

Debate Not Hate Survey

Research Report

June 2023



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Summary

Background

In June 2023, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to councillors in England and Wales, to investigate the extent to which they had experienced abuse or intimidation and for comparison with questions on this topic included in the 2022 Councillors' Census. It should be noted that the Councillors' Census was a more general data collection exercise which was not targeted at this issue in particular, which might explain some of the differences in results summarised in this report. A total of 815 councillors responded – a response rate of five per cent. The responding councillors represented a wide cross-section of political affiliations and levels of experience.

Key findings

- **51 per cent** of respondents with knowledge of their council's arrangements to deal with inappropriate behaviour from members of the public felt that these measures were not effective, compared to 29 per cent in the Councillors' Census.
- **82 per cent** of respondents felt personally at risk at least some of the time when serving as a councillor, compared to 73 per cent of respondents to the Councillors' Census.
- **47 per cent** of respondents with an opinion on the topic thought that their authority's arrangements for protecting them personally were not very effective or not at all effective, compared to 37 per cent of respondents to the Councillors' Census.
- **75 per cent** of respondents who took part in the 2023 local elections reported receiving at least some intimidation or abuse during the election campaign period.
- **81 per cent** of respondents who had served as a councillor for 12 months or more had experienced at least some intimidation or abuse during the previous year, compared to 73 per cent of respondents to the Councillors' Census.
- **50 per cent** of respondents reported that the amount of abuse and intimidation they receive has increased since they first served as a councillor, including 28 per cent of respondents who said it had sharply increased.
- Respondents provided a wide range of comments in relation to this issue, including: drawing attention to the problematic role of social media, perceived lack of support from councils and police authorities, a critique of the widespread availability of councillors' home addresses, the wide diversity of social backgrounds and political motivations of abusers, and the value of pre-emptive advice, training and preparation for dealing with cases of abuse or intimidation as and when they occur.

Introduction

The Local Government Association (LGA) launched its “Debate Not Hate” campaign following the finding in its 2022 Councillors’ Census that seven in ten councillors reported having experienced abuse or intimidation. The campaign aims to raise awareness of these issues and the ways that they undermine the safety and wellbeing of councillors in the course of performing their duties.

The following survey was run by the LGA to obtain an update on the findings related to abuse and intimidation in the 2022 Councillors Census (henceforth “the Census”), to explore the extent to which the situation has changed since that time.

Methodology

In June 2023, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to councillors of all political affiliations belonging to principal authorities in England and Wales. The survey asked them a series of questions on whether they have experienced abuse and intimidation in their role as a councillor.

Of the 16,182 councillors invited to take part in the survey, a total of 815 responses were received – a response rate of five per cent. This level of response rate means that these results should not be taken to be more widely representative of the views of all councillors. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents.

Where available, comparisons have been drawn between the results of this survey and the applicable results of the Census. However, the following considerations should be borne in mind when making comparisons:

- The Census was a general data collection exercise exploring all aspects of serving as a councillor, whilst this survey explicitly focused on the issue of abuse and intimidation faced by councillors. As such, many of the respondents to the Census may have been less affected by issues of abuse and intimidation than the respondents to this survey, since councillors who have personally experienced abuse and intimidation might have been more inclined to take part in a survey focusing on this issue.
- The Census had a much larger volume of responses, at over 5,000, making it potentially a more representative sample of the full population of councillors than the respondents to this survey.
- The Census was conducted in January and February 2022, whilst this survey was conducted in June 2023. It is thus possible that the survey might record a higher level of abuse because incidents have taken place during the recent May 2023 local elections.

These factors do not remove the possibility that any differences in the results are a reflection of changing levels of abuse over time, but they do provide alternative explanations which may account for some of the differences between the results of the Census and this survey.

In addition, the following methodological considerations should also be borne in mind when reading this report:

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the number of respondents who answered each question – as such, please note that bases vary throughout the survey.
- Throughout the report percentages in figures and tables may add to more than 100 per cent due to rounding.

Debate Not Hate Survey 2023

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

Councillor political affiliation and time in office

Respondent councillors were asked to specify their political affiliation. As Table 1 shows, approximately 39 per cent of respondents were affiliated with the Labour Party, including 28 per cent who were affiliated purely with Labour and a further 11 per cent who were also affiliated with the Co-operative Party. Twenty-five per cent of respondents belonged to the Conservative Party and 18 per cent belonged to the Liberal Democrats. The remainder were affiliated with the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, Residents' Associations or Ratepayer groups, or were Independent councillors. These affiliations were broadly representative of the political affiliation of the broader population of councillors, suggesting that the survey has captured a broad cross-section of councillors of different political affiliations.

Table 1. Political affiliation of respondent councillors

	Per cent
Labour (total)	39
Labour only	28
Labour and Co-operative	11
Conservative	25
Liberal Democrats	18
Green Party	8
Plaid Cymru	1
Residents' Association/Ratepayer	1
Independent	9
Other	0

Base: all respondents (815 respondents). Please note that some responses of other political affiliations were received, but as a percentage these have been rounded down to zero.

Respondents were also asked to provide the length of time they had served as a councillor at the time of answering the survey. As Table 2 shows, 20 per cent of respondents had been serving for less than a year, including those newly elected in the May 2023 elections, whilst 13 per cent had been serving for a year or more, but less than two years, 20 per cent had been serving for two years or more, but less than five years, and 48 per cent had been serving for five years or more. This illustrates that councillors of all levels of experience were represented in the survey, although almost half were longstanding councillors with many years of experience.

Table 2. Length of time serving as a councillor

	Per cent
Less than one year / newly elected in May	20
1 to <2 years	13
2 to <5 years	20
5 years or more	48

Base: all respondents (815 respondents).

The results of this report will be broken down by the length of time served as a councillor. Please note that “one to two years” is occasionally used as shorthand for those who served a year or more, but less than two years, and “two to five years” is used for those who served two years or more, but less than five years.

Arrangements to deal with inappropriate behaviour

Respondents were asked whether they thought there were effective arrangements in place in their authority to deal with inappropriate behaviour from members of the public. As Table 3 shows, 36 per cent of respondents thought that there were effective measures in place, 37 per cent thought there were not such measures in place, and 28 per cent did not know whether these measures were in place. If those who answered “don’t know” were excluded, 49 per cent of respondents would have answered “yes” and the remaining 51 per cent would have answered “no”.

Table 3 also shows the results for this question that were asked in the Census, for comparison with the results of the 2023 survey. This shows that the percentage who thought that effective arrangements were in place was considerably lower in the survey than in the Census.

Table 3. Do you think there are effective arrangements in place in your authority to deal with inappropriate behaviour from members of the public?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey
Yes	55	36
No	29	37
Don't know	17	28

Base: all respondents who answered this question (813 respondents).

There were few differences in responses to this question by the length of time serving as a councillor, although newer councillors tended to agree that effective measures were in place slightly more often than longstanding councillors: 54 per cent of respondents who had been councillors for less than a year agreed that effective measures were in place, whilst 51 per cent of those who had been councillors for five years or more disagreed that this was the case.

Feeling personally at risk as a councillor

Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they felt personally at risk when fulfilling their role as a councillor. As Table 4 shows, 82 per cent of respondents felt personally at risk at least some of the time they were serving as a councillor, including eight per cent who felt personally at risk frequently, 33 per cent who felt at risk occasionally and 41 per cent who felt at risk rarely. Eighteen per cent of respondents never felt at risk when fulfilling their role.

Table 4 also shows that a higher percentage of respondents reported feeling personally at risk when fulfilling their role as a councillor in comparison to the Census. Just over 73 per cent of respondents to the Census reported feeling at risk at least some of the time when serving as a councillor, compared to the 82 per cent of respondents to the survey who reported feeling this way.

Table 4. How often, if at all, do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey
Frequently	4	8
Occasionally	24	33
Rarely	45	41
Never	27	18

Base: all respondents who answered this question (814 respondents).

Newly elected councillors tended to be less likely to feel personally at risk, with 73 per cent of respondents serving less than a year feeling at risk at least some of the time, compared to 81 per cent for those serving for a year or more, 83 per cent for those serving two years or more, and 85 per cent for those serving five years or more.

Effectiveness of authority arrangements for protecting councillors

Respondents (excluding those who had been a councillor for less than a year) were asked how effective or not they thought their authority's arrangements were for protecting them as they fulfil their role. As Table 5 shows, 44 per cent of respondents thought that these arrangements were very or fairly effective (consisting of nine per cent for very effective and 34 per cent for fairly effective). Whilst 39 per cent thought that the arrangements were not very or not at all effective (25 per cent for not very effective and 15 per cent for not at all effective). The remaining 17 per cent did not know how effective these arrangements were. If respondents who answered "don't know" were excluded, these percentages would be 53 per cent who thought the arrangements were very or fairly effective, compared to 47 per cent who thought that they were not very or not at all effective.

Table 5 also compares these results with the Census, demonstrating that respondents to the survey had lower overall confidence in these arrangements than respondents to the Census. In contrast to the results from the survey, 64 per cent of respondents thought that these arrangements were very or fairly effective, including 15 per cent who found them very effective and 49 per cent who found them fairly effective. Please note that the Census did not include a “don’t know” option for this question, whilst this survey did, meaning that the results cannot be precisely compared. However, even excluding “don’t know” responses, the 64 per cent of respondents indicating confidence in these arrangements in the Census is notably higher than the 43 per cent of survey respondents with confidence in them.

Table 5. How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey
Very effective	15	9
Fairly effective	49	34
Not very effective	25	25
Not at all effective	12	15
Don't know	-	17

Base: all respondents who had been a councillor for a year or longer and who answered this question (654 respondents).

As Table 6 shows, respondents who had been a councillor for one year but less than two years had lower levels of agreement than longer-standing councillors that the measures in place to protect them were effective. Forty-nine per cent who had been a councillor for a year or more, but less than two years, thought that the arrangements were very or fairly effective, compared to 57 per cent of those who had been a councillor for two years or more, but less than five years, and 52 per cent of those who had served for five years or more.

**Table 6. How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?
Percentage saying very or fairly effective by length of service**

	Per cent
1 to <2 years	56
2 to <5 years	69
5 years or more	63

Base: all respondents who had been a councillor for one to two years (75 respondents), two to five years (137 respondents), and five years or more (332 respondents).

Intimidation and abuse during the 2023 campaign period

Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they experienced abuse or intimidation during the 2023 election campaign period. As Table 7 shows, 75 per cent of respondents (excluding those who answered “not applicable”) experienced at least some abuse or intimidation during these elections, including 17 per cent who said that they frequently experienced these issues, 30 per cent who said that they occasionally experienced them, and 29 per cent who rarely experienced them. The remaining 25 per cent of respondents said that they never experienced any abuse or intimidation during the campaign period.

Table 7. How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's election campaign period?

	Per cent
Frequently	17
Occasionally	30
Rarely	29
Never	25

Base: all respondents who answered this question and did not select “not applicable” (680 respondents).

Newer councillors were generally less likely to report experiencing abuse or intimidation during the campaign period, although reported levels remained high, at 70 per cent for councillors who had served for less than a year, compared to 76 per cent for both those who had served one year or more and two years or more, and 78 per cent for those who had served for five years or more.

Intimidation and abuse during the last twelve months

Respondents who had served as a councillor for at least a year were asked how often, if at all, they experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as a councillor during the 12 months before they completed the survey. As Table 8 shows, 81 per cent of these respondents had experienced at least some abuse or intimidation in

the 12 months before completing the survey, including 20 per cent who frequently experienced abuse or intimidation, 34 per cent who occasionally experienced it, and 27 per cent who rarely experienced it. Nineteen per cent replied that they had never experienced abuse or intimidation during this time.

Table 7 also compares these results with the findings of the Census, showing a higher level of reported abuse or intimidation compared to the Census: 73 per cent of respondents to the Census reported at least some abuse in the year before their response, compared to 81 per cent of respondents to this survey.

Table 8. Over the last twelve months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

	2022 Councillors' Census	2023 survey
Frequently	10	20
Occasionally	29	34
Rarely	33	27
Never	27	19

Base: all respondents who had served as a councillor for twelve months or more (655 respondents).

Respondents who had been a councillor for a year or more, but less than two years, reported the least abuse or intimidation, at 76 per cent, compared to 80 per cent for those who had served for two years or more, but less than five years, and 83 per cent for those who had served for five years or more.

Change in volume of intimidation and abuse since first serving as a councillor

Respondents who had served as a councillor for at least a year were asked how the volume of abuse and intimidation they receive has changed, if at all, since they first became a serving councillor. As Table 9 shows, 50 per cent of respondents said that the amount of abuse and intimidation had increased since they first served as a councillor, including 28 per cent who said the volume had increased sharply and 22 per cent who said volumes of abuse had increased slightly. Thirty-seven per cent said that the volume of abuse and intimidation had remained the same.

Six per cent said that the volume of abuse and intimidation had decreased, including four per cent who said they experienced a slight decrease and two per cent who volumes of abuse had decreased sharply. Eight per cent of respondents did not know how the volume of abuse and intimidation they experienced had changed. If these were excluded, 54 per cent of respondents would have said they experienced an increase in abuse and intimidation, 40 per cent would have said they experienced no change, and six per cent would have said they experienced a decrease in volumes of abuse.

Table 9. How has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received changed since you first served as a councillor?

	Per cent
It has sharply increased	28
It has slightly increased	22
It has stayed about the same	37
It has slightly decreased	4
It has sharply decreased	2
Don't know	8

Base: all respondents who had served as a councillor for twelve months or more and who answered this question (652 respondents).

There were substantial differences in responses to this question by the length of time served as a councillor. Respondents who had served as a councillor for less than two years predominantly reported no change in the volume of abuse experienced (63 per cent), whilst 30 per cent reported an increase in abuse. By contrast, 50 per cent of councillors who served for two years or more, but less than five said they experienced no change in abuse whilst 42 per cent experienced an increase. Thirty per cent of those who served for five years or more said they experienced no change whilst 65 per cent said they experienced an increase. It must be noted that these differences do not necessarily reflect differences in the rate of increase in abuse and intimidation, as those who have served as a councillor for longer will naturally report a greater increase than those who have not served for the same length of time.

Further comments

Respondents were asked to provide any comments about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally. A total of 481 respondents provided comments, which were grouped into common themes. The following themes emerged most frequently from respondents' comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards:

- **Social media and online abuse.** The most frequent theme emerging from the comments was that social media was the most common channel from which abuse originated. Respondents noted that the relative anonymity and license offered by these platforms provides people with opportunities to abuse councillors with few to no consequences, and cited instances of many councillors avoiding social media altogether for fear of such abuse. As one respondent reported, "some fellow councillors avoid social media like the plague because of the tribal abuse."
- **Lack of council duty to protect councillors.** Several respondents expressed that they had sought help and protection from their council in response to abuse and intimidation which they faced, but the support they received was limited or non-existent due to the fact that they were not council

employees. As one respondent summarised, “elected Members need to have more support in their role from Councils, and legislation needs to be in place to do this.”

- **Interactions with police authorities.** Some respondents mentioned apathy or disinterest on the part of the police when they reported these issues of abuse and intimidation to them. Whilst some mentioned the police taking action, some stated that this was slow to come and only took place in response to multiple requests from either themselves or their council. One councillor recounted that “The Police do not really seem interested and although I have spoken to them many times, the opinion is that it is part of the job of being a Councillor to receive this abuse on a regular basis.”
- **Threats of violence and threatening behaviour.** Respondents provided numerous accounts of threats made against them, up to and including death threats. Some respondents were deeply affected by these, whilst others assumed that they were simply part of the job until initiatives such as Debate Not Hate raised awareness of abuse against councillors on a wider level. One respondent reported that “As a councillor, I have faced direct death threats to me and my family that led to multiple arrests.”
- **Declining trust in politicians as a partial explanation for abuse.** Many respondents suggested that some incidents of abuse and intimidation of councillors could be explained by a general loss of confidence in politics and declining trust in politicians and public figures. This was especially the case with respondents affiliated with well-known political parties – one respondent mentioned that the abuse they experienced had declined considerably since they had transitioned from being a party-affiliated councillor to an independent one. As one respondent noted, “The lazy stereotypes about local and national politicians (and their chosen parties) used by some parts of the media are damaging proper debate.”
- **Issues faced at surgeries and face-to-face meetings.** Many respondents mentioned feeling reluctant to attend surgeries or face-to-face meetings with residents, for fear of encountering abuse and intimidation in these settings. Respondents particularly mentioned feeling unsafe running a surgery on their own, or even without a joint surgery by the police taking part in the same event. One respondent expressed that “I am reluctant to put out notices for surgery dates as I feel vulnerable to put myself out there, not knowing who is showing up and with what intentions, but I really would like to do surgery.”
- **Cases of physical assault.** Whilst most respondents reported only the fear and threat of physical violence, a small number recounted incidents of actual physical assault. For example, one respondent reported that “I got no help from the police in recovering my glasses, which the assaulter had stolen after hitting me with a stick.”
- **Critique of home address availability.** Many respondents questioned the wisdom of making councillors’ home addresses publicly available by default, and many reported instances of abuse and harassment located in and around their homes. As one respondent recounted, “My car has been damaged a few times and more recently the front of my house was vandalised with graffiti.” Another suggested that “I don’t think it should be assumed that we want our

home addresses made public. We should not have to ask to opt out (and provide a reason) but instead we should be asked if we'd like to opt in."

- **Diversity of social backgrounds and ideological positions of abusers.** Respondents described a wide variety of social and political characteristics of those who abused them, with instances of abuse coming from all positions in the political spectrum along with those of no clear political position. In general, respondents tended to experience abuse from those who opposed their own political stances, although many also reported abuse motivated by specific local issues without a clear ideological basis. One respondent said that "it has been my experience from observation that most social media abuse comes from the left of the political spectrum," whilst another mentioned that "Misinformation campaigns by the far right on issues such as immigration, clean air and road safety also have led to a rise in abuse."
- **Issues with reporting mechanisms.** Whether reporting abuse online, via social media, or to their council or police, respondents frequently highlighted the need for effective reporting mechanisms to be put in place which would result in preventative action taken, noting that in most cases nothing seems to happen in response to a report of abuse. As one respondent summarised, "The current system fails. You report a problem – nothing happens."
- **Abuse received via phone or texts.** Some respondents reported receiving threatening, harassing and inappropriate phone calls and texts. For example, one respondent said that "I have had unsolicited texts/calls on three occasions from males which I would class as sexual harassment."
- **The value of advice, training, and preparation for dealing with abuse.** Some respondents mentioned receiving advice and training in advance of any incidents of abuse, to help them deal with these incidents should they occur. Others made the general point that such training was valuable and should be provided as a default for all councillors. As one respondent said, "Personal training of all councillors is essential and should be mandatory. Experience can often defuse a situation."
- **Abuse targeted to specific protected characteristics.** Whilst the motivation behind most instances of abuse reported in the comments was either unclear or based on ideological or local government considerations, some respondents reported being targeted due to their own protected characteristics. The most frequent form this took was female councillors being targeted on account of their gender, or feeling particularly unsafe when receiving abuse because of their gender. As one respondent shared, "Some members of the public can be abusive but because of their volatile nature and don't mind threatening a woman." Other instances of abuse were targeted at specific groups on the basis of disability, age, sexual orientation and religion.
- **Abuse received from other councillors.** Many respondents mentioned receiving abuse from other councillors, in addition to members of the public. These cases of abuse were usually directed at members of opposing political parties, or were directed at councillors of principal authorities by some parish or town councillors. Some issues were also reported arising from council officers, although these were generally fewer in number. As one respondent noted, "The abuse I get is from a lack of civility from some other councillors and officers."

Annex A: Questionnaire

Please amend the details we have on record if necessary.

Name: _____

Authority: _____

Email address: _____

What is your political affiliation as a councillor?

Labour

Labour and Co-operative

Conservative

Liberal Democrats

Green Party

UKIP

Residents' Association/Ratepayer

Independent

Plaid Cymru

Democratic Unionist (DUP)

Ulster Unionist (UUP)

Alliance

Sinn Fein

Social Democrat and Labour (SDLP)

Other

How long have you been serving as a councillor?

Less than one year / newly elected in May

1 to <2 years

2 to <5 years

5 years or more

Do you think there are effective arrangements in place in your authority to deal with inappropriate behaviour from members of the public?

Yes

No

Don't know

How often, if at all, do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a councillor?

Frequently

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

Shown to respondents who have been serving for at least a year:

How effective or not do you think are your authority's arrangements for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a councillor?

Very effective

Fairly effective

Not very effective

Not at all effective

Don't know

The following questions relate to whether you have experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor.

These terms are defined as follows:

Abuse – words and/or behaviour that constitute abuse or mistreatment can include, but is not limited to, physical abuse, bullying, emotional abuse, unsolicited abusive communication, and harassment. It may be one-off or repeated.

Intimidation – words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence, or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress, which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life. It may be one-off or repeated behaviour.

How often, if at all, did you experience abuse or intimidation during this year's election campaign period?

Frequently

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

Not applicable – I did not take part in elections this year

Shown to respondents who have been serving for at least a year:

Over the last twelve months, how often, if at all, have you experienced abuse or intimidation in your role as a councillor?

Frequently

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

Shown to respondents who have been serving for at least a year:

How has the volume of abuse and intimidation you have received changed since you first served as a councillor?

It has sharply increased

It has slightly increased

It has stayed about the same

It has slightly decreased

It has sharply decreased

Don't know

Please use the space below to tell us anything more you'd like to about the safety of councillors, or civility in public life more generally.



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