

Motion put forward to the Cheshire Association of Local Councils AGM
by Alsager Town Council, 20 October 2021

Councillor Michael Unett, chair of Alsager Town Council's speech:

"We have certainly seen an eventful year. All the more eventful for local government when a teenager with an interest in politics and local councils found a recording of a Zoom meeting of a certain parish council, shared it around and it became a phenomenon. I think we know which one I am referring to – we've all seen it, we all know the quotes and ChALC's very own Jacquie Weaver is a national celebrity because of it – due to the expert way she handled that very difficult meeting.

That meeting sparked an interest in local town and parish councils and what we do. That was a definite positive, but I also feel it highlighted a significant problem. Because in the weeks and months following, example after example sprung up of rowdy meetings and councillor's bad behaviour in and outside of those meetings. And unfortunately all of those examples that reached significant attention were all Cheshire Councils.

This of course goes on across the country, but it is here where they have been the most notable.

And it is a small minority of people who act in this way, who frustrate meetings, abuse their position, swear at fellow councillors, bully and abuse fellow councillors, clerks and council staff and in some cases even their own residents.

I think that there are many of us, too many who at some point have had some experience of this or seen it for ourselves.

It may be a small minority who do this – but it affects us all – and it is up to all of us to change it – because the situation as it stands is not good enough.

Right now, there are very few powers available to appropriately sanction and hold to account elected representatives at our level of local government. There are those out there who think they can act however they want and are virtually untouchable between elections.

Never mind "you have no authority here, Jacquie Weaver", it very much feels like our monitoring officers have no authority to do anything about this – because they don't have enough powers or sanctions.

That has to change.

The decisions we make are the ones that are the most local, and have an impact on the day to day life of our communities and are just as important as those dealt with at higher levels. We must have the highest standards because when we don't, the important issues of our residents either get pushed aside or complicated – problems that our communities and councils face either caused or exacerbated – and the good work our councils drowned out and the reputation of politicians at all levels, and in our democracy itself, further damaged.

Faith in politics, politicians local and national, and in local democracy is at a low point – a lot of the criticism deserved and a lot undeserved. There are many more elected representatives who have a strong sense of public duty, who work tirelessly for their residents, and who always strive to do their very best.

But they and their work are often drowned out by the bad behaviour of others or face this kind of behaviour which in turn puts some off from continuing and others from even getting involved in the first place.

If we are to restore faith in politics and in local democracy, it must start with the most local level of local government – it starts with us.

I want Cheshire not to be the county with the most notable examples of councillor misbehaviour but instead for Cheshire to be at forefront in raising standards, in showing the positives our local councils and councillors do and the good services we provide. That is why we are requesting that ChALC lobby the LGA and other relevant organisations to see that powers and sanctions are made available.

If you want the same, for our council's to be noticed for their good work and services,

for us to be able to be held far better to account,

for us to be able to represent our communities without abuse and bullying from a small minority,

for our council staff to be able to do their jobs without facing the same,

and for the public's faith to begin to be restored in us, our councils, in our local democracy and in politics in general – then please support Alsager Town Council's motion:

This meeting calls upon the Cheshire Association of Local Council to request that ChALC lobby the Local Government Association and any other body they feel appropriate to strengthen the sanctions available to a Monitoring Officer for councillors who break the Code of Conduct."