

Support for Principal Officers Experiencing Abuse, Harassment and Intimidation

Document Control

Responsible Dept	Chief Executive	Author / Reviewer	Director of Performance & Engagement
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1. Introduction

- 1.1. Unfortunately, employees who work in the public sector, including those in high profile roles such as Chief Fire Officers, can be subject to abuse, harassment and intimidation from members of the public and current or former employees. There will inevitably be occasions when people will wish to challenge an organisation or its leadership, for example if they feel that either have behaved improperly, unethically or unlawfully. Legal, democratic challenge is welcome, and when it is presented in a constructive way it can provide an opportunity for discussion and identification of potential improvements in service.
- 1.2. In recent years, however, there has been an increase in levels of abuse and harassment across the sector, particularly through social media platforms. Feedback from senior colleagues particularly in the Fire Leaders Association (FLA) suggests this situation has been getting increasingly worse.
- 1.3. Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRAs) have a duty to take reasonable steps to protect their employees from bullying and harassment. While abuse and harassment can't always be prevented, there is an increasing expectation for all organisations to take reasonable steps to address it and mitigate it so far as is possible.
- 1.4. This policy sets out how the Staffordshire Commissioner's Office (SCO) will meet its responsibility to prevent or reduce intimidation or abuse and particularly support staff who experience online harassment. It applies to the Chief Fire Officer and the Principal Officer Team (Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Director of Finance, Assets & Resources. All these positions are appointed directly or with the

approval of the Commissioner and these roles are together referred to as **“Principal Officers”**. Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service is responsible for ensuring equivalent policies are in place to protect and support Firefighters and staff under their direction.

2. Background

- 2.1. FRS employees, like other public facing roles, can often face heightened public scrutiny. However, this is increasingly escalating into the abuse, harassment or intimidation of these employees, affecting their mental, physical and professional wellbeing.
- 2.2. In late 2024, a working group of principal officers conducted a survey to examine the issue. Responses were received from 44 UK FRSs (85%). The results reveal the extent of the problem of abuse, harassment and intimidation across FRSs and the lack of available support. 65% of respondents stated that they had experienced abuse, attacks or trolling as a result of their role. Of those, 41% said the most recent incident had occurred within the last three months and 19% stated family members had been targeted.
- 2.3. Officers reported facing online, verbal, and physical abuse. This abuse can take the form of complaints and allegations; racism, sexism, and misogyny; social media harassment; threats and intimidation; and undermining credibility. There were also reports of union-driven hostility and abuse around workplace or historical issues.
- 2.4. The survey revealed that abuse, harassment, and intimidation have a significant negative impact on the health, wellbeing and happiness of senior officers and their families. This includes threats to their personal safety and the safety of family members, reduced confidence levels, physical impacts from loss of sleep, anxiety, and strain on family relationships.
- 2.5. This may lead to demotivation, sick leave, or resignation, and has legal risks if the employer has failed to act appropriately to prevent or protect employees from the abuse. It can also be a factor in colleagues not wanting to seek promotion to senior leadership roles.
- 2.6. LGA Guidance (Circular EMP/3/25), issued in July 2025, states that policies and practices should be in place to the address emotional and psychological harm arising from online abuse or harassment.

3. Definitions

- 3.1. Not all views can or should be deemed as either abuse, harassment or intimidation, irrespective of how offensive they may be determined by others or how unpleasantly they may be presented. This section provides some definitions of key terms.
- 3.2. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define work-related violence as any abuse, threats, or assaults linked to a person's job, including verbal or online abuse. This can come from members of the public, service users or others and can be verbal abuse or threats made face-to-face as well as by telephone, letters or online.
- 3.3. **Abuse:** The Home Office and the Department of Health Guidance on Developing and Implementing Multi-agency Policies and Procedures to Protect Vulnerable Adults from Abuse defines abuse as *"a single act or repeated physical, verbal or psychological acts that violate an individual's human and civil rights. Some cases of abuse constitute criminal offences, for example, physical, psychological, or sexual assault, theft, fraud, and gender and racial discrimination."*
- 3.4. **Online Abuse:** Online abuse, harassment and intimidation can be defined as *"harms facilitated by digital means"*, for example, shared content or direct messages on social media with threats of violence, abusive language, or behaviour. It also includes smear campaigns, bullying, body-centred abuse, doxing, impersonation, and inciting hate, among other activities. Online harassment, abuse and intimidation can be posted or shared in a range of platforms, including any social media platform, by email, or in online meeting platforms.
- 3.5. **Harassment:** The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 indicates that someone's actions amount to harassment when they make the victim feel distressed, humiliated, threatened, or fearful of further violence. The main goal of harassment is to persuade victims either not to do something that they are entitled or required to do or to do something that they are not obliged to do.
- 3.6. Actions listed under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 include, but are not limited to, phone calls; letters; emails; visits; stalking; verbal abuse of any kind, including on social media; threats; damage to property; and bodily harm. These actions amount to harassment when they occur more than once.
- 3.7. **Coercion:** The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Anti-Harassment Policy Guidelines define coercion and intimidation as forms of harassment. Coercion is defined as the action of forcefully persuading or threatening an individual to do something, which includes behaviours such as blackmail, extortion, or threats or physical and sexual assaults.

- 3.8. **Public Intimidation:** Public intimidation is defined by the LGA as, “*words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block, influence or deter participation in public debate or causing alarm or distress which could lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life.*”
- 3.9. The following actions and behaviours constitute public intimidation: verbal abuse; physical attacks; being stalked, followed, or loitered around; threats of harm; distribution of misinformation; character assassination; inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls, and communications on social media; sexual harassment or sexual assault; any other threatening behaviours, including malicious communications such as poison pen letters, indecent or grossly offensive emails, or graphic pictures that aim to cause distress or anxiety.

4. Online abuse, harassment and intimidation

- 4.1. While serious incidents such as hate crimes and harassment or threats to life have robust definitions and thresholds for police charges and legal consequences, the U.K. legal system does not have an absolute definition for online harassment.
- 4.2. As the Fire and Rescue Authority, however, the Commissioner has a duty to ensure appropriate support is in place for the Principal Officer Team, especially as some forms of online abuse and harassment may amount to hate crimes and malicious communications and may therefore have criminal consequences.
- 4.3. Online harassment can be carried out by known individuals and/or groups and/or anonymously. It is known by a variety of terms including cyberbullying, cyber aggression, online bullying, and cyber harassment.
- 4.4. There is no legal definition of cyberbullying, however it can broadly be described as the use of information and communications technology to support deliberate and hostile attempts to hurt, upset or humiliate another person.
- 4.5. This can include messages, comments or ‘tweets’ via an online social media platform (such as X, Facebook or Instagram), blogs, messaging boards (such as Reddit), or direct contact via email or mobile phone (including texts and other instant messages). The posting of private or personal details about someone online (known as ‘doxing’) would also be considered cyber bullying.
- 4.6. Instances of repeated allegations or complaints may fall into maliciousness. This can be hugely stressful for all involved and requires very firm and consistent handling

of processes to demonstrate integrity to the public, as well as support for employees during any investigation processes or formal procedures.

- 4.7. Under the legal framework, single instances or comments may not always amount to harassment, but if it is offensive, abusive, threatening or intending to cause distress it may be considered malicious communication.
- 4.8. In determining whether abusive speech is criminal, the police must balance several considerations, including freedom of expression and journalistic expression. Regardless of whether the abusive or intimidating message(s) results in police action, as the employer, we must consider what levels of support the employee experiencing this may need.
- 4.9. The Crown Prosecution Service website has useful additional information for understanding online harassment or crimes:
<https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/cyber-online-crime>
<https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/stalking-or-harassment>
- 4.10. Abuse of an employee *within* the Service (including online abuse) will be treated separately from abuse from members of the public. It is covered by the Fire Service Code of Ethics and SFRS policies relating to standards of behaviour and is therefore outside the scope of this policy.

5. Relevant Legislation

- 5.1. As the employer of the Principal Officer Team, the Commissioner has legal responsibilities, both under common law and health and safety legislation, to protect them from harm, including harm caused by abuse, harassment and intimidation.
- 5.2. Reasonable preventative measures are required by law to ensure a safe work environment, including acting to prevent online abuse and harassment as far as is possible. These duties apply even if the abuse doesn't meet the legal threshold for police action.
- 5.3. Women are particularly at risk of experiencing a variety of harmful behaviours online, such as image-based abuse and sexualised bullying. Employers must take reasonable steps to prevent their workers from being subjected to sexual harassment by third parties at work, including online harassment.

5.4. While abuse can't always be prevented, there is increasing expectation for organisations to take reasonable steps to address and mitigate it. The main pieces of legislation are:

- [The Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974](#): this places a legal duty on employers to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of workers. This includes protecting them from work-related violence, and maintenance of a working environment that is without risks to workers' health and is adequate as regards to facilities and arrangements for their welfare at work.
- [The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999](#): these specifically require employers to assess the health and safety risks to workers, including the risk of work-related violence and taking steps to eliminate or reduce the risk.
- [The Worker Protection \(Amendment of Equality Act 2010\) Act 2023](#): introduced a new specific duty for employers to be proactive and systematic in preventing and tackling sexual harassment at work.

5.5. Offences may fall under the following acts:

- [The Malicious Communications Act 1988](#)
- [The Protection from Harassment Act 1997](#)
- [The Communications Act 2003](#)
- [The Online Safety Act 2023](#)

6. How we will prevent and manage abuse, harassment and intimidation

6.1. Even where abuse, harassment and intimidation do not meet criminal thresholds, it may still have a profoundly negative impact on employees and their families, particularly if it is repeated and if it strays into additional concerning activity and/or threats.

6.2. We will judge the appropriate response to abuse and what support is needed on a case-by-case basis and to discuss the management of the situation with the member of staff affected.

6.3. To proactively manage the risk of abuse, harassment and intimidation, we will work with the Principal Officer Team to:

- **Conduct regular risk assessments** for physical and online safety to seek to eliminate or at least control risks.
- **Anticipate contentious decisions** that could trigger abuse and prepare support in advance. It is possible to identify potentially contentious decisions and offer proactive support, e.g. preparing communications.

- **Be aware of any vulnerable employees**, especially those with protected characteristics, who may face higher incidents of targeted online abuse, particularly racist, homophobic and misogynistic harassment.

6.4. To provide the Principal Officer Team with wellbeing and other support, we will:

- **Clearly communicate available support** for employees facing abuse or harassment.
- **Adjust duties or workloads** for affected employees to reduce exposure.
- **Acknowledge the emotional impact** of harassment and personal abuse and create a supportive environment, ensuring we act with empathy, speed and rigour to reports of abuse.
- **Debrief affected employees** after incidents and conduct follow-up risk assessments and consider what information or steps need to be shared more widely to protect employees.
- **Support police reporting**, if this is needed, by guiding employees through the process or providing evidence where necessary.

6.5. To ensure the right culture, communication channels and reporting mechanisms are in place, we will:

- **Encourage reporting for all incidents** and ensure systems are in place to record, gather evidence and respond to abuse appropriately.
- **Gather employee and staff association feedback** regularly to identify patterns of abuse and improve responses and support offered.
- **Clearly communicate our stance** on online abuse to all employees, the public, and service users.

6.6. Training and Awareness

- As the Principal Officer Team are senior officers in public-facing roles, **provide training** on handling abuse, digital self-defence and social media use.
- **Inform new members of the Principal Officer Team** during recruitment or induction about abuse risks and available support.

6.7. Digital and Social Media Guidance

- **Provide training on social media use** to help the Principal Officer Team protect accounts, guard personal information, and handle abuse.
- **Clarify use of work vs personal devices** and set boundaries around communication and information sharing of their own or other employee's data.
- **Report abuse to platforms** through formal organisational channels where possible.

7. Reporting and recording of abuse, harassment and intimidation

- 7.1. The Principal Officer Team are strongly encouraged to report all incidents of abuse, harassment and intimidation to the SCO Chief Executive in their role as Monitoring Officer to the Fire and Rescue Authority.
- 7.2. The Chief Executive will be responsible for overseeing the management, reporting and monitoring of issues relating to this policy. This includes patterns and nature of incidents and repeat offenders. This will support early risk identification and decision making on interventions e.g. applying vexatious persons policies.
- 7.3. Monitoring and impact assessments will be carried out through 2:2 Executive Review Meetings held by the Commissioner and the Chief Executive with the Chief Fire Officer and Deputy Chief Fire Officer. This will enable opportunities to improve the system to be identified and implemented.

8. How we will support employees experiencing abuse, harassment and intimidation

- 8.1. The support to be provided to individual member(s) the Principal Officer Team will be discussed and agreed between the Commissioner, Chief Fire Officer and the individual(s) affected. This support will be tailored but may include:
- **Single points of contact**, including out of office hours support for wellbeing, such as through Occupational Health, Safety & Welfare or an externally sourced provider of support services.
 - **Counselling** through Occupational Health, Safety & Welfare or an externally sourced provider of support services such as the Firefighters Charity.
 - **Conversations to manage workloads or review duties** to reduce exposure to individuals or groups who may be sending distressing messages.
 - **Technical support**, for example from IT teams offering technological support by enabling profanity filters etc.
 - **Legal services advice** for example if the police need to become involved
 - **Communication specialists** to engage with groups or individuals to inform them that their messaging is inappropriate
 - **Wellbeing guidance and support** from the [Fire Leaders Association](#) and [Local Government Association](#)

9. Monitoring

9.1. Compliance with this Policy will be monitored by the Chief Executive in their role as Monitoring Officer and the Director of Performance & Engagement as Deputy Monitoring Officer.

9.2. The Director of Performance & Engagement on behalf of the Chief Executive is responsible for the revision and updating of this document.

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