

A chairde,

Firstly we wish to commend the work of the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life for their work thus far and to wish all participants the very best in their endeavours to improve safe participation for all those who engage in political life – politicians, political staff, house services, civil servants, service & maintenance staff, guests and visitors and general members of the public.

We, the Sinn Féin parliamentary representatives and staff team wish to make a number of observations and recommendations which will hopefully assist the task force with its work.

Sinn Féin recognise that political work and representing constituents demands meaningful and direct in person connections with the general public. This approach has served our country well in allowing citizens generally easy access to politicians and their staff. Respectful discourse has always been a mainstay between politicians and those who engage with them.

With an eye to the Terms of Reference set for the Task force;

1. It is very obvious that the nature of abuse is becoming more extreme, the prevalence becoming more regular and the impact becoming more of a burden on all of those who choose to enter and engage with politics at every level. Online abuse is becoming more vitriolic and more threatening and more often than not becomes a sustained harassment campaign online and at times with some individuals in person.
2. Far right groupings have clearly in recent times sought to manipulate and exploit genuinely held concerns within local communities on a range of societal issues. A multi agency and societal approach is required to try and engage people who have genuine concerns from getting manipulated and used by these elements. There must be greater engagement by government departments with local communities on issues like the housing of asylum seekers. In many cases these groups exploit an information vacuum.

The work of the committee on DCEDIY in examining some issues so far has been helpful. A more thorough approach perhaps with joint sittings of other committees may be considered to develop a strategy to try and address matters.

In our opinion, Social Media companies have another distance to go in being part of addressing much of the disinformation that is peddled by these groups and the sharing of very sinister word, image and video content online.

The task Force will hopefully result in a comprehensive response and strategy from the Houses of the Oireachtas and political parties that can hopefully be used as a tool by all those active in political life to help them be safer and more confident in their work in the political sphere.

Recommendations;

- Any work undertaken in this area must be conscious of everyone active in political life – politicians (national & Local), staff, civil servants, service staff, contractors, constituency staff & political party members
- There is currently a security review of the Leinster House campus underway – all persons permitted to enter Leinster House should be asked for their views on how to improve security
- Reporting of incidents affecting people is key to recording prevalence of this unacceptable behaviour
- A dedicated unit should be established now within the Houses of Oireachtas and An Garda Síochána that can act as a supporting, recording, advising, justice seeking and criminal charge seeking operation to assist all people working in political life.
- A review of current legislation should be undertaken through the committee structure in the Houses of the Oireachtas
- A further examination of resources available to people active in political life to improve their personal safety outside of the Houses of the Oireachtas should be examined
- Social Media companies (many European Headquartered in Ireland) must be brought in to engage with political personnel again to highlight the deteriorating situation that their platforms are responsible for in adding to this dangerous minority of society
- The work of the Task Force should not end with the publishing of the final report – we need to consider how this work continues, perhaps through the establishment of either a select or standing committee similar to other Parliaments like standards in public life