

## **Guide to Personal Safety for Councillors**

This is to give you some safety advice and guidance when working as a Councillor, in the public domain.

The relationship between councillors and the communities they serve has always been at the heart of what being a councillor is all about. The face to face contact when constituents can share problems and concerns is vital to making that relationship work.

Too often in the past it has been undervalued by local authorities – councillors have been left to make their own arrangements without any support. That situation is not acceptable and every local authority should be discussing with its elected members how they can be assisted to carry out this role safely and effectively.

The information that follows is advice aimed at individual councillors but it should also be read and acted upon by council officers.

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## **Personal Safety**

### **A Guide for Local Councillors**

#### **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.

With time and experience Councillors become adept at 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.

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 come 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 service to the council without experiencing any problems and a little time given to preparation and planning can reduce the already small risk 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, council officers or members of the local party.
- 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:

When visiting or using other premises please adhere to their risk rules.

- Council premises (e.g. libraries) 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 (pastel) 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 – if everything in the garden was rosy, they probably wouldn't be coming to see you!

You need to be prepared to handle all types of emotion. For example, it is worth having some tissues on hand for the person for whom it is just too much and who bursts into tears, due to Covid avoid using large boxes of tissues and opt for small individual packets that the constituent can take home, reducing cross contamination.

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 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.)

Ask your Council to provide you with such training if you feel you would benefit.

## **Home and other site visits**

Councillors do sometimes visit residents in their homes especially those who are elderly or disabled or where they simply want 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.

Make a call on your mobile phone during the visit, or plan with a colleague to contact you at a specific time at this point, if you feel that you are vulnerable, then possibly use a code word to inform your colleague so 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.

Good publicity by the authority as to how to contact councillors and details of ward surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted, 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 them, what they represent or the Council.

These calls need to be dealt with in accordance with police advice.

- 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 Council.

## **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 Council 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 reported to the authority's chief executive or other nominated officer (e.g. safety liaison 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**

Local authorities have responsibilities for the safety of elected members whilst on council business as they do for their officers.

As mentioned earlier training is available.

In recent years, most local authorities have introduced such training for appropriate officers to help them undertake their jobs with a minimum of personal risk.

Councillors should ask their authorities to arrange suitable training for those members, especially new councillors, who might feel that they would benefit and/or include safety as part of the induction training for all new councillors.

Contact: Member Development Manager for training courses information.

## **Using Social Media**

Watch what you say! Social Media is one of the most used forms by thieves, they love it when you say 'we are on holiday', or we're going out to see "" in a concert etc. This is an open invitation to thieves, to be able to enter your premise without confrontation.

Always be aware that what is said in the media spreads so quickly and even if retracted a statement is not forgotten.

## **Stalking**

Although very rare these events do happen – Report it to the police and Chief Executive. Providing as much detail as possible.

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 pet it may be prudent 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 react in a protective manner to their owner, but an aggressive manner to you.

## **Mobile phones MP3 players, IPod, 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.

I am sure we have all seen, people who step into the road without looking, whilst talking, listening to music, or even texting.

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

So be aware!

## **Public Transport, Buses Trains and Taxi's**

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

If late evening, try to pre book a taxi, with a firm you know.

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

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 your buddy 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.

If travelling in a car/taxi with another person, please remember that it is compulsory that you and the driver wear a face mask and that there is good ventilation during your journey.

## **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, note that the words change as you move around.

There is also a council app called Gemini, which can be fitted to your phone and when pressed, in emergencies can locate your exact position and send an alarm to Bradford's central CCTV control centre which is manned 24/7/365 who will then contact you and the emergency services, please ask the 'Member Development Manager' for details on how to get this fitted.

## **Election Time**

When you are looking to promote your Party for future election purposes, now may be a good time to consider how this is going to be done safely.

It's important that you risk assess and record how you are going to canvass safely, this needs to include people assisting you.

Media platforms can be used to get your message across to the public, to promote the importance of your local parties.

Internet access;

Twitter

Face book

Various face time platform,

Television and Radio. Local or National.

Postal service leaflets/letters.

Taking the points suggested in this personal safety guidance, when completing the risk assessment consider rules relating to premises, transport and current Government/NHS guidance.