

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Date of Meeting	Thursday 24 February 2022
Report Subject	WLGA Fair Campaigns Pledge
Report Author	Chief Officer (Governance)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The WLGA has been concerned for some time that there has been a coarsening of public debate with elected representatives at all levels being subject to increasing levels of vilification and personal abuse. The WLGA Executive Board has resolved that they will themselves run positive campaigns based on merit, will not resort to personal abuse and will “call out” poor behaviour. They also called on all candidates at the forthcoming elections to give a similar pledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That all Councillors intending to seek re-election make a Fair Campaigns Pledge.
2	That the Returning Officer be requested to ask all candidates at the forthcoming elections to make a Fair Campaigns Pledge.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE FAIR CAMPAIGNS PLEDGE
1.01	The WLGA has been concerned for some time about the coarsening of public debate and the increasing levels of abuse and even intimidation directed at Councillors, especially on line. It has worked with the Campaign on Civility in Public Life to try and counter this trend. The WLGA Executive Board recently agreed to support a ‘Fair Campaigns’ Pledge for local consideration, to outline a clear public statement about expectations about respect and tone of political debate in the elections period.

1.02	Political parties already have guidelines or codes of conduct for candidates and have internal disciplinary procedures. There is also an inter-party complaints resolution process in Wales to try to resolve any complaints about local party activity during election periods.
1.03	Serving Councillors, who are seeking re-election, remain bound by the statutory Code of Conduct, which sets out high standards of conduct including treating others with respect and consideration and prohibiting bullying behaviour or harassment. The Public Services Ombudsman has previously reported concerns that Code of Conduct complaints about Councillors increase significantly in the run-up to the election and would be supportive of any efforts to encourage good behaviour and respect during elections. Whilst serving Councillors are bound by the Code of Conduct, other candidates are not and concerns have been previously raised that election campaigns are not always conducted 'on a level playing field' as a result.
1.04	A series of infographics for Councillors and candidates (see Appendix 1) have recently been produced through the Civility in Public Life campaign. These set out 'rules' and expected standards of debate on social media platforms and top tips on handling online abuse. These are available in both Welsh and English for download and use on Councillors' social media at Digital citizenship: support and resources for councillors Local Government Association
1.05	Neither the Council nor the Returning Officer can control how candidates for election behave. However, the Returning Officer will hold briefings with potential candidates before the notice of election is published. He will hold similar briefings with confirmed candidates thereafter. He is willing to ask all those considering standing for election to make a Fair Campaign Pledge.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	It is anticipated that the introduction of the Fair Campaign Pledge will have few resource implications.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	None.

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	It is possible that the Fair Campaign Pledge might be portrayed as a restriction on freedom of political expression (which is a human right). That right permits the expression of views in a sometimes challenging or offensive manner to make a point. It is important therefore that when asking candidates to make such a pledge:

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) their ability to campaign on any issue and in the manner they choose is reaffirmed; and 2) that they are nevertheless reminded of the consequences to themselves and society of campaigning based on misinformation, abuse etc.
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5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – infographic Fair Campaign Pledge.

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	<p>None</p> <p>Contact Officer: Gareth Owens, Chief Officer (Governance) Telephone: 01352 702344 E-mail: Gareth.legal@flintshire.gov.uk</p>

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>WLGA – the representative body for all County and County Borough Councils in Wales. As well as representative role it also co-ordinates activity especially where all Councils need to undertake a common task (e.g. recruiting Lay Members).</p> <p>Campaign for Civility in Public Life – is the name for collective action being taken by the local government associations in the 4 home nations primarily aimed at</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) articulating good standards for anyone engaging in public and political discourse; 2) understanding the scale and impact of intimidation and abusive behaviour on the respective membership organisations, and developing recommendations for achieving positive debate and public decision-making on a local level; 3) supporting the members of each association and all democratically elected local representatives in addressing intimidation and abuse, so they deliver the best on behalf of their communities. <p>Returning Officer – a statutory position with responsibility to manage the election process. The position is nominated to but not employed by the Council. It is commonly held by the Chief Executive in addition to their role within the Council, and that is the case for Flintshire.</p>