

AGENDA 11, Enc iii) Proposal to Ashington Town Council - Motion to Adopt the Civility & Respect Pledge and Implement Training Programme

Proposed by: Councillor Kerry Davison

Background

Across Northumberland, and nationally, local councils have faced ongoing challenges with councillor conduct and maintaining appropriate standards in public life. In 2022, Northumberland County Council's Deputy Leader, Cllr Wearmouth, proposed a motion addressing serious concerns about councillor behaviour, particularly on social media platforms. The Leader, Councillor Glen Sanderson, stated there would be a zero tolerance approach to poor behaviour and reminded councillors how family members are greatly affected by online abuse.

Following the local elections in May 2025, it has become evident that issues surrounding civility and respect remain a pressing concern within our local democratic institutions. As a Town Council, we have a responsibility to lead by example and create a culture where all councillors can serve their community effectively, free from bullying, harassment, and intimidation.

The maintenance of high standards in public life is not merely an aspiration but a fundamental requirement for effective local governance. The principles that underpin our democratic institutions must be actively upheld, particularly in an era where online communication can amplify discourteous behaviour and undermine public confidence in local government.

As your representative, I have recently submitted a proposal to Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC) requesting comprehensive training on Civility & Respect for all councils across Northumberland. I think it would be appropriate for Ashington Town Council to demonstrate leadership on this issue by taking proactive steps ourselves, both in anticipation of county-wide training and as a demonstration of our commitment to the highest standards of public service.

National Context: Government Standards Reform

The timing of this proposal is particularly significant. In November 2025, the Government announced sweeping reforms to strengthen standards in local government, with 94% of consultation respondents backing a mandatory code of conduct. Secretary of State Steve Reed stated that the reforms will tackle widespread concerns and give councils powers to suspend councillors for serious misconduct for up to six months and withhold allowances.

The proposed reforms include a mandatory code of conduct that will apply to all types and tiers of local authority in England, ensuring everyone is held to the same high standard. The Government acknowledges that the current system has left councils' hands tied in instances of handling misconduct, and the new legislation will introduce standards committees as a requirement, interim suspension powers, and a national appeals function.

AGENDA 11, Enc iii) Proposal to Ashington Town Council - Motion to Adopt the Civility & Respect Pledge and Implement Training Programme

The mandatory code will include behaviour standards and a requirement for elected members to cooperate with code of conduct investigations, whilst submitting multiple vexatious complaints would itself be a code of conduct breach.

By proactively adopting the Civility and Respect Pledge now, Ashington Town Council will be ahead of these legislative changes and will demonstrate our commitment to the highest standards even before they become mandatory.

I have recently submitted a proposal to Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC) requesting comprehensive training on Civility & Respect for all councils across Northumberland. It is appropriate that Ashington Town Council demonstrates leadership on this issue by taking proactive steps ourselves, both in anticipation of county-wide training and as a demonstration of our commitment to the highest standards of public service.

The Proposal

I propose that Ashington Town Council:

1. **Formally adopts the NALC Civility and Respect Pledge**
2. **Commits to undertaking Civility & Respect training** for all councillors, either through NALC provision or alternative appropriate providers
3. **Reviews and strengthens** our existing policies and procedures relating to councillor conduct

The NALC Civility and Respect Campaign

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Civility and Respect Campaign recognises that councillors have the right to work in an environment free from bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The campaign encourages councils to:

- Sign the Civility and Respect Pledge
- Adopt clear policies and procedures
- Provide appropriate training
- Create a culture where poor behaviour is challenged

Poor behaviour not only damages working relationships but can deter talented individuals from entering public service and undermine public confidence in local democracy.

The Nolan Principles: Our Foundation

The Seven Principles of Public Life must form the cornerstone of all councillor conduct:

- **Selflessness** – acting solely in the public interest

AGENDA 11, Enc iii) Proposal to Ashington Town Council - Motion to Adopt the Civility & Respect Pledge and Implement Training Programme

- **Integrity** – avoiding obligations to external individuals or organisations
- **Objectivity** – making decisions on merit
- **Accountability** – submitting to appropriate scrutiny
- **Openness** – being as open as possible about decisions and actions
- **Honesty** – being truthful
- **Leadership** – exhibiting these principles through example

These principles apply not only during formal council meetings but extend to all councillor conduct, including online interactions and informal discussions.

Training Priorities

Any training undertaken should include particular emphasis on:

1. **Online Behaviour and Digital Conduct** – addressing the specific challenges of social media, email communication, and online public forums
2. **The Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles)** – embedding these principles in everyday council practice
3. **The NALC Civility and Respect Campaign** – understanding the pledge, its importance, and practical implementation
4. **Standards in Public Life** – understanding codes of conduct and complaints processes
5. **Personal Responsibility** – empowering individual councillors to set the tone for our council

Behaviour Beyond the Council Chamber

While formal meetings are governed by Standing Orders and codes of conduct, councillor behaviour outside meetings is equally important. This includes:

- Social media interactions
- Email correspondence
- Informal meetings and conversations
- Interactions with officers, fellow councillors, and members of the public
- Comments to media and in public forums

As NALC emphasises, individual councillors must take personal responsibility for setting the tone of their councils, ensuring that all interactions are fair, inclusive, and effective.

AGENDA 11, Enc iii) Proposal to Ashington Town Council - Motion to Adopt the Civility & Respect Pledge and Implement Training Programme

Benefits to Ashington Town Council

By adopting this proposal, Ashington Town Council will:

- Demonstrate leadership and set an example for other councils in Northumberland
- Create a more positive and productive working environment for all councillors
- Protect the wellbeing of our councillors, officers, and staff
- Enhance public confidence in our council
- Ensure we meet and exceed expected standards in public life
- Reduce the risk of formal complaints and reputational damage
- Attract and retain talented individuals willing to serve our community
- Be prepared for the enhanced powers that councils will have to suspend and sanction councillors who breach standards

Implementation

If this proposal is approved, I recommend the following actions:

1. **Immediate:** Formally sign and publicise the NALC Civility and Respect Pledge
2. **Short-term (before next Annual Meeting in May):**
 - Review existing policies on councillor conduct and social media use
 - Identify appropriate training providers (prioritising NALC provision when available)
 - Schedule training for all councillors
3. **Ongoing:**
 - Include civility and respect as a standing item in councillor induction
 - Regularly review and reinforce standards expectations
 - Celebrate and recognise positive examples of respectful conduct

Personal Commitment

As the proposer of this motion, I commit to:

- Undertaking any training arranged by the council
- Leading by example in demonstrating civility and respect in all my interactions as a councillor
- Supporting fellow councillors in maintaining high standards

AGENDA 11, Enc iii) Proposal to Ashington Town Council - Motion to Adopt the Civility & Respect Pledge and Implement Training Programme

- Championing the principles of the Civility and Respect Campaign in all aspects of my council work

Recommendation

I recommend that Ashington Town Council:

RESOLVES to:

1. Formally adopt the NALC Civility and Respect Pledge
2. Commit to arranging appropriate Civility & Respect training for all councillors, with preference for participating in any county-wide training organised through NALC
3. Task the Clerk with reviewing current policies relating to councillor conduct and bringing recommendations for any improvements to a future meeting
4. Publicise our commitment to civility and respect to our residents and stakeholders

Conclusion

Local democracy depends upon the willingness of individuals to serve their communities. To sustain this, we must ensure that the environment in which councillors operate is respectful, professional, and conducive to effective decision-making.

By taking proactive action now, Ashington Town Council can demonstrate genuine leadership on this issue, support the wellbeing of all councillors, and reinforce public confidence in local democracy.

I urge fellow councillors to support this proposal and join me in making Ashington Town Council a model of civility, respect, and excellence in public service.