

Debate not hate says East Surrey shadow authority

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East Surrey councillors shared their experience of facing intimidation and harassment from voters as they debated a motion calling for civility in political discourse.

At a meeting of the full shadow authority, several members recalled facing extreme vitriol from members of the public and implored councillors and voters to engage respectfully.

It came as councillors debated a motion supporting the Local Government Association's (LGA) 'Debate Not Hate' campaign, which aims to tackle growing abuse against local politicians.

Introducing the motion, Councillor Kirsty Hewens (Liberal Democrats: Walton South & Oatlands) said: "This motion is not about stifling or sanitising debate. We all know there is a fundamental difference between robust political disagreement and personal abuse.

"What matters is how we conduct those debates."

She added: "As councillors, we expect to be challenged. And we should be. Residents have every right to question our decisions, disagree with us and hold us to account."

However, she said there is a line between this and growing volumes of abuse directed towards councillors and officers from the public.

"This behaviour discourages good people from standing for public office," Councillor Hewens said.

Other shadow authority councillors shared their own first hand accounts of receiving intimidation and harassment from voters.

Councillor Shelly Newton (Conservative: Tadworth, Walton & Kingswood) told councillors the authority's Conservative group would support the motion, saying: "Politics is about ideas. We should challenge each other's policies, question decisions, and hold one another to account.

"That's what our residents expect us to do. That's why they elected us. But there is a clear line between challenging someone's views and attacking the person behind them."

She added that in her two years as a councillor, she had received inappropriate messages and experienced harassment that resulted in police involvement.

"While canvassing I was grabbed, pulled into a resident's home, and had my way blocked out by the resident who then shouted at me about national politics," she added.

An LGA survey found that seven in 10 councillors across the country have reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past year.

The East Surrey motion threw the shadow council's support behind the LGA's campaign and called for the authority to commit to "fostering a culture where political debate is encouraged, but personal abuse, intimidation, discrimination and harassment are never tolerated".

Councillor Andrew Matthews (Liberal Democrats: Bookham & Fetcham West) added: "As I'm sure many of us have experienced, we've had threats of violence. I've been threatened with being punched in the face. I've had people stalk me. I'm not alone."

Seconding the motion, Councillor Elly Heaton (Green Party: Redhill West & Meadvale) thanked the councillors for sharing their stories, calling them a "disappointingly relatable experience".

The LGA's campaign also noted that more than half of councillors have reported being victims of misinformation.

The organisation's website says: "The increasing level of abuse and intimidation aimed at local politicians is preventing elected members from representing the communities they serve, deterring individuals from standing for election and undermining local democracy."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Image: Councillors debate the motion (Credit: East Surrey Shadow Authority)