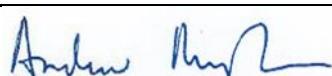


LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Member-officer relationships: bullying and harassment	
REPORT OF Borough Solicitor	
FOR SUBMISSION TO Standards Committee	DATE 26 th January 2026
SUMMARY OF REPORT <p>This report discusses a national focus on fostering positive working relationships between Members and officers as a cornerstone of effective local government, with particular attention on the impact of bullying behaviours. It considers Camden's governance framework for addressing bullying and harassment by councillors, comparing it with approaches adopted in neighbouring councils. The report concludes that Camden's framework is robust and highlights the upcoming post-election opportunity to re-engage all councillors with the Code of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocol.</p>	
Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information <p>No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report.</p>	
Contact Officer: Cheryl Hardman Principal Democratic Services Officer Camden Town Hall Judd Street London WC1H 9JE 020 7974 1619 cheryl.hardman@camden.gov.uk	
RECOMMENDATIONS <p>That Standards Committee note and comment on the report.</p>	

Signed:



Borough Solicitor

Date: 14 January 2026

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report discusses a national focus on fostering positive working relationships between Members and officers as a cornerstone of effective local government, with particular attention on the impact of bullying behaviours. It considers Camden's governance framework for addressing bullying and harassment by councillors, comparing it with approaches adopted in neighbouring councils. The report concludes that Camden's framework is robust and highlights the upcoming post-election opportunity to re-engage all councillors with the Code of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocol.

2. Good governance

- 2.1. Recently published guidance¹ by the Local Government Association (LGA) highlights the importance of effective working relationships between elected Members and officers to good governance and public service delivery. Where there are poor relationships, there is often a lack of trust, mutual respect and blurred boundaries between roles. This can result in inadequate challenge, weak financial oversight and poor decision-making. Statutory guidance on *Best Value Standards and Intervention*² identified 'a culture of bullying, distrust and broken relationships' as indicative of a potentially failing local authority.
- 2.2. The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) noted in its 2019 report, *Local Government Ethical Standards*³, that there were high standards of conduct within the sector but acknowledged evidence of misconduct by some councillors. Most of these cases related to bullying and harassment. The CSPL elaborated on the significant impact that bullying by councillors could have on the wellbeing of officers and other councillors, while potentially resulting in decision-making that is not in the public interest. The report understood the behaviour as a breach of the Nolan principle of leadership.
- 2.3. In its response to the recent consultation⁴ on the Standards and Conduct Framework, the Government highlighted the need for respectful behaviour as well as the distress experienced by victims of bullying and harassment. The strengthening of the framework is intended to reinforce high standards of conduct, ensuring respectful behaviour.

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/good-practice-guidance-member-officer-relations-protocols> [accessed: 19 December 2025]

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-value-standards-and-intervention-a-statutory-guide-for-best-valueAuthorities/best-value-standards-and-intervention-a-statutory-guide-for-best-valueAuthorities#defining-best-value> [accessed: 19 December 2025]

³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF [accessed: 22 December 2025]

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-the-standards-and-conduct-framework-for-local-authorities-in-england/outcome/strengthening-the-standards-and-conduct-framework-for-local-authorities-in-england-consultation-results-and-government-response#ministerial-foreword> [accessed: 19 December 2025]

2.4. The LGA has described a member-officer relations protocol as good practice; making a key contribution to supporting an effective organisational culture⁵. It notes that where expectations are not written down, they can be overlooked or misunderstood. It recommends that awareness is raised of the protocol's purpose and expectations during induction and refresher training for Members, using real-life scenarios and case studies. Group leaders are encouraged to support understanding and engagement with the protocol.

3. The approach in Camden

3.1. The Councillor Code of Conduct (Appendix A) in Camden replicates the provisions on bullying and harassment from the LGA Model Code of Conduct⁶. This adopts the comprehensive Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) definition of bullying, with the definition of harassment being drawn from the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. The Council supplemented the Model Code with examples of bullying, such inclusion having been recommended by the CSPL as best practice⁷.

3.2. The Member-Officer Protocol (Appendix B) provides guidance in support of both the Councillor and Officer Codes of Conduct. This addresses roles, responsibilities and relationships. The Protocol highlights the need for Members to recognise their position in relation to officers and avoid behaviours that could be regarded as bullying. This does not prevent Members from being critical of service performance but should not result in personal criticism of an officer, particularly in a public forum. The Protocol provides detailed advice on the contact between Members and officers. While in the main this contact will be with senior officers, it is recognised that there may be direct contacts with more junior staff when dealing with case work. The Protocol outlines the process for Members to follow should they have a complaint about an officer.

3.3. Training on the Code of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocol is provided during the induction of Members following local and by-elections.

4. Comparative practice analysis

4.1. A review was conducted of the Councillor Codes of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocols from 11 central and north London councils to identify if there were potential improvements for Camden's documents in relation to bullying and harassment behaviours. The councils examined were Barnet, Enfield, Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, Lambeth, Waltham Forest, Wandsworth and Westminster.

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/good-practice-guidance-member-officer-relations-protocols> [accessed 19 December 2025]

⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-government-association-model-councillor-code-conduct-2020#2-bullying-harassment-and-discrimination> [accessed: 22 December 2025]

⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF [accessed: 22 December 2025]

- 4.2. Most councils' Codes of Conduct require councillors to avoid behaviour that could be considered bullying or harassment. One council did not explicitly reference these terms, focusing instead on the principle of respect.
- 4.3. Five councils adopted the full ACAS definition of bullying from the Model Code, as included in Camden's Code. Four used a shorter version and one referenced ACAS but did not set out the definition in the Code.
- 4.4. Four councils continue to use the Equality Act 2010 definition of harassment rather than the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 definition found in the latest Model Code. The Council had responded to the 2020 draft Model Code of Conduct consultation recommending that harassment be defined in a way that did not require the protected characteristics to be engaged, and it updated to the 1997 definition once the final Model Code was published. It should be noted that promoting equalities and not discriminating unlawfully against any person is included as a separate obligation so the link between the Equality Act and Code of Conduct remains.
- 4.5. Only two councils, alongside Camden, provided examples of bullying and harassment within their Codes to support Members, officers and the public.
- 4.6. Member-Officer Protocols were broadly similar across councils, emphasising the link between positive working relationships and effective local government. While guidance on how to formally and respectfully address poor performance was common, detailed practical advice on Member-officer contact, such as that found in Camden's protocol, was less frequent.
- 4.7. Overall, Camden's Councillor Code of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocol compare favourably with neighbouring councils, offering a strong formal framework on bullying and harassment.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Positive working relationships between Members and officers are essential for effective governance. This can be undermined where some Members engage in behaviours that could be characterised as bullying or harassment. Nationally, there has been a focus on strengthening governance frameworks to reinforce high standards of conduct, in particular addressing concerns about bullying of officers. Having reviewed the approach to bullying and harassment by Members within Camden, the formal framework is strong and compares favourably to neighbouring councils. The upcoming induction offers an opportunity to engage all councillors with the Code of Conduct and Member-Officer Protocol.

6. Comments of the Director of Finance

- 6.1. The Director of Finance has been consulted and has no comments to add.

7. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

7.1. This is a report of the Borough Solicitor and there are no other legal comments.

8. Environmental Implications

8.1. There are no environmental impacts.

9. Appendices

Appendix A: Councillor Code of Conduct

Appendix B: Member/Officer Protocol

REPORT ENDS