

5.3 PERSONAL SAFETY – GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL COUNCILLORS

1. 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 experienced in calming down and treating with respect and sympathy angry and frustrated residents who often resort to their elected representative when they feel that they are getting nowhere in resolving their problems through other channels.

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.

2. WARD SURGERIES

If possible do not hold surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Try to get someone to act as a 'receptionist'. This not only makes you safer but makes it much easier to manage a busy surgery.

If you cannot avoid doing surgeries on your own, make sure that the layout of the room suits 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.

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

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

1. council premises (eg libraries) during opening hours or other premises where there are many other people about
2. premises where the names of any visitors for councillors are recorded
3. premises where there is a comfortable waiting area
4. 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 (pastel) colours
- has a swift means of escape and any visitors are not able to lock the door from the inside.

3. **DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL CONSTITUENTS**

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.

Councillors have to 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 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 with 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.

4. **HOME VISITS**

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

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. or make a call on your mobile phone during the visit.

5. **PERSONAL CALLERS**

Most councillors seek to maintain a balance between their personal and public lives and do not want to encourage any callers at their private homes. Good publicity by the authority as to how to contact councillors and details of ward surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted callers.

6. **MALICIOUS AND NUISANCE TELEPHONE CALLS**

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 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 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 (eg railway sounds, industrial noises, machinery, music, animals)
- inform the police
 - inform the council

7. **MAIL**

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

8. **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 getting into the car
- take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around.

9. **REPORTING INCIDENTS**

Any incidents of concern even if fairly minor or 'nearly happened' should be reported to the authority's Health and Safety Officer. This enables the Council 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.

