COSLA

CIVILITY IN PUBLIC LIFE



CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Across Scotland, as well as elsewhere in the UK and internationally, there is growing concern about the health of our civic culture and the quality of public debate. While disagreement and robust challenge are essential features of a healthy democracy, recent years have seen a shift in tone and behaviour that risks undermining democratic participation, public trust, and social cohesion. This Civility Action Plan is a collective response to that challenge.

What do we mean by civility?

In this context, civility refers broadly to the norms, attitudes and behaviours that shape how people interact with one another and engage with society, including with politics/politicians, public life and online spaces. It is influenced by societal expectations about what is acceptable, which in turn affect how people think, speak and act. Civility does not mean avoiding disagreement or legitimate challenge; it means engaging with others in ways that recognise their dignity, allow differences to be expressed without intimidation or dehumanisation, and supporting safe and meaningful participation. It can be seen in respectful debate, constructive challenge and responsible conduct, while its absence can manifest in hostility, abuse and harassment, as well as sexism and misogyny, violence against women and girls, racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

A CHANGING GLOBAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

We are living in a period of sustained global uncertainty. Geopolitical instability, economic pressure, climate anxiety, public health shocks and rapid technological change have all contributed to a heightened sense of insecurity. Against this backdrop, progress towards gender equality has come under increasing pressure, alongside wider challenges to established human rights and equality gains, with growing evidence of resistance to, and in some cases regression from, previously agreed standards and commitments.

These pressures shape political discourse and public behaviour, often driving polarisation, mistrust and anger.Internationally, democratic norms are under strain, with visible increases in authoritarian rhetoric, dis and mis information, and hostility towards democratic institutions and those who serve within them. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report named societal polarisation as one of the top global risks for 2026.

Scotland is not immune to these wider trends.

Although our democratic institutions remain strong, the wider environment in which democratic debate takes place has changed significantly. The speed and reach of digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped public and political discourse. Platform design, algorithmic recommendation systems and user behaviours can interact in ways that reward content that provokes strong emotional responses and sustained engagement. This can enable divisive, misleading or harmful narratives to spread rapidly and at scale, influencing attitudes and behaviours while reinforcing social divisions. The cumulative effect can be a less respectful and more hostile public sphere, with significant implications for democratic participation, public trust and the safety of those engaged in public life, particularly women and marginalised groups. The use of bots and coordinated inauthentic activity can further distort online debate, making certain views appear more widespread or extreme than they are and contributing to confusion, mistrust and division. These dynamics often reward outrage, simplification and confrontation over deliberation, nuance and mutual respect. This has consequences not only for political culture, but for how people experience everyday civic life.



RISING ABUSE AND INTIMIDATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

One of the most concerning manifestations of this changing climate is the increase in abuse, intimidation and harassment directed at people involved in public life. Elected representatives at local and national levels, candidates, activists, and public facing workers have all reported higher levels of hostility, both in person and online. This behaviour disproportionately affects women, people from ethnic minority groups, and others from marginalised groups, reinforcing existing inequalities in representation.

Engenders Part of the Job Report published June 2026 found that 90% of women councillors surveyed had experienced sexism, misogyny or gender-based violence at some point during their career as a councillor.

2026 Debate Not Hate survey – 80% of responding councillors reported feeling at least some level of personal risk when fulfilling their role as a councillor

Hate Crime figures for Scotland for 2026 show an increase in hate crime directed towards people based on disability, race, sexual orientation and trans identity.

Teachers and school support staff, social care workers, Police officers, healthcare workers and many other public facing roles have reported rising levels of abuse in recent years.

The impact is profound. Abuse and intimidation can deter people from standing for election, limit who feels able to participate in public debate, and place significant emotional and psychological strain on those who serve their communities. Over time, this threatens the resilience and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Representative democracy is not simply a 'nice to have'; it is fundamental to effective and legitimate governance. When elected institutions reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, policymaking benefits from a wider range of lived experience, knowledge and perspectives. This helps decision makers to identify impacts that might otherwise be overlooked, understand how challenges are experienced by different groups, and design responses that are more inclusive, practical and responsive to local needs. Broader representation therefore strengthens the quality of decisions as well as public confidence in them, ultimately leading to fairer policies and better outcomes for communities.

DEMOCRATIC WELLBEING AND PARTICIPATION

Alongside these pressures sit broader concerns about democratic wellbeing. Participation in formal democratic processes, trust in institutions, and confidence that political engagement can bring about positive change have shown signs of fragility. When public discourse becomes increasingly hostile or dismissive, people may withdraw – not only from politics, but from civic life more broadly.

Respectful debate and civility are essential, not as a call for conformity or the avoidance of difficult conversations or rigorous debate, but as a condition that makes participation possible. Respectful disagreement, fair challenge, and a shared commitment to democratic norms are essential if individuals and communities are to feel heard, valued and safe to contribute.

The erosion of civility can also create space for more extreme viewpoints to take hold. Where dialogue breaks down, differences are framed as threats rather than disagreements, and trust between communities weakens. This can be exploited by those seeking to divide, scapegoat or undermine democratic values.

A focus on civility is therefore not separate from work to prevent extremism, build community resilience or promote community cohesion. It is part of the same endeavour: strengthening the social foundations that allow pluralism, disagreement and shared problem-solving to coexist.



WHY A COLLECTIVE, CROSS-SECTOR RESPONSE IS NEEDED

These challenges cannot be addressed by any single institution or sector acting alone. Civility is shaped across many domains: politics, public services, media, education, community life, online spaces and civil society. Responsibility is similarly shared.

This Civility Action Plan brings together partners from across the public sector and civil society in recognition that:

- **Standards of behaviour are set and reinforced collectively**
- **Public trust is influenced by everyday interactions, not just formal politics**
- **Preventative, relationship-based approaches are more sustainable than reactive ones**

The plan is not about limiting free expression or blunting legitimate political disagreement. Rather, it seeks to establish practical supports and collaborative actions that can tackle some of the root causes of incivility as well as address some of the manifestations.

Acting now is both necessary and timely. The cumulative impact of global uncertainty, digital transformation and domestic pressures risks normalising behaviours that weaken democratic culture. At the same time, there is widespread appetite – across institutions and communities – for a different approach: one that values empathy, accountability and respect alongside robust debate.

This Action Plan is an opportunity for Scotland's public, voluntary and civic sectors to show leadership together, affirming a collective commitment to civility as a democratic strength, not a constraint, and to safeguarding the conditions in which everyone can participate in public life with confidence and dignity.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

This Civility Action Plan is intended to be a living document. It will evolve over time to reflect emerging global and national trends, developments in technology and public discourse and new challenges affecting civic life in Scotland.

The actions set out here are not fixed or exhaustive; they will be reviewed and adapted as learning is shared, evidence develops and the wider context continues to change. The plan is also open and collaborative. We welcome engagement and additional input from partners and organisations who are not yet involved but share an interest in strengthening civility, democratic participation and respectful public debate. Those who wish to contribute to or help shape the continuing development of this work are warmly encouraged to get in touch with COSLA on corporatepolicyteam@cosla.gov.uk.

RECOGNISING WIDER STRUCTURAL PRESSURES

The challenges affecting civility in public life do not arise in isolation from wider systemic and structural factors and inequalities. Long-standing issues such as accessibility and inclusiveness of local and national government structures, processes, gaps in democratic literacy and the adequacy of institutional support for elected members all shape how people experience participation, representation and debate.

Pressures on time, resources and capacity within democratic institutions can exacerbate stress, vulnerability and conflict, particularly for those in public facing roles. While this Action Plan cannot, on its own, resolve these broader structural challenges, it seeks to acknowledge their influence and avoid treating civility as a purely behavioural or individual issue. The actions outlined here are therefore intended to complement, rather than substitute for, wider efforts to modernise democratic institutions, strengthen support for those who serve within them and improve the conditions that enable respectful, inclusive, safe and effective participation in public life.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PRESSURES, ABUSE AND THE CASE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Much of the abuse and intimidation experienced by elected members in local government must be understood in the context of the erosion of local government budgets. Sustained reductions over many years to local government funding have required councillors to take increasingly difficult decisions about service provision, prioritisation and the reallocation of scarce resources.

The decisions that elected members are forced to take can be unpopular and have a direct, tangible impact on communities and often reflect constrained choices rather than local preference. At the same time, wider challenges such as the cost of living crisis have placed significant additional strain on households, intensifying frustration and anxiety and further limiting the capacity of women and other people underrepresented in local government to participate. In this context, communities can experience a growing sense of diminished influence over local spending and decision making, contributing to feelings of exclusion and disempowerment which may, at times, manifest as anger or hostility directed towards individual elected members and public officials.

Addressing the conditions that give rise to such dynamics requires not only action on civility but renewed attention to the role, powers and resourcing of local government. An empowered system of local democracy, supported by adequate sustainable funding, reduced ring-fencing and directed spend, and greater financial flexibility to respond to local priorities can help to restore trust, accountability and meaningful participation. While this Action Plan cannot deliver these structural reforms, it recognises that a well-resourced and trusted local government sector is a critical foundation for healthier public discourse for enabling members and communities to engage with one another in a more constructive and respectful way.



CONCLUSION

The partners involved in the development of the Civility Action Plan share a commitment to building a Scotland where disagreement is robust yet respectful, participation is safe and everyone can contribute with confidence. The Plan provides a framework for collective action and offers a basis for partners to come together, share learning and adapt approaches over time. Through sustained collaboration, we can help to build a civic culture in Scotland where challenge is welcomed, abuse is not accepted and democratic participation is strengthened.

If your organisation would like to get involved, please contact corporatepolicyteam@cosla.gov.uk.