

# **Protocol on councillor safety, lone working and online communications**

**August 2023**



Derby City Council

## Purpose

1. The purpose of this protocol is to provide councillors with unambiguous guidance in relation to the safe conduct of their duties and responsibilities as community leaders.

## Principles

2. As a councillor, you are free to engage with residents in a manner of your choosing, provided that in doing so your activity is consistent with the obligations placed upon you under the Councillors' Code of Conduct and within other related codes and protocols.
3. The Council recognises that it holds a duty of care towards councillors and that it has a responsibility to provide appropriate guidance and resources to enable you to go about your duties safely.
4. Councillors recognise that as elected representatives they will be subject to a higher degree of scrutiny and standards of behaviour than ordinary members of the public. Moreover, councillors accept that political disagreement is a product of a healthy democracy. Nevertheless, all councillors can expect to be treated respectfully and you are within your rights to withdraw from any form of communication that is either vexatious, abusive, threatening or offensive.

## Managing Risks

5. Personal safety is about assessing and managing risks, with the ultimate aim of being safe. Rather than avoiding risks, you should routinely assess risks to determine whether they are acceptable to you.
6. Councillors are encouraged to use the guidance contained within this protocol to undertake a personal risk assessment, examining the different activities you may undertake, with a view to identifying potential hazards.
7. The Councillor and Civic Support team maintain a Lone Working Risk Assessment for councillors ([members.services@derby.gov.uk](mailto:members.services@derby.gov.uk)); you may also be able to access support via your political group or party. For specialist advice for adapting this document to your specific circumstances, contact the Corporate Health and Safety team ([employee.healthandsafety@derby.gov.uk](mailto:employee.healthandsafety@derby.gov.uk)).

## Community Engagement and Lone Working

8. Engaging with residents in their communities is a fundamental aspect of a councillor's role. However, certain activities can lead to a heightened level of risk to your personal safety.



9. Councillors should routinely undertake organic risk assessments by considering the signals you pick up from your immediate environment. It is important to consider the unique and personal set of physical signals that tell you that something doesn't feel right. Pay attention to your 'gut instinct' and if you feel uncomfortable or in danger remove yourself from the situation as soon as you can.
10. When undertaking activities in your wards, consider the following precautions before you leave the house:
  - Tell a family member or fellow councillor where you are going and what time you expect to return;
  - Charge your mobile phone and ensure emergency numbers are saved in your directory;
  - Consider using a personal alarm and check the batteries before you leave home (see Paragraphs 15 and 16).
11. Councillors are encouraged to work closely with their ward counterparts or political colleagues. Consider forming a buddy system when undertaking ward work.
12. Councillors are strongly discouraged from receiving visitors at home. Details of councillors' private addresses are not routinely published by the Council and have been designated as a sensitive interest for the purposes of registration of Pecuniary Interests under the requirements of the Localism Act 2011.
13. Contact details for all councillors are published on the Democracy Portal and will typically include your Derby City Council issued email address and mobile phone number.
14. Whilst only directly applicable to employees, councillors are encouraged to follow the principles contained within the Council's [Protecting Lone Workers Policy](#) and the [Abuse, Aggression and Violence Policy](#).
15. Derby Carelink provides 24 hour support for lone workers. After the expiry of a pre-set time period, Carelink will automatically call a user's phone and if they fail to answer initiate an emergency protocol agreed with you in advance. The system also has an immediate emergency call facility allowing a councillor to summon help discretely via a personal alarm.
16. To sign-up for Carelink or request a personal alarm, please contact [carelink@derby.gov.uk](mailto:carelink@derby.gov.uk), copying-in [members.services@derby.gov.uk](mailto:members.services@derby.gov.uk).

### **Canvassing**

17. Refer to guidance issued by your political groups or parties when canvassing. Take care to follow the general principles below:
  - Do not canvass alone.



- Ensure you exchange telephone numbers before you begin canvassing and regularly check to ensure everyone is safe.
  - Ensure you have a plan if a colleague is not visible or isn't responding to a phone-call.
  - Keep personal belongings out of sight and ensure your hands are as free as possible.
  - Canvass in well-populated areas and if doing so at night wear high visibility clothing.
  - Walk facing oncoming traffic.
  - Take care when posting leaflets through letterboxes or canvassing properties where there are signs there may be a dog present.
  - When holding doorstep conversations, do not stand too close to the door and pay attention to non-verbal behaviour.
  - Do not persist with a conversation where a resident appears unwilling to engage. If a resident is abusive or aggressive, withdraw and ensure that the household is avoided by your colleagues (see paragraph 18).
18. Councillors are encouraged to share information and intelligence with their ward colleagues irrespective of political affiliation – if you do not feel comfortable liaising directly with a political opponent, notify the Localities team.

### ***Ward Surgeries***

19. The Councillor and Civic Support team will arrange and publicise surgeries on your behalf. However, it is your responsibility to ensure surgery venues are suitable and that appropriate measures are in place to protect your personal safety.
20. Choose venues carefully and avoid holding surgeries alone or in otherwise empty buildings. Suitable venues may include libraries, supermarkets or shopping centres where there is a high level of footfall.
21. Ensure that your surgery venue has good access and more than one exit. Check for a strong and reliable mobile phone signal.
22. Consider hosting surgeries jointly with ward colleagues or taking a companion with you. Develop coded language with your companion to share information about your personal safety without alerting the resident you may be speaking to.
23. Carefully consider the seating arrangements for your chosen venue (seating set-out at either a 45-degree or 90-degree angle is less confrontational). Ensure you are seated closest to the exit and position a table or desk to provide a natural security barrier. Ensure the immediate area is free from objects that could be used against you and that your exit route is clear.
24. Before using a venue for the first time, ask the Corporate Health and Safety Team to support you with adapting the Councillor Lone Working Risk Assessment ([members.services@derby.gov.uk](mailto:members.services@derby.gov.uk) / [employee.healthandsafety@derby.gov.uk](mailto:employee.healthandsafety@derby.gov.uk)).



## Home Visits

25. Home visits to residents should only be conducted in exceptional circumstances. Before proceeding, consider whether there are alternative options available. These could include:
- A telephone conversation or email exchange
  - Agreeing to meet at the Council House or at public place in your ward
  - Attending your next scheduled Ward Surgery
26. Before agreeing to a home visit, ensure you check who else will be present at the property during your meeting or if there will be a dog on-site. Consider taking a companion with you and ensure that someone knows exactly where you are and what time you plan to finish. If your plans change, ensure you notify someone.
27. Assess the property before knocking on the door. Pay attention to visible clues about the layout of the property or the presence of a dog.
28. Avoid taking too many personal belongings into someone's property and ensure your hands remain free, in case you need to make a quick exit.
29. After knocking on the door, take a step back and position yourself so that you can see beyond the resident when they answer. Undertake a doorstep conversation before entering the property and use your senses to assess potential risks – these could include:
- Indications that the resident is intoxicated or has been using drugs;
  - Facial expressions and body language that may indicate threatening or violent behaviour;
  - Hearing sounds that suggest others are in the property that you weren't expecting.
30. If your gut instinct tells you something is wrong, make an excuse for not entering the property and seek to re-arrange the meeting until you have sought advice. If you decide to enter, pay attention to the front door handle and locking mechanism. If a resident chooses to lock the door out of habit, politely ask for it to be left open.
31. Manage the meeting carefully and consider the following precautions:
- Avoid meeting in the kitchen or in areas of the home where there are objects that could be used against you.
  - Ask for dogs or other animals to be placed in a separate room.
  - Sit in a seat nearest to the door and in a way that means you could get to your feet quickly if necessary.



- If you have arranged a safety call from a companion, take care to use coded language to communicate the situation without causing offence.
- If during the discussion, behaviour begins to deteriorate or you feel uncomfortable, try to smooth things over and make an excuse to leave.
- Find a sensible reason to defer a decision or in extremis agree to anything which enables you to exit the situation safely.

32. Ensure you report any incidents in line with paragraphs 48 to 50 of this protocol.

### **Threatening behaviour, stalking and harassment**

33. There is not a definitive means of determining when somebody's actions become threatening and not every act of violence is preceded by a clear deterioration in behaviour. Often it is a combination of factors that may cause you to feel unsafe – these can include:

- Intimidating non-verbal behaviour – including exaggerated hand and arm movements
- Prolonged eye contact
- Standing too close to you
- Saying things that are illogical or sit outside of your own frame of reference.
- Repetition of statements or sentences
- Actual threat of harm to either your person, family or property

34. Harassment is a broad term which describes behaviour or patterns of behaviour which cause alarm or distress to the recipient. These can include repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications; making false and malicious assertions or allegations or focusing unwarranted attention on others who are connected with an individual (known as stalking by-proxy).

35. Stalking can include following a person; watching or spying on someone or forcing contact via any means, including social media. Whilst taken in isolation, this type of behaviour may appear innocent, when carried out repeatedly it can cause significant alarm, harassment or distress to the victim.

36. If you feel you may be the subject of either harassment or stalking, consider accessing the support available at paragraphs 47 to 55 of this protocol.

### **Online Safety and Communications**

37. Social media is a powerful tool for you to engage with your electorate. However, the use of social media also carries considerable risks, including in relation to intimidation, abuse and personal safety, as well as potential legal implications and reputational damage to yourself and the Council when used improperly.



38. Councillors should be mindful of general risks associated with online activity such as phishing scams and identity theft, as well as a heightened risk of cyber-bullying, cyber stalking and impersonation created by your public role.
39. Do not underestimate the risk to your personal safety arising from online abuse. Threats of violence or the incitement of others is illegal and should be reported to both the Police and the hosting platform (e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc.).
40. Apply the same judgement to online engagement as you would to a physical interaction. If you choose to meet with someone who has been difficult online or they attend a meeting or surgery, apply the personal safety guidance detailed elsewhere in this protocol.
41. The Local Government Association (LGA) has undertaken an extensive body of work on Civility in Public Life and has published a range of materials as part of its Digital Citizenship programme, providing guidance and tools to support councillors with your [online communications](#).
42. The LGA recommends the following rules of engagement for councillors when communicating online and for handling online abuse:
- **Set clear expectations** – make publicly available rules of engagement on your social media profiles and apply them consistently.
  - **Lead by example** – do not post comments that could be considered abusive, and avoid posting false or unverified information.
  - **Consider content** – give careful thought to how engagement with controversial issues will be managed.
  - **Defuse conflict** – wait before responding to comments; carefully consider the framing of arguments and the language used.
  - **Learn when to step back** – there is no need to respond to threatening or abusive behaviour.
  - **Protect privacy** – carefully manage passwords and privacy settings; do not post information that could give away your whereabouts or discloses personal information not available elsewhere. Consider using a separate account for official business in your role as a councillor.
  - **Get and give support** – offer to support fellow councillors and reach out to council officers when needed.
  - **Record abuse** – screenshot comments and keep a record of abusive or threatening communications.
  - **Report serious issues** – if you have concerns about your safety, report this immediately to the Police and to the Council.
43. Civil and criminal law contains several offences that can relate to the use of social media. As councillors, you may either be victims of these offences or if social media is used improperly then be subject to legal penalties yourself. Relevant offences to be aware of include:



- **Defamation** – if an individual publishes an untrue statement about a person which is damaging to their reputation, they could be ordered to pay large sums in damages.
- **Harassment** – it is an offence to pursue a campaign against a person that is likely to cause them alarm or distress.
- **Malicious and obscene communications** – it is an offence to send communication that is indecent, grossly offensive or threatening, for the purpose of causing stress and anxiety to the recipient.
- **Incitement** – it is an offence to incite any criminal act.
- **Discrimination** – it is an offence to discriminate against anyone based on protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010.
- **Data protection** – publishing personal data without the individual's prior consent may incur substantial fines from the Information Commissioner (ICO).
- **Copyright** – publishing images, music and documents without the permission of the creator is likely to be a breach of copyright.

44. The Councillors' Code of Conduct applies to all forms of communication including electronic and social media communications. Misuse of social media risks councillors being found in breach of several obligations under the Code, including bringing your office or the authority into disrepute.
45. When using social media, it can be unclear if you are acting in an official or private capacity. If a councillor identifies themselves as an elected representative in their online profile, anything you post may be presumed to be in an official capacity and therefore subject to the Code of Conduct. The manner in which you conduct yourself in any public setting will reflect on the reputation of the Council.
46. When using social media, councillors should take particular care to avoid allegations of bias or predetermination; you should not suggest that you have made up your mind about a matter that you may subsequently be involved in determining. If predetermination can be demonstrated, decisions of the Council may be subject to Judicial Review and result in both abortive costs and severe reputational damage for the Council.

### Reporting of incidents and accessing support

47. If you are a victim of harassment, abuse, intimidation or violence then it is vital that all incidents are reported irrespective of their severity. Reporting and monitoring allows the Council and/or the Police to take further action if necessary.
48. If you believe that you are in immediate danger, contact the emergency services by calling 999.
49. If following an incident you feel that a criminal offence may have been committed, contact Derbyshire Constabulary by calling 101 and reporting the matter to your





Local Policing Unit (Derby North / Derby West / Derby East). Ensure that after having reported the matter to the Police, the incident is also reported to the Council in accordance with paragraph 50.

50. Low-level incidents should be reported using the [Abuse, Violence and Aggression Incident Report Form](#). All incidents will be centrally recorded by the Corporate Health and Safety Team, who will liaise with Councillor and Civic Support about any additional actions or mitigations that may be required.
51. Any safeguarding concerns encountered in the course of your duties should be reported as soon as possible via the Council's established procedures. View the Council's website for information on [safeguarding adults](#) and [safeguarding children](#), before completing the online forms:
- [Derby Safeguarding Adults Board referral](#)
  - [Report concerns about a child](#)
52. The Council holds a statutory responsibility to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism (known as the Prevent duty). Should you have concerns about extremism or radicalisation, these should be reported to the Head of Community Safety and Localities or the Service Manager – Community Safety for escalation to the Police.
53. The Council will share relevant information with councillors about known and potential threats where appropriate, as well as provide regular updates in reaction to serious incidents. The Counter-Terrorism Local Profile is shared annually with the relevant Cabinet Member and summary guidance issued to councillors.
54. If you are subject to persistent contact from a particular individual that may by virtue of its volume constitute harassment, speak to the Head of Democracy about establishing a written Communications Plan. Some individuals may be known to the Council already and where appropriate they can be allocated a named single point of contact or directed to the appropriate support service.
55. Being abused or intimidated can have a severe impact on your mental health. If you are feeling anxious, worried or it is affecting your daily routine then consider the following options:
- Speak to a councillor nominated to provide pastoral care within your group to establish what additional support may be required.
  - Speak to a member of the Democratic Services team about additional support the Council may be able to offer you, including the creation of a wellbeing support plan.
  - Access DCC wellbeing support and information – councillors are encouraged to make contact with the Chaplaincy Service and Council House Mental Health First Aiders.
  - Speak directly to your GP.



## **Training and access to external resources**

56. Personal safety training and additional guidance will be offered to councillors as part of the Councillor Induction Programme and the annual programme of Councillor Training.
57. Free personal safety training for councillors is regularly offered by organisations such as the Local Government Association and will be promoted via regular Keeping in Touch with Councillors e-bulletins.
58. This protocol has been produced with reference to a wide range of publicly available resources relating to personal and online safety. Further information can be accessed via the links below.

### **Derby City Council**

[Protecting Lone Workers Policy](#)

[Abuse, Aggression and Violence Policy](#)

[Employee Social Media Policy](#)

### **Local Government Association (LGA)**

[Handling Abuse and Intimidation](#)

[Civility in Public Life: Abuse and Intimidation Support Offer](#)

[Digital Citizenship: support and resources for councillors](#)

### **Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)**

[Personal Safety for Councillors Booklet](#)

### **Suzy Lamplugh Trust**

[Personal Safety Advice](#)

