

Protocol on councillor safety, lone working and online communications

Purpose

- 1.1 At its meeting of 1 November 2022, the Standards Committee received a report relating to the use of social media by councillors. Following significant discussion on the role of social media in public life, the Committee resolved to request that a guidance document was prepared detailing the appropriate and safe use of social media.
- 1.2 At subsequent meetings of the committee, further discussion has taken place in relation to councillor safety more generally, particularly in relation to lone working and incidents of abuse and harassment. It was therefore felt that a broader document covering all aspects of personal and online safety should be developed.
- 1.4 The draft Protocol attached at Appendix 1 has been developed in partnership with several services within Derby City Council and is presented to the Standards Committee for initial consideration.

Recommendations

- 2.1 To approve the Protocol on councillor safety, lone working and online communications as attached at Appendix 1.
- 2.2 To delegate authority to the Monitoring Officer to make any further minor or technical amendments to the Protocol as may be requested, in consultation with the Chair of the Standards Committee.
- 2.3 Subject to recommendation 2.2, to authorise the Chair of the Standards Committee to write to all councillors circulating the protocol and advising members of the support, advice and information that is available to them.

Reasons

- 3.1 Whilst councillors are not employees, the Council has a duty of care towards elected members. Access to appropriate information, resources and training will allow councillors to go about their duties safely.
- 3.2 The Standards Committee holds delegated responsibility to advise the Council on the adoption or revision of codes and protocols related to the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

- 3.2 At the local elections in May 2023 there were a significant number of councillors elected for the first time. It is important that newly elected councillors are properly advised of the support available to them.

Supporting information

- 4.1 The draft Protocol has been informed by previous discussion of the Standards Committee and online resources available as part of the Local Government Association's (LGA) Digital Citizenship and Civility in Public Life programmes.
- 4.2 In the report received in November 2022, the Committee heard that around a third of complaints received under the Councillor Complaints Procedure related to conduct on social media and a national survey conducted by the LGA had found that three quarters of councillors had previously experienced online abuse from members of the public.
- 4.3 In physical settings, councillors are routinely in situations where they are exposed to a heightened degree of risk. This can include when conducting ward surgeries, visiting residents or canvassing on behalf of their political parties. It's therefore important that councillors are given the tools to make informed decisions about the level of risk they are prepared to tolerate.
- 4.4 Whilst most incidents are low-level and require no further action, they can sometimes escalate into abuse, harassment or violence. There have been several high-profile examples of elected politicians being subject to serious violence in recent years, most notably in the tragic murders of Jo Cox MP and Sir David Amess MP in 2016 and 2021 respectively.
- 4.5 Councillors receive annual training in relation to lone working and personal safety, but it was felt that bespoke guidance was necessary to ensure councillors were able to appropriately manage risks and understand how incidents should be reported.
- 4.6 The draft protocol therefore covers the following areas:
- Managing and assessing risks
 - Community engagement and lone working, including canvassing, ward surgeries and home visits.
 - Understanding threatening behaviour, stalking and harassment
 - Online safety and communications
 - Reporting incidents and accessing support
 - Training and access to external resources
- 4.7 It is recommended that the Standards Committee reviews the draft protocol and considers any amendments that may be required, before the document is circulated more widely to all councillors.

Public/stakeholder engagement

- 5.1 The draft Protocol has been developed by Democratic Services in consultation with the Corporate Health and Safety, Community Safety and Localities and Human Resources departments within Derby City Council.

Other options

- 6.1 To do nothing – the Council does not hold the same legal responsibilities towards councillors as it would towards employees. However, to do nothing would be a dereliction of the Council's duty of care and would undermine the important work undertaken by councillors on behalf of the organisation.

Financial and value for money issues

- 7.1 None directly arising.

Legal implications

- 8.1 Section 3 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 places a general duty on employers to conduct their undertakings in such a way as to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that persons other than themselves or their employees are not exposed to risks to their health or safety. Whilst not tested in caselaw, this would likely cover councillors and their relationship with the Council when undertaking their legal duties.

Climate implications

- 9.1 None directly arising.

Socio-Economic implications

- 10.1 None directly arising.

Other significant implications

- 11.1 Failure to ensure councillors are properly informed about personal safety places them at increased risk of harm. The Standards Committee plays an important role in ensuring guidance and best practice can be shared and implemented within the Council's policies and procedures, as they pertain to councillors.

This report has been approved by the following people:

Role	Name	Date of sign-off
Legal	Olu Idowu, Head of Legal Services	27/07/2023
Finance		
Service Director(s)		
Report sponsor	Emily Feenan, Director of Corporate Governance, Property and Procurement (Monitoring Officer)	27/07/2023
Other(s)	Darren Allsobrook, Corporate Health and Safety Manager	31/07/2023
	Liz Moore, Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development	28/07/2023
	Charles Edwards, Head of Community Safety and Localities	27/07/2023
	Jenny Crowder, Digital Lead, Communications & Marketing	28/07/2023

Background papers:	Item 6 – Social Media, Best Practice for Councillors, Standards Committee, 1 November 2022
List of appendices:	Appendix 1 – Draft protocol on councillor safety, lone working and online communications