

Meeting of:	COUNCIL
Date of Meeting:	13 MARCH 2024
Report Title:	ELECTED MEMBER PERSONAL SAFETY PROTOCOL
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	MONITORING OFFICER
Responsible Officer:	RACHEL KEEPINS DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect upon the policy framework and procedure rules in respect of this report.
Executive Summary:	This report presents to Council a protocol for Elected Member Personal Safety which incorporates useful steps that Elected Members can follow to keep themselves safe whilst carrying out their role. The protocol incorporates guidance for Members, and makes reference to a generic risk assessment of Elected Member activities, the Council's Lone Working Guidance and the Social Media Protocol for Elected Members.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to seek Council approval of the Elected Member Personal Safety Protocol and delegate approval to the Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer – Finance, Housing and Change to consider and approve any requests for funding appropriate security measures where a Member is at personal risk or significant threat of harm in carrying out their role.

2. Background

- 2.1 Following the Local Government Elections 2022 the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), along with Data Cymru, published a report detailing the results from Exit Surveys of Councillors who had stood down voluntarily in the local 2022 elections. The purpose of this was for WLGA and Councils to use the data gathered to understand the demographic of these councillors, their experiences whilst in office and their reasons for standing down. This information was also intended to be used to assess and improve the support and development opportunities for councillors provided both locally and nationally.

- 2.2 Under part 5 of the WLGA report, 'Reasons for standing down', (where Members could include a multitude of reasons), whilst the most popular reason, with 50%, was given as retirement, there were 14% who stated their reason as 'Experience of bullying / harassment / intimidation' and 13% 'Concern about bullying / harassment / intimidation'.
- 2.3 Under section 12 of the report 'What did councillors least enjoy about being a councillor, their responses were broadly split across 5 categories including 'Abuse and harassment from the public' with comments such as:
- "Unfortunately, misinformation particularly on social media has created a situation where I found it difficult to want to publicise my work out of fear of personal attacks or harassment. In some cases, I also received death threats which resulted in police involvement."*
- 2.4 Whilst, fortunately, incidents involving violence and aggression towards Elected Members is rare, it is acknowledged that Elected Members are constantly interacting with residents of their community and it is these interactions, sometimes involving differences of opinion and on occasion controversial decisions that they are involved in making, that may lead to Elected Members being subjected to verbal, written or online abuse.
- 2.5 The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) states in their guide on Personal Safety for Councillors that: *'While most of the aggression councillors experience will sit at the 'low to modest' spectrum of unacceptable behaviour, severe abuse can tip into the legal definition of violence even if no physical interaction is involved. A strong legislative framework is useful, but the law can only ever protect retrospectively, and no Act of Parliament will ever prevent bad things from happening. It is important to take time to reflect on the systems and processes that could help reduce any potential risks.'*

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 At its meeting on 12 March 2020, the Democratic Services Committee considered the "Personal Safety for Councillors" report and guidance was originally circulated to all Members at that time. Following the tragic murder of Sir David Amess MP on 15 October 2021, the guidance, together with a list of additional online resources directed at Personal Safety and Online Abuse, was once again circulated via email to Members. In light of the findings following the Local Government Elections and in response to recent reported occurrences by Members of online social media abuse and incidents where they have felt vulnerable, an Elected Member Personal Safety Protocol has been drafted based on the previous guidance issued to Members and in consultation with the Corporate Health and Safety Unit. The protocol is attached at **Appendix A** and was presented to the Democratic Services Committee on 26 October 2023 for comment and consideration. The Committee endorsed the protocol subject to minor amendments.
- 3.2 The protocol has been developed having regard to guidance published by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) and sets out what personal safety measures Elected

Members can establish to prevent and to deal with those rare circumstances when they might find themselves in situations where they become anxious for their safety.

- 3.3 As well as providing useful steps and guidance that Elected Members can follow to keep themselves safe, the protocol refers to a generic risk assessment of Elected Member activities, for Members to use in relation to their various activities and consider how it relates to them, the risks involved and associated guidance for their continued safety.
- 3.4 It also references the Authority's Lone Working Guidance, which Members are encouraged to familiarise themselves with to ensure their own personal safety. This is to be read in conjunction with the protocol in order to reduce the risks of lone working as far as is reasonably practicable.
- 3.5 Finally, the protocol references social media and online guidance for Elected Members which provides information including 'Setting up social media accounts', 'Using social media effectively and safely', 'Dealing with difficult posts and complaints' and 'Ways to keep you and others safe'.
- 3.6 Links to further guidance are also provided within the protocol for further consideration.
- 3.7 The Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales (IRPW) has stated that the Authority must support the work of its Elected Members and Statutory Co-opted Members to enable them to carry out their duties. To support their work, the Council provides access to e-mail, telephone, data, ICT etc. However, the Authority must also support the safety of Councillors as outlined in the IRPW Annual Report 2021:

"As a result of their legitimate actions as a Councillor and elected Members personal security may become significantly, adversely affected. In keeping with their existing responsibilities, it is the duty of the Democratic Services Committee to fund or provide support necessary to enable a Councillor to discharge their role reasonably and safely. This may require the funding of appropriate security measures to protect Councillors from personal risk or significant threat. Risk assessment and liaison with relevant bodies such as the Police and Security Services would normally inform the selection of required provision".

Further Possible Actions

- 3.8 Whilst the Democratic Services Committee is under a duty to provide the support necessary to enable Members to discharge their roles reasonably and safely, it is not practicable to bring individual requests to provide funding for appropriate security measures to the Committee, particularly as some requests may be urgent. It is therefore proposed that the Monitoring Officer and Chief Officer – Finance, Housing and Change be delegated authority to consider any requests to provide funding for appropriate security measures by Members. Any such request will be considered on its merits but there will be an expectation that security measures have been advised by the police or security services. The relevant bodies would normally inform the required provision of support and any funding would be reasonable and proportionate.
4. **Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)**

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 The well-being goals identified in the Act were considered in the preparation of this report. It is considered that there is no significant or unacceptable impact upon the achievement of well-being goals/objectives as a result of this report.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There are no Climate Change implications as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 There are no Safeguarding or Corporate Parent implications as a result of this report.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 Any requests to provide funding for appropriate security measures by Members would be reasonable and proportionate and be based on a risk assessment and liaison with police/security services and would be met from within the existing Democratic Services budget where possible.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that Council:

- a) Consider and approve the Elected Member Personal Safety Protocol attached at **Appendix A**; and
- b) Delegate authority to the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Officer – Finance, Housing and Change to consider and determine any requests for funding appropriate security measures where a Member is at personal risk or significant threat of harm in carrying out their role.

Background documents

None