



# City of Westminster Standards Committee

<b>Meeting:</b>	Standards Committee
<b>Date:</b>	13 July 2023
<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	Safety Protocol for Councillors
<b>Report of:</b>	Parveen Akhtar – Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 During discussions held at its previous meeting the Committee highlighted matters relating to the personal safety of elected Members and requested a Westminster specific document come before it, providing practical advice for Councillors on what steps they can take if experiencing any threatening/intimidatory behaviour.
- 1.2 The purpose of the discussion at the Committee was to help ensure the Council had measures in place to support Councillors in maintaining their personal safety and provide support and advice to Councillors where necessary.
- 1.5 This report sets out details of the support in place, including the Member Safety Protocol, and provides a note of the measures taken to try to ensure the safety of Councillors.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the contents of the report be noted, and any further actions be identified for consideration.

## 3. Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 Concerns about the impact that an increasing level of intimidation and toxicity of debate is having on the personal safety of councillors is not a new issue and is regarded as one of the significant factors in individuals choosing not to

stand as a Councillor which could have implications for future democratic representation.

- 3.2 Councillors are at the centre of local democracy. Elected from amongst their local community and forming a vital link between councils and residents. However, increasing levels of abuse and intimidation in political and public discourse are negatively impacting democracy at local and national levels. It is recognised that rights to object and constructive challenge are both key components of democracy, but abuse and intimidation cross the line into unacceptable behaviour and serve to silence democratic voices and deter people from engaging with politics.
- 3.3 The role of Councillor has changed in a number of ways over the years particularly due to advances in technology. While much of this has been positive, resulting in Members' being more visible and accessible to residents, it has also led to Members being more exposed as they are easier to contact both online and by easy access to contact details. Personal safety can easily be taken for granted and it is essential to note that every individual is responsible for taking steps to keep themselves safe in any environment.
- 3.4 To complement and reinforce the steps that Members can take themselves, this report seeks to signpost to what is already in place to help Councillors manage the risks associated with carrying out their role and highlight sources of relevant advice. The Council aims to take a proactive approach to dealing with the personal safety of elected members. A number of measures are in place to provide support, guidance and training, as set out below:
- **Code of Conduct:** The Council's Code of Conduct sets out the standards of conduct required of councillors and is designed to protect this democratic role, encourage good conduct and safeguard the public's trust in local government.
  - **Home addresses:** Some members have chosen to ask that the Council does not publish their home addresses on the Council's website. The Director of Law and Governance has the ability to withhold publication of home addresses in the register of interests if the member considers that its publication could put them at risk.
  - **Internal Guidance:** The Councillors Safety Protocol attached as Appendix A was developed by People Services and the Legal Team in response to some incidents and was agreed with the Whips, Group Leaders and the Chief Executive. It is available on the Councillor Hub and sets out how to deal with unacceptable behaviour and how to report any incidents.
  - **LGA Guidance:** LGA guidance is regarded as one of the best resources on safety information for councillors. The guidance can be found [here](#) and includes guidance on handling harassment, abuse and intimidation, practical advice for handling online abuse and practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security. The LGA also provides

training for councillors on personal safety and handling abuse and intimidation online.

- Training: Two personal safety courses for members were held in 2022 as part of the induction programme with another scheduled to take place in November 2023, this will be facilitated by an external trainer. Social media training has also been provided previously and another session will be held on 28 September 2023. This will provide advice on dealing with online abuse, harassment, or 'trolling' and will cover best practise principles for safeguarding against bullying on social media. The training will ensure members are clear what is and is not acceptable online and it will complement the general rules under the Code of Conduct.

#### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 There are no financial implications for this report.

#### **5. Legal Implications**

- 5.1 When a candidate is successfully elected, their contact details are published online. Members are provided with a City Council email address so they do not have to give out their personal contact details and they may also use the City Council offices as their published correspondence address on their main website profile.
- 5.2 Councillors are required to register disclosable pecuniary interests which include any beneficial interest in land which is within the area of the Council. Sufficient detail should be given to identify the land in question, which will probably include a home address. Where a councillor considers that disclosure of the details of such an interest could lead to their, or a person connected with them, being subject to violence or intimidation, they can make a request to the Director of Law and Governance in relation to what is termed a sensitive interest. If she agrees that that risk arises if the interest is entered on the register, copies of the register that are made available for inspection and any published version of the register will exclude details of the interest, but will state that the councillor has an interest, the details of which are withheld. The Director of Law and Governance will treat such requests sympathetically where there are legitimate concerns of abuse or intimidation.

#### **6. Carbon Impact**

- 6.1 The decision will have no carbon impact.

## **7. Consultation**

7.1 The report is for information only.

### **Appendices:**

Appendix A – Councillor Safety Protocol

### **Background Papers:**

Local Government Association: Councillors' Guide to Handling Harassment, Abuse and Intimidation: <https://www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation>

**If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact:**

Tristan Fieldsend, Senior Committee and Councillor Co-Ordinator