



THE JO COX
FOUNDATION

The Jo Cox Civility Commission

No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation



A call to action

About The Jo Cox Foundation

The Jo Cox Foundation makes meaningful change on issues that the late Jo Cox MP was passionate about.

Like Jo, we believe that a kinder, fairer, and more connected world is possible. Underpinning this belief is the understanding that we have more in common than that which divides us. As we work to make change, we follow Jo's example of collaborating with others and bringing people together to achieve more than we can alone.

We work in three areas: we nurture stronger communities, champion respect in politics and advocate for a fairer world.

Contents

1. About the Jo Cox Civility Commission 3
2. Foreword: The Rt Hon Jacqui Smith,
Chair, The Jo Cox Foundation 4
3. Foreword: Baroness Bertin and Lord Coaker,
Co-chairs, the Jo Cox Civility Commission 6
4. Abuse and intimidation: a worsening problem 8
5. Our recommendations 14
6. Summary and next steps 28



About the Jo Cox Civility Commission

As part of our Respectful Politics workstream, we launched the Jo Cox Civility Commission in February 2023. The Commission takes as its starting point a belief that abuse and intimidation is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK, but that addressing the issue is complex and requires action across multiple different sectors.

We set out to find practical and deliverable solutions to the problem. We have listened to those with lived experience of the issue, and to experts in the field, with a focus on ensuring our final recommendations are both ambitious and implementable.

The Commission is chaired by Baroness Gabrielle Bertin and Lord Vernon Coaker. The Co-chairs have had a particular focus on ensuring the Commission represents views and experiences from across the political spectrum.

Since February, we have engaged with significant numbers of stakeholders, including:

- 87 submissions to our open call, spanning serving and former politicians, government officials, policy professionals and other experts in the field.
- Interviews and discussions with relevant expert bodies, including the Electoral Commission, the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councillors, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association, and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.
- Conversations with security and justice departments and organisations, including the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Parliamentary Security team, officials from Operation Bridger, and the City of London Police.
- Interviews and roundtable discussions with experts on representative democracy, including Elect Her, the Centenary Action Group, the Board of Deputies, and the Disability Policy Centre.
- Interviews with current and former politicians in Westminster and devolved administrations, and current and former local councillors.



The Rt Hon Jacqui Smith, Chair of The Jo Cox Foundation



At The Jo Cox Foundation, we believe that abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is one of the biggest threats to democracy in the UK.

In talking to people about the Commission, there is broad recognition of the problem, but people have often said to me “But what can be done? It feels very difficult to solve”.

They're right, but Jo didn't believe in the 'too difficult' pile and was ambitious to achieve change. That's why we're proud to be leading this work in her name and we believe that we've found some practical and deliverable ways to tackle the problem and improve our public life and democracy.

The starting point of our work on this issue is Jo. Her tragic murder in 2016 was a turning point in recognising the need for better politics and the risks of divisive discourse. But we don't focus on this because of the way that Jo died, but because of the way she lived. At the Foundation we seek to make positive change on issues that Jo was passionate about, and one of those was achieving a 50/50 Parliament, and empowering other women to get involved in politics. We know that abuse disproportionately impacts women, as well as those from minority ethnic backgrounds, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people. If people are put off entering political life, our democratic institutions become less representative and less effective. We all suffer.

Abuse impacts both those already engaged in politics and those who may want to get involved. We've seen many sitting MPs say they are standing down at the next election, with some specifically referencing the issue of abuse.



In her announcement that she would not seek reelection, SNP MP Mhairi Black drew particular attention to the impact that abuse has had on her family, saying *“Since 2015, the lives of my loved ones have been turned upside down and inside out. Between media attention, social media abuse, threats, constant travel, and the murders of two MPs, my loved ones have been in a constant state of anxiety for my health and safety.”* Research by Girl Guiding UK¹ shows that the issue of online abuse is shaping the career choices of girls and young women, with more than a third (36%) put off from doing certain jobs, including politics, because of the abuse high profile women get online. If we wish to empower women to run for office, this research makes it clear that it is essential to act now.

We don't seek to 'sanitise' political debate. A healthy democracy has debate, disagreement and different opinions at its heart. Jo held strong views and argued for them. I have never backed off a political argument. It is abuse and intimidation which stifle debate and limit those willing to engage in it.

There is no simple solution to this complex problem. That's why we have engaged widely and why we have made recommendations that cover a range of themes. We want to see immediate action to protect those who are already elected or are standing for election. But we also want to address the underlying causes of abuse and intimidation including addressing the lack of political literacy which often underlies attacks. We will build a broad coalition to deliver change.

Two main refrains have dominated the work on this project. Firstly, a lack of a central coordinating force at government level. With change needed in so many areas, we think it's vital that countering this problem of abuse becomes the responsibility of central government. Secondly, a lack of political education has come up in almost all the conversations we've had - the public just don't know what role their elected officials play, what they can change, and what is outside their control. This leads to confusion, misunderstanding, and abuse.

This is vital work, and we have been proud to lead on the development of these recommendations. I am particularly grateful to Baroness Bertin and Lord Coaker for their stewardship of the Commission and for bringing cross-party experience and support. The team at the Foundation led by CEO Su Moore and Hannah Phillips have worked tirelessly to develop this report - thank you. I would also like to thank the donors who have made this work possible, most notably the JRSST Charitable Trust.

However, we couldn't have done it alone and we are thankful to all of the over 100 stakeholders who have engaged so willingly. The really hard work begins now, as we enter the second phase of this work and push for the implementation of our proposals.

We know that there is broad support for action in this area and we are already building a coalition who are clear that they don't want this to be a report that sits on a shelf. We call for anyone with an interest in the future of democracy to support us in this second phase.

1. Girl Guiding UK, *Girls Attitude Survey Report, 2021*.
<https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2021-report.pdf>

**Baroness Gabrielle Bertin
and Lord Vernon Coaker,**
Co-chairs of the Jo Cox
Civility Commission



We have taken different paths in politics, but we are united in our belief that the abuse and intimidation of elected representatives is a worrying and significant threat to democracy in this country.

We have a long and honourable tradition of robust political debate in the UK, which is something that we should rightly be proud of, but political discourse now frequently moves beyond the rough and tumble of political life – and into the realms of abuse and intimidation. This can have a devastating impact on the lives of those who represent us, their staff, and their families.

This report does not seek to evidence the problem that exists, but rather to put forward solutions that will make a difference when addressing the issue. That said, the evidence that exists is shocking and distressing. We all know that two MPs have been killed in the last eight years. At a national level, politicians experience attacks on their offices, threats of extreme sexual violence, death threats and credible threats against family members. But the issue doesn't just exist at a national level.

Local politicians also experience extreme abuse, including having their homes and cars attacked, being slandered and accused of terrible crimes, being stalked, and having their families threatened.

The timing of this report is important. The issue is bad, it's getting worse, and we think that with a General Election on the horizon there is an opportunity to perform a reset, setting a new tone for political life in the UK.

We've seen worrying research about perceptions of what's acceptable from the general public. In polling after the May 2023 local elections, the Electoral Commission asked the public what kind of behaviour towards politicians was acceptable. What was particularly striking was the difference in perception according to age. While for those 45 and over, 3% thought abusive behaviour was acceptable, this rose to 16% in the 18 - 24 age group. We need change now so these feelings don't become even more entrenched.²

It's been so important for us to work together as Co-chairs of this project because this issue has an impact across the political landscape; it is not a matter of political party but of the good health of public life. We believe there will be cross-party support for these recommendations, and we look forward to working with politicians across the spectrum to push for real change on abuse and intimidation.

As Jacqui has said, we know that we can only truly achieve impact by working in partnership, and we look forward to continuing to champion the recommendations of the Jo Cox Civility Commission.



2. Electoral Commission, Public Attitudes, 2023.
<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-views-and-research/our-research/public-attitudes-2023>

Abuse and intimidation: a worsening problem

Abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is not a new problem, but it is a worsening one. The extent of the issue was comprehensively outlined in the Committee on Standards in Public Life's 2017 Intimidation in Public Life report.³

Since then a range of research has been conducted, including academic research about the gendered impact of harassment⁴, social media analysis at election times, and reports by sector experts including the Local Government Association⁵ and the Fawcett Society⁶.

Here we set out an overview of the nature and extent of the issue, as well as outlining why this is a problem for our democracy. This is not a comprehensive analysis of the issue – that is not the intention of this report – but rather a summary of the problem which demonstrates the necessity of our recommendations.

We are also aware that new issues and challenges might arise, and will remain flexible to amend and update our recommendations when needed. We do not believe we currently have enough evidence about the impact of misinformation on abuse, for example, but this is an issue that we will stay abreast of, particularly ahead of the next General Election.

We follow the lead of the Local Government Association and use the following definitions:

Abuse:

a single act or repeated physical, verbal, or psychological acts that violate an individual's human and civil rights

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

Online and offline abuse

Abuse takes place both online (including via social media, email, and virtual meetings) and offline (in-person or via telephone or post). It takes many forms, but includes death threats, threats of sexual violence, abusive and discriminatory language, threats to family members, and reputational assaults. Examples of the most serious types of abuse include destruction of property, physical assault, and serious ongoing harassment like stalking.

Strikingly, although most abuse comes from the public, abuse also comes from other politicians. The Local Government Association found that 7% of local councillors reported that abuse had come from other councillors⁷.



I am currently facing death threats and a torrent of Islamophobic and misogynistic abuse. In fact I've received such abuse since being elected, since putting myself forward as a candidate for elections and receive comments including, and I quote, 'vile and filthy religion, importing vile and filthy creatures like Apsana Begum'.

I am now facing a heightened risk to my safety with serious death threats, threats to kidnap me, threats of sexual violence and threats about ripping off my hijab in public. It goes on and on.

Apsana Begum MP

Speaking in the House of Commons, November 2023



3. Committee on Standards in Public Life, *Intimidation in Public Life*, 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

4. Collignon et al., "The Gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates," *The Political Quarterly* 93, 1 (2022), pp. 32-38. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-923X.13070>

5. Local Government Association, *Debate Not Hate*, 2022. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/debate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy>

6. The Fawcett Society, *A House for Everyone*, 2023. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone>

7. Local Government Association, *National census of local authority councillors*, 2022. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>



The scale of the problem

Abuse and intimidation impact politicians at all levels – from local to national, and across the UK, including MPs, Peers, members of the devolved administrations, local councillors, elected mayors, and Police and Crime Commissioners. Though research has been carried out about how prevalent the problem may be, there is no current coherent data collection mechanism (something we will be recommending in this report) to show the full scale and impact of the problem.

Existing research paints a bleak picture. In 2023, ITV Wales found that 80% of Welsh MPs and Senedd Members have felt threatened since being in office, while 43% have received a death threat.⁸ In Scotland, Holyrood magazine revealed that 70% of Members of Scottish Parliament said they had feared for their safety since being elected, rising to almost 90% of female MSPs.⁹ On a local level, Local Government Association data from 2022 showed that seven out ten of local councillors had experienced abuse and intimidation in the last year.¹⁰



I've had a swastika painted on my wall, the words traitor painted on my wall, campaign posters defaced and destroyed, tyre slashed and threatened with being egged on the street.

Local councillor, 2023

8. S. Vivian, "MP abuse: 'My staff have to sit behind bulletproof glass' says Welsh politician Fay Jones", *ITV Wales*, 12 June 2023. <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2023-06-12/death-threats-mean-my-staff-have-to-sit-behind-bulletproof-glass>

9. L. Wilson, "Death Threats Sent to Third of MPs", *Holyrood*, 15 February 2021. <https://www.holyrood.com/news/view/death-threats-sent-to-third-of-msps>

10. Local Government Association, *National census of local authority councillors, 2022*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-census-local-authority-councillors-2022>

11. The Fawcett Society, *A House for Everyone, 2023*. <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/a-house-for-everyone>



I was subject to an array of dead animals appearing on my front lawn and my door. I woke up to find a rat through my door following a Parish Council meeting the night before.

I was extremely ill during the election period this year and contemplated suicide.

Parish councillor, 2023

The inflammatory nature of some issues

Whilst we all retain the right to disagree with our elected representatives, their role is to speak out about issues of importance. However, in our stakeholder research it has become clear that some representatives are deciding not to speak about certain issues because of the amount of abuse they know that will cause. The Fawcett Society shows this to be the case: 58% of MPs (and 73% of female MPs) 'do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online'.¹¹

At a local level, issues such as planning and transport have been shown to be the cause of a considerable amount of abuse. In October 2023, MP Ben Bradshaw spoke out after local councillors were subject to threats and abuse following decisions about a low traffic neighbourhood saying *"It's much worse for local councillors. They have been subjected to appalling abuse and defamation on social media and elsewhere. I have been getting increasingly concerned about the tone of some of the discussions and debates around the active travel scheme."*¹²

A disproportionate impact on some groups

Though our research suggests that the majority of elected representatives receive abuse, studies show that some groups are targeted more frequently, and in different ways. Misogyny plays a significant role in abuse. Social media analysis from the 2019 General Election showed that abuse targeted at male candidates focused more on their political beliefs, while women received more sexist abuse¹³. In their Debate Not Hate research, many Local Government Association respondents directly linked abuse associated with personal characteristics with a reluctance to stand for election or re-election; some described women choosing to take on back-office roles in the local party rather than run for office because of concerns about what abuse they would face.¹⁴

Politicians from minority ethnic backgrounds are also specifically targeted for abuse. Ahead of the 2017 General Election, Amnesty research about abuse targeted towards female MPs showed that the 20 minority ethnic MPs received almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.¹⁵ Recent research shows that some politicians are particularly targeted with racist abuse. In July 2023, Greater London Authority research showed that Sadiq Khan had received more than 300,000 pieces of openly racist or racially-oriented abuse on social media since he was elected London mayor.¹⁶ Those with multiple marginalised identities, such as black women, may experience particular forms of abuse, which Glitch¹⁷ and others have identified.

12. Road CC, "MP calls out "criminal behaviour" after local councillors receive faeces in their mailbox for implementing LTNs, Road CC, 5 wober 2023. <https://road.cc/content/news/politicians-receive-death-threats-supporting-ltns-304319>

13. Gorrell et al, "Which Politicians Receive Abuse", EPJ Data Science, 2020. <https://epjdatascience.springeropen.com/articles/10.1140/epjds/s13688-020-00236-9>

14. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

15. Amnesty International UK, Black and Asian women MPs abused more online, 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps>

16. P. Walker, Rise in racist abuse against Sadiq Khan linked to London clean air zone expansion, The Guardian, 5 July 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jul/05/rise-in-racist-abuse-against-sadiq-khan-linked-to-london-clean-air-zone-expansion>

17. Glitch, The Digital Misogynoir Report, 2023. https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Glitch-Misogynoir-Report_Final_18Jul_v5_Single-Pages.pdf

The impact of abuse and intimidation

A diminishing pool of candidates

Abuse and intimidation is one of the contributing factors for elected representatives choosing to step back from politics. At the time of writing, over 75 MPs have said that they will not be seeking reelection. While politicians have various reasons for stepping down, several have specifically stated that the level of abuse to which they have been subjected has informed their decision.

At a local level, the Local Government Association found that 27% of councillors said they would not stand for the next election and 31% were undecided. Of those respondents, 68% said abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again.¹⁸

In a poignant letter to her constituents when standing down in 2019, Heidi Allen MP wrote, *"Nobody in any job should have to put up with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home"*.

While it is challenging to research, there are clear indicators and anecdotal evidence that the issue of abuse and intimidation is putting people off getting involved in politics in the first place. Local Government Association research showed that 60% of respondents said they were aware of others being unwilling to stand or restand for election, or take on leadership roles, due to anticipated abuse.¹⁹



The politics of today, with all its anger, abuse and in my own case, two threats on my life, is not the politics we want or need for our great country.

We have always been at our best and delivered the most, when we are able to express political disagreements through healthy debate then unite as a community and as a country. I hope one day that we can return to such a place.

Mark Lancaster, MP

Announcing he was standing down in 2019



A negative impact on the relationship between representative and represented

In 2017 the Committee on Standards in Public Life research²⁰ referenced how intimidation had led to MPs changing their working arrangements and the ways they interacted with their constituents. This included making surgeries by appointment only, and limiting public appearances. The murder of Sir David Amess in 2021 highlighted the risks that MPs face, and in the days following his death, some called for an end to face-to-face meetings with constituents altogether.

It is clear that most MPs want to continue meeting with their constituents, and the access to our representatives is a vital part of the British political system. However, the current risks mean that some MPs have taken measures to ensure their safety that many would consider shocking. For example, in 2023, Virginia Crosbie MP spoke about how she now wears a stab vest to her constituency surgeries.²¹ We believe that the reduction of abuse is key to ensure that contact between MPs and constituents can be facilitated safely.



I could not run in another election. I would not want to put my family through the stress and anxiety.

Local councillor, 2022

Sometimes, though, the systems that are currently in place may need to change to prevent abuse and ensure the safety of representatives. That is particularly the case at a local level, where Council meetings are often a flashpoint. In 2022, the Deputy Leader of Warrington Borough Council spoke about her experiences in a Council meeting. She said, *“A controversial planning application was granted, and at the end of the meeting, the crowd surged forward and circled around me and were pushing me and pointing in my face, yelling at me and swearing. I honestly thought I was going to die. I couldn’t get out until I felt someone dragging me out of that room.”*²²

Summary

Abuse and intimidation of elected representatives is having a detrimental impact on democracy in the UK. The problem is severe, and it’s getting worse.

We believe that the recommendations presented in this call to action, if implemented, will bring about significant change on this issue, supporting a healthy democracy and an improved public life into the future.

18. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

19. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

20. Intimidation in Public Life, 2017.

21. W. Hayward, “Welsh MP wears a stab vest when meeting the public at surgeries due to security concerns”, *Wales Online*, 3 January 2023. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/welsh-mp-wears-stab-vest-25882570>

22. C. Hamilton, “Angry mob leaves Warrington councillor fearing for her life”, *BBC*, 11 October 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-63221404>

Our recommendations

The aim of this work has been to find implementable solutions that make a difference to the issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians. Throughout our discussions with stakeholders, our focus has been on working collaboratively to highlight the areas where change is both necessary and possible. Our recommendations are deliberately ambitious – we want them to be able to address the root causes of the issue, as well as to bring more immediate solutions to improve the situation for those politicians who currently serve.

Coordination and behaviour

A key theme from our stakeholder research is the absence of a central body to monitor abuse and intimidation of elected representatives and to act to reduce it. There has been significant progress through bodies such as Operation Bridger, local police forces, the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC), and actions in Parliament led by the Speaker. Yet, more action is needed to streamline monitoring and reporting. Furthermore, throughout our research we have spoken to organisations and individuals taking on initiatives to reduce abuse, often in a voluntary role, because they have personally identified a gap. While this progress and initiative is to be commended, further systemic change is needed.



I find it difficult to recommend this job to anyone.

Sitting MP, 2022

We have always known that abuse towards elected representatives is a complex issue. With solutions falling across many different sectors, we strongly believe that central government has a role to play in taking responsibility for bringing about change. This needs to be explicitly included in a ministerial portfolio, with a UK-wide mandate, and accompanied by a team to support the Minister, with a budget and powers to enact these recommendations. We stand ready to work with the government to support the establishment of this function.

Another overarching recommendation that we have included in this category is about modelling behaviour. If members of the public witness their representatives behaving poorly towards each other, there is little precedent for the public to treat them with respect. Elected representatives must understand the Nolan Principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership, and they must implement and demonstrate these in their professional lives.

Government should implement and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all elected politicians.

This would include coordinating existing initiatives, resourcing new solutions, and facilitating information sharing between agencies.

This unit should be responsible for better measurements and analysis of the problem, and should be expected to produce an annual report on the scale of the problem, actions taken, and impact.

All elected representatives, and especially those in leadership roles, should model good behaviour.

Political literacy

A commonality in the stakeholder interviews and in the submissions we received was that abuse often stems from a lack of understanding of what elected representatives do, and how the public should engage with them. As an example of this, one MP's constituency staff member told us about the frequency with which they are contacted by members of the public seeking help with an issue that lies within the Council's remit. When an immediate solution cannot be found, there is often an escalation into abuse directed at the staff.

We are proposing a two-fold solution to this issue, which we believe addresses some of the roots of the wider problem. Firstly, we think this needs to be tackled within education. To that end, we are backing the work of Shout Out UK and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Political Literacy²³, and supporting their calls to embed mandatory political literacy in the curriculum and ensure teachers have the training and confidence to deliver this education. We are also proposing that elected representatives have a duty

to support this work, and should be expected to visit educational institutions to raise awareness of their roles, as advocated by I Have A Voice²⁴. We know that many serving politicians do excellent work within their communities, especially in educational establishments. Our recommendation acknowledges this and backs more work in this area.

Secondly, we are also proposing that measures need to be taken to expand political awareness in the general public. We have deliberately framed this recommendation quite broadly, but believe that a potential solution could be a public education campaign run alongside elections, supporting the public to understand the process and the responsibilities of different levels of government, as well as appropriate behaviour towards candidates.

We acknowledge that, of all the recommendations, it is this group where the impact on the issue may take the longest to be seen. However, when it comes to tackling the root causes of abuse and intimidation, we believe that change here is vital.

Government should implement significant awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility.

All councillors and parliamentarians should regularly visit education institutions in their constituencies, raising awareness of their roles.

Impartial political and media literacy should be made a mandatory part of the school curriculum, including addressing how to deal with information sources and misinformation. Teachers should be adequately trained to deliver this.



23. ShoutOutUK, All Party Parliamentary Group on Political Literacy, 2023.

24. I Have A Voice, 2023.
<https://www.ihaveavoice.org.uk>

Social media

When speaking publicly about this topic, spokespeople for The Jo Cox Foundation have been asked more than once: “Isn’t it just a social media issue?”. While it is clear that there is a correlation between the advent of social media and an increase in the ease of abusing representatives, it is very clear that social media alone is not the cause of the problem.

However, this does not mean that social media does not play a role in the solution. Stakeholders have told us about the sheer quantity of hate and abuse they get on the platforms and the impact this has on their work. Jess Phillips MP has spoken publicly about how she received 600 rape threats via social media in one evening alone.²⁵ Research also suggests that politicians avoid posting on social media for fear of pile-ons.²⁶

As we have developed this call to action, we have closely watched the development and passing of the Online Safety Act. While we welcome the broader responsibilities on social media companies that this enshrines, we call for Ofcom, the regulator, to specifically consider the experiences of elected politicians as part of their regulatory duties. We also recommend additional requirements for social media companies to offer support to representatives at election time and to expand their current support to include local government representatives, who are often neglected when it comes to this provision.

We have focused this section specifically on social media, but more broadly we believe there is a role for print and broadcast media to play in setting the tone and encouraging civil discourse. We note that progress has been made on the regulation surrounding this since the Committee On Standards in Public Life made a suite of recommendations in 2017.

The specific issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians must be considered when implementing the Online Safety Act.

The regulator Ofcom must actively seek the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area, and ensure regular, specific training.

Social media companies should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.

This supports the call made by the Local Government Association in their Debate Not Hate²⁷ publication.



25. BBC, “MP Jess Phillips in web plea ‘after 600 rape threats’”, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-44438468>

26. e.g. National Democratic Institute, *Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics*, 2019. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Tweets%20That%20Chill%20Report.pdf>

Police and security

In December 2015, Operation Bridger was established, designed to offer police protection to MPs, both at Westminster, and when they are in their constituency. After the murder of Jo Cox, Operation Bridger was expanded to include the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team, who coordinate reports from Parliament and local police forces. We would support strengthening the requirement for parliamentarians to take up these security measures in order to protect themselves, their staff and their families.

Though progress has clearly been made, and many politicians we have spoken to are grateful for the support from both Operation Bridger and their local police forces, the system is not perfect. There are inconsistencies in the roll-out and a lack of communication between various key players. We would like to be clear that this is not due to a lack of will, and we have found all police and security stakeholders to be supportive of our work in developing these recommendations. However, resourcing remains an issue, and many of the dedicated officers are doing this work on a voluntary basis in addition to their normal policing duties.

While extra protection has been offered to parliamentarians, and we have heard promising feedback from the devolved administrations about the

support they receive, the protection of local politicians remains a gap. This is why we are recommending that Operation Bridger be extended to offer support to local politicians including councillors, elected mayors and Police and Crime Commissioners. Our stakeholder discussions have revealed that it is at a local government level where there are particular inconsistencies and misunderstandings, which is why we are also calling for ongoing training for police officers about the role of elected representatives at all levels. We commend the collaboration efforts that are ongoing, including between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Police Scotland.²⁸ We also call for improved coordination and information sharing between the various forces and bodies across the nations and regions.

We believe that the full extent of this problem is not understood by police forces due to underreporting. For this reason, we are calling for clearer guidance about what should be reported to the police, and then a responsibility on the elected representatives to report anything that breaches this threshold.

While our recommendations in this area are probably the most precise and detailed of the whole report, there is one binding theme, and that is resourcing. We believe that without more resource, nothing here can change, so we are calling for the Home Office to ensure that this work is properly funded.

Parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear and specific briefings, including:

- Clear guidelines about what communications received by parliamentarians should be reported to police.
- Clear guidance about which bodies are responsible for which aspects of security and a clear explanation about what security arrangements are available.
- Clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Guidance should be developed for local councillors about what communications should be reported to the police, and the mechanism for doing this. This should include clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

27. Debate Not Hate, 2022.

28. COSLA, **Priorities Agreed to Strengthen Collaboration Between Local Government and Policing, April 17 2023.**
<https://www.cosla.gov.uk/news/2023/cosla-police-scotland-and-the-scottish-police-authority-agree-priorities-to-strengthen-collaboration-between-local-government-and-policing-17th-April-2023>

Police and security continued

Ongoing training must continue for all police about their responsibilities for dealing with threats against elected representatives. This should include training in the following areas:

- Equalities including particular vulnerabilities related to misogyny and other protected characteristics.
- The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
- Cross-cutting nature of abuse including hate crime.
- New legislation, including the Election Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023.

Agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives must be defined. Elected representatives must then adopt the minimum level.

Elected politicians should report all abuse (threshold confirmed by police) so an understanding of the level of threat is built up in police systems.

Elected politicians should follow guidance from the police and the Crown Prosecution Service about when to pursue prosecution.

There must be dedicated resources in each local police force to ensure an appropriate, consistent response to support elected representatives across the country. This would enable:

- Increasing the remit of the Single Point of Contact in each police force to include local elected representatives.
- Streamlining implementation of Operation Bridger and enforcement of the Single Point of Contact system.
- Increased capacity for police forces to provide home and venue (surgeries) risk assessments for both MPs and local government elected representatives and facilitate additional security measures if necessary.

Information sharing must be improved between different forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations)

This set of recommendations is designed to offer immediate support to those currently in office who are experiencing abuse and intimidation. We acknowledge the commitment of the Speakers of the House of Commons and House of Lords in this area, and the progress made to date. We look forward to working with the Speakers and others, including the Committee on Standards, to make further progress on this work ahead of the General Election and beyond.

It is here that we have the most explicit recommendations about the experiences of both family and staff who are often on the frontline of abuse received. Staff are often the first to read abuse directed to their employer, and family members have to deal with stress and worry about their loved ones.

We want to ensure that their wellbeing is taken care of, and that provisions are put in place to support them.

29. *Debate Not Hate, 2022.*

30. *National Association of Local Councils (NALC), Civility and Respect Project, 2023.*
<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/civility-and-respect-project>

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations) continued

Parliamentarians should be able to claim for the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, including:

- Costs associated with wellbeing measures for staff who process/ experience abuse.
- The swift implementation of security measures advised by Operation Bridger.

Written resources should be developed for the families of elected representatives about dealing with abuse. This should include explanations of escalation procedures and clarification of points of contact.

Mandatory, properly resourced training should be developed for both elected representatives and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse. This should include active bystander training, situational awareness, and training around safe social media use.

Local government

The Local Government Association (LGA) have been vital partners as we have developed this work, and their Debate Not Hate campaign, launched in 2022, has been a trailblazer in the fight against abuse and intimidation.²⁹ Many of our recommendations in this section are adapted from their 2022 report, and we lend our full weight to their ongoing work on this issue. We also recognise that there are particular issues at the parish and town council level, where the abuse can be very much on the doorstep and there are few resources to support councillors. We thank the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for their essential engagement in our work and commend their ongoing Civility and Respect project.³⁰

During our stakeholder research we have heard from a significant number of local councillors as well as staff, many of whom have shocking stories of abuse they have faced, including destruction of property, defamation, and death threats. But more is needed to support these officials who play a vital role in our government, as we have already suggested within the policing and security section.

Local government is often a stepping stone for national politics, and we are clear, not only is abuse unacceptable at any level, but that if we do not manage to make an impact at the local level we will be unable to change politics at the national level.

Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.

- Police should be involved where appropriate and in particular when there is a risk to democratic engagement.
- The opportunity should exist for council meetings to take place online in instances when there are specific risks of physical abuse to councillors.

Councils should pass motions affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour, from the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate toolkit or the National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) Civility and Respect Project.

Local authorities should ensure security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors. These should be clearly signposted, and there should be a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.

Elections

We launch this report at the beginning of what is very likely to be a General Election year. We believe that this election gives the opportunity for a reset on this issue. With the potential for a new cohort of parliamentarians, we can show that abuse is not to be simply accepted.

We also acknowledge that election periods can be a time of heightened tensions and potential conflicts, which is why we have put forward a set of recommendations specifically focused on this. These are broad, including proposals around candidate selection, guidance for candidates and regulation around spending. On the rigorousness of candidate selection we recognise the existing work on this by many of the political parties. We also recognise the huge improvements that have been made on this issue generally by the Electoral Commission who have been an extremely helpful partner in the development of this call to action.

Once an election is called, we are urging all candidates to sign up to The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge³¹, confirming that they intend to run a respectful campaign. By showing a powerful and united front, we can demonstrate to the public that respect and civility really do matter.

IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS, I PLEDGE TO:

1.

Set a respectful tone
when campaigning

2.

Lead by example to foster
constructive democratic debate

3.

Demonstrate compassion by
defending and promoting the dignity
of others, especially my opponents



Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.

The Electoral Commission should expand its guidance for candidates about use of social media during the election period, with a specific focus on upholding public confidence in the democratic process.

Political parties should rigorously screen candidates during the candidate selection process.

Political parties should require candidates to sign up to an election code of conduct in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.

Social media companies should offer additional support for candidates at election times about how to protect themselves on the platform and report abuse. Advice should also be available to the general public around misinformation that might interfere with the democratic process.

Political parties

While individual politicians certainly have a role to play in addressing this problem, so too do political parties. While most parties have their own codes of conduct which govern how members should behave, there is inconsistency in how these codes are implemented when representatives are in breach of them. We understand that this process can be complicated and time-consuming, and that work is already on-going in this area, but we believe that it is important for high standards to be met and maintained, and

for the parties to show leadership on this issue. We believe that civility and equalities training should not only be implemented when reacting to incidents but proactively offered to promote an inclusive culture.

As well as oversight of behaviour, parties also should have a responsibility to their elected representatives when they face abuse, and we have included a recommendation about the support that should be offered for party members who wish to take legal action in instances of abuse.

Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct, with relevant sanctions when the code is not adhered to.

Mandatory civility and equalities training should be implemented for all candidates.

Political parties should review how they offer legal support to candidates or elected officials where civil action is more appropriate than criminal action.



Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Coordination and behaviour

Government should implement and resource a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of all elected politicians. This would include coordinating existing initiatives, resourcing new solutions, and facilitating information sharing between agencies.

This unit should be responsible for better measurements and analysis of the problem, and should be expected to produce an annual report on the scale of the problem, actions taken, and impact.

All elected representatives, and especially those in leadership roles, should model good behaviour.

Government

2024

Elected representatives

2024

Political literacy

Government should implement significant awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility.

All councillors and parliamentarians should regularly visit education institutions in their constituencies, raising awareness of their roles.

Impartial political and media literacy should be made a mandatory part of the school curriculum, including addressing how to deal with information sources and misinformation. Teachers should be adequately trained to deliver this.

Government

2024

Elected representatives

2024

Department for Education
Devolved administrations

2027

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Social media

The specific issue of abuse and intimidation of elected politicians must be considered when implementing the Online Safety Act. The regulator Ofcom must actively seek the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area, and ensure regular, specific training.

Ofcom

2024

Social media companies should acknowledge the democratic significance of local politicians and provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online. This supports the call made by the Local Government Association in their Debate Not Hate³² publication.

Social media companies

2024

Police and security

Parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear and specific briefings, including:

- Clear guidelines about what communications received by parliamentarians should be reported to police.
- Clear guidance about which bodies are responsible for which aspects of security and a clear explanation about what security arrangements are available.
- Clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Operation Bridger
City of London Police

2024

Guidance should be developed for local councillors about what communications should be reported to the police, and the mechanism for doing this. This should include clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

Operation Bridger
City of London Police
Local Government Association

2027

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Police and security continued

Ongoing training must continue for all police about their responsibilities for dealing with threats against elected representatives. This should include training in the following areas:

- Equalities including particular vulnerabilities related to misogyny and other protected characteristics.
- The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
- Cross-cutting nature of abuse including hate crime.
- New legislation, including the Election Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023.

College of Policing

2024

Agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives must be defined. Elected representatives must then adopt the minimum level.

Security agencies

2024

Elected representatives

Elected politicians should report all abuse (threshold confirmed by police) so an understanding of the level of threat is built up in police systems.

Elected politicians should follow guidance from the police and the Crown Prosecution Service about when to pursue prosecution.

All elected representatives

2024

Information sharing must be improved between different forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

National Police Chiefs' Council

2025

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Police and security continued

There must be dedicated resources in each local police force to ensure an appropriate, consistent response to support elected representatives across the country. This would enable:

- Increasing the remit of the Single Point of Contact in each police force to include local elected representatives.
- Streamlining implementation of Operation Bridger and enforcement of the Single Point of Contact system.
- Increased capacity for police forces to provide home and venue (surgeries) risk assessments for both MPs and local government elected representatives and facilitate additional security measures if necessary.

Home Office

2025

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations)

Parliamentarians should be able to claim for the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, including:

- Costs associated with wellbeing measures for staff who process/ experience abuse.
- The swift implementation of security measures advised by Operation Bridger.

IPSA

2024

Written resources should be developed for the families of elected representatives about dealing with abuse. This should include explanations of escalation procedures and clarification of points of contact.

Mandatory, properly resourced training should be developed for both elected representatives and their staff on preventing and addressing abuse. This should include active bystander training, situational awareness, and training around safe social media use.

**Speaker's Office
(Commons and Lords)**

**Security teams
in Westminster**

**Devolved
administrations**

2024

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Local government

<p>Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police should be involved where appropriate and in particular when there is a risk to democratic engagement. • The opportunity should exist for council meetings to take place online in instances when there are specific risks of physical abuse to councillors. 	<p>Local authorities</p>	<p>2024</p>
<p>Councils should pass motions affirming principles to address abuse and model good behaviour, from the Local Government Association’s Debate Not Hate toolkit or the National Association of Local Councils’ (NALC) Civility and Respect Project.</p>	<p>Local authorities</p>	<p>2025</p>
<p>Local authorities should ensure security and wellbeing resources are available to councillors. These should be clearly signposted, and there should be a dedicated point of contact for the escalation of any issues.</p>	<p>Local authorities</p>	<p>2025</p>

Recommendation:

Responsible for implementation:

Date to be implemented by:

Elections

Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.	Government	2024
The Electoral Commission should expand its guidance for candidates about use of social media during the election period, with a specific focus on upholding public confidence in the democratic process.	Electoral Commission	2024
Political parties should rigorously screen candidates during the candidate selection process.	Political parties	2024
Political parties should require candidates to sign up to an election code of conduct in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.	Political parties	2024
Social media companies should offer additional support for candidates at election times about how to protect themselves on the platform and report abuse. Advice should also be available to the general public around misinformation that might interfere with the democratic process.	Social media companies	2024

Political parties

Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct, with relevant sanctions when the code is not adhered to.	Political parties	2024
Mandatory civility and equalities training should be implemented for all candidates.	Political parties	2025
Political parties should review how they offer legal support to candidates or elected officials where civil action is more appropriate than criminal action.	Political parties	2025

Summary and next steps

Abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is a genuine threat to democracy in this country. Now is the time to act to stop this problem getting worse, before even more elected representatives step down and the pipeline of potential politicians is further depleted.

We believe that these recommendations are only the first step for change in our campaign to reduce abuse and intimidation of elected representatives. Now the hard work begins, as we collaborate with government and stakeholders to make the case for their adoption of these recommendations.

Do you want to back our call for change?

If you're an elected politician, or an organisation working on any of the areas we cover in this report, we would welcome your public endorsement.

You can pledge your support at
www.jocoxfoundation.org/commission

Do you want to support our campaigning on this issue?

You can donate to our work at
www.jocoxfoundation.org/donate

All donations will enable us to make even more progress as we push for the implementation of these recommendations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many stakeholders who have engaged with us as we have developed these recommendations. Many individuals and organisations have been generous with both their time and their expertise, and this work would not have been possible without their support.

We would particularly like to thank:

- The **JRSST Charitable Trust** whose funding has made this work possible.
- **WA Communications** who have supported the PR for this work, and have also designed the report.
- The many individual donors who have supported this work.

The JRSST Charitable Trust has supported this work in recognition of the importance of the issue. The facts presented and the views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust.

The logo for JRSST Charitable Trust, featuring the text "JRSST" in white on a red square background, followed by "Charitable Trust" in black on a white background.

Contact us

If you would like to be in touch, please contact us on
commission@jocoxfoundation.org

THE JO COX
FOUNDATION