

Update on tackling intimidation in public life

In July 2017, the then Prime Minister commissioned the independent and respected Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake a review into abuse and intimidation in elections. This followed concerning evidence from many Parliamentary candidates – across the political spectrum – on their experiences during the 2017 general election.

For those in public life, it has become harder and harder to conduct any political discussion, on any issue, without it descending into tribalism and rancour. Social media and digital communication – which in themselves can and should be forces for good in our democracy – are being exploited and abused, often anonymously.

It is important to distinguish between strongly felt political debate on one hand, and unacceptable acts of abuse, hatred, intimidation and violence. British democracy has always been robust and oppositional. But a line is crossed when disagreement mutates into intimidation.

Left unchecked, abuse and intimidation will change our democracy and mean that the way Members interact with constituents will need to change. Increasing levels of threats directed at those in public life is a worrying trend that will require a coordinated and thorough response from government, the relevant authorities, businesses and the public themselves to address.

As the general election campaign commences, I want to update the House on the actions that the Government has taken to tackle intimidation, and the steps that the Government is taking in this specific election.

Prosecution guidance

We have worked with the Law Officers to publish new guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for the legal authorities on the laws on intimidation, and the wide range of areas in which intimidation can be prosecuted under existing laws. This has been complemented by guidance to the police from the National Police Chiefs Council.

The CPS guidance can be found at: [Responding to intimidating behaviour: Information for Parliamentarians](#). The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), CPS, College of Policing and Electoral Commission have also issued [Joint Guidance for Candidates in Elections](#), which is distributed by the Electoral Commission.

Supporting local councils

We have passed legislation to remove the requirements for candidates running for local government, parish council, and local mayoral elections, to have

their addresses on their ballot papers.

We have written to Local Authority Chief Executives, to raise awareness about the sensitive interest provisions in the Localism Act 2011 which protect the personal addresses of councillors in England, ensuring that monitoring officers are aware of the guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

New legislation to tackle intimidation

We have consulted on our Internet Safety Strategy Green paper, and we published the world-leading DCMS-Home Office Online Harms White Paper in April 2019. This set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we will tackle online harms and set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe. It established a government-wide approach to online safety, delivering the Digital Charter's ambitions of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online, whilst also leading the world in innovation-friendly regulation that supports the growth of the tech sector.

The White Paper set out the Government's intention to introduce a new mandatory 'duty of care', which will require relevant companies to take reasonable steps to keep their users safe and tackle illegal and harmful activity on their services. It stated that the new regulatory framework will make clear companies' responsibility to address the harm of "online abuse of public figures". The White Paper also included ambitious measures to support education and awareness for all users and to promote the development and adoption of new safety technologies.

The Cabinet Office has undertaken a public consultation entitled 'Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information'. From that we committed to legislate to introduce a new electoral offence, clarify the electoral offence of undue influence of a voter, and introduce a digital imprints regime.

Digital imprints

We recognise the important arguments in favour of having a digital imprints regime in place as soon as possible, but it was not possible to legislate for and implement a regime in advance of a December election. Technical considerations would need to be addressed, for example to avoid the need for individual candidates and campaigners to publish their home addresses as part of an imprint. Moreover, for a digital imprints regime to work properly, political parties, campaigners and others would need to understand on what material they are required to include an imprint. Rushing into a new regime – that could have proved unworkable – could have led to significant issues, including confusion, unintentionally stifling democratic debate or to people unknowingly committing an offence.

The Government is committed to implementing a digital imprints regime as soon as it can – but it must be a workable regime.

Defending Democracy Programme

On 22 July 2019, the Government announced the Defending Democracy programme that will help maintain the integrity of our democracy and electoral processes. This cross-government programme, led by the Cabinet Office, has been set up to: * protect and secure UK democratic processes, systems and institutions from interference, including from cyber, personnel and physical threats; * strengthen the integrity of UK elections; * encourage respect for open, fair and safe democratic participation; and * promote fact-based and open discourse, including online.

Earlier this year, this Government committed to publishing a consultation on electoral integrity, which will look at measures to improve voters' confidence in our democracy.

Protection of candidates

The Parliamentary Liaison and Investigations Team (PLAIT) and the Members Security Support Team (MSSS) will continue to support Members once they become candidates after dissolution. Personal security advice and guidance has been provided to all Members, and there is a package of security measures available for homes and constituency offices.

- Local police forces are chiefly responsible for the security of candidates. As such, they have been briefed on their responsibilities regarding the delivery of protective security measures. The Home Secretary wrote to Chief Constables on 21st October 2019, and the Security Minister wrote to PCCs, to ensure that they prioritised tackling the intimidation and abuse of Members and candidates.
- Local police forces also have a dedicated point of contact for candidates who can be contacted for security advice. All urgent concerns, or contact outside of office hours, should be directed to police control rooms, who have been briefed to provide suitable guidance and support.
- Recognising that intimidation can take a number of forms, the Cabinet Office will coordinate with the Police, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and others to issue a package of security guidance, including how to report it. Following the dissolution of Parliament, this guidance will be sent to all Returning Officers, to be issued to all candidates in every constituency.

The Cabinet Office, in its cross government coordination role, has set up an Election Cell which will meet regularly during the election campaign period and whose attendees include organisations responsible for the safety of candidates.

Advice to candidates regarding abuse online

Social media helps Members and candidates connect with the public and can and should be a force for good in our democracy. However, there have been worrying trends of abuse and threats directed towards Members of all parties, and particularly female and BAME Members. The Government believes this is completely unacceptable.

Illegal activity online should be treated in the same way as illegal activity offline, and reported to the police. Social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, have also developed guidance and dedicated mailboxes for reporting abuse and intimidation against candidates during an election. Today, the Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and I have written to social media companies asking them to work together during this election to provide clear advice to candidates in one place so candidates know what content breaches their terms and conditions, where to report suspected breaches and what they can expect once a report has been made. We have also asked that they work together to identify where abusive users towards candidates are migrating between platforms and to encourage more proactivity on this. A copy of this letter has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Conclusion

Democracy is a fundamental British value and one underpinned by respectful, vibrant and robust debate. But this freedom cannot be an excuse to cause harm, spread hatred or impose views upon others – a line is crossed when disagreement mutates into intimidation, violence or abuse.

Our politics will be the poorer if talented potential candidates – people who just want to stand to represent their peers and stand up for their areas – decide not to get involved out of fear for their or their loved ones safety. If fewer candidates put themselves forward, then voters will have less choice at the ballot box.

The Government will take all necessary steps to protect the debate, have put in place measures to support candidates with their safety for this election and have ambitious plans to tackle online and offline abuse of those in public life beyond.