

Guide to Personal Safety – For Local Councillors

The information that follows is personal safety advice aimed at individual councillors.



Contents

Introduction	2
Ward Surgeries	2
Dealing with emotional constituents	3
Home and other site visits	4
Personal Callers	4
Mail/Parcels	4
Car safety and parking	5
Reporting Incidents	5
Training	5
Using Social Media	5
Stalking	5
Animals	6
Mobile phones, IPad/Tablets etc.	6
Public Transport	6
Security	6
Election Time	6
Reporting	7

Introduction

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 become adept at calming down and treating; with respect and sympathy, angry and frustrated residents who often contact their elected representative when they feel that they are getting nowhere in resolving their concerns through other channels.

Circumstances will vary and councillors will take their own decisions about how to conduct their duties as councillors while remaining easily accessible to their residents.

The purpose of this guide is not to make councillors nervous but to set out what personal safety measures can be taken to prevent and to deal with those rare circumstances when they might find themselves in situations where they become anxious for their safety.

In general terms, the guidance follows advice given to others who by virtue of public duties or employment meet many people whom they do not know.

Ward Surgeries

The arrangements each councillor makes will vary accordingly 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.

What follows are suggestions about how to make a surgery safe and effective – some apply wherever the surgery is held while others are good practice to be followed if the opportunity arises.

Most councillors will go through their entire time as an elected member without experiencing any problems. Giving a little time to preparation and planning can reduce the already small risk even further.

The basics:

- If possible do not hold surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Try to get someone to act as 'receptionist'. This not only makes you safer but makes it much easier to manage a busy surgery. If you are currently doing surgeries alone, arrange to discuss how this can be overcome with fellow councillors, in your ward or in your political group, other members of your local party or Democratic Support.
- If you cannot avoid doing 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).
- 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 in order to provide some privacy.

- Make sure there are no heavy items in the room that could be used as weapons. If you are at the stage of looking for suitable premises in which to hold a surgery, try to get a space with as many of the following features as possible:
- Public buildings (for example a library, health centre, shopping centre) 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.
- The surgery (interviewing) room:
 - Is in view of the reception or public area.
 - Is connected to the reception by an alarm and there is a procedure for dealing with a call for assistance.
 - Has a vision panel in the door.
 - Is decorated in calming colours.
 - Has a swift means of escape and any visitors are not able to lock the door from the inside possibly trapping yourself inside with them.

Dealing with emotional constituents

It's 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.

Councillors must develop the quiet skill of being concerned about constituents' problems without being so involved that they become too emotional to be of help.

Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your constituents. You may find that racist, sexist, ageist 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 they are more general remarks, you should indicate 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 judgement and if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation do not put yourself at risk no matter how angry the remarks make you.

Comprehensive training is available to help those who have to deal with aggressive and difficult people.

A wide range of advice is included in such training (e.g. dressing sensibly – not wearing anything around your neck (scarves etc.) that a person could get hold of.)

Please speak to Democratic Support to provide you with such training if you feel you would benefit.

Home and other site visits

Councillors sometimes wish to visit residents in their homes especially those who are elderly or disabled or where they simply want to see for themselves the conditions that may be the subject of a complaint.

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.

Sometimes the councillor might prefer to be accompanied by a ward colleague or obtain an initial report from council officers or invite the person to a more public place.

It is always advisable for you to keep a record of your whereabouts. If necessary, you can let the person whom you are visiting know there is such a record or that you are expected at another place by a certain time etc.

Make a call on your mobile phone during the visit, or plan with a colleague to contact you at a specific time to check that you are okay. If you feel that you are vulnerable, then possibly use a code word to inform your colleague so that they can contact the emergency services or follow the procedure that has been mutually agreed.

Personal Callers

Most councillors seek to maintain a balance between their personal and public life and do not want to encourage any callers at their private homes.

Councillors occasionally get the odd nuisance or abusive call, although infrequently, they can become the target of a persistent anonymous caller, who may have a grudge against them, what they represent or the Council.

These calls need to be dealt with in accordance with police advice below:

- Keep the callers talking.
- Note any clues the caller may provide as to gender, accent etc.
- Listen for any clues as to the motive and intention of the caller.
- Write down the details immediately to assist police at a later stage.
- Listen for background noise which may provide valuable information (e.g. railway sounds industrial noises, machinery, music, animals).
- Inform the police.
- Inform the Monitoring Officer.

Mail/Parcels

As with telephone calls, councillors on rare occasions can become the target of a malicious anonymous letter.

Any such suspect letters should be given immediately to the police.

Caution needs to be taken with letters and parcels that maybe appear unusual or seem to contain unknown items/substances, if unsure seek advice from the police as to what action to take.

Car safety and parking

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

- Consider whether an area will be dark and isolated when you return to your car, Park, where possible, under street lighting.
- Lock car doors as soon as you get into the car.
- Take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around.
- When parking, try to face the vehicle the way you would leave, this avoids unnecessary manoeuvring and losing precious time, if you need to make a quick escape.

Reporting Incidents

Any incidents of concern even if fairly minor or 'nearly happened' should be immediately reported to the Council's Monitoring Officer.

This enables the Authority to undertake proper monitoring and decide if any action needs to be taken to prevent a similar incident reoccurring.

You may also consider it advisable to warn ward colleagues, of an unsafe situation you have encountered so they are aware of the risk.

Training

Personal Safety training is covered in the induction training programme for new Councillors. The Democratic Support team is always your first point of contact for any training matters and refreshers training can be arranged on request. Any personal safety concerns can be raised with the team. Democratic Support aim is to support councillors in carrying out their work and staying safe.

The Local Government Association has resources available and their [Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation](#) is particularly useful.

Using Social Media

Be careful what you put out on social media. It is unwise to post anything which will encourage anyone to rob your home by revealing a time when you will be away on holiday or out at an event. Knowing that your home may be empty is a temptation to burglars.

Stalking

Although very rare stalking can occur. This is a police matter, so report it to them and let the Monitoring Officer know immediately. Provide as much detail as possible such as time; date, location, description of person, any witnesses, and anything else that may be useful information for the police to follow up.

Animals

Be aware when entering a person's premise that if they have a dog, it is wise to ask them to put the animal in another room while you talk, especially if the person is emotional, dogs pick up on their owners' emotions and may react in a protective manner to their owner which may mean they will be aggressive to you.

Mobile phones, iPad/Tablets etc.

Be very aware of your surroundings whilst either on the phone or using ear plug listening devices.

Whilst absorbed on a phone conversation or listening to music, it is very easy to become oblivious to our surroundings.

This is when you are in danger from not being aware of what is happening around you.

There are people who take advantage of your distraction and use this opportunity to assault or rob you of your personal goods.

Public Transport

When using public transport be aware of people around you and make sure that you are not distracted.

If walking to a bus stop or station, always walk with confidence, and stay in areas with streetlights.

If you think you are being followed it may be useful to safely cross over the road or mingle into a group of people going in your direction.

If you still feel that you are in danger then contact someone you know on the phone and tell them your location, give a description of the person/s who you believe are following you and if necessary call the police and ask for assistance, its often possible for them to pick up the situation on CCTV.

Security

If you are unsure of your location, there is a free app called 'What3words' which when activated will give you 3 words and you can use them to inform emergency services of your location, these words are unique and can help them locate you quickly within a 2metre radius. The words change as you move around.

Election Time

When you are looking to canvass for elections, always think how this can be done safely. Those who are members of political groups will have their own personal safety guidelines for

this. Independent councillors will need to risk assess and consider how they can do this safely.

Reporting

Remember! In any event where you feel that your personal safety has been at risk, or you have felt at risk or intimidated, please notify the Monitoring Officer at your very earliest opportunity.