

# **Committee on Standards in Public Life: Liberal Democrat response**

My thanks to the Committee on Standards in Public Life for its continued work and in particular its vigilance on the issue of intimidation in public life. The erosion of democracy and democratic norms is an ongoing, global issue and one that the Liberal Democrats take seriously.

My thanks as well to Lord Evans for his invitation of 16 September 2020, for us to detail the steps we have taken towards implementing the committee's recommendations.

We have used the table of recommendations provided to structure this response and are, of course, happy to discuss any aspects further.

*Mark Pack - Party President*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Response</b>
<p>Those in positions of leadership within political parties must set an appropriate tone during election campaigns, and make clear that any intimidatory behaviour is unacceptable. They should challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.</p>	<p>Our Leader, Ed Davey, takes this matter extremely seriously and, as shown with his recent experience campaigning for the role, sets a firm and exemplary standard for the Party around him. He and the other key leading figures in the Party, including the Chief Executive and President, continue to proactively address these matters. Moreover, we believe our 2019 campaign, in the context of a fraught political landscape, was conducted well within the spirit the Committee on Standards in Public Life intended.</p>
<p>Political parties must proactively work together to tackle the issue of intimidation in public life.</p>	<p>We remain committed to working with colleagues in other parties across the country to tackle this issue, as demonstrated by our engagement with the Committee and attendance of the meeting on the 27 March 2019.</p> <p>Five of our elected representatives, including our current leader, were signatories of the cross-party Early Day Motion tabled on 15 October 2019 on the subject. Our former Leader, Jo Swinson, was a vocal and high-profile proponent of a cross-party call for a detoxified public discourse during the tempestuous late 2019 period.</p> <p>Baroness Ludford jointly authored the Committee on Human Rights’s paper, “Democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association: Threats to MPs” and former President Sal Brinton has been a leading voice as well.</p>

Political parties should set clear expectations about the behaviour expected of their members, both offline and online through a code of conduct for members which specifically prohibits any intimidatory behaviour. Parties should ensure that members are familiar with the code. The consequences of any breach of the code should be clear and unambiguous.

Our Party has a clear code of conduct, [available here](#), which has been written to be broadly applicable and easy for members to understand. We also have an [online-specific code of conduct](#) to reflect the new reality that politics happens online as much as in person.

We have a robust [internal disciplinary process](#), which is regularly reviewed to ensure it is up to date and effective.

We have provisions to cover our registered supporters scheme, recognising that it is not only the behaviour of party members for which we must take some responsibility. We aim in all that we do to ensure those fighting for a Liberal vision of Britain do so in a proper way.

In addition, we take preventative measures, such as training for party members on how our complaints system works and briefings for those attending party conferences on expected behaviour standards.

Political parties must ensure that party members who breach the party's code of conduct by engaging intimidation are consistently and appropriately disciplined in a timely manner.

The Party's internal disciplinary process has a number of dedicated staff and is supported, at a strategic level, by a sub-group of our Federal Board. In sum, we are resourcing this work fully and also placing it at the heart of our most senior leadership body.

We have a range of sanctions available, including expulsion from the party, and cooperate as appropriate with the police where the severity of events or allegations require it.

We have experienced, recently, a delay in our process (in part driven by disruptions, ranging from the 2019 General Election to the global pandemic) and so have dedicated additional resources to bring the resulting backlog down. This work is frequently monitored by

	our Federal Board and is overseen at Director level via our Chief Operating Officer.
Political parties must collect data on the number of complaints against members for engaging in intimidatory behaviour, and the outcome of any disciplinary processes which result from these complaints.	The Party does collect this data and the outcome of all complaints. As our new system becomes more firmly established, patterns from this data will be used to help guide proactive work within the party to help minimise the risks of issues occurring..
Leaders of political parties should always call out intimidatory behaviour, even when it is perpetrated by those in the party's fringes. Fringe group leaders and spokespeople should immediately denounce any intimidatory behaviour on the part of their members or supporters.	The Party and its Leaders across the different parts of the country take their roles in doing so seriously and we can demonstrate examples of swift, robust action in cases where intimidatory behaviour, whether it is new or discovered in someone's past, has been taken. Intimidatory behaviour in our Party leads to suspension and removal.
The political parties must work together to develop a joint code of conduct on intimidatory behaviour during election campaigns <sup>1</sup> by December 2018. The code should be jointly enforced by the political parties	As a Party we provided our feedback on the joint code of conduct proposed by the, extremely helpful, Jo Cox Foundation. We are keen to reach agreement on a finalised code and to work with other political parties to ensure it is jointly enforced.  We are conscious that this did not happen in time for the most recent, unexpected, General Election, but hope to hear more before the end of this Parliament.

---

<sup>1</sup> Has since been revised in view of continuing evidence of intimidation in public life to say that "the joint standard should apply at all times and not just periods of election campaigns".

Political parties must take steps to provide support for all candidates, including through networks, training, and support and resources. In particular, the parties should develop these support mechanisms for female, BAME, and LGBT candidates who are more likely to be targeted as subjects of intimidation.

The Liberal Democrats take training extremely seriously and we are currently in the process of reorganising the teams central to delivering training and support. We are working closely with our sister organisation (ALDC) to reduce duplication of work and increase the amount of training and material available to candidates and members. Ensuring that our central teams are producing high quality, one-to-many material is a strategic priority for 2021 and we are pleased with the success of our training during the COVID-19 pandemic - with online training proving to be much more of an opportunity than a hindrance.

Some specific work, to add some colour to this answer, includes:

- Daily briefing to candidates during the election which was used to encourage reporting as well as offer a clear route through which to provide support.
- A dedicated phone line running throughout the election period staffed from 8am – 9.30pm for candidates to phone with any queries and concerns they had, including harassment and threats.
- Appointments advertised and available with Wellbeing and Pastoral Advisor (Amanda Curtain) for PPCs who need emotional support.
- A direct line from Candidates' Office to HR, where the HR Manager regularly dealt directly with candidates who were threatened, intimidated, or harassed. This included liaising with the police on their behalf, providing practical advice and emotional support.
- Asking candidates to sign the Jo Cox pledge to take part in a respectful campaign.
- The Liberal Democrats Racial Diversity Campaign (RDC) supports Liberal Democrats from ethnic minorities to seek and win public office. It finds, trains

	<p>and supports ethnic minority candidates through to their candidate approval, selection and election. In addition, we have a Vice President, Isabelle Parasram, directly responsible for engagement with ethnic minority communities. She sits on our Federal Board and is currently working with the Chief Executive on an internal review of our Party which will inform changes to who we operate to make us more diverse and inclusive (not just in our candidate pool but at all levels).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Our Campaign for Gender Balance (CGB) exists to support women interested in standing for public office with the Liberal Democrats. CGB organises some of the party's best training which includes Inspiration Days and Future Women MPs' Weekends.</li> </ul>
<p>Political parties must offer more support and training to candidates on their use of social media. This training should include: managing social media profiles, block and mute features, reporting content, and recognising when behaviour should be reported directly to the police.</p>	<p>Our work on this important area of concern has been in line with the direction set by the Committee. For instance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· A guide was written by the Lib Dems Candidates' Office and distributed to all Prospective Parliamentary Candidates on how to manage social media, including blocking, mute and reporting features, and how to know what constitutes harassment. This was produced based on the latest information for political candidates from social media companies (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and online safety bodies.</li> <li>· Staff attended a 'Facebook and Instagram Women's Safety event' and funnelled key information/links out to PPCs via regular daily briefings and in a guide for staying safe online.</li> <li>· A training session called 'Dealing with Trolls' was made available.</li> </ul>

- Our new Director of Strategy, Research and Messaging, alongside others, will be preparing the Party for its social media/online strategy in the next General Election and we intend to ensure that any such work has the wellbeing of our Candidates, and indeed all candidates/the British democracy in mind.

- We have just commissioned a review of our vetting processes of the social media activities of people who wish to be party candidates. Our implementation of its recommendations will ensure that we take past mis-behaviour seriously and that our candidates understand the standards expected of them.