

WIGTON TOWN COUNCIL
INTIMIDATION POLICY

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Policy

Wigton Town Council recognises the growing need to provide councillors and staff with support relating to intimidation. This policy sets out the action the council will take to handle intimidation against its councillors and staff, including appointing a nominated officer to support them when intimidation is experienced, and gives guidance to councillors and staff on what can be done to minimise or handle its occurrence.

Background

Serving as a councillor is a responsibility, a privilege and a hugely rewarding undertaking. However, an increasing number of councillors and candidates are being subjected to abuse, threats and public intimidation which could cause them to withdraw from public service. The growth of social media has provided an additional and largely anonymous route for individuals and groups to engage in such activity.

Likewise, council staff can face intimidation from members of the public when performing their duties, which can have a serious impact on their willingness to continue working in public.

This policy is concerned with intimidation which arises during the course of or in connection with an individual's performance of their role or duties as a councillor or staff member; it does not deal with any intimidation which may arise in a purely private situation.

What is Intimidation?

This policy defines public intimidation as **“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”**. This includes discriminatory, physical, psychological and verbal actions such as: physical attacks; being stalked, followed or loitered around; threats of harm; distribution of misinformation; character assassination; inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media; sexual harassment or sexual assault; and other threatening behaviours.

Nominated Officer to Support Councillors/Staff facing Intimidation

Wigton Town Council shall nominate a councillor from among its members to give support and assistance to councillors or staff experiencing public intimidation. A deputy nominated officer may be appointed to ensure continuity of support in case the nominated officer is unavailable.

The nominated officer shall act as a sounding board for any councillor or staff member who wishes to make contact in confidence if he or she has received intimidatory contact or communication from an external or internal source. This officer can provide support and advice, and also offer practical advice on personal safety.

If the councillor experiencing intimidation decides that action should be taken, the nominated officer will support them to ensure that effective action is taken, eg raising awareness of an incident with the wider council as a matter of urgency, ensuring that

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effective decisions are made, or reporting the case to the police and following up so that action is taken.

Together with other members of the council, the nominated officer should forge good relations with the local police so that in the event of an incident of serious intimidation, they can act as a liaison point to enable the case to be reported.

Reporting incidents

If any councillor or staff member considers any incident of intimidation to be serious, they should contact the Wigton Town Council nominated officer and consider informing the police. Even if an incident is not considered serious enough to involve the police, it should always be reported to the council.

If you have been subjected to or witnessed a hate incident or crime you have a duty to report it. By taking appropriate action you may help to prevent a similar incident reoccurring.

General advice to councillors/staff on handling intimidation

The most important determining factor in deciding how to respond to intimidation is the impact it has on you, the concerned councillor. Sometimes, it is not one single action but a series of linked events that determines the perception of a threat and causes damage to one's sense of security. There will likely be variations from person to person in what constitutes intimidation based on contextual and demographic factors such as age, gender or ethnicity and previous experiences. However, regardless of what others may think, if it is **affecting you and your sense of security**, then that is sufficient enough for you to take action.

- Councillors are encouraged to keep a record of any intimidatory communication or behaviour
- It is fine to consider the context, content and frequency of communications and behaviours, and action can be taken retroactively
- Contact with unknown or anonymous individuals should be undertaken with care
- Councillors are encouraged to speak out against harassment and intimidation of others and address any inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour, where they feel safe to do so.

3.1 Actions to take if you believe you are being subjected to intimidation

- Make sure that your immediate safety is not at risk.
- If possible, record or diarise the encounter or communication. In the case of an email or letter you can copy or save it. A telephone call or face-to-face discussion and social media incident could be written in a diary as soon as possible after the event, recorded, screen-shot or saved. You can also take photos of damage or even a computer screen. Even if this is the first or only incident, others may also have been subjected to intimidation and a collective record is important if future action is going to be taken. It is also important that incidents relating to the same individual or individuals should be recorded as such evidence could be critical if the matter gives rise to a criminal prosecution.
- Raise the incident with a view to discussing it or obtaining support from the nominated Wigton Town Council officer.

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- If a serious potential crime has occurred, it is advisable to formally report it to the council and/or to the police. Discussion with the nominated officer can help you decide whether to report the event.
- If you are concerned about your personal safety, raise this with the council and the police so that there is a record of the impact the incident is having and review your own security and personal safety.
- Under the Health and Safety at Work Act, councils have a duty to safeguard their staff against potentially violent persons; while councillors are not employees, the council should similarly take effective action to support them when intimidation arises. A register of abusive persons causing intimidation against staff and councillors should be maintained.
- Every situation will be different, and it will need a personal judgement about whether it is worthwhile to pursue the incident, ignore it or politely acknowledge.
- If the incidents, letters, phone calls, social media communications or emails continue, further steps may need to be considered such as advising the individual that such abuse will result in a referral to the police.

3.2 *Personal safety and security*

An important role of a councillor is to keep in touch with residents and communities, including helping individuals with any problems they might have. Sometimes councillors can find themselves in a position where they need to manage angry and frustrated residents who often contact their elected representative when they feel that they have no other avenue to pursue. Often this will be on a face-to-face basis when alone.

The measures should be considered to prevent or deal with those rare circumstances when you find yourself in a situation where you are concerned for your safety:

- assess the risks to their person in carrying out their public duties
- recognise potential danger from personal contact and take appropriate action
- be proactive in considering personal safety by ensuring your mobile telephone is charged and through ensuring your partner, friends or relatives have information on your activities
- if possible, vary daily routines, such as leaving and returning home at the same time or on the same route.

3.3 *Dealing with a variety of behaviours*

It is inevitable that some of the people you will meet will be angry or upset. Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your constituents.

If you are subjected to offensive, threatening, intimidating, racist, homophobic or derogatory remarks, you are within your rights to bring the meeting to an end and seek assistance. It is recommended that you take a detailed note of the incident and person(s) involved and let your council know about the incident. There will be a nominated officer you can contact for support. You can decide if you want to inform the police.

3.4 *Personal callers to councillors' private homes*

Most councillors seek to maintain a balance between their personal and public lives and do not want to encourage any callers at their private homes. Good publicity by the council as to how to contact councillors and details of ward surgeries reduces the chances of

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unwanted callers. Contact details for councillors can be found on the council's website, although councillors do not need to show their address on the published election nomination paper or on the council's website.

If a visit is to take place at your private home, it is recommended that this only takes place via a pre-arranged appointment, ideally with another person in support

It is inadvisable to see an unannounced caller in your home. You can suggest making an appointment, but if you have any doubts as to their intention or if they appear angry/aggressive, then contact the police

If you believe you are safe, you can try to ascertain their name and address and try to ascertain the nature of the issue they want to discuss, conducting any discussion outside the house.

If you do feel under threat you can carry a personal alarm, perhaps keeping it at the door for easy access.

If you have another person with you inside the house they could take a photo of the person or film the encounter, but be aware that this is likely to inflame the situation if the person is aware of it and they may become more aggressive – this should really be a last resort if you want evidence for the police.

If more than one individual who are not known to you turns up unannounced and you are concerned that they pose a threat it is advisable to contact the police and decline to open the door.

Once the incident is over, record as much as you can, including descriptions, should you decide to take any action over the matter. If you are concerned, report the incident to the council and/or the police.

3.5 Intimidation on the telephone

- Continue to be polite and try to stay calm – ensuring you are safe.
- If you have a recording function on your phone, particularly if it is a mobile phone, switch this on. You can also use your mobile phone to record a landline call by switching on the voice recording function and holding it to the landline phone.
- Try to ascertain the complaint if there is one and indicate to the person on the phone that you consider that they are trying to intimidate you and that calls may be recorded.
- Try to ascertain the name, address and telephone number if you can.
- Sometimes a suggestion that the caller refers the matter to a particular committee of the council may result in a solution for the caller.
- If the call continues with threats, abuse and/or intimidation, you can terminate the call, indicating to the caller that you will do this.
- Make a note of any details of the call you can remember, particularly the person's phone number
- If you are concerned make a report to the Wigton Town Council nominated officer.

3.6 Councillors and social media

Social media can be very useful in getting feedback on proposals and communicating information about councillors' activities. However, remember that not everybody is on social media and so opinions expressed may not be representative.

Social media is always on, so consider setting personal limits and establishing your own routine. You have no obligation to respond to posts and comments at any speed but it is often helpful to explicitly indicate that to users.

Councillors are subject to the council's code of conduct when using social media.

Consider the content of your communications carefully and apply this test – if you would be reluctant to say it face-to-face or in an official email, then it is probably inappropriate to say online.

Once something is posted on social media, it is difficult to retain control over how it will be used. Think about this when posting.

Different platforms allow for different types of interactions. It is useful to indicate the aims and intended audiences of your different accounts.

3.7 Responsibilities of councillors on social media

Councillors are personally responsible for the content they publish on any form of social media. Publishing an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation may give rise to defamation. The same applies if you pass on any similar untrue statements you receive.

Social media sites are in the public domain and it is important to ensure you are confident of the nature of the information you publish. Once published, content is almost impossible to control and may be manipulated without your consent, used in different contexts, or further distributed.

You can make use of stringent privacy settings if you do not want your social media to be accessed by the press or public.

Some councillors choose to have separate social media profiles for personal and council use. It is important to keep in mind, however, that even the strictest privacy setting is no guarantee for posts or actions to remain private. As a rule of thumb, never post anything online you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.

3.8 Summary of practical tips to prevent and handle online abuse

1. Lead by example – do not post comments that could be considered abusive and avoid posting false or unverified information.
2. Consider content – some content will be more controversial than others.
3. Consider before posting how you will manage engagement with this, for example only engaging in comments on the policy itself or directing people to consultation documents.
4. Defuse conflict–waiting to respond can take the heat out of situations, as can reframing your own language.

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5. Know when to step back - Remember you do not have to engage with abusive or threatening behaviour. You can set the record straight with factual information if you wish, but you can step away when you want to.

6. Protect your privacy – set different passwords for different accounts, and do not post information that can allow people to identify your whereabouts outside of official council business.

7. Understand privacy settings – there is a range of settings to help you manage who can see or comment on your posts.

8. Get and give support – where you feel able, provide support to fellow councillors online, and reach out to colleagues and your council for support where needed.

9. Report serious issues - if you feel unable to deal with online abuse yourself or have any concerns about your safety, report this to your council or the police.