

December 2023



THREATS, HARASSMENT, AND INTIMIDATION IN PUBLIC OFFICE

- A survey report on councillors' perspective

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ABOUT AILG

The Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) is a national body proudly representing the democratically elected councillors and their member local authorities. It is a networking, policy development and training resource for the elected councillors 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 24 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

OVERVIEW OF THE SURVEY

The experiences of AILG members in being subjected to abuse, threats and public intimidation, continue to undermine the principles of free speech, democratic engagement and debate. As a follow on from the survey of councillors completed in 2021 the AILG again partnered with CMG (Crime Management Group) to conduct the 2023 online survey.

This was conducted between June and September 2023, 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 226 responses which represents a response rate of 23.8%, an increase in the number of respondents from 2021.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The results illustrate the daunting reality of life as a councillor in Ireland today.

The survey findings show that threats, intimidation and harassment are commonplace, with over 63% of respondents experiencing such incidents between April 2021 and September 2023, and almost 26% currently experiencing them when they completed the survey.

Respondents continue to experience threats of violence, and similar threats are made towards members of their families. Threats to damage their car or home, death threats, arson and threats of sexual violence are also being experienced. Over 38% of respondents experienced threats via social media, which was a reduction on the 2021 figures, but almost 33% continue to experience threats in a face-to-face setting. This is almost the same as the 2021 percentage.

The impact on councillors and on their families continues to be significant, with over 56% of respondents being worried or extremely worried as a result. This has led to over 50% 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, with 66% saying that they were not prepared or only moderately prepared for handling the threats, harassment and intimidation they experienced. This is a slight decrease of 5% from the 2021 survey which suggests that some of the security awareness measures available to councillors such as training and aide memoires, may be having a positive impact. However, only 6.7% of respondents considered current preventative and response measures to be very effective, so clearly better advice and response processes need to be provided.

In common with the 2021 survey, over 25% of threats were reported to An Garda Síochána, but only 3.5% of cases reported resulted in prosecutions. Whilst this is a slight increase of 1% when compared to 2021 (2.7%), it is still would appear to be an extremely low prosecution rate.

In addition to reporting to An Garda Síochána, reports were made to respondents' parties (13.4%), to local authorities (14.6%), or to social media platforms (6.6%). 19% of respondents received some advice or intervention following making of a report. This is a slight increase of 2% over 2021 figures.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media

Councillors expressed concerns about an absence of support or action when reports were made, particularly to social media platforms. Some respondents made reference to a lack of legal deterrents for intimidation and threats made through social media, and it was even suggested that councillors should stop using social media entirely.

Incident types

The survey illustrates how threats continue to escalate to actual incidents. Among the more frequently experienced incident types were; campaigns to discredit councillors, receiving repeated unwanted messages, personal information being placed in the public domain, people repeatedly and unexpectedly appearing at events or places that respondents attend, privacy being invaded, damage to car, home or property, and being followed or stalked. Less frequently experienced, but more troubling incidents included; sexually explicit contacts, physical attacks, protests at councillors' homes, malicious or dangerous items being received by post, and racial abuse.

Councillor response to threats

39% of respondents made no security enhancements to their home or office when threats were received. Whilst this is a lower percentage than in 2021 (48%), this continues to suggest that councillors need professional support in assessing threats, and also suggests that councillors are continuing to address complex and frightening personal security issues for which they don't have the expertise or experience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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. The most common are; blocking of incoming email addresses and phone numbers, reducing social media use, changing their routine, enhancing home security, and searching for and removing personal data from open sources.

Over 10% of respondents stopped attending meeting in certain locations and just under 5% stopped attending meetings at night. When one considers the typical role and routine of a councillor, these changes are very significant and are likely having very detrimental effect on councillors' ability to fully connect with their constituents, and to actually carry out their role.

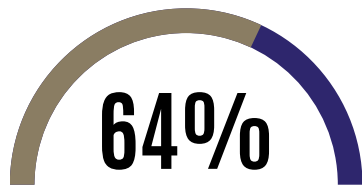
The survey results continue to be cause for concern, and as with the 2021 survey, the comments from respondents which are included throughout the report, give a pronounced insight into the ongoing risks to the mental and physical wellbeing of councillors.

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.

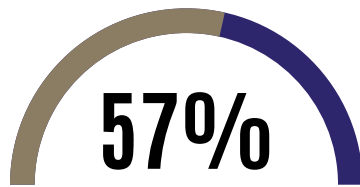


SECTION 1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

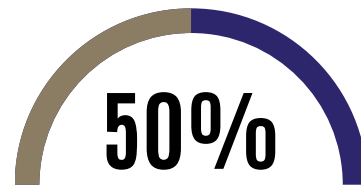
This section summarises the main finding of the survey.



64% of respondents have been a victim of threats, harassments or intimidation during the past two years



57% of respondents are worried or extremely worried about the impact of threats, harassment and intimidation on their family



Over 50% of respondents have considered or are currently considering leaving their role because of threats & harassment. This is a slight increase when compared to the 2021 survey.

OVER 50% OF RESPONDENTS HAVE CONSIDERED OR ARE CURRENTLY CONSIDERING LEAVING THEIR ROLE BECAUSE OF THREATS AND HARASSMENT. THIS IS A SLIGHT INCREASE WHEN COMPARED TO THE 2021 SURVEY.

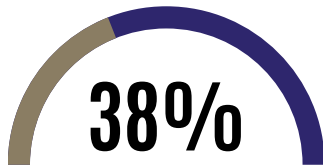
CURRENT SITUATION

Almost 26% of respondents are currently experiencing threats, harassment or intimidation. In this survey a new response option of “unsure” was introduced. This was introduced to reflect the fact that often it is not possible to determine conclusively whether a campaign of harassment or intimidation has actually concluded or not. The number of respondents who selected this option was 7.7%.

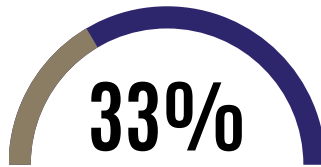
TYPES OF THREATS MADE

Almost 36% of threats made, were again in common with the 2021 survey, threats of violence towards councillors. Over 17% related to damage to property, over 5% were threats of violence towards a councillor’s family member, almost 5% were death threats, and over 3% were threats of arson.

SECTION 1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



38% of respondents experienced threats via social media.



33% experienced threats in a face-to-face setting.

TYPES OF THREATS MADE

Over 23% of respondents experienced repeated receipt of unwanted messages. **There was a significant increase from 4% in 2021 to 13.3% in 2023 of incidents where a person (known to be generally hostile to a councillor) repeatedly and unexpectedly appeared at an event or place that councillor attends.** This is one of a number of indicators of stalking type behaviour and is hugely concerning. Over 6% of respondents recorded being followed or stalked.

The category “other” which 4.8% of respondents selected includes the following examples of harassment or intimidation; (being) intimidated in a supermarket, and (receiving) verbal abuse whilst socialising. One councillor noted that they felt fearful walking in their own village, while another said they were careful about what shop they would enter.

Less frequently experienced, but more troubling incidents included; sexually explicit contacts (4.8%), physical attacks (2.7%), protests at councillors’ homes (2.7%), racial abuse via an email or letter (2.2%), malicious or dangerous items being received

REPORTING THREATS

Over 25% of threats were reported to An Garda Síochána but only 3.5% of cases reported resulted in prosecutions.

Where threats were carried out, or where incidents occurred without threats being made, over 35% related to campaigns to discredit councillors.

by post (2.2%), and racial abuse over the phone or by text (2.2%).

The existence of the following 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. These are; incidents where a person repeatedly and unexpectedly appeared at events or places the councillor attended, damage to car, home or property, being followed or stalked, being physically attacked, malicious items being received by post. **Many very serious and in some cases fatal attacks on public representatives in the UK have illustrated pre-attacks behaviours such as the above.** If such behaviours are becoming more commonplace in Ireland, this is a worrying development.

SECTION 1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

THREATS & REPORTING

Where threats were reported, only 19% of councillors received some form of advice or intervention and only 29% rated the advice or interventions as being 4 or 5 on an effectiveness scale of 1 to 5.

This suggests that the advice is either ineffective or is being provided by sources who do not have expertise in this area.

Where an incident occurred, no prior warning was detected in over 35% of cases, but the most common prior warning experienced was an increase in threatening behaviour (13.3%), direct threats about the incident being received (3.1%) and non-public information about a councillor or their routine being obtained by unauthorised persons.

Changes that councillors felt they needed to implement in response to threats and incidents included:

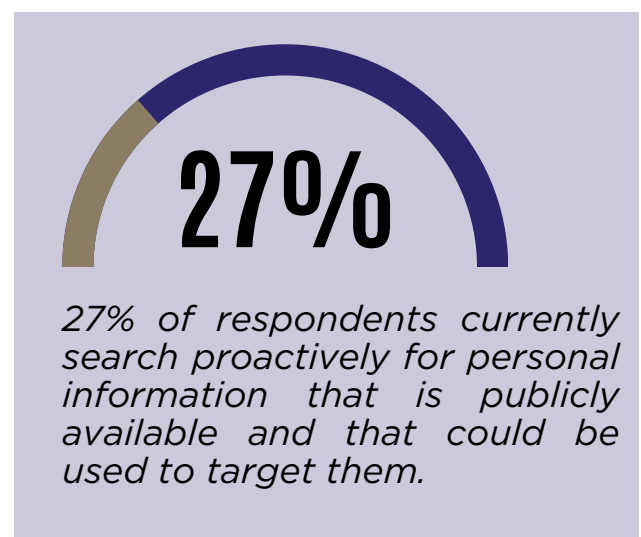
- *Blocked certain incoming email addresses or phone numbers (30%)*
- *Reduced social media use (29.2%)*
- *Changed routine (19.9%)*
- *Made changes to home security (17.3%)*
- *Searched for and removing personal data (11.5%)*
- *Stopped attending meetings in certain locations (10.2%)*
- *Started using alternate routes (9.3%)*
- *Briefed staff or family (on threats and security measures) 7.5%*

Other response measures included:

- *Making changes to office security (5.8%)*
- *Stopping attending meetings at night (4.9%)*
- *Stopped using social media (4.4%)*
- *Establishing a hostile incident emergency procedure for family (4.4%)*
- *Other changes made by 3% of respondents included:*
 - *Stopped going out socially at night.*
 - *Removed images of family from internet.*
 - *Took home address off council website.*

Despite receiving threats almost 40% did not make any changes to home or office security. Over 41% did not make any changes to mobile or communications security. This suggests an absence of available security advice or other interventions.

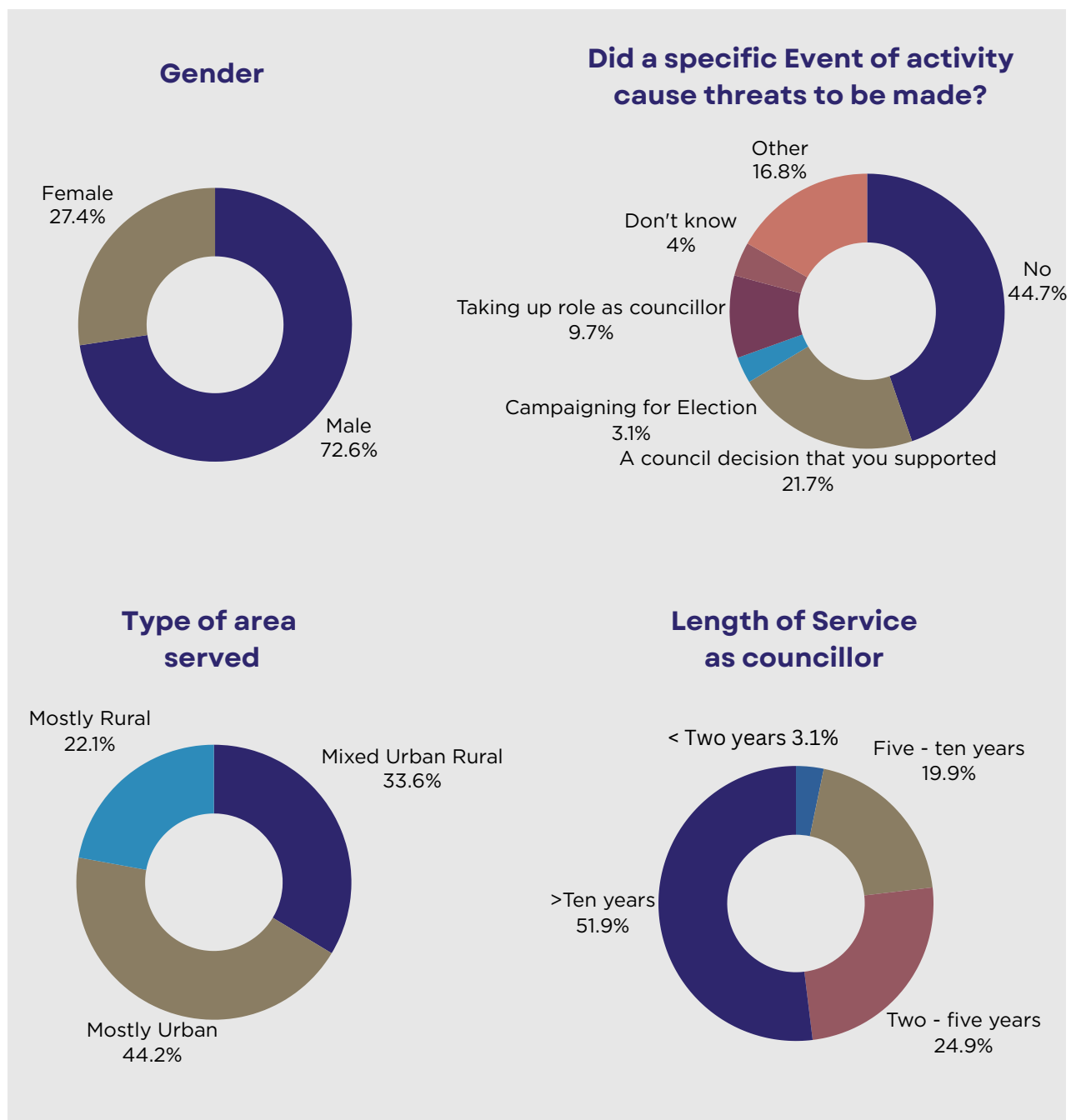
Over 70% rated currently available prevention and response measures at only 1 to 3 on an effectiveness scale of 1-5.



SECTION 2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

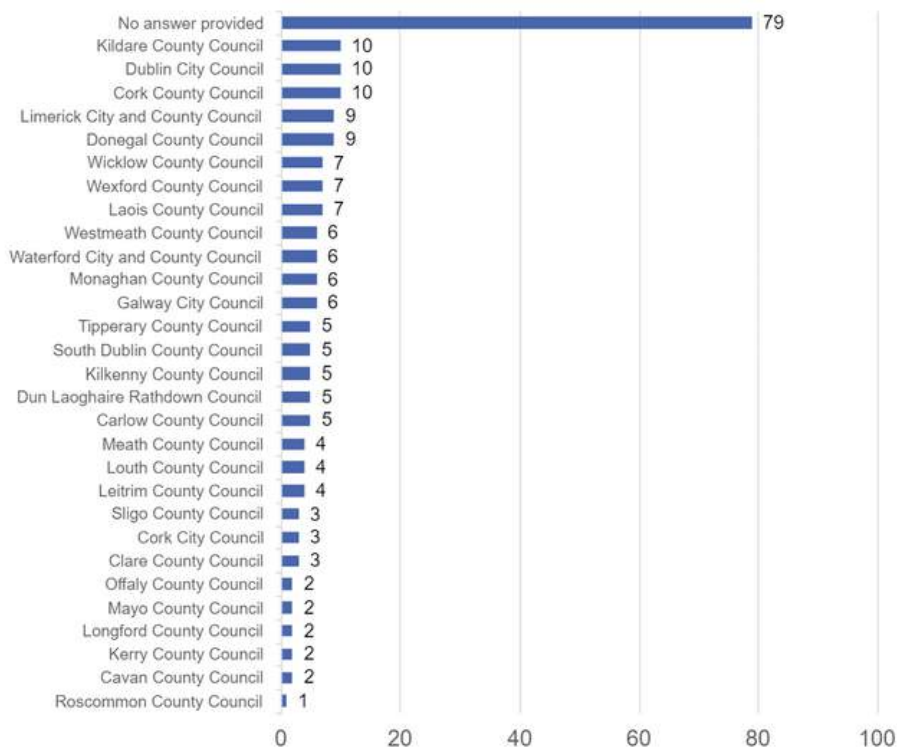
Respondents were asked to indicate their gender, their length of service and the type of area that they serve.

They were also asked if they had experienced any threats, harassment or intimidation in the period since April 2021, and if they were currently experiencing any such occurrences.



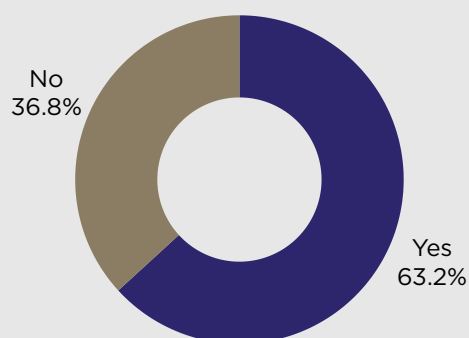
SECTION 2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

Local authority on which respondents are serving

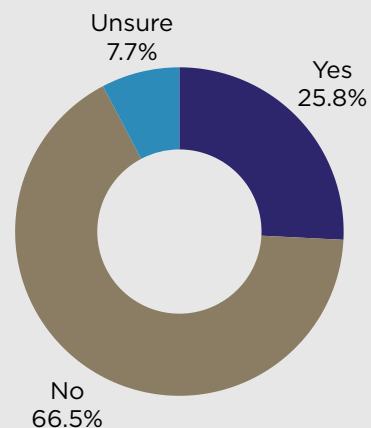


HOW COMMON ARE THREATS & HARASSMENT?

Since 1st April 2021 have you experienced any threats, harassment or intimidation as a result of being a councillor?



Are you currently experiencing threats, harassment or intimidation?



SECTION 3. PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

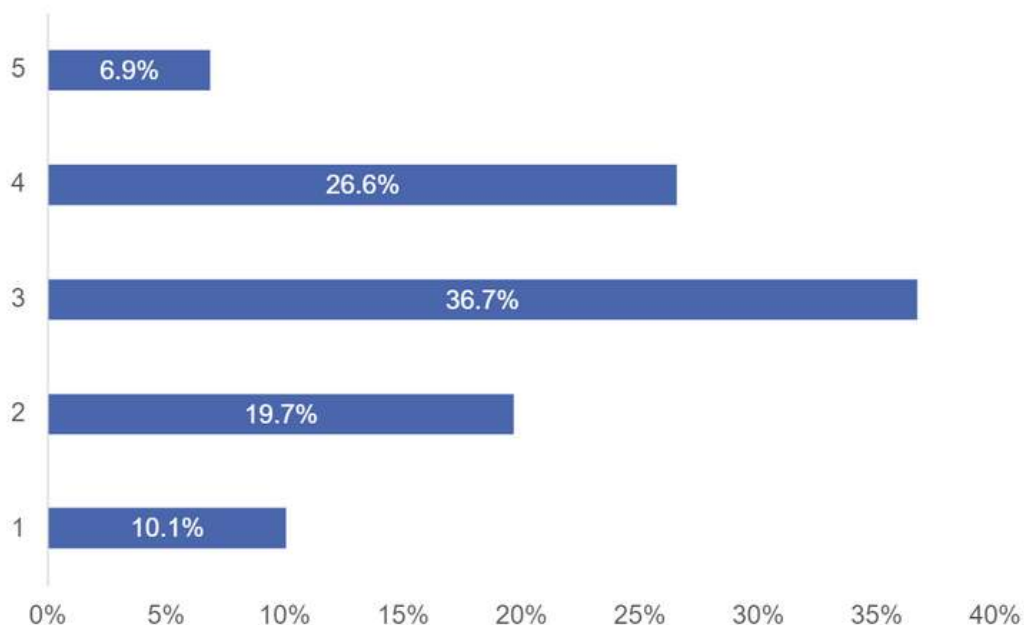
Respondents were asked how well prepared they were to handle threats and intimidation, and what were the impacts of threats and intimidation on them and on their families.

They were also asked whether they had considered leaving their role as a result, and whether experiencing abuse, harassment or intimidation, or the possibility of this, has influenced their decision making about whether to stand for election in 2024.

Again, as in the 2021 survey, a significant number of respondents' comments are included in this section because they illustrate 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.

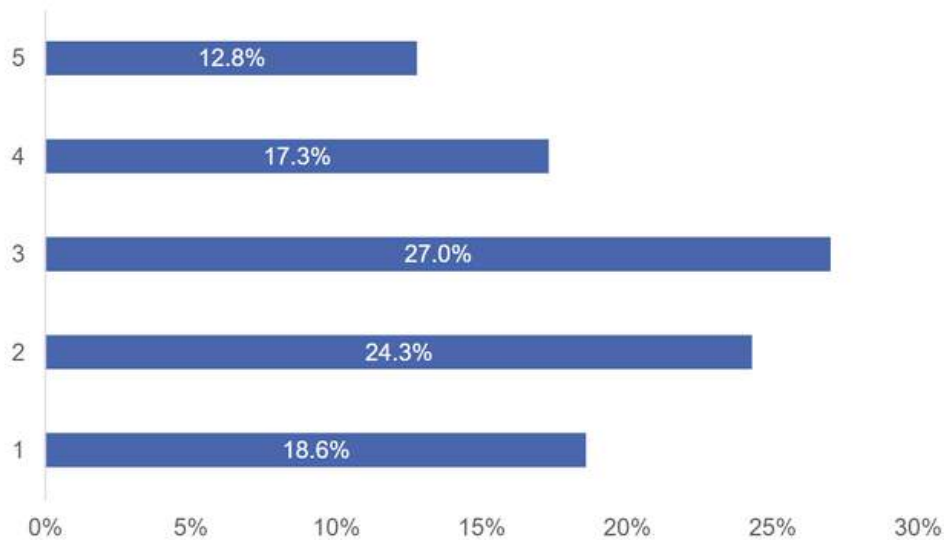
PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

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?

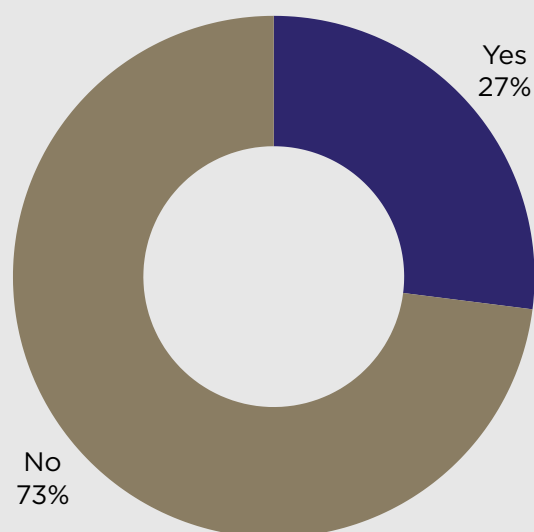


SECTION 3. PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

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



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



SECTION 3. PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

“We are on our own. All of us unprotected, sitting ducks. That’s got to change.”

“The harassment I’ve faced is aimed at all local reps in my area who support refugees.”

“I feel there are not ample supports for public representatives when it comes to threats. I have been threatened online by far-right individuals regarding supporting immigrants.”

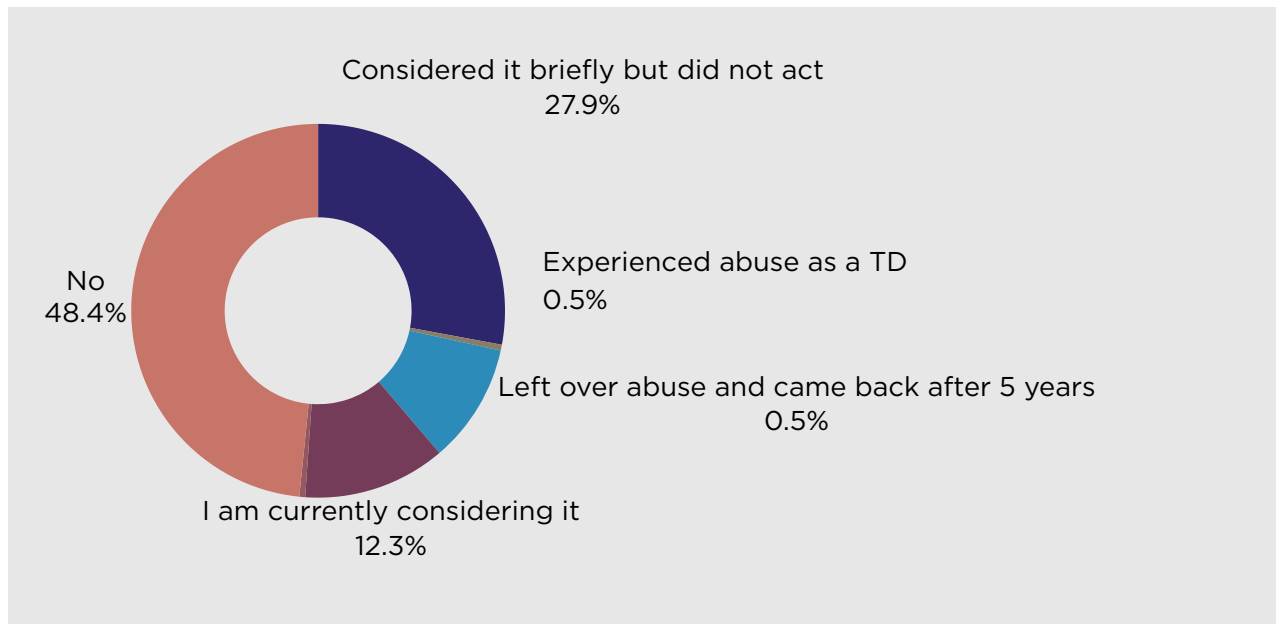
“Mainly what I received were personal attacks on social media. It affected me in the short term but when people locally told me how disgusted they were with what had happened it really helped me. I knew then that his opinion and comments weren’t the view of my real supporters, which gave me the confidence to move on, and realise his opinion wasn’t worth anything.”

“Support from the state for elected representatives is almost non-existent. Scores of women are leaving politics due to the hostile political environment. Something needs to be done before an elected rep is killed.”

“I was targeted daily on a social media page that was set up against IP applicants. I never posted or commented on this page, but I was singled out and subjected to slurs, lies, fabricated images etc. It carried over to Twitter also. It had a huge effect on my family who were able to see the daily onslaught.”

SECTION 3. PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

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



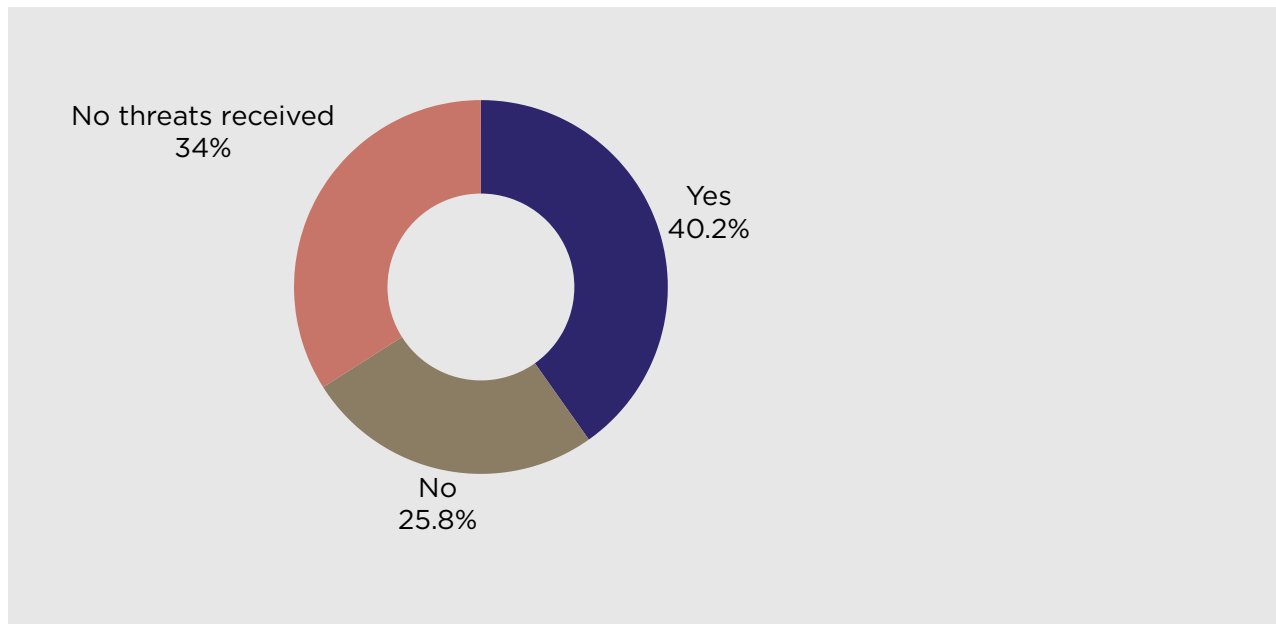
“IT HAS CAUSED ME TO LEAVE EVENTS FOR FEAR OF THREATS OCCURRING AND CHANGE MY SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOUR, LIMIT THE ISSUES I WILL SPEAK ABOUT, MEDIA COVERAGE, AND EVENTS I WILL ATTEND”

“Nothing like this has ever happened to me until I became a politician in 2019. Many (people) say “kill her” online.”.

“Seriously considering stepping down after 32 years an elected councillor.”

SECTION 3. PREPAREDNESS AND IMPACT

Did you tell your immediate family about the threats?



“IT’S NOT SAFE FOR ME, IT’S NOT SAFE FOR MY YOUNG FAMILY. IT’S CERTAINLY NOT SAFE FOR ANYONE WHO HAS PREVIOUSLY BEEN STALKED, AND THE REQUIREMENT (TO MAKE HOME ADDRESS PUBLICLY AVAILABLE) OUGHT TO BE CHANGED”.

“It is not safe or nowadays necessary that people running for election must make their home addresses publicly available. Address should include townland, and other contact details in lieu of home address.”

“It was different before the Internet, when only local people would really see your address, but nowadays it’s available online and any crackpot anywhere in the world can find it.”

SECTION 4. TYPES OF THREATS

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

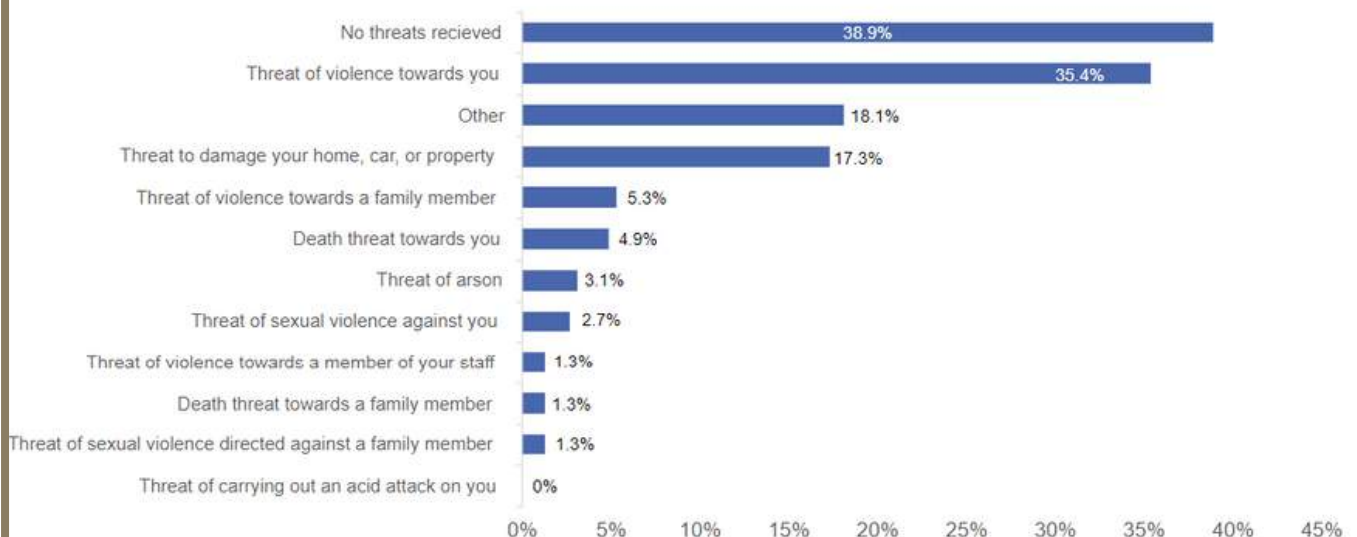
The most common threat related to violence towards a councillor (35.4%) and the second most common was “other” (18.1%) and included:

- Intimation in relation to support for asylum seekers.
- Threatening to expose information to harm reputation.
- Making false allegations.
- Being told the aggressor knew where the councillor lives and would “get” them.

The third was a threat to damage the victim’s car, home or property (17.3%). The fourth most experienced was a threat of violence towards a family member (5.3%) and death threats towards a councillor were fifth, accounting for 4.9%.

THREAT TYPES

Please indicate the types of threats you received

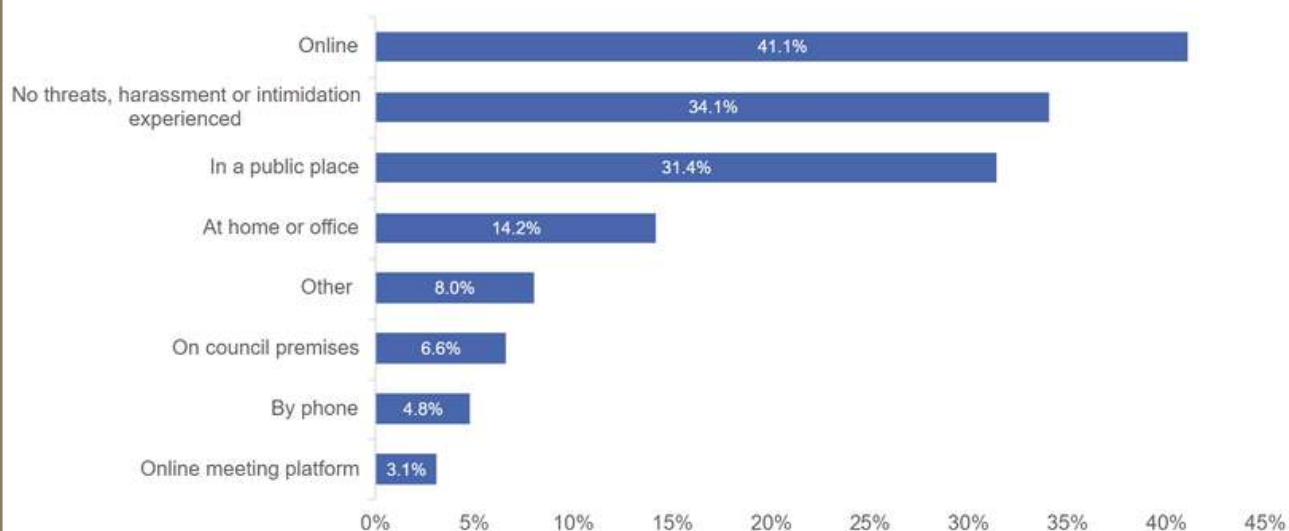


The category “Other” included the following:

- “Mostly intimation in relation to my support for asylum seekers.”
- “Making false allegations.”
- “Unsolicited photos of me placed on social media.”
- “Recording (my) movements from council meetings and putting on Facebook.”
- “A full enquiry into all matters regarding taxes, property ownership and threat to expose anything that may be found to harm my reputation.”
- “Sexual harassment / advances.”
- “Discredit(ing) every initiative or project I am involved in or support.”
- “Rubbish dumped outside my home.”
- “Being followed leaving the office.”

SECTION 4. TYPES OF THREATS

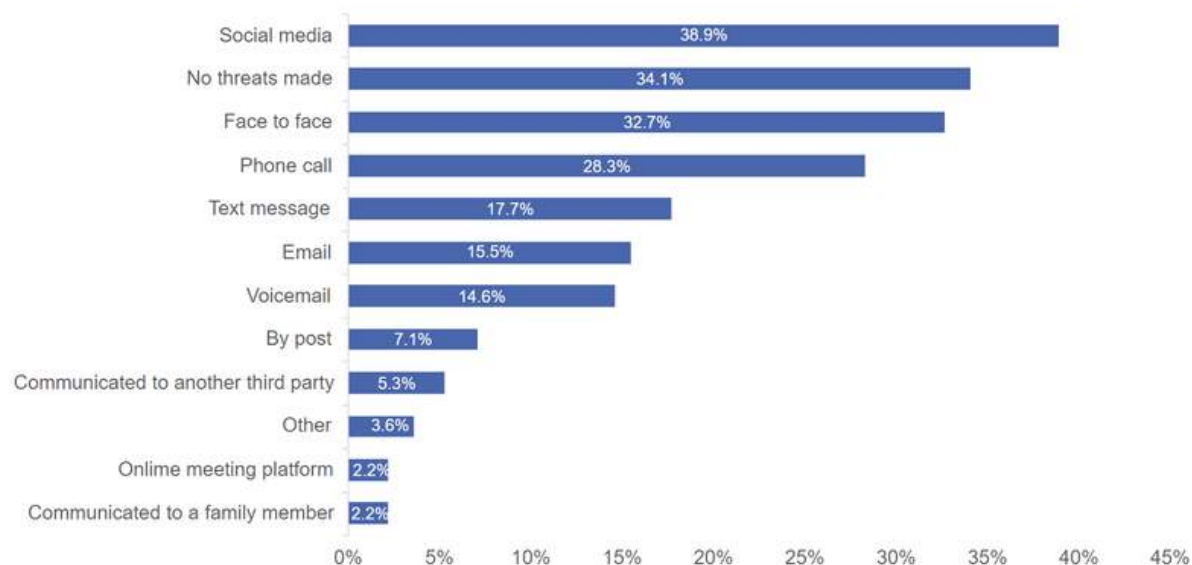
Where did the threats, harassment or intimidation take place?



The category "other" included the following:

- Community events
- Community meetings
- In a pub.

How were the threats made?



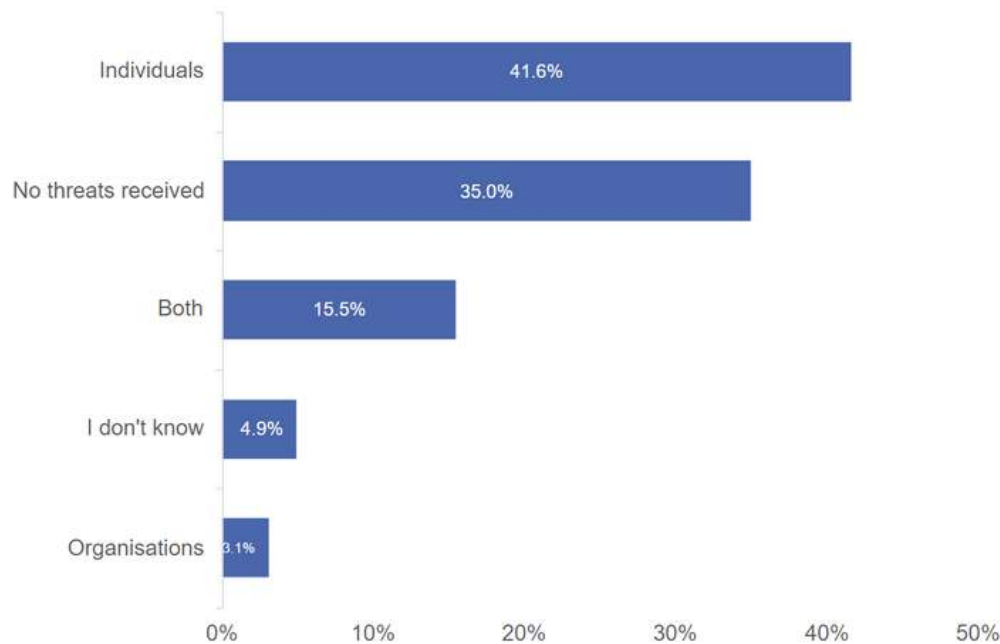
The category "other" included the following:

- Threat painted on footpath outside home
- During protest at home
- Threat communicated to other councillors.

SECTION 4. TYPES OF THREATS

THREAT ACTORS

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



“MANY PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS COMPLAINED TO META, AND THEY REFUSED TO TAKE THE PAGE DOWN. I FELT FEARFUL WALKING IN MY OWN VILLAGE DUE TO THE LEVEL OF DISCORD WITH LOCALS.”

“I believe this harassment was caused by both underlying racial discrimination in Irish communities and an attempt for far-right groups to intimidate me into leaving politics.”

“A very disturbing and sickening experience when being accused wrongly with an energetic campaign nationally of misinformation to personally damage my reputation.”

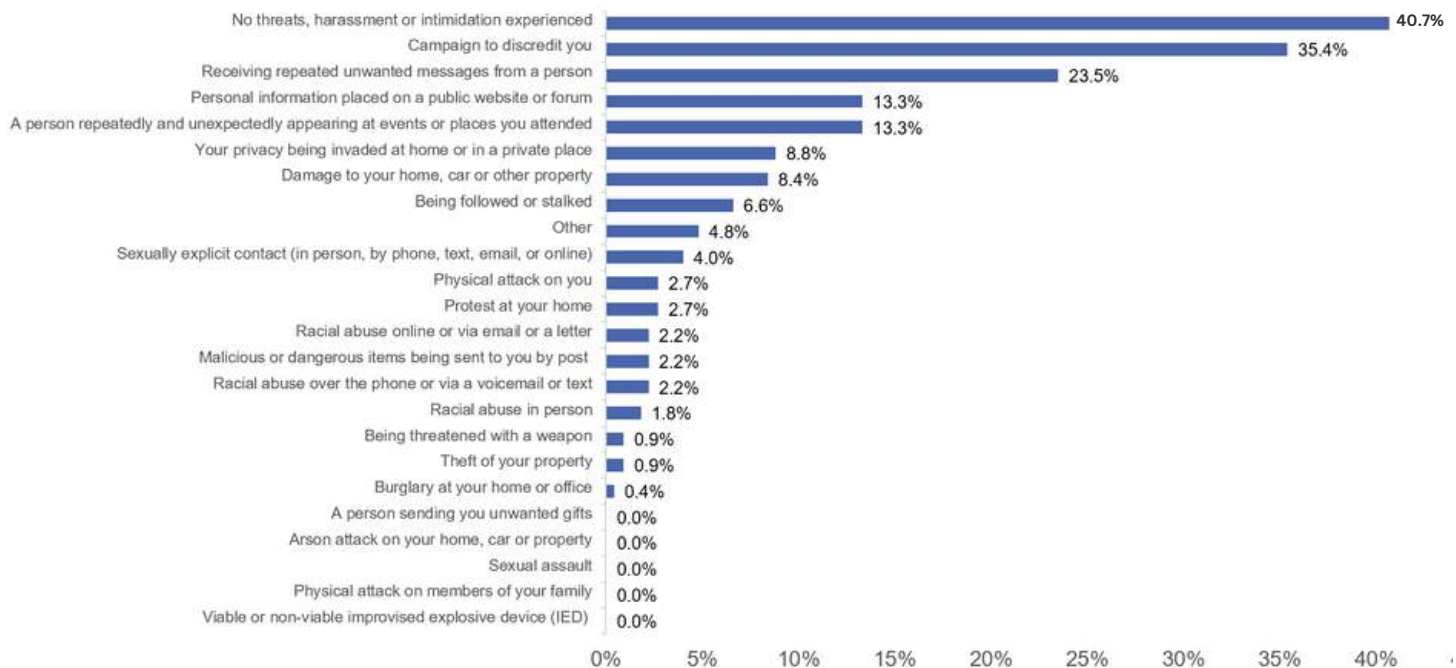
SECTION 5. THREATS THAT ESCALATE TO ACTUAL INCIDENTS

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



The category “other” included the following:

- “Intimidated in a supermarket.”
- “A malicious campaign that has not yet ended.”
- “Verbal abuse while I was socialising.”

SECTION 5. THREATS THAT ESCALATE TO ACTUAL INCIDENTS

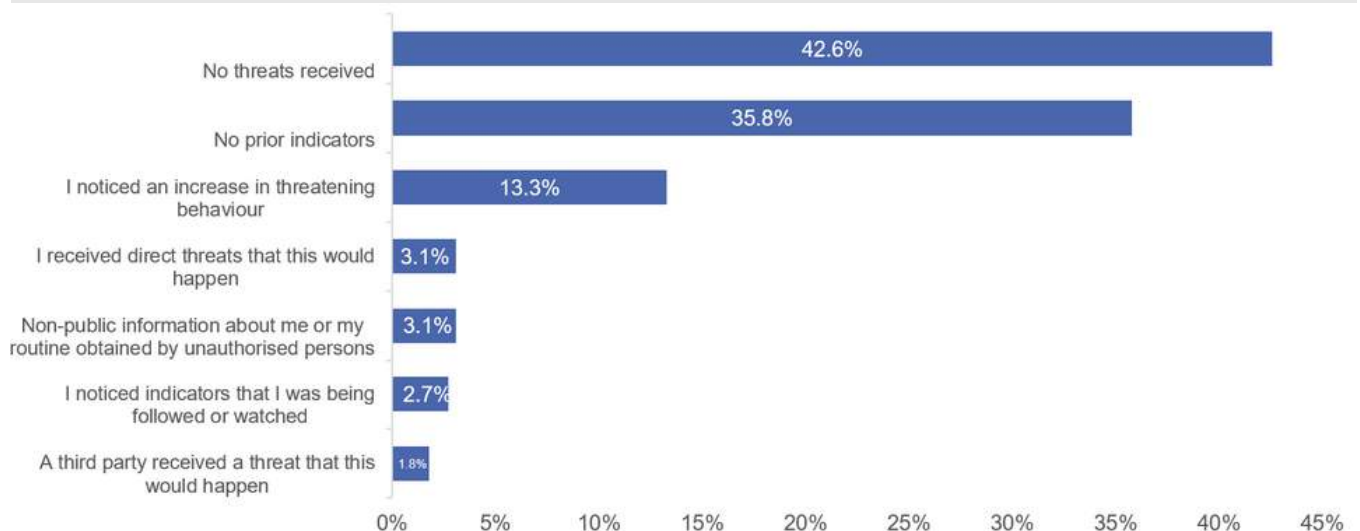
PRIOR WARNING

When councillors were asked if they had any prior indication that something was about to happen before an incident occurred, almost 36% of respondents advised that there had been no prior signals before the incident.

Over 13% of respondents said they noticed an increase in threatening behaviour before the incident occurred.



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



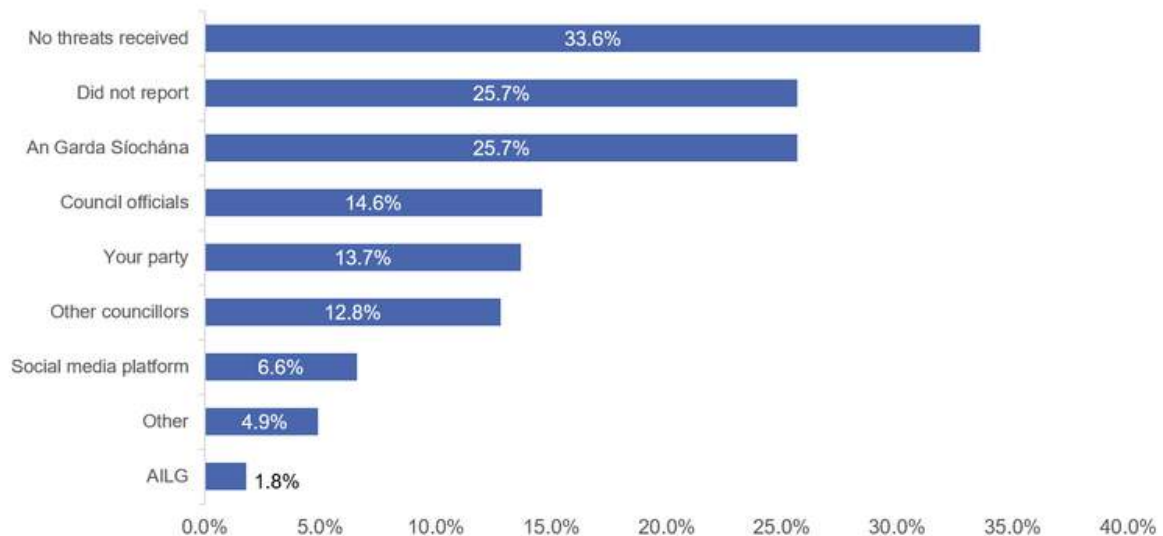
SECTION 6. RESPONDING TO AND REPORTING THREATS AND INCIDENTS

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

Over a quarter (25.7%) 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 effective preventative and response measures.

Some respondents cited inaction by social media platforms as being a reason for not reporting threats made on social media.

To whom did you report the threat(s)?



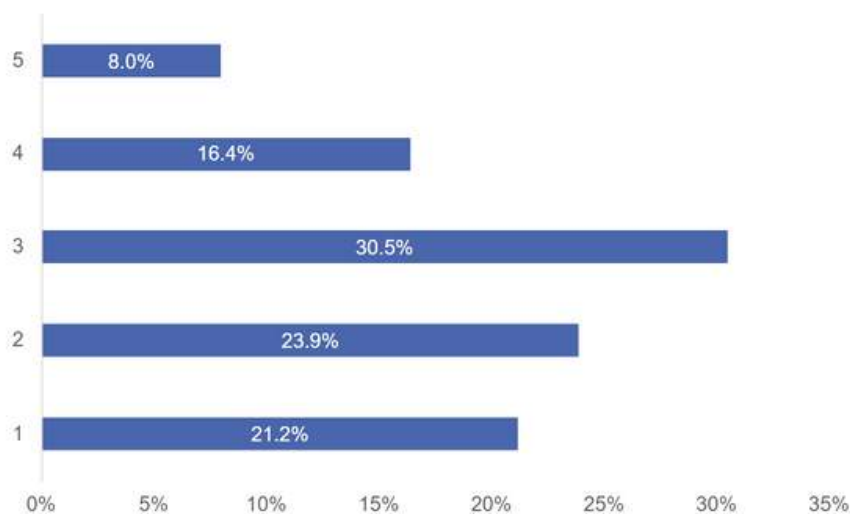
The category “other” included the following:

- Solicitor
- Family
- Charity regulator

SECTION 6. RESPONDING TO AND REPORTING THREATS AND INCIDENTS

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?



“MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO PREVENT THIS FORM OF INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS”

“I do not use twitter and I feel that this is where a lot of abuse can take place.”

“Councillors should refrain from using social media.”

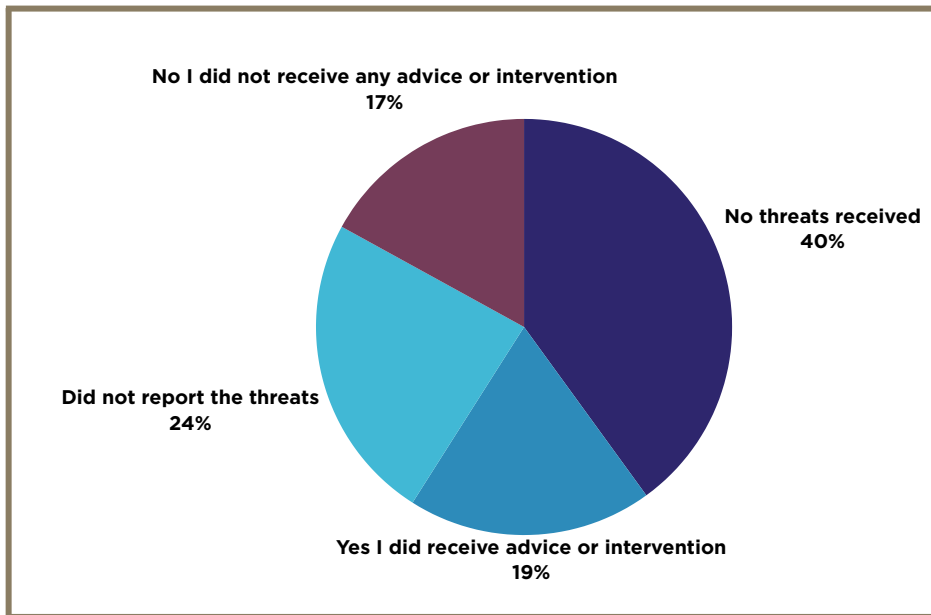
“No proper legal deterrent to stop untruths on social media.”

“Social media companies have a lot to answer for. They never act on complaints, ever.”

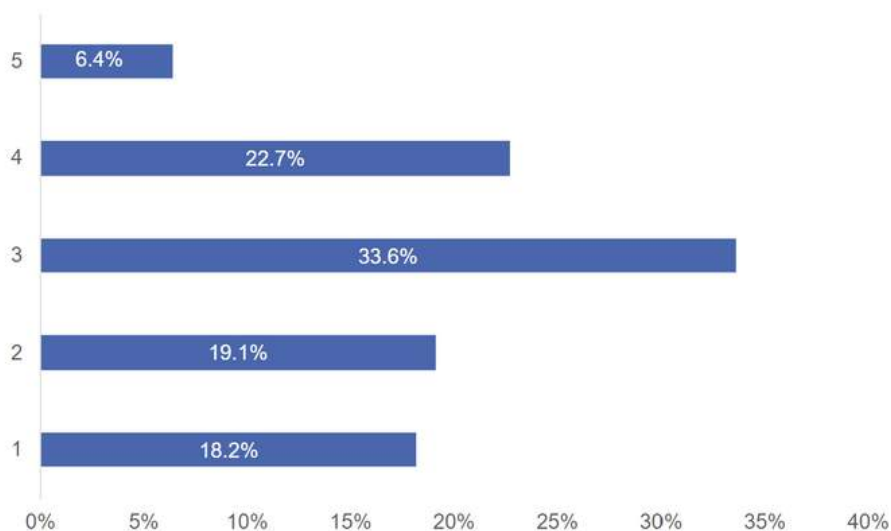
SECTION 6. RESPONDING TO AND REPORTING THREATS AND INCIDENTS

OUTCOMES OF REPORTS BEING MADE

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



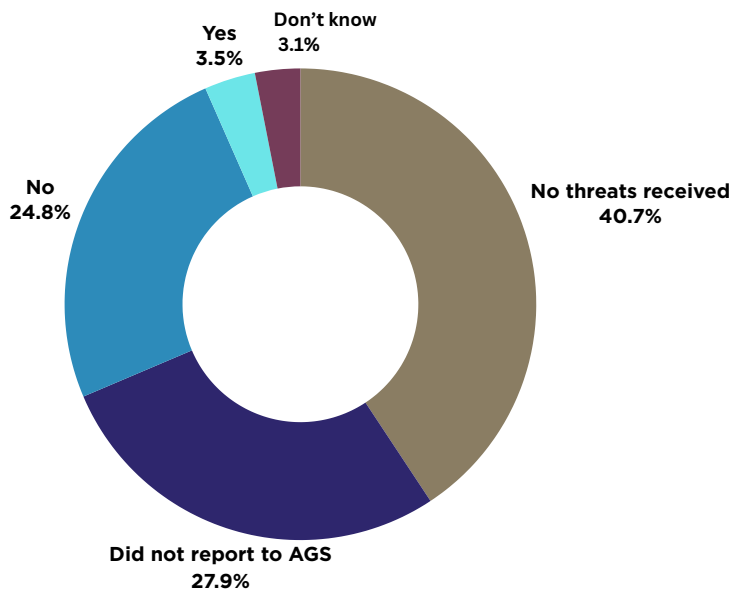
On scale of 1 to 5 (1-ineffective, 5-very effective) how would you rate the effectiveness of advice you received following threats?



SECTION 6. RESPONDING TO AND REPORTING THREATS AND INCIDENTS

OUTCOMES OF REPORTS BEING MADE

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



“A PUBLIC MEETING HELD BY OUR PARTY WAS ATTENDED BY PUBLIC PROTESTORS AND THE GARDAI HAD TO BE CALLED TO ATTEND TO PREVENT ANY POTENTIAL HARM TO SPEAKERS.”

“Our local crime prevention officer visited our monthly meeting to give advice.”

“Incident reported to An Garda Síochána regarding abusive and threatening verbal attacks via social media platform. No action or advice provided by Garda. Legal advice and direction had to be sought privately.”

SECTION 7. NECESSARY LIFESTYLE CHANGES & SECURITY ENHANCEMENTS

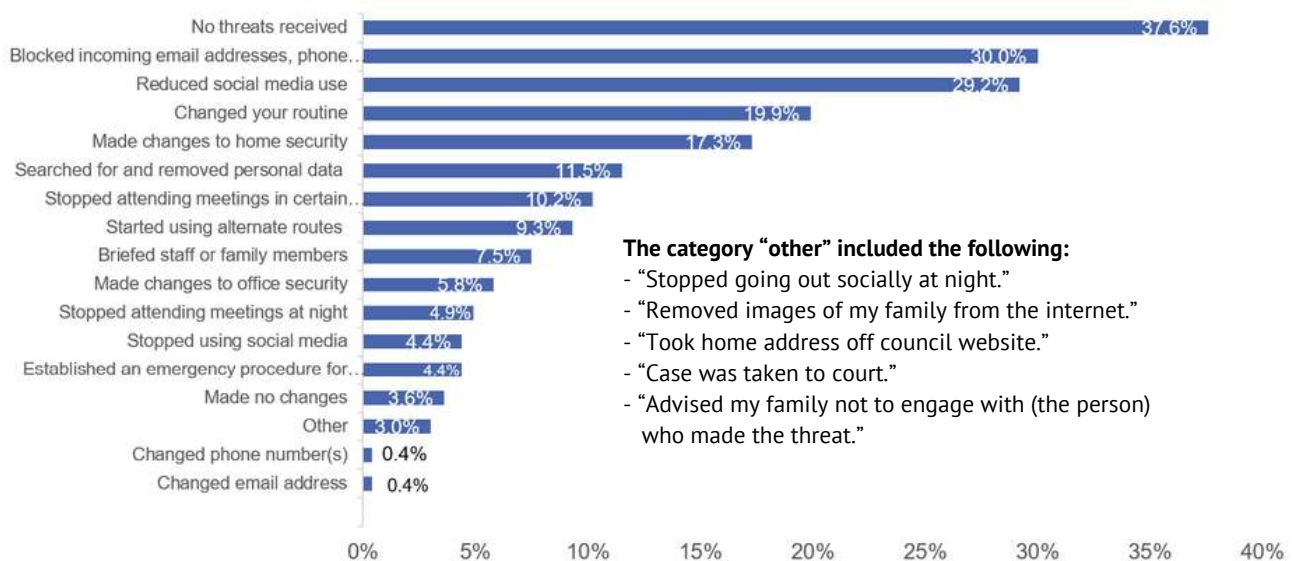
Respondents were asked what lifestyle changes they have made and what personal security enhancements they have enacted following receipt of threats, harassment or intimidation.

They were also asked how likely did they believe, that the threats would be carried out. Over 10% of respondents stopped attending meeting in certain locations and just under 5% stopped attending meetings at night. When one considers the typical role and routine of a councillor, these changes are very significant and are likely having a very detrimental effect on councillors' ability to fully connect with their constituents, and to actually carry out their role.



LIFESTYLE CHANGES

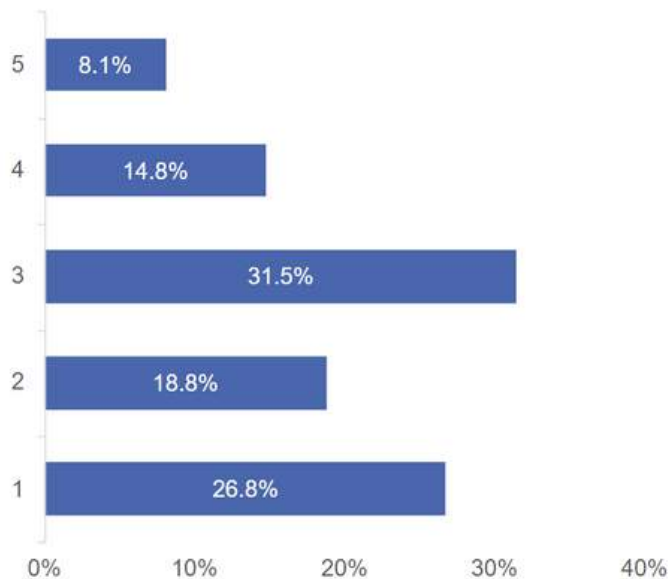
Have you done any of the following as a result of receiving threats



SECTION 7. NECESSARY LIFESTYLE CHANGES & SECURITY ENHANCEMENTS

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?



“I RECEIVE A LOT OF MESSAGES OF A SEXUAL NATURE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECT MESSAGE OR WHATSAPP”

“Please remove our home addresses from the public domain.”

“I believe that threats and harassment are mostly directed at women councillors.”

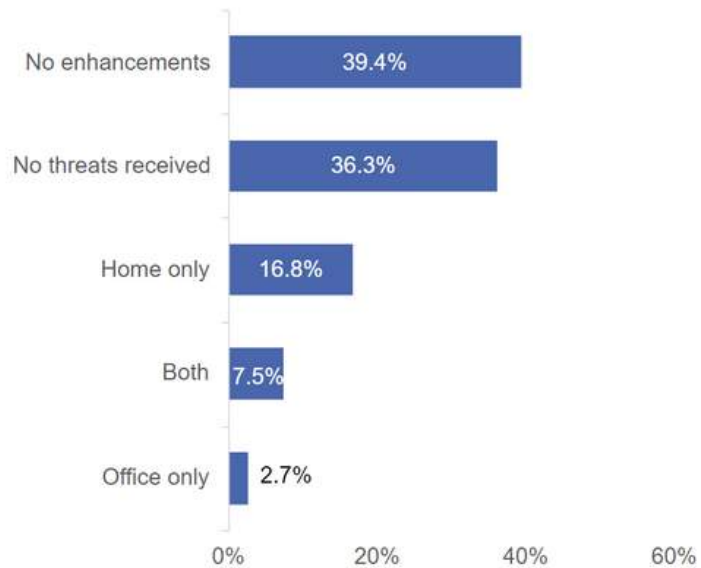
“I am aware of and have witnessed my colleagues verbally attacked, harassed online and viciously trolled. Those who were threatened were either women or members of the LGBTQ+ community”.

“It’s easy for me to say as I only experience what I would consider low level issues, in my opinion, to do the role a certain amount of mental fortitude is necessary”

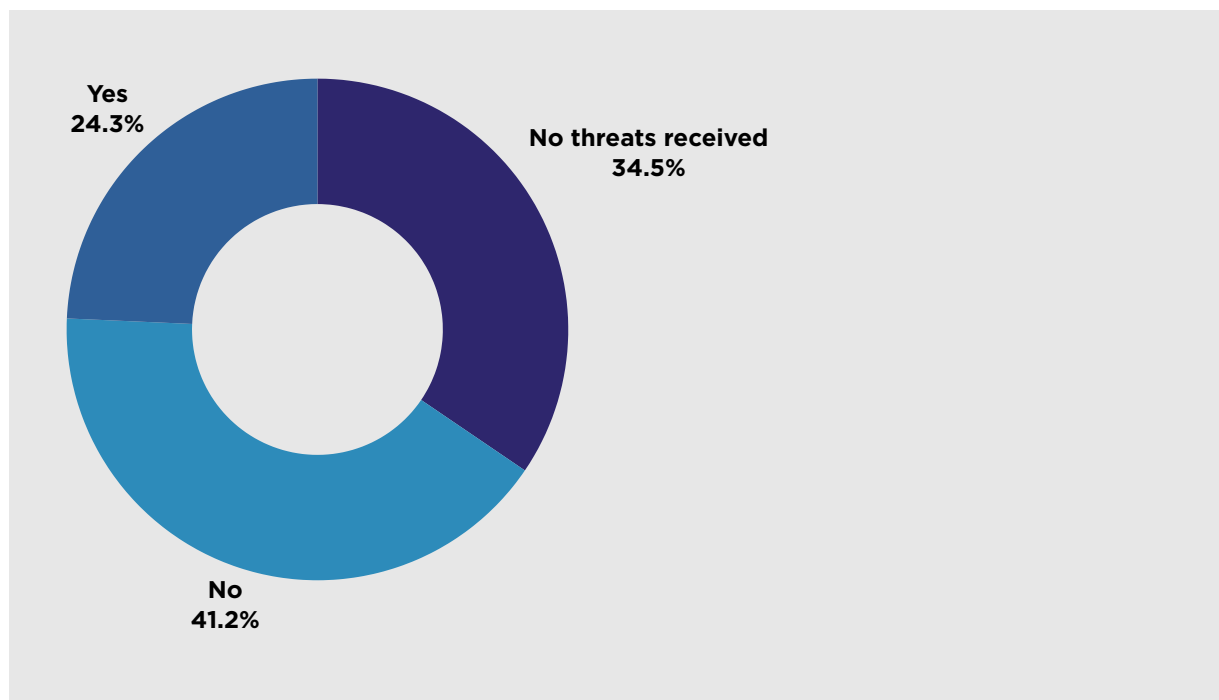
SECTION 7. NECESSARY LIFESTYLE CHANGES & SECURITY ENHANCEMENTS

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?



SECTION 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.

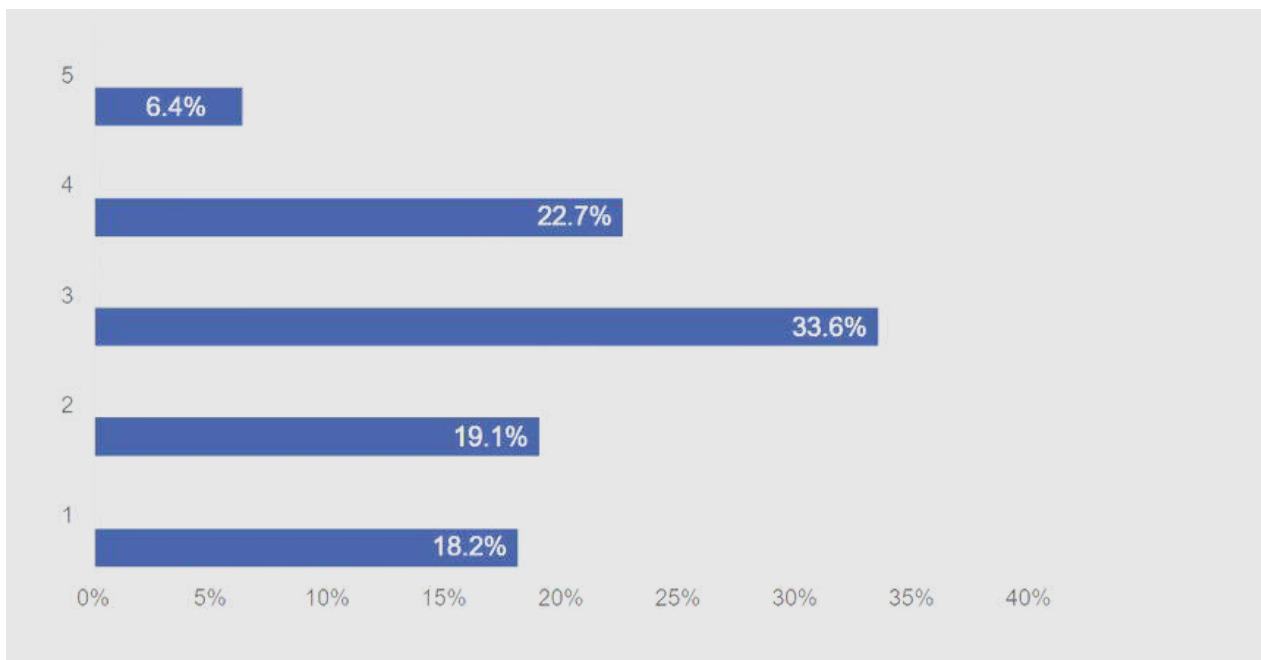
They were also asked if they would be able to identify pre-cursors or warning signs of potential violence. This was asked to determine whether councillors could identify both tangible and non-tangible pre-cursors. Only 21% claimed that they would recognise these pre-cursors, however when asked to give examples, about 37% of the examples provided are recognisable pre-cursors to violence. This is a positive indicator that topics included in security awareness training delivered to councillors are having an impact and resulting in some early warning signs being identifiable.

39% of respondents made no security enhancements to their home or office when threats were received. Whilst this is a lower percentage than in 2021 (48%), this does continue to suggest that councillors need professional support in assessing threats, and also suggests that councillors are continuing to address complex and frightening personal security issues for which they don't have the expertise or experience.



SECTION 8. 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?



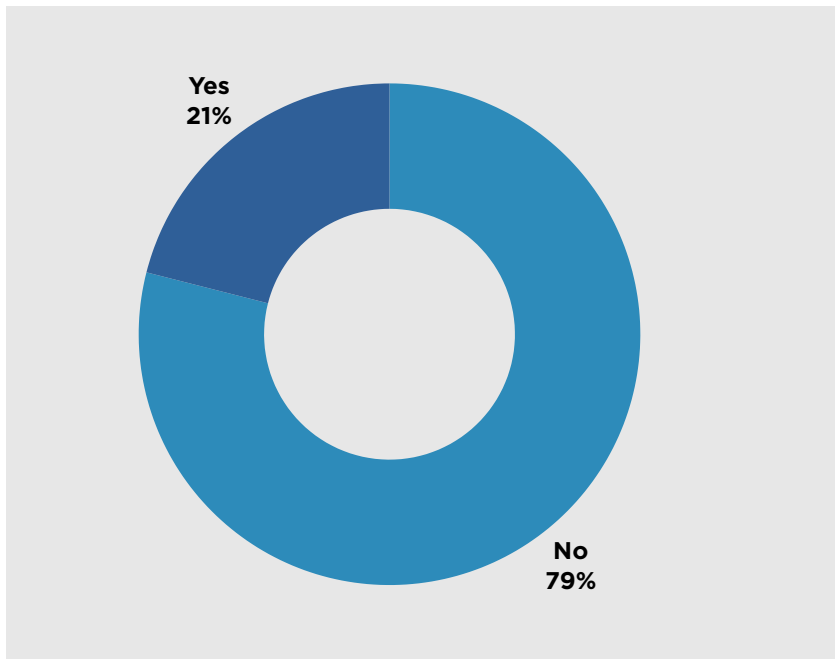
“LOCAL COUNCILLORS ARE FACING MORE RISKS THAN EVER BEFORE AS EVIDENCED BY RECENT ATTACKS AROUND THE COUNTRY AND THE ONLINE ABUSE THAT IS A REGULAR OCCURRENCE FOR MANY COUNCILLORS.”

“I think a home security allowance to pay for CCTV at our homes is vital.”

“Having spent many years in a political party (people) did everything within their power to destroy me.”

SECTION 8. DEALING WITH FUTURE THREATS AND INCIDENTS

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



“IF OUT SOCIALISING THERE WERE POTENTIAL LEVELS OF CONFRONTATION WHICH I AVOIDED.”

“In the interpersonal sense I can read the body language and escalated dysregulation of a person who might represent a threat. This gives me a warning sign which could mean that I should disengage immediately or shift my own behaviour to de-escalate the situation accordingly.”

“A person shouting rather than speaking. Being confronted by an angry person. Someone using foul language while talking to me in an aggressive manner. Being confronted by a number of people at the same time.”

SECTION 9. COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 AND 2023

As this is the second AILG / CMG survey that has been conducted, some comparisons with the previous survey completed in 2021 were made. The more significant comparisons are contained in this section.

Gender

The gender breakdown of respondents changed significantly with the percentage of male respondents increasing from 59.6% in 2021 to 72.6% in 2023. Female respondents decreased from 40.4% in 2021 to 27.4% in 2023.

Length of service

There were no significant changes in the typical length of service of respondents other than a considerable reduction from 38.6% to 3.1% in those with less than two years service. This is explained by the fact that it is over two years since the first survey was completed and therefore most respondents will now have completed an additional two years service. Similarly, those with more than ten years service increased from 33.2% to 49.6% for the same reason.

Type of areas served

The type of areas served by respondents illustrated some moderate changes also with more urban or mixed urban/rural responses in 2023; a combined 77.8% in 2023 versus 83.8% in 2021. Responses from rural respondents increased from 16.1% to 22.1%.



SECTION 9. COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 AND 2023

Extent of security threats encountered by respondents

The number of respondents who had experienced threats since 2021 decreased when compared to the first survey (71.7% versus 63.2%) however this may be attributable to the fact that the current survey covered only a two-year period rather than the three-year period covered by the 2021 survey.

In 2021 the percentage number of respondents experiencing threats or intimidation at the time of the survey was 28.3%. This had reduced to 25.8% in 2023. However, a new response option of “unsure” was introduced in 2023. This was introduced to reflect the fact that often it is not possible to determine conclusively whether a campaign of harassment or intimidation has actually concluded or not. The percentage number of respondents who selected this option was 7.7%.

Preparedness of respondents in addressing threats, harassment, or intimidation situations

There were no significant changes in terms of how well prepared councillors were for handling threats, harassment or intimidation other than a reduction from 15.8% down to 10% of those who were not prepared at all.



SECTION 9.

COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 AND 2023

Preparedness of respondents in addressing threats, harassment, or intimidation situations

Equally, there were no significant changes in terms of how worried councillors were about the impact of their family of threats, harassment or intimidation.

The number of respondents who proactively search for personal information about them that is publicly available, and that could be used to target them decreased from 36.3% in 2021 to 27% in 2023.

Councillors who are currently considering leaving their role as a result of threats and harassment increased from 9.5% to 12.3%.

Types of threats received

The types of threats received were largely unchanged in terms of how typical they were, with threats of violence, threats to damage home, car, or property, death threats and threats of violence towards councillors' family members being the most experienced in both surveys. The percentage of threats experience online via social media reduced from 58% in 2021 to 41% in 2023, however two new 2023 categories – threats made on online meeting platforms, and threats made by phone, showed a rate of 3.1% and 4.6% respectively.



SECTION 9. COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 AND 2023

Types of threats received

In terms of actual incidents experienced as distinct from threats, the most commonly experienced incidents in the 2023 survey were the same as those experienced in 2021 with campaigns to discredit, repeated unwanted messages, personal information being placed in the public domain, privacy being invaded, damage to home, car or property and being followed or stalked remaining the most experienced incidents in both surveys.

There was a significant increase from 4% in 2021 to 13.3% in 2023 of a person repeatedly and unexpectedly appearing at an event or place a councillor attends. This is one of a number of indicators of stalking type behaviour and is hugely concerning. Over 6% of respondents recorded being followed or stalked.

In terms of prior indicators that an incident was about to occur there was a slight increase in the percentage of respondents who experienced an increase in threatening behaviour prior to an incident. The percentage who noticed that they were being followed decreased from 6.3% in 2021 to 2.7% in 2023. However, this is merely an indicator as to whether councillors noticed the indicators, not necessary that these indicators did not occur.



SECTION 9. COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 & 2023

Reporting threats

As regards to whom reports were made to when threats were received, **there was a significant increase in the 2023 survey of councillors reporting received threats to council officials (up to 14.6% from 7.2% in 2021).** The percentage of reports made to An Garda Síochána and to a councillor's party remained essentially at the same levels. In the 2023 survey 6.6% of reports were made to social media platforms. Only about 1% was recorded for this category in 2021.

There was virtually no difference between the percentage of respondents who received advice or interventions and those who did not, as between the 2021 figures and those for 2023. However, the percentage who rated the advice or interventions received at 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 increased from 18% in 2021 to 29% in 2023.

Lifestyle Changes

In terms of lifestyle changes, there were few significant changes between the most frequently encountered changes made in 2021 compared to 2023 with the following being the most used; blocked incoming emails and phone numbers, reduced social media use, changed routine, enhanced home



security, searched for and removed personal data, briefed family or staff on security measures, enhanced office security.

There was an increase from 5.43% in 2021 to 10.2% in 2023 of respondents who stopped attending meeting in certain locations. Similarly, there was an increase in those who stopped attending meetings at night - up to 4.9% in 2023 from 1.3% in 2021. This is particularly relevant when one considers the typical working pattern of councillors. Feeling unable to attend meetings either in certain locations or at night would severely impact on the work of the average councillor.

SECTION 9. COMPARISONS WITH 2021 SURVEY

COMPARISONS: 2021 AND 2023

Enhancing security measures

As regards enhancing physical or electronic security measures after receiving threats, there is a modest increase in the percentage of respondents who enhanced home security (16.8% versus 13.9% in 2021), and there was a reduction in the percentage who enhanced mobile or communications security (24.3% in 2023 versus 31.4% in 2021).

The percentage of respondents who rated the effectiveness of currently available preventative and response measures at between 3 and 5 on a scale of 1-5 increased significantly from 21% in 2021 to 62% in 2023.

When asked to give examples, about 37% of the examples provided are recognisable precursors to violence. This is a positive indicator that topics included in security awareness training delivered to councillors are having an impact and resulting in some early warning signs being identifiable.



SECTION 10. SUGGESTED COURSES OF ACTION

Actions taken since 2021 survey

Following the results of the initial 2021 survey carried out by AILG and CMG, the Association of Irish Local Government partnered with Crime Management Group in early 2022 to deliver in-person training on personal safety and risk assessment. This has been followed up by a tailored in-person and online security training programme for councillors on positive personal security practices including how to identify and counteract threats both on-line and in-person and

ensuring a safe environment at home, at clinics, and at public meetings. Other areas of training included briefing sessions from a senior Garda Crime Prevention specialist with practical advice on how to secure person and premises, collaborations with Meta (Facebook) and Twitter to deliver online webinars focusing on safety tools on social media platforms which was also followed up by safety tips guidance document for Facebook and Instagram.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, AILG made numerous representations to the Minister of State with responsibility for Local Government and Planning for appropriate security supports for councillors to ensure their safety and the safety of their families, homes and property. AILG's lobbying efforts were rewarded when Minister Kieran O'Donnell TD, announced the introduction of a new €2,500 security allowance scheme for councillors during his address at AILG's Autumn Seminar in September 2023.

From an All-Island perspective, AILG have had ongoing engagement with our sister association, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) on this issue. The Association invited NILGA to present their own survey findings on the issue of councillor abuse at the AILG annual conference in April 2023 which had several similarities to the AILG-CMG report findings. Both AILG and NILGA have emphasised our ongoing commitment to work together to address this critical issue. Following a joint meeting in Northern Ireland to share experiences of the abuse and intimidation suffered by councillors in carrying out their duties, both organisations issued a joint statement on the safety concerns of elected members in all parts of Ireland. AILG and NILGA will continue to collaborate in 2024 to promote the important work and role of local councillors across the island of Ireland and to raise awareness on this issue.



SECTION 10. SUGGESTED COURSES OF ACTION

Recommendations

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.

As noted in the 2021 report this will require action by several stakeholders including councillors themselves, political parties, law enforcement, social media platforms, and local authorities.



The results of this survey highlight again the volume and level of threats, harassment and intimidation which continue to be an ongoing risk to the mental and physical wellbeing of councillors. It can now be said with increased confidence that this is affecting councillors' ability to effectively carry out their day-to-day role, is impacting on their ability to fully connect with their constituents, and cause them significant concerns about their own safety and security, and that of their families.

Similar to the 2021 survey, the results are also a serious cause for concern in the local government sector which has been actively working to try promote gender balance and wider diversity in local government. With the 2024 local elections just around the corner, AILG continues to have grave concerns about retention rates, with many local councillors already choosing not to re-run for election. The existence of intimidation, abuse and threats may also deter potential new candidates from running for election. These comments from individual councillors are very telling:

"I never posted or commented on this page, but I was singled out and subjected to slurs, lies, fabricated images etc. It carried over to Twitter also. It had a huge effect on my family who were able to see the daily onslaught. I felt fearful walking in my own village due to the level of discord with locals."

"It has caused me to leave events for fear of threats occurring and change my social media behaviour, limit the issues I will speak about, media coverage and events I will attend."

SECTION 10. SUGGESTED COURSES OF ACTION

Below AILG and CMG recommend some suggested courses of action to be made in order to address the findings and to improve the situation.

Recommendations

Availability of Professional Threat and Risk Analysis and Mitigation Processes

- Availability of proportionate, immediate and proven risk mitigation measures and responses to acute cases of threats and intimidation.
- Provision of immediately available on-call advice and response to general personal security queries, or in cases where councillors feel that danger is imminent.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

- Launch public awareness campaigns promoting the important role of the councillor and to educate constituents about the importance of respectful communication and the consequences of abusive behavior towards councillors, and to tackle the normalising of abuse and harassment of councillors.

Social Media Guidance:

- Develop social media guidance for councillors to tackling online abuse.
- The AILG will also engage with the following;
 - Office of the online safety commissioner, of Coimisiún na Meán, to highlight the particular problem of online abuse towards councillors.
 - Electoral Commission, An Coimisiún Toghcháin, to request greater scrutiny of disinformation and manipulative behaviour during the electoral process.
 - Social media platforms to request greater and more targeted support for candidates during the forthcoming local elections.

Further Training Programs:

- Provide mandatory training programs for councillors on topics such as conflict resolution, personal security training.
- Introduced as part of 2024 post local elections Induction training programme for councillors.

Establish protocols for reporting and responding to criminal behavior:

- Provide guidance document/protocol with a step-by-step guide on how to report and respond to serious cases of abuse and harassment.

