



Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

Personal Safety and Lone Working Policy for Councillors

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 An important role of councillors is to keep in touch with their communities. This includes helping individuals with any problems they might have. Often this extends beyond just the delivery of council services. These contacts are usually rewarding and non-adversarial. Councillors are sometimes in a position where they need to calm down angry and frustrated residents who often contact their elected representatives when they feel that they have no other avenue to pursue. Often councillors will deal with constituents on a face to face basis when alone.
- 1.2 Councillors should therefore always make an assessment of the level of risk and what arrangements are in place for their safety. This approach applies to other situations where personal safety is a factor, such as when holding ward surgeries.
- 1.3 The purpose of this guide is to set out what personal safety measures can be taken to prevent and to deal with those rare circumstances where they might find themselves in situations where they become anxious for their safety. Many councillors will not experience any problems during their term(s) of office, but a little time given to the preparation and planning can reduce any risk further.

2.0 Ward Surgeries

- 2.1 The arrangements each councillor makes will vary according to local circumstances and it will be a fortunate councillor who can find premises for their surgery which meet every aspect of good practice and are also accessible to their constituents.

2.2 The following suggestions will help to make a ward surgery safer and more effective.

3.0 The Basics

3.1 Do not hold ward surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Try to get someone to act as receptionist. This not only makes you safer, but also makes it much easier to manage a busy surgery. If you are currently holding ward surgeries alone, arrange to discuss how this can be overcome with fellow councillors or council officers.

3.2 If you cannot avoid holding surgeries on your own, make sure you remember a few simple guidelines. The layout of the room should suit you, i.e. you should sit nearest to the door with the constituents seated on the other side of the table. Seating is best set out at an angle of 45 degrees (seating directly opposite can be confrontational).

3.3 Ideally, there should be a separate and comfortable waiting area for constituents. If there is no separate waiting room, try to ensure that the waiting constituents are as far as possible away from those whom you are talking to.

3.4 Make sure there are no heavy items in the room that could be used as weapons.

3.5 If you are at the stage of looking for suitable premises in which to hold a ward surgery, try to get a space with as many as possible of the following features:

- Council premises during opening hours or other premises where there are many other people about.
- Premises where the names of any visitors for councillors are recorded.
- Premises where there is a comfortable waiting area.
- Try to ensure the surgery (interviewing) room has:
 - Easy access to a landline.
 - A clear and agreed procedure for dealing with a call for assistance.
 - An alarm linked to reception.
 - Is in view of the reception or public area.
 - A vision panel in the door.
 - Has a swift means of escape and any visitors are not able to lock the door from the inside.

4.0 Dealing with Emotional Constituents

4.1 It is inevitable that some of the people you will meet will be angry or upset. You need to be prepared to handle all types of emotion. For example, it is worth having some tissues on hand. Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your constituent.

4.2 You may find that racist or other offensive remarks are made. If they are directed at you, do not respond. This will only make the situation worse. Instead, bring the interview to an end as quickly as possible. If there are more general remarks, you should state that this is not acceptable and that you cannot continue the interview. Often this will elicit an apology. Otherwise, ask the person to leave. However, you must use your own judgment if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation. (Please note that any hate motivated crimes or incidents should be reported to the police.)

5.0 Home Visits

5.1 Councillors do sometimes visit residents in their homes, especially those who are elderly or disabled, or where they simply want to see for themselves the conditions that are the subject of complaints. Before arranging a lone home visit, councillors should always consider alternative options.

- Can contact be made by telephone or email?
- Can a meeting be arranged in a public place, such as a community centre or a café?
- Can the resident attend a ward surgery (if appropriate).
- Can a ward colleague, Police Community Support Officer or another person accompany you?

5.2 It is for each councillor to decide whether a particular visit should be made, especially if the person to be visited is unknown to the councillor. Most councillors trust their own instincts as to whether to meet someone alone. However, if you have any doubts about the safety of the premises you are to visit, and the purpose of the visit is not about the premises themselves, then arrange for the meeting to take place at a neutral venue.

5.3 If a home visit is undertaken, the following general personal safety issues should be considered and planned before the visit:

- Arrange the visit during normal working hours, if possible.
- If appropriate, seek advice regarding the council's Staff Warning Register from the Information Governance Manager.
- Let somebody know who you are visiting, providing details of address, date and time of visit and expected duration.
- Keep a record of your whereabouts. This might include making a call on your mobile during the home visit, telling the resident that there is such a record or that you are expected elsewhere at a specific time. It would be advisable to let colleagues or family members know when you expect to finish.

5.4 During a home visit, the following specific personal safety issues should be followed:

- Consider calling the person before the meeting to confirm arrangements and establish their mood/state of mind.
- Use a code word on the telephone. This needs to be a word you have agreed with someone which will alert them that you think you might have a problem.
- Park your car so that it can be driven away easily.
- Park in a well-lit area near other vehicles, if possible.
- Stay alert when approaching the property, and look around the garden for obvious dangers, for example dogs or prowlers.
- After knocking, stand back and to the side of the door.
- If there is a need to look through the letter-box, do not look in directly – try to observe from the side.
- Do not stand on the edge of the steps.
- Be aware of potential weapons.
- Ask for any dogs or other pets to be secured, where appropriate.
- Assess the situation and mood of the resident. Also note any other people in the property and their mood.
- If in any doubt, or if you feel threatened, do not enter. Make an excuse and leave.
- Only sit down when the resident does.

- Where possible, sit in an upright chair, as this is easier to stand up from and use as a defensive barrier. If you have to sit in an armchair or settee, sit on the edge, near the arm. This will enable you to stand up more easily.
- Be aware of any alternative escape routes.
- If the situation changes and you feel threatened, make an excuse and leave. Back out, rather than turn your back on the resident.

5.5 If a serious incident occurs:

- Vacate the premises immediately and report the incident.
- If racist or other offensive remarks are made, indicate firmly to the constituent that this is not acceptable. If it continues, the councillor should inform the constituent that it will not be possible to continue the home visit (please note: any hate motivated crimes or incidents should be reported to the police).

5.6 If a councillor is unable to leave immediately when a serious situation occurs, the following steps should be taken, as appropriate.

- Place defensive barriers between yourself and the resident.
- Continue talking to the resident as long as possible, reassuring them that you mean them no harm.
- Use reasonable force to protect yourself, if absolutely necessary, but only as a means of last resort. Escape should always be the first option.
- Set off your personal attack alarm, if you have one, or scream or shout to attract the attention of others.

6.0 The Council's Staff Warning Register

6.1 The council has a Staff Warning Register. Councillors can contact the Information Governance Manager for information about potentially violent persons prior to undertaking a home visit.

7.0 Lone Working

7.1 If you are working alone, you might consider the following options:

- Leave details of where you are going and how long you will be with a friend, relative or colleague.
- Check that your mobile phone is charged and switched on.
- Carry a personal attack alarm.
- Consider making regular check-in calls to a friend, relative or colleague, or ask them to call you at regular intervals.
- Team up with a councillor from a neighbouring ward to make visits.
- If there are a number of risks associated with a particular visit, you may wish to carry out a risk assessment and discuss or ask another councillor, or an officer, for their view on whether a visit should be undertaken.

8.0 Personal Callers to Councillors' Private Homes

8.1 Councillors occasionally get the odd nuisance or abusive call. Although such calls are likely to be rare, you might become the target of a persistent anonymous caller with a grudge against the council. These calls need to be dealt with in accordance with police advice:

- Keep the caller talking.
- Note any clues the caller may provide as to sex, age, accent, etc.
- Listen for any clues as to the caller's motive and intention.
- Write down the details immediately to assist the police at a later stage.
- Listen for background noise that may provide valuable information (e.g. railway sounds, industrial noises, machinery, music, animals).
- Inform the police.
- Inform the council.

9.0 Mail

9.1 As with telephone calls, councillors can, on rare occasions, become the target of malicious anonymous letters. Any such letters should be given immediately to the police.

10.0 Car Safety and Parking

10.1 You need to take the same precautions as most car owners do:

- Have your keys in your hand or easily accessible.
- Consider whether an area will be dark and isolated when you return to your car.
- Park, where possible, under street lighting and try not to park in dark, deserted streets or isolated car parks.
- If you have to park in a multi-storey car park, try to park on the ground floor away from stairs and lifts.
- Don't stay around for longer than necessary and stay alert at all times.
- Always lock the car doors when you get into the car and when you leave it.
- Take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around.
- Always carry a torch with you.
- Look around your vehicle as you approach in case someone is crouching down.
- Look inside before entering your vehicle to ensure no-one is hiding there (even if the doors were locked).
- Try to park on the left-hand side of the road facing the way you want to drive off.
- In a cul-de-sac do not park facing the dead end.
- Try to park in a space where you will not be blocked in.
- At service stations, always lock the car when you go to pay.
- Ensure your vehicle has sufficient fuel for the journey.
- If you are following in your vehicle, do not get out. Ensure that it is locked, flash your lights and sound the horn to attract attention.

11.0 Attendance at Meetings

11.1 Councillors have to attend evening meetings which often finish after dark. It is possible that depending on the nature and outcome of the meeting that members of the public may leave feeling angry or upset. In such instances, councillors may wish to ask to be accompanied to their car or nearest bus stop by colleagues or officers who also attended the meeting. If waiting for a taxi, you should wait in well-lit areas, preferably inside the building or close to the main entrance. Before entering the taxi, ensure it has the relevant licensing plate and they can confirm your booking.

12.0 Reporting Incidents

- 12.1 Depending on the severity of the incident, the councillor involved should contact the police, even if an incident is not considered serious enough to involve the police.
- 12.2 If you have been subject to, or witnessed a hate incident or crime, you have a duty to report it.
- 12.3 By taking appropriate action, you may help to prevent a similar incident re-occurring.