



AILG

Association of Irish Local Government
Aontas Rialtas Áitiúil na hÉireann

CMIG

Report following councillor survey on threats, harassment, and intimidation in public office

May 2021

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About AILG

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is the primary body proudly representing the democratically elected members and their member local authority. It is a networking, policy development and training resource for the elected members of Ireland's thirty-one county and city councils.

Through regular interaction with other stakeholders in the local government environment the AILG aims to ensure that the contribution of Ireland's democratically elected councillors is appreciated in Government Departments and throughout the full range of public agencies.

About CMG

CMG is a management consulting practice that specialises in helping organisations deal with risks that emanate from criminal or terrorist activity. CMG works with many prominent private and publicly quoted companies, NGOs and government organisations introducing change to ensure effective reduction of criminal and terrorist activity, and management of risks emanating from such activity. Founded 22 years ago, CMG is recognised as a market leader within its fields of specialty and is highly respected for its successful record. CMG specialises in mitigating risks to people who hold public office or who have a public profile, including harassment, intimidation, stalking and fixated threat cases.

Executive Summary

- The AILG was aware that an increasing number of councillors are being subjected to abuse, threats and public intimidation, undermining the principles of free speech, democratic engagement and debate. The AILG partnered with CMG (Crime Management Group) to develop an online survey conducted during February and March 2021, to obtain a comprehensive picture of the type and format of threats, harassment and intimidation that councillors have and are experiencing.
- A link to complete the survey was sent to all 949 councillors in the Republic of Ireland. There were 223 responses which represents a response rate of 23.49%.
- The results illustrate the daunting reality of life as a councillor in Ireland today. Threats, intimidation and harassment are commonplace, with almost 72% of respondents experiencing such incidents in the past three years, and 28% currently experiencing them. Respondents routinely experience threats of violence, death threats and threats of sexual violence, and threats are sometimes directed against councillors' family members. 60% of respondents experienced threats via social media, while 33% experienced threats in a face to face setting.

Executive Summary

- The impact on councillors and on their families is significant, with almost 62% of respondents being worried or extremely worried as a result. This has led to over 48% of respondents having considered, or currently considering leaving their role because of threats and harassment.
- The survey suggests that councillors are ill prepared for dealing with such incidents, as 71% said that they were not prepared or only moderately prepared for handling the threats, harassment and intimidation they experienced. Only 7% of respondents considered current preventative and response measures to be effective.
- Over 25% of threats were reported to An Garda Síochána, but only 2.7% of cases reported resulted in prosecutions. In addition to reporting to An Garda Síochána, some respondents reported incidents to their respective party, to their local authority, or to social media platforms, but only 17% of respondents received any form of advice or intervention following reports.

Executive Summary

- Over a third (35%) did not make any report, and councillors expressed concerns about an absence of support or action when reports were made, and a lack of availability of preventative and response measures.
- Some respondents felt there was no point in reporting incidents since little, they felt would, or could be done. Respondents identified a lack of action, or inadequate action by social media platforms as being a particular problem.
- The survey also illustrates that threats can, and do escalate to actual incidents. Among the incident types experienced were; campaigns to discredit councillors by making false allegations of criminality, damage to car, home or property, being followed or stalked, being physically attacked, or councillors' personal information being placed in the public domain. Less frequently experienced, but more troubling incidents included; being threatened with a weapon, malicious or dangerous items being received by post, racial abuse online or by email, or letter, and protests taking place at councillors' homes.

Executive Summary

- 48% of respondents made no security enhancements where threats were received. This suggests an absence of professional support and proportionate and effective responses, and also suggests that councillors are themselves trying to solve complex and frightening situations which are simply beyond their experience.
- Respondents were asked to indicate the lifestyle changes they have had to make, and the personal security enhancements they have implemented following receipt of threats, harassment or intimidation. These have ranged from blocking of incoming email address and phone numbers, changing their routes and routine, enhancing home security, and briefing family members on the threats, to ceasing social media use, or putting in place emergency response procedures for family members. A small number of respondents have had to move house.
- The statistics are cause for concern, but the comments from respondents which are included throughout the report, give the greatest insight into the ongoing risks to the mental and physical wellbeing of councillors. It is clear that threats, harassment and intimidation continue to affect councillors' ability to effectively carry out their role, and cause them significant concerns about their own safety and security, and that of their families.

1. Summary of findings

This section summarises the main finding of the survey. One of the most concerning findings is the frequency with which councillors experience threats, harassment and intimidation.

Almost 72% of respondents had experienced these events in the last three years, and even more concerning is the fact that over 28% are currently experiencing them. It's perhaps not surprising that over 60% of respondents experience threats via social media, but over 33% experienced them face to face.

Just under 36% of threats made were threats of violence, 9% were death threats, and 6.7% were threats of sexual violence. 6.6% related to threats of violence towards councillors' families.

There are strong indicators that councillors are severely negatively impacted by these incidents and are concerned about the availability and effectiveness of current preventative and response measures. Only 7.6% rated current measures at 4 or 5 on an effectiveness scale of 1 to 5. *In many cases councillors have had to make what might be considered extraordinary lifestyle changes and security enhancements in response to threats and incidents, and tellingly over 48% have considered, or are currently considering leaving their role because of threats and harassment.*



Summary of findings

- Almost 72% of councillors who responded have been a victim of threats, harassments or intimidation during the past three years
- Over 28% of respondents are currently experiencing threats, harassment or intimidation
- Almost 36% of threats made were threats of violence, 17% related to damage to property, 9% were death threats, and 7% were threats of sexual violence
- Almost 62% of respondents are worried or extremely worried about the impact of threats, harassment and intimidation on their family
- 71% said that they were not prepared or only moderately prepared for handling threats, harassment or intimidation
- Over 48% have considered or are currently considering leaving their role because of threats and harassment

Summary of findings

- 60% of respondents experienced threats via social media, while 33% experienced threats in a face to face setting
- Over 25% of threats were reported to An Garda Síochána but only 2.7% of cases reported resulted in prosecutions
- Where threats were carried out, or where incidents occurred without threats being made, just under 42% related to campaigns to discredit councillors. This included making false allegations of criminality, or otherwise attempting to damage their reputations
- Almost 27% of incidents related to repeated unwanted messages. 20% related to the placing of councillors' personal information in the public domain, and almost 10% related to invasion of privacy at home or in another private place

Summary of findings

- Less frequent but nevertheless concerning incidents included: damage to car, home or property (8.5%), being followed or stalked (8.1%), being physically attacked (4.9%), or incidents where a person repeatedly and unexpectedly appeared at events or places the councillor attended (4%). The existence of these four types of incident is particularly worrying because they can be indicators or so-called fixated threats whereby a person develops an obsessional pre-occupation (often delusional) with another person or has a perceived grievance, which they pursue to an irrational degree
- Other extremely serious incidents are rarer, but it is troubling that public representatives experienced such incidents. These include; being threatened with a weapon (2.2%), malicious or dangerous items being sent by post (2.2%), racial abuse online or via email or a letter (1.8%), protests at councillors' homes (0.9%), arson attacks on car or home (0.9%) and sexual assault (0.9%)

Summary of findings

- Where threats were reported, only 17% of councillors received some form of advice or intervention and only 18.8% rated the advice or interventions as being 4 or 5 on an effectiveness scale of 1 to 5
- Where an incident occurred, no prior indicators were detected in over 40% of cases
- Changes that councillors felt they needed to implement in response to threats and incidents included:
 - Blocking certain incoming email addresses or phone numbers (44%)
 - Reducing social media use (33%)
 - Searching for and removing personal data (15%)
 - Making changes to home security (12%)
 - Changing routine (11.7%)

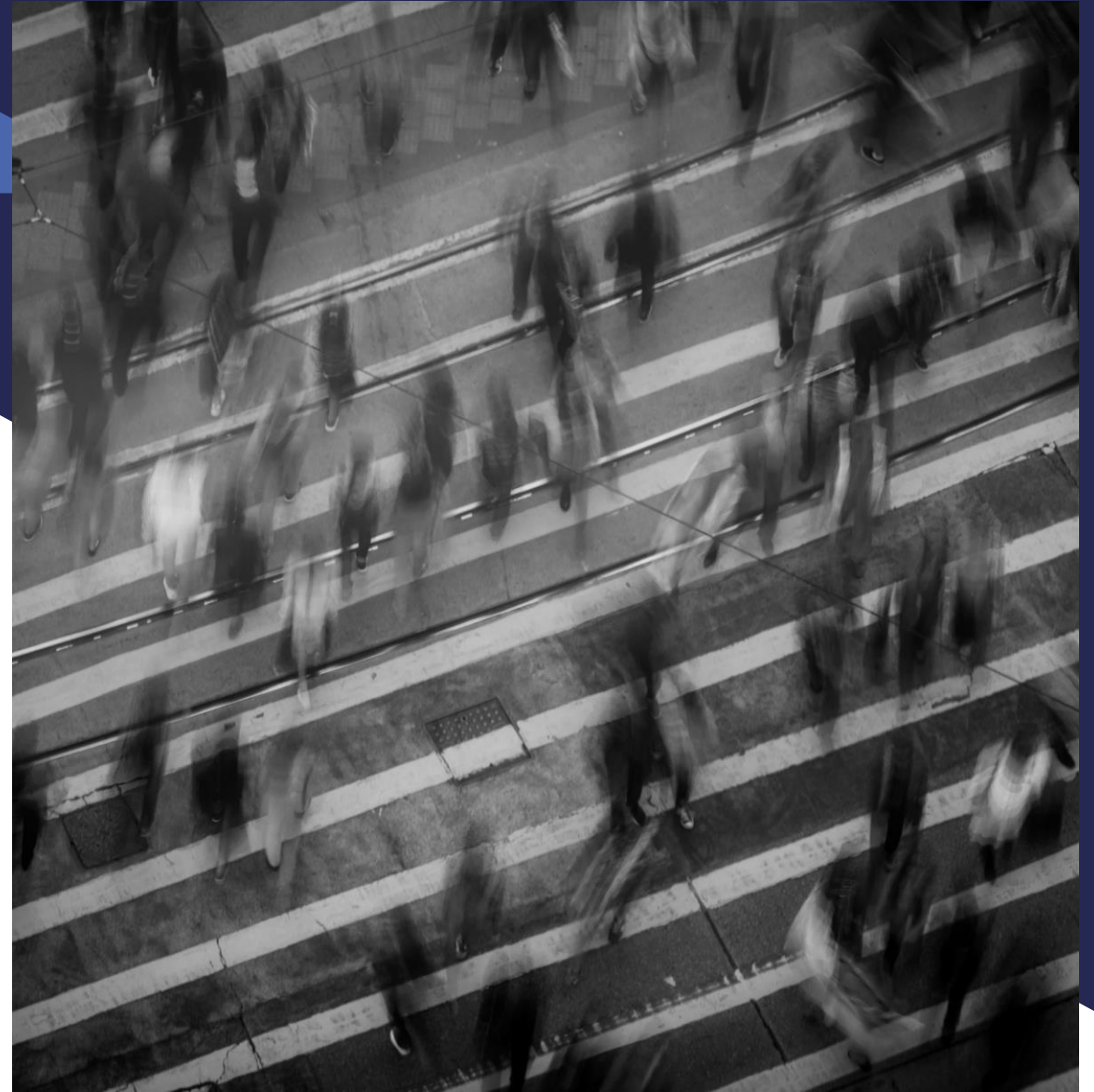
Summary of findings

- Other measures included:
 - Using alternate routes (6.7%)
 - Stopping attending meetings in certain locations (5.4%)
 - Establishing a hostile incident emergency procedure for family (1.8%)
 - A small number (0.9%) were obliged to move house
- 13.9% of respondents enhanced home security measures, 2.2% enhanced office security, but over 48% did not make any such enhancements. This may stem from a lack of available advice or other interventions
- 64% rated currently available prevention and response measures at only 1 or 2 on an effectiveness scale of 1-5. Only 7.6% rated measures at 4 or 5
- 36% of respondents currently search proactively for personal information that is publicly available and that could be used to target them

2. About the respondents

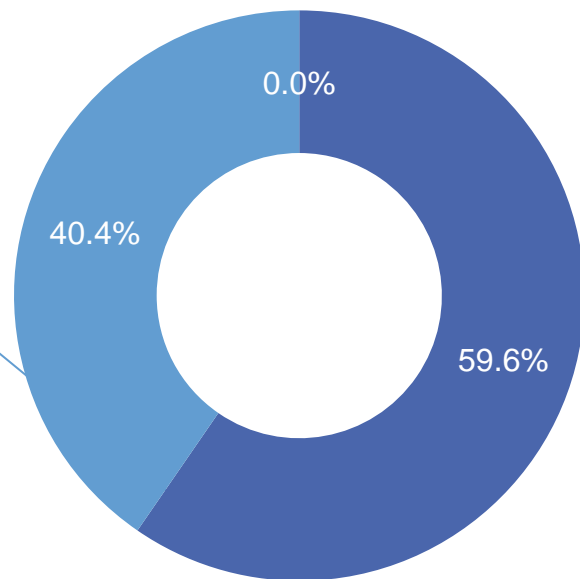
Respondents were asked to indicate their gender, their length of service and the type of area that they serve.

They were also asked if they had experienced any threats, harassment or intimidation in the years 2018, 2019 or 2020, and if they were currently experiencing any such occurrences.



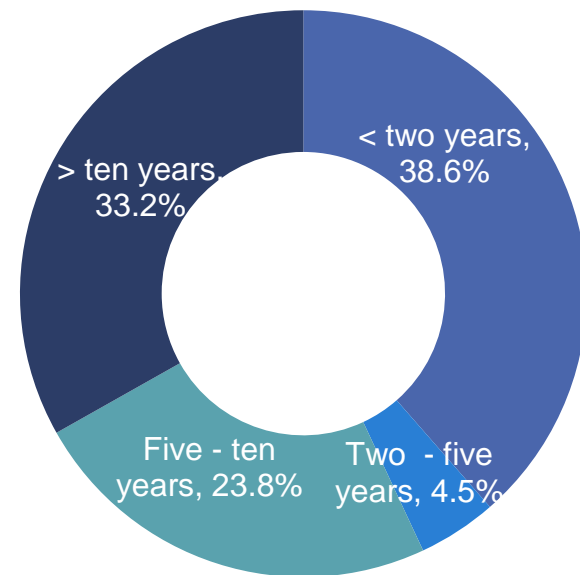
About the respondents

Gender



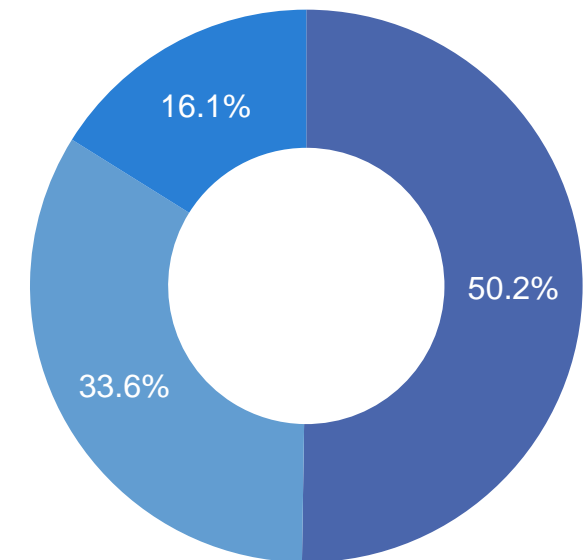
- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

Length of service as a councillor



- < two years
- Two - five years
- Five - ten years
- > ten years

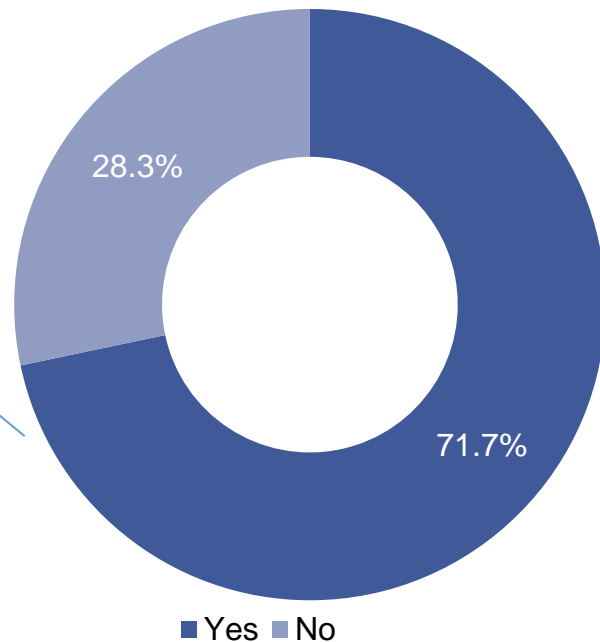
Type of area served



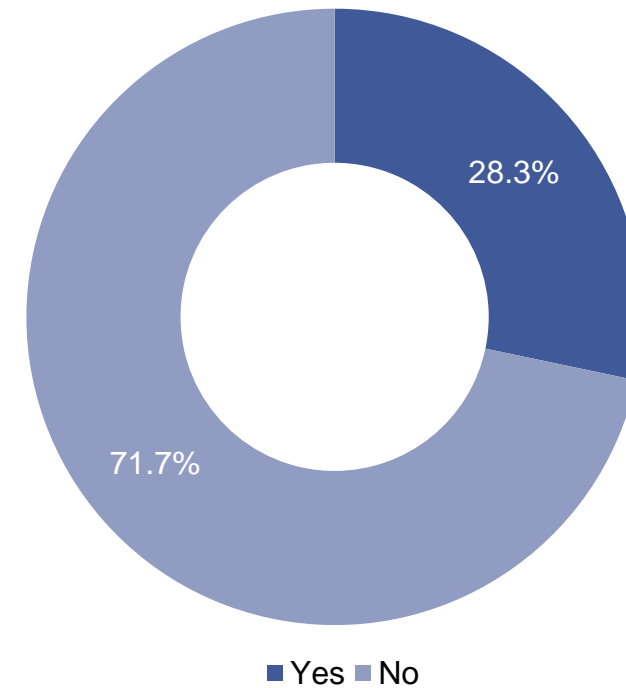
- Mixed urban / rural
- Mostly urban
- Mostly rural

How common are threats and harassment?

In the past three years only (2018, 2019 or 2020) have you experienced any threats, harassment or intimidation as a result of being a councillor?



Are you currently experiencing threats, harassment or intimidation?

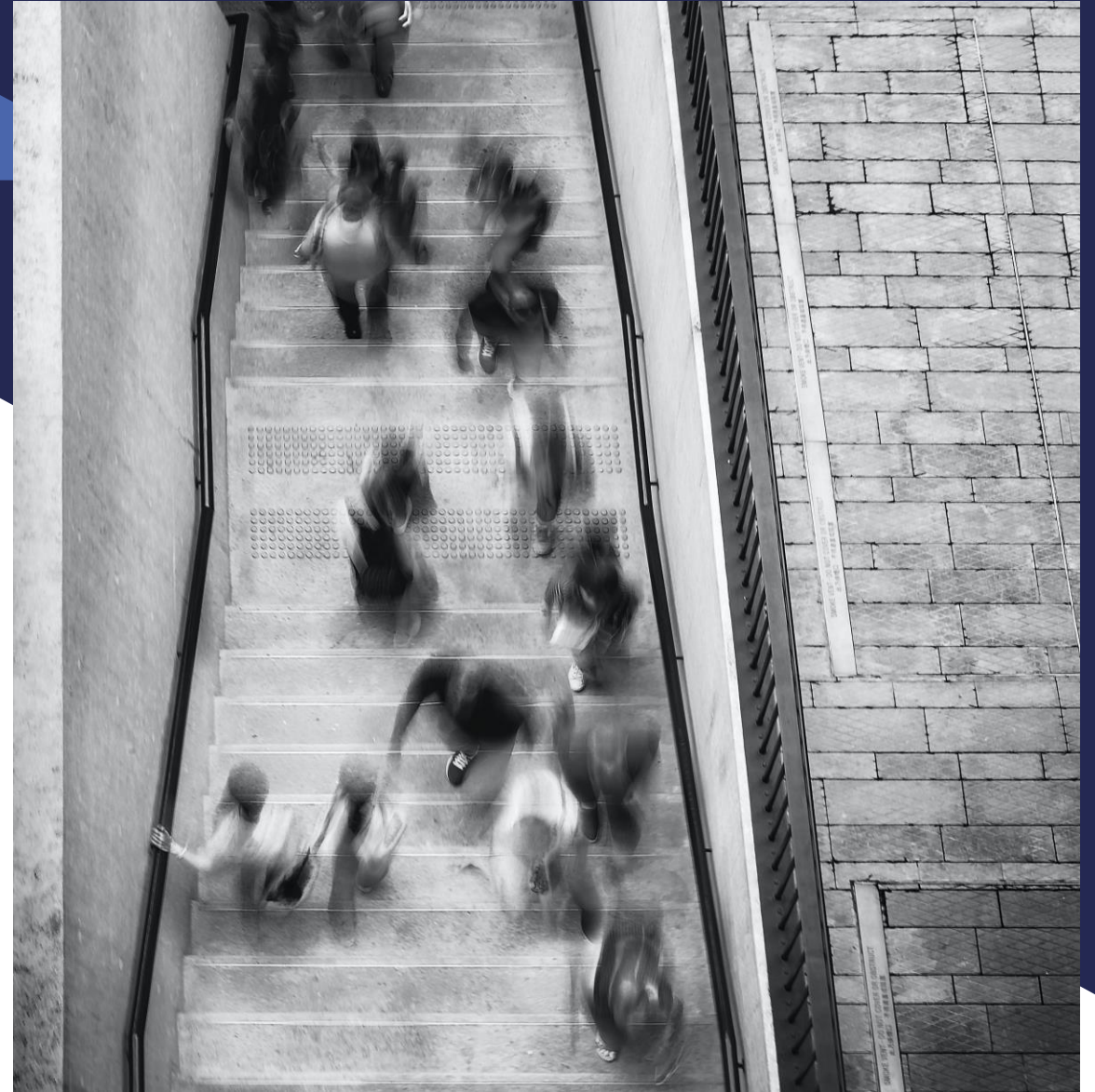


3. Preparedness and impact

Respondents were asked how well prepared they were to handle threats and intimidation, and what were the impacts of threats and intimidation on them and on their families.

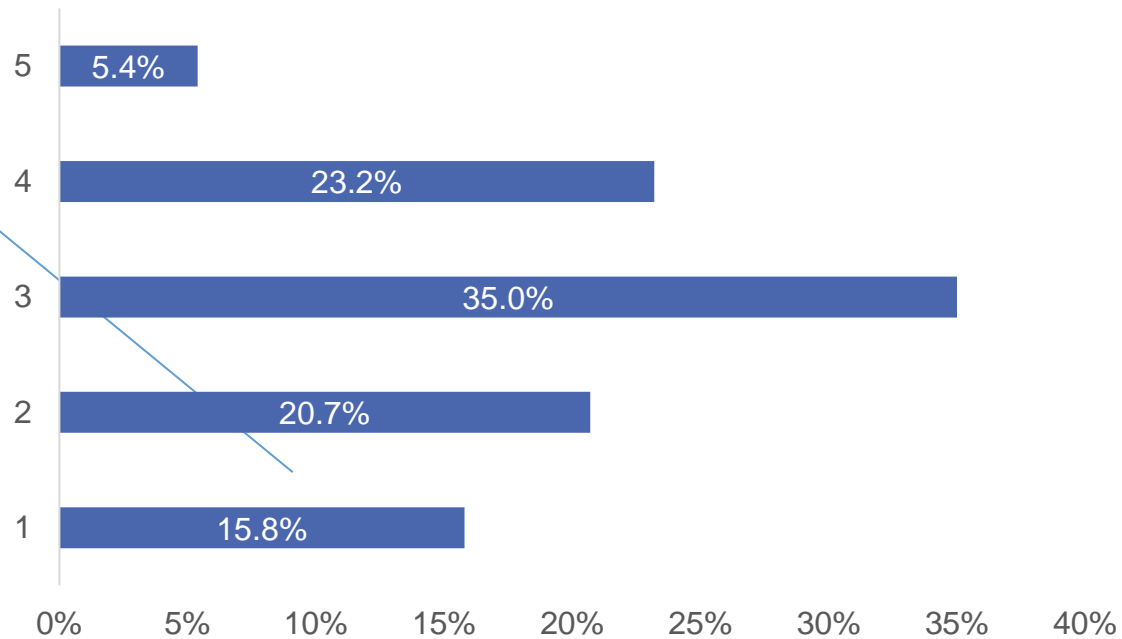
They were also asked whether they had considered leaving their role as a result, and whether they took precautions such as proactively searching for personal information about themselves that is publicly available, and that could be used to target them.

A significant number of respondents' comments are included in this section because they illustrate very well the effects that threats, harassment and intimidation can have on a person's professional and personal life, and how in some cases, councillors felt intimidated into not speaking out about issues.

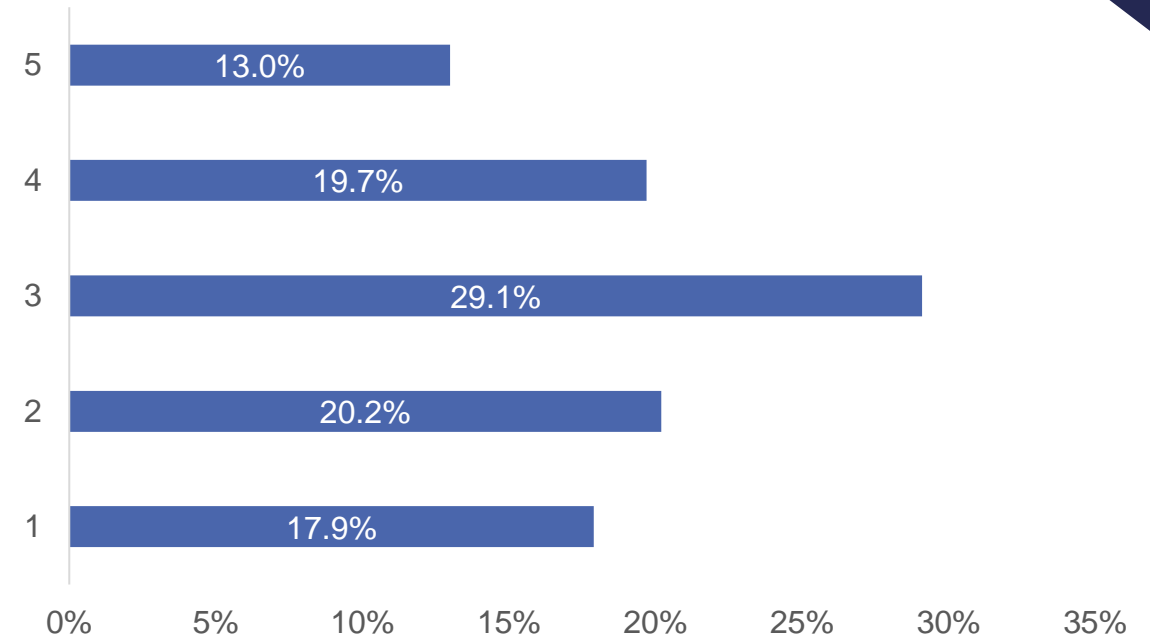


Preparedness and impact

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 - not prepared, 5 - very well prepared) how well prepared would you say you were for handling threats, harassment or intimidation?



On a scale of 1 to 5 how worried are you about the impact on your family of threats, harassment or intimidation?



Preparedness and impact

“As a new local councillor since 2019, I never imagined it would be as bad as this. I want to make a contribution to my community and constituency but I wonder at what cost? How will it effect me and my family?”

“This is a serious issue. It never crossed my mind that it would happen but when it did it made me quite wary”.

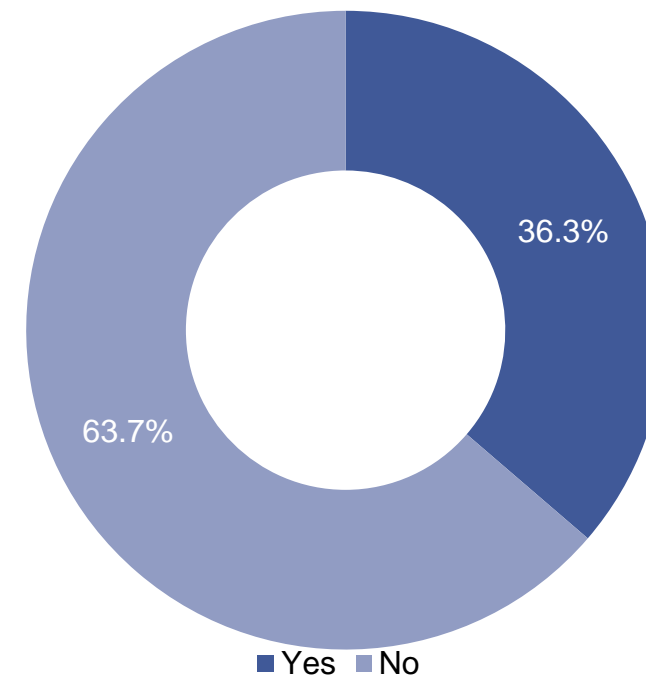
“(I was) mostly unprepared as to how to deal with social media and erroneous information circulated. Also, as a woman many, many comments are very personal and hateful”.

“I realise it's a small minority who harass, but the effects on someone unfamiliar with harassment are dreadful. I always slept well. Unfortunately not anymore”.

“Intimidating and bullying behaviour does not always come from the public, but rather from other councillors. I have experienced a lot of this and nothing is really being done about it within the local authority. Training is needed for staff in this area”.

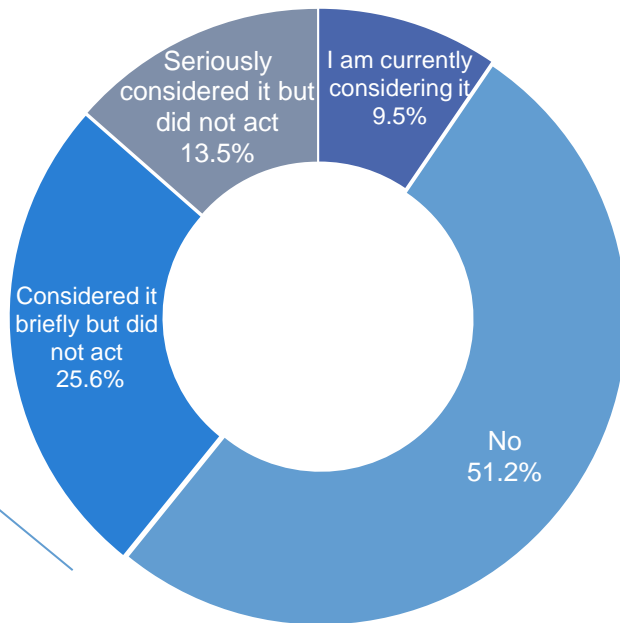
“We are constantly on-call and deal with a lot of abuse particularly on social media. It is very distressing”.

Do you ever proactively search for personal information about you that is publicly available, and that could be used to target you?



Preparedness and impact

Have you considered leaving your role as a councillor because of threats and harassment?



- I am currently considering it
- No
- Considered it briefly but did not act
- Seriously considered it but did not act

“I will be leaving at next election”.

“More than likely I will not run again”.

“(I am) considering how long I can sustain this role for my mental health and wellbeing, Will I run in the next election? How long will I be able to give it?”

“What way could it effect my family? How far could it go in affecting my young children as they grow up?”

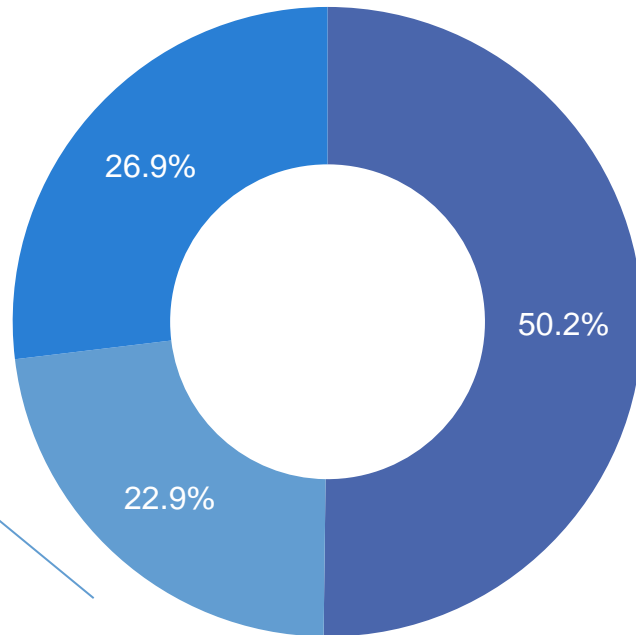
“Is this a sustainable role for a woman with young children? How long can I tolerate this level of negativity into the future?”

“I work hard for the good people of the community, not the bad minority”.

“Is it any wonder so many councillors are leaving the role? How is it sustainable the way it is? Good people are out there wanting to make a contribution to public life, but the current culture will scare so many of them away”.

Preparedness and impact

Did you tell your immediate family about the threats?



■ Yes ■ No ■ No threats received

“I have a young family and I hate that anyone can look up our exact home address online. I feel like it puts them at risk”.

“Public availability of our home addresses may be a chilling factor, deterring some women from running for office”.

“I am worried about false claims being posted on social media about me and my family”.

“The threat of violence, emotional or physical, is enough to prevent me from challenging some activity in person and online”.

“Continuous whispering campaign and social media hounding has made me make up my mind to leave public life”.

“There is no protocol or safety measures in place for intimidating behaviour by colleagues at meetings. As we are viewed as 'self-employed' there is no sense of 'duty of care' to councillors and I do not know who to report to if a colleague is displaying intimidating or aggressive/bullying behaviour”.

“Repeat commenting/messaging across several platforms on the same night, a private DM on Twitter about my kids, hoping they don't get sick”.

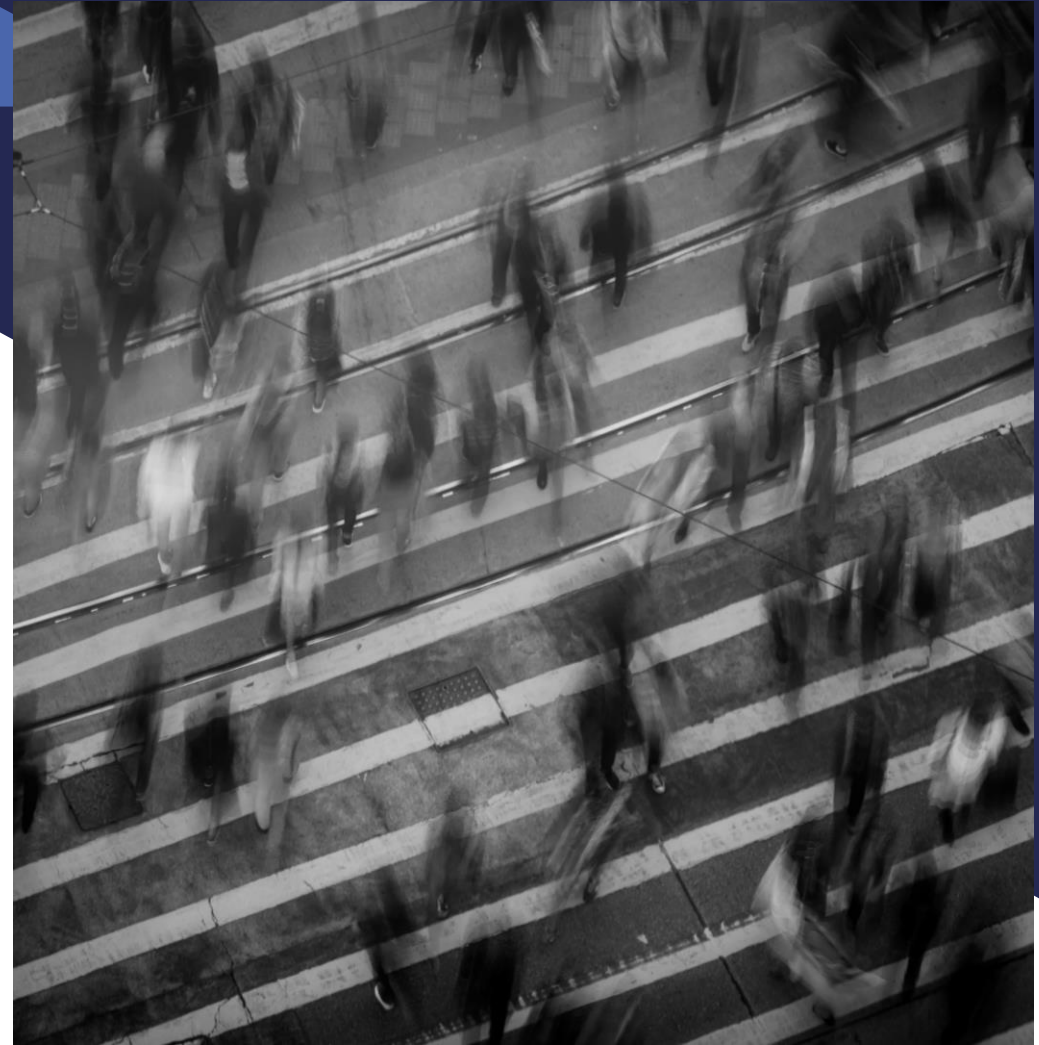
4. Types of threats, how, and where they're experienced, and by whom are they typically communicated?

Respondents were asked about the types of threats they experienced, how and where they were made, and by whom they were communicated.

The most common threat related to violence towards a councillor (35.9%) and the second most common was "other" (29.5%) and included:

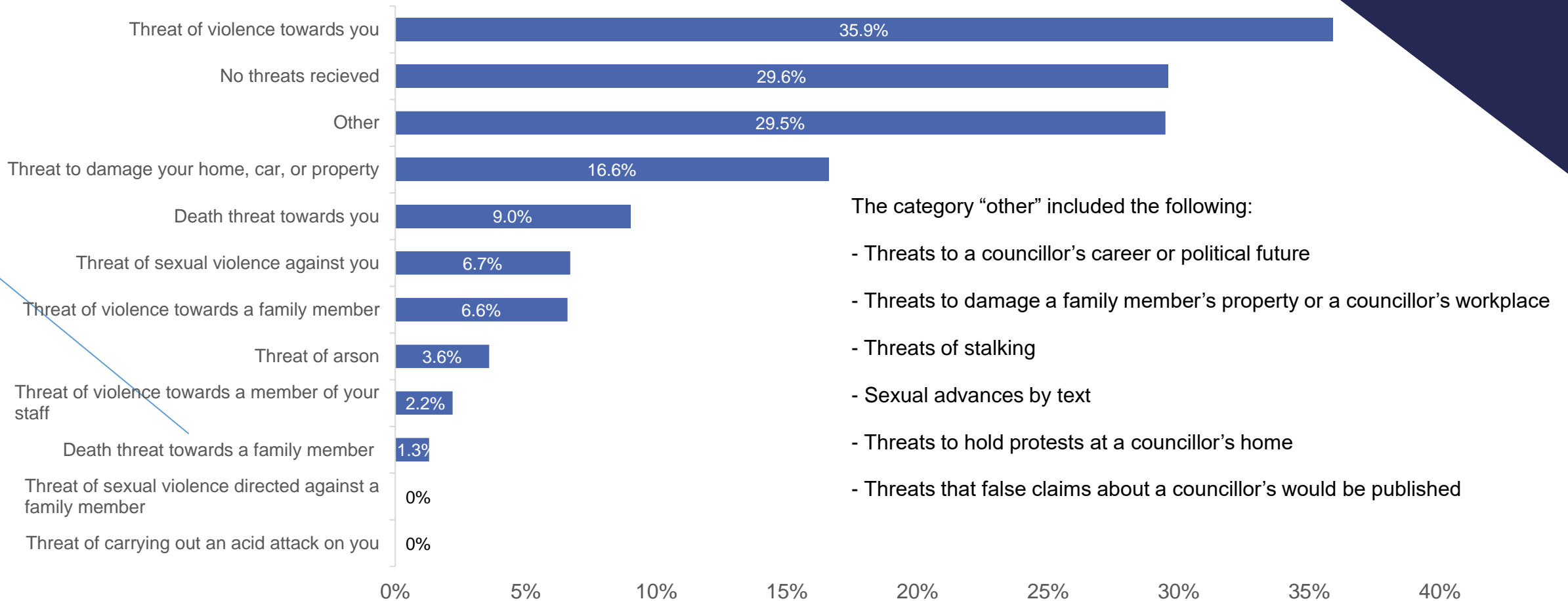
- Threats to a councillor's career or political future
- Threats to damage a family member's property or the councillor's workplace
- Threats of stalking
- Sexual advances by text
- Threats to hold protests at a councillor's home.

The third was a threat to damage the victim's car, home or property (16.6%). The fourth most experienced was a death threat (9%) and threats of sexual violence were fifth, accounting for 6.7%.

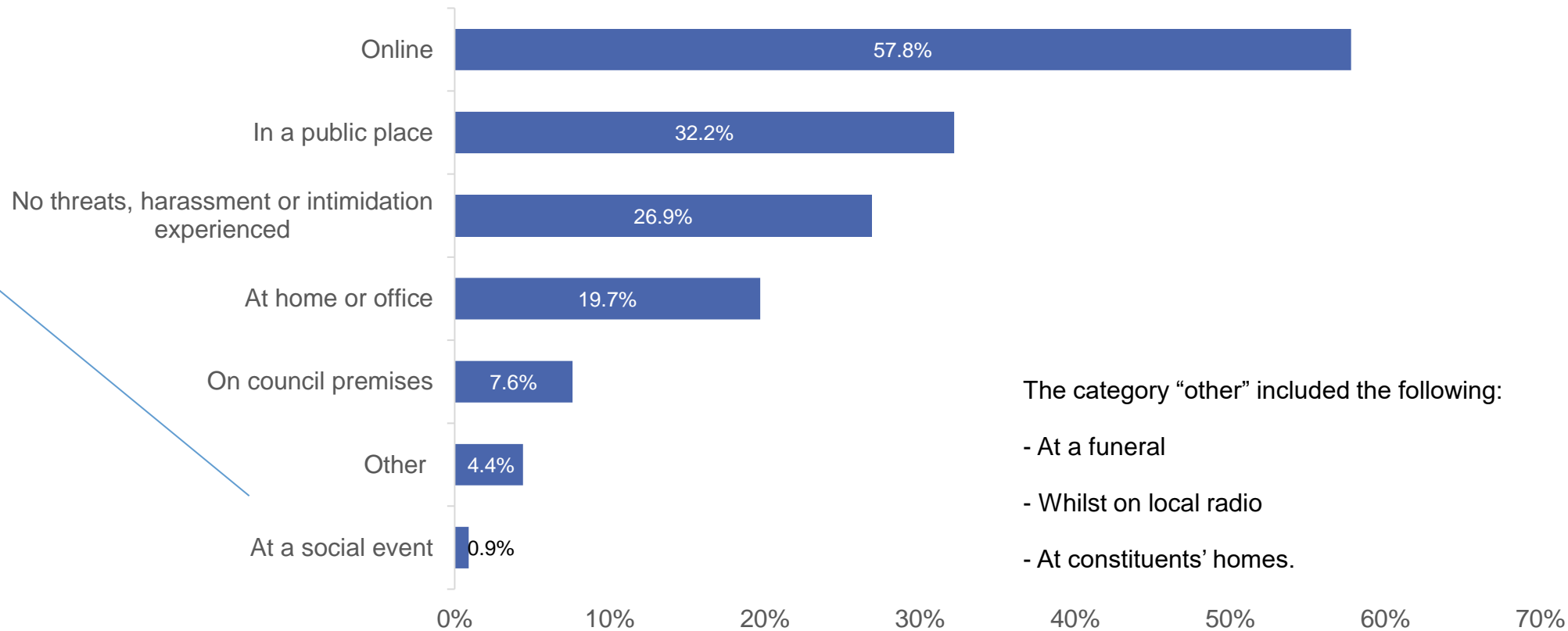


Threat types

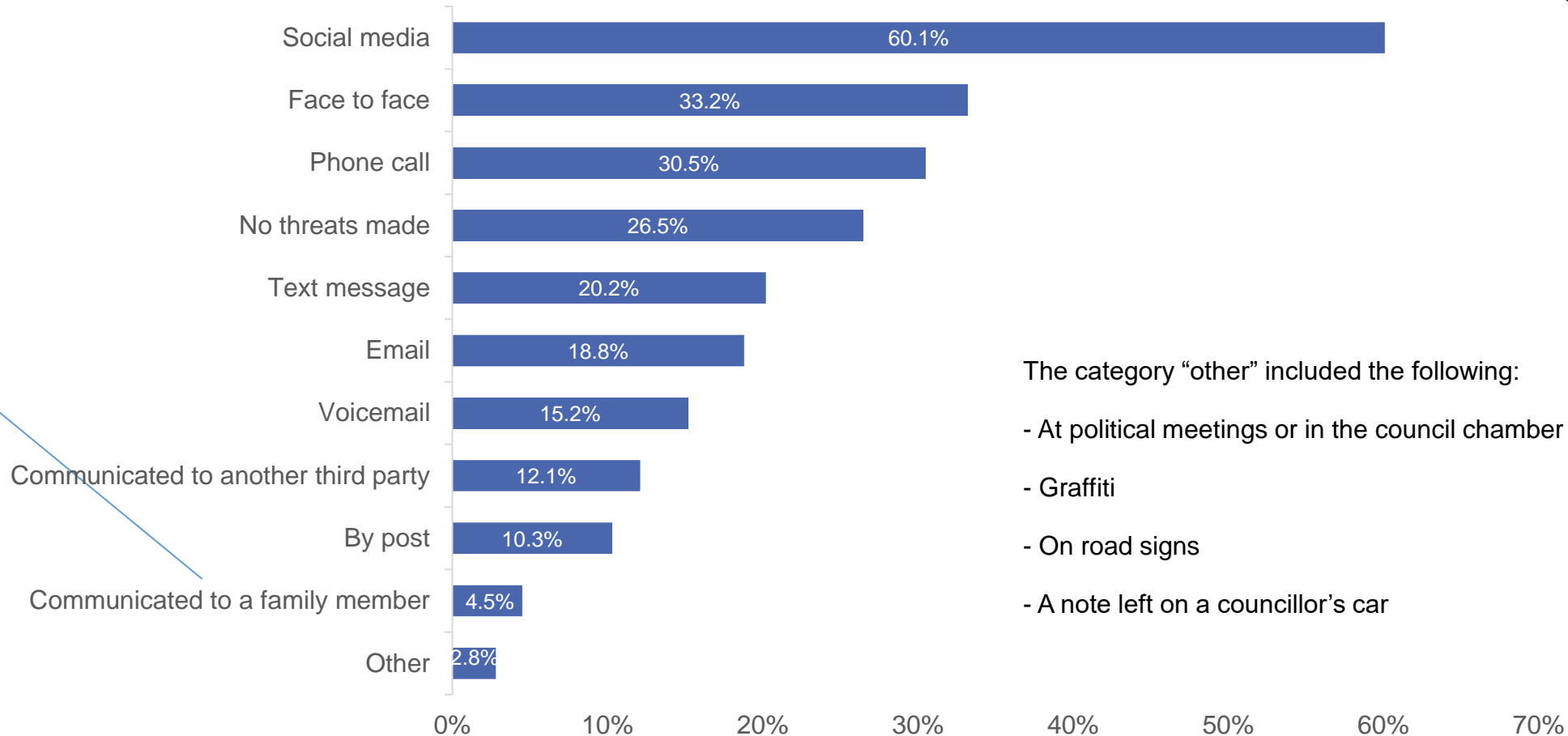
Please indicate the type of threats you received



Where did the threats, harassment or intimidation take place?

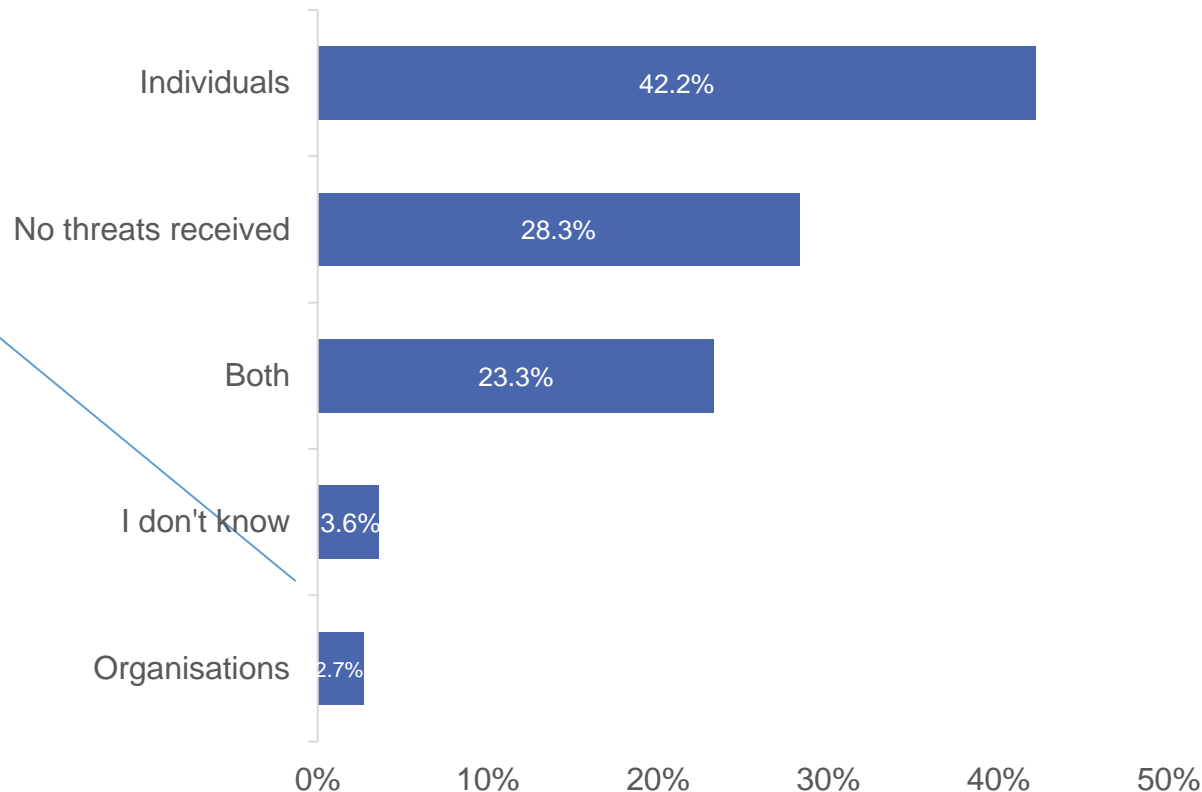


How the threats were made



Who are the threat actors?

Do you believe the threats were made by individuals or organisations?



“Several of my colleagues have been subject to threats, harassment or intimidation and my concern is that it’s only a matter of time before it comes to my door”.

“(The) offender's organisation (is) unable to continue an internal investigation if a report is made to An Garda Síochána. This was disappointing”.

“We are now at a stage where people are wound up so much online that it manifests as hate / violence in the physical world. Sadly it will only get worse as social media is an amplifier”.

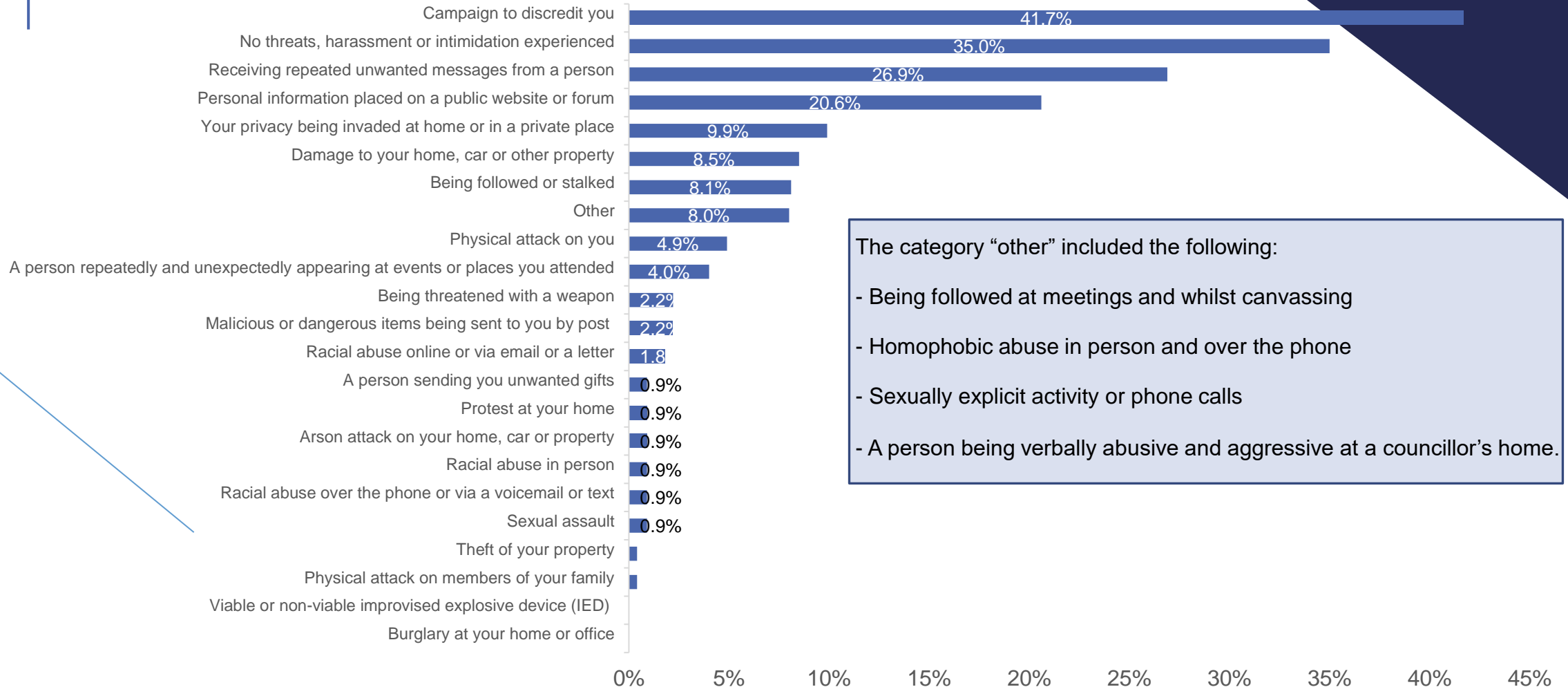
“I had someone call to my house - during lockdown - in a "I know where you live" way. I am concerned that if I make a decision or statement (that upsets someone), someone will put a brick through our window or worse”.

5. Threats that escalate to actual incidents

Whilst threats can by themselves instill fear and can be very worrying for a victim, it is clearly far more concerning when threats are carried out.

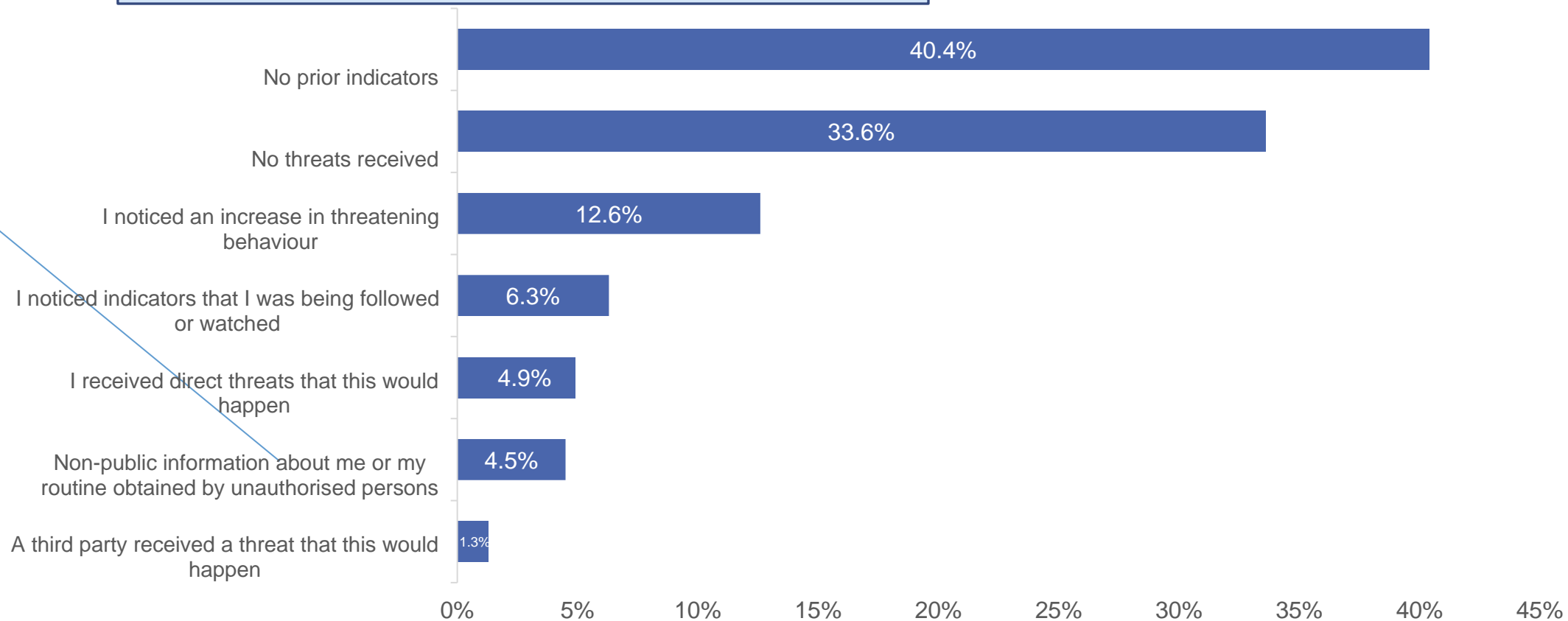
Respondents were asked to describe any actual incidents that they experienced, and whether there had been any prior warning.

Types of incidents experienced



Prior warning

Prior to an incident occurring did you have any indication that something was about to happen?



6. Responding to and reporting threats and incidents

Respondents were asked to whom they reported threats, harassment or intimidation and what were the outcomes of such reports.

Over a third (35%) did not make any report, and councillors expressed concerns about an absence of support or action when reports were made, and a lack of availability of preventative and response measures.

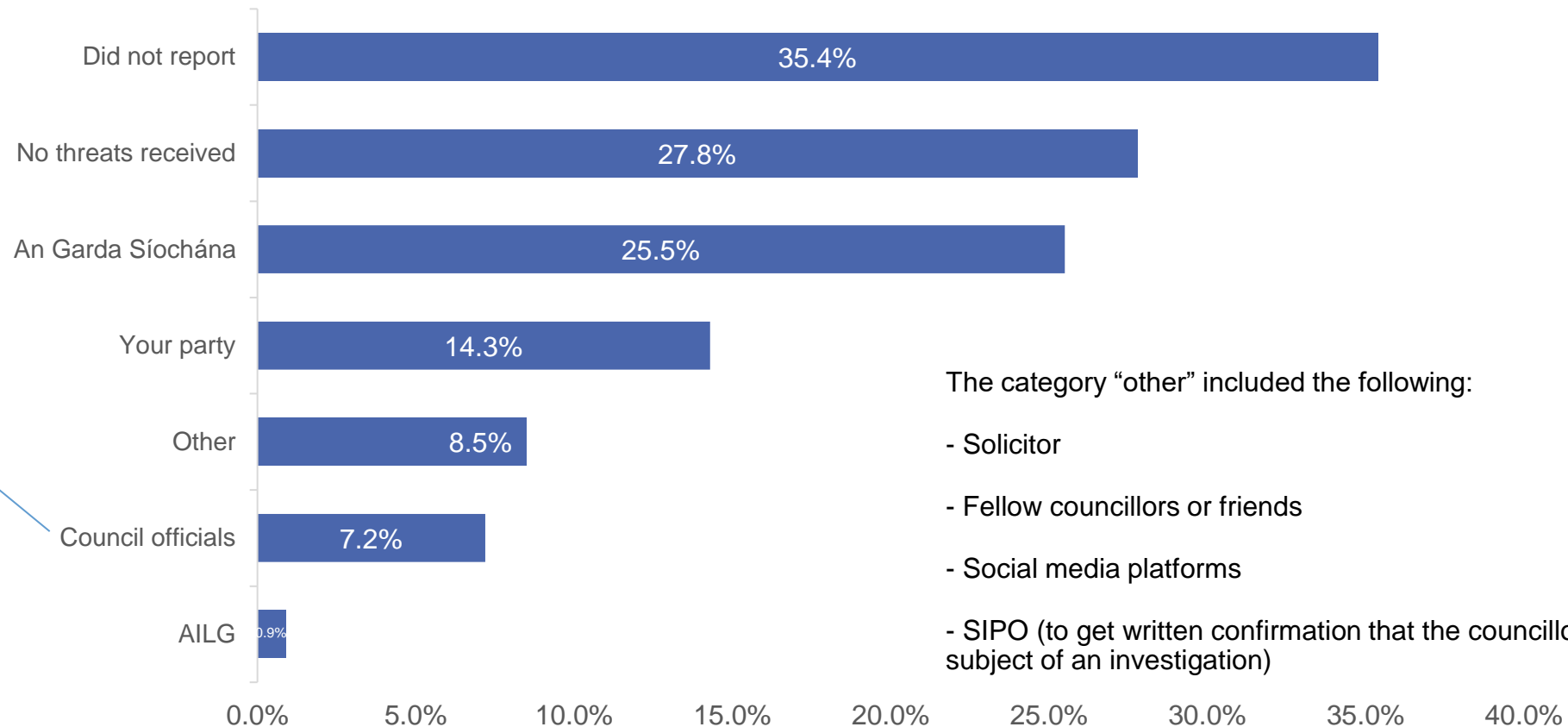
Some respondents felt there was no point in reporting incidents since little would, or could be done. Respondents identified a lack of action or inadequate action by social media platforms as being a particular problem.

This is certainly a different perception of the approach by some social media platforms which have extensive threat response processes in place including law enforcement liaison. This view may also be influenced by the broad spread of levels of familiarity that respondents had with security settings on social media platforms.



Reporting

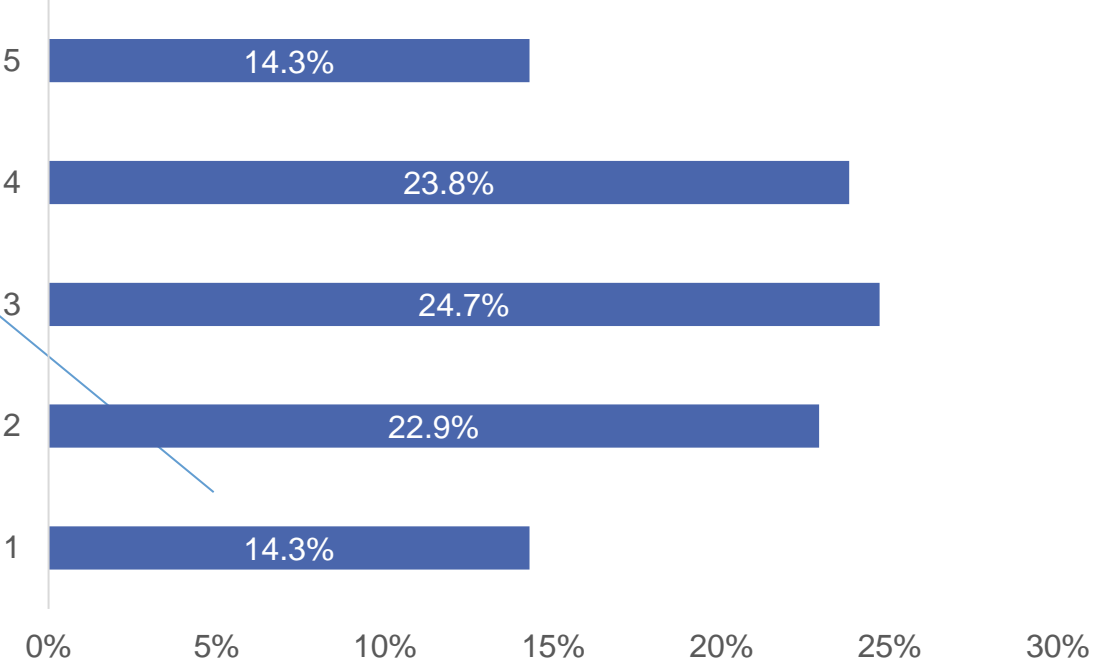
To whom did you report the threat(s)?



•In the survey 1: Entirely unfamiliar 5: very familiar.

Social Media

On a scale of 1 – 5 (1 - entirely unfamiliar, 5 – very familiar)
 How would you rate your level of familiarity with the security settings on social media or social networking platforms you use?



Social Media

“Social media has now become such a toxic platform and a lot of work needs to be carried out in this area to ensure the personal protection of public representatives, but also the protection of our transparent democracy”.

“Social media companies need to act to remove abuse online. In my case they did not remove any material as they did not deem it broke their community standards which was completely unacceptable as it included lies and threats.”

“To be effective you need to speak out on various issues which can leave you vulnerable. Online social media warriors are inflaming the issue”.

“Colleagues often fall silent when such things happen. Reality is that many are aware of abuse or have contributed to it directly through blaming others for decisions or by allowing falsehoods to prevail. Social media is the perfect platform for dirty politics in that it amplifies whispers, lies, discreditation in a way chatter didn’t”.

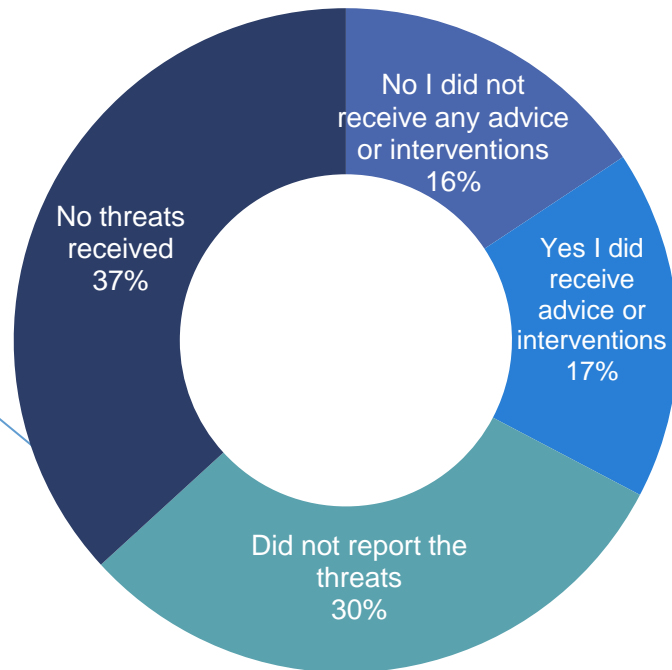
“Social media and mobile phones without names attached has left councillors really vulnerable to all sorts of threats. My experience is not related to any physical attacks but attacks of a personal nature on my character which were completely untrue”.

“If you say something in public to someone it is a crime. If you write to someone or email them and state some thing derogatory it is a crime. But you can say what you like on social media and there is no sanction at all”.

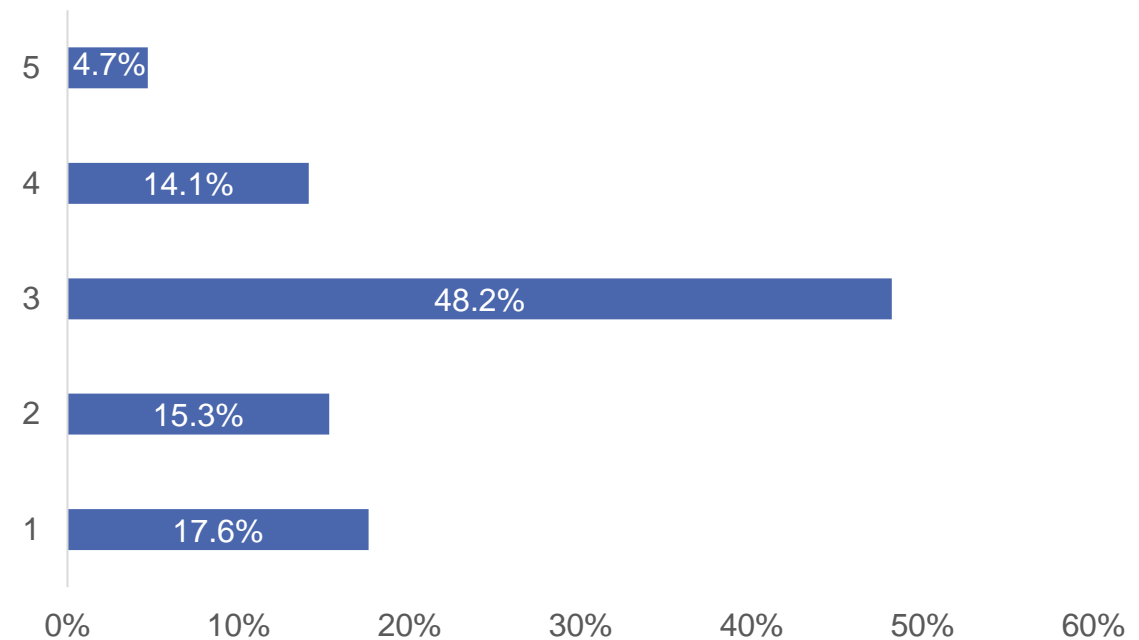
“No point in blaming social media solely, though they could be far more proactive in doing more to increase the discourse standard”.

Outcomes of reports being made

When you reported the threats, were you given any personal security advice or interventions?

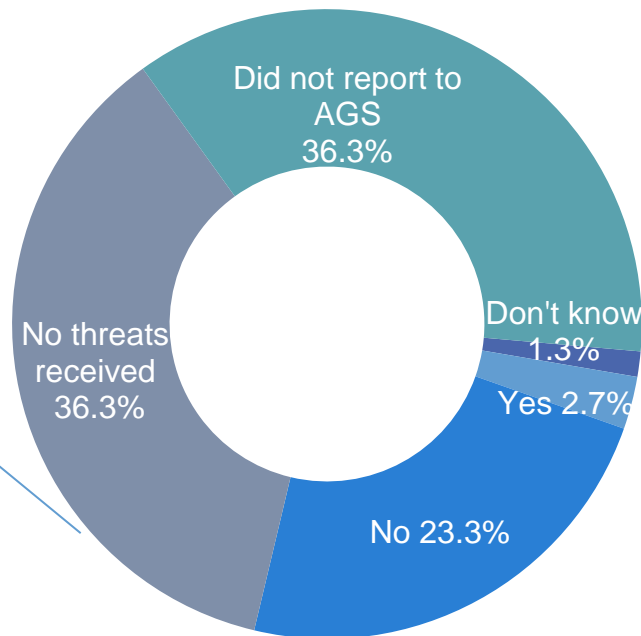


On scale of 1 to 5 (1-ineffective, 5-very effective) how would you rate the effectiveness of advice you received following threats?



Outcomes of reports being made

If you reported threats or incidents to An Garda Síochána did any prosecutions result from your reports?



■ Don't know
 ■ Yes
 ■ No
 ■ No threats received
 ■ Did not report to AGS

“I have spoken out on this issue and encouraged those with information to make statements to Gardaí. The concern about threats, harassment and intimidation - especially targeting my family or home - does give pause for thought before speaking out on this issue”.

“Gardai have never really done much except visit the office and that’s it.”

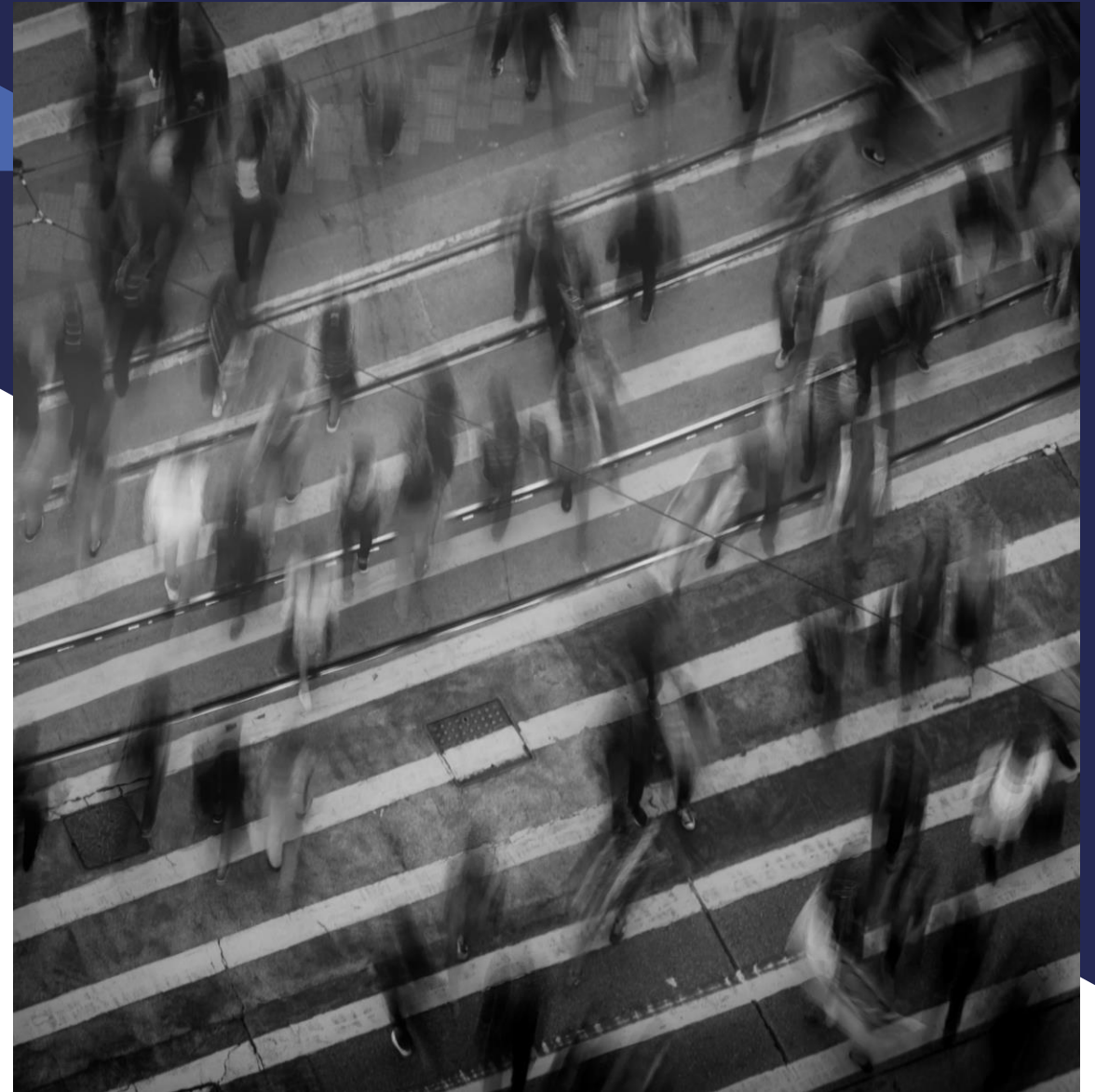
“I feel that more support should be given to deal with incidents. The support from the Gardai was in the form of advice. Apparently little could be done in the way of the legal system. Therefore I didn’t take it any further. The incident didn’t stop me from carrying out my role but it did frighten me and left me feeling vulnerable”.

7. Necessary lifestyle changes and security enhancements

Respondents were asked what lifestyle changes they have made and what personal security enhancements they have enacted following receipt of threats, harassment or intimidation.

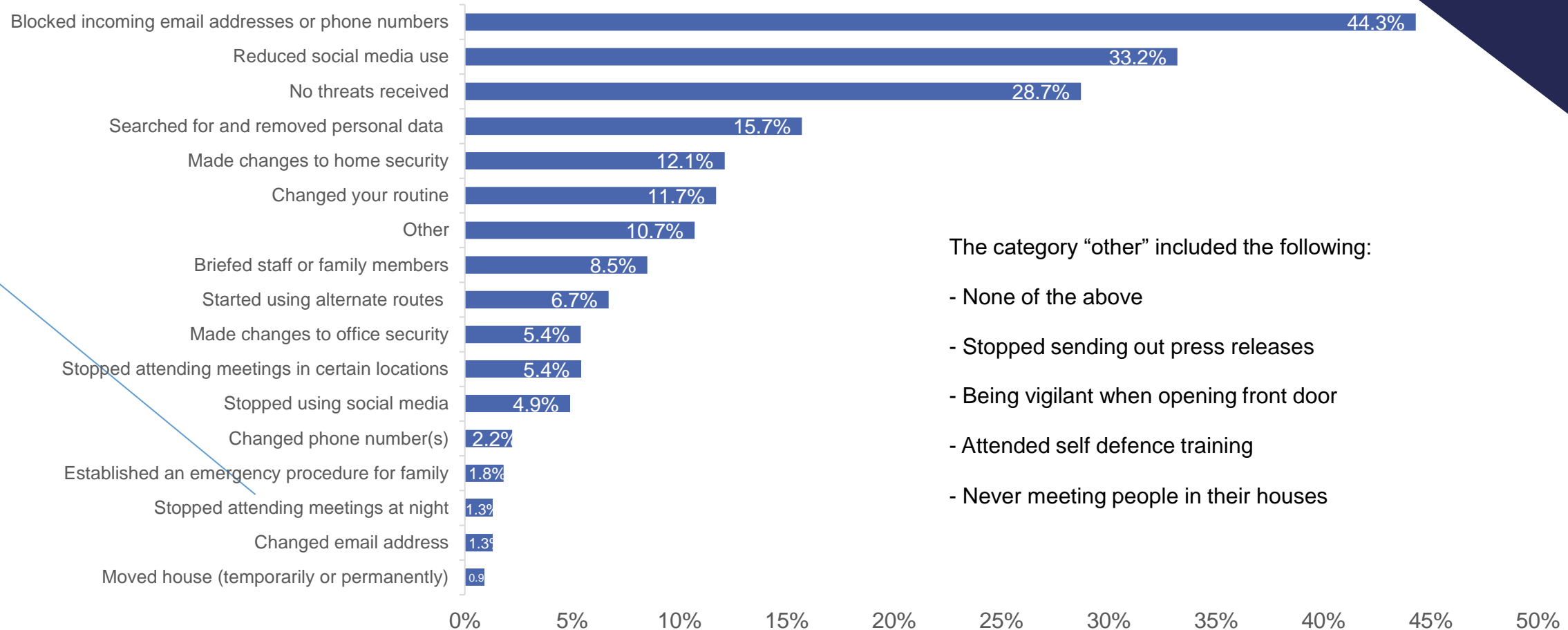
They were also asked how likely did they believe, that the threats would be carried out.

Likelihood of implementation of a threat is often the only factor taken into account in deciding whether security or other measures are enacted or not. Unfortunately, this is not an effective approach because other factors such as context, case history, communications analysis, escalation triggers, and identifying possible pathways to violence are among the critical steps to identifying a robust and effective mitigation strategy.



Lifestyle changes

Have you done any of the following as a result of receiving threats?

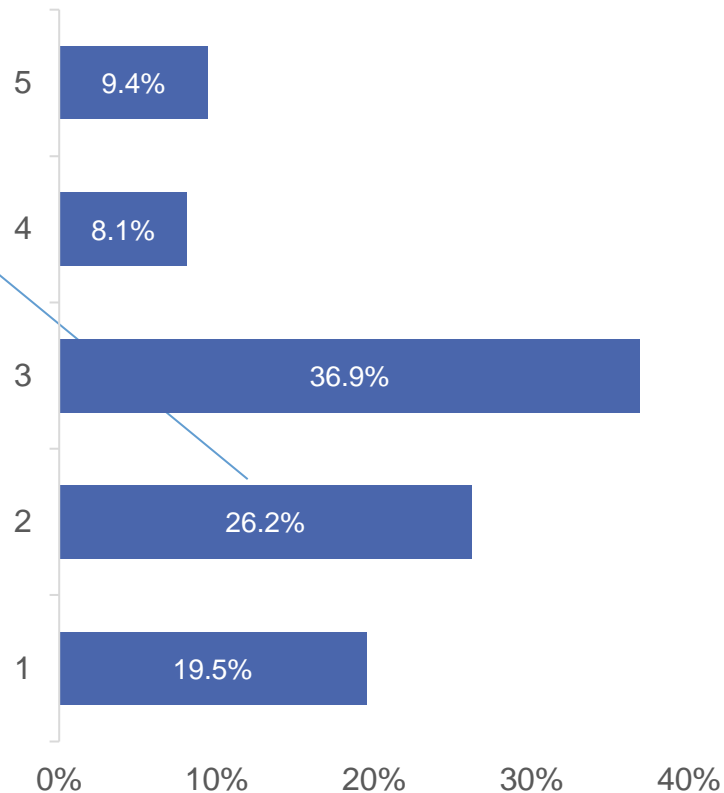


The category “other” included the following:

- None of the above
- Stopped sending out press releases
- Being vigilant when opening front door
- Attended self defence training
- Never meeting people in their houses

Likelihood of threats being carried out

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 – very unlikely, 5 - very likely) how likely was it, did you believe, that the threats would be carried out?



“Threats ranged from a bullet to (comments on) my physical features. (I) didn’t put (these) on record”.

“Our home addresses should not be freely available on council websites or any other info such as online SIPO forms. We should have some GDPR protection”.

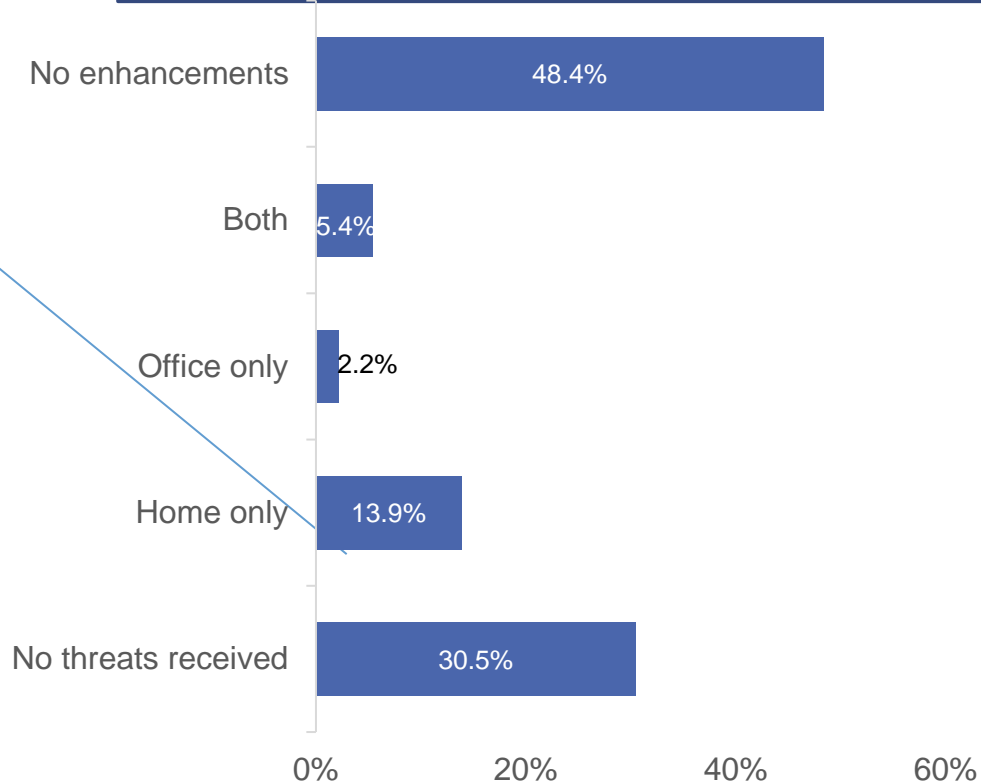
“Public representatives know that a statement or social media post on vaccination, for example, may elicit a barrage of calls and messages that are less than courteous. There is a temptation to say nothing on what might be seen by some as controversial topics, rather than bear the brunt of abusive messages and calls”.

“I also think people think they ‘own you’ because you are an elected rep and can say anything about you or to you at any event or time”.

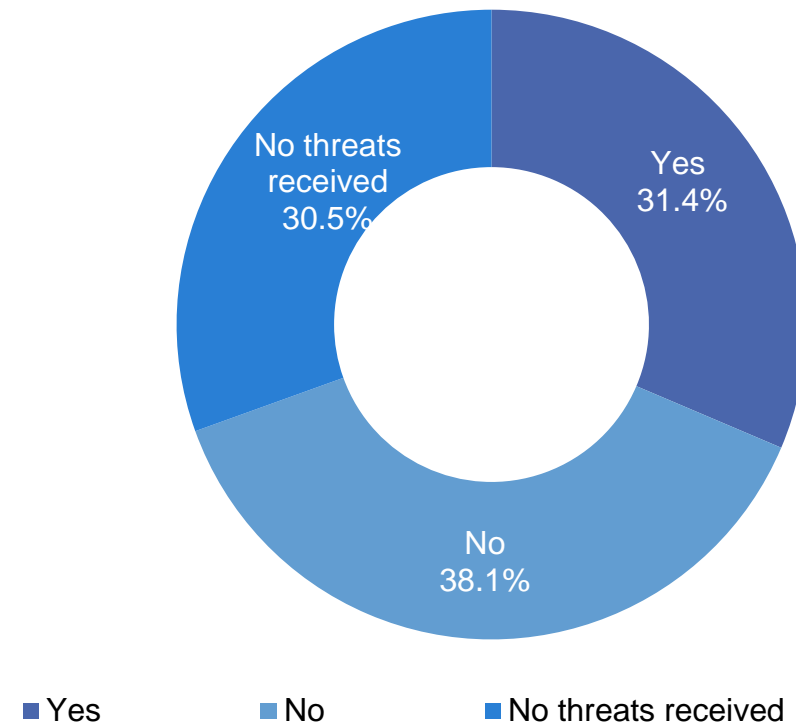
“I also think the permanent and public availability of our home address may be in breach of our rights under GDPR. It’ll be online forever, even if I lose my seat”.

Security enhancements

After receiving the threats did you enhance the physical or electronic security measures at your home or office?



After receiving the threats did you enhance your mobile or communications security measures?



8. Dealing with future threats and incidents

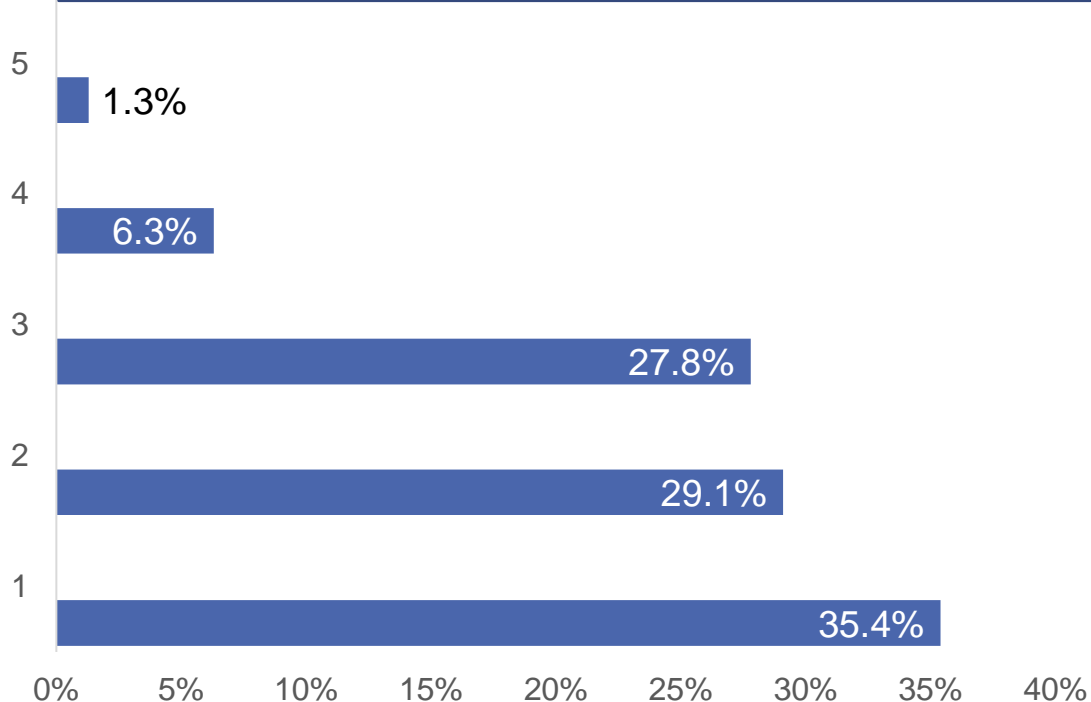
Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of preventative and response measures that are currently available to them. This was to gain an insight into the adequacy of these measures in the context of dealing with future incidents.

They were also asked if they would be able to identify pre-cursors or warning signs of potential violence. This was asked to determine whether councillors could identify both tangible and non-tangible pre-cursors. While 57% claimed that they would recognise these pre-cursors, it is important to note that the survey also shows that where an incident occurred, no prior indicators were detected in over 40% cases, so in those cases there may have been nothing tangible to recognise. This can mean that people who are at risk underestimate the actual level of risk that exists, and consequently little or nothing may be implemented by way of preventative or response measures.

Furthermore 48% of respondents made no security enhancements where threats were made. These factors suggest an absence of professional support and proportionate and effective responses, and also suggest that councillors are themselves trying to solve complex and frightening situations which are simply beyond their experience.

Dealing with future threats and incidents

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 – non-existent, 5 - very effective), how would you rate the effectiveness of current preventative and response measures for dealing with threats, harassment or intimidation that are available to you?



“There was no support available”.

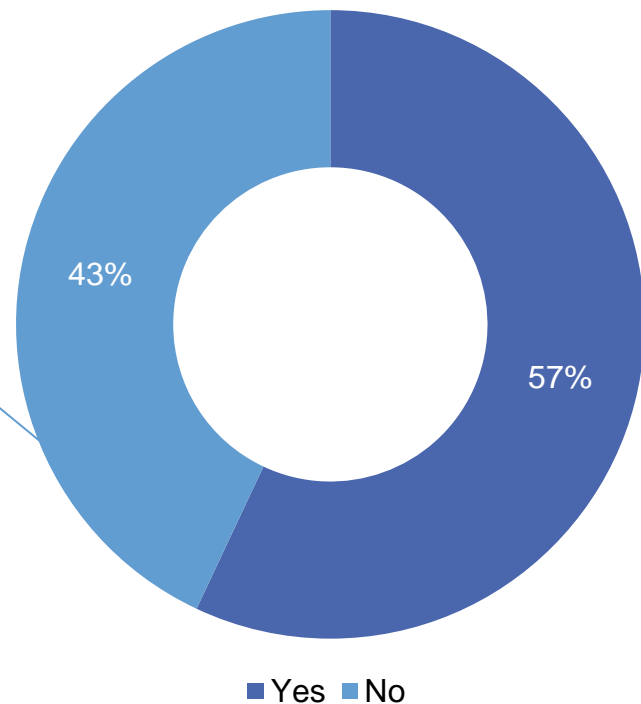
“There is little support for politicians subjected to threats or harassment, and this is weakened by other politicians treating legitimate criticism as harassment”.

“I am not familiar with any preventative measures to tackle this problem”.

“My stress levels increased. This contributed to a re-occurrence of (an illness) which had been dormant for almost a decade”.

Dealing with future threats and incidents

Would you be able to identify pre-cursors or warning signs of potential violence?



“Councillors’ home addresses are displayed on the Council’s website. I feel that this should be removed and post directed to the Council’s address for collection”.

“It just seems this is becoming part of the job unfortunately. (It) definitely should be highlighted to potential council candidates as it can be a shock to the system”.

“I think that public representatives should be respectful people and that as democrats that we hold abusive people to account. Respectful debate is what we should aspire to without calling people's bona fides into question”.

“I feel that more support should be given to deal with incidents”.

9. Suggested courses of action

The courses of action below are suggested as ways of causing a substantial shift in the way threats, harassment and intimidation of councillors are perceived, prevented, and where incident do occur, responded to. This may require action by several stakeholders including councillors themselves, political parties, law enforcement, social media platforms, and local authorities.

Recommendations

The results of this survey highlight the volume and level of threats, harassment and intimidation which continue to be an ongoing risk to the mental and physical wellbeing of councillors. This in turn can affect councillors' ability to effectively carry out their day-to-day role, and cause them significant concerns about their own safety and security, and that of their families.

It also raises serious concerns in the local government sector which has been actively working to try promote gender balance and wider diversity in local government. The increasing online intimidation, abuse and threats may act as a deterrent and hold people back from running for future election. AILG also have grave concerns that this issue will affect retention rates, with many local public representatives already choosing not to re-run for election. As one survey respondent advised:

“Is it any wonder so many councillors are leaving the role? How is it sustainable the way it is? Good people are out there wanting to make a contribution to public life, but the current culture will scare so many of them away”.

Suggested courses of action

Below AILG and CMG recommend some key changes to be made in response to these findings:

- Training for councillors so that they understand the fundamentals of personal security awareness, the risks associated with their digital footprint, and so that they are able to recognise both tangible and intangible pre-cursors to violence, and be better prepared for threats, and occurrences of harassment and intimidation
- Availability to councillors of professional threat and risk analysis and mitigation processes so that the nature and intensity of threats and risks can be identified
- Availability of proportionate, immediate and proven risk mitigation measures and responses to acute cases of threats and intimidation
- Supports in the form of accurate records and data from councillors for investigations by law enforcement into threats received or incidents that occur
- Agreement with local authorities on the issue of their duty of care to councillors in this context
- More effective liaison within the local government sector between local authorities, political parties, councillors and social media providers so that it is clear what providers are able to provide by way of interventions where threats are made on their platforms