

Members Abuse, Intimidation and Harassment Survey 2025



Research and Consultation | Chesh



Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback from Cheshire East Councillors to feed into a Task and Finish Group review on the levels of abuse, intimidation and harassment faced by elected Members in the course of their work, with a view to identifying what support can be put in place to assist Councillors if needed.

The survey was conducted between 14 and 28 February 2025, and in total 55 Councillors responded to the survey, giving a 67% response rate.

Experiences of abuse, harassment and intimidation

76% of respondents rarely or never felt at risk personally when fulfilling their roles as Councillors, while 24% frequently or occasionally felt at risk.

Female respondents were more likely to feel at risk personally when fulfilling their roles as Councillors either frequently or occasionally (41% female Vs 4% male).

13% of respondents frequently experience abuse, intimidation or harassment in their role as Councillors, with a further 36% occasionally experiencing this.

35% of respondents had considered leaving their role as a Councillor because of incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment.

Increasing levels of harassment

43% of respondents felt the volume of abuse, intimidation or harassment had increased in the last 12 months, with reasons given for why it had increased including:

- Social media toxicity
- Public frustration with council decisions, financial cuts, and service provision
- Political negativity and criticism, particularly from those with opposing views
- A lack of consequences for being abusive

Format of the harassment

The most common mediums through which abuse, intimidation and harassment was received were:

- Social media (82% had experienced via this medium)
- In person (62%)

- Email (51%)

The most common ways of experiencing abuse, intimidation and harassment were:

- Campaigns to discredit them (55% had experienced this)
- Receiving unwanted, repeated communications (45%)
- Personal information placed on public website or forum (34%)

22% of respondents had experienced a threat of violence in their role as a Councillor, while 6% had experienced a threat of death.

Protection for Councillors

18% of respondents felt the council's arrangements for protecting them personally in their roles as Councillors was effective, while 53% felt council arrangement were ineffective.

Reasons given for why Councillors felt the council's arrangements for protecting them were not effective included:

- A lack of protection
- Publishing of their personal information
- Lack of awareness of procedures
- Lack of feedback when reporting issues

Reporting and preventing harassment

49% of those who had experienced abuse, intimidation or harassment as a Councillor reported it to their group leader or political party, while 40% had reported it to council officers, and 33% to the police.

On a scale of 1 to 5, 27% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very effective) or 4 as to the effectiveness of the advice they received upon reporting it, while 24% gave a response of 1 (very ineffective) or 2.

On a scale of 1 to 5, 38% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very well prepared) or 4 as to how well prepared they are to handle incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment. 15% gave a response of 1 (not well prepared at all) or 2.

92% of respondents were aware their home address could be withheld from the Cheshire East Council website, and of these, 50% had requested for their home address to be withheld from it.

Final comments

The final question of the survey asked respondents if they have any final comments to make in relation to this survey for the Task and Finish Group to consider – Responses have been summarised below:

- Social media concerns
- Improve the working environment for and between Councillors
- Privacy concerns for Councillors
- Toxic political debate must be tackled
- Some Councillors do not experience harassment

Conclusions

While a majority of Councillors responding to the survey rarely feel at risk while performing their duties, it is clear that a significant proportion do feel at risk.

That 35% have considered leaving their role as a Councillor due to abuse, intimidation or harassment suggests there is an issue that needs to be addressed.

It is also concerning that:

- Female Councillors are significantly more likely to feel at risk frequently or occasionally as compared to male Councillors
- Levels of abuse, intimidation or harassment appear to be increasing

Over half of Councillors, 53%, feel council arrangements for protecting them personally are ineffective – something again which probably needs addressing.

The main areas for improvement seem to be around:

- Tackling social media dialogue
- Improving the working relationship between Councillors
- Addressing privacy concerns of Councillors
- Tackling toxic political debate

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Introduction

Purpose of the survey

The purpose of this survey was to gather feedback from Cheshire East Councillors to feed into a Task and Finish Group to review the levels of abuse, intimidation and harassment faced by elected Members in the course of their work, with a view to identifying what support can be put in place to assist Councillors if needed.

The Cheshire East Members Abuse, Intimidation and Harassment Survey 2025 was conducted between 14 and 28 February 2025.

Survey methodology and response

All 82 Cheshire East Council Members were invited to complete the survey by email on 14 November 2025, with a reminder to complete the survey sent out on 25 February 2025.

In total, 55 Members responded to the survey, giving a 67% response rate.

About Councillors

Of the 55 Councillors answering the survey, 33 had been serving for more than 5 years, while 19 had been serving for between 1 to 2 years.

How long have you been serving as a Councillor?	Count	Percent
Less than one year	1	2%
1 to <2 years	19	35%
2 to <5 years	2	4%
5 years or more	33	60%
Valid responses	55	

53% of survey respondents were female, 47% were male.

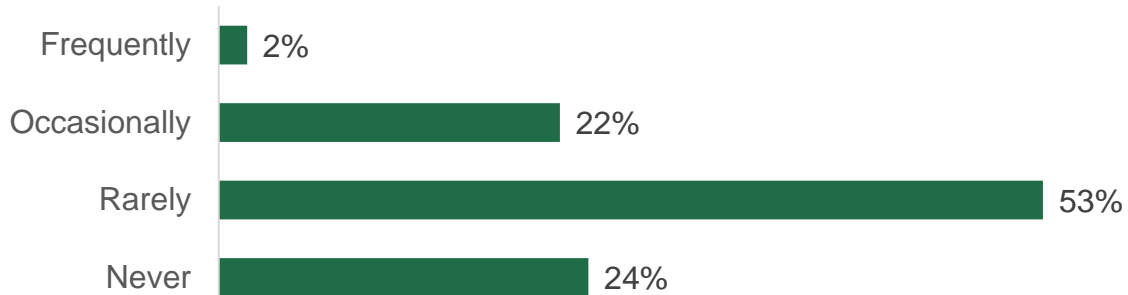
Which of the following best describes you?	Count	Percent
Female	29	53%
Male	26	47%
Valid responses	55	

Experiences of abuse, harassment and intimidation

Feeling at risk

76% of respondents rarely or never felt at risk personally when fulfilling their roles as Councillors. 24% of respondents felt frequently or occasionally at risk.

How often, if at all do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a Councillor?



Number of responses = 55

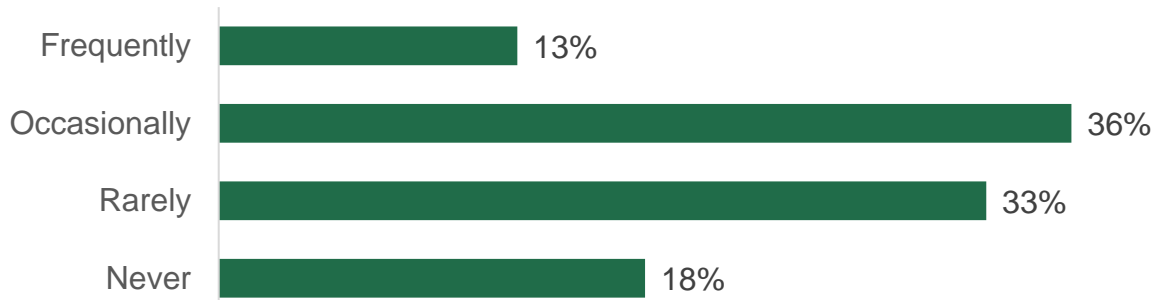
Female respondents were more likely to feel at risk personally when fulfilling their roles as Councillors either frequently or occasionally (41% female Vs 4% male).

How often, if at all do you feel at risk personally when fulfilling your role as a Councillor?	Female	Male
Frequently	0%	4%
Occasionally	41%	0%
Rarely	41%	65%
Never	17%	31%
Valid responses	29	26

Experiences of harassment

13% of respondents frequently experience abuse, intimidation or harassment in their role as Councillors, with a further 36% occasionally experiencing this.

How often, if at all have you experienced abuse, intimidation or harassment in your role as a Councillor?



Number of responses = 55

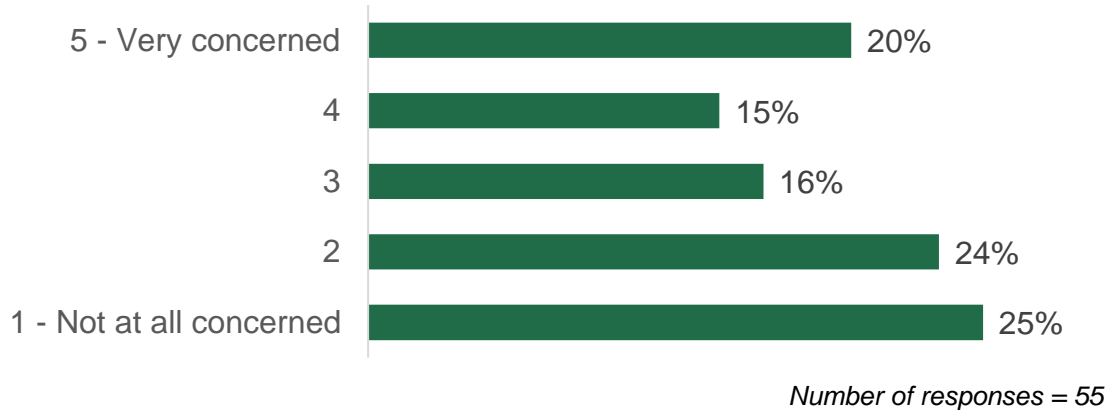
Female respondents were slightly more likely to experience abuse, intimidation or harassment in their role as Councillors either frequently or occasionally (55% female Vs 42% male).

How often, if at all have you experienced abuse, intimidation or harassment in your role as a councillor?	Female	Male
Frequently	10%	15%
Occasionally	45%	27%
Rarely	31%	35%
Never	14%	23%
Valid responses	29	26

Impacts of harassment

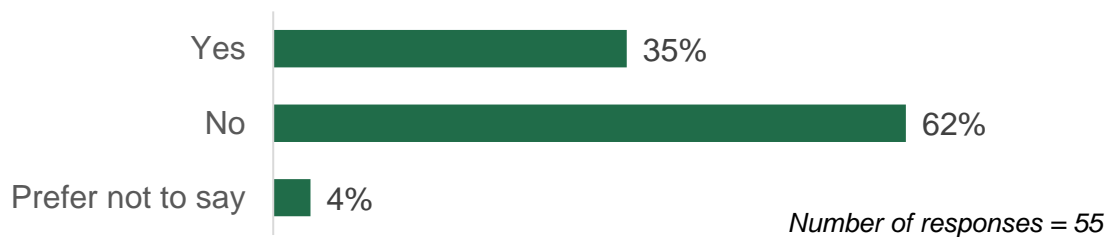
On a scale of 1 to 5, 35% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very concerned) or 4 about their level of concern of the impact on their family of abuse, intimidation or harassment.

On a scale on 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all concerned" and 5 is "very concerned", how concerned are you about the impact on your family of abuse, intimidation or harassment?



35% of respondents had considered leaving their role as a Councillor because of incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment.

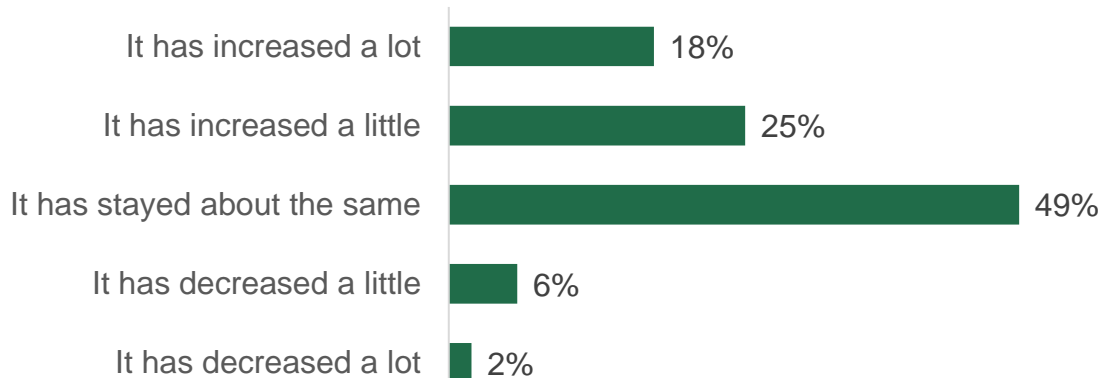
Have you ever considered leaving your role as a Councillor because of incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment?



Increasing levels of harassment

43% of respondents felt the volume of abuse, intimidation or harassment had increased in the last 12 months.

And thinking about the last 12 months, how has the volume of abuse, harassment and intimidation you have received in your role as a Councillor changed?



Number of responses = 51

Respondents who felt the level of abuse had increased in the last 12 months were asked to explain why they felt that was the case. Responses have been summarised below:

- **Social media** (10 comments) – Increased use of social media and social media toxicity has led to more online abuse, misinformation, and emboldened individuals to express hostility without facing consequences.
- **Public frustration with council decisions, financial cuts and services** (8 comments) – Difficult decisions, financial cuts, resident frustration with lack of basic services, and public frustration with council inefficiency have led to unpopularity and frustration among residents, resulting in increased verbal abuse and confrontation towards Councillors.
- **Political negativity and criticism** (8 comments) – The rise of alternative political views and the influence of national and international political figures such as Trump and Musk have contributed to a more hostile environment. Becoming a Councillor has seen a significant increase in 'casual' abuse directed at our integrity, intelligence, and motives by people not previously known.
- **Intimidation and harassment** (4 comments) – Councillors have experienced intimidation and harassment from fellow Councillors, residents, and even council officers. Councillors face harassment through coordinated campaigns, complaints, and public confrontations.

- **Mental health impact** (3 comments) – The stress and abuse faced by Councillors have had a significant impact on their mental health, leading some to consider resigning.
- **Lack of consequences for being abusive** (2 comments) – There are no consequences for those who abuse and harass Councillors. Some in positions of authority within political groups incite others to do the same.
- **Misinformation** (1 comment) – There is an increasing willingness from people to criticise and make false statements about Councillors on social media.
- **Lack of support** (1 comment) – There is a lack of support from authorities in addressing harassment.

Format of the harassment

How the harassment occurs

The most common mediums through which abuse, intimidation and harassment was received were:

- Social media (82% had experienced via this medium)
- In person (62%)
- Email (51%)

Thinking about the abuse, intimidation or harassment you have experienced in your role as a Councillor, how has this been received?	Count	Percent
Social media	37	82%
In person (face to face)	28	62%
Email	23	51%
Phone call	9	20%
Other	7	16%
By post	5	11%
Communicated via a third party	5	11%
Text message	4	9%
WhatsApp	3	7%
Voicemail	1	2%
	45	

The most common ways of experiencing abuse, intimidation and harassment were:

- Campaigns to discredit them (55% had experienced this)
- Receiving unwanted, repeated communications (45%)
- Personal information placed on public website or forum (34%)

Thinking about the abuse, intimidation or harassment you have experienced in your role as a Councillor, how has this manifested itself?	Count	Percent
Campaign to discredit you	24	55%
Receiving unwanted, repeated communications	20	45%
Personal information placed on public website or forum	15	34%
Other	12	27%
Privacy being invaded at home or in a private place	10	23%
A person repeatedly or unexpectedly appearing at events or places you attend	6	14%
Damage to your home, car or other property	4	9%

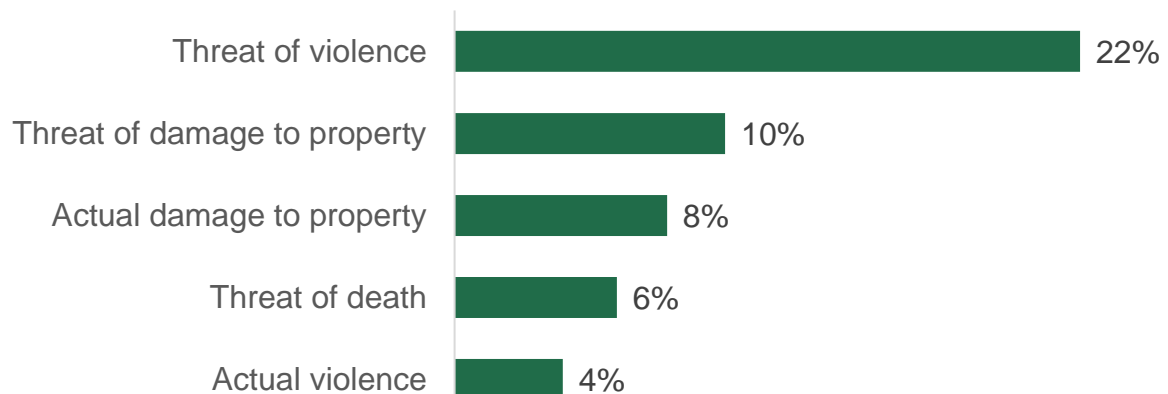
Physical attacks	3	7%
Being followed or stalked	3	7%
Sexual assault	1	2%
Protest at your home	1	2%
Racial abuse	1	2%
Malicious or dangerous items being sent to you	1	2%
A person sending you unwanted gifts	0	0%
44		

Threats and actual harassment

22% of respondents had experienced a threat of violence in their role as a Councillor.

6% had experienced a threat of death, while 4% had experienced actual violence in their role as a Councillor.

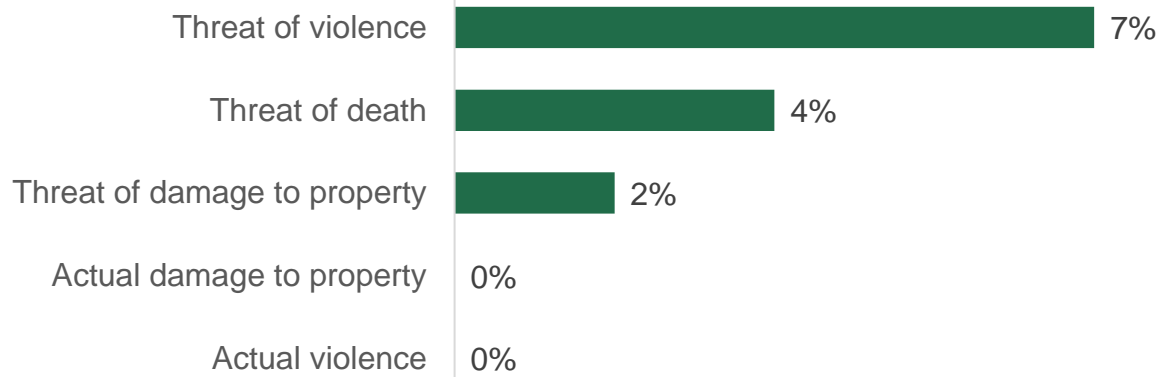
Due to your role as a Councillor, have you ever experienced any of the following?



Number of responses between 52 and 54

7% of respondents reported that people close to them had experienced threat of violence due to their roles as Councillors.

Due to your role as a Councillor, has a person closely connected with you ever experienced any of the following?



Number of responses between 53 and 55

26% of respondents reported that a member of the public had attended their home in a way that they considered intimidatory or inappropriate.

In your role as Councillor, have you ever had a member of the public do any of the following in a way that you considered intimidatory or inappropriate?

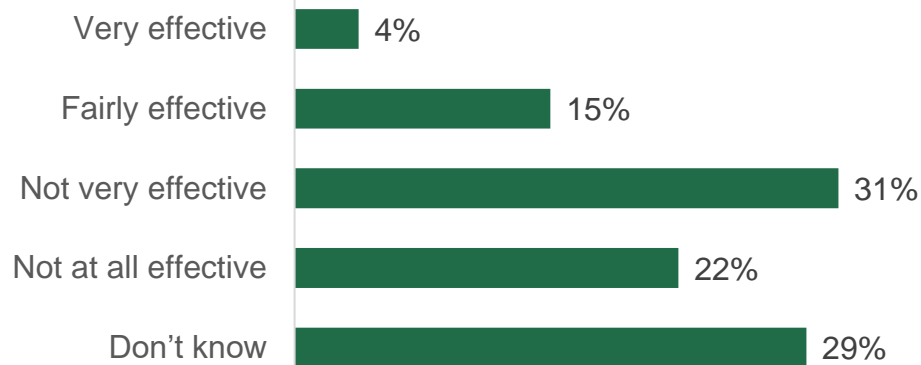


Number of responses between 51 and 53

Protection for Councillors

18% of respondents felt the council's arrangements for protecting them personally in their roles as Councillors was effective, while 53% felt council arrangements were ineffective.

How effective or not do you think Cheshire East Council's arrangements are for protecting you personally as you fulfil your role as a Councillor?



Number of responses = 55

Respondents who felt the council's arrangements for protecting them were not effective were asked to explain why they felt that was the case. Responses have been summarised below:

- **Lack of protection** (6 comments) – Concerns about the absence of clear responsibility for protection issues, and the lack of direct protection measures from the council for Councillors.
- **Publishing of personal information** (6 comments) – Concern about public availability of Councillors' personal details, such as home addresses, which can lead to harassment.
- **Lack of awareness of procedures** (4 comments) – Councillors stated there was a lack of awareness about existing procedures and protocols for protection, and insufficient understanding of the impact of abuse and harassment on Councillors.
- **Lack of feedback when reporting issues** (2 comments) – Complaints about the lack of feedback or response after reporting issues.
- **Security concerns** (3 comments) – Concerns about inadequate security measures at meetings and in council buildings.

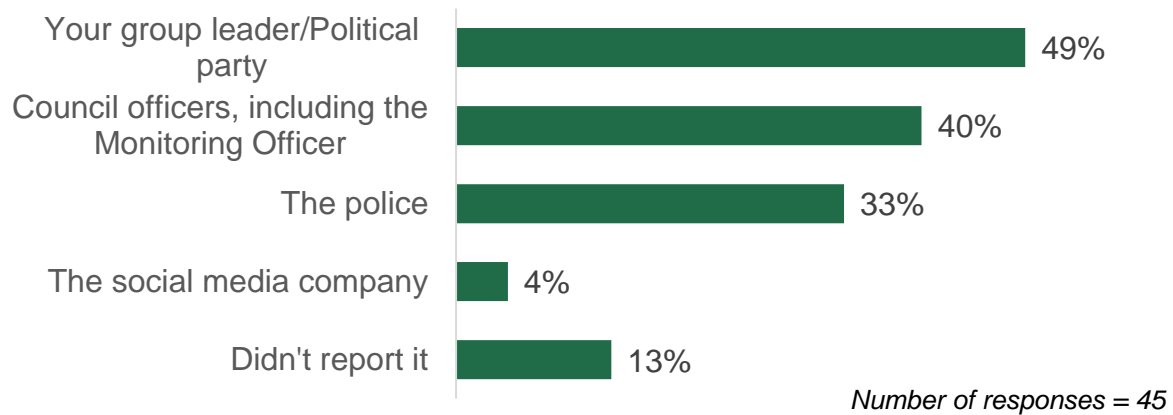
- **Online abuse concerns** (2 comments) – Concerns related to the amount of online abuse from the public and the need for measures to block such abuse.

Reporting harassment

49% of those who had experienced abuse, intimidation or harassment as a Councillor reported it to their group leader or political party.

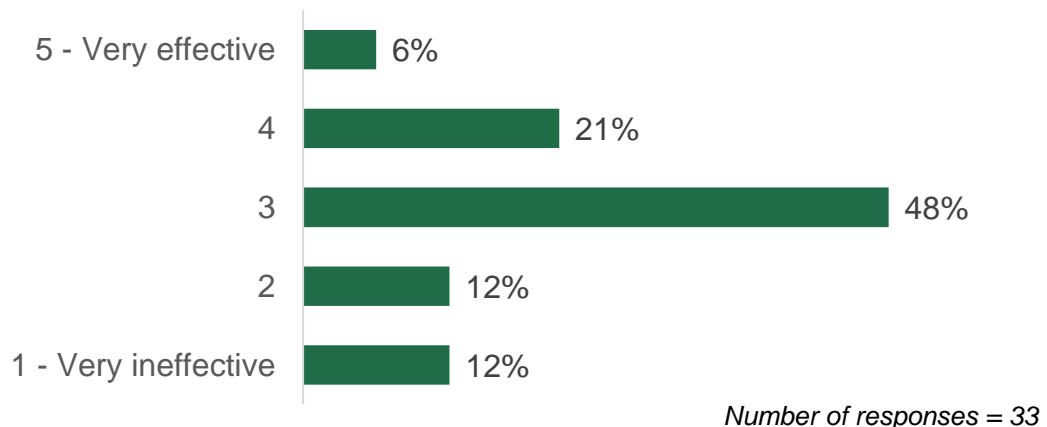
40% reported it to council officers, while 33% reported it to the police.

Thinking about the abuse, intimidation or harassment you have experienced in your role as a Councillor, to which of the following, if any, did you report it to when it happened?



On a scale of 1 to 5, 27% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very effective) or 4 as to the effectiveness of the advice they received upon reporting it. 24% gave a response of 1 (very ineffective) or 2.

On a scale on 1 to 5, where 1 is "very ineffective" and 5 is "very effective", how would you describe the effectiveness of the advice you received upon reporting your incident of abuse, intimidation or harassment?



Respondents were asked to explain why they felt the advice they had received upon reporting harassment was effective or not. Responses have been summarised below.

Positive responses included:

- **Positive feedback about council officers** (1 comment) – Council officers provided really good advice.
- **Good police support** (1 comment) – Support from specially trained police officers was good.

Negative responses included:

- **Police response dissatisfaction** (3 comment) – Police did not appear to treat incidents seriously. The police response to a reported physical assault was considered weak.
- **Negative feedback about social media operators** (2 comments) – Reporting harassment to social media operators was considered a waste of time, all that was received was an acknowledgement to the complaint, nothing more.
- **Lack of expertise or capacity at CEC** (1 comment) – Concerns about Cheshire East Council's expertise or capacity to deal with issues.
- **The reporting protocol is unclear** (1 comment) – Lack of clarity about the reporting protocol.
- **Long investigation time** (1 comment) – Investigations take a long time, allowing those involved to feel they have escaped justice.

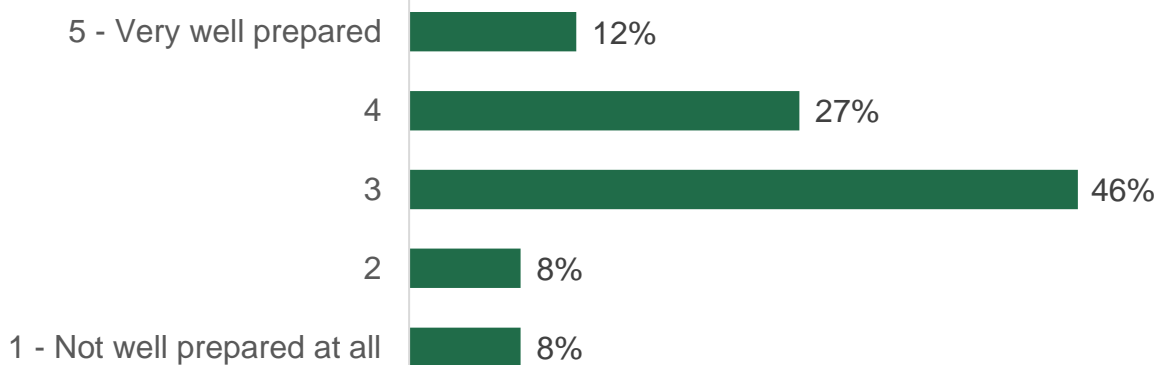
Other responses included:

- **Resilience required for Councillors** (1 comment) – Councillors need to be more resilient than ordinary members of the public.
- **CCTV footage retention** (1 comment) – Concerns about CCTV footage only being kept for 21 days and the need for early reporting.
- **Intimidation and embarrassment** (1 comment) – Reporting is hard due to intimidation and embarrassment.
- **Inconsistent responses** (1 comment) – The response was effective on some occasions but not on others.

Preventing harassment

On a scale of 1 to 5, 38% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very well prepared) or 4 as to how well prepared they are to handle incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment. 15% gave a response of 1 (not well prepared at all) or 2.

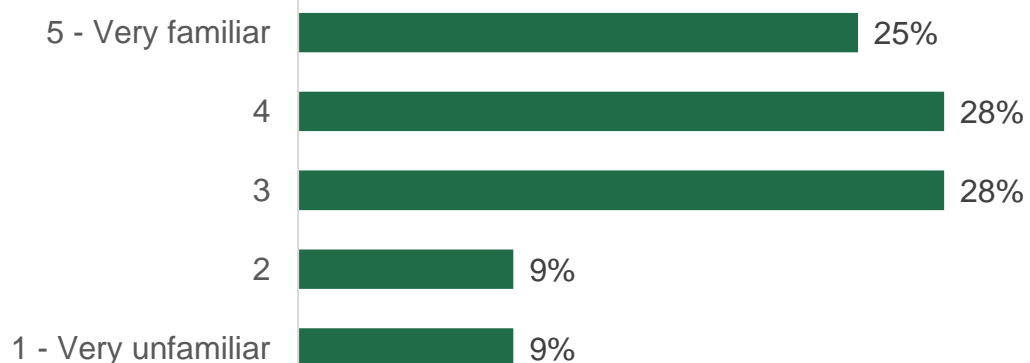
On a scale on 1 to 5, where 1 is "not well prepared at all" and 5 is "very well prepared", how well prepared would you say you are to handle incidents of abuse, intimidation or harassment?



Number of responses = 52

On a scale of 1 to 5, 53% of respondents gave a response of 5 (very familiar) or 4 as to how they rate their familiarity with settings on social media. 19% gave a response of 1 (very unfamiliar) or 2.

On a scale on 1 to 5, where 1 is "very unfamiliar" and 5 is "very familiar", how would you rate your familiarity with settings on the social media or social networking platforms that you use?



Number of responses = 53

92% of respondents were aware their home address could be withheld from the Cheshire East Council website, and of these, 50% had requested for their home address to be withheld from it.

In your role as Councillor, have you ever requested that your home address be withheld from the Cheshire East website?



Number of responses = 48

Final comments

The final question of the survey asked respondents if they have any final comments to make in relation to this survey for the Task and Finish Group to consider.

Responses have been summarised below.

Social media concerns (9 comments):

- Several Councillors avoid using social media to avoid abuse, harassment, intimidation and hostility, and to protect their families and protect their mental health (4 comments).
- Comments and posts by Councillors on social media are sometimes problematic (1 comment).
- Councillors should think before they talk or act and avoid getting drawn into social media activities (1 comment).
- The council should provide more support and protection for Councillors using social media (1 comment).
- Concern about social media becoming more right-wing and racist (1 comment).
- Online communication should be treated in the same way as verbal threats and intimidation (1 comment).

Improve the working environment for Councillors (7 comments):

- Relationships between different Councillors need improving, some Councillors undermine the council by spreading hatred. Suggestion for all political parties to sign up to a “Debate Not Hate” charter to promote respectful debate (3 comments).
- Concern about female Councillors experiencing abuse that male Councillors do not (1 comment).
- Less experienced or confident Councillors may feel intimidated and fearful (1 comment).
- Victimisation of any Councillor should not be tolerated and should be reported as soon as possible (1 comment).
- The impact on the families of Councillors, who worry about their safety, should not be underestimated (1 comment).

Privacy concerns for Councillors (6 comments):

- Private addresses of Councillors should automatically be kept private, unless Councillors opt-in to have them made public (1 comment).
- All Councillor addresses should be removed from the public record to protect elected members (1 comment).
- Some Councillors have been told they are not allowed to hide their address on the council website (1 comment).

- Removing addresses from the website may not be effective on its own; there is a need for stronger monitoring officer processes (1 comment).
- Councillors should be provided with work mobile phones, so that political and personal lives can easily be separated (1 comment).
- Unaware of any protection arrangements by CEC (1 comment).

Tackling toxic political debate (5 comments):

- Toxic attacks from a small but vocal group of individuals can deter people from representing their neighbourhoods, affecting democracy (1 comment).
- Stronger action should be taken to tackle and shame the appalling behaviour of a small minority (1 comment).
- Disappointment that the survey was necessary due to increasing abuse and harassment (1 comment).
- Hopeful that the Task Group's findings will improve understanding and democracy (1 comment).
- Call for robust plans instead of the same ubiquitous responses (1 comment).

Comments that some Councillors do not experience harassment (3 comments):

- Some Councillors do not experience bullying or intimidation in their wards, and have never felt threatened in any way (3 comments).

Conclusions

While a majority of Councillors responding to the survey rarely feel at risk while performing their duties, it is clear that a significant proportion do feel at risk.

That 35% have considered leaving their role as a Councillor due to abuse, intimidation or harassment suggests there is an issue that needs to be addressed.

It is also concerning that:

- Female Councillors are significantly more likely to feel at risk frequently or occasionally as compared to male Councillors
- Levels of abuse, intimidation or harassment appear to be increasing

Over half of Councillors, 53%, feel council arrangements for protecting them personally are ineffective – something again which probably needs addressing.

The main areas for improvement seem to be around:

- Tackling social media dialogue
- Improving the working relationship between Councillors
- Addressing privacy concerns of Councillors
- Tackling toxic political debate

