

Jo Cox Civility Commission – funding and recommendations

Summary and Recommendations

This paper considers a recent funding request from the Jo Cox Civility Commission to all Scottish councils of between £500-£1000. Leaders and Chief Executives have suggested that a COSLA position would be helpful. This paper provides 2 options for Leaders - either to use a collective funding model like that provided to CHAS, or to agree that this is for local determination. The associated risks of encouraging additional requests from other bodies by supporting collective funding are outlined in the paper.

Leaders are also asked to consider a political endorsement of the Jo Cox Civility Commission Recommendations from January this year. These recommendations have already been welcomed by the Barriers to Elected Office Special Interest Group (BEO SIG) and we are aware that several councils have passed motions on the recommendations. The BEO SIG will continue working with the Jo Cox Commission on safety and civility in public life. Any additional support to the Commission in the form of collective funding or endorsement of recommendations will not impact the current working relationship.

This paper invites Leaders to:

- i. Agree whether collective funding of £500-£1000 each should be given to the Jo Cox Civility Commission by all councils, and if so how much, or if this should be for local determination; and
- ii. Agree that COSLA endorse the recommendations made by the Jo Cox Civility Commission in January 2024.

References

Previous reports on [topic]:

- LSB24067 – Jo Cox Civility Commission request for funding



Jo Cox Civility Commission – Request for funding and recommendations

Purpose

1. Council Leaders and Chief Executives have recently received a letter from the Jo Cox Foundation asking for funding to support their work to tackle the abuse and intimidation of elected members. Member councils have been in touch with COSLA seeking a national position on how we can collectively respond to the request.
2. Through the work of the Barriers to Elected Office SIG, COSLA officers have a positive working relationship with the foundation, however, were unaware that this request was going to be made. The Foundation has apologised for this and is keen to work in partnership on the matter. Leaders are asked for a position on whether a collective funding decision should be sought.
3. Leaders are also asked if COSLA should endorse the Commission's January 2024 report with 28 cross – sectoral recommendations on how the growing threat to our democracy can be addressed.

Current COSLA Position

4. The Foundation and the findings of its Civility Commission have been reported to and welcomed by the Barriers to Elected Office SIG. Input from the Commission feeds directly into the councillor safety work but is also regularly used by our partners working on disability and gender matters.

What is changing?

5. Via the BEO SIG, officers are aware several member councils have endorsed the work of the Commission along with its recommendations. A full list of recommendations can be found in Appendix 1, but Leaders should be aware the report includes three specific recommendations for Local Government action.
6. The Civility Commission Report [Jo Cox Civility Commission - The Jo Cox Foundation](#), has been taken seriously within Whitehall and Westminster, and is informing some of the discussions that are ongoing in this area, including within the Defending Democracy Taskforce. It is likely that, post-riots, the Commission's report might impact the Online Safety Act and other legislation. The recommendations by the Commission around extending Operation Bridger to look at local elected members, has supported a mindset shift in Whitehall and ongoing lobbying efforts by the LGA.
7. The funding for the Jo Cox Civility Commission is due to end in December 2024. Currently this funding covers one member of staff and input from other staff who focus

more specifically on the Jo Cox Foundation. Without additional funding current work on advocacy with stakeholders, and media campaigning will be impacted. With additional funding the Commission are also seeking to explore research opportunities with options including the experience of local government and experiences of staff/ family members. The Commission are keen to explore some of this work in the devolved nations, to date projects have been undertaken in Wales but Scotland and more recently Northern Ireland are key focuses in ongoing work planning.

8. To date the Jo Cox Commission has focused more resources on England rather than Scotland. However, the commission did hold the Scottish Parliament “Great Get Together” sponsored by Paul O’Kane MSP in June 2024, which had speakers from all parties, including the Deputy First Minister. Additionally on the 30th of January 2024 in collaboration with Glasgow University the Commission hosted an event titled “No Place in Politics: Tackling Abuse and Intimidation”. It is also worth noting that most of the Commission's work is transferable across the whole of the UK, and the understanding of devolved issues within the Commission might help influence policy at Westminster.
9. COSLA officers acknowledge that this has not been raised in the manner we would expect, however, there is clear value to the work of the BEO SIG and to COSLA’s priorities overall. In consideration, Leaders should be reflective on the risk of setting a precedent or expectations with much wider impacts than this single request.

Proposed COSLA Position

10. Given the impact of this work on local democracy, Leaders are asked to consider the following two options:

Option 1: collectively agree that all councils welcome and support the request for funding and that a standard contribution is offered by all. The request has been for between £500-£1000 each and, if Leaders favour this option, then COSLA will also need Leaders’ agreement on what this contribution would be.

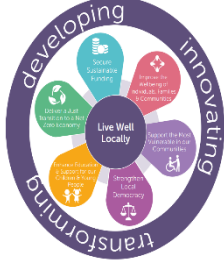
Option 2: agree that this is a matter to be locally determined based on funding available, acknowledging the work that individual councils are undertaking to already support councillors to undertake their duties in a safe manner.

11. As noted above, officers are aware that several councils have accepted the recommendations by the Jo Cox Civility Commission. Given the precedent it sets and the potential difficulty of agreeing a national position, Leaders may want to favour Option 2. Irrespective, action towards implementation of the recommendations would take place through the BEO SIG and would be consistent with current workplans.

Next Steps

12. The BEO SIG will continue working with the Jo Cox Commission on safety and civility in public life. Any additional support to the Commission in the form of collective funding or endorsement of recommendations will be communicated following August Leaders.

Contribution to agreed COSLA Plan and Verity House Agreement:

<u>COSLA Plan 22-27</u>	Priority Areas	
	Strengthen Local Democracy	√
	Secure Sustainable Funding	
	Improve the Wellbeing of Individuals, Families and Communities	
	Enhance Education and Support for our Children and Young People	
	Deliver a Just Transition to a Net Zero Economy	
	Support the Most Vulnerable in our Communities	
<u>Verity House Agreement</u>	Shared Priorities	
	Tackling Poverty	
	Just transition to net zero	
	Sustainable Public Services	

Date Considered August 2024

Appendix 1 – Jo Cox Civility Commission Recommendations

Coordination and behaviour

- 1) 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.
- 2) All elected representatives, and especially those in leadership roles, should model good behaviour.

Political Literacy

- 1) Government should implement significant awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility.
- 2) All councillors and parliamentarians should regularly visit education institutions in their constituencies, raising awareness of their roles.
- 3) 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.

Social media and media

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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 Hate publication.

Police and Security

- 1) **Update: in progress.** Parliamentarians, staff and families must receive clear and specific briefings, including:
 - a. Clear guidelines about what communications received by parliamentarians should be reported to police.
 - b. Clear guidance about which bodies are responsible for which aspects of security and a clear explanation about what security arrangements are available.
 - c. Clear guidance about which laws exist to counter abuse of elected representatives.

- 2) 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.
- 3) **Update: in progress.** 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:
 - a. Equalities including particular vulnerabilities related to misogyny and other protected characteristics.
 - b. The roles and responsibilities of different levels of government.
 - c. Cross-cutting nature of abuse including hate crime.
 - d. New legislation, including the Election Act 2022 and the Online Safety Act 2023.
- 4) **Update: in progress.** Agreed minimum levels of protection measures for elected representatives must be defined. Elected representatives must then adopt the minimum level.
- 5) **Update: in progress.** 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.
- 6) **Update: Recommendation adopted (February 2024).** 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:
 - a. Increasing the remit of the Single Point of Contact in each police force to include local elected representatives.
 - b. Streamlining implementation of Operation Bridger and enforcement of the Single Point of Contact system.
 - c. 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.
- 7) **Update: in progress.** Information sharing must be improved between different forces through the Operation Bridger Network and across nations and regions.

Parliaments (Westminster and devolved administrations)

- 1) **Update: in progress.** Parliamentarians should be able to claim for the costs associated with addressing abuse and intimidation, including:
 - a. Costs associated with wellbeing measures for staff who process/ experience abuse.
 - b. The swift implementation of security measures advised by Operation Bridger.
- 2) **Update: in progress.** 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.

- 3) **Update: in progress.** 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

- 1) **Update: in progress.** Local authorities should improve risk planning for abuse at council meetings and other events, ensuring high risk events are properly resourced with trained security.
 - a. Police should be involved where appropriate and in particular when there is a risk to democratic engagement.
 - b. The opportunity should exist for council meetings to take place online in instances when there are specific risks of physical abuse to councillors.
- 2) **Update: in progress.** 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.
- 3) 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

- 1) **Update: Recommendation adopted (January 2024).** Government should make any costs associated with candidate safety an exemption to election spending limits.
- 2) **Update: In progress.** 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.
- 3) **Update: In progress.** Political parties should rigorously screen candidates during the candidate selection process.
- 4) Political parties should require candidates to sign up to an election code of conduct in line with The Jo Cox Foundation's Civility Pledge.
- 5) 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

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