

# Communications protocol for the death of a council colleague due to suspected COVID-19

April 2020



# Communications protocol for the death of a council colleague due to suspected COVID-19

(this protocol is in support of, and should be read alongside, the council's [Guidance for Handling Death in Service and Family Bereavements](#))

## Introduction

Unfortunately it is not unheard of for a member of council staff to lose their life. There are clear processes in place to support families and colleagues in the event of a 'death in service', and individual teams, working with HR, have handled incidents in recent years with sensitivity and compassion.

COVID-19, however, brings with it new and unprecedented challenges. Under normal circumstances colleagues could gather together to express their grief, attend funerals, seek support from their local church or mosque, or toast their colleague in the pub. But these ways to express grief or pay respects are not available to us during lockdown.

An additional consideration is that the risk of catching COVID-19 affects us all. So while the death of a colleague from another illness or accident can be devastating, it is less likely to feed an anxiety that the same thing could easily happen to you. The death of a colleague from COVID-19 will spark fears that they may have passed it on to colleagues; that it was the nature of the work that made them vulnerable; and ultimately that what happened to them could happen to me.

Councils across the country need to support their staff, both temporary and permanent, through this strange, unsettling and upsetting new territory. This toolkit sets out some of the main areas you, as managers, will want to think about, to ensure you are able to sensitively support your teams if you experience the death of a colleague due to COVID-19.

## When you find out

To make sure we all follow the correct processes, and offer the right support at the right time, it will be crucial to inform key colleagues of the sad news, as soon as you are notified. The following flowchart explains what to do:



It's really important that HR colleagues are informed asap so established protocols can be followed and any unintended insensitivities can be avoided. Please contact HR helpdesk email [hr@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:hr@southwark.gov.uk) or telephone 020 7525 7213 in the first instance, with *Request for advice on death in service* as the subject header, to ensure it is responded to swiftly.

## Sensitive messaging

There is no easy way to communicate with a bereaved family or grieving colleagues. Words can offer comfort but can also inadvertently cause upset. Any messages sent to people affected by a death should:

- Be personal, written ideally by, or including quotes from, someone who knew the staff member well (a line manager for example)
- Express shared sadness

- Pay tribute to the person who has passed away
- Offer or signpost to appropriate support

Not everyone is comfortable writing such messages and if you need support please do contact colleagues in HR and/or Communications for support.

### **Supporting your team**

When a colleague dies, managers should speak to each of their direct reports and ensure others do the same, to make sure that everyone's needs and feelings are taken into account. This will help managers ascertain what specific support is required by different team members, some of whom who may be more impacted than others.

Advice should be sought from Human Resources who will also liaise with the communications department and provide advice and support to the manager on how to do this. If specific concerns relating to the death are voiced (for example around the rest of the team's safety), these will be explored and the response published on the Source or shared in an all-staff email to help address any wider concerns.

Bereavement in the workplace can be challenging to manage. Employees may need to take time off unexpectedly, find their performance is impacted, or be temporarily unable to perform certain roles. This can be particularly challenging during a pandemic, when the pressures on staff are already high, but it is incredibly important to listen to and support our staff through this difficult time. A compassionate and supportive approach demonstrates that the organisation values its employees, helps build commitment, reduces sickness absence, and strengthens the workforce for the future.

### **Paying respects**

Teams should be encouraged to share stories and remember their colleague in ways that feel comfortable for them, recognising the challenges of grieving during lockdown.

Working remotely makes this more difficult but Microsoft Teams and other video conferencing facilities can give colleagues opportunities to be together through a shared sad experience.

Individual teams may wish to prepare a book of condolence to send to the family of their colleague. Given current restrictions, this could be managed electronically with one team member responsible for collecting messages and compiling for the family.

There is a growing trend for people to set up fundraising pages online so that friends and colleagues can contribute to funeral costs or support for those left behind. If a colleague is thinking of setting something up, please ask them to run it past HR and Communications first, just to work through any sensitivities or risks.

Councils should also consider putting plans in place to recognise the contribution of council workers lost to COVID-19 and celebrating their lives, once the emergency is over. In Southwark we have arranged with our friends at Southwark Cathedral to hold an interfaith service in autumn 2020 to pay our respects to all those with a connection to Southwark who lose their lives due to COVID-19. This will be held once the country has come out of lockdown and returned to some sort of normality. When the time is right we will ask their families, friends and colleagues to join us in a celebration of their lives and recognition of the difference they made in supporting our borough through this time.

### **Media interest**

With a 24/7 media anxious to report constantly on COVID-19, there is heightened interest in any deaths linked to the virus. Some political or campaigning organisations will seek to draw conclusions about deaths in certain circumstances, as evidence to support their claims. For example, the deaths of frontline workers such as doctors, nurses and social workers have been used to illustrate the need for greater availability of PPE.

There will also be more local interest in the deaths of individuals, especially those known in the community such as councillors.

At a time of deep sadness for the family and friends of someone who has died from COVID-19, it is not the council's place to share the details of their loved one with the media, nor to feed the media frenzy around a particular narrative or campaign.

Southwark's approach will be as follows:

- To avoid the risk of individuals appearing in the media, the council will not communicate the names of the deceased corporately, neither internally (via the intranet or all-staff emails) nor externally.
- The council will not respond to media enquiries seeking details about individual deaths, nor proactively communicate information about the deaths of staff members in any way.
- Should the family of a deceased colleague release the name to the media, or wish to speak to the media, the council will support this where possible, and provide a thoughtful quote about the staff member/councillor.
- Regional or national media enquiries about the death of council staff will be passed to London Councils and/or the LGA for handling.
- Once the emergency is over, with the agreement of families, we will work with Southwark News on a thoughtful tribute to those colleagues who have died, to coincide with the service at Southwark Cathedral.

## Social media

In the same way as with traditional media, the council will not be commenting on any staff deaths on social media, and would ask that colleagues follow suit, out of respect for the families and friends of those who have died. If colleagues are friends with those affected outside of work, and wish to respond to a family

post about the deceased, then this should be treated with the utmost sensitivity and follow the guidance about messaging above. Speculation about the cause of, or circumstances surrounding, the death must be avoided.

If individual teams are using Yammer to stay connected, then this may well be a positive space to remember colleagues and share stories and memories. However, it is advised that these be limited to conversations within groups and teams of those who knew the deceased.

## Signposting or seeking support

If you or your team is struggling following the death of a colleague, there is help and support available. The council provides an Employee Assistance Programme for all employees and more detail can be found here:

<http://thesource/human-resources/leave-and-sickness/sickness/counselling-and-support>

This includes a helpline staff can access 24 hours a day 7 days a week by calling 0800 1116 387.

Colleagues and family members can also contact their GP for help (many are offering telephone or virtual appointments during lockdown) or contact one of a number of charities who specialise in grief and bereavement support, including:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

The Greater London Authority has also compiled some useful advice on coping with a bereavement during the Coronavirus outbreak. <https://www.london.gov.uk/coronavirus/how-cope-bereavement-and-grief-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

