

# Highways Authorities Responses to the Raise the Flag Campaign.

## 1 Overview

Operation Raise the Colours is a 2025 campaign group in the United Kingdom that advocates the displaying the Union Flag and the Saint George's Cross in public places, as well as the flags of the other countries of the UK. The campaign began in August 2025 and has particularly aroused controversy around the Flag of England due to its history of use by anti-immigration nationalists. It has involved tying flags to lampposts and painting them onto mini-roundabouts.

APSE conducted a survey and the [Highways and street lighting network](#) was convened on 8 October 2025 to discuss the issues and ascertain the impact on local authorities across the UK.

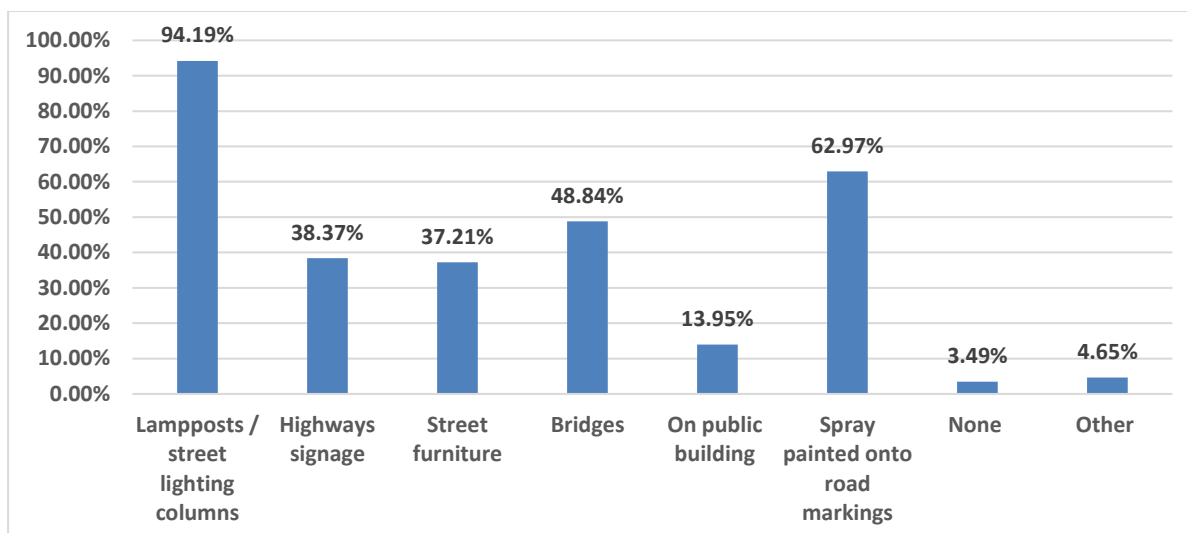
This briefing provides a summary of the survey results and an overview of the key points raised at the network meeting.

## 2 Councils, highways, and flags survey.

The survey was conducted in late September and early October 2025 and received a total of 87 responses. The majority of respondents (66.16%) were from local authorities in England, 26.15% of respondents were from Scotland, 6.15% of respondents were from Wales and 1.54% of respondents were from Northern Ireland, allowing a snapshot of the impact of the campaign to be gained from across the UK.

### 2.1 Has your authority seen local action as a result of the social media 'raise the flag' campaign? If yes, where have flags been placed?

The survey sought to gain an understanding of where campaigners had erected the flags, and the graph below provides an overview of the responses.



The vast majority of respondents (94.19%) report that flags are being placed on lampposts and street lighting columns, 67.97% report that flags have been spray painted onto road markings and 48.84% advised that flags have been placed on bridges.

The responses clearly demonstrated that campaigners are placing the flags on prominent and accessible places.

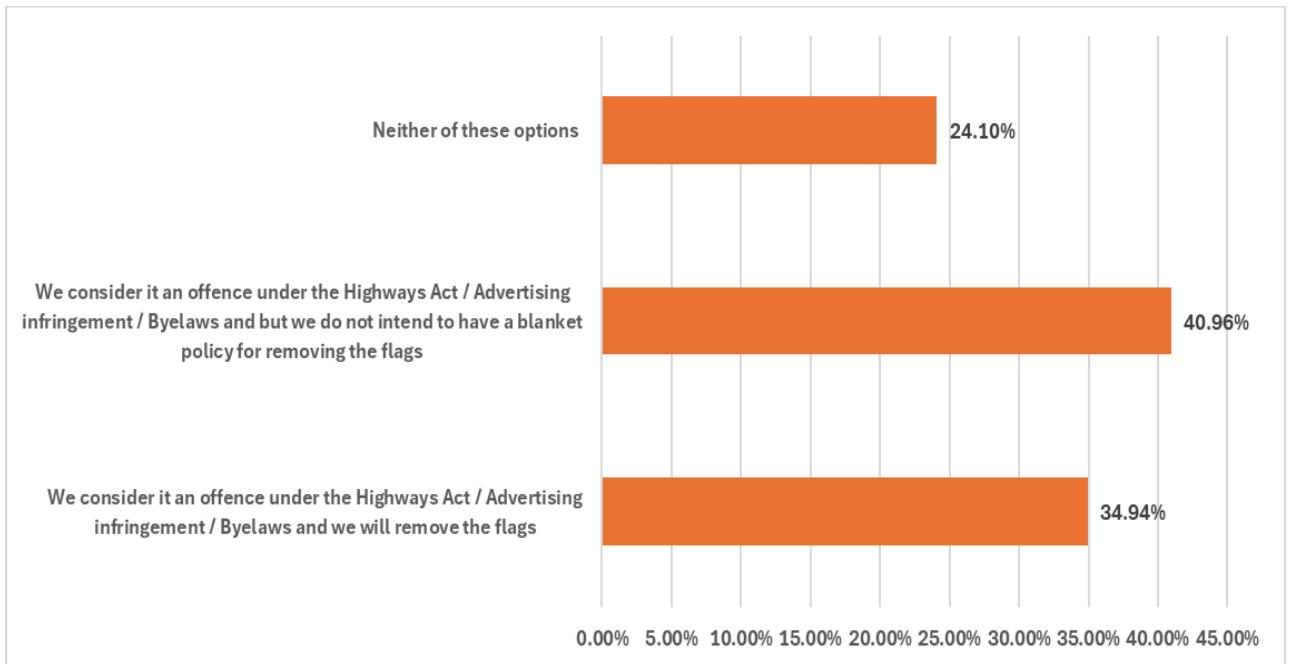
## 2.2 What has been the community's response to this issue?

To gain an understanding of the impact on local communities the survey asked how the community had responded to the issue. The highest number of respondents, 66.28%, stated that the council had received a small number of complaints. 24.42% report that the council has received a large number of complaints and only 9.30% report not receiving any complaints.

The survey did not seek to ascertain the nature of the complaints, however it is clear that the community are aware of the campaign and have been impacted enough to contact their local council to lodge a complaint.

## 2.3 What is your council's policy towards the flags in terms of potential infringements of Highways Regulations?

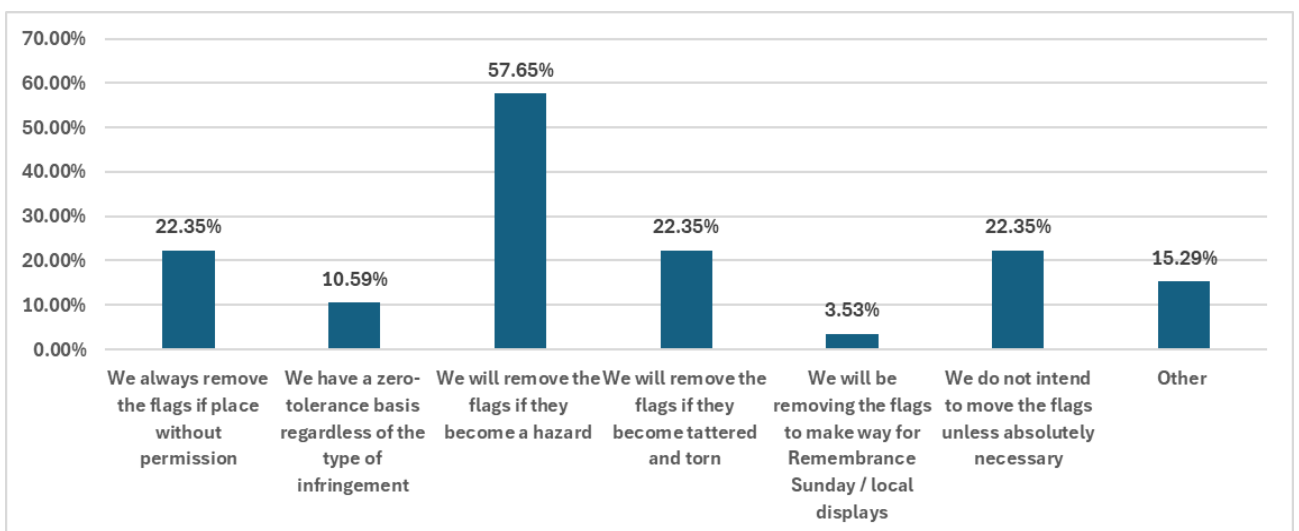
The survey sought to ascertain whether councils had adopted a policy towards the flags in terms of potential infringements of Highways Regulations and the graph below outlines an overview of the responses received.



The responses to this question highlight that councils are adopting different approaches and this could be due to the assessment that the council has made of the local situation and implemented a policy based on the assessment.

## 2.4 What is your overall policy towards the flags?

To establish if councils had adopted an overall policy that was not related to infringements of Highways Regulations the survey asked what the council's overall policy was to the flags. The responses are highlighted in the graph below.



Although the results show that the policy that councils have adopted is varied, over half of the respondents, 57.65%, report that they will only remove the flags if they become a hazard, which could indicate that the main driving factor for the policy adopted relates to the safety of the public.

The survey also asked respondents how effective they believed the council's policy had been to date, 20.24% believed that the policy had been very ineffective or ineffective. 15.47% believed that the policy had been effective or very effective, 47.62% were not sure how effective the policy was.

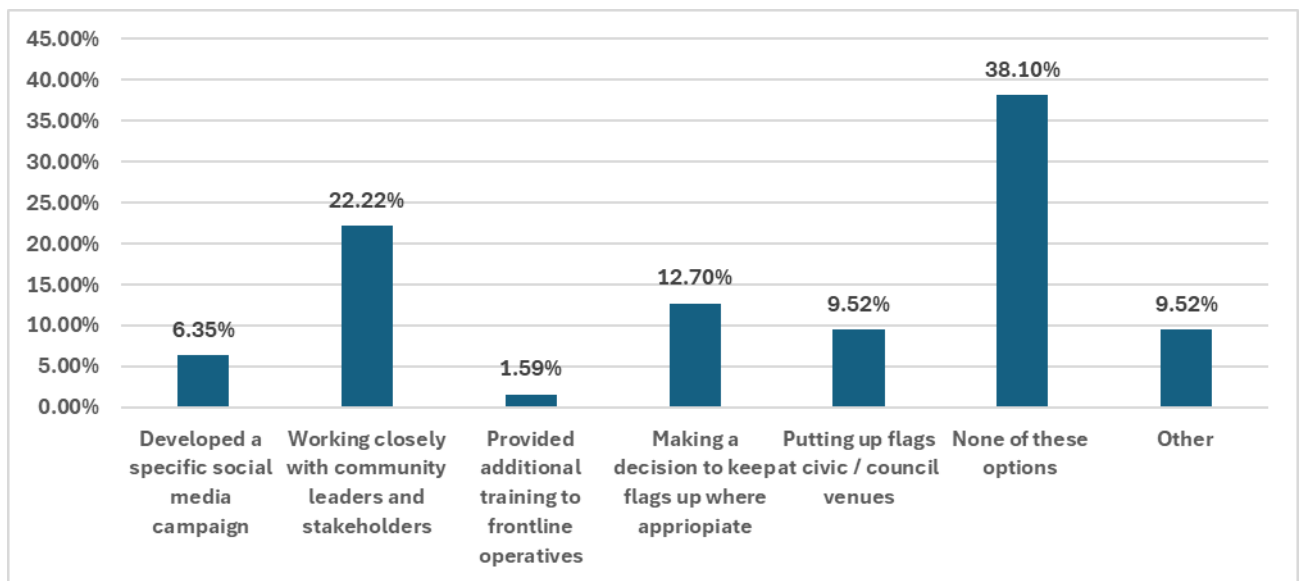
## **2.5 Have you received any strong representations from any communities about the significance of where flags have been placed.**

The survey sought to establish if strong representation had been made from communities regarding the significance of where flags have been placed and 67.19% report that there had not been any significant representation and 32.81% report that representations had been received.

In addition, it was asked if the respondents, councillors, or MPs had liaised with or sought public views on the policy the council had adopted regarding flags, whilst 19.05% reported that they had, the vast majority 80.95% had not.

## **2.6 What measures is your authority taking to foster good community relations in response to the process?**

Local authorities play a key role in fostering and promoting community cohesion, therefore the survey asked what measures councils were taking to foster good community relations in response to the campaign. The graph below provides an overview of the responses received.



The responses show that there are a range of measures that councils are taking to foster community cohesion with 22.22% working closely with community leaders and stakeholders, and 9.52% report putting up flags on civic or council buildings and 6.35% have developed a specific social media campaign.

### **3 Report back on a specially convened APSE Highways, Street - Lighting network.**

A specially convened APSE Highways and Streetlighting network took place on Wednesday 8 October, to bring local authorities together to discuss their approaches and the challenges that they are facing in relation to the Operation Raise the Colour Campaign.

The session commenced with a presentation outlining an overview of the survey results and an APSE Associate provided some context regarding the legislation that was in place regarding dealing with the actions that campaigners had been undertaking and in so doing, the following key points were noted: -

- The main legislation (in England) covering the issue was the Highways Act 1980, section 132 – unauthorised marks and banners on highways.
- Within Scotland authorities relied upon the Roads Scotland Act 1984 – installation of signs on structures.
- Under the Highways Act the Highways Authority must give permission for flags

to be erected, and individual authorities will have a policy in place around attachments to street lighting.

- Local authorities have to consider safety concerns, and if the flag poses a safety risk to pedestrians, drivers, and other road users. Where an authority deems that there is a safety risk the Highways Authority could remove any unauthorised items and recover the expenses from the person responsible.
- The Act has the provision for local authorities to issue fines and the circumstances for this approach will be set out in the councils' policies.
- There are exceptions under the Act which include where there is a reasonable excuse or an authorised enactment, but these exceptions are not applicable with respect to the flag campaign.
- The Act is clear on authorisation and if there is no authorisation granted it goes against the principles of the Act.
- One of the significant factors restricting enforcement of the Act is related to the significant pressures on Highway's budgets and there are costs associated with the removal of flags, particularly where road closures may be required, and resource and costs are associated with pursuing the person responsible.

A group discussion ensued, and the key points were noted as follows: -

- A council may have a defined policy on what flags can be flown and, in some policies, where a flag has wording on it, this would be classed as advertising.
- Many councils are now looking at adopting a revision of their flag policies in light of the campaign.
- Each circumstance is taken on a case-by-case basis, and flags are removed in circumstances where there is a safety concern.
- Due to the sensitivities of the campaign councils have generally adopted a neutral approach where there is not a safety implication.
- An example was cited from a council that had made the decision to remove all the flags, but the location of the staff removing the flags had been shared in the community. The staff had them become the target of verbal abuse, threats, and physical assaults, therefore the council had to stop some of the removals for safety concerns and to protect staff.
- An authority had tried to contact the people putting up the flags to explain why their actions were inappropriate.
- It was reported that a council had been working with the police over the

situation but as it is not deemed as a criminal offence, the response was limited.

- There was an example provided by a local authority of where the police had become involved and this had resulted in the tension in the community escalating.
- An authority that had the maintenance of the street lighting columns outsourced to a contractor reported that there was reticence from the contractor to get involved in the removal of flags and the reason cited was due to safety concerns.
- It was commented that some councils were waiting for the installation of Christmas lights and the bad weather to take the flags down as it was deemed that the flags would then be less likely to be put back up, the point of 'the campaign having been achieved'.
- A council reported that their staff were reluctant to remove the flags as there had been instances of photos of operatives taking down flags being shared on social media, leading to the staff having concerns that they and their families may be targeted by the campaigners.
- Concern was expressed that the cost and resources of removing the flags was impacting on the ability of the service to deliver on other priorities. This of itself was a consideration in not removing the flags.
- Many attendees expressed concern about safety issues, with young people putting themselves at risk by putting up flags in precarious sites such as streetlighting columns and bridges with no safety measures in place.
- There were councils that reported that they had retrieved flags, and they had made the decision to store them should the owners wish to claim them back.
- It was noted that the campaign had become commercialised with advertisements named after a well-known online retailer 'wish list' for delivery of flags to properties with a 'pick your lamppost' where the flags have then been unlawfully erected.
- Some expressed a view that there were people in the community that had indicated that the flags could be viewed as a gesture and as such, the public money being spent on removing them could be spent on other priorities such as pothole repairs.
- There was a clear consensus that from a Highways management perspective the campaign had a 'nuisance' factor.

## **APSE Comment**

The survey and the discussion have highlighted that the Raise the Flag Campaign requires councils to adopt an approach that balances the safety of the public, the safety of the workforce, the views of the campaigners, the concerns of the wider community and the impact of budgets and resources of taking action or not.

Whilst councils have legislative powers under the Highways Act 1980, the Roads Scotland Act 1984, and policies that the council has in place, it is clear that case by case assessments of the situation are being undertaken prior to these powers being used.

It is also clear that the primary concern of local authorities is safety and ensuring that the impact on the workforce and public is minimised.

APSE will endeavour to share policies to support member councils in pursuit of best practice examples.

On a final point, [APSE Highways, street lighting network](#) is a forum for local authorities to come together to share their approaches, discuss the challenges and solutions on a range of issues impacting on the service.

**Vickie Hacking**  
**Principal Advisor**

**Bonni Jee**  
**Principal Advisor (Highways)**

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APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers, and heads of service, together with trade union representatives, to discuss service specific issues, innovation, and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

APSE Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email [enquiries@apse.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@apse.org.uk).

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- Cemeteries and crematoria
- Local Government Reorganisation
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation
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- Parks, horticultural and ground maintenance
- Renewables and climate change
- Roads, highways, and street lighting
- Sports and leisure management
- Vehicle maintenance and transport
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