Facebook 'Page' rather than a 'profile' for your councillor role
- **Lead by example** – do not post comments that could be considered abusive, and avoid posting false or unverified information.
- **Consider content** – some content will be more controversial than others. Consider before posting how you will manage engagement with this, for example only engaging in comments on the policy itself or directing people to consultation documents.
- **Defuse conflict** – waiting to respond can take the heat out of situations, as can reframing your own language.
- **Know when to step back** - Remember you do not have to engage with abusive or threatening behaviour. You can set the record straight with factual information if you wish, but you can step away when you want to.

- **Protect your privacy** – set different passwords for different accounts, and do not post information that can allow people to identify your whereabouts outside of official council business.
- **Understand privacy settings** – there is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.
- **Get and give support** – where you feel able, provide support to fellow councillors online, and reach out to colleagues and your council for support where needed.

Tackling abuse on social media:

- **Keep a record-** (such as a screen shot) that includes the poster's details
- **Escalation-** If the post is a complaint about a council service, you can ask for contact details and pass the information to officers to follow-up and inform the individual that this is the course of action you are taking.
- **Block abusive users-** Consider “blocking” or “muting” a person or their posts. It is important to remember that, as a councillor, you do not have to accept abusive behaviour.
- **Reporting abuse-** Most social media platforms have ‘rules’ or ‘terms of use’ that prohibit abusive behaviour. If you feel someone has broken a social media platform’s ‘rules’, you can report the user to the platform in question. It will then be up to the platform to take further action. You can also report abuse to Democratic Services or the police if necessary as highlighted in the reporting procedure above.

Visit the platform's own safety advice pages:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/help/safety>

Instagram: <https://help.instagram.com/>

X (was Twitter): <https://help.x.com/en/safety-and-security/account-security-tips>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/about/policies/#community-guidelines>

Resources and further guidance:

The above guidance should be read in conjunction with the Blaby District Council Social Media Protocol for Members.

The LGA has developed a range of guidance and resources to support councillors with their online communications: [Improving digital citizenship: A practical guide for councillors | Local Government Association](#)

Lone working

If you are working alone, consider the following advice:

- Leave details of where you are going and how long you will be with a friend, relative or colleague
- Check that your mobile phone is charged and switched on
- Carry a personal attack alarm- Democratic Services can provide these on request
- Have a buddy system so you can ring in at an agreed time. Agree with your buddy what will happen if you do not contact at the agreed time.
- Team up with a Councillor from a neighbouring ward or from the corresponding county division to make visits

If there are a number of risks associated with a particular visit you may wish to carry out a risk assessment and discuss or ask another Councillor or an Officer for their view on whether a visit should be undertaken

Home visits

Before arranging a lone home visit, Councillors should always consider alternative options:

- Can contact be made by telephone or email?
- Can a meeting be arranged in a public place such as a Community Centre or a café?
- Can the resident attend a Ward Surgery?
- Can a colleague or another person accompany you?

We would strongly encourage Councillors to arrange meetings with residents in a public place. You can use the interview rooms fitted with panic buttons at Blaby District Council offices for this purpose. To book a room, please speak to Democratic Services.

If a home visit is undertaken, the following general personal safety issues should be considered and planned before the visit:

- Arrange the visit during normal working hours, if possible
- If appropriate, consult the Council's Tread Carefully list- please speak to Democratic Services to arrange this
- Let somebody know who you are visiting, providing details of address, date and time of visit and expected duration. You may also wish to establish a code word which will alert them that there may be a problem
- Keep a record of your whereabouts. This might include making a call on your mobile during the home visit, telling the resident that there is such a record or that you are expected elsewhere at a specific time

During a home visit, the following specific personal safety issues should be followed:

- Call the person before the meeting to confirm arrangements and establish their mood/state of mind
- Stay alert when approaching the property, and look around the garden for dangers, for example dogs
- After knocking, stand back and to the side of the door
- Ask for any dogs or other pets to be secured, where appropriate
- Assess the situation and mood of the resident.
- If in any doubt or you feel threatened, do not enter, make an excuse and leave
- Only sit down when the resident does

Car safety

You need to take the same precautions as most car owners do:

- Have your keys in your hand or easily accessible
- Park where possible, under street lighting and try not to park in dark streets or isolated car parks
- Lock the car doors after you get into the car and after leaving it
- Carry a torch with you
- Look around your vehicle as you approach in case someone is crouching down
- Look inside before entering your vehicle to ensure no one is hiding there (even if the doors were locked)
- Try to park on the left hand side of the road facing the way you want to drive off
- Ensure your vehicle has sufficient fuel for the journey

- If you are followed in your vehicle, do not get out. Ensure that it is locked, drive to a safe place such as police station, flash your lights and sound the horn to attract attention

Ward surgeries

- Avoid holding surgeries in otherwise empty buildings. Choose busy locations such as libraries, supermarkets and parish buildings
- Consider having someone else with you- this could be your fellow ward councillor or a family member. If you are in a single member ward, you could establish a buddy system with a fellow single member ward councillor to agree that you will each accompany the other to surgeries and long visits.
- Sit nearest the exit and consider the layout of your seating
- Keep your desk clear of items which could be used against you, including hot drinks

This guidance, used in conjunction with the support highlighted on page 5 should be used by councillors to keep them safe, and to stop debate turning into hate.

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