

Respect is high on the agenda at the City Chambers

Last week at the City Chambers, SNP Councillor Ellie Bird's motion demanded that councillors set a respectful tone both in and out of chamber.

The suggestion was universally approved by politicians of all colours who all agreed that such behaviour ought to apply to dialogue whether it is in the chamber, online or face to face. It arose from a fraught few weeks of politics at Westminster, when some of the language used in the House of Commons was deplored by politicians and commentators.



Councillor Ellie Bird with Deputy Council Leader Cammy Day at the City Chambers PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

The motion read :

“Council condemns the pejorative and inflammatory language that has been heard in the House of Commons over the past weeks.

Regrets that dangerous rhetoric of this kind threatens to widen division in our society and encourage hate speech, verbal abuse and the threat of physical violence, including that faced by politicians at both a local and national level.

Notes the President of COSLA’s recent letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons raising these concerns, and Cllr Watt’s motion on Threatening Behaviour Towards Councillors from May’s meeting of full council.

Welcomes the robust debate and close cross party working that is central to our role as elected members.

Agrees however, that it is also our responsibility to set a respectful tone both in and out of the chamber.

Requests an update to Policy and Sustainability committee on the work done to date on the protocol referred to in Cllr Watt’s motion.”

Cllr Mandy Watt lodged a motion in May recognising the febrile atmosphere in which politicians work, but suggested that there should be a zero tolerance approach to any violent behaviour towards councillors.

All the councillors who contributed to the debate on Thursday spoke in support of it. It seems that on the face of it at least there could be a move towards a more civil debate in and out of the City Chambers in future.

Councillor Kate Campbell said : “I will continue to challenge the welfare policies of the Tory government. We can have a strong democracy but constructive debate.

"I do believe that we can set a tone that is respectful."

Cllr Miller admitted she was a relative newbie at the City Chambers. She said : "I try to focus on the arguments and the issues we are debating.

"My aim is always to be available to residents so in person I have made a choice to be accessible to residents.

There is no such thing as a political bubble the words and the tone used filter out onto the street or into a meeting and also on social media. The impact on our health is unacceptable and can be a real threat to our safety.

"Very seriously for those who don't make the same choices as I do and use much more robust phrases may want to reflect and choose to change. They need to know the impact they have on other members. We have it in our power to do that I would love to see consent on this today.

Cllr Jim Campbell said : "I listened to the contribution from Ellie Bird in this chamber today. It has caused me to think very carefully about what you said."

Cllr Cameron who has been at the centre of some recent unwanted media attention said : "I would like to think I do conduct myself in a way which is respectful.

"We all have different approaches and it is tough at times. I don't care so much about that personally, but I do care about the message that sends out. We have the ability to transform people's lives."

Green councillor Susan Rae said she also supported the motion mentioning that one woman councillor had been compared to a terrorist. (Councillor John McLellan writing in his regular Edinburgh Evening News column referred to the Transport Convener Cllr Lesley Macinnes and the way the council deals with transport issues as the 'Transport Taliban'.)

Cllr Rae continued : "If you use that language you are fuelling a fire. If there are consequences, then you are also complicit in those consequences. It may result in abuse and in people having to leave their homes. If you do nothing then you are complicit in that too."