

Written evidence submitted by the Committee on Standards in Public Life

Committee on Standards in Public Life

1. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent, non-departmental public body sponsored by the Cabinet Office, responsible for advising the Prime Minister on the arrangements for upholding standards across public life in England. CSPL is not a regulator and does not have investigative powers or consider individual cases.¹
2. CSPL articulated the Seven Principles of Public Life, commonly referred to as the Nolan Principles, in its first report in 1995: honesty; objectivity; openness; selflessness; integrity; accountability; and leadership. These Principles apply to all holders of public office and to private providers of public services.²

Introduction

3. CSPL welcomes the establishment by the House of Commons of this Speaker's Conference on the important issue of the security of candidates, MPs and elections, and its consideration of: the factors influencing the threat levels against candidates and MPs, and the effectiveness of the response to such threats; and the arrangements necessary to secure free and fair elections, and the appropriate protection of candidates and MPs at future parliamentary elections in the UK.³
4. CSPL has held a longstanding interest in issues related to the intimidation and abuse of parliamentary candidates, MPs and public office holders, since the publication of its 2017 report *Intimidation in Public Life*.⁴ This submission draws on the evidence we received in 2017⁵ and subsequently in 2020, when we followed up the recommendations made in our intimidation report (summarised for information at paragraphs 6-12).⁶
5. It is clear that much has happened to tackle threats to public office holders since 2017, but CSPL is concerned that intimidation in public life remains a pressing issue that presents a real danger to the security of parliamentary candidates and MPs, and more widely to our representative democracy. CSPL is of the view that there remains more to do, and at a greater pace, by everyone in public life to address this important issue.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life/about/terms-of-reference>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8756/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/intimidation-in-public-life>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-progress-report-on-recommendations>

Background on Intimidation in Public Life report and follow up

6. In July 2017, CSPL was asked by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, to undertake a review on the intimidation of parliamentary candidates, considering the broader implications for all holders of public office, following significant reports of abuse of candidates at the 2017 General Election.⁷ In December 2017, CSPL published its report, *Intimidation in Public Life*.⁸
7. The report defined intimidation as “words and / or behaviour intended or likely to block or deter participation, which could reasonably lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life”. Intimidation is different from the legitimate political debate and influence that underpins our democracy.⁹
8. The Committee heard evidence of persistent and shocking intimidatory behaviour, including harassment, threatened violence and sexual violence, and damage to property. Much of that abuse was targeted at certain groups, and was accelerated and enabled by social media, which has increasingly played a role in political debate in recent years. The Committee’s report concluded that social media companies had been too slow to act on online intimidation to protect their users; political parties had failed to show leadership in calling out intimidation and setting the tone for healthy debate during elections; police authorities had shown inconsistency in addressing illegal intimidatory behaviour; and electoral law was out of date on the issue.
9. The report made a package of recommendations to government, political parties, the police, social media companies, press regulators and the media to address these issues (attached in full at **Annex A**). In summary, we recommended that:
 - government should consult on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law of intimidating parliamentary candidates and party campaigners; and legislate to shift the liability of illegal content online towards social media companies;
 - social media companies must take greater responsibility for tackling intimidation and abuse on their platforms including by implementing automated techniques to identify and remove intimidatory content quickly and consistently, and prevent “dogpiling”; giving users better options to reduce intimidation on their platforms; publishing performance data on reporting and taking down content; revising tools for users to escalate potentially illegal online activity to the police; working with government to establish “pop-up” reporting teams for election campaigns; and providing advice, guidance and support to parliamentary candidates to help them remain safe and secure on their platforms;

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/review-into-abuse-and-intimidation-in-elections>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>

- political parties must set an appropriate tone during elections, challenging intimidation where it occurs; set clear expectations about the behaviour of their members (online and offline) through codes of conduct which specifically prohibit intimidatory behaviour and make the consequences of any breaches of the code clear and unambiguous; work together to develop a joint code of conduct on intimidatory behaviour during election campaigns; and provide better support for candidates experiencing intimidation;
- police forces should have access to sufficient training to enable them to investigate offences committed through social media; and the National Police Chiefs' Council should produce guidance for candidates on behaviour they may experience during elections which is likely to constitute a criminal offence; and
- press regulators should extend their codes of conduct to prohibit language that incites intimidation.

10. The Committee also heard evidence that intimidation reflects broader concerns about our political culture, and that intimidatory behaviour can itself stem from our current political climate, and in particular, low levels of public trust in politicians and feelings of frustration and alienation by some people about politics. Therefore, the report also recommended that all those in public life take responsibility for shaping a political culture, which seeks to prevent a decline in public trust by upholding high standards of conduct across public life, including not engaging in and challenging intimidation where it occurs.

11. In 2020, the Committee wrote to all of the political parties represented in Westminster; the National Police Chiefs' Council; Twitter (now X), Facebook and Google; and press regulators, IPSO and Impress, asking for an update on progress made against our 2017 recommendations¹⁰, which we published in a short report.¹¹ Notably, we found that:

- the then government had made progress in some areas, including in establishing a new regulatory framework for online harms¹², but had not committed to bringing forward legislation to move the liability of illegal content online towards social media companies. It had, however, consulted on the introduction of a new electoral offence of intimidation during elections¹³; and published legislation to remove the requirement for candidates standing at local elections to publish their home addresses on the ballot paper¹⁴;

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/intimidation-in-public-life#correspondence->

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-progress-report-on-recommendations>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper>

¹³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799873/Protecting-the-Debate-Government-Response-2019.05.01.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2018/1308/contents/made>, this came into force in the polls in 2019

- political parties had made some progress in key areas, but there was more to be done. All of the political parties represented in Westminster had put in place codes of conduct setting out the minimum standards of behaviour expected of their members, all of which prohibited bullying, harassment and unlawful discrimination.¹⁵ Each party also had in place internal disciplinary processes for dealing with alleged breaches of their code, with a range of sanctions available to them for disciplining intimidatory behaviour. However, most parties were not collecting data on the number of complaints made against members for engaging in intimidation or the outcome of any disciplinary process resulting from those complaints;
- the National Police Chiefs' Council had published joint guidance with the Crown Prosecution Service, the College of Policing and the Electoral Commission about behaviour likely to constitute a criminal offence during elections, which included practical advice on how candidates should protect themselves¹⁶; and
- Facebook, Twitter (now X) and Google had at the time better measures in place to protect their users from intimidation, including updated policies; new mechanisms to identify and remove abusive content; channels for reporting content that violates their policies; and increased user options for blocking and muting content. All three companies were publishing transparency data on reported content and takedowns, but not on the time it took to remove content; and had established temporary election teams during the 2019 General Election to “protect the integrity of election-related content and identify and respond more quickly to potential threats and challenges, including removing intimidatory content”¹⁷. None of the social media companies had, in our view, adequately revised their tools for users to escalate potentially illegal online activity to the police.

12. On our recommendation that political parties work together to develop a joint code of conduct, a joint statement on intimidatory behaviour was published in 2020, which was signed by the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, and the Green Party.¹⁸

Speaker's Conference themes and questions

¹⁵

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841226/Review_of_political_parties_Codes_of_Conduct_July_2019.pdf

¹⁶ https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Joint-Guidance-for-Candidates-in-Elections.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-progress-report-on-recommendations/intimidation-in-public-life-progress-report-on-recommendations>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-joint-statement-on-conduct-of-political-party-members>

13. The following answers are based on the evidence we took in 2017 and subsequent follow up.

Factors influencing threat levels against candidates and MPs

What factors influence the level and nature of threats targeted at candidates and MPs?

14. The Committee found that intimidation had been experienced by all groups across public life and the political spectrum. However, as noted in paragraph 8, much of this abuse was targeted at certain groups. Specifically, we found that candidates and MPs who are female, from ethnic minority backgrounds or LGBTQ+ were “disproportionately targeted in terms of scale, intensity and vitriol”, and that the intimidation experienced by those with intersecting identities was even worse.¹⁹ Amnesty International told the Committee that “no female MP who was active on Twitter had been free from intimidation”, and that “Black and Asian women MPs – despite representing only 11% of all women MPs in Westminster – received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs”.²⁰
15. News coverage from the 2024 General Election suggests this remains the case.²¹ CSPL participated in strategic roundtables for regulators held by the Electoral Commission to discuss and later reflect on the challenges of the General Election. The Electoral Commission subsequently published a *Report on the 2024 UK parliamentary general election and the May 2024 elections*.²² Many of the observations made in that report on intimidation are consistent with the Committee’s 2017 findings. Specifically, that in 2024, “many candidates experienced unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment, in particular directed at women and candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds”.²³
16. The Committee was “deeply concerned about the impact that this targeted, aggressive behaviour may have on the diverse and representative nature of democracy and public life”. The overwhelming view of the candidates who gave evidence to our review was that intimidation is discouraging individuals, particularly women from an ethnic minority²⁴, from standing for public office.²⁵ We remain of the view that our public life will suffer if certain candidates are deterred from entering or

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.28

²⁰

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61b0cdb3e90e07044b1ef590/4_Intimidation_Submissions_80-97.pdf (Amnesty International, written submission 87)

²¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ng3j1pnpqo>

²² <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-2024-uk-parliamentary-general-election-and-may-2024-elections>

²³ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-2024-uk-parliamentary-general-election-and-may-2024-elections>

²⁴

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61b0cdb3e90e07044b1ef590/4_Intimidation_Submissions_80-97.pdf (Amnesty International, written submission 87)

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.16

remaining in politics because of the abuse they receive. As we said in 2017, we fear that a failure to adequately address this issue “will perpetuate inequalities in Britain’s public life and restrict the diversity of those representing the public”.²⁶

17. The Committee found that social media was the most significant factor accelerating the prevalence of intimidation. Whilst the abuse of parliamentary candidates was not a new phenomenon, social media had “sparked a step-change in the abuse and intimidation MPs, candidates and others in public life receive”.²⁷ The Committee’s evidence suggested several reasons for this “step-change”, including:

- the rapid scale and increasingly global use of social media;
- the accelerating pace of political debate online, encouraging and enabling users to comment on politics in real time;
- the unprecedented, immediate and persistent access social media gives the public to those in public life;
- the ease of communicating online versus for example, writing an abusive letter;
- the brevity encouraged by online communication changing the tone of the debate; and
- the impact of anonymity and the “safe-distance” nature of social media on the severity of abuse and intimidation received by those in public life.

What are the drivers of these behaviours?

18. The Committee found that intimidation does not take place in a vacuum, and can stem from our political culture itself. The evidence we received at the time suggests that there is a relationship between our political culture and the behaviour of the public.

19. The Committee has long been concerned about the impact that poor behaviour by those in public life can have on public trust in politics. One consistent theme of the evidence is that these scandals cause “immense damage to public institutions”, resulting in “mistrust, frustration and a gulf between the public and those in public life”²⁸ and that intimidation is more likely to occur in a climate where there are higher levels of frustration and lower levels of public trust in politics and politicians, because the public “may perceive those involved in public life to be legitimate targets for personal attacks and abuse”.²⁹

²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life> , p.79

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.32

²⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.70

20. The Committee also heard significant evidence of intimidation which is motivated by prejudice or hate towards an individual's gender, race, religion or sexual orientation. This was exacerbated by those in public life setting a "derogatory and abusive" tone for political debate, which engenders "prejudice or hatred towards individuals or groups" and "creates a context in which others feel it is appropriate to engage in intimidatory behaviour".³⁰ Public discourse must allow for significant and robust disagreement; however, what is said by politicians reverberates throughout society. Therefore, those in positions of leadership across public life "must set and protect a tone in public discourse which is not dehumanising or derogatory, and which recognises the rights of others to participate in public life".³¹

How effective are existing deterrents to threatening candidates and MPs, specifically in relation to the criminal justice response?

21. The Committee's analysis of the then legal provisions pertaining to intimidation found that criminal law was sufficient in relation to offences against a person (e.g. common assault) and damage to property, as well as credible threats of violence. But there were concerns about the sufficiency of criminal law to deter intimidatory behaviour online. However, given that criminal law is neutral on whether an offence is committed on or offline (e.g. what is illegal offline remains illegal online), the Committee recommended in 2017 that "the current criminal law should remain as it is".³² On the effectiveness of electoral law in relation to intimidation please see paragraph 29.
22. In regards to enforcement, the Committee heard from the Crown Prosecution Service in 2017 that although the approach taken by local police forces on intimidation was inconsistent (see paragraph 25), there had been a 68% rise in communications prosecutions³³ since 2013. Several high profile cases of intimidation of then sitting MPs had also been successfully prosecuted.³⁴ It may be that an increasing prosecution rate acts as a deterrent to threatening public office holders. However, we have not taken evidence to support this.

Effectiveness of the response to such threats at the 2024 General Election

How effective were steps taken to protect candidates and make them feel safe during the General Election period?

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.71

³⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.72

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.73

³² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.60

³³ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/communications-offence>

³⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, pp.62-4

23. We did not take evidence on the effectiveness of the response to such threats in 2024. However, as noted in paragraph 15, we have seen evidence from the Electoral Commission that candidates and campaigners continued to experience unacceptable levels of intimidation and harassment both online and offline in 2024.³⁵ The Committee has also worked closely with the Jo Cox Foundation since 2017 on intimidation.³⁶ In 2023, The Jo Cox Foundation launched the Jo Cox Civility Commission “to find practical and deliverable solutions to the complex problem” of abuse and intimidation in public life.³⁷ It is clear from the evidence set out in their 2024 report, *No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation*, that the scale of abuse and intimidation towards candidates at elections continues to be “severe and... [is] getting worse”.³⁸
24. It is worth noting that the problem of intimidation has become considerably more complex and multi-dimensional since 2017. In 2024, for example, we saw worrying indicators of new sources of intimidation in the campaign tactics on behalf of independent candidates (e.g. anonymous leaflets inciting intimidation towards other candidates³⁹). Therefore, it follows that while securing cross-party consent for action to deal with intimidation remains vital, there are new threats from independent and small party sources which are unlikely to be cooperative in the effort to secure agreement or able to enforce restraint.

What challenges do police forces face in relation to consistent policing?

25. The Committee found that the approach taken on intimidation by local police forces was inconsistent. We heard that this may be due to some police forces not fully understanding the context in which MPs and candidates operate, especially during elections. The Committee was told in 2017 that the most significant challenge for the consistent policing of intimidation was the rise of social media, and in particular its wide reach, which can make establishing attribution for an offence difficult. This was further complicated by the international presence of social media platforms and the number of jurisdictions in which they operate.
26. Therefore, the Committee recommended that guidance be produced for local police forces on investigating offences committed through social media and the context in which MPs and candidates work. The National Police Chiefs' Council confirmed in 2020 that they had done this.⁴⁰
27. The evidence also led the Committee to conclude that election periods are a heightened environment which makes it more likely that candidates will experience intimidation. But some police forces were not clear on which offences constituted intimidation during elections, often conflating personal threats and public order

³⁵

³⁶ <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/>

³⁷ <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/our-work/respectful-politics/commission/>

³⁸ <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/our-work/respectful-politics/commission/recommendations/>

³⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/06/shock-at-adam-independent-muslim-mp-leicester-south-victory-not-sectarian>

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-letter-from-npcc>

offences.⁴¹ The Committee considered this warranted additional training and guidance for police forces on how to police intimidation during elections, enabling more cases to proceed to prosecution where appropriate. The College of Policing subsequently updated its Authorised Professional Practice on policing elections to include information on the Committee's report, and the police's responsibility to mitigate and investigate allegations and offences related to intimidation.⁴²

28. We have not taken evidence since, however, on the effectiveness of either piece of guidance in relation to the consistency of policing on the intimidation of public officials.

Are there any changes to electoral law that would help strengthen the security of candidates and democracy more widely?

29. The Committee recommended in 2017 that the government "consult on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law of intimidating parliamentary candidates and party campaigners".⁴³ The government consulted on this in 2018⁴⁴. The Elections Act 2022⁴⁵ introduced a new penalty for people convicted of intimidation when the intimidation is directed at candidates, campaigners or elected representatives, called a disqualification order. Anyone found guilty of this behaviour could be banned from standing for elected office for five years.⁴⁶ CSPL welcomes this significant legislative change.

Do affected individuals have the information and support required to tackle threatening behaviour or communication?

30. In 2017, a number of former parliamentary candidates said that they were "not confident in recognising when intimidatory behaviour was likely to constitute a criminal offence". It was also clear from the evidence that candidates had a "very broad range of expectations as to what the police would be able to do in relation to intimidatory behaviour".⁴⁷
31. The Committee said it was in the interests of both effective policing and parliamentary candidates that there is clarity as to what behaviour is and is not illegal, and what candidates should expect from the police during elections. We maintain this view, and welcome the guidance published in 2019 by the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Crown Prosecution Service, the College of Policing and

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.67

⁴² <https://www.college.police.uk/app/policing-elections>

⁴³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.61

⁴⁴

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799873/Protecting-the-Debate-Government-Response-2019.05.01.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/contents/enacted>

⁴⁶ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9192/CBP-9192.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.68

the Electoral Commission about behaviour which candidates may experience during elections that is likely to constitute a criminal offence.⁴⁸

Securing free and fair elections

What are the barriers to an individual feeling safe and able to stand, campaign and serve as an MP?

32. We have not taken wider evidence on all of the barriers to an individual feeling safe and able to stand for election and serve as an MP. However, the Committee's evidence was clear that intimidation – which can include physical violence, threats of violence, damage to property, and abusive online and offline communication (e.g. racism, sexism, antisemitism, homophobia and transphobia), amongst other activities – is a significant barrier to an individual feeling safe enough to stand, campaign and serve as an MP. The overwhelming view of candidates in 2017 was that this intimidatory behaviour is stopping them from wanting to engage in public life at all.
33. Intimidation does not only impact decisions about standing for election, but also changes the way candidates and MPs work and interact with constituents and the public. In 2017, some sitting MPs said that they had to make their surgeries less readily accessible by not holding them in public and by making them appointment only, reduce their public appearances, and be accompanied to and in some cases, seek protection from the police, at events, especially during elections.⁴⁹

How do threats, abuse and harassment affect the staff and families of candidates and MPs? And how does this affect decisions about standing, campaigning and serving as an MP?

34. The Committee heard that the prevalence of intimidation in public life has an impact beyond parliamentary candidates and MPs. It affects candidates' families, staff, party volunteers and voters. Distressing stories about threats, harassment and abuse were made towards family members of candidates and MPs, including children. For example, there was a case where a freelance journalist had doorstepped the seven-year-old child of a parliamentary candidate at their family home without parental knowledge or consent. In this instance, both the candidate and their child were extremely distressed.⁵⁰
35. Several candidates said that the impact of intimidation on their families in particular would likely stop them from standing for election in the future. For example, former MP Dr Lisa Cameron told us in 2017: *"I wouldn't have given up my job and stood for election if the abuse I would receive had been explained to me. I wouldn't have. I believed I had something to contribute with lengthy experience in the NHS, but I have*

⁴⁸ https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Joint-Guidance-for-Candidates-in-Elections.pdf

⁴⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.78

⁵⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.75

a young family, and I wouldn't have wanted to put them through it. Their wellbeing is the priority".⁵¹

36. The impact of intimidation towards the staff, supporters and volunteers of candidates was also significant, with evidence suggesting that they could be “put off from standing for elected and appointed public offices altogether if they experience intimidation or witness it before they are even a candidate”.⁵²

How does the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation during election periods affect the risk to candidates, and are there sufficient measures in place to identify, tackle and deter such material?

37. We did not take evidence on the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation during elections and the impact of that on the risk to candidates in 2017, and have not since. However, we have kept on top of general developments in this space.
38. In May 2024, we met with Professor Kate Dommett, Professor of Digital Politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield, and Dr Sam Power, then Senior Lecturer in Politics in the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex⁵³, about the risks of misinformation during campaigning.⁵⁴ Notably, we heard that:
- misinformation is little regulated in existing electoral law – with the most relevant legal framework being Section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983⁵⁵, which makes it an offence to make false statements relating to the character or conduct of a political candidate unless there are reasonable grounds for doing so. However, Section 106 is rarely used. Therefore, there may be scope to update electoral law in this space;
 - the main intervention to prevent the spread of misinformation tends to be Codes of Conduct, which although sometimes criticised as being “toothless”, can be a useful first step for putting in place clear expectations for campaign conduct. However, because some malign actors will fall out of the scope of existing accountability systems, a multifaceted approach to misinformation is necessary; and
 - increasing transparency interventions, such as digital imprints and warning labels to flag misinformation by official fact checkers is necessary, but has some limitations.⁵⁶

⁵¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.29

⁵² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.79

⁵³ Now lecturer at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, Bristol University

⁵⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6674159af92bc4be25da7ed6/31_Minutes_of_16_May_2024_meeting.pdf

⁵⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1983/2/section/106>

39. CSPL is also concerned that the advent of AI may present a variety of new threats to our electoral integrity through disinformation. Deep fake images and other forms of disinformation especially if spread by social media present new problems in any attempt to control what can be circulated and create an atmosphere of civility in campaigns and beyond them. However, we have not taken evidence on this.

Protection of candidates and MPs

What more can be done to tackle malicious communications targeted at MPs and candidates on social media platforms?

40. The Committee made a significant number of recommendations to social media companies in 2017 to help them take better responsibility for tackling intimidation and abuse targeted at MPs and candidates on their platforms. Please refer back to paragraphs 8, 9, 11 and 17.
41. The Committee was pleased to see that progress had been made by social media companies on these issues in 2020. However, we are concerned that recent policy changes made by Meta around content moderation⁵⁷ clearly go against the intentions of the Committee's 2017 recommendations.⁵⁸ We will monitor developments in this space.

What steps should political parties take to help tackle threats against candidates, MPs and elections?

42. Political parties are the cornerstone of democratic engagement within the political system. The Committee feels strongly that every political party, no matter their size or politics, must demonstrate leadership in combating intimidation in public life. This includes: setting an appropriate tone for public debate around elections for their campaigners and supporters; addressing intimidatory behaviour undertaken by their members; and providing support to their candidates and members who face intimidation. Leaders of political parties should be aware of how their behaviour shapes the behaviour of party members and supporters, and take steps to eradicate any culture of intimidation in politics.
43. Political parties are membership organisations with staff often working on a voluntary basis with limited resources. They do, however, have a responsibility to ensure their members are aware of the behaviour expected of them, and take the necessary steps to discipline those who engage in intimidation. As noted in paragraphs 9 and 11, this should be done through parties' own codes of conduct, which have in place sufficiently robust sanctions for intimidatory behaviour.

⁵⁶

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6674159af92bc4be25da7ed6/31_Minutes_of_16_May_2024_meeting.pdf

⁵⁷ <https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2025/01/metas-new-content-policy-will-harm-vulnerable-users-if-it-really-valued-free>

44. On providing support to candidates and members dealing with intimidation, the Committee said in 2017 that political parties should: prepare candidates better for the “ruthless nature of campaigning”; develop welfare support networks for candidates to “break the culture of silence” around intimidation; and signpost candidates to counselling and other services.⁵⁹ The Committee also said that political parties must play a role in supporting candidates online as part of their duty of care, and offer social media training. We maintain this view.
45. Ahead of the 2024 General Election, the Chair of the Committee wrote to the Prime Minister and the leaders of all of the political parties in the UK to remind them that they and their candidates have a responsibility to uphold the Nolan Principles and to promote civility during the election.⁶⁰ We also issued a joint statement with the Electoral Commission calling on all parties contesting the election to campaign respectfully.⁶¹ It asked candidates to sign up to the Jo Cox Foundation Civility Pledge, which called on candidates to use a civil and constructive tone in political debate; act with integrity, honesty and compassion; and behave respectfully towards others, even those they disagree with.⁶² We remain of the view that everyone involved in campaigning has a role in ensuring it remains safe and respectful – as well as full of vibrant and strongly felt political debate; and that our democracy depends on the free and fair participation of all candidates.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

6 February 2025

Annex A

Intimidation in Public Life report recommendations

Recommendation	Responsibility
Government should bring forward legislation to shift the liability of illegal content online towards	Government

⁵⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>, p.53

⁶⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letters-to-political-party-leaders-and-parliamentary-candidates-about-upholding-standards-of-conduct-ahead-of-the-forthcoming-general-election>

⁶¹ <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/campaigning-your-vote/abuse-and-intimidation>

⁶² <https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/our-work/respectful-politics/civility-pledge/>

social media companies.	
Government should consult on the introduction of a new offence in electoral law of intimidating Parliamentary candidates and party campaigners.	Government
Government should bring forward legislation to remove the requirement for candidates standing as local councillors to have their home addresses published on the ballot paper. Returning Officers should not disclose the home addresses of those attending an election court.	Government
Local Authority Monitoring Officers should ensure that members required to declare pecuniary interests are aware of the sensitive interests provisions in the Localism Act 2011.	Local Authority Monitoring Officers
MPs should actively co-operate with the police and other security services working to address the security threats facing Parliamentarians and Parliamentary candidates.	MPs
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.	Political parties
Political parties must proactively work together to tackle the issue of intimidation in public life.	Political parties
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.	Political parties
Political parties must ensure that party members who breach the party's code of conduct by engaging in intimidation are consistently and appropriately disciplined in a timely manner.	Political parties
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.	Political parties

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.	Political parties
The political parties must work together to develop a joint code of conduct on intimidatory behaviour during election campaigns by December 2018. The code should be jointly enforced by the political parties.	Political parties
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.	Political parties
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.	Political parties
The Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should develop a strategy for engaging with international partners to promote international consensus on what constitutes hate crime and intimidation online.	Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
The National Police Chiefs Council should ensure that local police forces have sufficient training to enable them to effectively investigate offences committed through social media. Local police forces should be able to access advice and guidance on the context in which MPs and Parliamentary candidates work.	National Police Chiefs Council
The National Police Chiefs Council, working with the Crown Prosecution Service and the College of Policing, should produce accessible guidance for Parliamentary candidates giving clear advice on behaviour they may experience during a campaign which is likely to constitute a criminal offence.	National Police Chiefs Council, Crown Prosecution Service and College of Policing
The College of Policing Authorised Professional	College of Policing

Practice for elections should be updated to include offences relating to intimidation, including offences committed through social media.	
Social media companies must develop and implement automated techniques to identify intimidatory content posted on their platforms. They should use this technology to ensure intimidatory content is taken down as soon as possible.	Social media companies
Social media companies must do more to prevent users being inundated with hostile messages on their platforms, and to support users who become victims of this behaviour.	Social media companies
Social media companies must implement tools to enhance the ability of users to tackle online intimidation through user options.	Social media companies
All social media companies must ensure they are able to make decisions quickly and consistently on the takedown of intimidatory content online.	Social media companies
Twitter, Facebook and Google must publish UK-level performance data on the number of reports they receive, the percentage of reported content that is taken down, and the time it takes to take down that content, on at least a quarterly basis.	Social media companies
Social media companies must urgently revise their tools for users to escalate any reports of potential illegal online activity to the police.	Social media companies
Social media companies should work with the government to establish a 'pop up' social media reporting team for election campaigns.	Social media companies
Social media companies should actively provide advice, guidance and support to Parliamentary candidates on steps they can take to remain safe and secure while using their sites.	Social media companies
Press regulation bodies should extend their codes of conduct to prohibit unacceptable language that incites intimidation.	Press regulation bodies (IPSO and Impress)
News organisations should only consider stories from freelance journalists that meet the standards of IPSO's Editors Code, or the Editorial Guidelines of Impress, as appropriate,	News organisations

and ensure that freelance journalists are aware of this policy.	
Nobody in public life should engage in intimidatory behaviour, nor condone or tolerate it. All those in public life have a responsibility to challenge and report it wherever it occurs.	All those in public life
Those in public life should seek to uphold high standards of conduct, adhering to the Seven Principles of Public Life, and help prevent a decline in public trust in political institutions through their own conduct.	All those in public life
Those in public life must set and protect a tone in public discourse which is not dehumanising or derogatory, and which recognises the rights of others to participate in public life.	All those in public life
Those in public life have a responsibility not to use language which engenders hatred or hostility towards individuals because of their personal characteristics.	All those in public life
Those in public life should not engage in highly personalised attacks, nor portray policy disagreements or questions of professional competence as breaches of ethical standards.	All those in public life