

Dear **(name of local MP)**,

As a **town/parish/community clerk**, working for **name of town, parish or community council**, I am writing to you in a personal capacity to draw your attention to growing concerns about the bullying, harassment and intimidation of local town and parish councillors and their staff, all working in and for their communities. This is clearly an issue at a national level affecting our MPs whose day to day work is made more difficult through incivility, online and in person abuse, stalking and even threats. As public servants, we deserve protection from this.

At a local level, this lack of civility and respect is an issue with significant impact too. It is partly reflected in the low numbers of candidates, particularly females, stepping forward as local councillors, uncontested elections and, in some cases, a reluctance to take on public facing work for fear of abuse (e.g., attendance at councillor surgeries and meetings). With more than 10,000 town, parish and community councils (plus 735 in Wales) and with around 100,000 councillors, this worsening situation is magnified and clearly bad for democracy.

The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC), the professional membership body for clerks, as well as the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), One Voice Wales (OVC) and County Associations (bodies representing local councils and councillors in England and Wales) have together recognised this. Investment has been made in a Civility & Respect Project which is coordinating a programme to support councillors and staff within our sector via training, good governance, clear policies and intervention processes. It will also work to influence relevant legislation to combat online abuse, introduce sanctions and enhance the role of monitoring officers.

In all of this, I'd like to highlight the effect on staff working in local councils, particularly for clerks. (A clerk is the executive officer steering the council, whether in a large city or town council or a small parish council, and usually its responsible finance officer). In the last 2 years, the high turnover of professional clerks is now heading towards a major recruitment and retention issue. Some are experiencing not only casual abuse from the public as they run their councils but, sadly, in some documented cases, persistent incivility from the councillors they serve. Unlike most other employees, clerks have no recourse to this unacceptable behaviour and often, with little in the way of sanctions, the only option is for a clerk to resign.

The issue was recently highlighted by a national online petition pressing the government to amend legislation to enable Councillors to be disqualified or suspended for breaking relevant codes of conduct. This received thousands of signatures from clerks and councillors in England and Wales. It is also the subject of an Early Day Motion – Conduct of councillors towards town and parish clerks (EDM 691 – tabled on 25 November 2021, primary sponsor - Dr Julian Lewis).

Staying with this topic, on 24 January, Mark Garnier MP asked Kemi Badenoch MP, Minister for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) when the government will legislate to implement the recommendations set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL). Ms Badenoch said she is 'actively considering the recommendations carefully and will respond shortly'. She reiterated the importance of local authorities having the 'right tools to make the system work'.

I would welcome your support in raising this important national issue affecting local town and parish councils via parliament and, as a clerk, I encourage you to join your fellow MPs in adding your signature to EDM 691.

Yours sincerely

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